



LIGHT & LIFE

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THE MIRACLE OF LOURDES

Fr. Joseph Sergott, O.P.

It was the summer of 1988. The Marian Year was drawing to a close. I was just a few weeks shy of entering the novitiate of the Western Dominican Province. So, I planned a Marian pilgrimage with my brother Larry (who also became a priest), which covered Fatima, Lourdes, Rome and Medjugorje in three short weeks.

I had yet to learn much about St. Dominic; but I remember that everywhere I went on pilgrimage I discovered a statue or an image of St. Dominic displayed in a prominent place. I remember especially the image of St. Dominic on the façade at the entrance to the main basilica at Lourdes. He was kneeling and receiving the rosary from the Baby Jesus and the Queen of the Most Holy Rosary.

Since then I have learned much about the rosary itself. Many people question the use of devotional prayers, claiming that they cloud our focus on Christ. But the rosary is the Gospel Prayer: when we pray it, we *enter into* the sacred mysteries of the life of Jesus Christ and his Blessed Mother. Traditions that lose their meaning in the Church, die out over the centuries. The rosary is as strong as ever—perhaps because it is a prayer that focuses on Christ and the grace-filled life that he lived for a short time on earth. When we pray it, the Blessed Virgin joins her prayers with ours.

On that pilgrimage, I will never forget the Living Rosary that we prayed on a hot July summer night at Lourdes. There were tens of thousands of pilgrims—perhaps as many as 50,000 that night. As we walked through the darkness with our lit candles and prayed the rosary in five languages, while singing the Lourdes hymn at the end of each decade, chills went down my spine. And as we sang the refrain all 50,000 of us raised our candles in unison in the air. It was a sight to behold.

Why were we all there? What were we hoping to experience? What were we searching for? I remember

seeing many, many very ill people pushed in wheel chairs by volunteers. Lourdes was teeming with the sick and the dying, seeking Mary's intercession in their lives; seeking the healing power of the living God who has chosen to work his miracles through a humble, simple maiden that said "yes" to his request to be the Mother of his Son.

Exactly 130 years prior to that occasion, at that very same place, another simple, humble girl was out doing her daily chores gathering firewood for the family hearth when a blowing wind nearby grabbed her attention. Turning, she saw a lady dressed in white at the grotto of Massabielle, with a rosary in her hand. Over the next several months that lady, the Blessed Virgin Mary, would appear to Bernadette Soubirous, and give her several requests, i.e., to dig under a nearby rock and to drink from a spring that initially was only a trickle of water and mostly mud, to have a church built upon that very spot, and to tell the priest who asked her name, "I am the Immaculate Conception."

The young 14-year-old peasant girl could never have understood the dogma defined only four years earlier in 1854 by Pope Bl. Pius IX that proclaims that the Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God and by virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, preserved immune from all stain of original sin. (*Ineffabilis Deus*, DS 2803)

In retrospect, the apparitions at Lourdes still pose a challenge to many. Supposedly, Massabielle was a garbage dump before it became famous as being the grotto where the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared. This was a point of contention by the civil authorities at the time who doubted the veracity of the apparitions. They asked how the Virgin Mary could chose such a profane place. But keep in mind that the Messiah was born in a stable and afterwards was laid in a feeding trough that had been used for barnyard animals! When the sacred enters the profane, it sanctifies it.

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in honor of

OUR LADY OF LOURDES

FEBRUARY 11 — FEBRUARY 19

TO BE OFFERED FOR YOUR INTENTIONS

THEOLOGY FOR THE LAITY

The Abiding Compassion of the Unchanging God of Love

By Fr. Michael J. Dodds, O.P.

"GOD IS LOVE" (1 JOHN 4: 16)

In this brief sentence, St. John summarizes our Christian faith. All the ponderings of theologians through all the ages flow from this single truth. God is an eternal communion of love— Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Divine love is the source of all creation. As St. Thomas Aquinas says: "The Father loves not only the Son, but also Himself and us, by the Holy Spirit" (*Summa Theologica* [ST] I, 37, 2, ad 3).

God created the world in love. Even when we sinned, God's love remained with us: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3: 16). In love Jesus gave his life for us: "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). In love he sent the Holy Spirit (John 14: 15-18) and promised to remain with us always: "If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him" (John 14: 23). "I am with you always to the close of the age" (Matthew 28: 20).

God's love is abiding, faithful and unchanging— no matter how much our love for God may wax and wane. As God says through the prophet Isaiah: "Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even though these may forget, yet I will not forget you" (Isaiah 49: 15). St. Paul assures us: "If we are faithless, he remains faithful— for he cannot deny himself" (2 Timothy 2: 13). Our love can sometimes become selfish, but God's love is always generous— a friendship, as St. Thomas Aquinas says, in which "God simply wishes the eternal good, which is Himself, for the creature" (ST I-II, 110, 1, co.).

God's love is not just greater than ours: it is fundamentally different. Our love is awakened by the goodness in things. When dinner tastes good, we love a second helping; when it's not so tasty, we find we're not so hungry. God's love, in contrast, is not awakened by the goodness of things but is rather the source of their goodness. As Aquinas explains: "Our love ... is not the cause of goodness; but ... the love of God infuses and creates goodness" (ST I, 20, 2, co.). In the act of creation, God shares his goodness with creatures: "God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good" (Genesis 1: 31). God dwells most intimately in all that he has made: "As long as a thing has being, God must be present to it. ... But being is innermost in each thing and most fundamentally inherent in all things. ... Hence it must be that God is in all things, and innermost" (ST I, 8, 1, co.).

God's love abides with us in our sorrow, suffering and distress. Scripture uses the word "compassion" to describe this special presence of God: "The Lord has comforted his people and will have compassion" (Isaiah 49: 13). "For

the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,' says the Lord, who has compassion on you" (Isaiah 54:10). Jesus embodies divine compassion "He saw a great throng, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick" (Matthew 14: 13-14). Jesus also commands us to practice compassion: "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6: 36).

How should we understand God's compassion? Human compassion involves both a reaction of sadness and a desire to help when we become aware of another's sorrow or distress (ST I, 21, 3). As God's love is different from ours, so is God's compassion. It is more intimate, more engaged. Our compassion for the victims of some tragedy is awakened when we hear of their plight. God's compassion does not need to be awakened, since his love is ever active and ever present with us. God does not "react" to our situation, but is simply present with us, acting always to bring us from present sorrow to the fullness of peace in his kingdom. As Bernard of Clairvaux says: "God is not affected; he is affection."

In our sympathetic response to the suffering of another, we become saddened, and our sorrow is the human sign of our concern. Beyond sympathy, however, we are also capable of empathy in which we forget ourselves and simply view the suffering of the other as our own. As Aquinas explains:

Just as, properly speaking, it is not *compassion* but *suffering* that describes our condition when we ourselves experience some cruel treatment, so also, if there are some persons so united to us as to be, in a way, something of ourselves, such as children or parents, we do not have compassion at their distress but rather we suffer as in our own wounds (ST II-II, 30, 1, ad 2.).

If empathy is a more profound sort of human love than mere sympathy, then it seems that, when we speak of the perfection of divine love, we should use the language of empathy. It is just this language that Jesus uses in speaking of the suffering of humankind. He does not say that he experiences a sympathetic sorrow at human distress, but rather that he sees our human plight as his own. So, in the parable of the sheep and the goats, Jesus says: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me" (Matthew 25: 35-36). He does not say, "*You* were hungry, and I felt bad for you," or "*you* were thirsty and I grieved for you," but rather, "*I* was hungry... *I* was thirsty." Jesus so identifies himself with us in our distress as to call our suffering his own.

Such is the intimacy of divine love, in which God does not (as if at some distance) react or respond to our suffering, but simply identifies with us in our suffering. As Aquinas says: "God does not have compassion on us except on account of love, insofar as he loves us as something of himself" (*ST II-II 30, 2, ad 1*). Just as we, seeing those whom we love most deeply "as something of ourselves," are identified with them in their suffering, so, analogously, God, seeing us "as something of himself," makes us one with him in love and regards our suffering his own.

To evoke the infinite depth of divine love, Scripture uses metaphorical images. So, God says to Israel: "I led them with cords of compassion, with the bands of love... My compassion grows warm and tender" (Hosea 11: 4, 8). The prophet Isaiah testifies: "I will tell of the kindnesses of the Lord, the deeds for which he is to be praised, ... the many good things he has done for Israel, according to his compassion and many kindnesses. ... In all their distress he too was distressed. ... In his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old" (Isaiah 63: 7-9). In such images, we find the profundity and intimacy of divine love.

The theme of God's oneness with his people is developed in the New Testament through the image of the Body of Christ (e.g., Corinthians 12: 12-27). By grace, we are truly united with Christ and made one with him through the Holy Spirit. We become in a way one person with Christ. So, when Jesus appears to Paul, who was then persecuting the Church, he says: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9: 4). —Not "why do you persecute *them*?" but "why do you persecute *me*?" As Aquinas explains: "As a natural body is one, though made up of various members, so the whole Church, which is the Mystical Body of Christ, is reckoned as one person with its head, who is Christ" (*ST III, 49, 1, co.*).

Because we are one body with Christ, our sufferings are in some way Christ's own. So, Aquinas explains the words of Jesus: "Whatever you do to one of these least of my brothers, you do to me,"... because the head and the members are one body" (*Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, 25, lect. 3*). Since Jesus is God, it is God himself who is identified with us in our suffering. It is God himself who has compassion on us "on account of love, insofar as he loves us as something of himself" (*ST II-II 30, 2, ad 1*).

Our sorrow at the distress of another is the sign or sacrament of our love. By entering into the sorrow of another, praying for them, and acting as best we can to relieve their distress, we reflect the transcendent compassion of God. As our Dominican Father Leo Thomas has written:

Our eyes are the eyes that God uses to weep for the pain of the world. Our emotions are the emotions God uses to have compassion upon his people. Our hands are the hands God uses to bestow his healing blessing upon those in need. If we do not weep, some people will never know God cares. If we do not lay our hand on others in a gesture of acceptance, some will never experience healing in this world. ... This is the mystery of the Incarnation: God will establish

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What would the Blessed Virgin say... to College Students?

by Fr. Peter Do, O.P.

As a campus minister and college chaplain at the University of Oregon Newman Center, I get the privilege of mentoring and ministering with many faithful and talented college students. For many college students, going off to college is the first time in life that they leave their parent's house to be on their own. It can be overwhelming since they now must juggle the demands of study, work, and other "adulting" responsibilities, such as taking care of car payments and rents. It also means more freedom from mom and dad. With the ability to make their own choices, sometimes they don't make the best choices and fail to learn from their mistakes.

To help them make better choices, I thought to ask Mother Mary for her advice on what she might give to college students. Here are three things that she would say to college students: First, don't be afraid to ask for help. At the wedding of Cana, Mary noticed that a newly-wed couple ran out of wine. She was not afraid to ask Jesus for help (cf. Jn. 2:3). As a college student, you will encounter problems and perhaps even a crisis, like flunking a course or losing a first love. It can be paralyzing and devastating. I remember one student walking into the Newman Center one day in tears and shared that she flunked her courses and would be kicked out of school. She asked for help and with the support of the staff and her peers at the Newman Center, she got a second chance and changed her major. She has since graduated and is now the director of youth and young adults ministry.

Second, look for service opportunities. After hearing that her cousin Elizabeth was pregnant, Mary quickly made the long trip to help her. With the increased use of social media like Facebook and Instagram, one sad consequence is that it breeds narcissism. Students tend to be more concerned about themselves than others, spending a lot of time looking at how many followers and likes they get on social media. Instead, focus on helping others. Like Mary, say "I'm the Lord's servant." (Lk. 1:38) After hurricane Katrina, many of our college students spent a week helping the community in New Orleans recover and rebuild homes.

Finally, take a digital sabbath. If you are experiencing anxiety and feel overwhelmed, take a break, find a church or a quiet place to rest, and spend quality time talking with Mary's son Jesus. Mary and Joseph also experienced anxiety when they went searching for little Jesus (cf. Lk 2:48), and found peace when they found him in the Temple. A digital Sabbath is a break and rest from using social media, texting, and other forms of electronic communication. Instead, connect face to face with a friend. During this last Lenten season, many students at the Newman Center gave up social media for the whole of Lent! Try it this upcoming Lenten season and see if you experience more peace. ■

Abiding Compassion, continued from page 3

his presence in the world though the weakness and limitations of sinful humanity. (Leo Thomas, O.P., with Jan Alkire, *Healing Ministry: a Practical Guide* [Kansas City, Mo.: Sheed and Ward, 1994], 12).

We speak a language of the heart, often best expressed by our silent presence. As Pope Francis has said, "Our response must either be silence or the word that is born of our tears." Here, we might think of the tears of Mary, Our Lady of Sorrows, who entered most profoundly into the suffering of her Son as she stood at the foot of the cross. In Mary we find the human reflection of God's unfathomable love, of which St. Catherine of Siena spoke so eloquently: "O immeasurably tender love! Who would not be set afire with such love? ... You gave us the Word, your only-begotten Son. ... What was the reason for this? Love. For you loved us before we existed. O good, O eternal greatness, you made yourself lowly and small to make us great! No matter where I turn, I find nothing but your deep and burning love" (St. Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue* [New York: Paulist Press, 1980], 61, 273).■

Miracle of Lourdes, continued from page 1

St. Bernadette has many of the attributes of those chosen by the Blessed Virgin Mary over the centuries, e.g. the children of Fatima, St. Catherine Labouré, San Juan Diego, the children of La Salette, etc. They all have been humble people who are simple, detached, without guile, chaste, obedient, faithful, and dismissed by the world as being insignificant. All of these characteristics (and more) represent the Blessed Virgin Mary herself.

I want to dispel the romanticism surrounding the 14-year girl that the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared to at the grotto of Massabielle. From the day that the apparitions began until the day she died, St. Bernadette suffered tremendously both spiritually and physically. She was chastised by civil authorities, by some ecclesiastical authorities and by many, many people who thought she was a fraud. In many ways, she reminds me of the virgin-martyrs of the early Church. Like them she proved victorious over those who were more sophisticated, brighter and had more standing in the world. If you have noble aspirations of following the example of St. Bernadette, you will need the heart of a lion and a faith that moves mountains.

In the 150 years since the apparitions, many people have tried to debunk or take advantage of the Lourdes story. Early on scientists were commissioned to study the water with the hope that it could be bottled and sold because of some supposed rare healing properties; but, in the end all they could conclude was that it is pure spring water. However, our Church is an Incarnational Church where the Lord himself blesses us through sacraments that use pure elements of the earth, touched by the divine, to cleanse, feed, and heal us and deepen our faith in Him. If pure water from the earth (or from the heavens) can be used with the baptismal formula to wash away our sins and make us children of God reborn in the image of Jesus Christ, perhaps some water bubbling up from a spring near a grotto, mixed with a little mud and a little faith can also work miracles. ■

Blessings & Petitions Corner

In this column of *Light & Life* we are adding the *Blessings & Petitions Corner* for Confraternity members to share with us either how God has blessed them through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, or to request prayers from Confraternity members for a pressing need.

All submissions need to be brief and succinct because of limited space. Everything that is submitted for the Corner will be considered public domain.

Please pray for my husband who has been living with leukemia and double pneumonia for over a year now. His strength has been greatly weakened by the cancer and I ask that the merciful Lord relieve him of this suffering, should it be his will.

Elizabeth, Lake Forest, CA

Please pray for the repose of the soul of Mary Fazio who died on November 10, 2017. Mary volunteered at the Rosary Center for 40 hours a week for over 35 years. She was instrumental in supporting the mission of the Rosary Center with her prayers, time and financial assistance.

Cecelia, Portland, OR

It's an honor to be a member of the Rosary Confraternity. I enjoy praying the rosary. Please pray for healing for my husband, Bill, who has leukemia and also suffers from heart blockages and side effects from medications, and for my brother-in-law, Barry, who is recovering from kidney transplant surgery. Please pray also for the donor of his kidney and the donor's family.

Debbie, Louisiana

Please pray for my son who struggles with addiction and mental illness, and for all families who endure through these struggles, that they will be given the help they need.

Elizabeth, Boston

NEW OFFERINGS AT THE ROSARY CENTER

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