

The Truth About Mary – Part 2

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In “The Truth About Mary – Part 1”, we covered the “why” of the Marian devotions that are so integral to the lives of many Catholics. The truth is that we do venerate and honor her because of her virtues as well as for her unique relationship to God. As the mother of Jesus Christ, she is the mother of God. In part 2, we will be concerned with one of the more controversial aspects of Marian devotion, namely the apparitions attributed to her. A Marian apparition is an event in which the Blessed Virgin Mary is believed to have supernaturally appeared to one or more people. These apparitions are often given names based on the places in which they were reported, such as Fatima in Portugal or Lourdes in France. (Coincidentally, this month is the month, February 11 in 1858, when Mary appeared to the young girl, Bernadette Soubirous at Lourdes in France.) Marian apparitions sometimes are reported to have occurred at the same site over an extended period of time. In most instances, one or a few people report having witnessed the apparition. Although there are many who claim to have seen the Blessed Virgin, there are only 9 apparitions that have been declared “genuine” and approved and therefore worthy of belief for Catholics, although belief in them is not required by divine faith. In other words, although the Church may declare that an apparition is worthy of my devotion, I am not required to believe. Nevertheless, the Catholic Church has officially confirmed apparitions in Mexico, France, Portugal and elsewhere. Others have claimed to have seen the Virgin Mary, but these claims have not been approved officially by the Catholic Church. Obviously, because of the sheer number of claims, this aspect of Marian devotion is controversial.

The two best known apparition sites are at Fatima in Portugal and Lourdes in southern France. At Lourdes, thousands have claimed to be healed physically, spiritually or emotionally. Most have declared a change or growth in their faith in God. Doctors have been unable to explain many of the spontaneous healings that have occurred since these apparitions occurred there in 1858. In addition, many books and articles have been written testifying to the miraculous healings that have defied explanation by the medical community. There have also been songs and films about the apparitions, especially those that occurred at Lourdes.

While Marian apparitions may seem to some as fanciful tales or superstitions, the effect of some of the apparitions on the lives of millions of Catholics has been and continues to be rather astounding. Each year, millions of men and women (not all Catholics) make pilgrimages to these Marian shrines. Those who do, go for spiritual reasons, such as the desire for physical or inner healing or for spiritual growth and many have testified to the extraordinary power of those places, especially as regards their spiritual lives.

You are reading this article in the month of February, the month in which Mary, the mother of God, appeared to a young girl named Bernadette in Lourdes, France. May I recommend for your pleasure and edification, the film entitled, “The Song of Bernadette”, an Academy Award winner

in 1943! The film is very helpful in explaining the phenomenon of Marian apparitions. The scene that sums up the misperceptions about these occurrences is toward the end of the film when the local pastor says concerning the recent events at Lourdes, “for those who believe in God, no explanation is necessary; for those who do not, no explanation will suffice.”