

THE BURNING BUSH



Readings: Ex 3: 1-6; Lk 10: 38-42

Speaking at the Torchlight Procession here in 2008 Pope Benedict pointed out that, “Lourdes is one of the places chosen by God for his beauty to be reflected with particular brightness hence the importance here of the symbol of light... .. (B)efore the grotto, night and day, summer and winter, a burning bush shines out, aflame with the prayers of pilgrims and the sick” (BENEDICT XVI, at the Torchlight Procession, 13 September 2010). The burning bush was the sign of God’s presence, which showed Moses that he was standing on holy ground (Cf. Ex 3: 1-6) . The large stand of candles that is always lighting in the grotto is a burning bush, a sign of God’s presence, in that holy place. Pope John Paul said that in the grotto of Lourdes there ‘began a dialogue between Heaven and earth which has lasted through time’ (JOHN PAUL II, at the Torchlight Procession 14 August 2004).

Last year’s pilgrimages recalled how, at the first apparition, Bernadette was taught to make the Sign of the Cross. Then she began to recite the Rosary. So, her part in the dialogue between Heaven and earth began with the first decade of that Rosary by praying the “Our Father”.

The theme of this year’s pilgrimages is *Pray the Our Father with Bernadette*. That prayer contains the central meaning of our pilgrimage, not just to Lourdes but the whole pilgrimage of our life. We are on a journey to our Father lives in heaven, in the new creation, beyond all human imagining. God our Father sent his Son so that we could see the loving, caring, human face of God. Anyone who sees the Son sees the Father (Cf. Jn 14:9). The whole meaning of our life is to respond to the love of God shown to us in Christ. And at the grotto the first thing Bernadette saw was a gentle light and the smile of Our Lady. That smile, Pope Benedict said, was “a true reflection of God’s tenderness... the source of an invincible hope” (Homily at the Mass for the Sick, 15 September 2008).

It is a lesson that we particularly need to learn in our time. Life goes from crisis to crisis, priority to priority; the news presents disasters and dangers and disillusionment; we are driven on by hopes and plans and our concerns for those we love. We are struck by illness and by the pain and worry it brings. Many things, good and bad, compete for our attention; there is so much sound and activity and pressure.

The temptation is to be like Martha, to ‘worry and fret about so many things’. Those worries and needs have their importance, indeed in the Our Father we pray about some of them— our hunger for daily bread, our longing for forgiveness, our fear of being tempted beyond our strength. But the first

three petitions of the Lord's Prayer express the one thing necessary – to share in the life of the new creation, where our Father is, in heaven. There every evil and every suffering is overcome; in him everything that is good in human life is transformed and transfigured and shares in his eternal life. "Eternal life is this: to know you, the one true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (Jn 17:3).

Jesus taught us to use the name Father, to see the infinite God as the One who gives us life and who calls us to himself, the Father who runs out to meet his prodigal sons and daughters. The first three petitions are not focused on our needs. They are about God. They might be summed up in a phrase very familiar to Bernadette, God Alone, *Dieu Seul*. She often used those words because they were on the gate of her convent and on the crest of her congregation, the Sisters of Charity of Nevers.

That is what we recognise when we pray, '*hallowed be thy name*'. At the grotto with its burning bush, we ask that God's name will be honoured in us and in all human hearts. That is the one thing necessary. Bernadette put it in her own words: "Let us seek only the glory of God" (BVP, II, p. 391). God alone is the deep meaning and the great hope which underlies every longing of the human heart (Cf. BENEDICT XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 31).

We pray '*may God's kingdom come*'. It is a prayer for the realisation of God's 'plan for the fullness of time to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth' (Eph 1:10). St Cyril of Jerusalem says that "only a pure soul may boldly say 'Thy kingdom come'. That is so because it is a prayer which asks that things may *not* happen according to *our* plan but according to *God's* plan. Even our most cherished hopes and ambitions are not to be identified with the plan of God to make all things new (Cf. Rev 21:5). "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord" (Is 55:8). In all the worrying and fretting we can lose sight of the real meaning of life which is not something we can achieve but God's *gift*. Bernadette knew that very well: "If you had two hearts you could reserve one for God and the other for creatures. I have only one heart... therefore God must reign and possess my heart" (PN, p 55, 56). The Church, Vatican II said, "has a single intention: that God's kingdom may come, and that the salvation of the whole human race may come to pass" (VATICAN II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 45).

Perhaps the most common theme of Bernadette's prayer was '*Thy will be done*': "O my God, may your will be done! I accept all suffering since such is your will!" (SBS, p. 87). "What God wills and as long as he wills" (SBS p. 108). She often echoed the response of Mary to the angel, *Fiat*, let it be done to me according to your word: "*Fiat... for life. Fiat... for suffering. Fiat... for death. Fiat... always*" (PN p. 51). And for her those were not just words to be said, they were words that she lived in patient suffering to the very end. About an hour before she died she was clearly in pain; one of the sisters said, 'I am going to ask the Immaculate Mother to comfort you'. Bernadette replied, 'No, not comfort but strength and patience' (SBS, p. 116).

Underlying her endurance of suffering was a memory, a memory of this holy place. "Every day", she said, "I go on pilgrimage to my beloved grotto." "I carry the grotto in my heart" (BS, p. 28). "I shall do everything for Heaven, my true home. There I shall find my Mother in all the splendour of her glory".

We come to Lourdes, to the grotto, to the sign of the burning bush, to the Virgin's smile which reflects God's tender love. We come like Bernadette with the Lord's Prayer on our lips.

The ancient words which we use at Mass to sum up that prayer repeat the first three petitions of the Our Father. But we do not repeat them as petitions, because they are already fulfilled in Christ, the first-born. They are "now proclaimed as adoration and thanksgiving as in the liturgy of heaven" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2855). "For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen".

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Bernadette's words quoted from:

LAURENTIN, R., *Bernadette vous parle*, Mediaspaul, Paris, 2005 [BVP]; BERNADETTE, Personal Notes, Nevers, 2008 [PN]; *Some of Bernadette's Sayings*, Nevers 1978 [SBS]; MOLONEY, J., *Bernadette Speaks*, Dublin 1979 [BS]