

Pilgrimage to Lourdes

According to Catholic belief, in 1858, a young girl called Bernadette Soubirous was out with her sister collecting firewood when a beautiful woman appeared to her at a grotto. Speaking in her native Occitan language, the lady asked Bernadette to return to the grotto. She appeared to Bernadette several times, referring to herself as 'Immaculata Conception'. This was a recent phrase, only newly introduced to the Catholic scholars, Bishops and Cardinals in Rome. Pope Pius IX had in 1854 described Mary, Jesus' mother, as herself the product of an immaculate conception, or Immaculata Conception. When Bernadette told her local priest about the lady who appeared to her and this description, the priest was inclined to believe this was a genuine vision of Mary because Bernadette would have no knowledge of this phrase or its meaning.

The lady identified a particular spot on the ground where Bernadette should dig. When she obeyed a spring welled up and Bernadette drank the water. Today a huge spring gushes from the grotto and pilgrims drink from it and bathe in it. Others drank from the spring Bernadette had uncovered and began reporting they had been cured of illness. Today the water is believed to be able to cure disease and ailments. Over the years people have claimed the water has cured blindness, cancer and paralysis as well as many diseases.

Each year the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes, the church that has grown up at the site, welcomes pilgrims between March and October. Over 250 hotels cater for the huge influx of visitors to the small town of Lourdes. Many bathe in the water that still flows from the grotto. The Roman Catholic church recognizes 69 claims of miraculous healing after bathing in Lourdes.