

views of the *Domaine* stamped to their sides, fall into virtual invisibility. The pilgrim has had his own vision: a partial one, and clouded by his own insufficiency. But he will not, in the future, wholly forget it.

NEEDED: A HISTORY OF LOURDES

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MGR F. Trochu published in 1954 *Ste Bernadette Soubirous*, now translated and 'adapted' by Fr J. Joyce, S.J. (Longmans; 25s.): omission of notes and references has reduced the book from 585 pages to 400 and it will doubtless be the definitive 'life' of St Bernadette in English. Yet I feel that a History of Lourdes is still required. Lest I seem over-critical, and at the risk of being over-personal, may I say that already at school I was spell-bound by 'Lourdes'—in spite of books. Lasserre's book was clearly a 'literary' work by an enthusiast, not an historian: two persons sent me Zola's *Lourdes*, no less clearly rationalist, though I could not then know of its deliberate mendacity. I went to make a novena at Lourdes and sought for every trace of Bernadette and Abbé Peyramale. I returned, and remained, ever more beholden to our Lady of Lourdes, but not till, long afterwards, I read Fr Cros's three big volumes, did I feel that my 'devotion' had historically irreproachable foundations. A 'history' must not seek, or be afraid, to 'shock'.

Instinctively I turned to page 40 in the translation: Bernadette on her way to collect wood passed an old woman who was 'doing some washing'. I knew that Bernadette had said *des boyaux*. I turned to Trochu: the translation was quite faithful; but the French relegates the *boyaux* to a coy footnote. 'La Pigouno' 'did not hide' that what she was washing was—would 'offal' offend the delicate ears of England, or even America? Again, when the children returned after the first Apparition, Toinette says (page 46) that she will go to sell the bones they had collected, so 'the mother hurriedly began to tidy Toinette's unruly curls' (*recoiffer les boucles folles de T.*). But Toinette is originally reported simply as saying: 'My mother decided to comb our hair; she

began with me'. We cannot but recall February 25th when Mlle Estrade said that after one vision Bernadette slipped her hand under her hood and scratched: 'it is quite possible that a troublesome tribe had made its home there . . . in fact, Bernadette was scratching might and main (*de tout son cœur*)'. 'And you'd want me to believe', said her friend, 'that *that* girl saw the Blessed Virgin?' (Cros I; p. 263.) So was not that why Toinette was being combed? And no wonder, given the appalling conditions in which the Soubirous lived!

These are trifles. More important is the *mise en scène*. Between the opening where the statue stands and a lower orifice is a 'tunnel' (*couloir*) behind the rock-face down which the Vision often would slide (*se laissa couler*: the word of M. Clarens, Bernadette's kinsman and interrogator) and appear on the 'ground floor' of the Grotto, which was then piled high with debris. It was here that she named herself (March 25). The existence of this *couloir* used to be scarcely mentioned, and was even denied: Mgr Trochu (p. 254) says it becomes too narrow for the top to be reached from below: yet a local ecclesiastic told a friend of ours (who looked up through the *couloir*) that it was thus that a man would climb when the back of the statue must be cleaned. Anyhow, we must picture our Lady naming herself when she was at the *lower* opening.¹

As to one incident—we read (Trochu, p. 112; Joyce, p. 64) that on February 19 loud yells were belched from the Gave . . . like a brawling mob; that one voice, still more furious, shouted 'Off with you! off with you!'; and that our Lady by a 'single glance of sovereign authority' silenced all this: 'the enemy of all good should not chase her from the Grotto where she granted audience'. True, Dr Dozous says that on the 21st Bernadette had wept, and said that our Lady had looked over her head and told her to pray for sinners. But the Abbé Pène says that nothing new was said or done on the first two days of the 'fortnight'; no other

1 Bernadette of course spoke *secundum apparentias*. She saw the Lady above—then below—then above; and there *was* a *couloir*: how natural, then, to say she '*se laissa couler*', and the enchanting expression that she returned '*comme dans ses appartements*'! The children at Fatima spoke of a door in the sky shutting so quickly that they feared it would catch the vanishing Lady's feet; and Mme Nicolau, daughter-in-law of the miller who helped to pull the child—still in ecstasy—from the Grotto to his mill, said that he would point to a window and say: 'That is where she (the Lady) went out'. After all, St John (Apoc., 4, 1) saw a 'door' open in heaven, and was told to come up, to receive his revelation.

eye-witness mentions anything of these voices save M. Estrade, referred to in a note as saying that Bernadette told it to himself and his sister; and a priest from Tarbes says he heard it from her. But Estrade is extremely unreliable always; and his book appears to have been compiled by a Fr Dupuy in 1899 from twenty pages of notes taken in 1858: and it is out of the question that Bernadette should have spoken thus rhetorically. I think that Dr Dozous is here preferable, and that the noise, if any, was made by the crowd: the child's ecstasy differed in 'depth' (Joyce, p. 387).

Mgr Trochu has done justice to the civil authorities of Lourdes, especially M. Jacomet, showing that they were not unkind to Bernadette; but I think he underrates the personality of the Abbé Peyramale (p. 14, note 1). Of course it was this forceful priest who, once he believed, was the driving-power behind the building of the 'chapel'; equally of course all had to be sanctioned by the bishop (whose relations with the civil officials were at first singularly disingenuous): a conflict inevitably occurred: Peyramale vowed he would never set foot in the Grotto works again, and resolved to build a church of his own in the town itself. I have never found out the early history of this church: since it was desperately hard to find money to build the basilica, it was hardly to be expected that either the bishop or Père Sempé, the head of the missionaries installed by the bishop in the Grotto terrain, would feel pleased that funds should be diverted to the abbé's distant church. Thus it came about that when I sought the abbé's tomb I found it in the disintegrating walls of a crypt: the sarcophagus stood amid weeds and pools of water; on one side was engraved: 'Blessed are the persecuted'. It is good to know that a larger church now surrounds what was to have been his own, and that his tomb is decently sheltered. When we reflect that an atrocious vandalism pulled down the ancient church where Bernadette had prayed, and that for long after her death both the abbé and the child herself almost vanished from the 'geography' of Lourdes, we feel that a revulsion of feeling has taken place. Bernadette said she was a 'broom'; once used, it was put back into its corner. She (and I hope the abbé), are being taken out again—by this faithfully translated *Life*, by the glorious photography by von Matt in his *St Bernadette*, and, more accessibly, by B. G. Sandhurst's book: *We Saw Her* (also at Longmans, 1953). Bernadette, when, with floods of tears, she heard of Peyramale's

death, exclaimed that he *and* Père Sempé had been her two best friends, though I find it hard to think that she said to a nun that 'they accomplished what I could not'.

Bernadette's life had been made miserable at Lourdes by interviewers clerical or lay: it is almost incredible that seemingly the day after her arrival at Nevers, exhausted by her journey and very home-sick, she was produced, in her poor peasant's dress, before the Mother General and other superiors, about 130 novices and thirty postulants and Sisters summoned from other houses. There she was made to relate her visions and *act* them. Soeur Alexandrine, from the Lourdes hospice, had constantly to prompt the intimidated girl, though once, when Bernadette said that she had had, often, to try to drink the new-found water, the Sister whispered: 'You see how unmortified she is!', Bernadette, with a flash of her Pyrenean spirit, retorted: 'Well, it was *very* dirty!' Mgr Trochu is frank about the erratic treatment she endured in her convent—perhaps it could not have been different. She preserved her blunt straightforward sense of humour and could reduce the whole noviciate to laughter by mimicking her doctor; still, she was the victim of impertinent pietisms, and still more of snubs. Mgr Trochu makes two points clear. First, St Bernadette was a peasant, and remained one. She jarred on the bourgeois elegance of Nevers, rather as the *petite aristocracie* of Paray found St Margaret Mary obviously bourgeoisie. Certainly I think that Bernadette 'fitted in' less with the ruthless rectangularity of Nevers than with the mountains and rushing rivers and huddled houses of Lourdes—but she might never have become a Saint there! I think it is possible that Mère Vauzou, the Superior, didn't *like* Bernadette:² at any rate, at that time (and sometimes now) French ascetic 'direction' was very artificial: Mère Vauzou was said to have the 'passion for working at souls' (*travailler les âmes*), worrying her way into them and then trying to *shape* them: she froze Bernadette, who became tongue-tied. She thought that 'humiliations' would produce (or preserve) humility: such a system may crush a weak spirit; or 'neutralize' a personality; or be seen through and turn the victim into a cynic. But as Bernadette said herself, she got her true schooling from the dreadful

² Ironically, she was sent to die in the Hospice at Lourdes opposite the Grotto: when greater processions occurred, she had her window-shutters shut: when the introduction of Bernadette's cause was hinted at, she said: 'Not while I'm alive.' Yet she had a good heart, and was a woman of integrity.

physical and spiritual suffering that she went through—this, and the grace that preceded and accompanied her, according to our Lady who promised her happiness, not in this life, but in the next. Bernadette, in fact, was the first great apostle of Lourdes: the broom in its corner was still asked to do *a* job.

This is perhaps why we feel that though a History of Lourdes, that is, of its first centenary, should certainly be written, it would be wise for most of us to leave to one side all that is not directly concerned with the child Bernadette and the apparitions granted to her in the Grotto. We can forget the chatter of many voices and shut our eyes to all that injures the simplicity of the Vision and of its double message of penance and purity, and yield ourselves to that sense of holiness which makes the heart feel sick when it must turn to other memories.