



22nd Week of Ordinary Time: 28th/29th August
Reflection/Homily by Mgr Daniel McHugh

Called to Greatness

This coming weekend the relics of St Bernadette begin a journey across England, Scotland and Wales to give an opportunity for people to reach out to, to be in touch with, this famous Saint whose meetings with Our Lady in the Grotto of Massabielle in Lourdes has led to the establishment of one of the greatest sites of Pilgrimage across the world. Who was Bernadette? The Dictionary of Saints says of her: “Marie Bernarde (Bernadette) Soubirous was the eldest child of an impoverished miller. At the age of 14 she was ailing and undersized, sensitive and of a pleasant disposition but accounted backward and slow. Between 11th February and 16th July 1858, in a shallow cave on the bank of the River Gave, she had a series of remarkable experiences. On eighteen occasions she saw a very young and beautiful lady, who made various requests and communications to her, pointing out a forgotten spring of water and enjoining prayer and penitence. The lady eventually identified herself as the Virgin Mary, under the title of “The Immaculate Conception”. In 1866 she was admitted to the Convent of the Sisters of Charity in Nevers. It was the year in which the apparitions were authenticated by the Bishop of Tarbes. In the Convent she was sheltered from trying publicity, but suffered the tightening grip of asthma, living out a self-effacing life dying at the age of 35. The events of 1858 resulted in Lourdes becoming one of the greatest Shrines in the history of Christendom. Donald Attwater who wrote the Penguin Directory of the Saints concludes: “St Bernadette took no part in these developments (the growth of the Shrine at Lourdes); nor was it for her visions that she was Canonized, but for the humble simplicity and religious trustiness that characterized her whole life”. “Her moving life was not easy” we are reminded in a video promoting the journey of her relics. She grew up in a disused jail, lived in poorer circumstances than many can imagine, but in the sight of heaven she was the one “called to greatness” as one Bishop says in the video.

The story of Bernadette is reflected in the readings of the Mass for the 21st Sunday, especially the Gospel, where Jesus speaks of the Banquet of the Kingdom of Heaven where the Host says to the lowly guest “my friend move up higher.” The first reading for the same Sunday takes up the theme of humility in these words “great though the power of the Lord is, he accepts the homage of the humble.” Although unremarkable, Bernadette’s life was to inspire generations of people to journey in Faith on Pilgrimage to Lourdes where the central message is one of “conversion” through prayer. It is in a spirit of humility that we take part in the Eucharist this week knowing our need to pay homage in the Spirit of Jesus “humble of heart”.

One of the most beautiful parables, to my mind, is that of the Prodigal Son; Father Yen Vu, the Vietnamese Chaplain, focusses on it in a beautiful Reflection on the artist Rembrandt’s portrait of the “blind” Father welcoming home his wayward son. This interpretation highlights the beauty of the inner life of the Father. The account goes: as a

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father, the only authority God wants to express is the authority of compassion. He embraces the suffering of his children.”

When we think and pray, we know we have plenty to be humble about, but we often find it difficult to come to the point of recognizing it: the story of the Prodigal is a call to each one of us to recognize in humility our need of compassion and forgiveness before God.

This is the opening prayer for the Mass of St Bernadette:

*Lord God,
protector of the poor and helpless,
you gave Bernadette,
marvellous gifts of patience and love.
By her life of prayer and good works,
teach us to live our faith in simplicity
of heart,
that we may behold your face
in the heavenly kingdom.
Amen.*

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