

FAMOUS SHRINES OF OUR LADY 2

Lourdes: "I am the Immaculate Conception"

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My Personal Pilgrimage

So much has been written about Lourdes that it is superfluous to add anything except my own personal reactions. Lourdes is nobler in conception, lovelier in situation, and more spiritual in its atmosphere than I had anticipated. Our Lady has drawn from the hearts of her children the world over a stream of generosity that has built her Basilica in majestic proportions.

In 1858 this was an area for swine-herds; and now two magnificent churches stand—one atop the other—clinging to the rocky shoulders of the Pyrenees, while at the base of this foundation of rock rests the flickering grotto. The lower church is the Church of the Rosary and in front of this is Rosary Square, where the crowds assemble at night, and in the afternoons the sick and the maimed are drawn up. Two winding stairways of stone branch from Rosary Square to the entrance of the Basilica, whose spire soars over the scene. Within the Basilica are the chapels of the fifteen mysteries of the Rosary and the magnificent high altar and spacious sanctuary. From the balcony you look down on Rosary Square, and beyond to the distant Calvary group towards which the torch-light procession goes each evening, along the tree-shaded boulevard. From this vantage point you see the Gave River racing by, the well laid out gardens, the shrubs, the trees, and the green, green lawns. The sun is shining and there is a mountain crispness in the air. It is a beautiful setting. The country all round is mountainous, rewarding the energetic with wonderful panoramas. A mountain mist keeps the flowers in bloom, the shrubs healthy, and the lawns evergreen. There is a peace and restfulness in this lovely spot.

Lourdes is more spiritual in its atmosphere than I had hoped for. One hears the criticism of commercialism in its booths, but my own experience was that the booths have none of the high-powered salesmanship of the modern mart. All the goods for sale at Lourdes have the prices on them. You wander in and out of the open shops, and no one tries to sell you anything.

Prayer is in the air of this incredible place. It walks the streets of Lourdes audible and unashamed. The moment you leave your hotel room you take the beads in your hand and tell them in Mary's honour. Whether you march in procession or pray in chorus, or better still, kneel in the after-sundown dusk at the Grotto, you feel that Mary is helping you to pray. Faith is not easy to describe. Faith does not lend itself to words—even in a shrine like Lourdes, where Faith is the prime reason for the very existence of the place and is in the air of the Pyrenees you breathe.

A Change of Heart

No one goes to Lourdes without experiencing a change of heart. That is the daily miracle of Lourdes, the unseen and unrecorded one of the deepening of the spiritual life of hundreds of thousands each year. In this machine age of scientific wonders such as television machines, disease-killing drugs, and atomic energy, many tend to doubt the unseen changes which occur within the hearts of the pilgrims. The little girls who accompanied Bernadette that first day to gather kindling wood near the grotto would not believe because they did not see. "When the others came back with their sticks, Bernadette asked them if they had seen anything. They said no. They thought it was all nonsense and said she was a silly girl and had made it up." Abbe J. Belleney wrote about the apparitions in the simplest form, a form that Bernadette herself, who had trouble reading and writing, could have understood:

"Suddenly she heard a rushing sound like a great wind. She looked up at the tall rock above her, and then fell down on her knees, for there in a hole in the rock stood the most lovely lady she had ever seen. A bright light shone all round her, and she was dressed in white with a long blue sash. A rosary hung over her arm, and golden roses were at her feet."

The beautiful lady wished that crowds would come to Lourdes, and what a wonderful response the people of all nations

have given to that wish! Once there, she takes each one by the hand, and mother-like, leads them to the feet of her Divine Son. In short, we go to Jesus through Mary, and it is her divine mission to help us with the reassuring touch of her hand in ours. All through the days I spent at Lourdes I felt that purpose working within me. Saying my Mass at the Grotto, assisting at the blessing of the sick, marching in the torchlight processions, making the Way of the Cross, and during visits to the Blessed Sacrament I felt Mary by my side helping me to pray; and that was the experience of so many of my companions.

The Crutches of the Cured

The Grotto is constantly tugging at one's elbow to return again and again every day you spend at Lourdes. The weather-beaten crutches and evil trusses hang in the rain and sun over the entrance to the cave where the statue stands, where the candles burn, and the people from the ends of the earth, many on stretchers, pass. These symbols are left by the cured. They represent only a small percentage of the pilgrims, but they remain the very harbingers of hope.

It is difficult for a mechanised people to comprehend how the pitiable sick can summon up the look in their faces, the look that says: "Now, at last, I will be made whole." Ever since February 11, 1858, when the Mother of God lifted the thin veil which hides her constant nearness to all mankind and revealed herself to Bernadette Soubirous, the poor, uneducated girl of fourteen, at the grotto of Massabielle, near the Gave River, the little carts with their burden of sick have been wheeled from the pools to the Grotto.

Beneath the rock of Massabielle the Grotto glitters in the light of its thousand candles. Beyond the iron grille is the statue of the Virgin, standing in the hollowed rock where Bernadette once saw the glowing vision of the lady in white, the Immaculate Conception. In front of the iron grille are the stretchers, and on them are laid the patient sick. From 2.30 each afternoon they come from the baths to the Grotto and back to the Rosary Square for the solemn blessing of the sick.

The Song of Bernadette

The resignation of these sufferers preaches a sermon that goes direct to one's heart. Speak to them and learn how cheerful they are, confident that Mary will do what is best for them, remembering her words to Bernadette that she may not restore health and happiness here, but promises a big reward hereafter. That is the gift of Lourdes to the sick pilgrims. They return home happier and better, even though not necessarily cured. In their hearts is the Song of Bernadette, the song of resignation, a song that each of us must learn to sing; and the miracle that never fails at Lourdes is that all the sick who come, return to their homes singing that song.

The Prayer of Pain

The sick who come to Lourdes learn best the secrets given to Bernadette. Those secrets were demands made on her by Our Lady. From the apparitions to her death Bernadette practised those secrets, her prayer was the prayer of pain. We do not use the prayer of pain, sorrow, worry and humiliation enough. Why waste such precious pleading? In the Garden, being in agony, He prayed the longer. And His greatest prayer was made as He hung upon the Cross on Calvary.

The prayer of pain is a devotion, a spending of oneself, a giving of self, a spiritual bargaining. The smugness of just being good is broken when one sets out for a cause outside oneself. Our faith grows within the more it is shared outside. Hoard it and it decreases. A prayer of pain offered for sinners, said in reparation for sin, goes direct to the heart of Christ, Who led the way for us when He prayed from the Cross: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

The Blessing of the Sick

Earth holds no more poignant hour than the blessing of the sick every afternoon at Lourdes. The stretchers with their precious sick are wheeled away from the Grotto on to Rosary Square, where they are arranged row on row. The procession of the Blessed Sacrament leaves the Grotto. I walked beside the Bishop of Lourdes, who carried the Monstrance, for it was Rosary Sunday. We came slowly to the accompaniment of hymns and the Rosary to the Square now crowded with

the cases from the hospital wards. I looked at their pale, drawn faces, and lips busy with prayers, and all of them showed a great serenity. One of the marshals came bustling up to even up the line of stretchers. Then a young French priest took his place at the microphone for the time had come for the solemn litany. The Square was filled, a sea of white faces and hatless heads reached to the River Gave. The priest began his dramatic invocations by lifting his arms and holding them out like a cross.

"Holy Virgin, heal our sick," he cried in a voice full of emotion.

"Holy Virgin, heal our sick," the crowd responded with a cry like the rolling of waves.

"Holy Virgin," intoned the priest, "hear our prayers."

The voice of the crowd thundered back in echo.

"Jesus, Master, that I may see." "Jesus, Master, that I may speak." "Jesus, Master, that I may hear." "Jesus, Master, that I may walk."

The voice of the crowd caught the dramatic quality in the priest's ejaculations and roared them back. Here and there people held out their arms. Some of the sick half raised themselves on their stretchers. The atmosphere was tense with expectancy.

The Bishop slowly raised the Sacred Host to bless each one of the stretcher cases. I could see the eyes of the afflicted look up at the Monstrance as of old the sick looked up into His Face. What faith, what confidence, what hope shines in those pale, wan faces! A mother took her epileptic boy in her arms: his tongue was hanging out, his limbs were twitching, his expression was horrifying, but in the mother's eyes shone a love for this deformed son of her womb, and as the tears streamed down her cheeks, her lips muttered her words that the child of her heart might be cured. She held the wriggling boy until he almost touched the Monstrance, as if mindful of that suffering woman of old who assured herself that she would be cured were she only to touch the hem of His garment. The emotion of the moment swept over the people, and tears flowed freely. I was strong and healthy that day, but the mood caught at my throat and sent a tremor along my spine. Suddenly I wanted to cry. If a strong, healthy man could be carried away, what must be the effect on sick and suffering people in all their weakness?

Jesus of Nazareth Passes By

Thus for a few hours Jesus of Nazareth passed through the lines of little carts. We all felt His presence as if a breath from heaven, intangible, powerful, irresistible swept over us. We accepted the reality of the unseen, and our hope in Him grew. As I walked beside the Bishop of Lourdes bearing Our Blessed Lord to the sick, the strength of Job's faith was mine for those precious moments, and Job's words: "I believe that my Redeemer liveth," were echoing in my soul. Many priests lying in their stretchers were so overcome by His Presence by their beds of pain that they just clasped their hands, lowered their eye-lids, and let their tears speak to Him. If anywhere faith can be sublimated to vision it must happen in Rosary Square, Lourdes, during the blessing of the sick.

The atmosphere of tense expectancy owes much to the dramatic quality of the French announcers during the litany of the sick. One moment electrified me. The priest with arms uplifted, said to us:

"My brethren, let us lift our arms in prayer."

A forest of arms was raised in the most moving expression of prayer that I have ever seen.

I thanked His Lordship for the privilege of holding the cope during those memorable hours, but I did not want to leave the sick who had done so much for me, moving me deeper than any sermon has ever done. I followed the carts to the hospital served by Sisters and voluntary workers during the summer months. On arrival an English titled lady welcomed me and conducted me through the wards. There were pitiable sights there to remind me to count my blessings, and to thank God for the gift of normal health as one of my chief blessings. But should His testing and purifying hand fall on me in sickness I shall try to recall the resignation and submission to His Holy Will so evident on the serene and happy faces of the sick at Lourdes.

The Cold Baths

From the hospital I went to the pools. I left the sunny warm air and went into the bathroom. A cold and forbidding sunken bath, leaden in colour, was full of water that did not look clean. A statue of Our Lady on a niche over the bath assured me. I stripped and stood hesitating on the wet flagstones, and stepped down into icy water. I did the three immersions with the prescribed invocations and came up the steps to where my clothes hung. Still dripping, I put on my clothes with fears of a nasty chill. For a moment my clothes felt damp and uncomfortable, but by the time I had my shoes laced I was as warm as toast. I asked the priests who were with me how they felt and it was the same with them. The very sick are lowered into the baths. Patients with all kinds of skin diseases use the same water. There is not a towel in the whole establishment, so on go your clothes over your wet body, and Our Lady suspends the usual reaction from such imprudence, for no one contracts a cold.

The Torch-Light Procession

At eight-thirty in a windless evening we assembled for the torch-light procession. The long-stemmed torches with their artistic shades are bought at the booths and, falling in, you march behind your banners. Down the wide boulevard the procession moves singing the Lourdes "Ave, Ave." with jubilation. The saying of the Rosary comes easy, distractions are few, and devotion is welling up in the hearts of all. The procession turns at the Calvary group and returns by the other boulevard to Rosary Square. Here the Lourdes officials direct the pilgrims to figure march around the Square. On another evening I stood on the balcony outside the Basilica and viewed this magnificent spectacle. It was like a carnival parade of glow-worms with their lamps ablaze, for you can only see the torches moving, the holders are hidden in the darkness. Our torchlight procession on Rosary Sunday was a special one, for when our pilgrims had all entered the Square, on went the light which picked out the lines of the Basilica, and mounted the tall, slender spire to illuminate the statue of Our Lady in a warm glow of light. Our hearts were full, and when the Creed was intoned in Latin it was indeed an act of faith, a glorious finish to an evening spent with Our Lady. Usually the torchlight procession brings the day to a finish, but not for us. We gathered in the upper Basilica at 11 p.m. for a Holy Hour, then Solemn High Mass at midnight. During the High Mass we priests who were not on ceremonies said Mass in one of the chapels of the Mysteries of the Rosary. A fussy sacristan ordered us about, and gave us a chalice with only one particle for whoever served the Mass; no one else may receive Holy Communion at the private Masses.

Praying the Mass at the Grotto

Mass at midnight is always a devotional experience. I enjoyed saying that Mass in the Chapel of the Annunciation. But the next morning when I was privileged to say Mass on the simple altar of the Grotto I was deeply impressed.

I often picture the scene at Ephesus when St. John the Evangelist, its first Bishop, said Mass in the presence of Mary. Both of them had stood beneath the Cross on Calvary, and from the Cross came the all-revealing light which showed them, what we can only see in a dim light, the merit of this wonderful gift of the Holy Mass. No Mass that has ever been said by a human priest could have been as acceptable as that offered by St. John and Our Blessed Mother at Ephesus.

The thick, votive candles spluttering in the morning breeze. the noise of dripping candle-grease, the echo of my voice coming back from the natural sounding board of the rocky cave, and the statue of Our Lady looking down from her niche, all added to the background of this wonderful experience. I felt that Our Lady was present at my Mass that morning, praying it for me, and before I began the opening psalm I invited St. John the Evangelist to help me to say it well. There were no distractions that blessed morning, and at her name I lifted my heart in exultation and gratitude as I bowed my head in reverence.

So too at the list of the Saints in the Canon I paused at the mention of St. John the Evangelist to greet him and thank him for his presence by my side at the altar. During my thanksgiving I asked Our Lady of Lourdes, as my special request, that I might become less unworthy to invite her each morning to pray the Mass with me throughout the years that remain of my priesthood. That was also the favour and blessing I asked for all my friends that morning at the Memento for the

Living. With my hands joined and head bowed I recalled by name the many I wished to mention then, and for them, and for the others whose names I omitted, I prayed for a deeper love of the Holy Mass, and that Mary would accompany them to Mass, kneel beside them, and keep them busy during this most precious half-hour on earth.

At my farewell visit to the Grotto as I kissed the rock at Our Lady's feet, and moved slowly behind the little altar, my prayer was a petition for faith, and more faith in the mystery of the Mass. Following that simple, pious custom of the peasants of Massabielle in kissing the rock hallowed by the feet of Our Lady, I asked her to grant me as a souvenir of Lourdes that I should try to recapture the intention and rekindle the zeal which I experienced in the Mass I said at her Grotto, and that she should grant a like blessing to my friends and to my parishioners.

The Way of the Cross

The layout of the Stations of the Cross at Lourdes is the work of a true artist. I think he must have begun with the 14th, and worked backwards. A mighty cleavage in the rocky, steep shoulder of the mountain which rises sheer behind the Basilica gave the artist a wonderful opportunity to create a living tableau of the laying of the Body in the Sepulchre. The life-sized figures carrying the Body of the dead Christ are just about to enter the cleft cave. Mary and John and the faithful women follow. The tomb is hewn out of the solid rock, and gives a most realistic picture of the burial.

The fourteen groups are gifts from national pilgrimages. They are life-sized bronze figures, and the artist has set them in positions that create a sense of activity.

At ten o'clock in a morning of bright sunshine we began the Way of the Cross. As our pilgrimage was so large it was decided to do the Stations in groups. A priest was assigned to each group. As one group moved off from each station another arrived. The result was to give an echo-like effect to our prayers and hymns. The prayers and the verse of the Stabat Mater which we had finished came to us like an echo as the other group took our place.

The Stations are placed on either side of the narrow, cobble-stone path which winds its way up the steep shoulders of outspurs of the Pyrenees. The sun was hot, the going uneven, and the loose stones were uncomfortable as one knelt for the prayers. The Stations were tableaux vivants of the fourteen episodes on the way from Pilate's court to the tomb. The figures are life-like and aid one's mental picture of what happened on Good Friday. The effort of the climb and the rough going created a mood in sympathy with the Passion. The climbing and the kneeling were unpleasant that hot fore-noon, and we felt it was a penitential way for all, especially for the old.

But I must confess that my meditation brought me closer to Jesus and Mary one moonlight night when I climbed that path alone. All the street noises were hushed and nothing broke the stillness of the night except the chimes from the Basilica tower singing the Lourdes "Ave, Ave." The higher I climbed the nearer and clearer was the "Ave," and its message blended fruitfully with my meditations on Mary's part in the Passion of her Divine Son. That is one reason why I must return to Lourdes. I want to walk again the Way of the Cross up the sides of a mountain, to walk alone in the silence of the night with only one voice to break into my meditations, the "Ave" of Lourdes.

Up, ever up, we slowly made our thoughtful Way of the Cross until, at the 12th Station one of the pilgrim priests celebrated Mass, and I preached on Mary's share in that Via Dolorosa. Here are the ideas I proposed to the pilgrims brought there by the Irish Dominicans, and gathered round that altar in the glorious sunshine of an October morning.

The Mother of the Irish

We yield to no one in our love and devotion to Mary: she is, and always will be, the Mary of the Gael, the Mother of the Irish. In our ancient tongue she is linked with God in all our salutations. We say *Dia is Haire Dhuit*, and I have heard my grandparents always add to the invocation: "Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost," the words "and to Mary the Mother of God." So in our history, in our tradition, and in our language, the devotion to Mary has always been the devotion of filial children to a loving Mother. So Our Lady of Lourdes must be very happy looking down upon us here this morning. Here we are children of Mary, children of the Gael, come from afar to do her honour. We have made sacrifices in coming, but we are glad to do so if it will bring us nearer to Mary.

Ephesus, the City of Mary

I want you to go back with your imagination to a scene in the city of Mary, the city of Ephesus. That is the city where the Evangelist took Mary when he went there as its first Bishop. When Our Lord looking down from the Cross, said to John: "Behold thy Mother," the gospel tells us that John from that moment took her to his own. He brought her to Ephesus where she lived with him while he was Bishop of that See. And oh! what a scene that was each time St. John said Mass assisted by Mary, the Mother of God!

Mary Never Forgets

Mary never forgets, and in gratitude for the hospitality which she received from that city of Ephesus, she is now about to confer on that same city the signal honour of declaring to the world that she is the Mother of God, her greatest, her grandest, her unique title. The year is 431 and the Bishops of the Catholic world are assembled at Ephesus to debate whether Mary was in truth the Mother of God, and not merely the Mother of Christ made Man. The people of Ephesus are excited, and late one evening there comes from the council chamber the news, that the Bishops have decided to proclaim to the world as a dogma of our faith, that Mary is truly and really the Mother of God, So they rush from their homes, and light torches, and as the Bishops leave the council chamber they escort them to their houses, filling the streets of Ephesus with their jubilant cry of "Mary, Mother of God." That must have been a wonderful scene, and we will recall it each time in our processions while we are here in Lourdes singing the Lourdes "Ave," tha' long ago at Ephesus that cry, that jubilant, grateful cry, of "Mary the Mother of God" filled that city.

Mary never forgets. She remembers all that the children of the Gael have suffered in her name and for her sake, and if we cling to the faith of our fathers today, it is because of Mary's protection. She recalls the family Rosaries said in stealth behind closed doors during the long night of the penal days when the priest was hunted and the Mass was stopped, but in the fingers of old and young were Mary's beads recalling to them that Mary was still in her high heaven protecting the children that she loved.

Our Inheritance from St. Patrick

Now come with me to another scene. This time it is in Rome. It is the same year 431. and a young bishop kneels at the feet of the Pope, Pope Celestine, to receive from the Pope his commission to bring the good tidings of the Gospel to a pagan people across the seas. And as Celestine puts his hands upon the head of the young bishop he must have spoken to him about this new dogma of the Mother of God and told him to teach that dogma to the people among whom he was to bring the good tidings of the faith. "Bring to them a love of Mary," spoke the Pope to the young bishop, "give them a devotion to Mary as the Mother of God." How well that young bishop did that you can answer for yourselves by looking in upon yourselves while here in Lourdes and realise the feeling of being close to Mary in this holy spot.

That young bishop was our own St. Patrick, and if we, children of the Gael, are devoted to Mary, it is our inheritance from his teachings to our forefathers many centuries ago. There is no sacrifice great enough, or big enough, that we children of Mary are not prepared and willing to make for her sake, and for her honour, and so we have come to this holy place of Lourdes, and we are going to make a greater sacrifice still for we are going to cross three countries until at last we arrive at Fatima again to do her honour.

The Sorrows of Thy Mother

We have made the Way of the Cross and let us always remember that admonition: "Forget not the sorrows of thy Mother." To go frequently to Mary in her sorrows is to draw closer and dearer to her. We have walked in meditation along the Way of the Cross in this inspiring setting, up the steep sides of the Pyrenees. The way has been steep, it has been difficult. The life-size figures of each Station have aroused us, and our imagination has painted the scene more vividly than ever before. In each of those Stations Mary has a part, but she comes vividly before us at the 4th, when she meets her Divine Son, sees the depth of His Sorrow, feels the intensity of His sufferings, and she stands there before Him

helpless, unable to do a thing to alleviate that suffering. He looks at her, the only creature who has no part in His condemnation, and seeing her suffering, His own sorrows become more painful.

Mary Walks the Irish Roads

While here at the 12th Station she stands beneath the Cross, the sword of Simeon pushed in to its very hilt, the Mother of the Man of Sorrows has verily become the Woman of Dolours. And who of any race, or of any time have followed closer to Mary along the Via Dolorosa, than our Irish mothers? Mary has ever walked the Way of the Cross along the roads of Ireland. Over the cobblestones of sorrow and sadness she has trod with them who have known so much suffering, so much grief at parting, so much hunger and want, for her sake. No wonder Mary loves the Irish mother, no wonder the Irish mother loves Mary. And you, Irish mothers, who year by year, send your sons and daughters out from your homes into the foreign missions, how dear you are to her who freely and willingly gave up her own Son for the sake of others.

And now, here at the 12th Station, she stands by His Cross to see Him die. That gift of the mothers of Ireland towards the spread of our faith outside her own shores has brought the greatest blessing upon the people of Ireland. Mary accepts your sons for the priesthood and the teaching orders of brothers, and your daughters for all the religious communities of women as a precious gift to her Son; and so out from their own kith and kin they sail, but they leave behind them a fragrant memory of sacrifice made for the love of Mary.

A Gift from Irish Mothers

What a noble part those sons and daughters are playing in the vineyard of the Lord today! The missionary spirit of the Irish flourishes today as it did in the days when Irish monks took the countries of Europe in their stride. That was a golden age, it is no less golden today. The very name of Ireland overseas is linked with missionary zeal and activity. May that zeal flourish, for the extraordinary thing about the gift of faith is that the more you share it, the more you give it away, the more it grows within you. And all the sacrifices that the people of Ireland are making for the missions, and what sacrifices they are, everybody knows, not only in money, but in the gift of their sons and daughters, that is the greatest crown that Ireland can wear. Hers is a great spiritual kingdom upon which the sun never sets. You may fly across the world in a 'plane, and every place you touch down you will find Irish priests, Irish Brothers, and Irish nuns engaged in every work for the alleviation of the suffering of man, for the care of the children, the homeless, the foundling, the orphans, the lepers, the sick, the abandoned, all for the greater glory of God and for the honour of Mary their Mother.

That is our proudest boast, and that, my dear Irish mothers, is your contribution when you give your greatest gift, greater than your money, greater than your prayers, the gift of your sons and daughters to the missions. No wonder Our Lady of Lourdes is smiling down this morning upon us, her Irish *children*, her Irish pilgrims, come from that land that loves her to bear that love to her here at Lourdes and later at Fatima. God bless you all !

The Welcoming Madonna

Within the Rosary Chapel there is a fresco of Our Lady on the arch over the main altar. It depicts Our Lady with arms outstretched, her blue cloak in her hands as if about to enfold each of her children in a maternal embrace, her face radiating a welcome, and her eyes tender with love. Immediately she becomes to me the Madonna of Welcome. I took many pilgrims to look up at her, and to feel the warmth of that Mother's smile. It is a picture which I hope to carry with me down the years. If an inspired artist can arouse such warmth in a pilgrim's heart by just looking on that creation of his, what will be the effect when we look up into that face in the hereafter, and see in it a welcome that will fill our souls with happiness! What a rich thought to sustain us in our striving against that strong inclination to evil which we inherited from Adam's sin! On the last morning at Lourdes I knelt for a time looking at the Madonna of Welcome, sad at the thought of leaving Lourdes and going away from that reassuring smile. She seemed to smile more sweetly as a group of us bade her goodbye, and we felt that the Madonna of Welcome can also be a comfort, and a strength when one must go.

The Definition of the Dogma

"I am the Immaculate Conception," Our Lady herself declared at Lourdes in 1858, just four years after the definition of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception on December 8, 1854. The words spoken by Mary at Lourdes were strange words indeed for the peasant child, Bernadette, who could hardly have known the dogma defined four years earlier. Surely Mary must have used those words: "I am the Immaculate Conception," in gratitude for the definition of the dogma. She might have said: "I am the Virgin Mary; I am the Queen of Heaven; I am the Mother of God"; she might have used any of the titles in the unending litany of her graces. But, if she was to express the innermost truth, her real worth before God, she could only say: "I am the Immaculate Conception; I am His ideal of created holiness; I am His perfect one; I am the sinless one."

Let us recapture a glimpse of the scene in St. Peter's, Rome, on Friday, December 8, 1854. The Bishops of the world were assembled to discuss the ten volumes of reports sent to Rome from all the Catholic Bishops. For four days of five hours these reports were presented for discussion, with the result that a unanimous decision approved of the dogma. A special week of prayer prepared for the great day. The relics of Rome were ex-posed for the veneration of Bishops, priests, and people. A day of strict fast was observed on the Thursday. It rained all that week in Rome, but the morning of the 8th dawned crisp and clear. The procession formed in the Sistine Chapel. Two hundred mitred prelates marched. Penitentiaries of St. Peter's, the Swiss Guard, the noble Guard, surrounded the Pope borne on his chair of state through the cheering crowds.

Pope Pius IX Weeps

When the Pope intoned the "Gloria in Excelsis," a ray of winter sun shot through the lofty dome of St. Peter's to encircle his head like a halo. Everyone remarked it, for this holy man, Pius IX, had a deep personal devotion to Mary Immaculate. This was the only shaft of sunlight in a week of incessant rain.

As Pope Pius IX walked to the platform, after the Gospel was read in Latin and Greek, to perform his most solemn act, the definition and promulgation of a new dogma, the whole vast assembly arose in hushed expectancy. In charged silence the crowd listened to the fine, clear voice of the Pope reading the Bull: *Ineffabilis Deus*—"The Ineffable God." The clear voice began to falter, betraying his emotion, and when he came to the words *declaram us* ("we now declare") the voice was silent, and in its place came the sobbing of that grand old man, now fully conscious of the signal honour granted to him to proclaim, in the presence of the Bishops of the world, *urbi et orbi* (to Rome and to the world), the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary. Many a tear dimmed the eyes of the assembled Bishops at the sight of that strong roan, Pius IX, moved to tears. Recovering himself, on he read, and at its finish the cannons from Fort St. Angelo boomed through St. Peter's, and the bells of Rome began to peal. Everyone took a holiday to view the illuminated city, and next day the Bishops met the Holy Father, and from him received a gold medal commemorating the event, and a print of the Immaculate Conception. The medal was struck from gold given by the Irish miners on the Ballarat goldfields in Australia. The diocese of Perth, Western Australia, was one of the first to be dedicated to the Immaculate Conception, and its Cathedral was among the earliest to honour Our Lady under that title.

The eye-witness report of the scene in St. Peter's on December 8, 1854, was taken from Archbishop Dixon of Armagh, who was present that day.

To the Sinless One

Like those born in the salt mines of Russia. who never see the light of day, people who live in the grimy atmosphere of sin are unable to appreciate sinlessness.

Lady Butler, better known as the painter of the "Roll-Call," records an incident in the West of Ireland. She had been watching a poor woman driving home a small flock of sheep, and remarked how beautiful they were. And indeed, the sheep in that part recall the bright-fleeced animals of Homer. "Yes," was the unexpected reply, "and they are without sin."

In that age when men prayed and lived close to God, painters had a supernatural insight. The Madonnas of the Middle

Ages are prayers spoken on canvas by men who believed. Twenty-five times one of them tried and tried to put on canvas his conception of the woman without stain, the Immaculate Miracle. His creation exists, the Immaculate Conception by Murillo, Seville's boast, painted, as they vow, "with milk and roses."

God Could Do It: He Did It

Sin is defilement, sin is hostility to God, and whatever might touch the Woman predestined to be the Mother of God-made-Man, it could not be sin. St. Augustine says that the honour of the Lord forbade it. The Lord saved her body from the curse of Eve, why not her soul from the sin of Adam? Well had the monk of Canterbury argued a century and a half before the dogma: "God could do it: He ought to do it: He did it."

Mary Immaculate stands alone, separated from the purest and the holiest by a privileged redemption; "preserved" from sin, and not merely cleansed from it. She is our "solitary boast," the only merely human being who has escaped the defilement that runs in our blood. And as an invalid child in a city slum finds all the beauty of life concentrated in one pure and fragrant lily on the window sill, so in a world where the soilure of sin meets us on every side, we turn with relief to the Woman all fair who alone remains to us from our uprooted paradise.

For Mary we have no words to match her peerless glory. Only the spotless angels of God can appraise the miracle of her sinlessness—if even they.

Gratitude for Mary Immaculate

All of us, unless blinded by sin, can feel a thrill of delight in the thought of her, the Immaculate. Surely we can never thank God enough for the Immaculate Conception, for all there is in her of light and grace and glory—for all that raises our hearts and fills us with the hope of better things.

And for our youth, what confidence springs from the thought of the sinless one who is their loving Mother! The practice of invoking her each morning and night with the three Hail Marys in honour of and gratitude for the Immaculate Conception, is a sure defence against the weakness of the flesh, the corruption of the world, and the wiles of the devil. Let us priests, parents, and teachers help the child to form this practice, adding after each Hail Mary, the ejaculation: "O Mary, by thy pure and Immaculate Conception, make my body pure and my soul holy."

"For all high thoughts thou bringst to mind,

We love thee; love thee better yet

For all that taint on human kind

Thy brightness helps us to forget."

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