

Lourdes 2019 - "Blessed are the poor, for the Kingdom of God is theirs" (Luke 6, 20)

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

*Being poor is not appealing, all those who are poor share that opinion. It is understandable; nobody likes to be poor. What is appealing however is to possess the Kingdom of Heaven. But only the poor may enjoy that privilege* (Madeleine Delbr el, *The joy of believing*).

The 7<sup>th</sup> January 2019, will be the 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Bernadette's birth; she was baptised on 9<sup>th</sup> January. And on 16<sup>th</sup> April we will celebrate the 140<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her death.

We will also be remembering another saint In Lourdes, Benedict Joseph Labre, the beggar saint, patron saint of pilgrims, the homeless, and the Hospitality of Our Lady of Lourdes.

We are not glorifying a lifestyle of misfortune. "*Being poor is not appealing ...*"

Nor do we idealise the voice of the poor though their testimony echoes the Gospel for that could just lead us to remain in a state of detached admiration, without really changing, without a real conversion of hearts and lives.

We aspire to follow the same path that Mary offered to Bernadette, an Easter path; to die to our old self, to discover true Life, true Happiness. Of course, we have to listen, but we also have to engage. A pilgrim does not return home in the same state as he or she was before setting out; this presupposes that one gradually lets oneself be stripped, de-cluttered, impoverished, in order to open oneself to the riches of God's gift. Bernadette was not giving her family a lesson in morality when she appealed: "*As long as they do not get rich!*" She opened up to them the perspective she gained from contemplating the *other world* at the Grotto.

Personal poverty is humiliating and dehumanising yet wealth which is not shared, degrades and corrupts us. The Gospel does not promote social revolution, but revolutionises hearts leading the master to become a servant and wash the feet of the poorest. This is not a simple reversal of roles, for the two discover that they are brothers, loved by the same Father, stirred by the same heart.

From the beginning, Lourdes has triggered this revolution of hearts. The "rich" are willing to strain to carry the stretchers of the infirm, whom they call "our VIPs, the sick". But even in a charitable organisation, we are tempted to claim, our rights and privileges. Let us die to the old self with its rights and privileges in order to welcome the happiness of the promised Kingdom, already given to us in the joy of an outstretched hand.

In Lourdes, we aim to show true solidarity with concrete gestures, that lead us to continue doing it in our day to day life back home.

The Way of Bernadette, marked out by Mary

The Way of the Gospel, proclaimed to the poor, despite all the misery, evil and even the mud

The taste of the well-spring which is a happiness that needs to be shared

Communion with the very life of Jesus, who became poor to enrich us with his poverty.

## **Bernadette's poverty and wealth**

Bernadette knew all types of poverty; physical, material, intellectual, social ... she encountered misunderstanding and contempt.

She benefitted from a two-fold wealth, love and prayer first in the family, and later in community. She wanted to share this happiness with the poor. *"I love the poor, I love to care for the sick: I will stay with the sisters of Nevers."*

Bernadette knew true happiness: *"Oh no, Bernadette, you're not poor; you are happy, yes, happy!"* (Bishop Thibault)

As we examine this paradoxical link between poverty and happiness, we are helped by the figure of this other saint of Lourdes, patron of the Hospitality, Benedict Joseph Labre, the beggar saint. He was canonised in 1881, at a time when it was thought that material progress and medicine would succeed in promoting a model of humanity permanently free of misery. Further, canonising a down-and-out was considered scandalous!

*"God is waiting elsewhere,"* were the words with which Benedict Labre (1748-1783), son of peasants from Amettes (Pas-de-Calais), was repeatedly refused entrance to the monastic life. Then, at the age of 21, he set out, going from shrine to shrine, with a shoulder bag, and a crucifix around his neck.

He trekked 30,000 kilometres, passing through Santiago de Compostela, Loreto, and Rome. He set off on the road in order to find out what God expected of him, and he came to understand - through surrender and detachment - that his vocation was exactly that; to be a pilgrim.

In Rome he was living in arch No. 43 of the Colosseum! Just before Easter 1783, he was discovered not far from there, dying on the steps of the church of Madonna dei Monti. A neighbour took him into his house, and it was there that he died on Wednesday, 16<sup>th</sup> April, at the age of 35, the same age as Bernadette!

He would not have desired a different life for all the gold in the world any more than Mother Teresa would have stopped caring for the dregs of humanity whom she served. She did it for Jesus' sake! There is a secret here that needs to be revealed. *"This poor man, who lacks everything, seems to possess all that he has sought, and we ask him for the source of his joy."*

This is a secret that Mary knows and shares: she empties herself to be filled with grace, the presence of God who gives himself. Mary receives everything and retains nothing for herself. She reverses the curse of poverty by making it the condition in which God gives Himself. He becomes the servant, humbling himself to become one with those he loves. He joins himself to His handmaid. A gift bringing joy.

***"The Good News is proclaimed to the poor"*** (Lk 7: n22)

These are the last words of Jesus' response to those sent by John the Baptist, questioning him about his mission: "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect another? Healings, even resurrections, conclude with the certainty that the poor are visited by the joyous announcement of salvation. Theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.

This is the secret of happiness, and Bernadette embodies it, living by its light. The apparition in the hollow of the Grotto brought satisfaction to Bernadette: she was marginalised, had not yet gone to school, or made her first communion; now someone was taking an interest in her and reflected the

image the Father had of her: *"He has looked on his servant in her lowliness."* It was a young girl, *"as young and as small as me,"* she called me *"vous."*

Bernadette existed for someone. Her ordinary life, lived in poverty and love, allowed her to experience a heavenly happiness. In the hollow of the dark Grotto, from the depths of the cachot, she heard and saw, without being able to deny that she had seen or heard. She lived the experience of the first apostles, witnesses of the new life of the Risen One (Acts 4: 20).

*So they left the council rejoicing because they had been considered worthy to suffer dishonour for the sake of the name* (Acts 5: 41). The interrogations, the cachot itself, could no longer frighten Bernadette, as they could no longer frighten the apostles, the same men who, just a short time previously, were traitors, unfaithful and disloyal. *"It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me."* (Gal 2: 20). The Good News does not reside in an espoused belief, but is associated with a presence, "more intimate to myself than myself".

Bernadette remained herself, she did not receive any preferential treatment. Her confidence was not undermined by being addressed as *"foolish child"* and *"good for nothing"*. She acknowledged: *"It is because I was the most ignorant that the Blessed Virgin chose me."* She welcomed the response that her superior made to the bishop of Nevers when she made her first profession, that she would keep Sister Marie-Bernard at the mother house, and she must not consider this a privilege. She readily accepts it: *"I told you, my lord, that I was good for nothing! "*

*"Yes, Mademoiselle, Bernadette, I'm just that,"* she said to a new sister who was surprised to see her. *"There were so many young sisters in front of whom I would have knelt rather than Bernadette."* Holiness does not reveal itself in one's appearance but in one's heart. One has to open one's own heart to see into the other person's heart.

We are invited to open ourselves to God, who finds his joy in delighting his creatures, who seeks them when they are lost, reaching out to them in their poverty who wants to impart to them his Breath, his Life. This is how he recognises the souls of the poor, as they reach towards the One on whom they depend. God reveals himself by giving himself. *"What would you do,"* asked Benedict Joseph's confessor, to put him to the test, *"what would you do if an angel told you that you were damned? - I would still trust in Mercy."* A trust in God, who can only love and give himself. This is how we experience the greatest pilgrimage, which moves us from fear to love. God is my Father, Jesus is my brother, recognised in the most vulnerable.

Bernadette would find her happiness and her vocation in the service of the poorest. So, she chose to enter the convent of the Sisters of Charity of Nevers. She understood that the Lord who visited her, reveals himself to her now in the person of the poorest. *"The more disgusting the poor person is, the more he is to be loved."* Such is the happiness of the other world, capable of transfiguring apparent ugliness with the kiss of love.

***"Do not say, 'I am too young.' But go to whomsoever I send you."*** (Jeremiah 1: 7)

"Even poor people can be given a mission and become servants of the Gospel. This is the conviction of the Shiloh pilgrimage to Rome, inspired by Father Joseph Wresinski. Further, the Pope endorsed this: *I would like to ask you a favour, more than a favour, to give you a mission: a mission that only you, in your poverty, will be able to accomplish. Let me explain: Jesus, at times, was very strict and strongly reprimanded those who did not embrace the Father's message. He addressed this beautiful word "blessed" to the poor, to those who are hungry, to those who cry, to those who are hated and persecuted, but he also uttered another which made people scared! He said "woe!" And he said it to*

*the rich, to those well-satisfied with food, to those who now laugh, to those who like to be praised (see Lk 6: 24-26), to the hypocrites (see Mt 23: 15 f). I give you the mission to pray for them, so that the Lord may change their hearts.* (6 July 2016)

Bernadette is not only shown respectful attention, she is charged with a "mission" for the priests, much as the holy women at the empty tomb were sent to the apostles by the risen Jesus. *"Go and tell the priests that they should build a chapel here, and that people should come in procession."* Women initiated the building of the Church, and they continue throughout the ages to wake dormant men. They are the guardians of the power of life, always ready to rally.

A mission is not advertising but giving birth. The poor have nothing to give but are able to share their lives. Meeting the poor can help us fill the spiritual void that many are experiencing today. *"If you are in pain, find someone who needs to be comforted."* With these words Mother Teresa gave a new impetus to tired hearts. And Abbé Pierre recruits the first companion of Emmaüs by asking a young person who wanted to commit suicide to first help him carry a mattress to the home of a poor person.

*"See the miracle of poverty! Yes, the rich were foreigners; but the service of the poor 'naturalises' them."* (Bossuet, Sermon for the ninth Sunday before Easter, 2) Even before we serve, simply meeting someone poorer than we are, opens our eyes and our hearts to something beyond appearances, and brings joy through the meeting of hearts.

*"You know nothing, but you understand everything."* It is not acceptable to be poor, but it is necessary: *"The rich are burdened, and because of that, they flounder."* (in a sharing with people of the street).

*"I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned and revealed them to little children."* (Mt 11, Lk 10) The "poor" understand the Gospel from within! We may wish to begin preparations for our pilgrimages with people in poverty. The St. Lawrence Network will be able to provide a starter text, based on a meditation of Luke 6.

Mary entrusted Bernadette with pointing out the path to true happiness. She knew how to reveal to sinners the One who loves them. *"Since you are a sinner, I shall repeat the Blessed Virgin's smile for you."* It's not just about being kind, but about understanding what Jesus meant when He said in Luke, *"Blessed are the poor"* then immediately adds: *"But woe to you, the rich, for you have your consolation! Woe to you who are sated now, because you will be hungry! ..."* In St. Matthew, Jesus' preaching begins with the pronouncement of the Beatitudes and concludes, in chapter 23, with a series of "curses" that target the *"Scribes and Pharisees, the hypocrites!"*

Mary introduces Bernadette to this choice between life or death, blessing or curse. *"Therefore, choose life, that you may live, you and your offspring."* (Deuteronomy 30,19). Mary teaches as a mother, which makes Bernadette desire to "stay poor", to live and share the happiness of God.

*"A poor church for the poor":* this is Pope Francis' great desire because it testifies to another wealth that only the poor can know. Sharing that flows from our experience of poverty can really enrich us! First, we need to accept and not delegate this sharing. We are all poor people who need help, who need to be loved. We exist as the fruits of mercy.

*By bringing dirty, muddy water to her mouth, it is as if Bernadette **agreed to be in communion with the misery of the world.** As if she welcomed it whilst, at the same time, knowing that the water she found, came from God, and that it was thanks to God that she could, without fear, bring to her*

*mouth what was defiled* (P Etienne Grieu, Servons Brotherhood). This is the moment from which healings begin to occur.

In 2019 in Lourdes, we might take up this sign suggested at the gathering of the Diaconia: to place our hands into the mud then go together to wash with the water of the Grotto. Let the misery of the world penetrate us, let us admit our own misery so that we may be purified by one another. This is a gesture that can help us **understand confession and its communal dimension**.

**"You are the one in poverty, Lord Jesus! "**

Bernadette is happy, and in the world of Jesus, the world of God, we are happy with her. Our brethren from the Eastern Church tell us, "Our social doctrine is the Trinity! Each person surrenders himself totally to the other and receives back from the other. We are reborn of Mercy. We are grafted onto the filial life of Jesus, who desires unceasingly from God the Father what he unceasingly receives from him. He is the poor man, who receives and gives thanks.

In this way the Christian, by baptism, becomes that child, who does not create himself, but gratefully receives the life entrusted to him. He is the poor man who depends on the gift given to him. The Christian looks at and imitates Jesus, the firstborn. The state of childhood, the state of poverty, is not a biological or social reality, but a gift and a call from the Spirit. Pope Francis expresses this in his Message for the 1<sup>st</sup> World Day of the Poor: *Let us never forget that, for Christ's disciples, poverty is above all a call to follow Jesus in his own poverty. It means walking behind him and beside him, a journey that leads to the beatitude of the Kingdom of heaven* (see Mt 5: 3, Lk 6:20).

*For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that although he was rich, he became poor for your sake, so that you by his poverty could become rich. (2 Co 8: 9)*

The Pope continues, in his homily at the meeting on 19<sup>th</sup> November 2017: *Just as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me" (Mt 25:40). These least of our brethren, whom he loves dearly, are the hungry and the sick, the stranger and the prisoner, the poor and the abandoned, the suffering who receive no help, the needy who are cast aside. On their faces we can imagine seeing Jesus' own face; on their lips, even if pursed in pain, we can hear his words: "This is my body" (Mt 26:26). In the poor, Jesus knocks on the doors of our heart, thirsting for our love. When we overcome our indifference, and in the name of Jesus, we give of ourselves for the least of his brethren, we are his good and faithful friends, with whom he loves to dwell.*

*There, in the poor, we find the presence of Jesus, who, though rich, became poor (see 2 Cor 8:9). For this reason, in them, in their weakness, a "saving power" is present. And if in the eyes of the world they have little value, they are the ones who open to us the way to heaven; they are our "passport to paradise". For us it is an evangelical duty to care for them, as our real riches, and to do so not only by giving them bread, but also by breaking with them the bread of God's word, which is addressed first to them. To love the poor means to combat all forms of poverty, spiritual and material.*

Jesus is the Saviour, who wants to reach humanity in its entirety, from deep in his heart, the centre from which all the work of creation becomes possible again. Healings are only signs of an infinitely greater gift, which calls for the renunciation of self-reliance. The poor that we are, need to believe, to hope, to love. Let's listen again to Madeleine Delbrel: *"We have forgotten the faith of the poorest. They have been left alone, alone with their belief in the human spirit, where alone in a universe with half-truths, they were told lies. Capitalism has its proletariat, but so does the truth."*

*"It is an intelligence that has become exclusively utilitarian, and utilitarian only for a limited definition of happiness that I call misery of the mind."* The only question that all too often interests

us is, "*What's the point?*" We cut the link between charity and belief. Yet it is in the rags of a beggar, or on the face of a sick child, that we find joy. This joy leads us to commit ourselves to serve.

God is infinitely more practical than the best human schemes against the abandonment and lies of which the poor are victims. Our charity should never be limited to useful plans nor should we reduce poverty to only a few types! Progress in these areas requires an awareness of one's own poverties and, more fundamentally, it calls for a union with Christ, living with a heart close to the least of our brothers.

### ***He made a covenant with us***

Our poverty is our wealth, our need of and joy in relationships with others. Pilgrimage together gives us this experience, in the footsteps of Mary and Bernadette: "*I am unhappy, but I am happy. It is the fact of being recognised, of discussing, of sharing my suffering with others. We see joy in the eyes of others.* When we let ourselves be gazed upon by Christ, we become poor like him, begging for the love of the Father, thankful for the life we have received. The service of the poor is then a fraternal sharing of the very life of Jesus our brother, the first-born Son. Our very lives become the setting of the new covenant between God and man in Christ.

*"I do not long to be poor, I long to be Him"* (a Carmelite).