

BERNADETTE OF LOURDES HER LIFE, DEATH AND VISIONS

EXAMINATION OF THE EXCELLENT BOOK BY THERESE TAYLOR

Bernadette of Lourdes, Her Life, Death and Visions, Therese Taylor, Continuum, London, 2008

Lourdes is in France. It nestles among the Pyrenees. In 1858, a destitute asthmatic child of thirteen, Bernadette Soubirous, claimed she saw the Virgin Mary while going into a trance called ecstasy in a grotto or cave at the dump of Massabielle eighteen times between the 11th of February and July 18th. Today Lourdes is renowned for its miraculous healings.

There is incontestable proof that Bernadette saw nothing at all. Three Lourdes doctors who examined the case felt that the first vision was a trick of the light and when she got pressured by the crowds to have visions she convinced herself she was seeing something.

It is not that difficult to prove that Lourdes fails even the tests of the Catholic Church for a genuine heavenly visitation. Yet the Church gave it official approval.

QUESTION: Was Bernadette always unaware of her surroundings during her trance?

She seemed that way unless somebody went too near the rosebush that the vision was supposedly standing on (page 88).

She was aware of her surroundings during the vision when she looked away from it to do things (page 88) such as try to drink filthy water and eat plants.

QUESTION: Was Bernadette really transformed into something beautiful when having a vision?

Some people said that Bernadette looked so beautiful during visions that they had the impression that she was seeing something holy and from God. Even those who talked about the beauty remarked the strange pallor. It seems some just imagined the beauty they wanted to see. The reports that she looked ghastly are more believable. Page 109 says witnesses stated that she had an indescribable smile, was pale and her pupil seemed to have turned in its socket. The latter about her eyes is taken to mean she was looking upwards. But it is more natural to interpret it as if it mean the whites of the eyes alone could be seen.

Jeanne Abadie stated that she looked to be dead and they cried at the sight of her (page 63).

Antoine Nicolau said that Bernadette looked beautiful during the trance but he admitted to feeling fear as a result of seeing her (page 63).

Bernadette's trance during the second vision was "frightening" (page 63).

8 April 1858, Adelaide Monlaur was shocked at how pale Bernadette was during the vision and that she looked like she would fall dead and she gasped like somebody dying (page 110, Bernadette of Lourdes). Pierre Callet said that she looked like a dead baby in its cradle (page 110). The Garrison Chief Marshall d'Angla saw up to four of Bernadette's trances and that she didn't move at all and there was nothing ghastly but she was beautiful to look at then (page 111).

If the visionary really looked that serene and peaceful why did the people of Lourdes generally believe that Mary was spiteful and nasty (page 112) towards those who offended against the grotto? (page 113).

A lad of ten claimed to be seeing a vision and his friend wrote that his face was glowing with joy and showed matchless grace and his reverence was impossible to imagine and the overall impression was that a supernatural being was revealing itself to him (page 114). This is a far more radiant account than an any about Bernadette's physiognomy during the trance.

Abbe Dezirat saw Bernadette's trance during the 27 February apparition and was initially impressed but then declared that he had the sense that she was could be seeing something other than the Holy Virgin (page 122). He saw something disturbing in her trance.

When the apparition made Bernadette do ugly things is it any wonder if we think people were only imagining the beauty of

her face (page 106). We read that when the spring was found on February 18 1858 that several witnesses told the doctors they saw her falling on the ground and biting at it. The doctors recorded what they heard as they suspected epilepsy. Bernadette told them that she had no awareness of having done these things when the vision was taking place (page 106). At least she didn't deny it.

The Church describes the trances as ecstasy. It's a state of being enraptured in supernatural joy. She stated that her first communion made her as happy as the vision did (page 140). Clearly then the joy she experienced during the apparition was normal joy. Thus it is nonsense to argue that she looked bizarrely beautiful during the vision because of the supernatural joy it gave.

There were at least some visions in which Bernadette did not take on a transformed appearance (page 89).

The doctors said that from talking to Bernadette that she would have barely remembered the first apparition. The only reason she remembered it because her friends got her to go back to the grotto for more apparitions (page 106). They were correct. Later she stated that when she got her first communion it meant as much to her as the visions (page 104). That tells us that there was nothing remarkable about her ecstasy.

Bernadette told Sister Gabrielle that the first time she saw the vision she thought it was the Devil (page 328). If the Church is correct that ecstasy is a state of joy and love for God, then clearly she was not in ecstasy during the first apparition at least. She was found in a trance that must be described as satanic in origin or pathological.

QUESTION: Is it true that Bernadette never heard of the Immaculate Conception until Mary said "I am the Immaculate Conception"?

No. She heard something very close to it when the family prayed to Mary conceived without sin (page 49).

Bernadette is supposed to have repeated what the virgin said to her until she got to the priest to tell him. She was afraid of forgetting. But as she was so forgetful normally is it not more likely that she would have told her friends to remember it for her?

Bernadette's report is probably untrue as before and after it she still described the vision as that thing aquero and was reluctant to hold that it was the Virgin Mary.

In the *The Cult of the Virgin Mary, Psychological Origins*, Michael P Carroll, Princeton, New Jersey, 1986 page 163 we are reminded that when Mary told her she was the Immaculate Conception that Bernadette said she posed as did the entity on the medal. Bernadette then knew of the medal which says that Mary was immaculately conceived. The information came from respected writer Estrade who knew Bernadette well.

Its ludicrous to argue as the Church does that she didn't hear of the Immaculate Conception until Mary told her. Nobody can prove that. The lie is told out of desperation to make it seem Bernadette was told something she could not have known and thus was in touch with a real figure from Heaven.

QUESTION: What was Bernadette's possible motive for deceiving herself if that is what happened?

Before the apparition, according to de Brie, little statues of Mary were inexplicably found at the grotto (24). This indicates that an association with the grotto and Mary had taken place before Bernadette's visions. This could have been the trigger for

There is no evidence that she benefited from her visions but her family certainly did. That in fact is motive enough. Bernadette would have known early on that people would not be impressed by visions if there was money behind it.

She was unable to learn the catechism and thus could not qualify for her first holy communion. She was desperate to make her first communion. She stated later that her communion made her as happy as the vision did (page 140). She could have thought that claiming to have visions of Mary would get around the ban on people who didn't know the catechism getting their first communion. The ruse worked. She made her first communion on 3 June 1858 (page 139).

There was huge pressure on her to claim to be having visions and not to deny having them. The crowds gathered every soon after the first vision. There was no going back if she was lying or at least distorting the truth.

QUESTION: Is there any reason to think Bernadette was engaging in compulsive playacting or making herself believe she saw visions when she saw nothing?

The advantage of the affirmative is that it avoids making her out to be a raving lunatic. She could have seemed quite sane normally. A hallucination hypothesis is unnecessary - though we can't rule out that she had occasional hallucinations at the grotto.

Bernadette's parents ordered her to stay away from the grotto and her mother told a Mlle Estrade that she is not usually disobedient but she feels compelled to go to the grotto (page 86). Would the real Virgin enable a temptation to disobey parents - a sin? If it was not the real Virgin then was it a medical hallucination or if you believe in psychic powers, a psychic one?

When dying and to advertise herself as a saint she started claiming that the devil was appearing to her and scaring her and that by calling on Jesus she could get rid of him (page 223, 235). Some doctors thought that Bernadette was normal at the time of the apparitions. Dr Voisin was one who thought that she was suffering from hallucinations (page 170). The Church uses medical opinion to back itself up when it says a miracle has happened but it is selective in what medical opinion it wants to listen to. How dishonest!

Rationalists argued that Bernadette was mentally ill. They said the Church controlled her life to hide this from the people in order to deceive them so that they might believe in the vision.

Indeed, during the apparitions Bernadette did things that indicate mental illness. Also, from July 1860 the Church kept such a close eye on her that she was not allowed to visit her family unless a person authorised by the Church was with her (page 158). Soon she was in the Convent of St Gildard in Nevers. She tended to be distant and remote there. Though she was not forced to stay away from the visitors she hated having to deal with them. The Church probably saw no need to lock her away as she was a loner anyway.

The Church argues that she was so normal when she did meet visitors and worked in the infirmary and somebody as serene as she was could not be said to be mentally sick. But we can visit people in mental hospitals whenever we wish who this could be said of.

QUESTION: What did Bernadette mean when she claimed she felt a compulsion to go to the grotto for apparitions?

Bernadette seemed to experience a compulsion making her go to the grotto to see the entity.

Did she mean that she just felt a strong urge that she could resist if she wanted to?

She was a naive and young child. St John of the Cross said we must flee from revelations that purport to be from Heaven. Bernadette's vision gave her no indication that it was really from Heaven until much later. St John argued that if a revelation is really from God, God will get it through to us so we should not be afraid to run away from it. He said the risk of pride, demonic influence and deception was too great so we should never look for visions. It is worse to look for somebody else's visions than to look for visions yourself. You are not them and the chance of being deceived is greater.

Or did she mean that she had no choice? If she had no choice it would indicate that there was something sinister going on. Being forced is a sign that a demon or the devil is at work inside you.

Either way the vision cannot be regarded as good or holy. The apostle wrote about Satan appearing as an angel of light.

There is a story that Bernadette seemed to fall and her aunt Lucille cried out. Bernadette turned around and told her to calm down. Then she looked back at the vision and it was gone. The episode was important enough for Bernadette to warn Lucille to stay away in future. The story, if true, shows that it is not true that Bernadette was in a deep trance during the apparitions.

QUESTION: How did the 1858 Commission of Investigation reason?

The four concerns of the Commission are on page 149.

1 Its first concern was if the holy water from the spring really did effect miraculous cures.

2 The second was if the visions were really supernatural or could be explained naturally.

3 The third was if the object that appeared said anything

4 The fourth was if the spring really only appeared during the apparitions as some claimed.

These things were put in order of priority (page 149).

This order tells us a number of things. The Church's main argument was that if the holy water did miracles then the visions were true and from Heaven. This in fact is illogical. It puts the emphasis on the cures not the visions. Why did the Church want to do that? You might look for new miracles to verify the vision if the vision itself was dubious or suspect. The commission permitted the Church to believe that the vision was from Heaven and of Mary. But you get the impression they did not really believe in this permission - they had doubts that they chose to hide.

Moreover, the Church would have guessed that medical science had a lot to learn. It considered some cures inexplicable or strange but did not suggest they were miraculous. Not everything strange need be a miracle. So why did it depend on its assessments that such and such a cure was a miracle when that verdict could be in need of revision as medical knowledge progressed. Any miracle site can claim to produce miracle cures.

Number two should have been number one.

And number three speaks of the object - this reflects Bernadette's frequent declaration that what she saw was "that thing" as if it were not a person but something that was in the shape of a person. It is striking to see the Church taking that so seriously. You would expect it to say that it was the Virgin Mary especially when the entity supposedly had claimed to be the Immaculate Conception.

In relation to four, the appearance of the spring, the commission found witnesses who testified there had always been water at that spot but they thought it began to flow better after Bernadette tried to use it on the instructions of the apparition (page 150).

The Catholic Church teaches that the Catholics are obliged to believe in the teaching and authority of the priests and the bishops. An apparition that rewards disobedience is considered to be a promoter of rebellion and division and therefore unholy or fraudulent.

Bernadette went to the grotto for a few visions against the will of the Parish Priest (page 158, 159). Her aunt Basile Casterot gave witness to that. Bernadette said at the time that she would obey the lady who asked her to come to the grotto rather than the priest (page 159). Despite this the priest said she was obedient to Church authority (page 159). This lie helped get Church approval for the apparition claims.

During her last illness, Bernadette suffered the torment of being grilled on the apparitions. This seems cruel. But if you make such an incredible claim you have to endure such things. The evidence needs to be provided even if you suffer as Bernadette did.

A loving God would not make miracles for they imply that such treatment is right.

It is right if miracles happen or are possible. If they do not or are impossible it is wrong.

Conclusion

There is evidence that the visions of Lourdes were not miraculous. There is nothing indicating a supernatural origin.

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