



chapter one

••• SPRINGS OF LIVING WATER •••



Over the years I have often been asked why such a multitude of people come to Lourdes. It is not an easy question to answer. To have a more comprehensive response you would really need to ask each of the five million or so people who come every year to this shrine. Even then you would probably have five million very different answers. I think people come here because they are thirsty. There is an elemental thirst in the heart of each of us, a thirst for life, for answers to the restless yearnings of our hearts, a thirst for wholeness in body and in spirit, above all a thirst to love and be loved. Lourdes stands like an oasis in the wilderness of our time. It is a place where we can quench that thirst. “Go drink at the spring and wash yourself there,” Our Lady said to Bernadette. On one level she points to the physical as she makes known to Bernadette a spring of water. But on another level the Blessed Virgin points us beyond the physical to the spiritual. We see that this is no mere water. It is the symbol of Jesus himself. He is the living water.

We do not have to believe in apparitions, in any apparitions (although in the case of Lourdes I believe you would be a fool if you didn’t). We are not obliged to, since they are not essential to our faith. What is so great about Lourdes is that it always brings us back to what is essential. The Blessed Virgin always points us in the direction of the Gospels. She always points us, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to Jesus her son who in turn reveals to us the Father’s love. In Lourdes there are many processions and ceremonies. However, Lourdes is much more

than this. It is much more than a place of devotion, more than a place of physical healing. It is above all a place in which we rediscover from the heart of God how much God loves us, how much we are held in God's mercy.

One day in a little office I had within the shrine the door suddenly burst open. A lady stood there, an Indonesian woman from Singapore, who clearly was very ill. "What must I do to be healed?" she blurted out. My first instinct was to say that there was no magic formula, that there was no special ritual that led to some automatic cure. I was about to say this but thankfully did not. Just for a moment there was a grace-filled pause, and I found myself being transported to that well-known scene of the Gospel in which the rich man approaches Jesus and asks: "[W]hat must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Mark10:17). What the lady from Singapore was asking was no different. She wanted life. We all do. Consciously or subconsciously, we are always searching for happiness, for peace, for wholeness, for healing.

In the shrine of Lourdes, today as yesterday, multitudes gather just like those who gathered around Jesus on the hills of Galilee hungry not for "bread alone," but for "every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). Every year people come from every corner of the earth, people of every creed and color. Many come just to see, to visit. Not everyone comes to pray. Lourdes can also be a world of superstition, simple tourist curiosity and religious commerce of the worst kind. But many more people do come to Lourdes thirsting for the answer to the burdens and anxieties that afflict their lives and trouble their spirits.

Like the woman from Singapore, many do come in search of physical healing, and why not? I remember once, while on holiday at home in my native Scotland, I went into the local church to pray. I happened upon a group of people clearly about to set off on pilgrimage to Lourdes. Their priest was saying to them: "Now, don't be going to Lourdes looking for miracles of healing." I understood where the priest was coming

from. He was afraid their prayers might not be answered and they would come home disappointed. But it was the wrong approach. The true Christian approach is to believe that with God all things are possible—to pray by all means for the miracle and at the same time to pray to accept and live whatever God allows.

The God we believe in is the God of the impossible. Lourdes is a credible witness to this belief. Numerous claims of healing have been investigated throughout its history. Since its beginnings in 1858, after stringent investigations, some sixty-five or so cases of physical healing have been declared medically and scientifically inexplicable and recognized by the church as miraculous. For whatever genuine reason one comes to Lourdes, for healing of the body or wholeness of the spirit, no one, on the whole, leaves disappointed. Even those who come for physical healing and do not find it often leave with a realization that beyond all the pain and darkness of our lives there is a love that holds us together.

“Hell is not to suffer; hell is to suffer without love,” a pilgrim once told me in Lourdes. Hell is indeed the agony of being without love. Lourdes speaks of heaven, not hell, and reminds us of a love that is always there to hold us. For the sick and the disabled, Lourdes becomes a school in which to learn to surrender and abandon our lives and hearts into the hands of God. We have to learn to trust God enough to allow him to create a new and better life even from the worst of circumstances. Many people say to the sick, “Offer up your suffering to God.” That sentiment can conjure up a narrow and mean image of God. How can the one who loves us so much be happy to receive the morbid gift of our unhappiness? What we can offer to God is not so much our sufferings in themselves, but the patience and the love with which we try to live with them. In this way our faith in God’s providence, and surrender to God’s will, may grow.

Many years ago, as I have alluded to in the introduction to this book, I had a very difficult and trying time in my own life. I’d come back from

the missions in Africa very ill and could have died. One day in the hospital a young nurse handed me a cassette player, saying, “Here, Father, here’s some music for you to cheer you up.” The music was a song by an English singer called Elkie Brooks. She was famous in Britain in the 70s and 80s. The song was called “Fool If You Think It’s Over.” That’s just exactly how I was thinking at the time—that it was very much over. I was a fool. Little did I know then that life, far from being over, was just about to begin. I came to Lourdes, was healed and, as they say, the rest is history!

Fool if you think it’s over. That was the message given by the Risen Jesus to two very discouraged and downhearted disciples he met on the road to Emmaus. With the death of Jesus all their hopes and dreams had been shattered. He met them on the road of their sorrow and said, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory” (Luke 24:25–26). Jesus didn’t come into this world to teach us how to die. He came to teach us how to live in this world and beyond.

“We are an Easter people, and our song is alleluia,” said Pope John Paul II. Nowhere is that more evident than in Lourdes. There are people who come in sadness and despair. They often leave with new hope, new heart and new life. Here is a place where truly “the blind receive their sight, the lame walk...the deaf hear” (Matthew 11:5). Not just in physical terms, but especially in the realm of the heart.

Lourdes lies in a mountain valley. The surrounding countryside speaks of fresh pastures, of sheep and of shepherds. We are reminded of Bernadette, the little shepherdess. We are reminded of Jesus, of the words of the book of Revelation: “[H]e will guide them to springs of the water of life” (Revelation 7:17b).



chapter two

••• SIGN LANGUAGE •••

Long ago “God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways through the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son...” (Hebrews 1:1–2).

God speaks a word and the world comes into being. He speaks a word through the prophets and reveals himself to his people. Finally he speaks the last word, the Word that is Jesus. He reveals all he is, and all we are called to live, in the person of his own son. “[T]he Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14). We believe in a God who speaks. His word is an invitation to existence, to dialogue, to communion. Sometimes we don’t hear that word. And since we don’t hear it, we cannot enter into dialogue or communion. We are like the deaf and dumb, unable to hear, unable to speak, not in the physical sense but in the depths of our hearts. God knows our disabilities. He doesn’t leave us in our deafness or our dumbness. In the many and various ways that he speaks, he gives us another language to use, the only one the deaf and the dumb can understand: sign language!

The message of Lourdes comes to us in many signs: The more important are poverty, rock, cave, water and light. They are all outward signs of a deeper spiritual reality that God wishes to work in our hearts. They are great signs, powerful signs that can communicate to us an ever-deeper understanding of the message. But for that to take place, they have to be understood within the context of the Bible and especially the Gospels. Let’s take a closer look at these signs:

Poverty is the first sign. On February 11, 1858, it is poverty that forces Bernadette to leave home in search of firewood. It is poverty that

brings her to Massabielle and to a “young lady” who waits for her. Bernadette is one of the poor and oppressed that Scripture proclaims are the objects of God’s favor and concern.

It was poverty—need—that led the Samaritan woman to fetch water in the desert at Jacob’s well, and there Jesus waited for her.

It was poverty that led the Israelites through the desert as they searched for the Promised Land. It is in that desert that God waits for them and with them makes an alliance.

This is the spirituality of the desert. God offers presence and friendship to those who wander poor and in need through the desert of the world in search of life.

Rock is the second of the signs. At the foot of the Pyrenean Mountains, in a cave in the rock known as Massabielle, a lady, enveloped in light, appears, smiles and enters into dialogue with Bernadette. Pilgrims who come to Lourdes stand and pray before this cave where Mary appeared. Daily they kiss and touch the rock where she made herself known to Bernadette. Often they do not comprehend all of the deeper meaning.

The mountain, the rock, the cave is a powerful biblical sign. God is the rock of Israel, the one upon whom the people can rely (Psalm 18:31). He provides water for a thirsty people from the rock of Mt. Horeb (Exodus 17:6) The *rock* is a symbol of the safety, security and fidelity of God: “The LORD is my rock, my fortress” (Psalm 18:2).

The *mountain* is the place where God dwells (Exodus 19; 1 Kings 19). It is the place where he reveals himself. His temple in Jerusalem is built on the mountain and dominates the city.

The *cave*, the grotto, is the heart of the mountain where, in biblical times, the divine presence would make itself known. In the Bible Moses and Elijah are admitted into intimacy with God as they find themselves in a cave.

In Lourdes Mary now replaces the prophets. She is the first witness

of the incarnation. She appears in a cave to remind us that the Word was made flesh and dwells among us. Jesus, born in a cave at Bethlehem, reveals himself to humankind.

Water is the third sign. For many who come to Lourdes it is the only sign. Sadly, it is perhaps the least understood. There are people who can go to the baths as many as six times in one day. (We know cleanliness is next to godliness, but that's pushing it a bit too far.) I remember a little boy who went into the children's baths and started screaming, "She's not my mama!" Nine women had pretended to be the boy's mother so they could get into the baths before anyone else. I even heard the story of a farmer giving his pigs Lourdes water to drink so they wouldn't get sick. This is just nonsense. Not only is it not Christian—it is downright pagan. This is what happens when we do not understand what the symbolism of this water means. When we don't understand, we run the risk of falling into superstition and magic.

All kinds of scientific studies have been made on this water. The results of these tests show the water to be just that: There are no special properties, no special healing agents. It's just pure, simple water. The water itself is not miraculous. If the water was miraculous in itself, then anyone and everyone who touched this water would be healed. In that case there would be no need of faith—in God or in anything else. It is not the water that heals—only God heals. God may use the water, but it is only God who heals. It is true that many of the recognized cures of Lourdes have been associated with the water. But people have also been healed in other circumstances: during the processions, while receiving communion, while on the train or plane going home. Some have even been healed a few days after the pilgrimage while at home. In other words, there is no one element that heals. God alone heals. In all these elements the one common factor is God. Consider the Gospel story of the cripple who is lying near the pool of Beth-zatha (John 5). He complains to Jesus that he has no one to put him in the water when it moves,

for it is only when the water moves that healing takes place. God moves the water, then comes the healing. So it is with the water of Lourdes. It is only when God touches the water that healing comes about.

To really understand the meaning of this sign, we have to see it in a biblical context and within the context of the wider message of Lourdes that goes beyond the physical to the spiritual. Lourdes speaks of the healing of the heart more than of the body. So, too, does the Bible.

We are reminded of the “living water” promised to the Samaritan woman (John 4:10–14), and to all those who are thirsty (John 7:37). The water that is a sign of the permanent reality of our baptism and of life in the Holy Spirit (John 7:38–39). The whole meaning of the water is about moving away from sin and finding new life in Jesus: “Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and take your mat and walk?’” (Mark 2:9). While Jesus is interested in the whole person, both body and spirit, the sign of the water is much more about the spirit than it is about the body.

Light is the fourth sign. On Sunday, February 28, at the end of the twelfth apparition, Bernadette feels a need to leave something of herself at the Grotto. She leaves the candle she has been holding. It was the first of many in a long series as, day after day, year after year, pilgrims leave candles burning at the Grotto. They are little flames but with a very profound meaning. They are signs of faith and of Christian prayer. We are reminded of the Paschal candle, itself a sign of the Risen Christ. We are reminded of the tongues of flame at Pentecost (Acts 2:13), the burning bush of Moses (Exodus 3). Above all, we are reminded of Jesus, “the light of the world” (John 8:12).

We are reminded also of the mission given to each one of us by Jesus: “You are the light of the world.” Each evening the procession in Lourdes ends with the words: “You are the light of the world, go carry the light to your brothers.” We are light? It can’t be serious. We, with all our dark past and sinful present, are light? Are we any better than oth-

ers? No, we are not. We are just earthen vessels like everyone else. But there is a difference. We are earthen vessels who carry a treasure. The treasure is the word of whom we are servants. We cannot confuse the vessel with the treasure. We cannot equate that word to our own limited vision. We cannot water it down to accommodate the world. Nor can we keep it for ourselves as if it was our own property. We cannot hide the light under the bushel.

Bernadette was a simple, poor girl chosen by Our Lady to go and give a message to the world. We are chosen also. We each have a role to play. When we pass from one country to another, we find at the border signs asking, “Do you have anything to declare?” Sometimes fear and compromise with the world prevent us from “declaring.” Bernadette had her fears and her world also to contend with, but another power gave her the courage and the strength to give the message she was asked to give: “There was something in me that helped me overcome the obstacles. I was pressed on all sides but never overcome.” That’s what she said. It is a strength promised to all of us by Jesus: “[D]o not worry beforehand what you are to say; but say whatever is given to you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit” (Mark 13:11). We do not need to stop at the frontiers of fear and pressure from the world. We have much to declare.

We are marked with another sign—the *sign of the cross*. It is not a sign of defeat but of victory. It was the first gesture made by Bernadette and Our Lady at the first apparition, a sacred sign that led them into communication and communion. For we who are Christians, the sign of the cross is the greatest sign language we possess. When we make the sign of the cross, we know with whom we travel, whose word we can trust and share with others, and we know where we are going. We know the sign. Perhaps we just need to learn to speak the language in a better and deeper way.