

What's the background to the visit this week of the relics of St Bernadette of Lourdes to the Carfin Grotto?

An interesting article by Adam Simon from the diocese of Arundel and Brighton

The girl who said 'Yes'

ONE OF the most unassuming of saints, Bernadette Soubirous of Lourdes said that the Virgin Mary had chosen her to be a broom and, when her job was finished, she was to be put back into the cupboard. After making sure she had done what Our Lady had asked of her, Bernadette entered the convent of the Sisters of Charity in Nevers to do her novitiate, hidden from the tsunami of pilgrimage and faith which she had unleashed.

It is time for her to be brought her out of the cupboard in the joy of the two-month tour of her relics around Britain.

The foundation of the "Relic Tour" is evangelical – to allow Bernadette to remind us of the message of Lourdes and to reawaken the faith of those who encounter her relics. At a meeting in Lourdes last year, the rector of the sanctuary asked visiting directors of UK pilgrimages how people might be brought back to Lourdes post-Covid. Fr Dennis Touw, parish priest of St Thomas of Canterbury, Fulham, and director of the Westminster pilgrimage, replied: "Please send us Bernadette's relics."

Bernadette was born in Lourdes, a market town in the Pyrenees, in 1844, the eldest of four children. She did not compose any spiritual writings, did not found a religious order and did not die a martyr's death. She was a messenger. She faithfully passed on the words which she received from the "beautiful Lady" who appeared to her in the grotto of Massabielle, a remote cave on the edge of the town, between 11 February and 16 July 1858 in 18 apparitions. Through the call to penitence, to pilgrimage and to build a new church, Bernadette and the message of Lourdes revived the Church in France and beyond, and still does so today, with six million visitors and pilgrims coming to the grotto every year.

Bernadette is the saint of saying "Yes". The turning point in her life was her response to the Lady's request to come to the grotto each day for two weeks. She did not hesitate, despite knowing that she would get into trouble with her family and with the people of Lourdes when she told them what she had seen, and about the message she needed to pass on to

the world. She is very similar to Our Lady, whom we venerate for her response to the angel and for her part in our salvation. Bernadette's example encourages us to unlock the "Yes" in our hearts and obey God's will. Saying "Yes" gives the believer inner strength to face life's challenges. On the numerous occasions that Bernadette was questioned and pressurised by police, prosecutors and the clergy, "I promised the Lady" was all she had to say.

Bernadette was transformed in the presence of the Lady. "She was smiling and had a beautiful face, more beautiful than any I had ever seen", is how a local miller, Antoine Nicolau put it. He was one of many witnesses who observed Bernadette contemplating the Lady who appeared to her.

Whenever she recounted the story of the apparitions, notably when she re-enacted the moment when the Lady revealed her name – "I am the Immaculate Conception" – Bernadette's inner beauty shone through. This is what moved Mgr Laurence, the local bishop at the time, when he witnessed her giving her testimony. "Did you see that child?" he said as two tears rolled down his cheeks.

This is Bernadette's message for our world: if we treasure the beauty of the inner life, the life of prayer and of service, we too will be transformed. In Lourdes today, you can dis-

cover this extraordinary beauty in the faces of the pilgrims as they serve each other or sit in silent prayer in the peace of the grotto.

Bernadette showed exemplary courage both during and after the apparitions. She was asked to "go and tell the priests to build a church and to come in procession". She went to see the parish priest, Abbé Peyramale. She was 14 years old, 4ft 6ins, illiterate and from the poorest stratum of Lourdes society. He barked at her and mocked her; she did not flinch. In a year when Pope Francis has invited the laity to speak and be heard in the synod on synodality, to "dream about the Church we are called to be ... to bind up wounds ... to build bridges ... and restore strength to our hands for our common mission", we are invited, as Bernadette was, to speak out, to participate and not be afraid. Abbé Peyramale later became Bernadette's staunchest ally and one of the people outside her family she most loved.

BERNADETTE WAS kind. She remained poor and simple throughout her life. She was fun, as many testified. She lived life true to the Gospel and put up with great physical suffering with dignity and faith, dying in 1879 from a painful form of tuberculosis, aged 35. Thirty years later, her body was exhumed and was found to be intact. In the chapel in Nevers where her mortal remains lie, there is a peace like that in the grotto. In 1933, she was canonised. Bernadette is the saint of saying "Yes", with courage, in small and simple acts, which have huge consequences beyond what we can ever imagine. Our "Yes" may have more modest outcomes, but as she is taken out of the cupboard we can point young people to the beauty and purpose of Bernadette's life of faith.

After leaving Lourdes in 1866 to become a nun, Bernadette never returned. "Every day I go in my mind to the grotto and make my pilgrimage there," she used to say. If a visit to the relics awakens a desire to go to Lourdes, as Fr Dennis Touw hopes, the Relic Tour website indicates ways of going, with links to 37 diocesan and other pilgrimage associations. The fruit of Bernadette's life can be found in the way we live our lives, but in a special way in her beloved grotto.

Adam Simon is the author of *Bernadette of Lourdes: Pilgrimage Into the Heart of Jesus*.

A prayer to Our Lady found in St Bernadette's 1866 Journal (when she was 22, and 8 years after the Apparitions)

*How happy my soul was, good Mother,
when I had the good fortune to gaze upon you!*

*How I love to recall the pleasant moments spent under your gaze,
so full of kindness and mercy for us.*

*Yes, tender Mother, you stooped down to earth
to appear to a mere child ... You, the Queen of heaven and earth,
deigned to make use of
the most fragile thing in the world's eyes.*

