

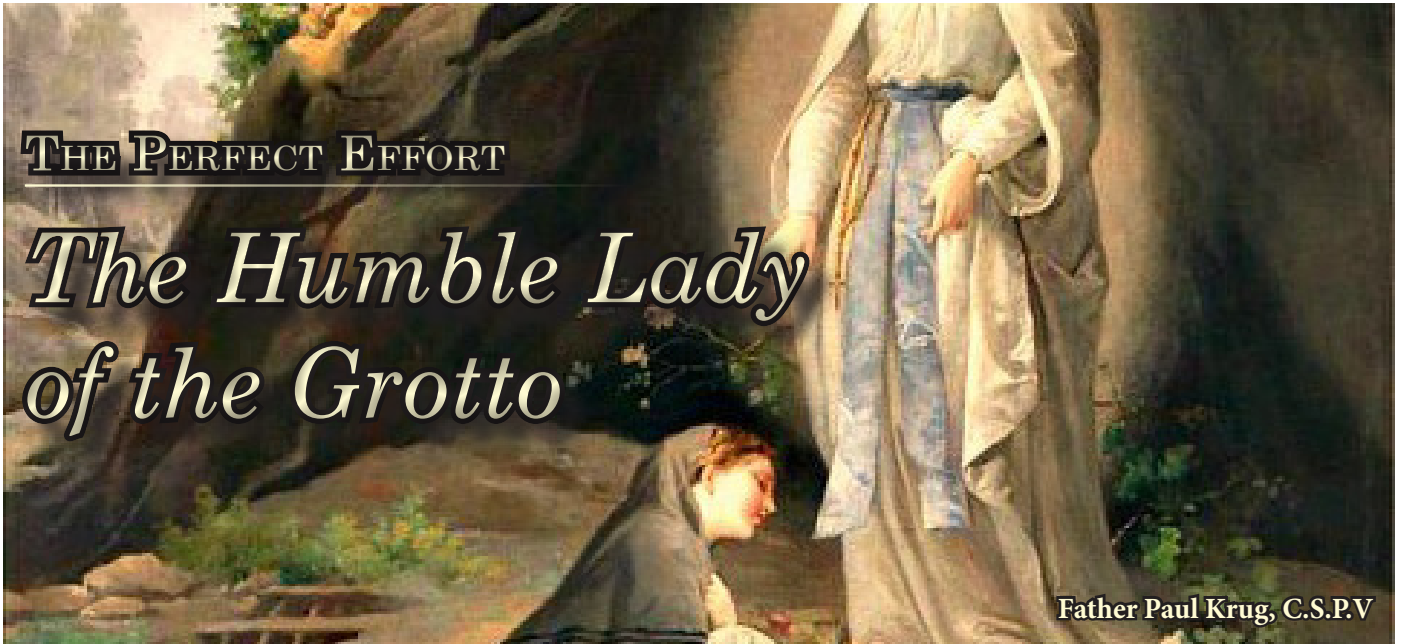
Dolorosa

SECOND WEEK OF LENT

FEBRUARY 2018

THE PERFECT EFFORT

The Humble Lady of the Grotto



Father Paul Krug, C.S.P.V

This past February 11, we celebrated the 160th anniversary of Our Lady's first apparition at Lourdes in 1858. To understand the importance of the apparitions of the Blessed Virgin to Saint Bernadette, we must consider the state of the world at that time.

The nineteenth century was truly one of the most wicked and godless centuries since the coming of Christ. It was a century characterized by revolt against God and the Church, and it was a century marked by bloody persecution and unbelief. The Church was persecuted throughout most of Europe. In Italy in 1870, the Freemasonic King Victor Emmanuel marched his army into Rome. There, he permanently destroyed the temporal power of the popes and, at the same time, vastly diminished their spiritual authority. In Germany the Prussian chancellor Otto von Bismarck sought to abolish the Catholic Church. In the Catholic Empire of Austria-Hungary, the Church was continually struggling against the injustices and interference of the so-called Catholic emperor. About the year 1863, Czar Alexander II of Russia opened a brutal

and bloody persecution against the Church in Poland and in parts of Eastern Europe. Catholics in Ireland were being persecuted by the unjust laws of Protestant England. Moreover, in France the Church was virtually suppressed by the Communist revolutionaries. This, of course, came about in the wake of the horrors of the French Revolution of 1789. Such was the condition of the Catholic Church in the greater part of Europe during the nineteenth century—Catholic Europe was no longer Catholic.

Pope Saint Pius X, when only the Bishop of Mantua, described the world at this time as being "wrapped in darkness and the shadow of death." Yet, despite the godlessness and wickedness of the century, Almighty God did not forget those who remained faithful

to Him. Thus, in an era in which there were relatively speaking few bright lights, one newspaper headline shone brightly through the darkness. It was printed on February 19, 1858, in the little town of Bigorre, France. The headline read: "A Lourdes Child Sees Virgin Mary."



Only about a week before this headline was printed, a fourteen-year-old simple peasant girl named Bernadette Soubirous was gathering firewood with her sister and a friend. The two girls ran ahead, leaving Bernadette to follow. As Bernadette stooped over to take off her shoes before crossing a little stream, she heard a sudden noise like a violent wind. Bernadette looked up and saw a golden cloud emerge from a grotto on the other side of the stream. Then, suddenly, there appeared in a niche of the grotto, a beautiful young Lady. The Lady, who appeared to be about sixteen years old, was wearing a long white dress and veil with a blue sash. Her bare feet were adorned with golden roses.

In his book *The Woman Shall Conquer*, Don Sharkey relates what happened next. “She looked at me immediately,” Bernadette said, “[she] smiled at me, and motioned me to advance as if she had been my mother” (46). Continuing, Bernadette relates:

All fear left me; I seemed to know no longer where I was. I rubbed my eyes; I shut them; I opened them. But the Lady was still there, continuing to smile at me and making me understand that I was not mistaken. Without thinking of what I was doing, I took my rosary in my hands and went to my knees. The Lady made a sign of approval with her head and took into her hands her own rosary which hung on her right arm.

As Bernadette recited the rosary, the Lady allowed her beads to glide through her fingers . . .

When the recitation of the rosary was finished, the Lady returned to the interior of the rock and the cloud went with her. (46-47)

The Lady of the Grotto appeared to Bernadette eighteen times in all. During these apparitions, she gave many messages to Bernadette. Among these messages, she encouraged Bernadette to pray and do penance for sinners. She instructed her to dig a hole with her bare hands in the earth at the foot of the grotto and then to drink and wash her face with the water from the spring which had suddenly and miraculously sprung up. The Lady, furthermore, requested that Bernadette inform the parish priest of her desire that a church be built at the grotto in her honor.

Although Bernadette faithfully fulfilled these requests, she nonetheless did not know who the Lady actually was. Many of the hundreds of visitors who came to witness the events at Lourdes referred to her as the Blessed Virgin Mary, but Bernadette did not. She simply did not know who the Lady was. It was not until the sixteenth apparition, which took place on March 25, the Feast of the Annunciation, that Bernadette asked the Lady her name. Bernadette related that the Lady merely smiled at her



request. She then asked a second and even a third time. “[Finally], at my third request,” Bernadette explained, “her face became very serious, and she seemed to bow down in an attitude of humility.” Continuing, Bernadette described what happened next:

Then she joined her hands and raised them to her breast. She looked up to Heaven. Then slowly opening her hands and leaning toward me, she said to me in a voice vibrating with emotion: “I am the Immaculate Conception.” (48-49)

At the time, however, the words “Immaculate Conception” meant nothing to Bernadette. In her ignorance, she did not know to what Our Lady was referring. And so, when her pastor asked her what the Lady said her name was, Bernadette simply repeated what Our Lady had said to her. The priest had previously been skeptical about the apparitions, but it was this revelation that made him believe, for Bernadette could not have made up these words.

Four years before, on December 8, 1854, Pope Pius IX, by his supreme apostolic authority, infallibly declared the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed

Virgin Mary to be a dogma of our Faith. Four years later, the Blessed Mother herself, as if to give her approval to the decree of her Son's Vicar, declared to an unbelieving and godless world that she is the Immaculate Conception.

Since 1858, countless miracles have occurred at Lourdes through the intercession of Our Lady. According to Don Sharkey, in the fifty years following the apparitions alone, some 4000 medically miraculous cures were recorded at Lourdes (52). These miracles are undeniable proof that the Mother of God truly did appear to Saint Bernadette 160 years ago.



Saint Bernadette Soubirous

While one can learn a multitude of lessons from the apparitions of Our Lady at Lourdes, there is one in particular that Our Lady taught us in a silently eloquent manner. It is indeed a lesson from which all can benefit. The lesson is one of humility. It is an instruction from which all can benefit because, as children of Adam and Eve, we all have a certain degree of pride within us.

The vice of pride is an inordinate and exaggerated opinion of our own excellence. It induces us to attribute to ourselves the gifts of God as if they were our own; that is, without giving God any credit for them. Furthermore, "pride moves us," as Father Ferreol Girardey, C.S.S.R., writes in *Sermon Matter*, "to prefer ourselves to our neighbor and to despise him as if he were inferior to us in good qualities" (233). It is, however, a vice hidden deep

within our fallen human nature, and while it does manifest itself in various ways according to one's personality and temperament, it nonetheless often goes unnoticed. In fact, very often pride slips unseen into our daily actions, even into our holiest actions, and corrupts them. It is therefore a vice we must continually subdue until we ultimately uproot it.

How do we control our pride? How do we subdue this vice which seems to make itself known in nearly every action we perform? Very simply, we strive to practice the opposite virtue—humility. Humility, as some mistakenly and erroneously believe, does not consist in merely external actions. Certain external actions, it is true, may be interpreted as signs of humility, but this does not necessarily mean the person is humble. Someone, for instance, may tout himself as a great sinner, make a show of taking a lower place, or may give alms to the poor, but in the next moment he may become angry and impatient in dealing with another's faults or in accepting a correction. Such a person's words and actions may imply humility, but his interior dispositions are anything but humble.

Essentially, humility is an internal habit of the soul that moves us to act in a certain way. It is defined by spiritual authors as a virtue which disposes us to realize our true position in the sight of God and then to act according to this reality. Humility, therefore, strengthens our will and puts us in check when we reach out for praise, esteem, and honor that is not due to us. If we are truly humble, then, we will not attempt to make ourselves look better than we are; we will make no efforts to be something we are not.

Humility is a wide-ranging virtue. In other words, one may consider this virtue in many and varied aspects. For instance, it can be broken down into humility in thought, word, or deed. The one facet of this virtue that typically stands out more than the others is humility in speech. This is true especially in light of Our Divine Savior's words, "Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaketh" (Lk. 6:45).

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At Lourdes, the Blessed Virgin Mary gave us an admirable example of humility in speech. This she did in her very first apparition to Saint Bernadette. While Saint Bernadette prayed the Rosary, as I mentioned, the Blessed Virgin Mary followed along using her own rosary. During the recitation of the Our Father and the Hail Mary, Our

Lady seemed only to listen without moving her lips. When they came to the Glory Be, however, the Blessed Virgin bowed her head and visibly recited it with Bernadette. In his book *Saint Bernadette Soubirous*, the Abbe Francis Trochu explains why it was that Our Lady would say only the Glory Be. This is what he wrote:

The [Glory Be], which is a hymn of praise to the Adorable Trinity, and is Heaven's Cantic, is indeed the only part of the Rosary suitable for [the Mother of God to say]. The [Our Father] is the prayer of needy mortals, tempted and sinful, on their journey to [Heaven]. (44)

As for the Hail Mary, Our Lady had no need to greet herself or pray to herself, and, furthermore, in her humility she would not speak words praising herself. And so, while Saint Bernadette recited this prayer, singing, as it were, the praises of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Our Lady stood in humble silence returning all her glory to God.

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A number of vices opposed to humility in speech exist; two, in particular, are rather prevalent today. One of these vices consists in needlessly saying positive things about ourselves; the other, in making negative comments about others. The positive side of the vice is called boasting. Boasting consists in praising ourselves, extolling our own excellence, or bragging of our accomplishments as though

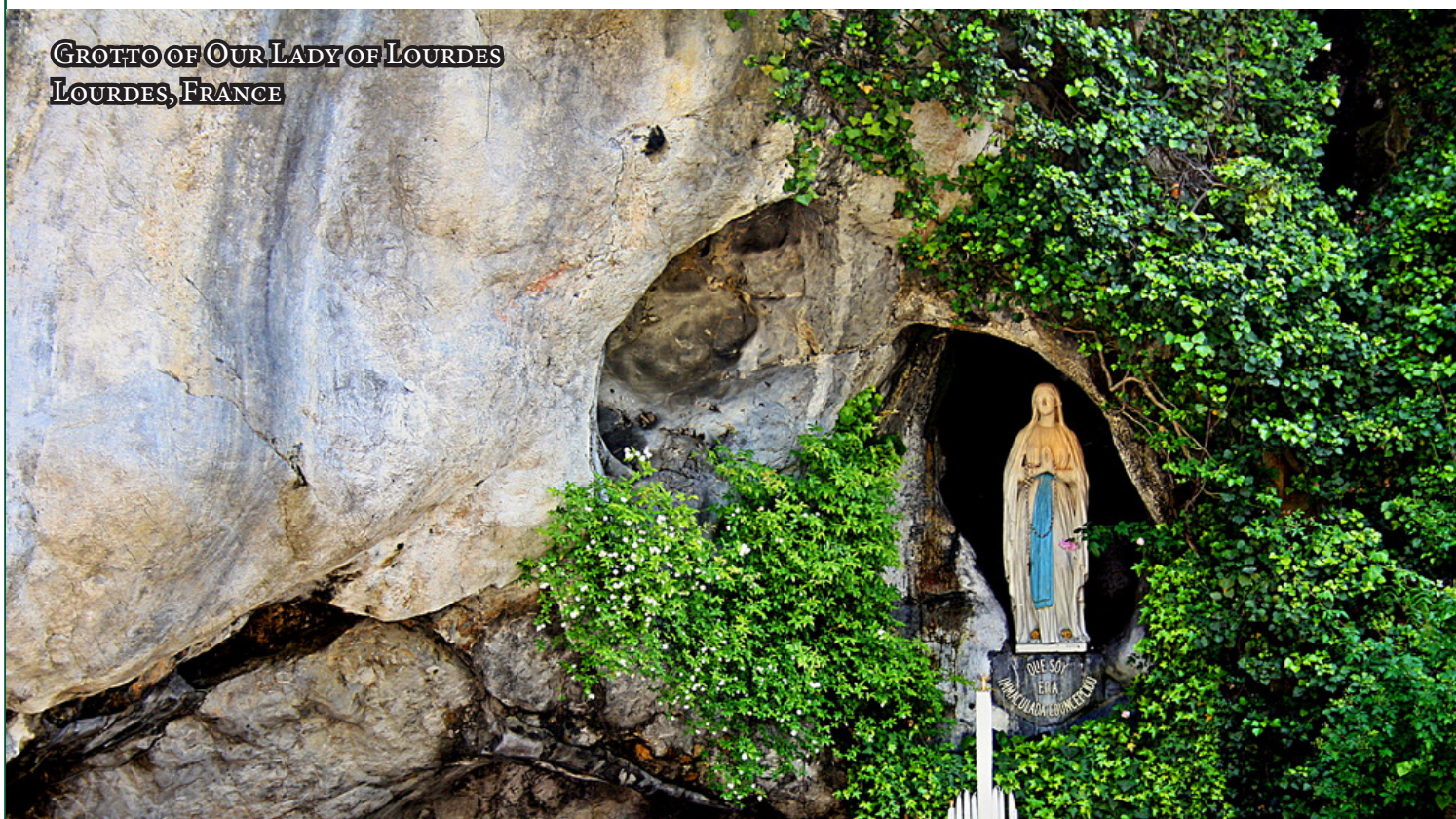
God had nothing to do with our success. The negative part of the vice is gossip. Gossip consists in speaking of the faults and shortcomings of our neighbor and, in doing so, making ourselves appear better than we really are. Now, while pride shows itself very clearly in boasting, its presence is not so easily detected in gossip.

Usually, one thinks of gossip as an offense against charity, which it is. However, it also offends against humility. Very simply, gossip is the casual, unconstrained, or unnecessary conversation about other people. More often than not, such speech turns to detraction and backbiting—to discussing the faults, the failings, and even the sins of others behind their backs. The gossiper thus proudly looks down on those he speaks of as inferior to himself.

Today, this vice is rampant, as the sins and failings of others are publicized to a greater extent than ever before. Gossip is freely broadcast in magazines, newspapers, and news broadcasts. With the convenience of social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, gossip is also readily available online. The comments people make about others—the detraction and calumny that is spouted—is almost beyond belief. Hence, the truth of the adage: “The tongue weighs practically nothing, but so few people can hold it.”

We must be ever mindful that if we gossip about others, we indulge our pride. This is because we indirectly praise ourselves and our own goodness when we speak about the faults and shortcomings of another or willingly listen to such gossip. When we do such things, it is as though we are saying, “Look at what that person does. I

GROTTO OF OUR LADY OF LOURDES
LOURDES, FRANCE





THE BASILICA OF OUR LADY OF THE ROSARY
LOURDES, FRANCE

am not like him. I would never do that. I am better.” What is this but a manifestation of pride?

Because of our fallen human nature, how easy it is to see the faults of our neighbor, while, on the other hand, how hard it is to see our own. We must realize that we all have our failings and that no one has the right to gossip about another. We must therefore be ever on guard against falling into this wretched vice, for the occasions for indulging in gossip are frequent and often take on the appearance of harmless conversation. The evil is thus not so easily recognized. When we notice, then, that a conversation turns to the faults of another, we should make it a point to say something good about the person or attempt to change the topic of conversation. If, however, we can neither say something good nor change the subject, we should make an excuse for that person. We should excuse him, or at the very least, excuse his intention. If someone does something that offends us, we must be on guard against gossiping about him because that is the very one about whom we will be tempted to speak badly. We ought, rather, to forgive him from our heart and forget about the offense.

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If there is one vice that God hates above all others, it is pride. “I hate arrogance and pride,” He tells us in the Book of Proverbs (8:13). Our Divine Savior even warns us that He will humble the proud. “Whosoever shall exalt himself,” He said, “shall be humbled” (Matt. 23:12). Whether in this life

or in the next, anyone who extols himself—anyone who looks down on his neighbor as inferior—will be humbled. We must strive all the more, then, to grow in the virtue of humility now while we have time. The only way we can grow in any virtue is to practice it, for virtue works like a muscle in the body. A muscle is strengthened in proportion to how often and how intensely it is exercised. Likewise, virtue is strengthened in proportion to how often and how intensely it is practiced.

Let us, then, with God’s grace, never let a day go by in which we do not strive to practice humility in some way. Let us especially give a perfect effort in refraining from gossip, whether speaking it or listening to it. At times, this will be difficult. When it is, let us like Saint Bernadette, turn to the Blessed Virgin and ask her to help us. Let us pray to Our Mother in the words of Saint Bernadette:

O Mary, give the precious virtue of humility to she who dares to call herself thy child. O loving Mother, help thy child to resemble you in everything and every way. In a word, grant that I may be a child according to your Heart and the Heart of thy dear Son. Amen.

May we go forth, then, with the utmost confidence that, having been faithful in striving to practice humility in this life, God will one day raise us up to the true and everlasting glory of heaven, for “He that humbleth himself,” Our Divine Savior said, “shall be exalted” (Lk. 14:11).