

Homily on the Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, Soufriere

Sunday, February 12, 2006

By Bishop Gabriel Malzaire

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, the celebration of the Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes is directly connected with the apparitions of our Blessed Lady to a 14-year-old girl, Bernadette Soubirou, in the grotto at Massabielle near Lourdes in France in 1858, i.e. 148 years ago. There were 18 apparitions in all. The first one took place on February 11, the day on which we celebrate the feast. The last apparition took place on July 16 of the same year.

At the apparitions Bernadette often fell into an ecstasy. The marvelous visions she saw in the hollow of the rock at Massabielle were that of a young and beautiful lady. "Lovelier than I have ever seen," was the description that Bernadette gave.

I wish to quote from a letter of St. Mary Bernadette herself as recorded in the office of Readings in the book of prayers of the Church. This is what she wrote: *One day, when I had gone with the two girls to collect wood by the bank of the river Gave, I heard a sound. I turned towards the meadow and saw that the trees were not moving at all. I looked up and saw a grotto. And I saw a Lady wearing a white dress with a blue sash. On each foot, she had a yellow rose; her rosary was the same colour.*

When I saw her I rubbed my eyes. I thought I must be mistaken. I put my hand in my pocket, where I kept my rosary. I wanted to make the sign of the cross, but I could not lift my hand to my forehead; it fell back. Then the Lady crossed herself. I again tried, and although my hand was trembling, I was eventually able to make the sign of the cross. I began to say the rosary. The Lady slipped the beads of her rosary through her fingers, but she did not move her lips. When I finished the rosary, she immediately disappeared.

I asked the two girls if they had seen anything. They said, "No," and asked what I had to tell them. I told them I had seen a Lady wearing a white dress but I did not know who she was. But I warned them to keep silent about it. Then they urged me not to go back there, but I refused. I went back on Sunday, feeling drawn by an inner force.

The Lady spoke to me a third time and asked me if I was willing to come to her over a period of a fortnight. I replied that I was. She added that I must tell the priests to have a chapel built there. Then she told me to drink from the spring. Not seeing any spring I was going to drink from the river Gave. She told me that she did not mean that, and pointed with her finger to the spring. When I went there I saw only a little dirty water. I put my hand in it, but I could not get hold of any. I scratched, and at last a little water came for drinking. Three times I threw it away; the fourth time I was able to drink it. Then the vision disappeared, and I went away.

I went back there for 15 days, and each day the Lady appeared to me, with the exception of a Monday and a Friday. She reminded me again to tell the priests to build a chapel, asked me to wash in the spring and to pray for the conversion of sinners. I asked her

several times who she was, but she gently smiled at me. Finally, she held her arms outstretched and raised her eyes to heaven and told me that she was the Immaculate Conception.

During that fortnight she also revealed three secrets to me, and forbade me to disclose them to anyone. I have kept them faithfully to this day. This is the story of Bernadette in a nutshell.

It is not strange that the clergy were initially skeptical about the apparitions and the requests of our Blessed Lady communicated through Bernadette. It was only four years later, in 1862, that the bishop of the Diocese declared the faithful “justified in believing the reality of the apparition.” A basilica was built upon the rock of Massabielle by the Parish Priest. In 1873 the great “national” French pilgrimages were inaugurated.

To date the grotto of Massabielle is one of the most visited centres of pilgrimage in the Catholic world. It is estimated that it receives over 1 million pilgrims per annum. About 4000 cures were received at Lourdes within the first 50 years of the pilgrimages.

Brothers and sisters it is evident that the object of the celebration of the feast of Lourdes is our Blessed Lady, the mother of our Saviour. It focuses on the role she plays in the economy of human salvation. She is portrayed as an intercessor, pleading the cause of humanity. It is not at all surprising that the first miracle of the Beloved Son, Jesus, was performed at her request. “Do whatever he tells you”, is what she said to the servants at the wedding at Cana in Galilee

In 1901 Pope Leo XIII consecrated the Church of the Rosary at Massabielle, and authorized a special office and a Mass in commemoration of the apparition, and in 1907 Pope Pius X extended the observance of this feast to the entire Church, now observed on February 11 every year. Lourdes has become a place of prayer, a place of praise and intercession.

The messages of Our Blessed Lady in all her apparitions around the world, whether they be at Fatima in Portugal, or at Guadeloupe in Mexico, or at Lourdes in France, or the many other places she appeared, the message has been the same: to pray for the conversion of the world to her Son, Jesus. In other words, the Blessed Mother keeps reminding us to “do whatever he tells you.” The first words of Jesus in his public ministry were “repent, for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand.”

The question we ought to ask ourselves, however, is: what would Our Lady have to say to the Church of the 21st century? We can easily say that she would be calling us again and again to conversion; and that is true. But what does that mean specifically? What are some of the areas needing that roundabout turn?

I think, as a mother, Our Lady would be outraged by the lack of parental responsibility that exists in some families today. We hear constant laments about the inadequacy in proper parental guidance given to children for their psychological, emotional and spiritual

development. Some parents have no time for their children. And we are surprised at the many social problems we have today, including the indiscipline in our schools.

We live in a hurried world; everyone wants to amass as much as is possible in the shortest possible time. Some are ready to sell themselves, body and soul, and even those of our children for monetary gains. In fact, this year's junior monarch, "The Duchess" made reference to these realities in her calypso, "Money Worries."

I think our Blessed Lady would look with sadness at the level of indiscipline in every strata of our present society; the lack of respect of the young towards the elderly, and the inadequacy of proper example of the adult community towards the younger generation.

I believe Our Blessed Lady would be appalled by the increasing rate of crime in our communities today caused by rising drug culture, which gives results in many other social and spiritual problems. She will be saddened by the apathy in the heart of the modern man and the modern woman because of the greed for money. In the very recent past we have had too many of the visitors to our shores being attacked by young men who aimlessly roam the streets. In this weekend's issue of The Chronicle Newspaper we have the case of the young man (Pajoe) from Gimmit, who was found dead in his house. He arrived from England only a few days ago, and his welcome was a brutal death. Brothers and sisters we must ask ourselves what are the causes of such aberrations. The answers are not too far fetched. We can find them in the homes, our communities, our churches; we find them in our attitudes towards each other.

I am certain that our Lady will be disturbed by the instant mentality that ravages the society today. People want instant solutions to their problems. No one wants to sacrifice any more so that they can gradually grow to maturity. Consequently, there is too little time spent in prayer and reflection on things important. I commend all of you who have followed the nine-day novena this week to pray for yourselves, for family and for the nation. Maybe we need more novenas if this is what will help us pray a little more. You will agree with me that people do not pray as much today as they did in the past. We say have no time, because we are too busy pursuing a life of pleasure and self-fulfillment. And if we do turn to religion, we want immediate answers to our many questions. When we find God too slow we try something else, maybe another religion, maybe obeah or the *Gadeh*, or we loose faith and stop going to Church, finding every reason to criticize those who are genuinely trying. We call them hypocrites and *sukuyan*. Brothers and sisters if we do not find time for God, God will not have time for us either. But again, God can never not have time for us. God is always disposed to our needs. He is only waiting on us to respond to his call.

Every generation finds itself in search of models; that is; persons who could provide for them a measuring rod for the values they cherish. In the Catholic tradition our Blessed Lady has always stood at a model of the true woman, a model of the perfect human being. I believe that our generation can learn much from her. Some of the qualities we can learn are as follows:

1. Mary is the gentle woman *par excellence*. In fact, we have a hymn that corresponds to this title. Our world can certainly benefit from the gentleness of Mary. We need to be a gentler and kinder people in our relationship with each other. So often we meet people who are very angry in themselves. It is appalling to hear the things they say to each other at homes and in the neighborhoods; the *mepwezie*, and the *malpale*, and *curses* that hurt so badly. Yes a dose of gentleness from Our Lady would do us well.
2. Our generation can certainly take a page from Our Lady's book of modesty. Modesty in dress is fast becoming a thing of the past. When we examine the manner in which some of our people dress today, it leaves much to be desired. You are aware that I have spoken on many occasions on the attire we use for religious celebrations, especially at confirmation and at wedding ceremonies. We bring the soap opera standards and mentality into our religious worship. They are our new measuring rod. It is sad to see how we settle for such sub-standards.

For the past few days we have been viewing on the TV screens advertisements of our young ladies preparing for the upcoming queen show. I am certainly appalled by the skimpiness of the swimsuit presentations. They leave very little to our imaginations. I have asked a few women, both young and not so young, their opinion and feelings about those ads. Invariably their comments were negative. They too expressed disgust as they asked themselves what is becoming of our Carnival celebrations?

I have no problem with Carnival celebrations, nor do I have a problem with Queen Shows, but I want to say that, if our cultural festivals are become occasions when we take liberty to do things in excess, especially things that are dis-edifying, I cannot in conscience support them or keep quiet about them. I am not sure if our parents are cognizant of what is really going on. These are our young girls who are showing their bodies to everyone. Is that what we want for our young girls? And what do we expect for them in the future? I don't think that the display of culture has anything to do with naked bodies of skimpy wears. They only serve to tantalize some and disgust others. Of course they will please a few. When I grew up carnival was about colour and costume – not skimpiness and nakedness. These were frowned upon or shunned in those days. What it says to me is that we are fast losing our sense of value and a sense of our own dignity.

I am telling you my brothers and sisters, our society is becoming more and more spiritually depraved. We often say the "beauty is in the eyes of the beholder." That may be so in the secular order of things, but when I reflect on the purity of our Blessed Lady, a quality that each Christian is invited to cultivate, it tells me that real beauty is in the soul. "What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world, with all its sensations and false joys and suffer the loss of his soul." We can celebrate our culture without loss of dignity. Indeed we can have clean fun.

For the past nine days many of you here have been following the novena to our Lady of Lourdes, our intercessor. I have no doubt that you have been spiritually nourished by the experience of those days. Some of you may have experienced spirituals healing. I urge you therefore, to take this experience to your community, your homes, and your work place. Ask our Blessed Lady to intercede for us so that we may seek earnestly to build for ourselves and for the next generation a more wholesome society.

God bless you all!