

Feast of the Immaculate Conception 2018

In 1858 Bernadette Soubirous saw eighteen apparitions of a “small young lady.” Although she never claimed the lady was the Blessed Virgin Mary, she was pushed by her parish priest to inquire after the lady’s name.

At first the lady was reluctant to do so. She bowed and smiled, but said nothing. Finally, she said, “I am the Immaculate Conception.”

During one of the lady’s visitations, she pointed to a place on the ground and told Bernadette to drink from the spring that flowed there, and to eat from the plants that grew there.

But Bernadette could not see any spring or plants, only muddy ground. She assumed the lady meant that the spring was underground. So she scratched in the earth until some muddy drops appeared. She tried to drink them, but it was not possible.

She continued to scratch and tried to drink three more times without success. Finally, on the fourth try, the water was more abundant and clearer. She drank it and ate from the plants.

People who had assembled around the place where the apparitions occurred could not see any streams of water or plants. They only saw mud on Bernadette’s face. They denounce her as a fraud.

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In the next few days, though, clear water began to flow from the earth, exactly in the place where Bernadette was scratching. The rest is history, as they say, the history of Lourdes.

Of course, when the Blessed Virgin Mary appears to someone, it would hard for there to be some other center of attention. Apparitions are like that.

But when the Immaculate Conception gives instructions to Bernadette, the center of attention shifts from the Lady to the one searching.

Bernadette has to scratch in the earth four times to make the water appear, but to the eyes of the bystanders it's all still mud.

People have a spiritual center that lies in the depths of their souls. It's not easily found, and we have to search in and through the muddier dimensions for the water to flow.

We have to have perseverance in order to get beyond the things that block the movement of the water/or Spirit in the case of our inner being,

The flow of the water increases as people have courage to participate in it. At first, only those privileged by revelation will attempt to drink. But soon, others will drink and bathe, and the healing powers of the Spirit will become apparent.

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If we dedicate ourselves to the search for the inner spring, as Bernadette did upon Mary's instruction, we will not discover that we are also Immaculate Conceptions. That title belongs to Mary alone. But we will come to the deeper awareness of the wonder of our own being, unique also, but to us and fashioned by no one less than God.

I find it interesting that Mary took the initiative to have Bernadette scratch at the earth, to get her hands dirty for the sake of opening up a means of grace—in her inmost being as well as in the physical world of the grotto in Lourdes.

We can go to Lourdes, but more importantly we can get under the surface of our own selves, even our present piety, to discover a richness within that will astound us.

Celebrating the Feast of the Immaculate Conception is not just about Mary's special place in the history of salvation, but also about what she is doing from that special place—helping us also come to a deeper awareness of the wonders that God has created in us, and what we can do with them.

The Immaculate Conception is not content with sitting on a throne in heaven, glorying in her special grace. She's happy to get to work, to point out for us, where the hidden springs of grace lie in our lives, so that we can be nourished by them and

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strengthened in the task of being proclaimers of God's Good News by what we say and most of all by how we act.