



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of December 18, 2012,
Novena of preparation for Christmas

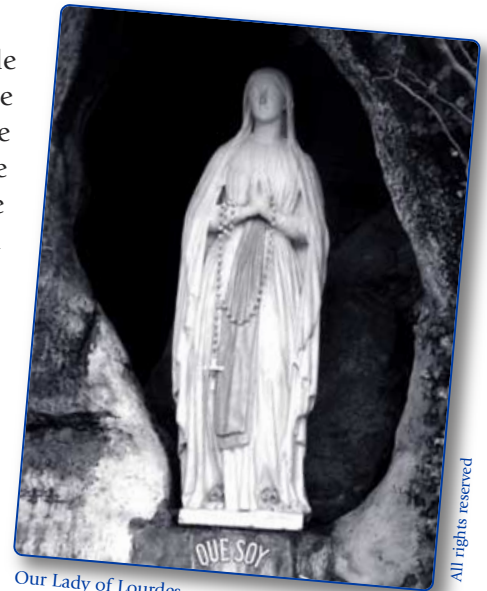
Dear Friends,

I KNOW perfectly well that in certain circles, just the idea of a miracle seems outdated and ridiculous," wrote Doctor Olivieri, president of the Lourdes Medical Bureau from 1959 to 1971... "So, when one tells these people about miraculous cures, they always have a ready response—they are due to as yet undiscovered causes, or to all sorts of natural causes... or will be able to be explained later... In the end, what all these explanations have in common is the *a priori* fundamental principle that 'miracles don't exist.' To which I reply: 'Miracles do exist.' As the great Carrel recognized, the healings at Lourdes are a fact against which no assertion can hold."

One of the most famous and earliest miracles of Our Lady of Lourdes was the healing of Pierre de Rudder. On February 16, 1867, Pierre de Rudder was on his way to his work near Jabbeke, Belgium, when he came across two young men who were cutting down trees close to the castle. One of the trees had fallen in a nearby field, and the woodcutters were struggling to drag it onto the road with levers. Pierre offered his help. Suddenly, the raised trunk fell again, crushing Pierre's left leg. The doctor, who was called immediately, ascertained that the tibia and fibula were fractured; to hold the broken bones in place so they might mend, he wrapped a starched bandage around the leg. In the weeks that followed, Pierre's suffering grew worse—a gangrenous wound had formed, which now attacked the surrounding muscle tissue. Twelve months passed without improvement—the crippled man, forty-four years old, remained immobilized in his bed, with no hope of healing. The doctors advised him to have the leg amputated, but he refused.

"What are you doing?"

Eight years passed. In 1875, Pierre decided to make a pilgrimage to the town of Oostakker, where a replica of the Grotto of Lourdes had been created, in honor of the Immaculate Virgin's apparitions to Saint Bernadette. On April 5th, Pierre went to the castle in Jabbeke and confided his plan to the viscount—he would go to Oostakker to beg his healing. Prompted by curiosity, the viscount's fiancée asked to see the wound. The invalid peeled off his bandages and the wound appeared, the size of the palm of a hand. The two ends of the broken bones were separated by a festering wound, without the least indication of healing. Pierre could turn his heel to face forward and his toes backward. On April 7th, supported by his crutches and helped by his wife, the injured man set off. Arriving in Oostakker, after a moment's rest, Pierre drank a little



Our Lady of Lourdes

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water and made two trips around the Grotto on his crutches. He then sat down, exhausted, before the image of the Blessed Virgin MARY, on one of the benches reserved for pilgrims. He begged forgiveness for all his sins, then asked Our Lady of Lourdes for the grace to be able to work again, so that he could earn a living for his family. Immediately, he felt a deep interior movement and was thrown into confusion. Not knowing what he was doing, he stood up without support, crossed the rows of pilgrims, and knelt before the statue. All of a sudden, he came to his senses and cried, "Me, on my knees! Oh my God, where am I?" He immediately sprang up, transported, radiant with joy, and devoutly began to make a circuit of the Grotto. "What happened? What are you doing, what are you doing?" cried his wife. A crowd pressed around Pierre, asking him questions. There could be no doubt—he could stand upright and walk, his two legs carrying him easily and painlessly. Thank you, Our Lady!

A doctor examined the limb and discovered that the leg and foot, which had been extremely swollen moments earlier, had returned to their normal size, so much so that the bandages had fallen off by themselves. The wound had healed over, and the broken bones had rejoined despite the distance that separated them. The two legs were of equal length. In gratitude for his cure, Pierre would return to the Grotto four hundred times during the twenty-three years he had yet to live on earth. With no effects remaining from his injury, he would

continue his work as a gardener until his death at the age of seventy-five, in 1898. To better assure the authenticity of his healing, after his death his leg bones were exhumed, allowing the objective reality of the wound as well as its healing to be substantiated. A cast of these bones was made and can be found at the Lourdes Medical Bureau. In 1908, the bishop of Bruges declared that, in Pierre de Rudder's healing, a miracle of God obtained by the intercession of the Most Blessed Virgin MARY had taken place.

A lengthy process

Pierre de Rudder's healing took place in Belgium, but it is above all in Lourdes that the healings occur. In 2011, for example, forty-eight healings were reported to the Lourdes Medical Bureau. When it was founded in 1884, it was known as the Office of Medical Findings. The doctors there, both believers and non-believers, verify the facts of each alleged healing, then closely study them to see if they are of an extraordinary nature, unexplainable by medical science. At the conclusion of these examinations by the Medical Bureau, if at least two-thirds of the doctors judge the healing to be definite, permanent, and medically inexplicable, the case is sent to the higher medical authority, the International Medical Committee of Lourdes, created in 1947. Entirely independent of the Medical Bureau, this committee meets in Paris once a year. It consists of about thirty members chosen by cooptation and appointed by the bishop of Tarbes and Lourdes. Most medical disciplines are represented, and the majority of the members are either highly-respected professors of medicine, or department heads of university hospitals, from various nations. For each case, a committee member who is a specialist in the illness involved produces a report to be discussed by all the members. At the end of this process, which lasts several years, the committee poses the question: is the proven healing a phenomenon contrary to the observations and expectations of medical experience, and scientifically unexplainable? If two-thirds of the members respond to this question in the affirmative, the case is sent to the bishop of the diocese of the person who received the healing. It is then up to the bishop to declare the healing a miracle, if he deems it justified. After establishing a commission to once again investigate the healing, particularly its spiritual circumstances, he finally decides whether or not to officially recognize it as a miracle.

Since the apparitions in Lourdes, sixty-seven cases have been recognized as miraculous (in the fall of 2011, two additional healings were recognized as inexplicable by the International Lourdes Medical Committee). However, the true number of authentic and complete healings is much greater. As Father Laurentin noted, "Among the many sick who are cured at Lourdes each year, there are some who do not report the cure and keep this favor to themselves. I know several cases of this sort. Of those who do report their cures, many do not have all

of the documentation necessary to open a case. Among those who can submit a case, many are rejected, either because the information is incomplete, or because there is insufficient proof on some point or another..." (*Lourdes: Histoire authentique des apparitions*, Paris Lethielleux 1961-1964). In 1993, the president of the Medical Bureau estimated that of the 6,000 plus reports of healings counted by the Lourdes medical authorities since the apparitions, about 2,000 cases could be considered extraordinary healings.

Drinking water

These facts have raised many questions, and have led to a search for natural causes that could explain them. The physical and chemical properties of the Grotto's water were questioned. It has been extensively analyzed. On August 7, 1858, a chemistry professor from the Faculty of Sciences in Toulouse concluded his analysis in these words: "The composition of the water from the Grotto in Lourdes is like most drinking water found in mountains where the soil is rich in calcium. The water does not contain any active substance capable of giving it particular therapeutic properties" (cf. Henri Lasserre, *Notre-Dame de Lourdes*, 1880). Other subsequent analyses have yielded similar results.

Some attempt to explain the healings at Lourdes as psychological phenomena. But one should note that the great diversity of diseases cured (tuberculosis, multiple sclerosis, Pott's disease, cancer ...) excludes the possibility of a single natural therapeutic agent, either physical or psychological. Furthermore, completely qualified specialists in psychiatry are among the doctors who examine the cases that are presented, particularly on the International Committee.

Doctor Alexis Carrel (1873-1944), a professor of anatomy at the Faculty of Medicine in Lyons, was personally confronted with the miracles in Lourdes. One day in 1903, as a favor to a colleague, this unbelieving doctor agreed to accompany a train of invalids to Lourdes. He was taking care of a young woman, Marie Bailly, who was dying from final-stage tuberculous peritonitis. While talking with a friend who was telling him about a nun who was suddenly cured after drinking the water, Alexis Carrel murmured, "Interesting case of auto-suggestion. A crowd in prayer gives off a sort of fluid that acts with incredible strength on the nervous system, but can do nothing when organic diseases are involved." His friend tried to correct him, but Alexis remained unshakable: "I remain incredulous. No one has conducted a scientific examination. The patient would have to have been examined by a competent doctor immediately before the healing. Miracles are absurd, that's certain. But if a miracle were proven, in solid enough conditions to be sure that one was not fooled, one would have to acknowledge it. No argument can hold against the reality of a fact... I came here with no other intention than to be a good recording instrument... But if I saw just one

wound heal before my eyes, I would become a fanatic believer or go mad." He then added, "Here is this young woman, Marie Bailly... I fear she will die in my hands. If she were healed, that would truly be a miracle. I would believe it all and become a monk!"

At three o'clock

Marie Bailly asked to be lowered into the water in the baths. Doctor Carrel thought that it would kill her, but he could not stand in the way of the invalid's wish. When they arrived there, the sick woman was not immersed; just some lotions were applied to her swollen stomach, and she was then carried to the Grotto. Carrel accompanied her. He murmured, "Ah! How I would like to believe, like all these unfortunates, that You, O Virgin MARY, are not just an exquisite spring created by our minds. Heal this young woman; she has suffered too much. Allow her to live a little, and make me believe." Suddenly, before his eyes, life was restored to the dying woman—her face lost its pallor, her pulse strengthened, the extraordinarily swollen stomach gradually shrunk in size. Carrel noted the exact time: 2:40pm. By 3 o'clock, the healing was total. "I'm healed!" said Marie Bailly. Carrel later wrote, "It was impossible. It was unexpected. It was a miracle!"

Through the evening and into the night, he meticulously studied the case, making note of the details. Two other doctors added their observations to his. He asked the miraculously healed woman: "What are you going to do now?" "I'm going to go to the nuns of Saint Vincent de Paul—I will be received by them and I will take care of the sick." Simultaneously happy and disturbed by the event, Carrel, after walking around well into the night, entered the basilica and, seated beside an old farmer, held his head in his hands and prayed: "Sweet Virgin, who help the unfortunate who humbly implore You, look upon me. I believe in you. You have chosen to respond to my doubt with a dazzling miracle. I don't know how to understand it and I still doubt. But to believe is my greatest desire, and the summit of all my hopes."

However, it still was not a conversion. Miracles, duly established, demonstrate that it is logical to believe, that one should believe. But the act of faith is the result of supernatural grace, demanding the participation of one's freedom. Alexis Carrel would need many years to arrive at the fullness of faith. On his return to Lyons, he wrote an article true to the facts of what he had witnessed, without coming to any conclusion. Saint Edith Stein has described a state of soul that resembled Carrel's at this moment of his life: "I can ardently desire religious faith, without it being given to me as a result. Imagine a confirmed atheist who feels the existence of God during a religious experience. He cannot escape the question of faith, even if he cannot penetrate into that sphere. He does not permit it to act in him, but holds fast to his sci-

entific vision of the world, which would have been overturned."

"May the desert bloom!"

In August 1909, Alexis Carrel was once again at Lourdes. In the examination room at the Medical Bureau, he was preparing to photograph two fistulas on the coxal-femoral joint of an invalid when, before his eyes, they instantly healed. But directly witnessing this new healing did not yet result in his return to the faith. His medical research earned him the Nobel Prize in medicine in 1912 (he is the father of several modern medical techniques), and led to him reflecting on the nature of man. He concluded that experimental science is incapable of saying what man is, because it does not get to his spiritual soul. In 1935, he published his masterpiece: *Man, the Unknown*. During the summer of 1937, he met Dom Alexis Presse, founder of the Cistercian Abbey in Boquen, Brittany. The friendship that was established between them was a powerful aid in his return to the faith. He now thought of his scientific career as only dealing with "the surface of life," and on November 3, 1938, he wrote in his journal: "Lord, my life has been a desert, for I have not known you. Despite it being autumn, make the desert bloom! May every moment of the days that remain to me be consecrated to you!" And in a 1940 article on prayer, he would write, "This God who is so approachable to those who know how to love, hides himself from those who know only how to understand."

Alexis Carrel died on November 5, 1944, after having received the last sacraments. Dom Presse would write, "Others have claimed that he was not Catholic (at the end of his life). I still hear him forcefully telling me: 'I want to believe and I do believe all that the Catholic Church wants us to believe, and in that I experience no difficulty, for I find nothing there at all that contradicts the certain facts of science.'"

The miracles that God brings about through the intercession of the saints are intended to strengthen faith, which is necessary for entering eternal life. "What moves us to believe is not the fact that revealed truths appear as true and intelligible in the light of our natural reason: we believe because of the authority of God himself who reveals them, who can neither deceive nor be deceived. So that the submission of our faith might nevertheless be in accordance with reason, God willed that external proofs of his Revelation should be joined to the internal helps of the Holy Spirit. Thus the miracles of Christ and the saints, prophecies, the Church's growth and holiness, and her fruitfulness and stability, are the most certain signs of divine Revelation, adapted to the intelligence of all. They are motives of credibility, which show that the assent of faith is by no means a blind impulse of the mind" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 156).

But besides the physical miracles, Lourdes is a place of many spiritual healings—conversions, returns to religious practice, interior peace... A Marian theologian remarked, "To Lourdes flock thousands of people who would not dream of asking for a physical healing. They come, not to see or because they have seen miracles, but for spiritual renewal. Even without any exterior miracles, the pilgrimages would continue at the same pace, because the interior miracles of the conversion of hearts would continue. They are of much greater importance!" (C. Balic, o.f.m., *Un double problème d'actualité: miracles et guérisons de Lourdes*, 1960). Jean-Pierre Bely, whose healing in 1987 was the sixty-sixth to be recognized as miraculous, testified that he first felt a peace and intense spiritual joy after receiving the Anointing of the Sick—the physical healing only took place later. All the recipients of miraculous healings at Lourdes have seen their lives transformed not only physically, but also spiritually.

"Here, we love..."

The Virgin MARY's message to Saint Bernadette is above all a message of interior healing—that is, of conversion and prayer. On August 14, 1983, at Lourdes, Pope John Paul II took up this message again: "Let us speak frankly—our world is in need of conversion... Today, even the sense of sin has begun to disappear, because the sense of God is being lost. People thought to build a humanism without God, and faith is continually at risk of appearing to be the eccentricity of a few, with no necessary role for the salvation of all. Consciences are darkened, as at the time of the first sin, no longer distinguishing between good and evil... It remains difficult to convince this world of the misery of its own sin, of the salvation that God unceasingly offers it... But the Virgin

without sin reminds us here of this most important need. She tells us, as she told Bernadette: Pray for sinners, come wash yourselves, purify yourselves, draw forth a new life... For if MARY represents the enemy of Satan, the opposite of sin, she shows herself here as the friend of sinners, like Christ who ate and lived in the midst of them, himself the Holy One of God. It is the Good News that she again tells the world, tells each of us. It is possible, it is beneficial, it is vital to find, to re-find, the path to God... It is as though here [at Lourdes] human respect and all the reservations that all too often block conversion and religious expression are naturally overcome. Here, one prays, one loves to pray, one loves to be reconciled with God, one loves to venerate the Eucharist, a place of honor is given to the poor, to the sick. It is an exceptional place of graces. God be praised!"

The next day, August 15th, the Pope exhorted the faithful to guard preciously the faith. "Do not allow the certainties of the faith to be dispersed or extinguished by the wind of atheist ideologies, or simply by systematic and ill-considered questions. Do not allow religious indifference to be substituted for faith in the Son of the living God, nor practical materialism to smother the aspiration to God that marks you... Pray, you too, pray yet more... and take care, youth and adults, to nourish your faith... Do not conform to the morals of the world, and above all, do not be discouraged. Life in accordance with Christ is possible, because the Holy Spirit has been given to us... Do not leave the new generations crippled by religious ignorance, but may your family, your friends, recognize the strength of your convictions reflected by your life. Demonstrate the hope that is within you!"

Let us pray that humble Saint Bernadette may help us follow this advice of Blessed John Paul II.

Dom Antoine Marie, o.s.b.

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