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## 071 - 25 Years of Banneux

Louis-Joseph Kerkhofs

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# 25 YEARS OF BANNEUX

PASTORAL LETTER (August 15, 1958)

**MOST REV. LOUIS-JOSEPH KERKHOFS**

Marian Reprint No. 71

## About Banneux . . .

Banneux-Notre Dame, Mary's newest shrine, deserves to be better known in the United States. Our Blessed Mother appeared at Banneux, Belgium, in 1933, to claim the fulfilment of a forgotten vow, to make known a new title "The Virgin of the Poor" and to invite all nations to come to her. The fame of this shrine has spread rapidly and it already attracts more pilgrims than any other shrine, except Lourdes and Fatima. In 1955, Our Lady's invitation to "all nations" was accepted by 750,000 visitors, and the number increases year by year.

Banneux is fortunate in having as its leading biographer the Bishop of the Diocese in which it is located, the Most Rev. Louis-Joseph Kerkhofs. His book *Notre Dame de Banneux* is the most authoritative. As yet, no complete treatment of the apparitions has appeared in the English language.

The pastoral letter gives a short history of the approbation of the apparitions, and dwells at length on the significance of the shrine, and compares it with that of Beauraing (see Reprint 64) with which it is so closely related in time, place, and meaning.

We are grateful to Rev. Anatole Baillargeon, O.M.I., for his translation.

### Reference material about Banneux:

Henry M. Gillett, *Famous Shrines of Our Lady*, Vol. 1

Don Sharkey, *The Woman Shall Conquer*

John Beevers, *The Sun Her Mantle*

John J. Delaney, *A Woman Clothed in the Sun*

B. G. Sandhurst, *We Saw Her*

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# 25 YEARS OF BANNEUX

PASTORAL LETTER (August 15, 1958)

**MOST REV. LOUIS-JOSEPH KERKHOFS**

**by the mercy of God and the grace of the Holy Apostolic See  
Bishop of Liege**

**Episcopal Assistant to the Pontifical Throne  
To the Clergy, the Faithful of our diocese and to  
the Devotees of Notre-Dame of Banneux  
Greetings and Blessings in Our Lord Jesus-Christ**

Dearly beloved,

1. The official recognition granted to the Banneux apparitions has permitted the priests and faithful of our diocese, as well as all the pilgrims of the Virgin of the Poor, to devote themselves unceasingly to the establishment and promotion of her cult. Today the Virgin of the Poor is known and venerated in the numerous churches dedicated to her. She is invoked in numberless chapels where her statue is the object of a Marian cult worthy of the soundest traditions of the Church. This same image of the Virgin of the Poor was solemnly crowned at Magherno in the presence of the Archbishop of Ancona by the Bishop of Pavia. It was crowned in Rome, at the Quadraro, by His Eminence Cardinal Micara, vicar to His Holiness Pope Pius XII. The same honors were rendered at Banneux itself on August 14, 1956, by His Excellency Bishop Ephrem Forni, Apostolic Nuncio to Brussels. These events did not go by unnoticed. From day to day pilgrims are gathering in greater numbers at Banneux where they come to manifest their devotion to the Virgin of the Poor.

2. Having been acquainted with the extraordinary events of 1933, we have, as the officially responsible bishop, recognized the authenticity of these apparitions. Thus did we express ourselves to our priests: "That which is of consequence in the present occurrence is the judgment of the local bishop. We do not refer to the judgment that he formulates in his own conscience and that he expresses as a private individual. Rather are we concerned here with the bishop speaking in his official capacity addressing himself to his diocesan flock by means of an official document." It was as head of the diocese that we approved in 1942 the cult and recognized the apparitions as being at least probable, that we reiterated this approbation in 1947 and that we finally judged the apparitions of Banneux as certain in 1949. We have given this approbation with full

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consciousness of our mission, of our authority and of our responsibility. History will one day relate how we studied this cause, who were the counsellors that guided us in the search for truth, and how providential were the decisions that had to be made on the many depositions presented before we could pass this final judgment.

3. In a note addressed to our clergy in 1949, we stated: "It is impossible not to consider this honored site as a precious element of the religious heritage of our diocese. In truth . . . we feel . . . happy in possessing Banneux, and in defending its cause inasmuch as is permitted by circumstances, we believe that we are accomplishing a duty of our office, a duty of gratitude, of love, of faithfulness towards Our Lady, a duty of Charity in regard to all the people of our diocese and many others.

Thanks be to God, this judgment is confirmed by new wonders. Each new favor, every increase in devotion and zeal towards the Virgin of the Poor bears witness to the presence of Mary at Banneux.

More than ever before is the universal role of the Virgin of the Poor affirmed by the extension of her cult throughout the world and among all classes of society. As was the case for Lourdes, Banneux will experience an expansion always more extensive, more luminous and more consoling. In 1947, we wrote: "What does the future hold in store? What influence will be exercised by this center of Marian radiance? God knows; and so does Mary. She had that knowledge and she suggested to us reasons for great hopes when she declared that the humble little spring of water was reserved for all nations."

4. Since then, more than ten years have passed; Banneux has been not only a land of blessings and graces, but it has become important for its spiritual radiance. Its message has been studied and merits being so more than ever. In its simplicity, it possesses a remarkable dogmatic wealth and depth. It will not be of interest simply to the theologians, since it is primarily a doctrine of Christian life, a call to the evangelical life, a consecrated life. In order better to put forward the worth of this treasure, which is too-little known, we address ourselves today especially to all "the souls hidden with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3), who want to live like Mary for their one and only Lord and work for the coming of His kingdom. There must spring forth from Banneux like "a pillar of fire" (Ex. 13:21) that grace of charity and unity capable of reuniting all Christians as "*universal brothers.*"

The Gospel must appear here with all the freshness and youth of the Spirit that inspires it. Here must it radiate to the very extremities of the earth, announcing the good news, Christ Our Lord, light of the world and glory of God (Luke 2:32). What is now important, dearly beloved brethren, is no longer the recognition of the *events of Banneux*, but the understanding and the propagation of the *message of the Virgin of the*

Poor. This message is of the greatest timeliness. Has it not been said of the Virgin of the Poor that she was: "The Virgin of modern times, Our Lady of tomorrow?" This is our reason for addressing this letter to you, dear people of my diocese, and to all of you, faithful pilgrims and servants of the Virgin of the Poor.

I

**The first step towards the fountain: the mediation of Mary**

5. On May first Bishop William van Zuylen, our esteemed coadjutor, inaugurated at Banneux the improvements which admirably calls attention to the meaning and significance of the *spring*, all the while making it more accessible to pilgrims who seek help and comfort. An altar has been erected at the very spot where the Virgin indicated the spring she had reserved for all nations, for the relief of the sick, for the relief of suffering. This altar makes possible the celebration of Holy Mass exactly where Mary has asked us to pray very much and promised the little visionary to pray for her. These changes were made possible only during this jubilee year, the twenty-fifth anniversary of the apparitions. The land, where the spring with its environs was found, formed part of the town property until recently when, to our great joy, it was acquired by the *Society of Banneux*. Today, after so many years of reflection, we have been able to organize this hallowed spot of prayer while better understanding its role in the unfolding of the apparitions and its significance in the message of Banneux. And this, we firmly believe, is what the Virgin wanted. To be precise: the very heart of Banneux is found in this place. And an inscription (at Banneux) masterfully expresses the doctrine recalled by the shrine: "*Fons unus Christus Jesus, hunc alma recludit. . .*" We translate it: "There is but one single fount, Christ Jesus; the Virgin Mary opened it to us."

6. Indeed, when the Virgin, all luminous in her immaculate whiteness, appeared in the small garden of the Beco family, with her blue sash, and the golden rose shining on her right foot, she came as a visitor to call the child of her choice, and with a gracious gesture of the finger beckoned her to come outdoors. Why? In order to recite with her the rosary she carried on her arm. When she reappeared three days later, she invited the child to follow her along the road. This call was faithfully obeyed. The young girl, her eyes riveted on the Virgin, followed step by step the path that Mary was tracing for her. When the Virgin came to a halt, the child prostrated herself. The walk was resumed and the child followed. Again the Virgin stopped, and again the child knelt down. In all, their walk was interrupted three times by these prostrations called for by Mary. This ritual has a meaning all its own; it brings to mind that of the

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liturgy of Good Friday, the triple adoration of the Cross. It is towards the spring that Mary is leading the child. The spring cannot be the image of Mary, who indicated it and reserves it for herself to benefit all nations. Rather the spring is the venerable symbol of Christ, source of grace, fountain of salvation. This symbol, reproduced in the remarkable mosaic which adorns the apse of Saint Clement's in Rome, has retained at Banneux all the power that it conjures up, for here, it is a real spring of water.

7. They who follow Mary to Banneux with docility will understand that this walking backwards of the Virgin is a clear sign of the eminent role which is here for every one of us, in the work of Redemption — her role of mediatrix. She has given us Jesus; she leads us to Him; she unites us to Him. Thus do the gesture of the apparition express in their concrete language the famous adage of Saint Bernard: "To Jesus by Mary," which makes this pilgrimage site so complete, since it leads to Christ. The Savior is not forgotten, the Virgin directs us here and a Marian devotion leads us to Jesus. Nor does it diminish in any way the cult due to the Son of God. This reproach often made by our separated brethren finds no grounds at Banneux, since, from the very first apparition, the Virgin calls us to follow her in order to lead us to her Son, fount of eternal life. In this manner there fully appears what we would willingly term the principal theme of the apparitions of Banneux: In leading every man to the fount of salvation, Mary could not have found a symbol more simple, more appropriate for her mediation. The child whom Mary chose most certainly did not invent facts of a truth so essential to Christian Revelation.

## II

### **"Plunge your hands into the water": union with Christ and poverty of the spirit.**

8. The first phrase that Mary addressed to the little visionary is today graven on the basin whence the spring flows: "Plunge yours hands into the water." Mariette Beco obeyed the Virgin's command. She extended her hands and plunged them into the icy water.

To stretch out one's hands is a natural gesture of expressing one's littleness, one's poverty, one's abandonment.

She who leads us to the spring had expressly named herself the Virgin of the Poor. By the title she gives herself, as well as by the action she asks, Mary undoubtedly refers to the first evangelical beatitude: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:3-12).

In order to enter into the kingdom and be reunited with Christ, Who is its head, we must be or become again like unto the little ones who

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await everything from their Father. "Unless you turn and become like little children, you will not enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18: 1-4).

Thus does the Virgin of the Poor bring us back to the fundamental truths of the gospel: She leads us to the source, that is to say, to Christ Himself, the one and only Savior with Whom she is closely associated; she reminds us of the primary interior disposition that will allow us to follow her to the spring and to penetrate spiritual poverty.

9. Spiritual poverty, i.e., poorness of spirit, consists in that detachment of the heart which renounces all to abandon itself to God.

He is poor who confides himself to God, receives everything from God, expects all from Him and is detached from all that is not God in order to live only in God and serve Him, his one and only Lord and Father. This spirit of poverty animated Mary. She proclaims it in her Magnificat: "My soul magnifies the Lord; my spirit has found joy in God, who is my Savior, because he has looked graciously upon the lowliness of his handmaid. He has done valiantly with the strength of his arm; he has exalted the lowly, he has filled the hungry with good things, protected his servant Israel, keeping his merciful design in remembrance, according to the promise which he made to our forefathers, Abraham and his posterity for evermore" (Luke 1:42-55).

The simplicity of Mary's welcome to God is such that all generations will proclaim her blessed (Luke 1:48). Poor in spirit, hers is the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:3).

This same poverty in spirit is requested by the Virgin of the Poor from all who would follow her and go to the spring.

This poverty will manifest itself by the unceasing and persevering prayer that Mary demands of us: "Pray very much," for the real poor are never weary of multiplying their entreaties; their supplications are in proportion to their needs. Our confidence in Mary is another manifestation of this spirit of poverty: "Believe in me, I shall believe in you." Our complete confidence in the Virgin of the Poor shall be a proof of our will to abandon ourselves to Christ the Savior under Mary's leadership.

10. Whosoever desires spiritual poverty will be able to express his intention at Banneux by renewing the gesture which the Virgin requested of the little visionary, who was invited by Our Lady to plunge her hands into the water.

At Banneux, it is to be noted that Mary did not ask, as she did at Lourdes, that the faithful wash themselves in the spring. She requested a much more mysterious action: "Plunge your hands into the water."

By frequent repetition, our understanding of its significance will continually grow. Gradually, it will be accompanied by a simple prayer, a prayer of abandonment, by a consecration to the Heart of Jesus. Little



by little, it will become a gesture of noble service and perfect faithfulness much akin to that which is found in the ordination to the priesthood, when the ordinands bind themselves to serve Christ in His Church and promise obedience and submission to Christ's representative amongst them, their bishop or their ecclesiastical superior.

11. Persons who are consecrated to God will renew their consecration at the spring and will encourage the souls confided to them to do likewise in all simplicity and humility.

Priests will make this offering of themselves in the oblation of the holy sacrifice, and while celebrating Mass in this privileged place, they will be mindful that Christ, source of our salvation, in instituting the memorial of his blessed Passion gives us in these holy mysteries what the Liturgy calls "the source of all holiness."

### III

#### **"For all nations": The universality of Banneux"**

12. On the 19th of January, 1933, during the third apparition, the little visionary asked why our Lady had said on the previous day that this spring was reserved "for her." The Virgin smiled at this frank question and answered: "This spring is reserved for all nations."

These words pronounced at the spring reveal its destiny: it is reserved for nations who, from that moment on, are invited to come there; it becomes a meeting place for all the people who will gather there. This invitation addressed to all nations announces the universal mission of Banneux.

Timely as it was for 1933, this call still remains urgent today.

Divided by opposing interests, the nations of the world are drawn up against one another, wrecking that human solidarity ordained by the Creator. They must be purified in the salutary waters of the spring that is Christ the Redeemer, the Head of humanity.

The Virgin leads them to this spring. Her beckoning men to Christ reminds us of the gesture of God who sent us His Son so that in Him we could find our salvation.

It is a fresh illustration of the admirable intervention of heaven in the sequence of world events. Nothing has been done, nothing will be done without Christ.

That which is conceived and bitterly debated in the councils of the nations will find its ultimate realization only in Jesus Christ.

13. It is also in Christ Jesus that the Catholic apostolate will draw increased vigor, as from a nourishing fountainhead.

At a time when modern techniques have allowed the world to become conscious of its unity in an ever-expanding international life, Christians

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cannot remain aloof from nations' efforts to create their unity in a spirit of peace. They must bear witness to truth and love in the midst of the world and to this end, they must deepen unceasingly their consciousness of their action with Christ, "for there is no salvation save in Him alone" (Acts 4:12).

If, therefore, we wish to collaborate as Christians with the efforts of the modern world and be the artisans of its unity in peace, we must follow this Marian route indicated by the Virgin of the Poor.

Mediatrice of all graces, Mary leads us to Jesus. She introduces us into the mystery of salvation and has us participate in imitation of her total poverty of spirit, in the gift of the Father, the Incarnate Word, Whose Mother she became on the blessed day of the Annunciation.

Christians will be united in *universal brotherhood* only if there is true poverty of spirit. Every Christian respectful of the equality of origin and destiny that unites men in Christ, Creator and Redeemer of the World, will see in each of his fellow-men the image of God and the brother of Jesus. This is the fashion in which he will best be able to collaborate in establishing the peace and unity of the world.

Mary sees us divided and knows our desires for unity and concord; she is well aware of how sin disunites us and hinders the building of a better world. May she help us to go beyond our frontiers and find once again unity in charity, to learn how to overcome the prejudices that separate us and to make amends for the injustices that divide us!

14. Union of men with Christ, dearly beloved brethren, cannot replace the structure of the earthly city. The world in which we live will always be filled with strife, and peace will never be that immutable peace of Christ that is to be found in heaven. Nevertheless, the spirit of Jesus, like leaven in the bread, gives life to our human structures, facilitates understanding between peoples and collaboration among nations. In order to achieve this end, there is a need for great wisdom, holy patience, profound charity, that will make our hearts universal and catholic.

To attain this universal love that has the very Heart of Jesus for model, we shall make greater efforts to pray as "catholics."

The liturgy of the Mass invites us to offer the sacrifice for our salvation and for that of the entire world. To pray catholic-wise means to pray for the salvation of all the world. The Mass itself, by uniting our prayer with that of Jesus who offers Himself in sacrifice, will enable our prayer to participate in the fulness of Christ the Savior.

In the eucharistic consecration in which Christ sacrifices Himself by offering Himself to His Father, the entire world is offered to its Creator and we are permitted to unite our spiritual sacrifices, the personal offering of our lives, as a holy and immaculate host (Rom. 12:1) by a sacrifice that is truly worthy of the Father.

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15. If the Mass inspires and generates a prayer that permits the Christian to reach the stature of Christ, Who has given His life for all men, it is easily understandable then that at Banneux we find united the spring and the cross, whence flows its (the spring's) fecundity; it is supremely fitting that there should be a renewal of the Sacrifice offered for all nations at the spring reserved for all nations.

That is why there is dominating the spring of Banneux an altar, where the glorified Christ perpetuates His filial oblation to the Father and the total gift of His life to mankind.

May we love all nations in charity; may we pray and work that they may form together the people of God, a purchased people, according to the expression of St. Peter (1 Peter 2:9).

This union of nations into one single, holy nation is a grace. God alone makes sure of it in the person of His Son.

Mary, Mother of the Savior and Queen of the World, wanted to direct our attention to these great truths of the gospel when, on the night of January 19, 1933, as the Virgin of the Poor, she led a little child to the spring at Banneux and told her: "This spring is reserved for all nations."

### IV

#### **I am the Mother of the Savior:**

##### **The place that Banneux holds in the series of Marian apparitions**

16. By consecrating the entire world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary on October 31, 1942, His Holiness Pius XII officially inaugurated what could be called a Marian era, the epoch of the Blessed Virgin's reign. Mary's apparitions greatly contributed to strengthening her reign and making us understand the eminent role she fulfills in the mystery of salvation. We believe that the apparitions of the Virgin of the Poor insert themselves in a very special manner within this great Marian movement, and it is our duty to meditate their meaning and portent. As the Bishop of Namur, His Excellency Andre-Marie Charue, recently expressed it: "It is hardly possible to admit that apparitions of the Virgin so near in time and space should be without some intimate reference to one another. The problem should be closely examined."

This problem of the relationship between Lourdes, Beauraing and Banneux must necessarily hold our attention. It seems opportune today to state in what manner we understand the harmony that exists among them.

17. From November 29, 1932, to January 3, 1933, Beauraing witnessed a series of 33 apparitions of the Blessed Virgin; a few days later on January 15, the Virgin of the Poor appeared at Banneux. These two series of apparitions nearly simultaneous, in the same country and at a very short distance from one another, could seem highly unlikely, and, if

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the first were true, would not the second by that very fact be deemed suspect? The extraordinary quality of the events at Banneux, their grand, simple, transcendent, truly gospel-like nature dispelled in a large measure our doubts on the subject. The beauty of the apparition as compared to the human instrument that the Virgin Mary had chosen will compel anyone who reflects upon the matter with an open mind to admit that these events were supernatural. The cult that ensued, its remarkable extension, the fervor and faithfulness of the pilgrims, the conversions, favors and cures that were obtained gradually increased the reasons to believe in the reality of the apparitions at Banneux.

What strikes us today (in this Lourdes Year) is their harmony with those of *Lourdes*. Is it not the Virgin of Lourdes who once again revealed herself at Banneux? Her white robe, her blue sash, the rose of gold on her right foot, are just so many indications, showing how Mary wanted us to note in her vestments and in her manner that she was taking up again the same message that she had inaugurated at Lourdes. In this jubilee year when Lourdes celebrates its first centenary, Banneux commemorates the twenty-fifth anniversary of the apparitions of the Virgin of the Poor. Indeed, Mary had the delicacy of linking the two when, on February 11, 1933, she appeared at Banneux to restate that she had come to relieve suffering. That which she has been accomplishing for such a long period of time and in so admirable a manner on the banks of the Gave, she came to do also at Banneux. As she had done at Lourdes, Mary at Banneux consecrated a spring. There she made it spring forth at the foot of the Massabielle cliff; here, she leads a child of her choice to it. Thus does the symbol that had been outlined at Lourdes assume at Banneux its full meaning: "*Fons unus Christus Iesus, hunc Alma recludit.*" The one source of our salvation is Jesus Christ.

18. The apparitions of Beauraing and Banneux are also linked. It is a great joy for us to recall here how Beauraing and Banneux have remained united in our preoccupations and how they have been signs from heaven for us in these troubled times. In 1935, His Excellency Bishop Thomas-Louis Heylen requested that we take in hand the interests of the Beauraing cause (when we were) in Rome. In 1957, on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the first apparition at Beauraing, His Excellency Bishop Charue invited us to join him in the celebrations by offering the Pontifical Jubilee Mass. His Excellency Bishop von Zuylen responded in our name to this amiable invitation. And great was our joy in receiving the Bishop of Namur in our cathedral to celebrate last January 15, a Mass of Thanksgiving for the signal favor of the apparitions at Banneux, bound as they are, without any doubt, with those of Beauraing.

In both cases, do we not find the same instructions and the same in-

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sistence? "Pray always . . . Pray very much . . ."

In both cases also, is there not found an identical solicitude for sinners? As it was noted by Bishop Charue: "... It is evident that the Madonna of Beauraing, all condescendence for the poor sinners that we are, can bear the name of Virgin of the Poor, especially if we refer to the poor in the Gospel sense, that is to say the humble, conscious of their misery and predisposed thereby to the effects of divine mercy."

At Beauraing as a Banneux, Mary proclaims her divine maternity: there, "I am the Mother of God, Queen of Heaven," here "I am the Mother of the Savior, Mother of God."

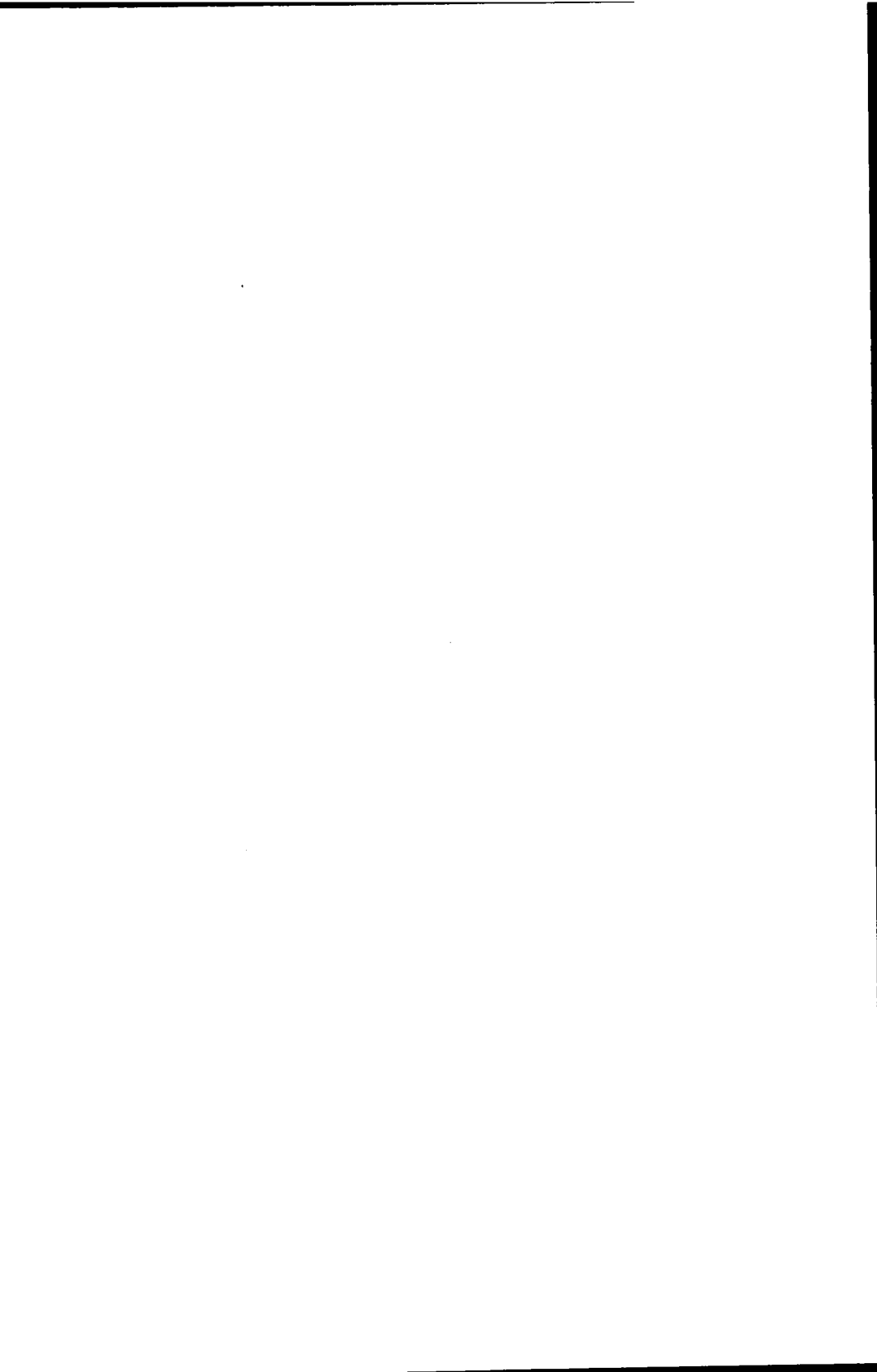
At Beauraing, she shows her heart. It has been said with great propriety that "Beauraing is the Paray-le-Monial of the Immaculate Heart of Mary." Her heart of gold shines with all the brilliance of the Incarnate Word's presence. She brings to Banneux the treasure that she keeps in her heart, just as she carried it in all haste to her cousin Elizabeth after the Annunciation. Is Banneux not a renewal of the Visitation?

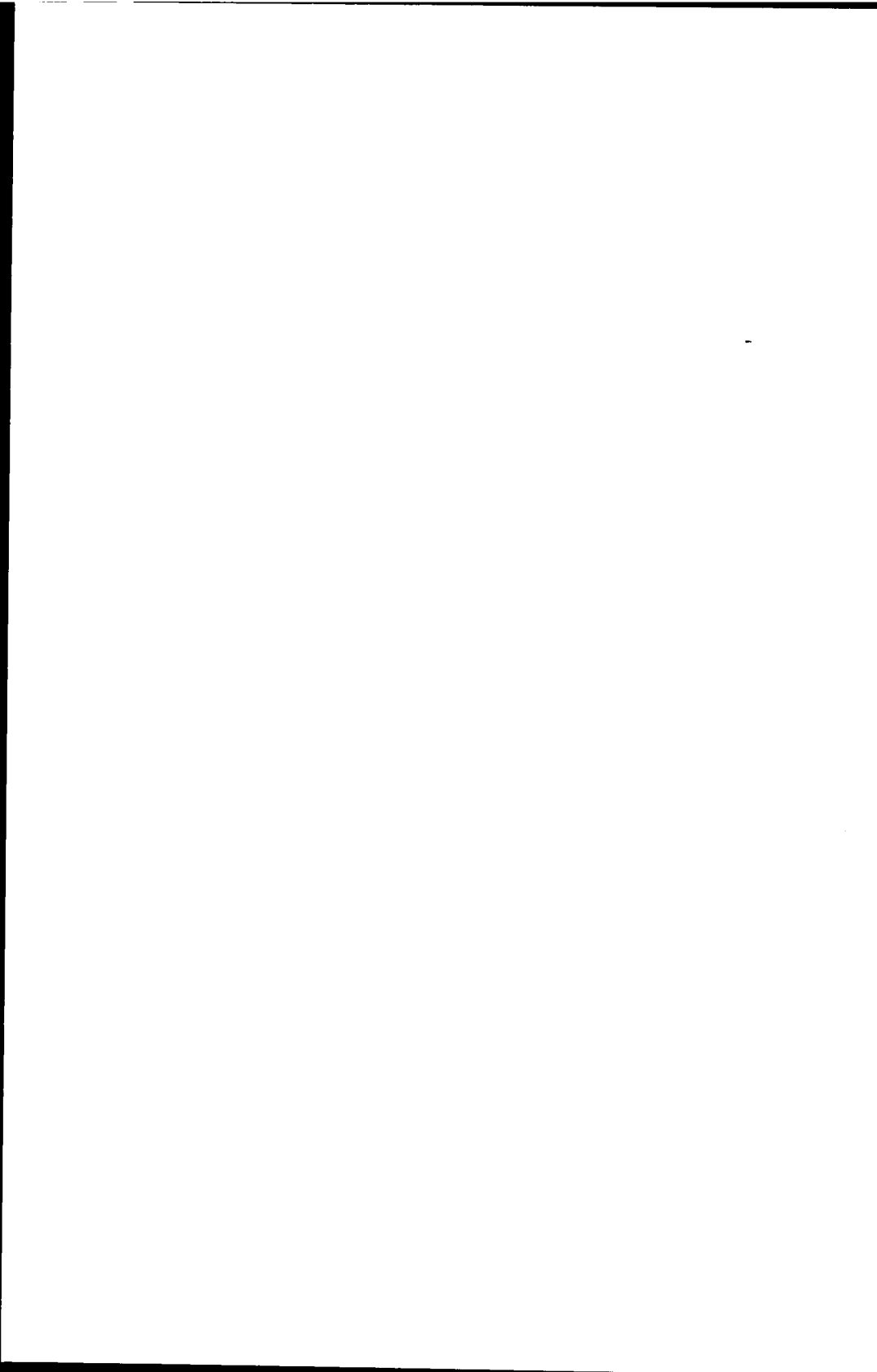
19. Thus did the close connections which exist, it seems, between the Marian apparitions of Banneux and those which are so intimately linked to it — Lourdes and Beauraing — gradually become clear to us. The future will show this relationship in a clearer light. The more we think about it, the better do we understand the exceptional value of the message of the Virgin of the Poor. Her visitation will remain for her faithful servants a signal grace and a reminder of the basic gospel truths, namely: the primacy of the poor in the kingdom of God, the universality of salvation and the mediation of Mary in the redemption, spiritual as well as physical, of every man in Jesus Christ.

20. May this year of jubilee be for all of us, dearly beloved brethren, a year of blessings and of graces! May it end next December 8 in a solemn Mass where clergy and faithful of all countries, if possible, will represent all the nations. Their presence shall be a fitting prelude to the realization of our most ardent wish: the adherence of all the peoples of the world to the Virgin of the Poor, Queen of Nations.

**LOUIS-JOSEPH**  
**Bishop of Liege**

(translated by Anatole Baillargeon, O.M.I.)





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