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## 066 - St. Bernadette and Our Lady

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*St. Bernadette  
and Our Lady*

MRS. MARY REED NEWLAND

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR . . .

The current reprint is a talk given by Mrs. Mary Reed Newland at the Sixth Annual Marian Institute, held at the Marian Library, University of Dayton, June 13-14, 1958. The theme of the 1958 meeting was "The Meaning of Lourdes."

An old New England farmhouse filled with the activity of seven growing youngsters wouldn't exactly fit Thoreau's demands for the creative writer, but Mrs. Newland thrives on it, for family life, centered in introducing the child to the atmosphere of Catholic living especially within the rhythm of the liturgical year and the example of the saints has been basic to her writing and lecturing.

Aside from numerous lectures to college groups, parents and teachers, Mrs. Newland's pen has found its way into the pages of such periodicals as *Catholic Digest*, *Integrity*, *The Marianist*, *Family Digest* and several anthologies. She has produced three especially readable books: *The Year and Our Children*, *We and Our Children* and *The Saints and Our Children*.

Mrs. Newland, who was born in Kalamazoo, Michigan, worked in department stores and advertising agencies until her marriage in 1943 to William J. Newland. She has attended the Pratt Institute and the New School for Social Research and studied art at the National Academy of Design. The author holds an honorary doctorate in Humane Letters from St. Joseph College, West Hartford, Connecticut. The family lives near Monson, Massachusetts.

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## ST. BERNADETTE AND OUR LADY

MRS. MARY REED NEWLAND

A VERY HOLY PRIEST has said, "When we see Christ in the Mystical Body around us, we must see His life literally in the people we meet and move among, and we must see the mysteries of His life in their lives if we are going to know how to deal with these people: members of our family, members of the neighborhood, our community, the school, wherever we are. We have to see that some people are just being born in Christ, some are being chased into Egypt as it were, some are living hidden lives, some are called to live His life publicly, and some are suffering His passion and dying in Christ."

Now, if this is true of the Christ life, it is true of the mysteries of Mary's life also; we must know the mysteries of her life and identify them as we see them in the lives of the people around us. It can help our children, the children we teach and the children we live with and know, as well as all our adult fellows, to see life in this fashion. It will eliminate a great deal of floundering around, wasted effort and diluted good will.

We come to think about a saint like Bernadette when we discover that if it is difficult for us to translate the mysteries of Mary's life in terms of our own, we can simply look in Bernadette's life and in the lives of all the saints and find them very clearly demonstrated there. And then we will be able to penetrate these mysteries more deeply and help our children to learn them.

How was Bernadette like Our Lady? She wasn't a saint from the outset, so she wasn't like Our Lady in that respect. But God the Father is pleased with us and becomes more and more pleased with us as He sees us grow in the likeness of His Son. Surely His Son was very pleased with the likeness of Mary that He saw develop in Bernadette. It seems to me that that must account for why so many children are chosen, even children who, to be honest, do not spend twenty-four hours a day in meditation.

All virtue is an imitation of Mary. All goodness, all holiness is a growing in a likeness of Mary. It is impossible to grow in holiness



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without being an imitator of Mary. How was Bernadette like Our Lady?

When Bernadette was finally in the convent, someone asked her why was she chosen for these apparitions. She answered quite sincerely, "Why, if Our Lady could have discovered anyone more ignorant than I, she would have chosen her. She found me underneath a pebble." She was truly sincere about it. Our Lady once said, "My spirit doth magnify the Lord and my soul rejoices in God my Saviour because He who is mighty has done great things to me, and Holy is His name."

He had looked on her lowliness she said. Humility is not a matter of denying that one has received gifts or that one has been asked to perceive apparitions. Humility in Our Lady was not a matter of saying she was not pleasing to God. She was completely aware of her own lowliness. Even though she was sublime, compared to God, she was as nothing. And it was her limpid understanding and acceptance of this that is thrilling for us to behold—her acceptance that all she was came from Him and was a gift from Him. She was content to radiate this: "My Spirit doth magnify." So Bernadette, whether or not she realized it, was imitating Our Lady in her humility and her lowliness. This is the sort of thing that parents must meditate on (teachers also) with regard to themselves and their own gifts and especially with regard to the training of their children.

In our home we have seven children, and they all have different gifts. One boy is an excellent scholar and his brother, who stayed back a year in school one time because he didn't read well, is not as excellent a scholar; however, he is beautifully coordinated physically and is an excellent athlete. So on the baseball field, one is inclined to be slightly jealous of the other, and in the classroom the other has a chip on his shoulder every so often because his brother does better than he. This is a common situation in all families, all classrooms, in all communities—this confusion about what to do with one's gifts and how to realize that each is made in a unique pattern. Each has a special work; each one must finally from the depths of his humility admit these are gifts, that they are not his doing and they were given

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to him so that he might "magnify the Lord."

We meditate on this in Our Lady, and we see it practically applied in the life of Bernadette, and then the next step for us is to act on it by teaching it in these terms to our children.

What was Bernadette's preparation for becoming the model of humility which, by the time the end came, she really was? Each saint reflects a different glory and characterizes a different virtue and surely Bernadette's was humility. It is interesting to think of all the death-bed statements of every saint you ever read and compare them, and Bernadette's is absolutely right for Bernadette. The last thing she said before she died, "Pray for me, Holy Mary, a poor sinner."

This humility of hers is a thing we ought to seek when we read her life and we look for clues for the forming of the minds and souls of our children. How was she prepared in this? Well, her beginning was rather ordinary like the beginning of most ordinary children.

Her family was well enough born, they were well enough off, they were educated in the local schools, they weren't illiterate like Maria Goretti's parents or like Don Bosco's parents. They had inherited a family business—milling. Things should have gone along in a sort of middling way for them. But through an unfortunate misunderstanding about the possession of the mill and her father's lamentable lack of practical business acumen and his wife's youth and inexperience and imprudence about entertaining too lavishly at the mill and not collecting the money for the milling done, sooner or later, it was apparent that the Soubirous were suffering a series, apparently an endless series, of misfortunes which made their lot far from a good one. In no time at all they were desperately poor.

Finally, at the age of thirteen, Bernadette was invited to go to Bartres to stay with the family of a woman she called her foster mother. The woman had taken care of her when she was an infant, and at that time she had been the petted darling of the family in Bartres, and they loved her very much. But, in the meantime, they had acquired five children of their own. So the relationship, theoretically, which was to have been the same with the addition of the fact that Bernadette was going to help earn her keep by shepherding, taking

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care of the sheep, the relationship was not the same once she got there.

Part of the agreement had been that she would take care of the sheep, probably help at other things (that would go without saying), but also that she would be allowed to enroll for catechism classes and prepare for her First Communion. Well, the catechism lessons were short-lived because the Cure left to join a monastery, and apparently there was not a permanent replacement for a long time. And in no time at all, Madam, the woman at the head of the household, was left with the catechism in hand and Bernadette to teach. And Bernadette spoke the Lourdes' *patois*, which was more Spanish than French, and Madam, in trying to teach it to her in French, which was a foreign language to Bernadette, got nowhere.

The testimony afterwards is very touching. (The woman makes me very irritated, I get very cross with this woman every time I read this testimony.) She said smiling (this is afterwards, smiling reminiscently), "Bernadette found it so difficult sometimes I used to lose my temper and get very angry; I would throw the book aside and say it was hopeless." Other testimonies indicate that she would call her an "idiot," and "it was impossible for her to learn anything and I would throw the book aside." It never occurred to her that the child couldn't learn it because it was in a foreign language. She hardly got the gist of it because she spoke almost a completely different tongue.

Now this is very important. Our Lady spoke Bernadette's tongue. The examiners were scandalized to hear that when they questioned her. "How did Our Lady speak to you, in French?" "No, she spoke *patois*," and Bernadette was embarrassed to admit it. They were *shocked* at Our Lady for not speaking pure French. Well, anyway, you can imagine the effect of all this on Bernadette. She was completely convinced, apparently, that she was an idiot.

She worked very hard. She went out early in the morning. She probably had good, but poor and unvaried, wholesome country fare. She had inevitably a lovely day in the fields. But we mustn't forget that she had asthma, tuberculosis; she had been a victim of the plague at one time; her health was miserable. She was tiny, she was

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so debilitated by sickness. Always, she said the rosary. She pulled it right out of her pocket at the first apparition. She was not a pietistic child given to posing. She was a completely humble, poor, little girl who was making the best of a bad situation and was getting pushed around a bit in the bargain.

Now why wouldn't she have been unhappy and miserable? And why wouldn't she have made it known? Well, sometime later when she was back in Lourdes, she was walking on the street with Jeanne Vedere, who was her cousin, and they met Father Aravant, who was the brother of Bernadette's foster mother in Bartres, the conversation was very animated. Bernadette showed her obvious affection for this man, and when he left, Jeanne said to her, "Who is he?" "Oh, he is the brother of my foster mother," answered Bernadette; "he is very nice. I loved it when he came to visit. When he came to visit in Bartres, he spoke to my foster mother about her treatment of me, and then things were better while he was there, but, when he left, things went on as before." And Jeanne said, "Well, if you were unhappy, why didn't you tell your father?" And Bernadette said, "Oh, no, I thought the good God willed it." Bernadette had learned abandonment by the time she was twelve or thirteen years old.

Afterward she said a number of times (she repeated those thoughts): "It is not good to care about what people do, one must be patient; God has a reason for letting these things happen." This *must* be true! We must learn this ourselves. Needless to say, it is not easy. It makes excellent sense, after you get finished examining all the variety of things one might do in any given situation, to end up seeing that in the end the best thing to do is always to let God have His way because He is wise and He knows what He is up to. But one must have a reason for letting Him have His way, one must *will* that He have His way in order to milk the situation of all its value.

This little one had learned it and one wonders how. Probably I would say, as member of a family, she learned it from overhearing it said hundreds of times by the grownups in her life. "It is God's will; God's will be done." People say this; we say it without even knowing that we say it. Thank God we say it. It forms the very mentality of our children. It is an incredible thing.



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The day I came here, I got into Springfield very early in the morning and went to Mass and had some time to wait for the plane. So afterwards I went back to the cathedral, and there was a little girl sitting there with her grandmother, waiting for the Cathedral High graduation to start taking place. They had a whole hour to wait, and the child was very restless. She was only four. Finally when she had run the gamut of all the things to do (she had run in the choir loft and looked at all the windows and the stations: the poor grandmother was about at the end of her tether.), I opened my Missal and I said, "Would you like to look at the pictures in my Missal?" (I have one of those Maryknoll Missals with a lot of colored reproductions that illustrate the mysteries of the liturgical year.) Now this is a little girl that I simply took for granted came from a good Catholic family. I was amazed to find that she didn't know who a single one of the people in those pictures in that Missal was. I showed her the picture of the Nativity and I said, "Who's that?" and she didn't know. I was absolutely appalled. Her grandmother (God love her), who didn't realize, was chatting with me afterwards; she said the child was very active, loved to watch things on television and dance around the way she sees them dance on television shows. When I left I said to the little girl, "You have a whole hour to wait; you must try very hard to be patient and not upset Grandma. Now you must ask God to give you the grace. You just kneel down now and talk to God and ask Him to give you the grace to be patient." And she asked, "Where is God?" This is heartbreaking! It seems hardly necessary to tell parents that they must teach their children about God, but one must. And we must not take this work lightly. This child was formed by what had been taught to her, and it wasn't God.

Bernadette was formed by what she had heard in the life around her. This was no accident that this child took all that abuse from the foster mother over a period of many months; coughed, wheezed, and racked herself through all those damp days, and took her place at the foot of the household: even the priest noticed it when he came. Interestingly enough it did not destroy her. Why not? *One is psychologically safe if one is doing things for the love of God*, if one understands that God's will is perfect and that the only intelligent

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as well as the only wise thing to do is to let Him have His way. Notice, if you will, that this priest had tried to remedy the situation. Parents will take exception sometimes and say, "Well, after all, I think we have a right to try to remedy a situation." Quite right, we do; and he tried. And you would think that if anyone could do it, the priest could have. The foster mother behaved while the priest was there, and she went back to her old ways when he was gone. This does not mean that she beat the child or anything like that. She was just apparently distracted and short of temper. She testified later on that Bernadette was very good, and when scolded, she would not answer back—and Bernadette had a temper.

Now in these passages in the lives of the saints there are many, many lessons to be learned by parents, many secrets to be discovered. We must apply them in terms of our own life. We have a little boy who had a tough teacher all year long in school; she had quite a reputation for being tough. (She had two other Newlands. Though no Newlands are docile, these were more so. She had no trouble with them.) Unfortunately she is the kind of person who makes pets of people and the children, you know, are not dopes; they see it all and size it up in no time. Well, the Newland whom she had this year is really the smartest of the lot, I think; I mean intelligence wise. (People say, "Well, if you do have a vocation in the house, and it's this one, he'll be a theologian.") Anyway, he began having a hard time with this teacher. He really *is* a day-dreamer, and has spasms and spells when he gets lazy, and he was bored a lot of the time, and the teacher used to call and complain. We did our best to work on him, and we didn't feel that she was being unjust, but we all realized that her personality was not the happiest in the world. Finally, two months before school closed, he said, "You know, I am going to make her my friend if it is the last thing I do." I was so pleased because, you know, months and months of taking a beating and you wonder if she will break this boy's spirit. That mustn't happen. Children have to be disciplined, but we musn't take the spirit out of them. Well it was not to be done. And by the last two weeks of school, he said, "You know, she just doesn't like me, and that's all there is to that. Other kids can do the very same thing and she lets them get away with it;

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and if I do them (now listen to this), as soon as it's recess and the kids are out, she's in there telling all the other teachers my faults. I've heard her. 'You should see that Newland boy.' Well, now, he has faults; I'll be the first to admit it. But there was a valiant attempt to win her friendship.

What can a parent say in a case like that? "That awful woman, I'll give her a piece of my mind!" That accomplishes nothing. We did the best we could to help him. We did the best we could to be understanding. So what does one say to a child? "Then this is the cross, dear, and you accept this, and you love her even though she can not seem to find much love in her heart for you. God permits this for some reason that maybe you won't know for a long time." That makes it sensible. That makes the thing make sense.

In Bernadette's case perhaps the maneuvering was different; perhaps it was all by chance. I don't know whether someone sat Bernadette down and explained these things or not; but she picked it up. She learned that beautiful abandonment to the will of God when she was a little girl. We have to *teach* this in this day and age; you can't wait for them to pick it up. The little girl in the cathedral picked up nothing, not even the name of Jesus, the Baby in the manger in Bethlehem. She did not even know His picture. So this sort of thing needs a teacher. We find our variety and our stories and our methods by scanning the lives of such saints as Bernadette, and we are thrilled by these occasions.

When did Our Lady say something like that? "Be it done unto me according to Thy word." Maybe Bernadette didn't know it but she was imitating Our Lady. She was repeating her very words when she answered Jeanne Vedere that day. And it served her well in the future. Before her life was over she had more than one difficult personality to live with. And one is either destroyed by these things or made holy by them. She grew to holiness because she was imitating Mary the whole time.

After the catechism lessons came to nothing, life at Bartres was not the idyl that it had been supposed it might be. She finally decided that she was going to go back to Lourdes whether or not anybody liked it. She even asked someone to tell her father to bring her

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home, but the poor Soubirous at that point were so distracted trying to keep body and soul together that I suppose it seemed that this was the better solution—to have at least one mouth at Bartres being fed, since not all the mouths at Lourdes were being fed. She was almost fourteen and had never made her First Communion. One day her mother saw her crying in the church when the children went up for First Communion. And so this little thing, only four feet nine inches—I think she was always so tiny because she was so sick all the time and she ate so little—this little thing marched herself home to enroll at the hospice and started taking lessons.

At the age of fourteen she was in what we would call the first grade. She was in a classroom where humiliation was heaped on humiliation because here was this older girl in with the babies and just beginning to learn. You recall that after the apparitions began even the good Sisters found it hard to believe in them. The one who taught her catechism said, "Well, if it is the Blessed Virgin you see, then get her to teach you your catechism." Now this should have ruined that child's spirit, mind, it should have soured her. We are all so taken up with the mental strain and stress of life in this twentieth century. How keep our children, who are living in a fallen world, sane and healthy and free of bitterness and frustration? We find how in the life of Bernadette and all the other saints.

She was going to school and preparing for First Communion, and she was living in a miserable hole, a former jail cell, styled by the people at Lourdes as unfit for animals with a cesspit outside and a manure pile on top. We stop and think twice, don't we, about our values when we see where God finds His mystics.

Pere Petitot, the French Dominican, says that she was every bit as great a contemplative as Saint Therese of Lisieux though she never taught any "little way" and she never evolved any kind of doctrine or promoted it. But, by the time she died, she had scaled the very peaks of the mystical life. We stop short and reexamine all our values when we see where He finds His saints. We look to see where this might match a mystery in Our Lady's life, and it becomes very obvious. Her baby was born in a cave that sheltered the sheep

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during the rain. Father Willam, the German Scripture scholar, says, "It was probably vermin infested."

It is a heroic thing to be a Christian, really a Christian, especially in these days. Our granny is sometimes given to reminiscing about how it was in Ireland and how they walked so many miles in bad weather and how they fasted so hard, and she shakes her head at some of the Christians she sees around her today. The heroism of the Christian life is a different thing today. It is an heroic thing, if you are really a Christian, to strip your values down over and over again and go backward all the time to first things first, and see what you do love the best. Is it really God and is it really His mother and is it really holiness? Or is it your standing or your neighborhood or your career or your job or your income?

This is one of the many, many things that Bernadette teaches us; her preparation in holiness was preparation indeed. But we have the same passion in our own lives. We have poverty. We are going through a recession now. Someone said, and it makes very good sense, "If Americans were becoming soft and self-indulgent to the point of disintegrating entirely, what we need is more recessions not less." That sounds brutal doesn't it? But we need either that or else we need self-discipline. Sometimes when we will not discipline ourselves it looks as though God permits a discipline to descend on us because we never come out of these things weaker, only stronger, and we see that saints like Bernadette emerged from these unthinkable conditions. There was no reason why she should have turned out right at all. All the things that we think are going to work to turn out proper children, good children, fine children, sometimes don't have anything to do with it.

She waited. It was a kind of Advent. She waited for the coming of her First Communion, and little did she know what was ahead of her. It was much like Our Lady waiting out the coming of her child. Our Lady never complained. All her plans were thrown away. She had to leave all behind—the cradle, things she had made for the baby. She could bring only perhaps the swaddlings and blankets. Think of what she had to leave behind when she went off to Bethlehem to have her baby. This was God's will. So we find this mystery



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in the life of Bernadette, and out of this we begin to find spiritual growth. We begin to see in Bernadette how spiritual growth takes place.

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