

# THE HOLY LIFE OF SAINT BERNADETTE

## VISITATIONS FROM THE QUEEN OF HEAVEN



### FROM GAVARNIE TO THE GROTTA

As warm sunlight bathes the beautiful, majestic peaks of the Pyrenees, snow melts to form a towering waterfall called Gavarnie Falls which cascades all the way down an enormous cliff face to form the River Gave. Passing by the small village of Gavarnie, the river wends its way down through mountain valleys until its crystal clear waters reach Lourdes, a small town in southern France nestled in the foothills of the Pyrenees.

It is here in 1858, in a small grotto beside the River Gave, that the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Holy Mother of God, appears to a young girl called Bernadette who is there to collect firewood for her family.



11TH FEBRUARY 1858

### THE APPARITIONS BEGIN

A heavy mist hangs over Lourdes on the first Thursday of Lent. It is cold in the *Cachot*, the cramped home of the Soubirous family, as they have run out of wood for the fire to keep their home warm. At 11 o'clock, Bernadette sets off to the wood at Massabielle with her younger sister and a friend, to gather sticks for the fire. The other girls cross the icy stream and go past the grotto, leaving Bernadette behind. As the church's clock tower strikes twelve and the *Angelus* rings out, Bernadette begins to take off her stockings to cross the stream when, suddenly, she hears a noise like a gust of wind in a storm. She looks at the trees in the field opposite the grotto but they are not moving.

### A BEAUTIFUL LADY

Bernadette turns to the grotto and sees some branches at the top swaying to and fro, and in a small niche she sees a beautiful young Lady who greets her with a bow of her head. Afraid, Bernadette steps back. Looking up she sees the Lady smiling at her kindly, inviting her nearer. A gentle light emanates from the Lady who is wearing a white dress which reaches down to her feet, on each of which rests a yellow rose. A long white veil covers her head, coming down over her shoulders almost to the bottom of her dress which is fastened at the waist by a blue sash which flows down below her knees. Her eyes are blue, and her face is so graceful and beautiful beyond compare.

### THE HOLY ROSARY

Taking her Rosary out of her pocket Bernadette kneels down to pray, but as she tries to make the Sign of the Cross she cannot lift her hand. The Lady holds her Rosary of large white beads that are widely spaced on a golden chain and makes the Sign of the Cross. Now, Bernadette is no longer afraid: she makes the Sign of the Cross and begins her Rosary. As she passes her beads through her fingers in time with Bernadette, the Queen of Heaven does not say the *Our Father* or *Hail Mary* but at each *Gloria Be* she bows her head to recite the prayer. As Bernadette completes her Rosary the Lady smiles, bows to her, retires into the niche and disappears.



I AM THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION  
O MARY, CONCEIVED WITHOUT SIN,  
PRAY FOR US WHO HAVE RECOURSE TO THEE  
AVE MARIA  
AVE MARIA

18TH FEBRUARY 1858

### OUR LADY SPEAKS

At the third visitation the Lady speaks to Bernadette for the first time and asks her, "Will you do me the favour of coming here for fifteen days?" Bernadette says that, with the permission of her parents, she will come. And the Queen of Heaven assures Bernadette of her future happiness, not in this world but in the eternal joy of God's Heavenly Kingdom.

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

25TH FEBRUARY 1858

### A MIRACULOUS SPRING

In the days that follow, Bernadette returns to the grotto as she promised. She carries a blessed candle, and is accompanied by her mother who is deeply moved when she sees her child in the presence of the apparition. At the ninth visitation, the Lady asks Bernadette to drink from the spring and wash in it. Bernadette goes to the River Gave but the Lady points at a patch of dirty water within the grotto. Bernadette digs with her hands, and a spring of clear water issues forth from the earth. She drinks from it, washes in it, and eats grass nearby as humble acts of penance for sinners.

25TH MARCH 1858

### A HOLY NAME

The first rays of dawn light the sky, heralding the *Feast of the Annunciation*. Our Lady smiles serenely as she watches those gathering at the grotto. Bernadette kneels down, speaks lovingly of how happy she is to see her, then she takes up her Rosary beads to pray. It is the sixteenth visitation and Bernadette is eager to know the Lady's name, "O Madame, will you be so kind as to tell me who you are?" Our Lady steps closer to the ground, opens her arms in blessing upon the earth, then joins her hands close to her heart, and raising her eyes to Heaven, says: "I AM THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION."



### THE REVERENCE OF BERNADETTE

Many onlookers gather at the grotto. Later, they speak of Bernadette: "Her eyes lighted up and sparkled; a beautiful grace spread over her whole being. Her soul seemed to be striving to proclaim its jubilation. We men who were present uncovered our heads and bent our knees. Like all those present at this heavenly scene, we could see that a conversation had begun between the mysterious Lady and the child whom we had before our eyes. I have encountered many people of elegance and distinction; but never have I seen anyone make a bow with such grace and refinement as did Bernadette."

"During the ecstasy Bernadette made the Sign of the Cross from time to time, and as I said on the way back from the grotto, if the Sign of the Cross is made in Heaven, it can only be made in that manner."

"I felt the presence of the Lady of the grotto and I felt her motherly gaze. It was the most solemn hour of my life! The thought that a sneering, self-satisfied fellow like me had been permitted to come so close to the Queen of Heaven."

7TH JANUARY 1844

Bernadette is born at the Boly Mill, a year after her mother and father are married. Two days later, she is baptised at St. Peter's parish church. In the years ahead she will grow up with a sister and three brothers.

NOVEMBER 1844

Bernadette is only 10 months old when her mother falls ill and is unable to look after her, so Bernadette is given to the care of family friends who live in Barrès, a small village three miles from Lourdes.

1ST APRIL 1846

Bernadette is just over two years old when she comes back to her family home at the Boly Mill where her mother and father work hard to supply flour for baking bread to the 4000 inhabitants of Lourdes.

24TH JUNE 1854

After 10 years of running the family mill, Bernadette's parents fall on hard times and are reduced to poverty. Unable to afford the rent on their home, they have to leave the mill and find somewhere else to live.

AUTUMN 1855

A plague of cholera sweeps through Lourdes and the surrounding villages. Bernadette, already suffering with asthma, is badly affected by the plague but after long and painful treatment she recovers.

NOVEMBER 1856

Bernadette's family lodge in other places for a time but, unable to afford the rent, they are made homeless again and again. Now in the direst poverty they are given shelter in the *Cachot*, an old dungeon.

SUMMER 1857

Bernadette returns to Barrès where she lives with her godparents and their five young children. She starts classes to learn her Catechism and enjoys caring for the children and working as a shepherdess.

11TH FEBRUARY 1858

Having returned home a few weeks ago, Bernadette heads out from the *Cachot* on this cold morning to search for wood for the fire. On arriving at a grotto down by the river she sees a beautiful Lady.

3RD JUNE 1858

Our Lady visits Bernadette almost daily for a fortnight, and then twice more ahead of the *Feast of Corpus Christi*. This day, with great reverence and joy, Bernadette receives Jesus in First Holy Communion.

16TH JULY 1858

It is the *Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel*. The Queen of Heaven makes her last visit to Bernadette. Unable to reach the grotto, Bernadette sees her from across the river: "Never had I seen her looking so beautiful."



### THE BOLY MILL

The Boly Mill has a storeroom for grain; a room for the large millstones; a shed for the big waterwheel driven by the river flowing past the mill; and a kitchen and three more rooms. The mill is home for Bernadette. She grows up in a loving Catholic family, and likes to help in the house and look after her younger sister and brothers. Her father and mother work hard in the mill, and despite only making a meagre living to help bring up their growing family, they are well known for their kindness, often giving away free sacks of flour to the poorest people in the town.



A. D. 1844 - 1879

### THE CACHOT

After ten years, unable to afford the rent and repairs to aging equipment, Bernadette's family have to leave the Boly Mill. Her father finds work in smaller mills, and her mother, work on the land and washing laundry, but despite this they are reduced to penury. Homeless and wheeling a cart of their scant possessions through the streets, they find refuge in the *Cachot*, a dark, damp dungeon of an old prison, measuring just 4 by 4.5 metres. It is from here that Bernadette sets out, one cold winter's day, in search of firewood for the family home, and encounters the Queen of Heaven!

