

chapter two



MIRACLES, CURES AND BLESSINGS

PERHAPS ONE OF THE GREATEST MIRACLES OF THE GROTTO OF Massabielle is that none were ever promised yet thousands have been attributed to the intercession of Our Lady of Lourdes. Of the some seven thousand cures reviewed by the Medical Bureau of Lourdes, the Church has declared sixty-seven to be miracles.

From Catherine Latapie-Chouat, the first *miraculée*, whose injured fingers regained movement, to Anna Santaniello, whose miraculous recovery from a heart condition was made public in 2005, we can trace a history of God's healing grace.¹

Bishop Laurence authenticated the first roll call of cured individuals, all healed in 1858, when he proclaimed the apparitions of the Blessed Virgin true in his mandate of January 18, 1862. The cures of all seven individuals—three women, one man, two teenagers and one toddler—were attributed to bathing in or applying the water from the spring of Massabielle.

The bishop had earlier directed his commission investigating the apparitions to leave no stone unturned. He urged the priests to meet not only with the doctors who cared for the sick before their cures

but also with scientists specializing in geology, physics and chemistry. No rational explanations for the cures came forth. “Science, which was consulted on this subject, responded negatively,” Bishop Laurence said. “These cures are thus the work of God.”²

- Catherine Latapie-Chouat, thirty-eight, suffered paralysis in her fingers when a tree fell on her hand. She prayed at the grotto and then bathed her arm in the waters. Immediately she was able to stretch and bend her fingers. Later that day she gave birth to her third child, who eventually became a priest.
- Louis Bouriette, fifty-four, a quarryman, had lost complete vision in his right eye during a mine explosion. He asked “Our Lady of the Grotto” to be with him as he bathed his eye several times with water from the spring. His sight was totally restored.
- Doctors had told Blaisette Cazenave, fifty, that her eye infections were incurable. In imitation of Bernadette, she drank from the spring and washed her face there. She did so again, and her eyelid sores vanished, as did the pain and inflammation.
- Henri Busquet was only sixteen when he begged his parents to take him from his hometown of Nay to Lourdes. His suffering from a sudden onset of tuberculosis had become unbearable. A neighbor gave the teenager Lourdes water. After praying with his family, Henri applied a bandage soaked in the Lourdes water to the abscessed tumor on his neck. Within two days the tuberculin ulcer had healed and the infection was gone.
- The story of two-year-old Justin Bouhort has been made famous by the movie *The Song of Bernadette*, based on the book of the same name by Franz Werfel.³ The toddler was very small and could not walk. Various illnesses had weakened him to the point of death.

His mother took him to the grotto and prayed. Then she plunged the baby into the cold waters of the spring, ignoring bystanders' protests. The next day a rosy-cheeked Justin walked for the first time. On December 8, 1933, at the age of seventy-seven, Justin attended the canonization ceremonies of Bernadette.

- Bedridden for more than twenty years and paralyzed on her left side, Madeleine Rizan, fifty-eight, believed she had reached life's end. On taking a few sips of Lourdes water offered by her daughter, who also applied it to her face and body, Madeleine instantly recovered.
- After reading about the cure of Madeleine Rizan in the newspaper, the father of Marie Moreau obtained water from Lourdes. An infection had robbed Marie, nearly seventeen, of most of her eyesight. The family began praying a novena, and Marie placed a compress soaked with Lourdes water to her eyes. The next morning when she removed it, her vision had been restored.

These "works of God" during the year of the apparitions were just the start. Each year increasing numbers of pilgrims shared their stories of healing. It was not until the early twentieth century, however, that the Church recognized the next round of miraculous cures.

In 1905 Pope Pius X called for a screening process to evaluate the claimed cures of Lourdes. The Medical Bureau of Lourdes assumed this responsibility.

Located on the second floor of the Accueil John Paul II, the Medical Bureau is to this day the first point of contact for a pilgrim who believes he or she has been healed. It is here that the pilgrim comes for examination. If the head of the Medical Bureau judges that the claim has substance, he invites doctors registered with the

bureau and present in the shrine that day—of any faith or nationality—to attend the consultation. If there is agreement that there appears to be a cure, the pilgrim must return to meet with the Medical Bureau over several years.

In the eighteenth century Cardinal Lambertini, the future Pope Benedict XIV, established the stringent criteria against which a cure is measured. Specifically, the illness or condition healed must be serious and incurable, the healing must be sudden and without relapse, and no medical treatment must be given.

The dossiers of promising healings are passed on to the International Medical Committee of Lourdes, formed in 1947 and comprised of specialists from all over the world. These experts evaluate the results of the repeated physical and psychological examinations, medical case notes, laboratory records and accounts of medical and other witnesses in light of current medicine and science. The bishop of Tarbes and Lourdes cochairs the committee with a physician nominated by him. A vote of the members determines whether a cure is inexplicable according to present scientific knowledge.

If a majority reaches a positive decision, the committee then forwards the file to the bishop of the diocese of the person who has been cured. The local bishop empanels a medical committee to consider the findings. Based on the committee's recommendations, he then decides in favor of a miracle or abstains from declaring the cure to be miraculous in nature.

Using this framework in reviewing past and current claims, one of the first cures recognized as miraculous in 1908 was exceptional in nearly all aspects. A fallen tree had crushed the left leg of Pierre de Rudder, fifty-two years of age. Infection had set in quickly, preventing the compound fracture from healing. For eight years Pierre

hobbled on crutches in pain, unfit for labor and facing the amputation of his leg.

In desperation Pierre made a pilgrimage to the Belgian town of Oostacker, where there is a small replica of the Lourdes grotto. Within minutes of praying to the Blessed Virgin for assistance, Pierre's bones knit back together. He was able to walk without crutches, and he lived an active life for twenty-three more years. His body was exhumed in a later inquiry, and an examination of his leg showed the break and healing. Pierre's was one of some sixty cures the Medical Bureau has declared miraculous using the Lambertini criteria.

Vittorio Micheli of Italy numbers among the most recent *miraculés*. In 1963 twenty-three-year-old Vittorio, suffering from a cancerous tumor, was lowered into the baths on a stretcher. Follow-up tests revealed his reconstructed hipbone with no tumor. Pain-free, Vittorio resumed walking as well as living life to the fullest.

A blocked carotid artery causing paralysis, blackouts and vision problems had diminished Serge Perrin, forty-one, a native of France. In May 1970, at the anointing of the sick at Lourdes, Serge felt a wave of change. His doctors later confirmed that he had been cured.

Delizia Cirolli was only twelve years old when physicians advised her parents that the tumor swelling her knee was incurable and potentially fatal. They advised amputation, a plan of treatment that her parents rejected. Delizia's friends and family raised enough money to send her from Sicily to Lourdes during the summer of 1976. She returned unchanged. As her condition worsened near Christmas, many prayed to Our Lady of Lourdes for her total recovery, which is exactly what came about.

A nurse at a French hospital, Jean-Pierre Bely understood well what the diagnosis of multiple sclerosis he received in 1972 meant for his future. In 1987, bedridden and “100 percent disabled,” Jean-Pierre made a pilgrimage to Lourdes. After the anointing of the sick, he experienced an overwhelming sense of peace. Then he realized that he had regained his sense of touch and his mobility.

Anna Santaniello of Italy, the final beneficiary of a recognized cure as of this writing, suffered severe heart disease following rheumatic fever. Labored breathing made it difficult for her to speak and to walk. The lack of oxygen gave her face and lips a bluish cast. In 1952, at the age of forty-one, she was taken to the baths on a stretcher. She left on her own and walked in the candlelight procession that night. The doctors who examined her found her to be in good health, having a regular pulse and heart rhythm and breathing without restrictions. She worked for many years as a pediatric nurse before retiring.

Of the sixty-seven miraculous cures recorded to date, some commonalities emerge.⁴ Most of the *miraclés* have been women (fifty-four), and most, not unexpectedly, have been French (fifty-five). All were born in Europe. At the time of being cured, they ranged in age from two to sixty-four years old, about half of them thirty years old and younger.

Tuberculosis, a common disease during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was the condition reported most often. From 1950 until today, four individuals with multiple sclerosis have been completely cured. Cancer, heart disease, infections, blindness and injuries caused by accidents are just some of the other conditions of which *miraclés* have been healed.

While the demographics provide a snapshot of the men, women,

teens and children whose health was inexplicably restored, how they were cured sheds additional light. For a majority of the *miraculés* (forty-nine of sixty-seven), the water from the spring of Massabielle was instrumental. Most had bathed in the water (thirty-nine), and a smaller number had either applied (eight) or drunk it (two). Eleven traced their recovery to the Eucharist; these received a Eucharistic blessing (eight) or Communion (three). Some were healed after receiving the anointing of the sick, praying at the shrine or returning from a pilgrimage. Six individuals who received healing, including Pierre de Rudder, whose leg was made whole, were cured without ever visiting Lourdes.

Among the miraculous cures the Church has recognized, only four have been designated since 1975. Bishop Jacques Perrier, bishop of Tarbes and Lourdes, has raised this as an issue. He does not question whether spontaneous cures happen—dozens are authenticated each year at Lourdes—but whether it's possible against today's medical landscape to validate a cure as a miracle. Of particular concern is the requirement that the person cured has not taken medicine or, if he or she has, that the medicine or treatment was ineffective.

When Cardinal Lambertini developed the criteria for recognizing a healing as miraculous, medical knowledge was limited. The discovery that lemons prevent scurvy is the one advance during his lifetime (1675–1758) that survives in medical history timelines. Diagnostic equipment was rare; the stethoscope had not even been invented. X-rays would be introduced more than 100 years after Lambertini's death, as would the common painkiller aspirin. Given the dearth of medication and therapies, it was not difficult during Lambertini's time to isolate the exclusive cause for a cure. Similarly, at the time of the apparitions during the nineteenth century, many

of the sick who came to Lourdes did so simply because they had no medical recourse.

In an editorial published in the diocesan *Bulletin Religieux* and later reprinted in *Lourdes Magazine*, Bishop Perrier noted that enforcing the Lambertini requirement that medicine should play no role in a healing is challenging. “This renders impossible, for example, the recognition of any miraculous cure of cancer,” wrote Bishop Perrier. Once cancer is detected, he explained, a responsible physician immediately and prudently starts a plan of treatment for his or her patient. “This person comes to Lourdes and regains his health at a precise moment which he will remember until he dies, in his body as much as in his mind. This healing is complete and stable.” However, the healing described would never be acknowledged as miraculous because prior and effective medical treatment was given. While recognizing that a miracle in the canonical sense is always possible, the bishop questioned whether an approach that is more respectful of both the person and faith should not be considered.⁵

A press conference in March 2006 in Paris featured a paper prepared by Professor François-Bernard Michel, cochair of the International Medical Committee of Lourdes. He described a new three-staged initiative for recognizing healings at Lourdes:

1. At the first stage the officer of the Medical Bureau thoroughly evaluates a person who believes he or she has received the grace of a spontaneous or extraordinary cure. If the “declared cure” passes inspection, it is classified as an “unexpected cure.”
2. The second stage involves critical examination of medical documents before and after the “unexpected cure,” looking for evidence supporting an indisputable change from a known illness or condi-

tion to restored health. Additionally, the cure must show signs of being completely out of character with the development of the illness. If these requirements are met, the “unexpected cure” becomes a “confirmed cure.”

3. During the third and final stage, the International Medical Committee affirms the “exceptional character” of the cure relative to present scientific knowledge. The bishop of Tarbes and Lourdes then forwards the file for further review to the diocese where the person who was cured lives.

The number of cures and miracles the Church affirms will always seem few in comparison to the millions of pilgrims who journey to Lourdes, as they do not include the blessings that countless numbers receive. These graces, not recognized by scientific inquiry, renew both body and soul. God blesses many pilgrims by way of the unexpected—perhaps an acceptance of one’s health or loss, a lightening of a burden, an easing of physical, emotional or psychological pain or even the gift of new life.

Elizabeth Grinder, who directs the U.S. National Rosary Pilgrimage, travels in the company of many pilgrims who are sick or have special needs. Most will return to the United States with the same health problems with which they arrived. Many will, however, be changed in spirit and outlook.

“It’s humbling to be a part of this pilgrimage. The first year that I went, I almost felt guilty,” says Liz. “I was on such an adrenaline high in witnessing the transformation of people. I truly believe that no one leaves Lourdes without something.”

Liz credits the changed hearts to Mary’s love, which encourages pilgrims. “The more I go, the more I realize how embraced we are