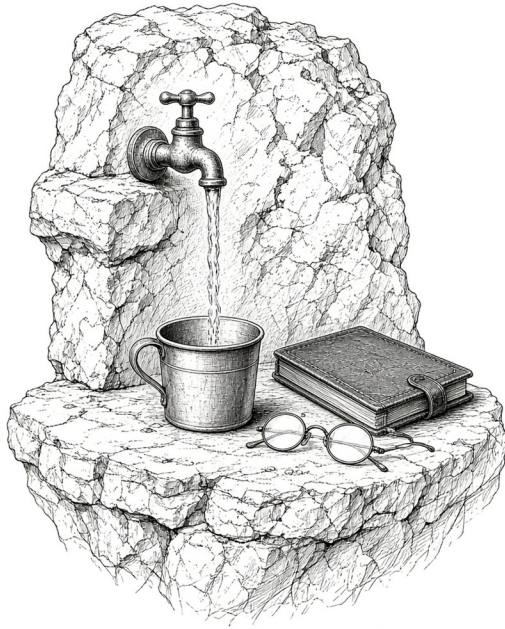




SILENT HOMILIES

The Ordinary Spring

*Lourdes water, and what the
doctors actually say*





SILENT HOMILIES

LITTLE TREASURES

The Ordinary Spring

Lourdes water, and what the doctors actually say

Before You Begin

Most people expect two things of Lourdes water.

They expect the Church to say that the spring contains something medically special. She does not. They expect the Church to accept every dramatic healing story. She does not.

The water at Massabielle is chemically ordinary. That has been known since 1858. The Sanctuary itself says so. At the same time the Church has spent more than a century asking doctors to examine claimed healings with great care. At the time of writing, about seven thousand three hundred cases have been recorded. Seventy-two have been recognised by a bishop as miracles.

This little book is about that combination. Ordinary water. Strict doctors. A pilgrimage that still goes on. It is not a list of wonders. It is not a sceptical tract. It is an attempt to say what the chemists found, what the Medical Bureau actually does, and why Catholics can pray at the grotto without pretending that medicine is the enemy.

Lourdes water is not holy water in the technical sense. It comes from the spring Bernadette uncovered. If a priest later blesses a bottle, that bottle then also contains blessed water. The spring itself remains what the analyses said it was.

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Chapter 1

The girl who was told to drink

On 25 February 1858 a fourteen-year-old girl named Bernadette Soubirous went back to a damp hollow in the rock of Massabielle, just outside Lourdes. She had already seen a lady there more than once. That morning the lady told her to drink from a spring and to wash in it.

Bernadette could see no spring. She scratched at the muddy ground with her hands until a little dirty water appeared. She drank it. The people watching thought she had lost her mind.

Within a few days the trickle had become a clear stream. Lourdes was not a famous place of pilgrimage then. It was a poor market town on the Gave de Pau. The hollow under the rock was used as a rubbish tip and a place where pigs were taken. The Church had not yet given any judgement. The police were irritated. The mayor was already wondering whether the water might be turned into something useful.

That last thought matters. Before anyone built a basilica, the first public question about the spring was a practical one. Was the water special in the way spa water is special? Could Lourdes become another Cauterets or Bagnères-de-Bigorre? The chemists would soon be asked to answer.

A Small Reflection

Bernadette drank before anyone knew what the water contained.

That is not an argument against later investigation. The rest of the Lourdes story is full of investigation. The Church did not stop at the first muddy handful. She later invited doctors in.

Bernadette did what she was asked. Later generations tested the water and tested the claims. Those two things belong to the same history. They are not opposites.

If I only trust what I have already explained, I will never begin. If I never allow a claim to be tested, I have not yet taken truth seriously.

A short prayer

Our Lady of Lourdes, who asked a child to drink, keep our faith simple enough to begin, and honest enough to be examined. Amen.

Chapter 2

The water that failed the spa test

In the summer of 1858 the mayor of Lourdes, Anselme Lacadé, asked a professor in Toulouse to analyse the new spring. He hoped the report would show minerals that could be advertised. Neighbouring towns already lived on visitors who came for sulphur and heat.

The analysis, later confirmed by other chemists including Professor Filhol, found something far less exciting. The water was drinkable and chemically ordinary. It contained the usual small amounts of carbonates, chlorides, and traces of other minerals that many mountain springs contain. Its temperature at the source was about twelve degrees. It was not a spa water in the commercial sense.

Later analyses have not changed the main point. The Sanctuary does not teach that the chemistry explains healings. Official language has been blunt: the water is ordinary. It has no special thermal virtue. It is not a medicine.

That disappointment is one of the most interesting facts in the whole story. If the Church had wanted an easy explanation, a mineral spring would have been useful. She was left with ordinary water and a request from a lady in a hollow rock.

A Small Reflection

Catholic faith does not need to invent strange chemistry in order to take Lourdes seriously.

The water remains water. Prayer remains prayer. A chemical analysis is a way of telling the truth about a created thing. It is not an act of unbelief.

If I need the spring to be chemically strange before I will listen to Bernadette, I have already decided that God cannot use ordinary things. Lourdes does not ask that of us. It asks us to take ordinary water, and then to look carefully at what people claim happened around it.

A short prayer

Lord of springs and of laboratories, thank you for water that needs no advertisement. Amen.

Chapter 3

Why the Church brought in doctors

Claims of healing began almost at once. Some were vague. Some were dramatic. The Church did not simply accept them.

In 1883 a permanent medical office was established at the Sanctuary. It is now called the Bureau des Constatations Médicales — the Office of Medical Observations. A doctor, Dunot de Saint-Maclou, was among those who shaped the early work. The point was simple. If someone said they had been cured, doctors should look at the file.

The Bureau does not exist to produce miracles. It exists to examine claims. Doctors are allowed to say no. They are allowed to say that the diagnosis was uncertain, that the improvement did not last, or that treatment could explain what happened.

In 1947 an international committee of doctors was added. It is now known as the CMIL — the International Medical Committee of Lourdes. When a file looks strong enough, it can be sent there. Doctors of different specialities, and not all of them Catholics, study the case and vote.

A shrine that invites that kind of scrutiny is doing something unusual. It is refusing to treat every grateful story as proof.

A Small Reflection

If something is true, honest examination should not frighten us.

A Church that believes truth comes from God does not need to hide from X-rays, dates and second opinions. The Bureau sits beside the grotto for that reason. It is not there to decorate the pilgrimage. It is there so that claims can be looked at by people who know how to read a medical file.

That does not mean every doctor will reach the same conclusion. It means the Church is willing to let trained people look.

A short prayer

*Lord of truth, give us a faith that can sit still while the notes are read.
Amen.*

Chapter 4

Doctors do not declare miracles

This distinction is easy to miss, and it matters.

The Medical Bureau and the international committee may conclude that a cure is complete, lasting, and unexplained in the present state of medical knowledge. That is a medical judgement. It is not yet a miracle.

The word miracle, in the official Lourdes process, belongs to the Church. The competent bishop — usually the bishop of the diocese where the person lives — receives the medical opinion and decides whether to recognise the cure as miraculous. He is not obliged to do so.

The stages can be said simply. A pilgrim reports a cure. Doctors at Lourdes examine the claim. If the file is strong, an international committee of doctors studies it. If they judge the cure medically unexplained, the bishop may then speak.

Many people use the word miracle after a good week. At Lourdes the Church uses it only after a long medical process. That slowness is not unbelief. It is a refusal to spend a large word on a thin case.

A Small Reflection

The word miracle matters. It should be used carefully.

“Medically unexplained” means that present medical knowledge does not account for what happened. It does not, by itself, tell us what God has done. That further judgement belongs to the Church, and she makes it slowly.

Ordinary life needs the same care. If I call every relief a miracle, the word will soon mean nothing. If I refuse the word even when a careful process has been completed, I may be protecting a theory rather than facing a fact.

A short prayer

Lord, teach us to use large words slowly, and to tell the truth about small recoveries as well. Amen.

Chapter 5

What the doctors look for

The criteria are strict because the claim is large.

The illness should be serious and well documented. There should be a clear diagnosis before the pilgrimage or the use of the water. The cure should be complete, or as complete as the condition allows. It should last. Treatment should not offer a reasonable explanation.

These ideas are older than Lourdes. When the Church examines possible miracles in the causes of saints, she has long used careful medical questions. Pope Benedict XIV, writing in the eighteenth century as Prospero Lambertini, helped to shape that tradition. Lourdes borrowed the same instinct: do not call something miraculous if a natural explanation will do.

Some conditions are hard to document in the way the Bureau needs. Psychological suffering is real. God is not forbidden to heal it. The difficulty is different. A process that asks for objective medical evidence will often be unable to treat those cases as it treats a well-photographed tumour or a clearly measured paralysis. That is a limit of the method. It is not a judgement on the person.

Strict standards are not hostility to faith. They are a way of refusing to exaggerate.

A Small Reflection

When we care deeply about something, we can become too quick to believe a story that supports it.

The Church at Lourdes tries to do the opposite. If something is true, it does not need us to stretch the file. A smaller number of well-documented cases may say more than thousands of untested stories.

That habit is useful far beyond a shrine. Families, parishes and movements are always tempted to protect a favourite narrative. Truth does not need that protection.

A short prayer

Lord, keep us from needing more wonders than You have given. Amen.

Chapter 6

Thousands of claims, very few recognitions

At the time of writing, about seven thousand three hundred cases have been recorded at the Medical Bureau since the apparitions. Seventy-two healings have been officially recognised by the Church as miracles.

The most recent, at the time of writing, is that of Antonietta Raco, an Italian woman healed after a pilgrimage in 2009. Her bishop recognised the cure on 16 April 2025. The one before that, recognised in December 2024, was John Traynor of Liverpool, healed in 1923.

Those numbers will change. The ratio is the point. Many people report improvement. Very few cases survive the medical and ecclesial process.

That is not a failure of Lourdes. It is what a cautious Church looks like. She can say, of most files, that she cannot establish what is being claimed. She does not need impressive statistics in order to keep the pilgrimage open.

A Small Reflection

The Church does not need a large official number.

She can say, of a particular case, that she cannot establish the claim. If an organisation accepts every claim, people eventually stop trusting its judgement. Restraint can strengthen trust rather than weaken it.

Most pilgrims are not looking for a place on a list. They are sick, or they have brought someone who is sick, and they are asking Our Lady to pray. The recognised miracles are rare. The ordinary pilgrimage is not.

A short prayer

Our Lady of Lourdes, hold those whose files will never be opened, and those whose files were closed without a miracle. Amen.

Chapter 7

What Alexis Carrel saw

In May 1902 a young doctor from Lyon named Alexis Carrel travelled to Lourdes with sick pilgrims. He later received the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine for work on blood vessels. In 1902 he was not writing as a Catholic apologist. He went, in part, because he wanted to see what was happening.

On the train he met Marie Bailly, a woman in her early twenties with a badly swollen abdomen. Several doctors, including Carrel, judged her condition extremely serious. At Lourdes water from the spring was poured over her abdomen. Carrel watched the swelling go down. He took notes.

The case caused trouble in French medical circles. Carrel's account was used by others in ways he did not always control. He later left France for North America. Marie Bailly's cure was never officially recognised by the Church as a Lourdes miracle. The file, for reasons that include incomplete procedure, did not complete the path that later cases would take.

That fact is part of the honesty of the story. A famous doctor saw something he could not easily dismiss. The Church still did not place the case on the official list. Seeing a change, documenting a change, and declaring a miracle remain three different acts.

A Small Reflection

A person can report honestly what they saw without yet knowing what it means.

Carrel was not required to settle every theological question on the platform at Lourdes. He was required, as a doctor, not to pretend the abdomen was still swollen when it was not.

We are often asked to decide too quickly whether a fact is for or against faith. Sometimes the faithful thing is to say what happened and to leave the larger word until later.

A short prayer

Lord, give us witnesses who will write what they saw, and keep us from forcing their notes into a sermon. Amen.

Chapter 8

John Traynor, and a long wait

John Traynor, a sailor from Liverpool, was badly wounded in the First World War. He lived with paralysis, epilepsy and unhealed wounds. In July 1923 he travelled to Lourdes with the first official pilgrimage of the Archdiocese of Liverpool. During those days his condition changed. He returned home pushing his own wheelchair.

Doctors at Lourdes examined him. In 1926 a medical report described the healing as beyond the forces of nature. That report, written in French, appears never to have been sent to Liverpool. Between 1913 and 1946 Lourdes did not refer potential miraculous cures to diocesan bishops in the way later practice would require. An attempt to reopen the case in 1993 failed for lack of enough contemporary medical evidence.

In 2023, during Liverpool's centenary pilgrimage, the file was examined again. Newly considered documents from the Lourdes archives were enough for the process to move. On 8 December 2024 Archbishop Malcolm McMahon declared the cure miraculous. It became the seventy-first official Lourdes miracle, and the first recognised case of an English pilgrim.

The delay was not a romantic test of faith. Papers did not travel. Procedures changed. A later generation finished work that an earlier generation had begun.

A Small Reflection

Sometimes slowness is caution. Sometimes it is simply delay.

Traynor's family and city did not need a century in order to give thanks. The official word took much longer because the Church wanted enough evidence before using the word miracle.

Bureaucracy is not holy. Caution can still be a form of love for the truth. The useful question is not whether every delay is good. It is whether we are delaying because we are afraid of a fact, or because we refuse to spend a large word too soon.

A short prayer

Lord, teach us when to wait for the file, and when to give thanks without a certificate. Amen.

Chapter 9

The baths

From early years pilgrims have washed in the water as well as drunk it. Bernadette was told to wash. The baths, or piscines, grew from that request.

In the nineteenth century the arrangements were crude. Water was not changed as often as modern hygiene would require. Émile Zola, who visited in the 1890s and did not believe, wrote that the same water served many sick people and became filthy. Even if one discounts his hostility, the sanitary conditions of that period were not those of a modern hospital.

The baths today are run with far greater care. Water is managed. Volunteers help people who cannot walk. Hygiene belongs to the care of the sick. Improving it does not weaken Lourdes. It is part of not treating the ill as props in a story.

The Gospels show Jesus using ordinary physical things, including mud, while healing. That is worth noticing. It is not a proof. It simply means that Christianity has never been embarrassed by water, touch and the body. Modern cleanliness does not cancel that. It protects the people who come.

A Small Reflection

Faith and good medical care do not compete.

A shrine should pray for the sick and care for them properly. Cleaner baths are not a lack of belief. They are part of treating ill people as people.

If I treat hygiene as a threat to faith, I have misunderstood both. If I treat prayer as unnecessary once the taps are clean, I have misunderstood Lourdes. The grotto and the medical office belong together.

A short prayer

Lord, who washed feet and opened eyes with mud, teach us to care for the sick without contempt for either water or medicine. Amen.

Chapter 10

Not only at the grotto

Some officially recognised Lourdes miracles concern people who were not healed at the moment they stood in front of the rock. Improvement has been recorded after return home, or in connection with water taken away from the shrine.

That fact needs a calm explanation. The Church does not teach that the geography itself causes healing, as if the mountain were a machine. She does not teach that Lourdes water is a transferable drug. People may take the water home and use it prayerfully. The intercession of Our Lady and the grace of God remain central. The water is a sign attached to a place of prayer.

Pilgrimage places matter. Catholics go to Lourdes because Bernadette was sent there and because the Church recognised what happened. God is not imprisoned in the Pyrenees. A bottle on a kitchen shelf does not shrink Our Lady to the size of the bottle. It is one way of remaining in the same request.

A Small Reflection

God is not limited to Lourdes.

The shrine matters because God has used that place and that child. It does not matter because God is unavailable everywhere else. If I refuse to go because God is everywhere, I may be avoiding the trouble of asking. If I think God can act only at the grotto, I have misunderstood what Catholics believe about God.

A bottle taken home is not a medicine. It is a way of staying inside the same prayer.

A short prayer

Our Lady of Lourdes, be near those who cannot travel, and those who carry only a small bottle home. Amen.

Chapter 11

When medicine can already explain more

As diagnosis and treatment improve, it can become harder to establish that a recovery has no medical explanation.

That is especially clear with illnesses that now have effective treatment, and with cancers whose course can include remission. Remission means that the disease has lessened or disappeared for a time. A recovery that would have looked impossible in 1880 may look different when modern drugs, surgery and follow-up are taken into account. The Bureau has to work with present knowledge, not with the knowledge of the year the shrine opened.

This does not mean miracles have stopped. It does not mean doctors have become unbelieving. It means the standard “medically unexplained” is a moving line. The Church accepts that. She would rather recognise fewer cases than pretend that treatment did not exist.

A medically explained recovery can still be received with gratitude. Grace does not begin only where medicine ends. God can work through a surgeon. A file that never reaches the official list is not a file from which God was absent.

A Small Reflection

If medicine explains a recovery, that does not mean God did nothing.

Catholic theology is larger than the gap in a medical textbook. We ask doctors to do their work. We ask God for healing. Those requests are allowed to occupy the same week.

One person will only give thanks if the doctors are baffled. Another will only trust the doctors and treat prayer as decoration. Lourdes, at its best, refuses both. It respects medical knowledge and continues to pray.

A short prayer

Lord, giver of skill and of unexpected mercy, teach us to thank You for every recovery we do not understand, and for every recovery we do. Amen.

Chapter 12

How to use the water without superstition

Lourdes water is not magic. It is not a medicine. It is not a sacrament. It comes from an ordinary spring attached to an extraordinary request.

Most sick people who visit Lourdes are not physically cured. That does not make the pilgrimage meaningless. People go to pray, to be accompanied, to go to Confession, to receive the Eucharist, to sit with others who are ill. Physical healing is asked for. It is not promised.

You may drink the water. You may wash with it. You may take a bottle home. You should still see the doctor. You should still take the medicine you have been given. Using the water as a substitute for treatment is not faith. It is a confusion of signs.

Use the water in prayer, but do not treat it as though it guarantees a result. Ask for healing and leave the outcome with God. If healing comes, give thanks. If it does not, the pilgrimage has not automatically failed. Our Lady did not promise Bernadette happiness in this world.

A Small Reflection

Faith does not ask us to choose between asking for a miracle and accepting medical truth.

A Catholic can pray, drink the water, see the doctor, take the medicine, accept uncertainty, and still trust God. Those acts are not in competition. They belong to the same person standing in the same week.

The water is ordinary. The doctors remain careful. The Church still prays. You do not have to inflate the chemistry. You do not have to empty the grotto. You can tell the truth and still ask.

A short prayer

Our Lady of Lourdes, pray for us. Saint Bernadette, pray for us. Jesus, I trust in You. Amen.

A last word

If you go to Lourdes, you can drink the water and pray for healing without pretending that the water is medicine. You can also accept medical care and live with uncertainty. The Church at Lourdes has lived with that balance for a long time.

The spring is still ordinary. The files are still examined. The pilgrimage still goes on.

A prayer

Our Lady of Lourdes, pray for us. Saint Bernadette, pray for us. Lord, who makes springs in waste places, have mercy on us. Amen.

A word of thanks

These pages are free to read.

If they have helped you, a gift through Silent Homilies is welcome. Please give only if you wish, and only if you can. It is never a charge for a blessing, and it has nothing to do with Lourdes water.

Printing this book

This booklet is designed in A5 format.

For best results print double-sided on A5 paper, flipped on the short edge. Recommended paper: 80–100 gsm.

Written to be read in one or two sittings.