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Religious identity of youth volunteers in the sanctuary of Lourdes

- Volunteers: who are?

Every year 400 000 young people from many different countries come to Lourdes. Among them are the volunteers. They can give their time, their empathy and their energy to help pilgrims. The service consists of welcoming primarily young people and their families, assisting groups in discovering the message of Lourdes, helping out at prayer sessions and celebrations, giving a helping hand to the various services in the Sanctuary, serving the sick. During time of service (15 days), they will live a community life by sharing tasks, meeting young people from other countries and praying together, with spiritual formation and personal support.

Discovering the Sanctuary can be an opportunity to learn about the meaning of the message of Lourdes through its history, the beauty of the place and the signs of Lourdes by way of the words and gestures used by Mary and Bernadette over the period of the 18 apparitions. The fidelity of Bernadette to her mission has meant that many young people have been able to hear this message and to make their own individual response to it. A way to enter into the mystery of the 1858 apparitions by focusing in on three places that are important in understanding the message.

- The message of Lourdes as a factor formation religious identity of youth volunteers.

The "*Message of Lourdes*" is the words and actions that were exchanged between the Virgin Mary and Bernadette at the Grotto of Massabielle during the 18 Apparitions from 11th. February 1858 to 16th. July 1858. To understand the events which took place and the "Message of Lourdes" it is necessary to know the context of the Apparitions that Bernadette experienced. This message can be heard as: God is love and he loves us as we are.

During the 3rd Apparition, on February 18, the Lady spoke to Bernadette Soubirous for the first time, and asked her :"**Would you be kind enough to come here for 15 days?**" Thus the first words she spoke were not in order to reveal her name, nor to deliver a message, but rather to ask a kindness of Bernadette. At that moment the human order of things was reversed. It was the Virgin Mary who asked a favour of Bernadette, who was of little importance in human eyes. Bernadette was to say in this respect: "I was nothing, and out of this nothing Jesus made something great." That same day the Lady said to Bernadette Soubirous : "**I don't promise to make you happy in this world, but in the other.**" She invited the visionary to discover, while still on earth, this other world, the world of Love where God is present. This other world is a foretaste of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Between the 8th and the 11th Apparitions on February 24, 25, 27 and 28, the Lady appealed for penance. **“Penance! Penance! Penance! You must pray to God for sinners. Go and kiss the ground for the conversion of sinners.”** At the Lady’s request, Bernadette Soubirous performed incomprehensible actions. She crawled on all fours, prostrated herself and kissed the ground, scratched the earth, tried to drink muddy water, smeared her face with it, and ate the leaves of a wild herb. These are biblical gestures. To crawl on all fours evokes the Incarnation, God made man. Kissing the ground shows that this Incarnation is truly a sign of the love of God for mankind. Smearing one’s face reminds us of Jesus, the suffering servant: “so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance” (Isaiah 52.14). Eating wild herbs harks back to a Jewish tradition. When the Jews wanted to show that God had taken upon himself all the sins of the world, they would slaughter a lamb, remove the innards, and fill the cavity with bitter herbs, praying over it as follows: “Behold the lamb of God, who takes everything upon himself, removing all the bitterness and all the sins of the world.”

During the 9th Apparition, on February 25, the Lady asked Bernadette Soubirous to “go and drink at the spring and wash yourself in it”. Hearing the Virgin Mary speak of water, the visionary began to move towards the Gave. Following the Lady’s directions, however, she went back into the Grotto and began to make a hollow in the earth. Soon a little muddy water appeared, and she was able to drink.

Today, following in the footsteps of Bernadette, pilgrims come to drink from, and to wash in the spring which appeared in 1858. In the Christian tradition, water is used at Baptism, symbolising the birth into a new life. In the course of the 13th Apparition, on March 2, the Lady entrusted Bernadette with a message for the priests: “ Go and tell the priests that people are to come here in procession, and that a chapel is to be built here.” The visionary was not being asked the impossible. The Lady asked her “to pass on (the message), not to make people believe it.” The response to the Virgin’s invitation would be swift: the first Marian procession took place on May 12, 1858, and the construction of the Crypt began on October 14, 1862.

During the 16th Apparition, on March 25, the Lady at last revealed her identity: " Que soy era Immaculada Councepciou " I am the Immaculate Conception These words were not uttered on December 8, Feast of the Immaculate Conception, but on March 25, nine months before December 25. By these words she identified herself as the one who offered no obstacle, hesitation, refusal, or sin, when faced with God’s purpose. Thus the Virgin Mary is placing herself within her message: herself without sin she asked that one should pray with her for sinners, and do penance for them.

The period of stay the volunteers in Lourdes fits into dynamics of the apparitions. During the session the volunteer can discover this message and experience it. This is the basis to strengthen their own religious identity, often through personal conversion. Then with his service they shall be involved in the mission of the Church. Specifically, Lourdes dividing his time with the pilgrims and all his life.

Bernadette’s life is marked by poverty in her family and ill-health which continued throughout her life. Her body carried in it so much pain. She also suffered at the hands of her superiors who were harsh on her with the intent of keeping her humble. But in fact, Bernadette was always very humble and receptive to God’s will for her. She lived out the spiritual work of mercy to ‘bear patiently those who do us ill’. When the volunteer see the way in which God was merciful to Bernadette and saw her with the gaze of love, he/she can begin to understand how he/she is to be merciful like the Father. In this way, maybe a lifetime to build their Christian religious identity.