

“The Year of Bernadette”

Sr. Mildred (Mary Ephrem) Neuzil and St. Bernadette Soubirous: How Heaven Connected Them

February 25th I had another of those “experiences” of which you had already heard, Father, many times. Though I had not at that time been thinking of her, she suddenly appeared at my side. This person was none other than St. Bernadette. She did not come as a Sister, but as the little peasant girl who saw “the Lady.”

I was transported somehow with her to the Lourdes Grotto in France. We stood a short distance away from it looking up into the niche, which was filled with light. In the midst of the brilliant light I saw “the Lady” so beautiful, so glowing as it were, in light that I could scarcely see the outline of her figure. It was brighter than any light I have ever seen. It was a light all heavenly and full of glory. I was transfixed.

Then suddenly the figure of Our Lady seemed to dissolve in the light but the brilliant light itself remained. Then I saw a path; at times it seemed to take the form of steps leading upwards from the niche where “the Lady” had been standing. Ever so often as I gazed at this luminous pathway, I caught a glimpse of angels.

I was anxious to follow the path of light and as I eagerly endeavored to do so, Bernadette held me back. Then I exclaimed, “But I want to go there.” The Saint answered, “No, my sister, it is not yet time for you, but it will be soon.” (Letter, Sr. Mildred (Mary Ephrem) Neuzil to Father (later Archbishop) Paul F. Leibold, April 12, 1958.)

The year 2008 was the 150th anniversary of the apparitions of Our Lady to Bernadette Soubirous in Lourdes, France. The year 2009 was declared “the year of Bernadette” by Bishop Jacques Perrier, bishop of Tarbes-Lourdes, a year dedicated to Youth, inviting them to learn the message of Bernadette’s simple but holy life. It is interesting to note that in this vision of Bernadette and this transport to Lourdes, Sr. Mildred Neuzil sees Bernadette, not as a sister but as a young peasant girl, young and poor!

Bernadette was born January 7, 1844, one of nine children, five of whom died at birth or shortly after. One brother died at age 10. Mr. Soubirous was a miller who ground wheat into flour for bread. **Bernadette was born in his mill to the sound of the grindstones crushing wheat. How symbolically rich an image for this victim soul who suffered much, like grain crushed for flour and mixed with Him Who is the Bread of Life.** Shortly after her birth the family fell upon hard times and a cousin offered them the lowest, filthiest room in his home, called the “dungeon,” a former prison considered unfit for prisoners because of its dampness. No wonder Bernadette was afflicted with such childhood illnesses: stomach and spleen problems, cholera that left her asthmatic. She was a quiet, docile girl who had difficulty learning because of missed classes due to illness; she was often in class with younger children and was sometimes humiliated and called “stupid.” With respect to the apparitions, many rejected her at first and tried to call her feeble-minded or fanatic or even insane.

She confided to a friend the secret of her resignation: **“When we think God permits this, we don’t complain.” “When we wish for nothing, we always have what we need.”** She appeared to be a normal girl no different than others but pious. Hers was a voluntary and often difficult obedience. She is sometimes referred to as **“the most secretive of all the saints” because of her few words and great silence, yet hers was the secret of transparency. Our Lady had given three secrets to Bernadette, asking her to tell them to no one, not even her confessor or the Pope, as they were meant only for her.** Many wanted to know them but she told no one.

She was 14 when the apparitions began February 11th, 1858. There were 18 in all and they ended in July of that year. We know the story of repeated questions and attempts from people in position to trick Bernadette and to diagnose her as mentally unbalanced or conniving-- an experience of rejection and suffering so common to other visionaries. Bernadette never changed her story and responded with remarkable candor and sincerity to the endless questions, even with surprising wit. **On the 16th visit, March 25, feast of the Annunciation, Our Lady finally identified herself, saying, “I am the Immaculate Conception,” a term Bernadette could not have known or understood, for it was only four years earlier that Pope Pius IX had proclaimed the dogma of the Immaculate Conception.** At an earlier apparition, a miraculous spring rose up in the grotto of Massabielle where Our Lady appeared and had asked for a chapel to be built and that processions be allowed there. **Lourdes has become the first significant Marian apparition of the Modern era, followed by the well known Fatima visions, lesser known appearances, and now Our Lady of America®.**

The similarities between Bernadette and Sr. Mildred are obvious. Sister Mildred was born to immigrant parents who came to New York for a better life and freedom of religion. While the Church in France was suffering from atheism in Bernadette’s time, in Sr. Mildred’s time our whole world is being enveloped in the errors of atheism which Our

Lady predicted at Fatima would reach even into high places within the Church if there was not enough reform in the world. Sr. Mildred, like Bernadette, was an amiable, docile soul drawn to silence and the religious life. On the outside she was as normal as any other sister, but her interior life was a life of special communion with the Lord which she thought was the norm for all sisters. While Sister Mildred entered the convent at age 14, Bernadette entered the convent at age 22 and remained there until her death at age 35. Sister Mildred died at age 83. **Both lives, however, seem to focus on a call to the young.**

Bernadette, too frail for Carmel, settled for the convent in Nevers, France instead. She was seen as a humble, simple soul of childlike demeanor but pleasant. Sr. Mildred, too, was a humble, simple soul, a domestic nun in a community that specialized in teaching and missionary work. She, too, left her family behind to enter the convent and give herself more completely to God. When her apparitions were made known, Sr. Mildred, like Bernadette, was not believed and was termed “crazy” by some who thought such interventions from heaven no longer happen in our sophisticated and enlightened age. Those in authority over Bernadette did not want to believe her at first because she was not learned, and neither did those in authority over Sr. Mildred because, as Our Lady said, “you are a little one.” **While Bernadette was given the outward and visible signs of Our Lady’s favor in the healing and miraculous spring water, Sr. Mildred was told, other than the signs given to the bishop to confirm the message’s authenticity, that Our Lady would grant “miracles, not of the body but of the soul.”** Our Lady of America® was much more interested in our interior lives than our physical lives. Just as Bernadette was a victim soul, so was Sr. Mildred. Recall that beautiful description of Our Lord’s appearance to her with the crown of thorns and a cross, asking her if she would suffer to bring Him to souls. Of course, like Bernadette with Our Lady, Sister Mildred refused Jesus nothing. **Our Lord often called Sr. Mildred “the little white dove,” a symbol of innocence and sacrifice. He told her He “was placing her on the altar of sacrifice.” Our Lady told Bernadette she could not “promise her happiness in this life, but only in the next.”** Both of these simple but holy women endured a great deal of physical, emotional and spiritual suffering and were joined to the passion of the Lord in intensely personal ways, a sign not only of God’s favor but of their holiness in surrender to His grace.

To Bernadette Our Lady identified herself as **“I am the Immaculate Conception.”** To Sr. Mildred she is **“Our Lady of America, the Immaculate Virgin®,”** focusing on both of her singular privileges, her Immaculate Conception and her Perpetual Virginity. **While at Lourdes Our Lady asked for a chapel to be built, with Sr. Mildred Our Lady asked only that we finish the National Shrine in Washington, DC, which we were already building to honor her under her unique privilege of the Immaculate Conception, our patronal church which she promised to make a place of special pilgrimage once a statue of her image is enthroned**

there in a place of honor, after being carried in solemn procession. Each was given a message to convey to the Church and the world at large, the need for prayer and penance, for a reform of life for our own conversion and for the salvation of souls. **Sr. Mildred's was an even more intense message on the doctrine of the Indwelling Trinity as our source of holiness from within, the most fundamental doctrine of our Faith that is mirrored in the family, in imitation of the simple life of the Holy Family that is paradise on earth.**

While Bernadette's life and mission was of great import to France, the message of Sr. Mildred from Our Lady of America® is of equal import to America, the United States in particular. Bernadette's story closes the 19th century; Sr. Mildred's closes the 20th century, a century Pope John Paul II referred to as the most evil in human history with its two world wars, the industrial revolution and the dehumanizing of man, the sexual revolution and the breakdown of Christian marriage and the Christian family, the increasing spread of the errors of communism and all the other "isms" with their false teachings and heresies, the attacks upon the Church from without and from disobedience within, and worst of all, the attacks upon the very sanctity of life itself.

Like Elizabeth of the Trinity and the Little Flower, young when they died, Bernadette died young, too, at age 35. The fact that Sr. Mildred saw Bernadette in this vision as a young peasant girl, not as an adult, speaks especially to young people. It is interesting that the bishop of Lourdes saw fit to declare 2009 a year for Youth. **"Our Lady of America's message to Sr. Mildred also spoke loudly and clearly to Youth, too, especially in America, to take a leadership role in a much needed reform of life and a return to Faith and Purity in our world. Our Lady even gave Youth a special title, "Torchbearers of the Queen."** Our Youth are the future of the world and of the Church. Pope John Paul II, so loved by our young people, called on them never to think they are too young to do God's work on earth.

The Lady Sr. Mildred saw at Lourdes, like in her own vision, was a Lady bathed in the light and glory of God Who dwells within. The pathway marked with angels Sister Mildred saw at Lourdes is consistent with the angels her companions often saw filling the room Sister Mildred was in, as they hovered over her for her protection. Just as Bernadette had to trust Our Lady with obedient faith, so Sr. Mildred had to trust that Our Lady would be faithful in her promise to realize the return to Faith and Purity in our world and the eventual **triumph of her Immaculate Heart**, revealed as the Immaculate Conception at Lourdes, first promised at Fatima, a triumph confirmed again by Our Lady of America, the Immaculate Virgin® here in America.

Bernadette's body was exhumed in 1909, then reburied; exhumed in 1919 and reburied; and exhumed in 1925, incorruptible still. It was then given a place of honor in the convent where she had died. She was canonized, fittingly, in 1933 on December 8, feast of the Immaculate Conception, by Pope Pius XI. While

Bernadette's mission has been fulfilled and she is called the **“patron saint of the poor, the sick and the family,”** Sr. Mildred's is far from over. We know **Sister Mildred's mission was to converge on the renewal of the Christian family and on a return to the interior life through union with the Divine Indwelling Trinity, and to reform our lives and return to Faith and Purity.** For Sr. Mildred the beatification process is just beginning. When her body is exhumed-- as we expect it will be one day-- we believe it, too, will be uncorrupted, perhaps even bearing the signs of the interior stigmata which many suspected she endured during her lifetime. **When asked if she would be canonized one day, Sister Mildred humbly replied, “Yes, but not because of me but because of the importance of this message.”** Sister often spoke of Our Lady's words that all her apparitions were converging in this one because of that great mystery of the Divine Indwelling. Throughout the Diary and Sister's letters, Our Lady appears on her established feast days.

The rest of Sr. Mildred's mission is up to us. Our Lady's own words, begging us to heed her and to act, says it well.

Tell the Bishops of the United States, my loyal sons, of my desires and how I wish them to be carried out. Through him who is head over you, make known the longings of my Immaculate Heart to establish the reign of my Divine Son in the hearts of men and thus save them from the scourge of heaven, both now and hereafter.

My daughter, will my children in America listen to my pleadings and console my Immaculate Heart? Will my loyal sons carry out my desires and thus help me bring the peace of Christ once again to mankind? (Sr. Mildred Mary Neuzil, Diary, pg. 15.)

(Notes on the life of Bernadette from BERNADETTE SPEAKS, Fr. Rene Laurentin, English translation, Daughters of St. Paul, 2000)

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