



## 2021 Walk to Bethlehem



### Our Lady of Lourdes



On February 11, 1858, a poor 14-year-old shepherd girl named Bernadette Soubirous was collecting firewood near Lourdes, France. She saw a bright light, and a “Lady” appeared before her in a natural hollow of rock in a cave on the shore of a river.

The “Lady” appeared with a youthful face, and she wore a white garment with a blue belt and carried a rosary. Over the course of 18 appearances, she identified herself as the Blessed Virgin Mary as the “Immaculate Conception.” Mary told Bernadette to drink from a spring within the cave and to tell Church authorities to build a shrine on the site. Since those appearances, more than 200 million pilgrims have visited Lourdes, many reporting cures from the miraculous spring. There has been a total of 70 miracles that have been validated by the Church, the most recent one occurring in 2018.

Father Edward Sorin, founder of the University of Notre Dame, visited Lourdes on one of his many trips back to France in the late 1800s to confer with the Holy Cross community. He was moved by the display of faith he saw there and began conversations at Notre Dame to construct a replica shrine on campus.

Notre Dame’s Grotto was constructed in 1896 (after Sorin’s death) and replicates the shrine at Lourdes on a one-seventh scale. A stone from Lourdes is implanted in the Grotto wall. The other boulders were unearthed from nearby farm fields, some weighing two or three tons. Workers, in digging the foundation, opened a spring of water in the same relative position as the miraculous spring that emerged at Lourdes--that spring now flows through the fountain on the left side of the Grotto.





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### St. Bernadette

The story of Bernadette and the visions of Mary that she received in Lourdes is well-known. Notre Dame's own Grotto replicates the Lourdes grotto on a one-seventh scale and is a center of prayer on campus.

Bernadette's own story, however, is more obscure. She was the oldest of six children born to a poor miller and his wife. The family business did not thrive, and the family lived in poverty. Bernadette had to work instead of going to school, and was hired out as a servant for two years when she was 12. At the time of the visions, the family was living in the basement of a worn-down building in town. On top of her poverty, Bernadette suffered from asthma and was never consistently healthy. People did not think her to be bright.

The apparitions gathered an extreme amount of attention to Bernadette. Anti-clerical French authorities tried to scare her into retracting her account because of the crowds of pilgrims who gathered at the cave where Mary appeared to her. She was questioned and cross-examined and interviewed unceasingly.



In addition, the pilgrims who came to Lourdes sought her out looking for the miraculous. They tried to cut pieces from her dress and they asked her to bless things. Many tried to give her money, but she and her family refused so as to not appear to be profiting from the apparition.

After a few years, Bernadette went to a convent of nuns who cared for the sick and the poor. She was both, so they took her in as a member of their community. They taught her to read and write, though she was often mistreated by her superiors.

When the church was built that Mary had asked for, Bernadette excused herself from the celebration of its consecration. She was always humble and very simple—she compared herself to a broom, saying, “Our Lady used me. They have put me back in my corner. I am happy there.”

She continued to suffer from asthma and other illnesses, and died in the convent at the age of 35 in 1879. Saint Bernadette is the patron of the ill, poor, sheep tenders and those ridiculed for their piety. Her feast day is February 18.

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