

Testimony

A Pamphlet from Pax Christi San Antonio

Anticipating December 2, 2018

Pax Christi San Antonio does not solicit donations. Thoughtful comments, however, may be sent to the editor at j6anthonyblasi@yahoo.com, with the understanding that permission to publish them is implied. Pax Christi International was founded in 1945 with the encouragement of Bishop Pierre Marie Théas of Montauban, France, by Marthe Dortel Claudot, as a Christian lay organization dedicated to preventing a repetition of the savagery of the twentieth century's world wars.

Editorial

After the Calendar, the Second and Third Readings commentaries are inspired by the Sunday readings for the first Sunday in Advent. Tom Keene's poem is *Love Alive*. For more of Tom's poems, see <http://www.tomkeeneandthemuse.com/index.php>.

Last week I evidently sent the issue of the Sunday prior by mistake to some addressees. Sorry about that. I need a new mailing firm.

December brings us two Marian feasts, where popular piety intersects official religion. December 8 is the feast of the Immaculate Conception, and December 12 is the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. I have sat through many saccharine homilies on Marian feasts, as well as homilies that promote self-centered magic, advocating bending the will of God to self-interested human interests. Such feasts can become genuine tests of denominational loyalty! Bishop Pierre Marie Théas, who promoted the founding of Pax Christi, wrote a most interesting meditation on the Marian pilgrimage site at Lourdes, France, in 1958, when he was the bishop of the diocese that includes Lourdes. The secular journal, *Revue des Deux Mondes*, published the essay. A translation of the essay follows the poem.

I would note a few things in regard to the essay by Bishop Théas, *The Sign from Lourdes*. It anticipates a theme of the Second Vatican Council when it refers to the Church as the "People of God." He avoids both skepticism and fideism. He places it in history, looking for what would later be termed "signs of the times." It was also significant that Pierre Théas was a known progressive, critic of capitalism, and friend of leftists—even a pastor for leftists. In his meditation, he highlights what can be appropriated from the religiosity of the lower classes.

Calendar

In Austin

Thursday January 17, 5:00pm-6:30pm, Dr. Eric Winsberg on climate science chaos, and unpredictability. Fleck Hall 305, St. Edward's University, 3001 S. Congress. For parking permit: <https://www.stedwards.edu/contact-us/main-campus-united-states>. Refreshments served. Register: <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/cel-speaker-series-eric-wisberg-on-philosophy-and-climate-science-tickets-46804971931> .

In Houston

Wednesday November 28, 6:30pm doors open, 7:00 film showing, *Living the Change* (stories of people pioneering change for sustainability). Rice Media Center, 2030 University Blvd., Cinema Auditorium(Room 1000). Info: Maria Martinez, arts@rice.edu, 713-348-4862. \$5.00 parking at West lot 4.

Thursday November 29, 5:30pm-7:30pm, Interfaith Homeless Memorial Service. Congregation Emanu El, 1500 Sunset Blvd.

Thursday November 29, 6:30pm-8:30pm, panel and performances, *Black Lives Matter: Reimagining the Black Future*. Moody Center, Lois Chiles Studio Theatre, Rice University. Use Entrance 8; parking in Moody Lot or West Lot 2 by credit card. Info: cercl@rice.edu

Friday November 30, 8:00am-9:00am, Bob Thomson, "Judge Not? Fear, the Bible, and Racialized Criminal Stereotyping." Lovett Hall, Room 402 (Use Entrance C), Rice University. Info: Hayley Hemstreet, hjh2@rice.edu, 713-348-3974. Register: https://events.rice.edu/#!/view/event/date/20181130/event_id/19381

Sunday December 2, 7:00pm-8:30pm, Climate Change & Laudato Si. Jones Hall, St. Thomas University, 3910 Yoakum Blvd. Information: Nicole Labadie, driscond@stthom.edu .

In San Antonio

Tuesday November 27, 7:30pm-9:00pm, Mark Shields, "Politics and Policy: How Will History Judge Today's Headlines?" Stieren Theatre, Trinity University, One Trinity Place.

Saturday December 1, 10:00am, Pax Christi San Antonio meeting. Residence of Maria Tobin, 8715 Starcrest Drive, #27.

Monday December 10, 6:30-8:30, Interreligious Council Monthly Meeting, "The upcoming festive season: How does it impact your faith community?" Jewish Community Campus, upper level, Federation Board Room, 12500 NW Military. RSVP: 210-787-8802 or icosa2018@gmail.com.

Tuesday December 11, 9:00am-12:00pm, San Antonio Archbishop Gustavo Garcia-Siller, "The Church in America: A Conversation on Immigration," responses by Sr. Norma Pimentel and Fr. Sean Carroll, SJ, followed by mass. Mexican American Catholic College, 3115 W. Ashby. Send RSVP to events@americamedia.org.

Second Reading (1 Thessalonians 3:12—4:2)

This brief passage is an encouragement for members of the Christian community in Thessalonica to love one another and to love all, and to live so as to please God. At first, it appears to say no more than “Do good and avoid evil.” However, there is that encouragement not only to love those in one’s own community but also to love all. The first century environment in which Christianity began placed much emphasis on belonging to the right ethnic group, especially the Romans whose empire it was, but Paul was saying to love all. How difficult a message that still appears to be today!

Third Reading (Luke 4.1-14)

The Gospel of Mark had said that after John the Baptist baptized Jesus in the Jordan, Jesus went out alone into the desert for forty days. Luke inserts at that point a narrative that may have been a story about temptation that a source, which Matthew also used, had applied to Jesus.

“If you are the son of God,” says the devil, “tell this stone to become bread.” Jesus had been fasting, and there would be nothing particularly wrong in ending the fast with bread. Temptation may begin with innocuous things. Jesus does not condemn bread in rebuffing the devil, but he points to what is more than, and apart from, bread: “The human shall not live on bread alone.” That which is more than bread, and apart from it, would lead one to provide bread for others, not oneself.

Then the devil showed Jesus “...in an instant all the kingdoms of the inhabited world.” It was “in an instant,” not a survey of what was actually in the kingdoms. The people in the kingdoms didn’t count in the panorama that the devil presents. “I will give you,” says the devil, “all this authority and all their glory, because it has been given to me...” Unlike bread, which is innocuous in itself and can even be good, authority and glory are described as possessions of the evil one. They become intrinsically evil when the people in the kingdoms do not receive consideration. Jesus rebuffs him again: “You shall worship the Lord your God, and you shall worship him alone.” When it is a matter of God or Caesar, priority goes to God.

Then the devil led Jesus to the Temple. That is a remarkable situation—the devil leading someone to the Temple. The devil leads Jesus to the very House of God. On its highest place, the devil says, “If you are the son of God, cast yourself down from here; for it is written: ‘He shall command his messengers concerning you, to protect you.’” In the manner of a hate-filled or self-serving clergy person, the devil quotes scripture. The climax of temptation occurs in religion itself. The temptation itself consists of using religion magically—i.e., as an instrument for doing good for oneself.

The focal issue is whom one serves.

Poem

Love Alive

A letting be
that we may become,

open doors,
open windows,

bursts of happenings
where seeds take root,
send up shoots,
blossom,
and in their turn,
go to seed.

A surrender
that liberates.

Tom Keene
April 22, 2016

The Sign from Lourdes¹ Bishop Pierre Marie Theas

What will the centenary of the apparitions be? A Marian Pentecost. A superabundant effusion of the Holy Spirit.

All people, whatever be their color, race, and language, understand the simple and profound message that has been entrusted to Bernadette Soubirous in the course of eighteen apparitions that were interspersed between February 11 to July 16, 1858.

There was no revelation of transcendent matters or ones difficult to understand. It was also a kind of continuation of apparitions of the Virgin in the nineteenth century—they were numerous and striking enough in our country of France—to insist, through gestures, attitudes, words, upon the fundamental and indispensable steps of the religious life: prayer and penitence. But at the same time God's infinite mercy toward sinful humanity was affirmed: the rays that extend from the hands of the Virgin to the Rue du Bac,² and the spring that pours forth, upon the indication of the Virgin, speak of this at Lourdes.

¹ Pierre Marie Théas, *Le signe de Lourdes*. *Revue des deux Mondes*, February 15, 1958, pp. 588-603, translated by A. Blasi.

² The Chapel of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal is located at 140 Rue du Bac, Paris—AB.

People in the nineteenth century and at all times would be called upon willingly by heaven to learn about and decipher some secrets. But there were none. It came down to the essential, to what one ought to profess and practice through the simple condition of the Christian. Bernadette knew this as by a kind of supernatural intuition. It is not her stock of knowledge from catechism that was able to inspire in her, from a perfect orthodoxy, the answer to a captious question.

On April 13, 1859, a group of priests speaking the local dialect of Lourdes come to see her. One among them poses the following question to her: "Did the Virgin tell you what was needed to go to heaven?"

"No, Father. We already knew that well: We did not need that."³

Matters most high and most personal have been confided at Lourdes in the secrecy of confidence and prayer that the seer will never betray.

One day a woman from the subprefecture of Argeles asks Bernadette to entrust her with the secrets. The child rises up abruptly, puts her hand on her own chest, regarding this great lady without the least timidity, and responds in a resolute tone that dissolves any desire to insist: "Madam, I am keeping that to myself.

Under the order of her pastor Bernadette had to ask her visitor in the apparition for her name. The Abbe Peyramale had no taste for becoming the constructor of a sanctuary or organizer of pilgrimages. He preferred, however, not to deal with an unknown woman, if he ever had to deal with her. The apparition was content to smile before these requirements, and it was only on March 25, in the sixteenth apparition, after a request was repeated three times, that the name was finally pronounced: "I am the Immaculate Conception." But this name had been proclaimed in Rome and in the whole universe four years earlier when Pius IX had defined the dogma of the Immaculate Conception.

It seems then that there would be nothing new. The essence and even the totality were already given and known through the Gospel and the teaching of the Church. However, these repeated visits from heaven ought well have a meaning and bring something new. But the gospel parable immediately comes to mind of the evil rich man who descended to hell and sees beyond the abyss Lazarus admitted to the heavenly banquet. A dialogue is engaged between the rich man who had received good things during life on earth and Abraham, in whose feast was Lazarus the poor man.

And the rich man says, "I pray you, Father, send Lazarus to the mouse of my father, since I have five brothers, to attest to these things, lest they also come to this place of torment.

Abraham responds, "They have Moses and the prophets; they listen to them."

"No, Abraham our father," he responds, but if someone from the dead comes to them, they will repent."

But Abraham says to him, "If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not believe someone who returns to life from death."

Would the fact of Lourdes be in contradiction with this law set forth in the parable? No. The fundamental principle is the same. It is the Church that is the witness

³ Thus Bernadette compares poorly to Joan of Arc, the warrior. One also found responses to the judges and theologians that are, properly speaking, distinctions worthy of Saint Thomas or replies worthy of Corneille: --Are you in a state of grace?—If I am, God preserve me; if I am not, let God put me in it.

and the vehicle of God among humanity; it is necessary to listen to it from the first. "Go teach...all that you read...be my witness...who hears you hears me...."

There is a great risk that if one rejects a sign from God, any other one, no matter how arresting, would also be unknown. It is the same with daily experience.

Moreover, after the death of the apostle St. John, every message, every revelation that God entrusts to a particular person, is integrated into and subordinated to the deposit of faith that the Church transmits and makes fruitful; it adds nothing positively new.

So once more God wishes in his generosity and mercy, to make signs for his people, heal their apathy, attract their attention. So what is the sign of Lourdes?

The response to this question is doubtlessly borne more by situations and gestures than by words. Actually, to understand the message that God wishes to reveal or explain for humans, it is important that it be attached to the totality of the intervention. Gestures and signs often provide greater clarity than does lengthy discourse. For St. Augustine, the Christ teaches primarily with miracles. Essential aspects of the mystery of our redemption are thus variously explained through symbols: water, bread, vine, food washing, etc.

We have intellectualized revelation too much. The philosophers and theologians satisfy themselves in abstractions; they are thereby accorded the admiration of centuries. It is not they who would have thought of the Incarnation, this presence and revelation of God in the flesh and through the flesh.

To know in an integral way the message and meaning of Lourdes, it is not only necessary then to stop at the words and thereby, so to speak, disincarnate them. They have their fullness only if one listens to them with the brook in the background, if one comments on them through the gestures of Bernadette, who kisses the ground, washes her face, drinks the water, eats the vegetation.... The water that springs forth at the will of the Apparition and flows always leads us by its biblical symbolism and sacramental usage in the more intimately in the knowledge of Lourdes, more mystically than the knowledge of lengthy discourse.... And then it is there; one puts it in bottles and carries it home. It is completely different with words that one commits to memory or on paper. The language of signs is direct and personal.

It is not so much as the greatness of Our Lady that has no significance. "A young girl, no greater than I," will Bernadette say. So why try to enlarge and age the young girl of Lourdes? Must not the youth signify simplicity, innocence, and purity?

For the believer, the faithful commentary on Lourdes is provided even more by the reception that the Church gives to this message. For sure, Lourdes does not enter into the course of official revelation, whatever the manifestations of the hierarchy about it might be, the liturgical feast celebrated on February 11, the encyclical of the most reverend pope Pius XII, "the Lourdes pilgrimage," etc.

The infallibility of the Church is not involved in the historical reality of the eighteen apparitions, but only in the dogmatic and moral teaching that it usually gives on the occasion of the fact of Lourdes and, solemnly, on the occasion of the centenary. The Catholic is not making, nor can a Catholic make, a true act of faith in the strict sense of the word, concerning apparitions of the Holy Virgin at Lourdes (it goes the same for the Rue du Bac, la Salette, Fatima); the Catholic makes an act of faith in the special

mission of Mary in the history of humanity's salvation, since that is part of the revelation of God to humanity.

Some of us will say, "If it is not an article of faith here, I am free to agree or deny my assent.... It is all or nothing." But life is not expressed in formulations of dilemma or alternatives.

Religious knowledge is situated in different levels: object, pattern, assent, certitude. It is important to make distinctions. It is an aberration to require an absolutely identical adhesion to everything that is said in the Church; there are the maximalists of the faith. But it is another aberration, also serious, of accepting only rigorously defined dogmas; there are the minimalists of the faith.

In the strict sense, then, I do not "believe" by an act of theological faith that Marie appeared at Lourdes, but I believe with a particular certitude, neither purely human nor totally supernatural, that Mary appeared at Lourdes. It is like a refraction from theological faith on a historical fact that does not appear in the revealed deposit of faith. It would be for all the faithful, whatever their exigencies and intellectual culture, rash, even temerity, to deny even to put in doubt, the general authenticity of facts.

I am careful to recognize them. Qualified persons have made a close and direct inquiry: Monsignor Laurence observed four years before declaring on January 18, 1862, that "the apparition shows all the characteristics of verity and the faithful have a certain basis for belief." The sense of the Church commands me by its liturgy, the solemn interventions of the papacy, the encouragements by the hierarchy, the adhesion of all the faithful people, the entire Church has accepted Lourdes. Moreover, Lourdes has such a place in the life of the contemporary Church that a believer is led on account of the origins to dismiss illusion and deception and to accept, on account of development, an obvious intervention by the Holy Spirit.

Only a vision of the faith of the Church allows the Catholic to understand this point of view, the simultaneously most calming and necessary certitude. The Church is not a society like any other. It is human and divine at the same time. It has its failures, errors, and sins from humanity; it has its health, truth, and sanctity from God. Humans can never make failure essential and definitive of God. The certitudes that we derive from events not only make us accept a fact as a historical given, but also as a positive will of God for human salvation by the very history of the people of God. The Church, inspired by the Spirit of truth, moved by its maternal instinct, distinguishes truth from falsity; she knows what is good or evil for her children. So in this unique phenomenon of Lourdes, the place and role of Mary in the Church is made manifest.

An irruption from heaven is always a challenge on earth; the measure of things is taken inversely, just as their wisdom is totally different. Faith and reason, miracle and science were for a long time and still remain for many two forces and two values exalted and humbled at Lourdes. Not that it is necessary to reject reason or flaunt science, but because of their sectarian claims it is necessary to humble them, i.e. draw them to their place in the order of things. And this was especially necessary in that half of the nineteenth century.

Science opened new perspectives to humanity. Scientific discoveries and technical progress were numerous over the course of a century that we are accustomed to them; and ultimately humanity also finds itself in the depths of its limits and misery. It was not so a century ago.

We can hardly imagine the kind of enthusiasm with which humans entered the steam era. During the centuries, one had perfected “harnesses” in the most material sense of the term. And then, all at once, one can be freed from the yoke, but also from wind. New sources of energy were domesticated: steam and electricity. But one knows that these decisive factors in the material progress of humanity are the discoveries of sources of energy, their technical application, and their transport. And this was the beginning of great industry.

A flirtatious philosophy with Voltaire, idealist with Kant, materialist with Hegel, positivist with Comte more or less sustains this evolution by the varying exaltation that they made of reason. Thus, all that would transcend the understanding of reason or compromise the determinism of science ought to be rejected as being opposed to the progress of humanity. A French prime minister had proclaimed the blessedness of modern times: Enrich yourselves.

The cosmos was closing in on itself; neither thing nor personage need disturb its mechanism. Thus God was denied, just like the possibility of his irruption into history, be it by apparitions or by miracles.

There were also skeptics at Lourdes; they assembled in the Café Français. Above all they read *Le Siècle* and *La Presse*. But now and then these two very secular papers reminded their readers that it is naivety, foolishness, obscurantism in the time of the electric telegraph and steam engine to admit to the possibility of apparitions and miracles. The sergeant major of the constabulary of Angla, serving t Lourdes at the time of the apparitions, declared one day before the grotto: “And to say that one sees the like in the nineteenth century!” The rationalist camp has not laid down arms after a century. A certain science, a certain literature have been prodigiously inventive, fanciful, and sectarian so as to not raise the siege that they had raised beforehand.

The Church showed herself reserved; she did not favor the visionaries. The harshness of the abbe Peyramale and the silence of the bishop reveal almost a certain indifference more than reserve; fundamentally they had no need to fortifier their faith and develop their devotion with it. But they also knew that God can intervene, that He intervened when He wish and how He wished. Their God is not a meticulous and impassible one appointed to the exact functioning of the heavenly and terrestrial mechanism.... Their God is the one of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who converse with humans and did marvelous things for His people; He made them leave Egypt, made them pass through the Red Sea, led them to the promised land, gave them patriarchs and prophets. This is always the same God who acts in the Church, it is always a people en route to the true promised land.

There was indeed this manifestation and this unique presence of his Son on the earth, which definitively marked history and fully provides that which had been prefigured for centuries of waiting. He is not dead, as Moses, and, by a single sacrifice, He rendered perfect forever those whom He sanctified. We have our chief and last sacrament forever, for the Christ is the way, the truth, and the life. It suffices to follow for not proceeding in darkness. And God wishes also, in His mercy to continue manifesting to humans the concern he has for them.

There is why there has always been apparitions in the Church, as well as miracles. The apparitions have multiplied in the course of the last hundred years, as have miracles. And at the very moment thin which one claimed to close heaven on

account of death and in which the vice of a scientific determinism claimed to eliminate from the universe the action of a liberty as powerful as good. All this shows that God is not disinterested in humanity, in His people, and in His Church. He is always acting, always powerful, but in a new style that corresponds both with the eternal economy of salvation and the particular needs of the epoch. Thus at Lourdes, more than in any other place, the tenderness, solicitude, imaginative capacity of God for His people is realized in a privileged manner and expressed for the faithful. The Church takes up the statement of Mary herself with fervor: *Fecit mihi magna qui potens est.*⁴ In his work, *Les Apparitions*, Mr. Lochet has shown very well how the Church keeps an equal distance from skepticism and credulity.⁵

“Rationalism rejects *a priori* the very possibility of an intervention in history by God. Following the requirements of its reason, it sets in advance the limits of God’s action. That ought not be. That cannot be. From the outset it denies the fact, it refuses it.... The Church does not mistrust God, but it mistrusts humanity and the devil.”

Before the miraculous fact, the rationalist is not free to be oriented toward any solution. The rationalist is bound in advance. There is a forbidden solution; it is to discover the intervention by God. The rationalist ought not arrive there. It is known in advance that it is necessary to look for something else.

The Church is free. She knows through a centennial experience that God sometimes intervenes in history. She believes in miracles. But she also knows that humanity can be deceived in this domain and that the devil can also deceive. She knows that error never brings good fruit.... That is why she suspends her judgement; she does not hurry up to rejoice; she awaits the fruit in order to judge the tree.⁶ There comes a moment in which she decides, in which she commits herself....

At Lourdes, the reality of the supernatural world is affirmed by the apparitions to which only Bernadette can give testimony and by the miracles that many can observe. Or rather, that which is the intrusion of God, the intervention of God in history, is rendered tangible for humans of our generation. This intervention cannot be just anything. It ought to have a reference to Jesus, the Witness and the Word. And it is remarkable enough that the principal act of prayer at Lourdes has become the procession of the Blessed Sacrament. And the cures, left to the good pleasure of God but scientifically monitored, give testimony in our time for the miracles in the Gospel.

The rationalist critique claimed that the miracles of the Gospel were only projections and objectifications of the fervor and admiration of the first Christians.

“The miracles of the Gospel ought to be considered as myths in which the needs of the heart are taken for facts and in which human dreams are transformed into realities that one seeks to insert into the texture of history.” This would be the work of the primitive conscience. But science would definitively exorcise human reason from these imagined things and from these fears and prohibit in the human heart being deluded by these illusions.

⁴ Latin: He who is mighty has done great things for me.

⁵ Pp. 46-48.

⁶ Monsignor Laurence, in his *Mandement sur l’Apparition qui a eu lieu à la grotte de Lourdes* : The testimony of Bernadette, already important in itself, borrows a wholly new strength (we say this without adding anything else) from miraculous deeds that were achieved after the first event. If one ought to judge the tree by its fruits, we can say that the Apparition recounted by the young girl is supernatural and divine, for it produced supernatural and divine effects.”

One Lourdes miracle, just one, counters this ingenious construction. A sufferer of tuberculosis who heals, a blind person who sees, a fistula that dries—all this is not a projection in the past, something from a dream or objectivation from a religious need, but a beautiful and sure fact. Ask this of Carrel, who had made the voyage to Lourdes and who noted, second by second, on his starched cuff, the unexpected evolution of an incurable malady. Claude Bernard wrote: “It is necessary to observe without preconception.... Rational science ought never repudiate a fact observed exactly and well.” But, cures manifestly occurred at Lourdes; they are medically, scientifically, hence humanly inexplicable....

It is important to note that the prodigies are accomplished at Lourdes in a typically biblical atmosphere, most often while one repeats the acclamations with which the crowd greeted the passage of Christ in his rank. One prays, and God cures whom He wills, when He wills—never in secret or after laborious preparations. All is simple, manifest, direct. A bath that one takes in the pool as at Siloe, a communion as if the Lord entered the house, a procession of the Holy sacrament, as if the Lord passed over the route, and the maladies are cured. Those who know beyond the monstrance, chasuble, ombrellino (umbraculum), the order of service, revive gospel times.

It is surely the Virgin who appeared to Bernadette. But it is again more the Christ of the Gospel who is present. For sure, he is present everywhere, in the church and tabernacle. But he wished to choose a place where, for concern with our weakness, he wishes to affirm his presence and render it perceptible to hearts.

The crowds run up, and they always remain what crowds are: undisciplined, excessive, sheep-like. Perhaps there would be vulgarity and superstition, but there is not only that. If the crowds of Lourdes walk physically, and more so morally, on the feet of some of us, they annoy and discourage, they also represent the people of God en route to the heavenly Jerusalem. This people pick up dust from the roads; it crew drew with it cripples; it is what it is, a sinful people, which wishes to be pardoned, sanctified, saved.

From having left their homes and worries, to devote the greater part of their time to prayer, all constitutes a highlight in the interior life of these Christians. Human respect does not constrain them anymore; they become others, or rather tend more loyally to what they should become. The crowds who have followed Christ to the desert and have acclaimed him as their king and messiah on Palm Sunday, what were they and what are they becoming?

We expect more from Lourdes, in this jubilee year. We know that the Church has opened the floodgates of the communion of saints very widely... But we also know that on February 12, 1959, there will not be here below a new heaven and a new earth, but there will be thousands of souls who will boast of a surer and more joyous step on the way of the conversion of the heart, of spiritual renewal; and such is the grace, the definitive sign of Lourdes.

“As with the crowds who pressed around Jesus, the cure of physical wounds remains there, i.e. at Lourdes, at the same time that a gesture of mercy, the sign of the power that the Son of Man has to pardon sins. Before the blessed grotto the Virgin invites us, in the name of her divine Son, to the conversion of the heart and the hope for pardon. Are we listening?...” In this humble response of a human who is self-conscious

as a sinner resides true greatness of this jubilee year. Pope Pius XII expresses it thusly in his encyclical [Le Pèlerinage de Lourdes](#).

God, who spoke through Mary at Lourdes, wanted to show in our century that he exists, that he speaks and acts, that He is the God not of the philosophers but of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—not the idea of God but the God of love. This One had in heart, through all the centuries, this statement: I have pity on the crowd.

What will the human response be? It will be first in the consciousness, and assuredly by the act of personal faith that one gives to this truth. But faith is an assent that also presupposes an intervention of the will and a movement of the heart. To God Who stimulates humans with innumerable concerns, the response can only be one of life, i.e. of a return to God.

In the fourth apparition, Sunday February, Bernadette is seen crying; she is asked the reason: “The lady,” she responds, “taking her gaze off me for an instant, directed it far over my head; then, referring to me, who had asked her what was saddening her, she said to me, ‘Pray for the sinners.’”

Wednesday February 24, the child advances towards the vault in which the altar of the grotto is now inserted. She kneels. One sees her sadden; in tears, she stands up again, and with her hands folded on her rosary, she seems to want to address the four or five hundred people around her. Those closest understand the voice panting a little: “Penance... penance... Penance....”

The child delivered her first message.

What did we find there that we did not know already? Once more, it is said simply. There is not even the intransigence of the prophets of the old law, nor the majesty of a John the Baptist. It is supplication from a poor child who asks people to do what they obstinately refused to do for centuries.

These three small words appear rather banal; they teach nothing.... But the three strokes that resound in the theatre do not say something great by themselves; they announce that the curtain will rise, that the play will be performed. For the play write and the actor, these three little strikes are formidable, for they expose them to the judgment of others. Three little words, and the drawn curtain rises over our conscience and God judges us. The human dreads this and prefers not to understand these three small strikes of the hammer that strikes against the rock of Massabielle,⁷ a small girl who does not play theatre. And then her words echo out to thousands, millions of consciences, to the entire people of God.

For these simple words, Pronounced by the voice that hesitates from emotion and asthma, are orchestrated and commented upon by the appeals that, as always, God addresses to humans. This is not the least proof of a supernatural origin of the apparitions of Lourdes that Bernadette has transmitted thusly to us except the simply pure gospel message. It is the same appeal that sounds through the whole of sacred history: “Convert and you will live!” The prophets have said the same thing.

Isaiah: “Convert and you will be saved!” Jeremiah: “Convert each of your perverse ways!” Ezekiel: “Convert and do penance!” Hosea: “Return to God!” Zechariah: “Turn to me, and I will myself return to you!” John the Baptist repeated to the crowd that approached him: “Repent! The kingdom of God is near.” And then Saint Mark: “Jesus

⁷ The huge rock where the grotto is located is named *Massabielle*, derived from *old mass* in French.

began by saying, the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news.”

The symbols and gestures will be added to the words. They will give them both direct commentary and first application.

What exactly happened at Massabielle on February 25 during the ninth apparition?

The lady said to Bernadette: “Go drink at the fountain and wash there.” Since there was no fountain, the seer turned to the stream. She is immediately reminded, and the vision indicates by hand a precise place in the interior of the grotto. Bernadette scratches the ground with her fingers. Muddy water springs forth; Bernadette places her lips there; she drinks. But when she rises, her face is stained and covered with mud.

Soon after the seer takes three small handfuls of a wild herb; she puts them in her mouth and eats them. Then she kisses the earth.

Why did the Holy Virgin ask of Bernadette these three gestures that offends our sensibility and admits to no rationale? The course of events will tell us. The preceding days the crowd admired the seer in her ecstatic beauty; this same crowd now shows its disappointment, its deception, and disavows her. A cry is launched that each repeats: “She is crazy... She is crazy.” Bernadette hears, endures, and is quiet.

But there is something of great sorrow for her. At the presbytery, the abbe Peyramale receives her in an uncomplimentary manner: “You are lying, you saw nothing. It is said to me that you ate the herb as animals do.” Poor Bernadette! She was so little already! There was she treated as crazy and lying, there was she humiliated, crushed, annihilated. She would be able to say as St. Paul the apostle said, “We have become the refuse of the world and the reject of all... Yes, I rejoice in my weakness, and in the outrages, distress, persecutions, anxieties on account of Christ; for when I am weak, it is then that I am strong.”

The water always flows at Lourdes. It is the symbol and pledge of a spiritual font that grace mysteriously makes pour forth in hearts for eternal life.

The pilgrims know this well; and their first step is confession. This presupposes a consciousness of sin and a will to make amendment. For these spiritual resurrections, there is no bureau of inquiry. But how much more numerous, necessary, and striking than the bodily cures! This remains in the secret of souls, and it is worth more as well.

What is prodigious at Lourdes as well is the just measure that people take with regard to the goods of the world. Nothing is more extraordinary than the peace that radiates out from maladies that have found a moral force that permits accepting with serenity, sometimes with joy, the infirmity from which they have a hope of being freed. It is thus above all the souls that are restored in their integrity, purified, renewed, rejuvenated.

It seems that Lourdes increasingly discovers its essential meaning. After the apologetical proof, one receives the spiritual significance. Christ is acclaimed as savior. “So that you know that the human son has the power to forgive sins, he says to the paralytic, ‘I say to you, arise, take your pallet, and follow me!’”

It cannot be merely a matter of an individual cure. It is important that there is also a Christian renewal of society. What corrupts our modern society, which has, however, so many just grounds for pride and hope, is materialism. The pope assigns us our task with a vigorous perspicacity. Does he not write in the encyclical *Le Pèlerinage de*

Lourdes, "This materialism is not confined to that condemned philosophy which dictates the policies and economy of a large segment of mankind. It rages also in a love of money which creates ever greater havoc as modern enterprises expand, and which, unfortunately, determines many of the decisions which weigh heavy on the life of the people. It finds expression in the cult of the body, in excessive desire for comforts, and in flight from all the austerities of life. It encourages scorn for human life, even for life which is destroyed before seeing the light of day. This materialism is present in the unrestrained search for pleasure, which flaunts itself shamelessly and tries, through reading matter and entertainments, to seduce souls which are still pure. It shows itself in lack of interest in one's brother, in selfishness which crushes him, in justice which deprives him of his rights - in a word, in that concept of life which regulates everything exclusively in terms of material prosperity and earthly satisfactions. 'And I will say to my soul. the rich man said, Soul, thou hast many good things laid up for many years; take thy ease, eat, drink, be merry. But God said to him, Thou fool, this night do they demand thy soul of thee.' (Luke 12:19-20"

It seems to me that our world is saved from the formidable temptation of materialism by prayer. For sure, at Lourdes there are acclamations, processions, crowds. But there is also silence, pauses, interiority. Sometimes in the evening, when the pilgrims linger or the season is slack, look at the prayer of these men and women. Nothing is more striking. In a century in which all the nations compete with ingenuity and billions in order to launch themselves into outer space to discover secrets there or find new prestige there, people are thinking that the thing worth pursuing is finding God in the great intimacy of their heart. And each pilgrim at Lourdes, in one's own way and according to one's grace, knows a moment of interiority in which one finds oneself, because there would be nothing to search for but God.

Only Lourdes is bringing this to our world; it would be once more a high point where the values of the spirit, of civilization, are saved despite the whirlwind and frenzy that prevail.

We have sought to promote this interiority, this spiritual encounter with God through Mary, by resituating as much as possible a more examined frame of mind, one that will approach this primitive state more closely. We believe that prayer sustains and gives orientation to this landscape. The years, the immediate necessities, the tastes of an era have developed Lourdes. One cannot stay in the primitive situation; and it is not necessary to decry further out of a bias that everything is from an evil taste and echoes the feelings of performers.

At Lourdes the rock, the water, the prairie, the trees come to constitute a special frame. All that which has been undertaken is aimed to provide more scrutiny, simplicity, authenticity. With respect to the Virgin herself, who had chosen a child, but also a place: Why this so wild grotto de Massabielle? But also to help the pilgrims discover an interior examination, to go toward an interior authenticity. To be true with themselves and with God, as we would be true with the nature of the Good God.

It is in this preoccupation that the subterranean church of Saint Pius X has been constructed. Conceived by M. Vago, with the help of the architects Messrs Le Donn  and Pinsard, realized by the Maison Campenon-Bernard, it must first offer a place for assembly and worship proportionate to the current needs. It was inserted into the earth, out of respect for the site and because it was better not to build anything more, because

it was necessary to multiply spaces free for giving souls the sense of a freedom, of a spiritual expansion.

The Church will be ready for the era in which great crowds will flock to Lourdes. His eminence Cardinal Roncalli, the current successor of Saint Pius X over the patriarchal see of Venice and former apostolic nuncio in France,⁸ will come to consecrate it March 25, the same date on which one hundred years ago the Virgin said to Bernadette, "I am the Immaculate Conception."

So by virtue of a completely gratuitous selection, Lourdes became the great Marian city on which the trusting and suppliant regard of the whole of Christianity is fixed, especially in this centenary year. Lourdes is a holy chosen city, *Electam sanctitatis civitatem*. Her glory is having been chosen for an extraordinary destiny. Do we really believe it? Do we believe it enough? Do we recognize it? In thinking about Lourdes, in bringing to mind the first century of its Marian history, we know how to say, My God, how good you are! My God, be praised and blessed! My God, mercy!

We pilgrims of Lourdes, accustomed to seeing the crowds gather on the banks of the brook, risk being blasé, forgetting the essential and being more conscious of the very secondary aspects of a pilgrimage site. We are exposed to being less open and less conscious of the grace of Lourdes. What a pity!

For sure, it is necessary to repeat: Lourdes does not engage theological faith. Since Our Lady has taken the trouble to come and return to the grotto, since she has taken the trouble to educate Bernadette and trust her with a message for us, why would we not take the trouble of recognizing, of making the miraculous history of apparitions known, of deepening the message, of entering into our lives? Must we say it? There are children around us, adolescents and adults, who are not cognizant of the great events that evolved at Massabielle in 185, who ignore the calls to prayer, to penance, to purity, addressed to Bernadette by the Mother of God. Numerous are those who do not have the slightest idea of the extraordinary influence that Lourdes exercises in the life of the Church. Is this normal?

The essential in Lourdes is neither the site nor the rock, nor the brook, nor the basilicas, nor the works of the century, nor the underground church; the essential is this invisible and sovereign reality that is called sanctifying grace, the presence of the Holy Trinity in souls and the life of God in us.

Lourdes has been *chosen* by Our Lady to be a holy city.

The meaning of Lourdes, the mission of Lourdes, the greatness of Lourdes are on a theological order.⁹ Like Mary, the Lourdaise city is in relation to God. It has been *chosen* by God to be in the service of the kingdom of God through Mary.

Let the entirety of this year, the centenary, and the jubilee become simultaneously the occasion of discovering the mystery of Lourdes and the true plan of God for our pilgrimage.

We adore the conduit of Providence in its choice. It chooses humans, it chooses peoples, it chooses cities, it chooses what it wants. It chooses Mary to give Christ to the world, it chooses Lourdes because Lourdes, before the face of Christianity, would be the monstrance of the one who said to Bernadette, "I am the Immaculate Conception."

God is admirable in his choices and preferences.

⁸ Angelo Cardinal Roncalli would be elected pope within the year and take the name *John XXIII*—AB.

⁹ Theological—a neologism, apparently meaning divine-word—AB

Pierre-Marie Théas
Bishop of Tarbes and Lourdes

Links

Pax Christi International
<http://www.paxchristi.net/>

Pax Christi U.S.A.
<http://www.paxchristiusa.org>

Pax Christi Texas
<http://www.paxchristitexas.org>

Pax Christi Dallas
<http://www.Paxchristidallastx.org>

Pax Christi San Antonio
<http://www.paxchristisa.org>

Marianist Social Justice Collaborative
www.msjc.net

Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, International JPIC Committee
<http://saccvi.blogspot.com/>

San Antonio Peace Center
<http://www.sanantoniopeace.center>

Interfaith Radio, (*Interfaith Voices*)
<http://www.interfaithradio.org/>

Texas Catholic Campaign to End the Death Penalty
www.txccedp.org

Dialogue Institute of San Antonio
www.thedialoginstitute.org/san-antonio/

Climate Change
www.creation-care.com