



SILENT HOMILIES

Only the Broom

*Bernadette, the catechism she could not yet read,
and why the Lady spoke her language*



Silent Homilies



Only the Broom

*Bernadette, the child still learning her catechism,
and why the Lady spoke her language*

Dedication



For every child who is last in the catechism class, and for the girl from
the Cachot who would not make the story larger than it was.

Before You Begin



Do you know what is strange about Bernadette? Not only that she said she saw Our Lady. Plenty of people have claimed that. The strange thing is who she was when it happened.

In 1858 she was fourteen. The family mill had failed, and they were living in a former lock-up in Lourdes. She had been ill for much of her childhood. She was behind at school and behind with formal catechism. She had not yet made her First Communion. At home she spoke the language of Bigorre, not the French of officials and textbooks. And this was the child the Lady spoke to.

When the Lady finally gave her name, Bernadette took the words to the priest without being able to explain them. She could repeat them. She could not yet teach them. That is the puzzle this book stays with. She had not become educated or impressive first. She was still the girl from the Cachot. And she could be faithful with something she could not yet explain.

Bernadette wanted to learn. She wanted Holy Communion. Catechism mattered to her, and it should. The Lady came to the child who was actually standing at Massabielle, not to the child she might have been after a few more years of school.

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Part One

The child from the Cachot

Chapter 1

A room that had been a jail



Bernadette Soubirous was born in Lourdes on 7 January 1844, the eldest child of François Soubirous, a miller, and Louise Castérot. She was baptised two days later at the parish church. There were better years at first. Then the mill failed. Work became irregular. The family moved more than once, and by 1857 they were living in a building known as the Cachot, a former lock-up lent to them by a cousin.

It was one damp room. There is no point romanticising the family's poverty. It affected where they lived, Bernadette's health, her schooling and almost every part of ordinary life. She had had cholera as a small child and suffered from asthma for the rest of her life. Lourdes itself was still a small Pyrenean town. It had not yet become the place pilgrims mean when they say the name. There were mills, quarries, farms and a river. Massabielle, where the grotto sits, was a rough place used for gathering wood and for rubbish. Nobody in February 1858 was walking there to pray.

None of this made Bernadette holy by itself. Plenty of poor children in Bigorre never saw an apparition. It simply tells us who she was when the story began: the eldest daughter of a family that had come down in the world, often unwell, living in a room that had been built to lock people in.

A Reflection

If you have been to Lourdes, it is easy to start with the baths and the basilicas. The Cachot is a better place to begin. It reminds you that the girl who later became famous first belonged to a family trying to keep warm. Holiness, if it came, came into that room. It did not wait for a better address.

A Short Prayer

Lord, remember families who live in rooms that were never meant for living. Amen.

Chapter 2

The language of home



At home Bernadette spoke the language of Bigorre. Linguists now call it Gascon Occitan, in the local form often named Bigourdan. In 1858 most people in Lourdes used that speech every day. French was the language of school, of officials and of many priests when they were being formal. Bernadette understood some French, but it was not the language in which she thought.

This matters because later films often give her a clear, trained voice. The girl at the grotto did not sound like that. When she spoke of what she had seen she used the words she had. She called the figure *aquero*, “that”, until she had something more precise. She described a small young lady. She did not reach for French phrases that would have impressed a magistrate.

Bernadette said the Lady spoke to her in the language she used at home. That is easy to pass over. Officials later questioned her in French. The first conversation at Massabielle, as she reported it, had not been in that language.

The language we speak at home usually feels different from a language we have learned at school. Bernadette knew some French, but it was not the language that came most naturally to her. Being questioned in a tongue that is not quite yours is tiring even when you have done nothing wrong. She had to do that again and again.

A Reflection

Lourdes is interesting here because the first words, as Bernadette told them, were not the words of the schoolroom. They were the words of a particular child. The Church uses many languages. What matters in this story is simpler. The Lady, according to Bernadette, began where she actually lived.

A Short Prayer

Lord, bless the language in which we first learned to pray, and teach us not to despise it. Amen.

Chapter 3

Catechism was a struggle



Bernadette knew prayers from home. She could say the Our Father and the Hail Mary. Formal catechism was another matter. Lessons were often given in French, in the question-and-answer style of the time, and she was behind. At fourteen she was sitting with younger children in order to catch up. Abbé Pomian, who taught her, did not find it easy. Neither did she.

Bernadette was behind with catechism, but that does not mean she was stupid. Her schooling had been interrupted, French was not the language she used most naturally, and she had been ill for much of her childhood. People who later questioned her found that she could remember what she had seen, refuse details she had not been given, and keep her temper.

She wanted First Communion. The delay was a grief to her. Children need teaching. Sacraments have a proper preparation. The Lady came while that work was still unfinished.

A catechist looking at Bernadette in early 1858 would have seen a girl who needed more time. That judgement was fair. A child who answers quickly in catechism may understand the lesson well, but speed is not the only thing that matters. Bernadette needed more time.

A Reflection

We can honour Bernadette and still take catechism seriously. The lessons still had to be learned. Her place in the class list did not tell God everything there was to know about her.

A Short Prayer

*Lord, help those who teach the faith, and those who find the lessons hard.
Do not let either group lose heart. Amen.*

Chapter 4

Bartrès, then home



In the winter of 1857 Bernadette was sent to Bartrès, a village above Lourdes, to help Marie Laguës and to mind sheep. The mountain air was better for her chest. There was also a hope that she might prepare for First Communion there. The lessons did not go well. She was tired in the evenings. The local priest who might have helped her left. She asked to come home.

She returned to the Cachot in the first days of January 1858. The air was worse. The room was crowded. What she gained was her family, the school of the Sisters of Nevers in Lourdes, and another attempt at catechism. She began classes that month. Three weeks later she was at Massabielle.

On 11 February she went with her sister Toinette and a friend, Jeanne Abadie, to gather wood. The house needed fire. That is the errand. There was no pilgrimage plan. There was no intention of founding a shrine. A poor family wanted fuel, and the eldest girl who suffered in the cold still went to the river with the others.

A Reflection

Bernadette was not looking for an apparition. She was looking for wood. When we know what Lourdes later became, it is easy to forget how ordinary that Thursday morning was. A girl who would rather have been warm went down to the river because the house needed fire.

A Short Prayer

Lord, meet us in the work we did not choose to make holy. Amen.

Chapter 5

Eleven February



The first apparition was on Thursday 11 February 1858. Bernadette fell behind the others near the grotto of Massabielle. She later said she heard a noise like a wind, saw a light in the niche, and then a young lady, dressed in white, with a rosary. Toinette and Jeanne did not see what she saw. That disagreement began at once and never really went away. Some people would believe her. Some would not. Some would want her to say more than she would say.

She was frightened. Then she used the rosary she already knew. The Lady, she said, passed the beads through her fingers but did not say the Hail Marys with her. Eighteen meetings followed, from that Thursday until 16 July. They were not a programme Bernadette designed. She was told to come. Some days there were few people. Some days there were thousands.

On 18 February the Lady spoke more plainly. Bernadette later reported the words, “I do not promise to make you happy in this world, but in the other.” There were also requests that belong to the whole Lourdes story: penance, prayer for sinners, a chapel, processions. Before any of that became a shrine with taps and baths, it was a sick girl returning to a rough place because she had been asked to.

The other girls had gone for wood. Only one of them came back with a story that would outlive the town as it then was. That is not a reason to treat the companions as fools. They saw a riverbank. Bernadette said she saw someone standing in the rock.

A Reflection

The first meeting was not a speech. It was a frightened child saying the Rosary in a place that was not yet holy in anyone else's eyes. If Lourdes teaches anything at the beginning, it is that prayer she already knew was enough to start with. The later words came later.

A Short Prayer

*Lady of Massabielle, who came to a girl gathering wood, keep us from
needing a finished shrine before we will pray. Amen.*

Chapter 6

The priest wanted a name



Fr Dominique Peyramale was parish priest of Lourdes. He was not a man who enjoyed village rumours. Crowds were gathering. Claims were being made. Civil officials were already uneasy. Peyramale was cautious, and he had good reason to be. The Church cannot accept every claimed apparition without examining it carefully.

He wanted a name. For weeks Bernadette had only a smile to report. He also asked for a sign that she could not produce herself. According to the usual Lourdes accounts, he told her that if the lady wanted a chapel she should give her name and make the rosebush at the grotto bloom. It was still winter. That request belongs to his caution.

On 25 March, the feast of the Annunciation, during the sixteenth apparition, Bernadette asked again. The wording she used was polite and local: would the lady be good enough to tell her who she was. She asked more than once. Then, she said, the Lady joined her hands, lifted her eyes and spoke in Bigourdan: “Que soy era Immaculada Councepciou.”

Bernadette did not know what the words meant as theology. She was afraid of forgetting them. She repeated them on the way to the presbytery and said them to the priest as she had heard them. She did not first turn them into school French. Peyramale understood at once what she could not explain. Four years earlier Rome had defined those words as a dogma. A child who was still catching up in catechism had just carried them across town in her own speech.

A Reflection

Caution in a parish priest is not the enemy of Our Lady. Peyramale's slowness is part of why the story can be trusted. He did not want a slogan from a crowd. He wanted a name. When the name came, it came in a language the child already had, and she refused to improve it on the road. That refusal still matters.

A Short Prayer

Que soy era Immaculada Councepciou. Lady, who named yourself to a child, keep us faithful to words we do not yet fully understand. Amen.

Part Two

A sound she carried

Chapter 7

Four years after the dogma



On 8 December 1854 Pope Pius IX defined the Immaculate Conception in the bull *Ineffabilis Deus*. The teaching is easy to mix up. It does not mean that Jesus was conceived without a human father. That is the virginal conception, a different mystery. The Immaculate Conception means that Mary, from the first moment of her own conception, was preserved from original sin by the grace of Christ. She is redeemed, as we are, but in a unique way and from the beginning.

The definition did not invent the belief. Catholics had honoured Mary under that title for a long time. What 1854 did was settle the question for the whole Church. Four years later, in a grotto above the Gave, a girl who had not mastered her catechism reported that the Lady had used that title as a name.

Catholics do not believe that an approved apparition adds something new to the Gospel. The faith of the Church was already there. An apparition such as Lourdes can help people live that faith more deeply. Peyramale was moved because the words fitted what the Church had already said, and because they were unlikely to have been invented by this particular child in that particular language. That is a reason for taking her report seriously. It is not a second definition of the dogma.

Bernadette could repeat the words, but she could not explain their theological meaning. The Church, of course, had spent centuries thinking about exactly what those words meant. She was not a doctor of the Church. She was a reliable messenger of a sentence she had been

given.

A Reflection

There is a difference between repeating a mystery and explaining it. The Church needs both. She needs teachers who can say what the Immaculate Conception is not, and she needs people who can hold a sentence faithfully before they can lecture on it. Bernadette belongs to the second group. That does not make the first group less necessary.

A Short Prayer

Holy Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who still need both the words and the meaning. Amen.

Chapter 8

Mud before water



On 25 February, during the ninth apparition, Bernadette was told to drink from a spring and to wash. She saw no spring. She scratched at the ground. Mud came first. People watching thought she had lost her wits. Then water appeared. That is the historical order, and it is worth keeping in that order.

Later the same water would be channelled, bottled and used in the baths. Pilgrims would queue with plastic bottles and walk away talking about cures. None of that was visible on the morning she put her hands in the dirt. What the crowd saw was a girl making herself look ridiculous because she had been asked to.

Some of the early reports of healing belong to those weeks. The Church later examined such claims with medical caution. On the morning itself, the crowd simply saw a girl putting her hands in the dirt because she had been asked to. She did what she was asked before it looked sensible.

Anyone watching Bernadette that morning would have seen a girl digging in wet earth with her hands. Only later did people understand why that moment mattered. The shrine pilgrims now photograph still depends on that beginning.

A Reflection

People who love Lourdes can forget how the first spring looked. We see taps and stone and candles. Bernadette saw mud. Other people laughed before they understood. She did not owe them a more elegant gesture.

A Short Prayer

Lord, give us the courage to do a required thing before it looks successful.

Amen.

Chapter 9

The questions they asked her



Bernadette was questioned by her family, by neighbours, by the police commissioner Jacomet, by the imperial prosecutor, by priests and later by a diocesan commission. The questions were not gentle. Officials wanted dates, words, contradictions, motives. Some hoped she would admit invention. Some hoped she would add a miracle on demand.

What remains striking is how little she decorated the account. She would describe what she thought she had seen. She would refuse details she had not been given. She would not swear that other people must see what she saw. When she was offered money she refused it. When she was told to stay away from the grotto she was caught between civil orders and the request she believed she had heard.

Her testimony was taken down more than once, so it can be compared. Recollections vary in small ways, as they usually do. The core of her account stayed steady: a lady, a rosary, a name given late, a spring, a request for a chapel and for penance. She did not build a system around those things.

That steadiness is one reason the bishop's commission could work. Bishop Bertrand-Sévère Laurence of Tarbes did not treat the affair as a piece of folklore to be waved through. He set up an enquiry. On 18 January 1862 he declared that the faithful were justified in believing the apparitions. Four years had passed. Caution had been given time to do its work.

A Reflection

A Church that asks hard questions is not being unkind to Our Lady. She is being careful with the Gospel. Bernadette's gift to that process was not a clever defence. It was a short story she would not enlarge. There are worse ways to speak when people want more than you have.

A Short Prayer

Lord, keep us from adding to a true thing simply because someone important wishes it were larger. Amen.

Chapter 10

The Communion she was waiting for



The apparitions did not replace First Communion. Bernadette still wanted the sacrament she had been preparing for in Bartrès and in the sisters' school. On Thursday 3 June 1858, the feast of Corpus Christi that year, she received Holy Communion with other girls in the oratory of the hospice. The Church had not yet given a public judgement on the grotto. Peyramale judged that her conduct was such that she should not be kept waiting any longer.

Someone later asked her which had made her happier, the apparitions or her First Communion. According to the usual accounts she said the two things go together and cannot be compared, and that she had been happy with both. She did not set what happened at the grotto against the Eucharist. She knew which gift belongs to every Catholic, and she had waited a long time for it.

After that day she continued to be watched. Admirers already wanted to treat her as a living relic. The last apparition came on 16 July, the feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. She saw the Lady from a distance, because the grotto itself had been barred. Then the meetings stopped. The child who had carried a sentence she did not understand still had to grow up, learn more French, and decide what to do with a fame she had never asked for.

A Reflection

It would be easy to tell Bernadette's story as if the grotto were the only sacrament that mattered. She did not tell it that way. She wanted the Mass. She wanted Communion. The Lady who spoke at Massabielle did not take the place of the altar in the hospice chapel. She sent a child towards the Church she already had.

A Short Prayer

Lord Jesus, present in the Eucharist, thank you for the day Bernadette received you. Feed those who are still waiting. Amen.

Part Three

Behind the door

Chapter 11

Nevers



Fame made ordinary life in Lourdes almost impossible. People wanted to see her, touch her, question her, and obtain a word that would settle their own doubts. In 1866 she left. On 29 July she took the habit of the Sisters of Charity of Nevers at Saint-Gildard and received the name Sister Marie-Bernard. She had considered a stricter contemplative life. Her health was not strong enough.

At Nevers she was expected to live the ordinary life of the community. She worked in the infirmary and later in the sacristy, sewing and embroidering for the altar. She was still the girl from the Cachot, now wearing a habit, still ill, and still required to be ordinary.

She followed news of the shrine from a distance. She was not present when the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception was consecrated in 1876. That absence fits her. Lourdes could grow without her standing in front of it. She had already done the part that required her particular memory.

She died at Nevers on 16 April 1879, at the age of thirty-five, of tuberculosis. She was beatified in 1925 and canonised on 8 December 1933 by Pope Pius XI, on the feast of the Immaculate Conception. The adult woman is part of the same story as the child at the river. If we freeze her at fourteen we miss the years in which she had to live without apparitions and without applause.

A Reflection

A vocation is not a way of remaining on the stage where God first used you. Bernadette's later life was mostly hidden work, illness and the ordinary duties of a sister. That is not a come-down from Lourdes. It is what she thought the rest of a life was for, once the particular task had been done.

A Short Prayer

Lord, bless those whose most public work is already behind them. Teach us the holiness of unfinished, hidden days. Amen.

Chapter 12

Only the broom



In later life a saying was attributed to Bernadette about a broom. The wording is not identical in every book. One common form is that the Virgin used her as a broom to remove the dust, and that when the work was done the broom was put back behind the door. Another form is shorter: Our Lady used her, and then she was put back in her corner, and she was happy there.

The saying survives in more than one version, so we should not pretend that every English word can be treated as a transcript. What the sources agree on is the thought. She did not regard herself as the owner of Lourdes. She thought of herself as someone who had been needed for a task and could then be put away.

A broom is an ordinary object. It does a job and stands in a corner. Bernadette seems to have been quite content when attention moved away from her. She did not think Lourdes belonged to her simply because she had been part of its beginning.

If the saying is hers even in substance, it also warns the rest of us. Pilgrims can treat a visionary as if the vision belonged to her. She refused that. The Lady used a child. The child did not become the Lady.

A Reflection

Bernadette did not seem to believe that being used by God gave her a right to remain at the centre of attention. Sometimes a task ends, another person takes over, and life becomes ordinary again. She seems to have accepted that more easily than many of us would.

A Short Prayer

Lord, if you use us for a time, teach us to be willing to be put away again.

Amen.

Chapter 13

What Lourdes became



The grotto is now a sanctuary. Large numbers of pilgrims come each year. There are baths, processions, hospitals, candles, and a town that lives by pilgrimage. None of that was visible from the Cachot in 1858. The Church accepted the apparitions as worthy of belief. She did not command every Catholic to treat them as a second Gospel.

That distinction is easy to forget on a crowded evening by the river. Private revelation, even when approved, is an aid to living the faith we already have. It does not add new public doctrine. You may go to Lourdes and be helped. You may also be a faithful Catholic and never go. Bernadette would have understood the second group more easily than we might think. She spent her last years a long way from the queues.

What should not be lost, even in the largest crowd, is the size of the first girl. The basilicas are large because the Church believed her. They are not large because she asked for them. She asked for a chapel. The rest grew around a sentence she had repeated without understanding it, and around a spring she had opened with her hands.

A Reflection

A shrine can help you pray. It can also make you forget the person through whom it began. If you go to Lourdes, it is worth walking back to the Cachot after the torchlight. The basilicas, the baths and the care of the sick belong to the living Church. The Cachot reminds you where the story started.

A Short Prayer

Our Lady of Lourdes, keep pilgrims close to your Son, and keep us from loving the shrine more than the Gospel it serves. Amen.

Chapter 14

Children last in class



Bernadette was last, or nearly last, in the sort of class that rewards quick memory and easy French. That fact has comforted many children who find lessons hard. It should not be used carelessly. She is not a reason to stop teaching. She is not a promise that every struggling child will become famous. She is evidence that a child's slowness in one kind of lesson does not measure that child's worth, or that child's possible usefulness to God.

A good catechist already knows this and still has to mark the register. Some children need more time. Some need a different language. Some are ill, or hungry, or ashamed. Bernadette was several of those things at once. The sisters and priests who kept teaching her were doing the right work. The Lady did not wait for their work to be finished before she spoke. Both statements can stand.

A child's school performance and that child's worth before God are not the same question. Catechists should teach properly. Children should be helped to learn. Slow learning is not evidence that God has little use for someone. Bernadette makes that concrete.

A Reflection

A child who cannot yet explain a dogma may still be asked to carry it. That is not a programme for education policy. It is a fact about Bernadette. The rest of us, whether we teach or sit at the back, have to live with the uncomfortable mercy of it.

A Short Prayer

Lord, look with kindness on children who find the lesson hard, and on those who have to teach them. Amen.

Chapter 15

What she would not add



If this story has a centre, it is not the broom. The broom is only how she later spoke of herself. The centre is a girl who would not improve the message. She repeated what she believed she had heard. She left the explanation to people whose job was explanation. She went on wanting Communion, wanting to be left in peace, and not wanting to become the owner of a shrine.

What is striking is that she did not keep adding new explanations once the questions became larger than what she believed she had actually seen. She knew the difference between what she had seen and what other people wished she had seen.

Bernadette said the Lady spoke her language. The child carried a sentence she could not yet explain. The priest recognised it. The Church took years to judge. The girl went away and died in an infirmary. Pilgrims still come.

A Reflection

We are not asked to become Bernadette. We are asked not to enlarge a true thing, and not to wait until we sound impressive before we will be used. That is already enough to be getting on with.

A Short Prayer

Lord, thank you for the child from the Cachot. Give us her honesty, and give us peace when our particular work is done. Amen.

A Letter to the Reader



If you have stayed to the end, you already know that this book is not trying to make Bernadette impressive. She would have disliked that. She thought of herself as a broom that had been used and put back.

You may go to Lourdes. You may never go. You may teach catechism. You may sit at the back of the class. In every case the same fact remains. God spoke to a child who was still learning, in the language she already had, and she carried the words without pretending to own them.

That is as much ending as she needs.

Sources



Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes, lourdes-france.org: accounts of the apparitions, including 25 March 1858 and the wording *Que soy era Immaculada Councepciou*; the episcopal decree of 18 January 1862.

Bishop Bertrand-Sévère Laurence, pastoral letter of 18 January 1862, judging the apparitions worthy of belief.

Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*, 8 December 1854.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, on the Immaculate Conception (nn. 490–493) and on private revelation (n. 67).

René Laurentin, *Bernadette vous parle*, and later studies of the Lourdes dossiers, for Peyramale's request that the lady give her name and that the rosebush bloom.

François Trochu, *Sainte Bernadette Soubirous*, for the outline of her life at Lourdes and at Nevers.

Sisters of Charity of Nevers / Espace Bernadette Soubirous Nevers, for her religious name, Sister Marie-Bernard, her work and her death on 16 April 1879.

On language: the Gascon Occitan of Bigorre (Bigourdan) as Bernadette's home speech, with limited French in 1858.

On the broom: a saying widely attributed to Bernadette in later life, reported in more than one wording, that the Virgin used her as a broom and then put her back in her place.

A word of thanks



There is no charge for reading this book. If Silent Homilies has helped you, and if you wish to support the work, you may. If you simply close the book and pray, that is already enough.

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