

# PRODIGAL PILGRIM

*Letters to Pope Francis  
from Lourdes, Fatima,  
Garabandal and Medjugorje*

AN EPISTOLARY JOURNEY

PETER BREEN



Published in Australia by  
Garratt Publishing  
32 Glenvale Crescent  
Mulgrave, VIC 3170  
[www.garrattpublishing.com.au](http://www.garrattpublishing.com.au)

Cover design by Custom EBook Covers  
Cover image © iStock  
Typesetting by Mike Kuszla

Scripture texts in this work are taken from the *New Jerusalem Bible, Reader's Edition*, first published 1990; Biblical text © 1985 Darton, Longman & Todd and Doubleday, New York.

English translation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* for use in the United States of America, copyright © 1994 United States Catholic Conference Inc – Liberia Editrice Vaticana.

Quotations from papal and other Vatican-generated documents available on [Vatican.va](http://Vatican.va) are copyright © Liberia Editrice Vaticana and reproduced with permission of the Holy See.

Excerpts from Frank Brennan's *Acting on Conscience* © Frank Brennan 2007 and published by University of Queensland Press used with permission of the author and publisher.

NIHIL OBSTAT – Dr Chris Geraghty DD (Sydney), M Th (Paris).

© Peter Breen 2022

This book is copyright. Except for private study, research, criticism, or reviews as permitted under the Copyright Act, no part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior written permission. Enquiries should be made to the author at [www.prodigalpilgrimbook.com](http://www.prodigalpilgrimbook.com) or the publisher.

Cataloguing in Publication Data

National Library of Australia

Breen, Peter

Prodigal Pilgrim: Letters to Pope Francis from Lourdes, Fatima, Garabandal and Medjugorje

ISBN 9781922484307



A catalogue record for this  
book is available from the  
National Library of Australia

*To the memory of Fr Vince Doyle (1935–2014),  
co-founder of the Mary of the Angelus Community*

SAMPLE

*Send out your Spirit ... and renew the face of the earth.*

– Psalm 104:30

*Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful,  
And kindle in us the fire of your love.  
Send forth your Spirit that we may be recreated,  
And you shall renew the face of the earth.*

– Traditional Christian Prayer

*Dear children ... I am preparing you for the new times  
That you may be firm in faith, and persevering in prayer,  
So that the Holy Spirit may work through you,  
And renew the face of the earth.*

– Mary's Message (in part) at Medjugorje on June 25, 2019,  
the 38th Anniversary of the Apparitions

## Author's Note

---

This book is a series of letters to Pope Francis written as I travelled on pilgrimage to the popular Marian healing shrines of Europe, returning to Medjugorje in Bosnia Herzegovina. The letters were written in English, translated to Spanish and posted in their countries of origin, with the exception of the last two letters, which were sent by FedEx courier from Australia. I received no replies to the letters – other than the attached letter from the office of the Secretary of State at the Vatican – and I have no idea whether the Pope read any of them.

While I am a practising Roman Catholic and generally subscribe to Church teaching, I wish to acknowledge that I could be wrong about my belief. Some people will be certain that there is no God, and all religion is a figment of human imagination. They could be right for all I know. The purpose of the pilgrimage was to examine the evidence for and against Marian apparitions, which the Church often describes as ‘worthy of belief as private revelation’.

Whatever the truth about Marian apparitions, they are extraordinary phenomena, and not easily dismissed even after close examination. Perhaps Mary is a prophet of our times – the harbinger of what lies ahead. Like Pope Benedict XVI, I am inclined to believe that neither mankind nor the world can be saved unless God reappears in a convincing fashion. Private revelations to six children (now adults) at Medjugorje over the past 40 years may represent a significant foresight into what salvation for humanity and the Earth could look like.



SECRETARY OF STATE

FIRST SECTION - GENERAL MATTERS

Vatican City, January 9, 2021

Dear Mr Breen

Encouraged by feelings of filial attachment and affection, you were kind enough to write to the Holy Father, Pope Francis, and to make certain observations.

His Holiness appreciates this show of cordial closeness, and begs you to pray for him and for the fruits of his service to the Holy People of God. At the same time, he imparts to you from his heart the implored Apostolic Blessing, which he gladly extends to your family and other loved ones.

I take this opportunity to convey to you the testimony of my consideration and esteem in Christ.

Mons. L. Roberto Cona  
Adviser

Peter BREEN  
MULLUMBIMBY

# CONTENTS

Introductory Letter .....	1
---------------------------	---

## **Part One—The Miracles of Lourdes 1858.....7**

Pilgrim Letter 1: A Meeting of Minds in the 'Holy Dip' Queue .....	9
Pilgrim Letter 2: Something Each Way in a Divided Church.....	18
Pilgrim Letter 3: Conscience as a Lifeline to Cautious Faith .....	24
Pilgrim Letter 4: In Search of Revelation through 'the Lady' .....	32
Pilgrim Letter 5: An Underground Basilica for Contemplatives .....	40

## **Part Two—The Secrets of Fatima 1917..... 49**

Pilgrim Letter 6: Attending the Third Secret Obsequies.....	51
Pilgrim Letter 7: The Unfulfilled Second Secret Prophecy.....	62
Pilgrim Letter 8: Cause for Concern at the August Apparition .....	70
Pilgrim Letter 9: Confidence in the September Apparition .....	76
Pilgrim Letter 10: The Miracle of the Sun as a Portent .....	84

## **Part Three—The Promises of Garabandal 1961–1965..... 95**

Pilgrim Letter 11: A Precarious Appearance in the Mountains.....	97
Pilgrim Letter 12: The Warning – Visible around the World .....	106
Pilgrim Letter 13: The Great Miracle – Visible in the Mountains .....	112
Pilgrim Letter 14: The Great Chastisement – Visible from Space?..	119
Pilgrim Letter 15: An Interlude on the Way of St James.....	129

## **Part Four—The Signs of Medjugorje 1981–2021.....139**

Pilgrim Letter 16: A Perfume of Roses in Full Bloom.....	141
--	-----

Pilgrim Letter 17: Three Days of Darkness in Medjugorje .....	150
Pilgrim Letter 18: Six Visionaries on the Same Prophetic Page .....	158
Pilgrim Letter 19: A Theory of God's Plan to Change the World .....	166
Pilgrim Letter 20: World Peace and Mary's Triumph Over Evil .....	174
Concluding Letter .....	182
Post Scriptum .....	188
Acknowledgements .....	196
Endnotes .....	198
Selected Bibliography .....	209
Index .....	212



## Introductory Letter

---

Prodigal Pilgrim Group  
Delivery Box #281  
245 Eighth Avenue  
New York, NY 10011  
United States of America

June 25, 2019

Fr Jorge Mario Bergoglio  
Holy Father Pope Francis  
Papal Residence  
Domus Sanctae Marthae  
00120 Citta del Vaticano

Dear Fr Jorge

I write to introduce myself as I set out on pilgrimage to the four popular Marian apparition shrines of Europe. First stop is Lourdes in France, then Fatima in Portugal, followed by Garabandal in Spain, and finally, Medjugorje in Bosnia Herzegovina. Medjugorje is a shrine for the ages in my correspondence. Is it possible that a woman who lived on the Earth 2000 years ago – and now occupies some other dimension in time and space – has been visiting us daily for the past 40 years with the extraordinary, if unsurprising, revelation that God has the power to intervene in human affairs? In one of her first Medjugorje

appearances in 1981, Mary the Mother of Jesus is credibly reported to have said to six young children: ‘... with prayer and fasting you can keep war at bay; you can suspend the laws of nature’.<sup>1</sup>

Please consider my correspondence as the reflections of a cautiously enthusiastic believer in Mary’s apparitions, though one experiencing a crisis of faith in the Church. I was encouraged to write to you following a homily you gave a couple of months ago during your regular Sunday Angelus prayer service, when you asked the faithful to let you know how we think the Church might improve upon its mission to spread the Good News in the modern world. In the context of this generous request for feedback, I decided to put pen to paper, in the hope of giving you my perspective on the Marian apparitions. Already I can report – even before the start of my pilgrimage – that while my crisis of faith in the Church is widely shared, causing numbers attending church services to drop off a cliff, devotion to Mary seems to be more popular than ever.

You will not be surprised to learn that my crisis of faith is a direct consequence of the sex abuse crimes committed against children in the care of the Church. A royal commission report into institutional responses to child sex abuse in Australia was particularly soul-destroying. Nearly 62 per cent of complaints to the commission involved Catholic perpetrators, yet Catholics are just 22 per cent of Australia’s population. I feel shocked and deeply ashamed whenever I recall that the world’s most senior cleric convicted of child sex abuse offences is Australia’s George Cardinal Pell. One of the reasons for going on pilgrimage to my favourite Marian shrines is to take some time out to further consider the culpability of George the convict, a man I know personally and held in high esteem before his descent into hell as a child sex abuse offender. That said, I am aware that George may be innocent of the crimes for which he is convicted. An

appeal has been lodged with the Court of Appeal, and if that fails, the cardinal will appeal to the High Court of Australia. I will write to you again when there is a final verdict.

As I write, George is serving a six years' prison sentence on the testimony of a credible witness who says the cardinal sexually assaulted him and another boy (now deceased) when they were child choristers at St Patrick's Cathedral in Melbourne in the mid-1990s. The initial appeal will be heard in the next couple of months. Lawyers acting for George the convict say that the testimony of the witness, though honestly given, is highly improbable in the light of 20 other 'opportunity witnesses' who described the movements of the cardinal in and around the cathedral at the time he was supposed to be committing the offences.

Some people say, triumphantly, that George's convictions and sentencing prove that the justice system works, and there is no need to be concerned about miscarriages of justice and unsafe or doubtful convictions. My experience of the legal system is rather less sanguine. Appeal courts are generally reluctant to interfere with jury decisions, which means most innocent prisoners never have the opportunity for a serious conviction review, as happened in the case of Lindy Chamberlain who was jailed for the macabre murder in the desert of her baby, Azaria. The Northern Territory government of the day made a political decision to appeal the ruling of the coroner – that a dingo took the Chamberlain baby – because the coroner's finding reflected badly on police. Australian courts supported the police and overturned the coroner's decision. Lindy Chamberlain went to jail as a murderer, along with her husband Michael as an accessory after the fact. When all the legal remedies were exhausted, new, and exculpatory evidence in the form of Azaria's matinee jacket finally nailed the dingo. And still there are those who say that Lindy Chamberlain murdered her baby.

Nobody would want to see George's convictions stand if he is not guilty of child sex abuse offences. Even so, somebody should pay for unspeakable crimes and the egregious harm caused to children who the Church was supposed to protect. As perhaps the third-highest official in the Vatican, Pell as piñata has a ring to it – in the Church's long tradition of utilitarian punishment. No less compelling, Holy Father, is the argument that the Church's response to the clerical sex abuse scandal has been irredeemably hopeless, and the more priests and religious that end up in the slammer the better. Some of us believe that the Church will never recover from the scandal until the Pope sanctions women priests and married clergy.

I should explain that this is not my first crisis of faith in the justice system or the Church. As a young man, I studied in a seminary with the intention of becoming a priest, until your predecessor, Pope Paul VI, ruled that birth control was sinful. That ruling was contrary to the recommendations of the Pontifical Commission on Birth Control, the advisory body established during Vatican Council II to consider the implications of contraception on Church moral teaching. Commission members recommended by 64 votes to five that the Church allow birth control. When it became obvious that the Pope would not follow the majority recommendation of the council's commission, I could not remain in the seminary in good conscience, joining the 1960s exodus of student priests from religious life.

After about 20 years' leave without pay from the Church, which included careers as a defence lawyer and politician, I found myself at the Marian shrine in Fatima trying to recall the fifteen decades of the rosary. Before I knew it, I was back in the fold with a new understanding of the primacy of conscience, and a passion for the modern private revelations of the Mother of Jesus – the Jewish woman in our camp, or 'Maryam' as she is known in the surahs of the Koran. As you know, some imams

teach that Jesus, a son of Maryam and messenger of Allah, did not die but was raised to the presence of Allah. I do not know how that teaching sits with you, Holy Father, but it's not far from Christian teaching on the Resurrection in my correspondence.

I moved to New York for a few months to resolve my most recent crisis of faith in the Church, since the Americans I know are much more sympathetic to religion than my mob Down Under. Historian Manning Clark described Australia as 'a society unique in the history of mankind ... holding no firm beliefs on the existence of God or survival after death'.<sup>2</sup> Bear in mind that modern Australia was founded as an outpost of the British Empire – during the Enlightenment – when science and reason and belief in progress through dialogue began to overshadow tradition and religion. Overwhelmed by appalling injustice and the instinct to survive, convicts and colonists set up their governing institutions largely on the understanding that we are alone in the universe. Religion does not play an important part in the lives of most Australians according to author Donald Horne in his 1960s book *The Lucky Country* – if there is a happy eternal life it's for everyone.

By way of contrast, 74 per cent of Americans today claim affiliation with a particular religious group – down from 84 per cent in 2007 – according to statistics from the Pew Research Center. The United States was established by the Pilgrim Fathers and the Puritans as a refuge from religious conflict. America's founders wanted a belief system that resembled more closely the teaching of the Bible – they believed that both the Church of England and the Roman Church had become dogmatic and authoritarian. The founding fathers created the brave new world of a secular republic with a guarantee of religious freedom in the First Amendment to the US Constitution. In the Second Amendment, they enshrined the right to keep and bear arms – a right that evolved from England's bill of rights – to enable American

states to protect themselves from the possibility of a tyrannical federal government. Some people say that gun laws are in place not to arm the militia – as the Supreme Court has ruled – but to protect citizens in the next civil war.

So here I am in New York – however temporarily – adjusting to a life where God and guns seem to rule the roost. Mind you, the way Americans politicise religion was a bit of a shock, as I prefer to see church and state kept well apart. Just the other day, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association placed a full-page advertisement in the newspaper *USA Today* seeking divine intervention for the president. Readers were inveigled in bold print: ‘The only one who can fix our nation’s problems is God Himself, and we pray that God will bless our President and our nation for His Glory’.<sup>3</sup> I don’t mean to sound disrespectful, but Donald Trump as God’s man generally fails the pub test in Australia – as does the idea, by the way, that God will save us without any effort on our part to help each other.

I finally decided to make the journey to Europe following your decision last month to officially recognise pilgrimages to Medjugorje. It was a brave decision when there is so much resistance in the Church to the idea that Mary appears at Medjugorje. Having approved Medjugorje pilgrimages, you might consider taking the next step and proclaim the apparitions ‘worthy of belief as private revelation’. Without your voice of approval, Holy Father, Mary’s prophetic warnings are too easily dismissed as mass hysteria, delusion, or some form of magic.

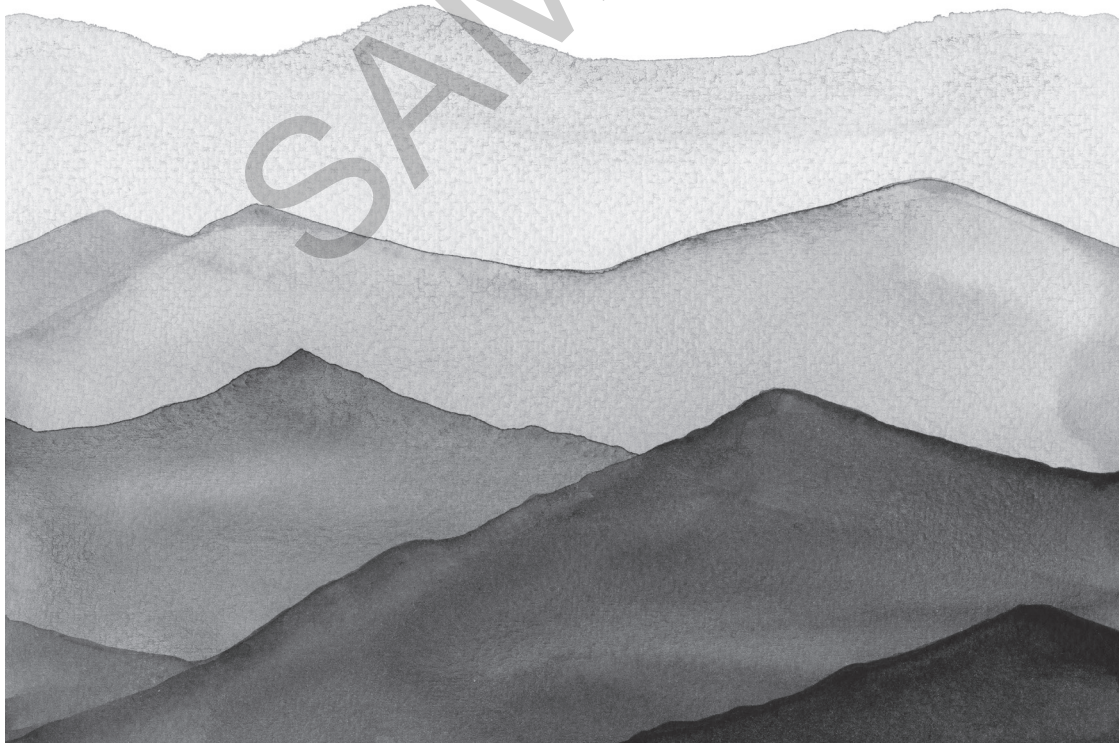
Sincerely

*Peter Breen*

Prodigal Pilgrim Group

Part One  
The Miracles of Lourdes 1858

SAMPLE



SAMPLE



# Pilgrim Letter 1: Lourdes

## A Meeting of Minds in the 'Holy Dip' Queue

---

Prodigal Pilgrim Group  
Grand Hotel Moderne  
21 Ave Bernadette Soubirous  
Lourdes, France

June 30, 2019

Fr Jorge Mario Bergoglio  
Holy Father Pope Francis  
Papal Residence  
Domus Sanctae Marthae  
00120 Citta del Vaticano

Dear Fr Jorge

Flying time from New York's JFK airport to Paris-Orly airport was less than eight hours – a walk in the park when compared with the 30-odd hours it takes to fly from Australia. I felt rejuvenated upon arrival in the City of Love (or the City of Light if you prefer). Both titles seemed appropriate as I said goodbye to the woman seated next to me on the aircraft, a whip-smart American named Madeline who worked as an economist and investment adviser for an NGO in Paris. She flies into Paris from New York each Monday and flies out again on Friday. Christian by birth and skeptical by nature, Madeline thought that the prospect of earthly visitations by the Mother of Jesus was a

bit over the top – if God is about, he or she is unlikely to sanction flitting in and out of temporal existence. Not so long ago, I observed, commuting back and forth from the US to Europe by aircraft was inconceivable. I promised to call her – even if I found nothing new under the Medjugorje sun.

An hour later, I boarded an aircraft for the 80-minute flight to the Tarbes-Lourdes airport, where I joined a shuttle bus for the city of Lourdes in the foothills of the Pyrenees. Checking into the Grand Hotel Moderne – the hotel in closest proximity to the world's most famous healing shrine – the concierge introduced me to a dapper Frenchman, Ulpiano, the guide for the tour group I would be accompanying for the next few days in Lourdes. Early in the evening, I caught up with Ulpiano and my fellow travellers, who invited me to join them on a stroll across the forecourt of the two basilicas in the precinct of the Massabielle grotto, where 'the Lady' appeared to 14-year-old Bernadette Soubirous in 1858. At the end of the short walk, I declined a further invitation to attend the nightly Lourdes candlelight procession, preferring instead the comfort and solitude of my hotel room – and an early night.

Ulpiano and I were the first of the group to foregather next morning outside the hotel. The tour guide was a dead ringer for Agatha Christie's Inspector Poirot with his inquisitive eyebrows and splendid moustache. He said that the Church officially approved the Lourdes apparitions in 1862, after several miraculous cures at the grotto in response to pilgrims' prayers seeking God's healing power through the intercession of 'the Lady'. Since the Church approved the apparitions, the Lourdes Medical Bureau had documented about 7,000 healings, although the Church in its wisdom officially sanctioned just 70 of these cures. I would put Lourdes on my bucket list of papal pilgrimages if I were you, Holy Father. With six million visitors to the city each year

(about 100,000 of them estimated to be seriously ill), Lourdes is the second most popular tourist destination in France after Paris.

I learned that Lourdes is named after a local Muslim leader who surrendered the city peacefully to Charlemagne in 778 CE. And Ulpiano updated the pilgrim group on Lourdes history, telling us that Bernadette was attending to wounded soldiers in the St Gildard Convent at Nevers when France was at war with the Prussian Empire in the early 1870s. One of the nuns admonished the young visionary for looking after enemy soldiers. Bernadette replied that God is in the heart of the enemy, no less than in the hearts of French soldiers.

It was Ulpiano who first drew my attention to the expression the ‘holy dip’ to describe the Lourdes healing baths, located some 60 metres past the Massabielle grotto, along the flagstone pavement that separates the base of the mountain from the Gave river. Initially, I assumed the Frenchman was referring to pilgrims in general with the words ‘holy trip’, until one of the bemused Americans put me on the right track. Ulpiano was saying that the men’s queue for the ‘holy dip’ healing baths moved faster than the women’s queue, for reasons he did not fully understand. The simple explanation for the faster queue is that the male section of the baths had less regard for privacy than the female section, crowding half a dozen men into a holding cell for undressing. Women had their own private undressing rooms – I know that now after comparing notes with two women pilgrims who took the plunge.

I decided to join the men’s queue for a ‘holy dip’ after parting company with Ulpiano. But first I would like to place in context Mary’s modern appearances on Earth and go back to the beginning of the Lourdes apparitions. As you know, ‘the Lady’ first appeared to Bernadette on February 11, 1858, while she was gathering firewood with two friends at the edge of what was then the village of Lourdes.

The child was between the Gave river and the Massabielle grotto when the apparition appeared.

I looked up and saw a cluster of branches and brambles underneath the topmost opening in the grotto [where I saw] a girl in white, no bigger than myself, who greeted me with a slight bow of the head; at the same time, she stretched out her arms away from her body, opening her hands as in pictures of Our Lady.<sup>4</sup>

During the third of the 18 apparitions at the Lourdes grotto – at the request of one of the spectators – Bernadette handed up pencil and paper and asked the apparition to write down her name. Bernadette said that the young girl appearing before her in the grotto began to laugh, and then spoke for the first time saying, ‘There is no need to write down what I have to say’.<sup>5</sup> From then on, Bernadette referred to the visitor as ‘the Lady’. When questioned by the Lourdes police investigator, Bernadette said ‘the Lady’ appeared ‘as if standing in a soft light’.<sup>6</sup> In response to further questions the visionary said, ‘I cannot explain these things to you [but] what I can assure you of is that she is real and alive, that she moves, smiles, and speaks just like us.’<sup>7</sup>

On February 25, 1858, ‘the Lady’ appeared to the visionary for the ninth time. An eyewitness, Elfrida Lacrampe – a local woman and one of about 500 spectators – described Bernadette kneeling on the ground outside the grotto and praying the rosary while communicating in a state of ecstasy with ‘the Lady’. ‘The child had not recited a decade of her beads when suddenly she set off on her knees and began to clamber in this way up the slope that led to the interior of the grotto.’<sup>8</sup>

Bernadette said later that she was following instructions. ‘The Lady said to me: “Go and drink at the spring and wash yourself in it.” Not seeing any spring [in the grotto] I was going to drink from the

Gave.”<sup>9</sup> Apparently at the apparition’s direction, the child – still on her knees – found her way to the back of the grotto and dug in the ground with her fingers. ‘I saw merely a bit of dirty water; I put my hand in it, but could not get hold of any. I scratched and the water came, but muddy. Three times I threw it away; the fourth time I was able to drink some.’<sup>10</sup>

One of her aunts, Bernarde Casterot – a widow of modest means who owned a tavern – helped walk Bernadette down from the slope, wiping the child’s face and mouth, and later telling investigators: ‘The ecstasy over, we took her back. People were jeering. We walked quickly along the road to escape the crowd. They were following us as though it were a comedy’.<sup>11</sup> Some people in the crowd were calling out that Bernadette was mad. The same aunt reported Bernadette’s movements during a previous apparition, saying the child ‘bows and smiles [during the ecstasy], and from time to time [there is] a small movement of the lips ... To see her face like that, brought tears to your eyes’.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile the pool of muddy water was expanding. Within days it was a steady stream flowing out of the grotto. A decade later, the source of the water was found to be a spring in the Massabielle limestone.

Remarkable healings attributed to washing, drinking, and bathing in the clear water began within days: a quarryman, Louis Bouriette, blind in one eye from a mine explosion and suffering from an incurable amaurosis, had his sight restored; a child named Julien, dying of progressive paralysis, and bathed by his mother in the spring water, walked for the first time. Doctors who had given the boy just days to live determined he was fully recovered, with no medical explanation.

News of the healings spread through Southern France – nearly 10,000 people descended on the grotto for the 15<sup>th</sup> apparition on March 4, 1858. Cure Abbe Peyramale, the parish priest of Lourdes,

again directed Bernadette to ask ‘the Lady’ her name. Bernadette did as she was told, reporting that ‘the Lady’ just smiled in answer to the question. During the 16<sup>th</sup> apparition on March 25, 1858, the Church’s feast day of the Annunciation, Bernadette asked ‘the Lady’ three times to disclose her name, and finally she obliged. Immediately following the apparition, Bernadette was heard repeating the answer, which she did not understand. ‘I am the Immaculate Conception.’<sup>13</sup> This eponymous name and title for Mary, declared a dogma of faith by your predecessor, Pope Pius IX, just four years earlier in 1854, assured the veracity of the apparitions in my opinion, since the child visionary had no way of being informed in March 1858 about a description of Mary in those words.

Bernadette observed the serendipitous confluence between the name of ‘the Lady’ and papal authority in a letter to Pope Pius IX, written at the request of her local bishop in December 1876.

I did not know what that [‘I am the Immaculate Conception’] meant; I had never heard [those words]. But since then, whenever I ponder the matter, I say to myself: How good the Blessed Virgin is! One would think she came to confirm the words of Our Holy Father.<sup>14</sup>

The letter was written when the visionary was a nun at the Nevers convent, and it’s generally agreed that her superiors had a hand in revising the letter. Even so, it seems unlikely that the most famous visionary in recent Marian history would allow her testimony to be compromised by editors changing the meaning of her words. It’s uncontested in my correspondence that the dogma of Mary’s conception without the stain of original sin was confirmed at Lourdes.

Informed consciences will differ on the other obvious question – whether papal infallibility was reinforced by the apparitions at

Lourdes. Of much greater interest to my mind is what the Church will do to validate Marian apparitions in the light of the overriding Christian principle that all public revelation of Jesus ended with the death of the last apostle. It may be a long bow to draw, but given that Mary was a contemporary of Jesus' apostles, there is a reasonable argument that the Church could recognise another category of public revelation beyond the limited references to Mary in scripture. I will say something more about public and private revelation, if I may, in another letter.

By the late 1870s, Bernadette was mostly confined to the convent's infirmary, in what she described as a 'habitual state of suffering'.<sup>15</sup> She suffered from a large tumour on the right knee, bone decay, anaemia and chest ailments related to her lifelong asthma condition, as well as endless spiritual attack. She died in the infirmary aged 35 years on April 16, 1879, and her body was interred in a lead-lined casket in the convent's chapel. Some 30 years later, the local bishop ordered the exhumation of the body as part of the cause for the young visionary's canonisation, and the body was found to be incorrupt. The crucifix and rosary beads buried with her were tarnished and rusted, but the flesh of her body remained intact – there was no trace of odour or decomposition. As you may have seen for yourself, Holy Father, Bernadette's incorrupt body remains on display to this day in a crystal reliquary in the chapel.

On December 8, 1933 – the feast day of the Immaculate Conception – 50,000 witnesses, including surviving members of the Soubirous family, crowded into St Peter's Basilica to hear Pope Pius XI announce that the name of Bernadette Soubirous had been added to the roll of saints. He described Bernadette as a simple miller's daughter who bore witness to the revelations of Mary, passing on her messages including her exhortations to penance which 'procured for

the world the magnificent spectacle of Lourdes, its three sanctuaries, its pilgrimages, its graces of conversion, of calls to perfection and of miraculous cures'.<sup>16</sup>

All this, Holy Father, leads me back to the 'holy dip' queue, which these days consists of a couple of dozen long benches not unlike church pews – half for the women's section and half for the men. The sick and infirm wait patiently, sitting in wheelchairs and laying on mobile hospital beds alongside the benches. As people wait, attendants gradually move those at the head of the queue through a vertically striped blue and white curtain at the entrance to the bathing compartments, or 'piscines' as they are called in French.

Things became difficult in the male queue when the Italian bloke seated to my right decided I needed to move more quickly as the queue progressed. There he was, looking over my shoulder at the gap between me and the bloke ahead of me, and getting in my ear with his repetitive 'Andiamo!' ('Let's go!'). The more he urged me on, the slower I moved, causing the gap in the queue to become wider. Instead of just moving aside for the Italian – doing the humble and sensible thing – I was torn between trying to recall the words of the healing prayer for sinful anger, and headbutting the guy in a meeting of minds.

Any chance of a healing was lost by the time our section of the queue was ushered through the blue and white striped curtain. Six of us – now at the head of the queue – were directed into one of the holding cells and told in French to strip down to our underwear. Unhappily, I was in the confined space with the Italian, who was still whining about the queue, even as he sat in the naughty corner in his y-fronts. Suddenly two attendants took me by each arm, ushered me through another curtain and directed me to drop my undies. Then they wrapped me in a damp towel, prayed over me in French and dunked



me in the holy piscine, which was so cold, I let out a yelp like a startled puppy dog.

Emerging cold and dripping wet from the bathing compartment, I managed to dry myself with the wet towel, dressed, and found my way outside, where I leaned on the stone wall that overlooks the fast-flowing Gave river. Warming myself in the morning sun, I was soon regretting the lost opportunity to do something about my sinful anger.

Sincerely

*Peter Breen*

Prodigal Pilgrim Group

SAMPLE