

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LOURDES

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LOURDES has become a household word throughout the Catholic world and a reality that cannot be disregarded for the world at large. Yet, both in the one environment and in the other (to quote Bernadette herself), 'I am afraid that many people skim over the surface of things.' Be this as it may, it is certainly most important that Lourdes, and all that Lourdes stands for, should be seen not merely as a fact to be reckoned with but also as a sign to be interpreted. Like the Incarnation itself, in the light of which this sign must be interpreted, it was initially something unassuming in appearance, an affair of very simple people for the most part and one that must have seemed at first to promise little impact on the world at large. But in the course of a hundred years it has become a sign from heaven that all who run may read, and must read. The miracles wrought there have commanded attention; but it is not the miracles of Lourdes that are the most significant; it is the miracle of Lourdes itself.

To appreciate this significance some regard must be had, in the first place, to its historical and geographical setting. The definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of our Lady in 1854 was the Church's recognition, not of course of a new truth or even of a new article of belief, but rather of a world need. It was her infallibly guided answer to the opposing falsehood of a world-wide materialism that had taken so firm a hold on what had been the Christendom of old and was the inevitable result of the individualism inherent in and the key-heresy of Protestantism. France in particular had become steeped in that rationalism which was the logical outcome of materialism, and France was in fact the mainspring of the rationalism which invaded the whole of Europe and from which stemmed not only the godlessness of the French Revolution but also the two no less evil and apparently opposed ideologies of Marxism and Nazism. It cannot be doubted but that the Encyclopaedists in France were the intellectual progenitors of these and similar evil systems, nor yet that they themselves were the inheritors of the great perennial heresy that found its peak-points in Manichaeism, Albigensianism and

Puritanism, as well as in the more recent divagations of materialism. Thus was the time ripe for the definition of a revealed truth which would give the lie to a materialism that now threatened to destroy the Christian world and indeed all that was good and worthwhile in the world of men. And the appearance of our Blessed Lady at Lourdes, four years later, was the God-given and most vivid illustration of that truth. Thus, out of the Catholic France of old two diametrically opposed things emerged and have survived to spread their influence—Communism and Lourdes; the one a logical outcome of a materialist aberration, the other a miracle of divine grace.

The enmity of the devil towards God, signaled in his initial and ceaseless effort to suborn the human race from its due allegiance to the Creator and the Father, began with a half-truth which clothed a terrible lie but was accepted by the mother of our race. 'You shall be as gods', whispered the tempter. This was the half-truth which hid the blasphemous lie and led to slavery. 'You are the children of God', was the divine word. This was the glorious truth which revealed the high destiny of man and gave him the freedom of the sons of God. By their disobedience our first parents chose the lie and rejected the truth, and thereby committed the whole human race to a participation in their sin and excluded it from the kingdom of God. Yet even in the moment of their rejection of him God gave them the sign of hope, the sign of the woman. 'I will put enmities between thee and the woman', he said to the devil, 'and between thy seed and her seed. She shall crush thy head.' The human God-given birthright, lost by the disobedience of the woman, was to be restored by the obedience of the woman. This sign of the woman, 'the great sign in heaven' revealed to St John the Evangelist and recorded by him in his Apocalypse, was made actual in the person of God's chosen mother, Mary. As in her life upon earth and in her essential rôle in the whole economy of the Incarnation, so in her appearances at Lourdes, at Fatima and in other less known places, she is the great sign pointing to man's place and rôle in the divine scheme of Redemption.

It is peculiarly significant that at Lourdes the Mother of God appeared alone to Bernadette, without the Divine Child in her arms. It is significant that, in her eventual answer to the repeated question of the little girl, she did not declare herself to be the

Mother of God; she answered, in somewhat mysterious words: 'I am the Immaculate Conception.' Though these words mystified Bernadette's first examiners, as well they might, they are perhaps the best proof of all of the authenticity of her vision. Our Lady declared herself to be not only the recipient but the very incarnation of a singular divine favour. The vision that Bernadette was granted at the grotto of Massabielle was the vision of human holiness, the vision of human perfection designed by God in the beginning for all mankind. It was the vision of that first innocence, glorified by supernatural grace, which was lost in the Fall by the machination of the devil through the perfidy of the first woman but was regained by the sacrifice of the Son of God through the faith and obedience of that second Eve in whom it was most perfectly restored from the first moment of her conception by the foreseen merits of her divine Son.

The first significance of Lourdes, then, is its emphasis, by contrast, upon the actual state of the world at that time. She who represented in her own person the perfect fruit of Redemption, 'our tainted nature's solitary boast', was shown to a world sunk so largely in materialism and slavery that men might see again the glory and perfection to which they have been called and, seeing 'the sign of the woman', might come again to seek their own true purpose in her divine Son, might see her not only as the 'woman clothed in the sun and the moon under her feet and a diadem of twelve stars on her head', but also as the woman 'travailing in birth and in pain to be delivered', as the Mother of God and also the Mother of Men.

But our Lady appeared at Lourdes in her Immaculate Conception not only as the perfect first-fruit of Redemption but also as an essential element in the accomplishment of Redemption. She was preserved immaculate for the supreme rôle she was destined to play as the Mother of God; but the actual acceptance by her of that rôle was left, by a divine courtesy and divine plan, to her own free choice. The invitation given to her at the Annunciation was more than a personal invitation to take a unique part in the working out of human salvation. It was also an invitation to the whole human race to take its divinely designed part therein, and the consent she gave was given both for herself and for all mankind. 'There is a spiritual matrimony between the Son of God and human nature', says St Thomas Aquinas (*Sum.*

Theol. III, 9, 1), 'and therefore in the Annunciation was sought the consent of the Blessed Virgin in the place of the whole of human nature.' Here, then, is the further significance of Lourdes. It emphasizes that partnership of the human with the divine which is essential to the whole economy of the Incarnation and Redemption in which our Lady is the link between God and man, the bridge across which the Son of God chose to come into the world of men and across which men will come to share in the divine heritage of the Son in the kingdom of his Father and theirs. Let there be no mistake, either on the part of believers or unbelievers; our Lady's glory is not the whole meaning of Lourdes. She is there as a sign, a sacramental sign that can achieve what it signifies. She is the human means to a divine end, as those will readily recognize who have been to Lourdes and know that the outstanding feature of any pilgrimage is the procession of the Blessed Sacrament and the Blessing of the Sick with the Sacred Host.

Though our Lady did not show herself to Bernadette precisely in her supreme glory as the Mother of God, she had made it abundantly clear that her sole purpose there, as always, was to 'show unto us the fruit' of her divine motherhood which includes as a necessary consequence her motherhood of men, the motherhood of the pain she suffered in company with her divine Son on Calvary. So she appears also as the champion of that other child of hers, the race of men, against the evil designs of the 'great red dragon' that lies in wait for its birth to devour it. (Cf. Apoc. xii, 3, 4.) It is said that the cave of Massabielle was the erstwhile meeting-place of satan-worshippers, an unholy shrine of the evil one. If this was so, it was fitting that she who was the personification of human holiness should appear over the very stronghold of the personification of evil to do battle with the enemy of God and man. She appeared 'like the dawn arising' but she came also 'terrible as an army in battle array'.

'Let us consider', to use the words of the present Holy Father in his first Encyclical, familiar to us under its English title *Darkness over the Earth*, 'let us consider, in the light of eternity, the course of external events.' At the time of the apparitions of our Lady at Lourdes, Karl Marx had launched his campaign. The *Communist Manifesto* of Engels, published but a few years before, was beginning to win its adherents. The now clear-cut issue between

Communism and Christianity had already begun to crystallize. Battle was joined in no uncertain fashion between the seed of the devil and the seed of the woman. The Mother appeared in the defence of her child. But at this present time, a hundred years later, we should do well to review the outcome of the battle which cannot be won unless the child will give heed to the warnings of the Mother. In our estimate of the significance of Lourdes we cannot disregard the significance of Fatima. In the former our Lady appeared with gentleness and persuasion; in the latter, sixty years later at the very moment of the launching of the Bolshevik revolution, she appeared with sternness and warning. There is no need, perhaps, to underline the moral. But in reading the signs it is to be remarked that at both places our Lady appeared with the Rosary in her hands, for the Rosary is the very summary of the Incarnation and contains the quintessence of divine truth.

The complete and only effective answer to the profound lie of materialism is divine truth, and divine truth is a Divine Person, the Word of God that was made flesh. The Incarnation of the Word was the supreme revelation, not only about God but also about man. The primeval lie that men should be as gods was answered once and for all when the Son of God became man that men might become the sons of God. The hypostatic union of the divine and human natures in Christ was meant to be extended in its degree to the whole of human nature. In the members of Christ's Mystical Body the Incarnation would be perpetuated; he would live on in their minds and hearts, be reflected in them, and in that union with God through Christ they would find their own sonship of God, being born again of the Holy Ghost through the Motherhood of Mary. In her is that reflection of the divine most perfectly to be found. At Lourdes she bade the people of the world to come to her there—not only to find her, but to find her in order to find her Son. Lourdes is not only a shrine of Mary Immaculate; it is a shrine of the Incarnation.

'Now look upon the face which unto Christ
Bears most resemblance, for its brightness clear
Alone can fit thee to behold the Christ.'

(*Paradiso*, Cant. xxxiii, 85.)