

St Bernadette teaches us how to embrace suffering



I am devoted to Our Lady of Lourdes and have experienced the healing power of Lourdes water. I still find it demoralising to learn about the unhappy life of St Bernadette Soubirous. I can only study her life in small doses. She grew up in grinding poverty, as her father lost the family business and her mother was forced to do laundry for wealthier families. Bernadette was sent away to live with another family at 13 to be an errand girl and look after sheep.

A reoccurring trial was that others treated Bernadette as though she was slow and stupid. It hurt her that she had not made her First Holy Communion when she was 14 because she had been dismissed as too dim to learn the catechism.

On one occasion during the 1858 apparitions, Our Lady confirmed to Bernadette that her life would be scarred with suffering, saying, “I cannot promise to make you happy in this world, only in the next.” On the 21st of February 1858, Our Lady explained to Bernadette her role in life, “you will pray to God for sinners.”

Bernadette willingly accepted her place as a suffering soul. Without making a prideful fuss, she dedicated herself to prayer and offering her many sufferings to make up for the sins of others. When she entered religious life, she was treated unfairly and severely by one Sr Vauzous.

It is thought that Sr Vauzous was jealous of the Bernadette and didn't think that a girl from such a lowly background was deserving of having colloquies with our Blessed Mother. Bernadette did not protest against Sr Vauzous, instead she accepted it as part of her duty in life to proffer her sufferings to the Lord as a form of expiation for the sins of others.

Bernadette had always been sickly, but in her final years, she developed a tumour in her knee which was excruciatingly painful. If she moved her leg in her sleep, it caused her to cry out in agony. Again, Bernadette took this as part of her vocation, which was devoted to making atonement for the sins of others. Sins that little Bernadette did not commit.

Here we come to the crux of why the story of Bernadette is so testing. How many of us are so generous as to do penance for sins that we did not commit? How many of us would find it impossible not to complain about our problems? Perhaps a more biting self-evaluation would mean asking ourselves if we are like any of Little Bernadette's persecutors.

It is true that Bernadette was given a unique role. But each of us can offer our trials in a similar way as a way of taking our small parts in the redemption of the world.

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