

St. Bernadette Soubirous

BORN 1844; DIED 1879
VIRGIN AND RELIGIOUS
FEAST DAY: APRIL 16

GOD sometimes offers this skeptical world direct confirmation of the truths of the faith. The dogma of the Immaculate Conception (the teaching that Mary, the mother of our Lord, was conceived without original sin) was proclaimed by Pope Pius IX in 1854. Four years later, the Mother of God appeared to a fourteen-year-old uneducated peasant girl who knew nothing about this and did not understand the meaning of the title, and used this title to identify herself to St. Bernadette Soubirous.

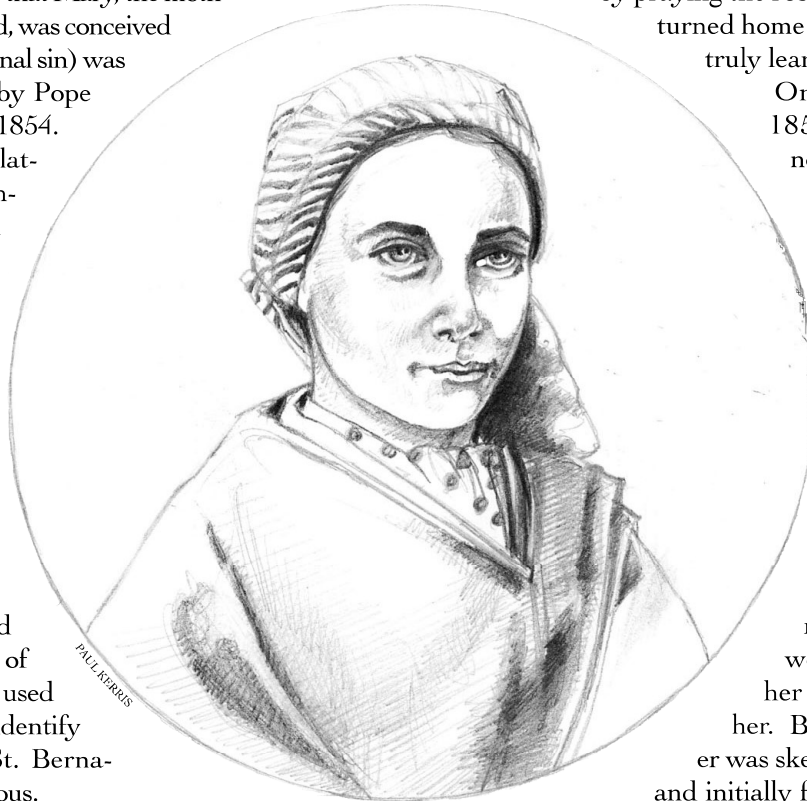
Bernadette was born in the small town of Lourdes in the foothills of the Pyrenees mountains southwest of Toulouse, France, the oldest of four surviving children of François Soubirous, a miller, and his wife Louise Casterot. She suffered from severe asthma and was always in frail health. She was a good and obedient child, although she also was willful and had a temper and a sharp tongue. Due to her family's poverty, she received very little schooling. Her knowledge of the faith was so lacking that, at thirteen, she still had not been permitted to make her First Communion. When Bernadette was thirteen, she went to live for a time with a family friend who

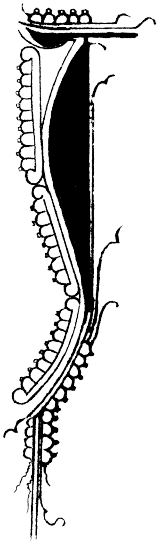
promised to see to her schooling and religious instruction. However, the catechism was written in standard French, which Bernadette could not read and her teacher could read little better, so she learned little. She also was not sent to school but instead set to watching the sheep in the fields, an occupation she partially relieved by praying the rosary. She soon returned home so that she might truly learn her catechism.

On February 11, 1858, Bernadette, now fourteen, was out collecting firewood with her sister and a friend when she noticed a bright light in a nearby grotto. As she approached, she saw a beautiful woman standing above a huge rock. The woman wordlessly greeted her and prayed with her. Bernadette's mother was skeptical of her story and initially forbade her to return to the site of the apparition, but

then relented. As the apparitions continued, curious crowds accompanied Bernadette to the site. She was forbidden to go there by the civil authorities, a prohibition she did not obey. On February 25, the beautiful lady instructed Bernadette to drink and wash in the spring, and showed her where to dig to find water. At first a muddy trickle, within a week the spring was producing water at a rate of twenty-seven thousand gallons a week. It was soon discovered to have the power of miraculous healing.

By March thousands of people were accompanying Bernadette to the spot. She reported to the local pastor that the lady had asked that





a chapel be built on the site. He did not receive her kindly and told the civil officials that he did not approve of these events. On March 25, the Feast of the Annunciation, Bernadette asked the beautiful woman who she was. The reply was: "I am the Immaculate Conception." One apparition occurred in April; in June, Bernadette finally made her First Communion, and a final vision occurred in July.

Bernadette had difficulty convincing the civil and Church authorities of the authenticity of her apparitions. It was here that Bernadette's inner strength became her most important asset. For some time she was interviewed, questioned, and harassed by the civil authorities. She never sought to capitalize on her fame, and refused donations for herself or her family, so that there would be no monetary gain. She endured everything with humility and patience, even the harsh treatment of her by her novice mistress after she entered the convent of the Sisters of Charity in Nevers, France at the age of twenty-two. As a nun, Bernadette lived



a life of complete self-effacement, once comparing herself to a broom that Our Lady had briefly used, then replaced in the corner. She said that, if Our Lady could have found someone more ignorant, she would have done so. She was joyful, full of humor, told funny stories, and was a fine mimic, to the merriment of her sisters in religion. Yet she always felt that she had not eradicated her pride and saw the harsh treatment she received from her novice mistress as a source of her own purification. She continued to suffer

"She never sought to capitalize on her fame, and refused donations for herself or her family, so that there would be no monetary gain."

from asthma and contracted tuberculosis of a bone in her leg, developing numerous bedsores as well. As she was dying, she was assailed by Satan, a final agony to add to her physical pain.

Eventually a chapel was built and pilgrims began flocking to Lourdes. People came and washed in the spring, and miracles abounded. The story of Bernadette shows that God often chooses the most lowly to manifest his glory, but also that holiness is not a matter of special gifts or extraordinary events, but of seeking perfection in the very ordinariness and hiddenness of life.

