

Praying as St Bernadette of Soubirous Prayed The Rosary and the Annunciation

The saints are now, where we hope to be one day. Their prayer formed them in faith, holiness and service. Learning about the lives of the saints can serve to inspire our own Christian living. Learning to pray, as they prayed, can draw us ever closer to the Lord.

St. Bernadette invites us to reflect more deeply on the mystery of the Annunciation, the announcement by the angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary that she would conceive a son by the power of the Holy Spirit to be called Jesus (Luke 1:26-38).

She shows us a path of encountering the Lord's presence through meditating on Mary's encounter with the angel Gabriel, and her response:

**Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord;
be it done to me according to your word.** [see Luke 1:26-38]



St. Bernadette Soubirous

- ◆ 1844-1879; Lourdes, France
- ◆ Feast Day: April 16

Bernadette grew up as an impoverished, sickly, and uneducated girl. She would have lived a life of anonymity if not for a few months in the year of 1858. During these months, Bernadette experienced eighteen visions of the Virgin Mary in a cave along a river in Lourdes, France. In her visions, Mary urged Bernadette to pray for sinners and to build a church at this site where others could come to pray.

The Virgin referred to herself as “the Immaculate Conception” and led Bernadette to a hidden spring that had never been seen before. At the young age of fourteen, Bernadette had to deal with the interrogations and ridicule from the leaders and people of the town and church who did not believe in her visions. Visitors who wanted to know more about the visions were constantly bothering her.

Bernadette never stopped believing in her visions. In 1866, she joined the Sisters of Notre Dame of Nevers and lived the rest of her life in the convent. She wanted nothing to do with the opening of the church that was built at the site of her visions of Mary. Rather, she was canonized in recognition of her prayerful devotion and her quiet faith and perseverance in the face of the others’ mockery and disbelief.

The Grotto on the campus of the University of Notre Dame, built in 1896, is a replica of the cave in Lourdes where Bernadette saw the Virgin Mary.

I promise to make you happy, not in this world, but in the next.

—The Virgin Mary to Bernadette at Lourdes

64 NOTRE DAME VISION

Between February 11 and July 16, 1858, St Bernadette prayed and spoke with the Blessed Virgin Mary 18 times in the Grotto of Massabielle, Lourdes, France.

As a starting place, let us imagine Bernadette's first encounter with Our Lady.

"A very young lady, delicate and dainty, visibly of flesh and blood, short rather than tall . . . stands calmly and without touching the side or arch in the narrow oval niche. The very young lady's garb is not at all common. . . Her snow-white raiment is so cut as to indicate her delicate waistline . . ."

" Sometimes [her dress] gleams like satin or silk, sometimes it is duller, like some unknown, very delicate, ineffably snowy velvet; again it seems like a transparently thin batiste that transmits to its fold every stirring of the limbs . . ."

Bernadette observes the most striking thing last of all: the young lady's feet are bare. And the tiny narrow foot give the effect of ivory, almost of alabaster . . .

The strangest thing, however, is this: two golden roses are placed about the beginnings of the slender toes of each foot - impossible to tell by what means, nor can one tell of what substance the two roses are, whether of delicate jewelled craftsmanship or of painting on high relief...

Bernadette would like to speak, to burst out in words or even in inarticulate songs, stammering, reverential, tender. But dare she speak before the Lady has spoken? She takes her rosary out of her pocket. What better thing can she do?"

This particular description of Bernadette's vision of Our Lady at Lourdes comes from a novel entitled *The Song of Bernadette* by Franz Werfel. It invites us to see Our Lady with love and affection, and to magnify Our Lord. Bernadette did this herself when she prayed the rosary as she herself asked 'what better thing could she do?' Bernadette prayed and spoke with Our Lady, day by day building a relationship with her.

In his encyclical on the Rosary, Pope St John Paul II the Great describes **the rosary as a way to contemplate the face of Christ with Mary.**

“Against the background of the words of the words ‘Hail Mary’ the words of the Annunciation – the principal events of the life of Jesus Christ, pass before the eyes of the soul.

They take shape in the complete series of the joyful, sorrowful, [luminous] and glorious mysteries, and they put us in living communion with Jesus through – we might say – the heart of his Mother.” St John Paul II Rosarium Virginis Mariae

“As we contemplate each mystery of her Son’s life, Mary invites us to do as she did at the Annunciation, in obedience of faith:

‘Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to your word’ (Lk 1:38) JP II, Rosarium Virginis Mariae

The rosary is a meditative and contemplative prayer.

“Meditation engages your thoughts, imagination, emotions and desires.” Catechism of the Catholic Church 2708

As you gaze contemplatively upon Christ from Mary’s vantage point, in the contemplative prayer of the rosary, you seek the one your soul loves with His Mother, who loves Him as no other has.

By developing such a vision of the Christ with Mary, the **heart is prompted to conversion to a greater love for God’s will and compassion and for our neighbour.** Our prayer for such a conversion of heart increases when we pray the rosary.

The Rosary in Daily Life

St. Bernadette teaches us to apply the fruits of our contemplation to everyday life. She shows us how to shape our vision of all things by God's love, especially our everyday, ordinary life.

The rosary is a prayer for everywhere and anywhere, for all times. Using our contemplative imagination which we find in the Scriptural words and images of each decade, and the Hail Mary, we can pray the rosary on our commute to work, while we wait in line, while we wash the dishes or while we lay awake at night.

Bernadette first prayed the rosary with Our Lady while looking for firewood, one sock on, and one sock off, preparing to cross a stream. We continue to build our vision of God's love day by day, decade by decade, even when we can't set aside quiet time with an image or the pages of Scripture.

With the help of St Bernadette, let us reflect on the scene of the Annunciation: Note the many concrete details provided by Luke's telling:

*"And in the sixth month,
the angel Gabriel was sent from God
unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth
to a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph,
of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary.
and the angel came unto her, and said,
"hail, though that art highly favoured, the Lord is with you,
blessed art you among women (Lk 1:26-28)*

In these three verses Luke bothers to tell us many concrete details:

- That Gabriel appeared in the sixth month
- In a city in Galilee, Nazareth
- Gabriel appeared to a virgin named Mary
- Espoused to a man named Joseph

Why so many concrete details? The historical reality of the story is quite important. It shows that **God's love is a love that bothers with our everyday situations.** God is invested and cares about our everyday, ordinary life. We know this because he lived one too. In these details we hear it was on a particular day ... that God came to Mary, a flesh and blood woman of history and declared his love for us.

The rosary **forms us to see the Annunciation in our daily lives.** Our vision of God's love illuminated by Luke 1:26-28 and contemplated from Mary's vantage point should announce to us that God became incarnate in a particular place and time, precisely to show us the truth about ourselves. We are loved right where we are. We are loved in the midst of pain and death. We are loved to the end.

The God who became incarnate in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy in Nazareth in the womb of Mary, loves you here and now. Bernadette knew this. Her circumstances of poverty and suffering made her keenly aware of it.

Let us consider three examples from Bernadette:

1. Bernadette experienced her visions of our Lady in a most inhospitable place. The Grotto at Massabielle, was used as a dump and shelter for swine. Even during her first encounter, Bernadette asked herself:

'Why here? Why did the Lady choose Massabielle, of all places, the filthy rock cavern ... the place of rubble, swine, and snakes. The spot detested by all the world.'

She could answer, it is because Christ entered the world in Nazareth, of Galilee, to show that I am loved, right where I am.

2. Bernadette lived in the *cachot* at the time of her visions. The *cachot* was the former lord's prison. She lived in this inhospitable place; her siblings sleeping on straw. Somehow, doesn't this echo the nativity? Don't these living conditions present the special solidarity between Mary and Bernadette?

3. Bernadette was chronically and critically ill. She suffered from severe asthma all her life and tuberculosis of the bone in her last seven years. This too she saw through the lens of the Incarnation. She called her bed in the infirmary at Nevers her little white chapel. Franz Werfel describes her illness in terms of the miraculous spring she dug from the ground at Massabielle.

“her sickness faced Bernadette like a mighty mountain through which she had to dig with her frail hands in order to some day see the light again. For hundreds of days she dug and dug without losing courage, with the tireless intrepidity of a good worker. She was fully employed.” *Franz Werfel, The Song of Bernadette*

As Bernadette put it: *“Do not just be a channel for grace, but a reservoir, an overflowing reservoir.”*

These words show that Bernadette saw her sufferings as illuminated by the reality of the Incarnation. The Annunciation was her lens for all things. Bernadette leads the way, she assists us in our praying of the rosary and the broadening of our contemplative vision. **She teaches us to apply the Annunciation as a lens for daily life. She helps us connect our desires, hopes and reasons for praying the rosary with the love we behold as we pray. Praying the rosary in this way gradually brings about conversion in our hearts.** Conversion being a change in our own heart, turning more and more toward God.

Bernadette led others to see Christ in everything, every day, even in inhospitable circumstances, poverty, suffering and illness. Let her lead us too. Allow your contemplative vision of the Word Incarnate and the meditative words of the Hail Mary, to let all things be opened to the light.

The Rosary and the Eucharist

Having contemplated God in the ordinary of our daily lives, we should remember that the Sacraments make the ordinary, extraordinary. God becomes present through words and gestures and under the signs of everyday things like bread, water, oil and wine. God was born in Bethlehem, which in Hebrew, means *'house of bread'*. He continues to be born, liturgically, into our world as the Bread of Life, the holy Eucharist.

The celebrated liturgy becomes the lived liturgy in the great Amen of the Mass. Sung at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer after the consecration of the bread and wine. With this Amen we join ourselves to God's sacrificial will. Soon after uttering this Amen, God comes under our roof. This truly is an annunciation.

Pope St John II also tells us:

"The liturgy, as the activity of Christ and the Church, is a saving action par excellence. The Rosary, as a 'meditation' with Mary on Christ, is a salutary contemplation. By immersing us in the mysteries of the Redeemer's life, it ensures that what he has done and what the liturgy makes present is profoundly assimilated and shapes our existence." (St. John Paul II, Rosarium Virginis Mariae)

The celebration of the liturgy and the praying of the rosary go hand in hand, especially regarding the Eucharistic sacrifice. We pray the Our Father and offer ourselves, like Mary, with our great Amen.

Special Solidarity that is the Eucharist

About her own reception of the Eucharist, Bernadette wrote:

"I was nothing, yet out of this nothingness Jesus has made something wondrous. I dare to say this for through Holy Communion I become one with God. Jesus gives me his heart; my heart is joined with his."
(St. Bernadette, *A Holy Life*)

"Jesus, keep me under the standard of your cross. May the crucifix not be just something I wear, something I look at, but **let it be alive in my heart.** Let me be transformed into a living crucifixion, in union with you through the Eucharist. By meditating on your life and the most intimate feelings of your heart, ... on this cross where your love holds me forever."

(St. Bernadette, *A Holy Life*)

Bernadette's prayer to Our Lady led her not only to meditate on the life of Christ but to **draw near him in the Eucharist where she could be united with the One her soul loves.**

Here, Mary is speaking to the soul.

"Courage, my child ... To love what God wills always, to will it always, to desire it always, to do it always: this is ... the foretaste of the peace of the saints. The more you unite your heart to mine, the more you will understand the truth of these words.

When you no longer have any will other than God's, your heart and mine will become one and the same heart. Learn to say *Ecce Ancilla* -behold the handmaid of the Lord, with me each day."

(Mary speaking to St. Bernadette, *A Holy Life*)

Bernadette writes this, 15 years after her visions at the Grotto. She sought Christ through the heart of His Mother.

As you pray the rosary meditate again on the words of the *Hail Mary*, but contemplate the *Annunciation of Christ* in the Eucharist. With Mary, gaze upon God in his house of bread, the Eucharist. Then, at Mass, practice adding the *Ecce Ancilla* - Behold the handmaid of the Lord, as a mental prayer after the Great Amen. Here too, stand with Mary and see God's love given for you on the altar.

"Against the backdrop of the words 'Hail Mary' -- the words of the Annunciation -- the principal events of the life of Jesus Christ pass before the eyes of the soul. They take shape in the complete series of the joyful, sorrowful, [luminous] and glorious mysteries, and they put us in living communion with Jesus through -- we might say -- the heart of his Mother. As we contemplate each mystery of her Son's life, Mary invites us to do as she did at the Annunciation, in the obedience of faith: '[Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to your word](#)' (Lk 1:38)." St. John Paul II, *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*

"Is there a more sacred or a more important act? Inexhaustible treasures of grace are opened to you through the Eucharist and its influence in your lives should increase over the years to come. So pray often. Pray to Our Lord and his Most Holy Mother to help you understand the importance of this great act. And when our Lord is in your heart ... dwell in the delights of his presence ... Oh, the happy moment!"

St. Bernadette to her cousins, *A Holy Life*

"The more I contemplate God, the more God looks on me.
The more I pray to him, the more he thinks of me, too."

St. Bernadette, *A Holy Life*



Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin
Mary
by Bartolome Esteban Murillo
1680/1690

St. Bernadette Soubirous The Rosary & the Annunciation

Prayer Guide

Dedicate 20-30 minutes each day to praying the Rosary.

1. Pray the Mysteries associated with each day of the week.
2. Focus explicitly on the Mystery of the Annunciation on each day.
 - Give your imagination over to seeing Mary with the Angel Gabriel
 - Allow each "Hail Mary" to place you again at the Annunciation

At the beginning of each decade of the Rosary, say to the Lord:

"Ecce Ancilla: behold the handmaid of the Lord."

3. As a mental prayer after the Great Amen at Mass, offer your *Ecce Ancilla* to the Lord with Mary.

4. Consider praying with one of the quotes from St. Bernadette, allowing her words to be spoken through you (or Mary's words to be spoken to you).

MYSTERIES OF THE ROSARY

The Joyful Mysteries (Monday and Saturday)

- The Annunciation
- The Visitation
- The Birth of Jesus
- The Presentation of Jesus
- The Finding of Jesus in the Temple

The Sorrowful Mysteries (Tuesday and Friday)

- The Agony in the Garden
- The Scourging at the Pillar
- The Crown of Thorns
- The Way of the Cross
- The Crucifixion

The Luminous Mysteries

- The Baptism of Jesus
- The Wedding at Cana
- The Proclamation of the Kingdom and the Call to Conversion
- The Transfiguration
- The Institution of the Eucharist

The Glorious Mysteries

- The Resurrection of Jesus
- The Ascension of Jesus
- The Descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost
- The Assumption of Mary
- The Coronation of Mary as Queen of Heaven and Earth

Offering Our Week of Prayer

At the conclusion of this week of prayer, offer both the fruits and the struggles of your prayer to the Lord.

At the Sunday Eucharist or as part of an act of spiritual communion, offer your week of prayer to Christ with the following prayer (or one you yourself compose):

Jesus, my only desire:
I thank you for the gift of prayer.
You know my heart:
accept from me my love and devotion;
take from me my fear and my doubt;
restore in me my trust in you;
and listen kindly to all my prayers.
Receive my prayer this week
as a pleasing offering.
Make up for what I lack
and increase in me only what you find beautiful.
I thank you for the witness of your saints
and beg you to send them to my aid
so that I may become one with you
as they are one with you.
Draw me into your communion with the Father
through the love of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.