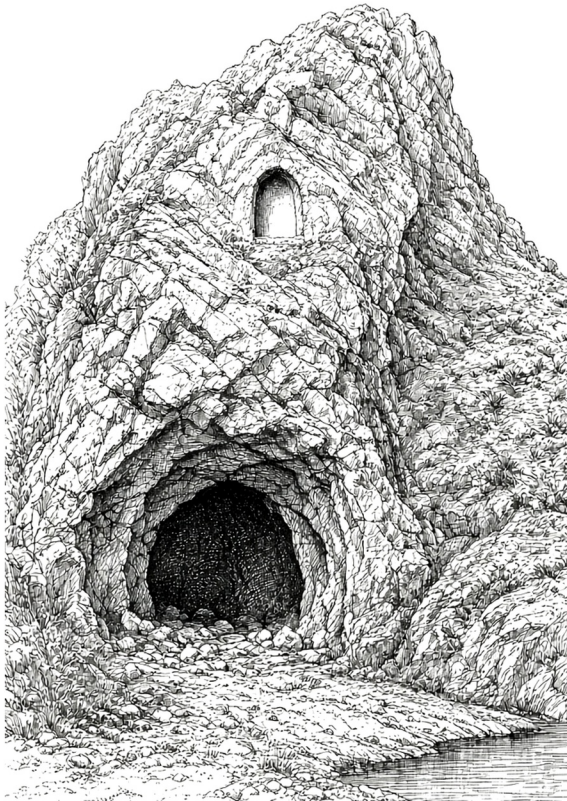




SILENT HOMILIES

One Decade More

*Lourdes, the forgotten sixth, and why
the beads were allowed to take longer*



Silent Homilies

Little Treasures



One Decade More

*Lourdes, the forgotten sixth, and why
the beads were allowed to take longer*

*A small book about Bernadette, the Rosary,
and prayer for the dead.*

Dedication



For those who first learned the Hail Mary as children, for those who
pray slowly because of illness, and for the dead who still need our
prayers.

Before You Begin



Do you know something interesting about the Rosary at Lourdes? On 11 February 1858, before any message was spoken and before anyone had found the spring, a fourteen-year-old girl and a Lady in white prayed the Rosary together at a damp rock called Massabielle.

Bernadette Soubirous came from a very poor family and suffered badly from asthma. Her education was limited, but she knew the Rosary. The Lady she saw was holding beads as well: white, on a chain Bernadette described as gold. They prayed. The Lady passed the beads through her fingers. She did not say the Hail Marys with the child.

Around Lourdes there is also an old local custom of adding a sixth decade, often for the dead. Some statues of Our Lady of Lourdes show six groups of beads instead of five. The usual five-decade Rosary is still the ordinary Catholic Rosary. This little book is not asking anyone to change that. It simply tells a story that sits beside it: why Catholics have sometimes stayed a little longer on the beads, and why that extra time has so often been given to people who can no longer ask for it themselves.

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Part One

Bernadette and the beads

Chapter 1

The Rosary Bernadette knew



When Bernadette Soubirous went to Massabielle on 11 February 1858, she was only fourteen years old. Her family was desperately poor. For a time they lived in a single damp room that had once been used as a prison cell. People in Lourdes still call it the Cachot. It was not a shrine. It was all they could afford.

She suffered badly from asthma and was often unwell. She spoke the local dialect more easily than French. She had not yet made her First Communion, and she was finding the catechism classes hard. That does not mean she knew nothing about the faith. She knew the Sign of the Cross. She knew the Our Father, the Hail Mary, the Glory Be and the Creed as they are said on the Rosary. She had learned those prayers at home, as children usually do.

That Thursday she went with her sister Toinette and a friend, Jeanne Abadie, to gather firewood by the river. They came to the rock of Massabielle. The other two crossed the little stream. Bernadette stayed behind to take off her stockings so that she would not get them wet. While she was doing that she heard a sound like a gust of wind. The trees did not move. A wild rose in a niche of the rock did. Then she saw a light, and in the light a young lady dressed in white, with a blue sash and a yellow rose on each foot.

Bernadette reached for her Rosary. When something extraordinary happened, the beads were the prayer she already had. One of the strengths of the Rosary is that it can be carried without a book. A child

can learn it. An elderly person can remember it. A scholar can pray it. A sick person can still use it when longer words become difficult. That is why it fitted a family like hers so well. It has never belonged only to people who cannot read.

A Small Reflection

A prayer learned in childhood often lasts longer than the explanations we add later. Illness, tiredness and grief can take away long sentences. They do not always take away ten Hail Marys. That is one reason the Church has trusted the Rosary to ordinary people for so long.

A Short Prayer

Mary, teach us to pray when we have very little to say. Lead us always to your Son. Amen.

Chapter 2

Our Lady had a rosary too



One detail is very easy to miss. Bernadette was not the only one holding a Rosary.

She later described the Lady's beads with some care. They were white. The chain looked like gold. The Lady held the rosary on her right arm. When Bernadette began to pray, the Lady took her own beads as well and passed them through her fingers.

The first meeting was not a conversation. No name was given that morning. Nobody was told about a spring. Nobody was asked to build a chapel. Two people prayed the Rosary: a poor girl from Lourdes, and the Lady she had just seen.

Bernadette tried to make the Sign of the Cross and found she could not until the Lady made it first. Then she was able to do the same. After that they prayed. When the Rosary ended, the Lady disappeared into the rock. Bernadette asked her companions not to tell anyone. Toinette told their mother anyway.

Eighteen apparitions followed, from that Thursday until 16 July. The Rosary came back again and again. Before the Lady spoke about penance, or drinking at the spring, or her name, she had already prayed with the child. People who visit Lourdes often look first for the water. The first thing that happened was a shared Rosary.

If you look at a statue of Our Lady of Lourdes, look at the beads in her hand or on her arm. That detail belongs to what Bernadette said she saw.

A Small Reflection

Lourdes did not begin with a new prayer. It began with the prayer Bernadette already knew. The Hail Mary was already on her lips. The life of Christ was already inside those words. Mary used what the child had brought with her.

A Short Prayer

*Lord Jesus, let the prayers we already know become a way of meeting you.
Amen.*

Chapter 3

Why she was silent during the Hail Mary



Bernadette noticed something else. The Lady passed the beads through her fingers, but she did not say the Hail Marys with her. The usual Lourdes tradition says that she joined in the Glory Be. Other details vary in later accounts, so we should be careful not to claim more than we know. What Bernadette was clear about is the silence during the Hail Mary.

Think about the words for a moment. The Hail Mary begins by greeting Mary. She would hardly say “Hail Mary” to herself. The prayer then asks her to pray for us sinners. She is not a sinner. The Glory Be is different. It praises the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. That is a prayer she can say without speaking about herself.

This detail does not prove the apparitions by itself. But it is one of those small details in Bernadette’s account that Catholics have always found interesting.

The Hail Marys give the Rosary its rhythm. The mysteries give it its centre. We look at the life of Christ with Mary. That is why the Rosary is Marian without taking the place of Christ. At Lourdes the Lady stays with the child in prayer. She does not take the Hail Mary over.

A Small Reflection

People sometimes worry that repeating the Hail Mary is empty. We repeat “I love you” without thinking the words have worn out. The Church repeats “Lord, have mercy.” The Hail Mary works in the same way. The familiar words leave the mind free to stay with Christ. Mary’s silence at Lourdes does not make those words less important. It shows that they are our greeting to her, and her way of taking us to her Son.

A Short Prayer

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Keep us close to Jesus.

Amen.

Chapter 4

Five decades, and sometimes six



The ordinary Catholic Rosary has five decades. That is the form most people know, and the form you will hear in almost any parish. It is a complete Rosary.

Around Lourdes there is also an older local custom. In parts of Bigorre, Béarn and the Basque country, people sometimes used a rosary with six decades. Dominican sisters at Lourdes have called this a Pyrenean rosary. The sixth decade was commonly offered for the holy souls, that is, for the dead who are being purified. That is local devotion. It is not a new rule for the whole Church.

What did Bernadette actually see? She spoke about the Rosary, but her earliest accounts do not give us a clear count of the decades. Later images are another matter. The crowned statue on the esplanade at Lourdes carries a six-decade rosary. Some makers of Lourdes statues said they changed their model from five decades to six because Bernadette insisted that the Lady's beads had six. Other people simply point to the local custom. It helps to keep those things separate: what Bernadette reported, what the region already practised, and what later statues have shown.

There is a real Pyrenean habit of staying one decade longer, often for the dead. There are Lourdes images that show six groups of beads. The Church has not told Catholics that they must add a sixth decade. The usual five-decade Rosary remains the ordinary form.

A Small Reflection

The Church can allow more than one way of using beads without turning a local custom into a test. Five decades remain the ordinary Rosary. Where people add a sixth, they are adding something, not repairing something that was missing.

A Short Prayer

Lord, keep us grateful for the Rosary we already know, and open to the older customs that help us remember the dead. Amen.

Part Two

The extra decade

Chapter 5

A decade for the dead



If the sixth decade around Lourdes was often given to the holy souls, Lourdes did not invent that instinct. Catholics have prayed for the dead for a very long time.

The Church teaches that people who die in God's friendship but still need purification are prepared by God for the fullness of heaven. We call this Purgatory. It is not a second chance to choose God. It is God completing his work of mercy in someone who already belongs to him. The faithful on earth can help the dead by prayer, by good works, and above all by the Mass.

The Mass is the Church's greatest prayer for the dead. The Rosary does not take its place. An extra decade is only a small devotion. Even so, ten Hail Marys said for someone who has died are a real way of not treating death as the end of our duty towards them.

We forget easily. It is easy to remember people who are still around us, because they speak to us and ask us for things. Someone who has died cannot do that. This is one reason the Church gives us All Souls' Day and encourages us to pray for the dead during November.

A Small Reflection

Modern life often wants grief to finish quickly. The Church is slower. She keeps names on a list. She keeps November. She keeps the words “eternal rest.” That does not mean she refuses to accept death. It means love still has work to do after the funeral.

A Short Prayer

*Lord Jesus, remember those who have died and still need our prayers.
Teach us not to forget them simply because we can no longer see them.
Amen.*

Chapter 6

The Brigittine rosary



The six-decade rosary near Lourdes is not the only longer rosary in Catholic history. Saint Bridget of Sweden, who died in 1373, is associated with a rosary of six decades. It is often called the Brigittine rosary. It has sixty-three Hail Marys. An old tradition gave Mary's life on earth as sixty-three years, and the number of Hail Marys followed that tradition. That number is a devotion, not a date we can prove from a register.

The mysteries are close to the ordinary ones, with a few extras. One common arrangement begins the Joyful mysteries with the Immaculate Conception. Another adds, among the Sorrowful mysteries, the moment when Christ's body is placed in his Mother's arms. The form is older than Lourdes and comes from a different family of prayer.

Discalced Carmelites later began to wear a six-decade rosary on the habit. You will sometimes hear that Saint Teresa of Avila learned it while staying with Brigittine nuns in Spain. That story is often repeated, but it is hard to support. The first Brigittine convent in Spain was founded after her death. What we can say more safely is that Carmelites came to use this longer rosary, and that Saint Teresa herself loved the Rosary from childhood.

Bridget and Carmel simply show that the Church has, more than once, allowed the Rosary to take a longer shape. The five-decade Rosary remains the one most Catholics pray. The mysteries of Christ remain at the centre either way.

A Small Reflection

Many of us assume that the rosary in our pocket has always looked exactly like this. It has not. Devotions grow, and they also settle. The five-decade Rosary settled because almost anyone can pray it. The longer forms remained for people who wanted them.

A Short Prayer

Lord, thank you for the many ways the Church has learned to stay with the mysteries of your life. Keep our prayer simple enough to finish. Amen.

Chapter 7

Why Catholics pray for the dead



Catholics have prayed for the dead for a very long time. Lourdes did not invent that. In the Second Book of Maccabees, Judas Maccabeus has sacrifices offered for soldiers who have died, so that they may be released from their sin. The writer calls this a holy and wholesome thought. The Church has read that page as one of the old reasons we pray for the dead.

The Church speaks about the communion of saints because Christians on earth, the souls being purified and the saints in heaven still belong to the one Body of Christ. Death changes the way we see a person. It does not take them out of that Body. We can still pray for them.

Our prayer cannot force anyone into heaven. It can ask God to complete his work of mercy. It can keep a name from disappearing. The Mass does this most directly, because it is Christ's own offering. A decade of the Rosary does it more quietly.

Grandad has died, so tonight we will offer these ten Hail Marys for him. A child can understand that before he can explain Purgatory. Praying for the dead teaches us not to treat people as finished.

A Small Reflection

It is easy to remember people who are still around us because they speak to us, telephone us and ask us for things. Someone who has died cannot do that. This is one reason the Church keeps reminding us to pray for the dead.

A Short Prayer

Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them. May they rest in peace. Amen.

Chapter 8

Lourdes, the sick, and prayer that takes time



Bernadette's asthma is part of the story, and it should stay a human fact. She was a child who found breathing difficult. She still walked to the grotto. She still knelt on wet ground. She still finished the Rosary. Illness did not make her holy by itself. It made her slow and tired, which is what illness usually does.

Lourdes later became a place where the sick are treated as honoured guests. Stretchers, volunteers, baths, hospitals and the blessing of the sick grew up around the shrine because the Lady asked Bernadette to drink at the spring, and because the Gospel itself keeps placing the sick in the middle of the crowd. Care for the body and prayer for the soul belong together there.

At Lourdes, a procession may move slowly because some pilgrims are seriously ill or have limited mobility. Nobody should see them as an inconvenience. Their presence is part of the pilgrimage. The Rosary is said in many languages. The sick are not asked to hurry so that the healthy can have a tidier evening.

This does not mean that suffering should be left untreated, or that every illness will be healed. Lourdes has always sent people to doctors as well as to the grotto. What the place refuses is the idea that a sick person should be kept out of sight while everyone else prays more neatly.

A Small Reflection

The first witness at Lourdes was not chosen for strength. She was a poor child with weak lungs. Perhaps that still tells us something about how the Church is meant to pray: not only at the pace of the healthy.

A Short Prayer

Lord Jesus, stay with those who pray slowly because they are ill. Give them patience, and give us the willingness to wait with them. Amen.

Part Three

What it means for us

Chapter 9

The evening procession



If you have never been to Lourdes, the evening procession is worth describing. After dark, people gather on the wide space in front of the churches. They carry candles, often in simple paper shades. The Rosary is prayed. The Ave Maria is sung. Different languages take different decades. Sick pilgrims are there as well, some of them in wheeled beds. In front of the Rosary Basilica stands the crowned statue of Our Lady. The procession moves around that space while the candles are still alight.

The Basilica of Our Lady of the Rosary was designed by Léopold Hardy and consecrated on 6 October 1901. Its mosaics show the mysteries of the Rosary. It was built because so many pilgrims were coming that the earlier churches could not hold them, and because the sanctuary wanted a church that honoured the Rosary itself.

The procession is easy to photograph. What you are looking at is the same prayer Bernadette began on a Thursday morning, now said by thousands of people who were not there in 1858. Some of them know all the mysteries. Some of them only know the refrain.

Look, if you go, at the rosary on the crowned statue. It has six decades. That is one of the public places where the longer local memory is still visible. You do not have to change your own beads because of it. You only have to notice that Lourdes has never been embarrassed by a prayer that takes a little more time.

A Small Reflection

A crowd praying the Rosary in several languages is a picture of the Church that no explanation quite replaces. Nobody in that procession is reciting a private theory. They are using the same few sentences, and those sentences are large enough to hold the healthy, the sick, and the people we name only as “us sinners.”

A Short Prayer

Mary, gather us as you gather the pilgrims at night in Lourdes. Keep our eyes on your Son. Amen.

Chapter 10

When prayer takes a little longer



An extra decade is optional. Praying six decades does not make somebody holier than a person who prays five. If we add them in order to feel ahead of other people, we have missed the point.

Sometimes we simply give a prayer a little more time. After the ordinary Rosary there is still room to say, “And for N., who has died.” That is all.

There is no single official method. In the Pyrenean custom the extra decade is often offered for the holy souls. The Brigittine form has its own mysteries and its own count. Other people add a decade only in November, or on an anniversary, or when a name will not leave them alone. None of these is a rule for every Catholic.

If you want to add another decade for someone who has died, you can. You certainly do not have to. After the fifth mystery, name the person or the intention. Pray one Our Father, ten Hail Marys and a Glory Be, as usual. Then finish the Rosary in the ordinary way. You have not created a new rite. You have given the dead a few more minutes.

A Small Reflection

Longer prayer is not automatically better prayer. A hurried extra decade can be emptier than five decades said with attention. The question is whether we have actually stayed with Christ, with Mary, and with the person we named.

A Short Prayer

*Lord, teach us to give time in prayer without turning time into a contest.
Amen.*

Chapter 11

Teaching the next generation



A child does not need a long explanation of Purgatory before learning to pray for someone who has died. Sometimes it is enough to say, “Grandad has died, so tonight we will offer these ten Hail Marys for him.” The child learns two things at once. Love does not simply stop. And we can still do something.

The same is true of the ordinary five-decade Rosary. Children often cannot manage a whole set of mysteries. One decade is already a real prayer. They do not need to pray an entire Rosary at once. If a family later adds a decade for the dead, it should feel like a kindness, not like a new test.

A parish can do something similar without inventing an obligation. In November, or on All Souls’ Day, or on the anniversary of a parishioner, an extra decade can be added after the usual Rosary for the names on the list. It should be offered as a possibility, not as a Lourdes rule that has suddenly arrived in the bulletin.

What we are handing on is not a special way of counting. We are handing on the habit of remembering people before God when they can no longer knock on the door. If the next generation keeps only five decades and still names the dead, that is already a great deal.

A Small Reflection

The prayers we give children are often the ones they will still have when they are old. Long explanations fade. The Hail Mary tends to remain. If that prayer also carries the names of the dead, a child has received more than a lecture would have given him at the same age.

A Short Prayer

Lord, bless the children who are learning the beads. Let the names of the dead find a place in their prayer without frightening them. Amen.

Chapter 12

One decade more



An extra decade does not mean that five decades are not enough. It is simply an old Catholic way of giving a little more prayer to someone else, especially someone who has died.

At Lourdes that instinct meets a particular story. A poor child reached for the beads she already knew. The Lady she saw was holding beads as well. They prayed without hurry. Later, in the same mountains, people sometimes stayed for one decade more and gave it to the holy souls. Elsewhere the Church blessed another six-decade rosary in memory of Mary. None of that cancels the Rosary you already pray.

A few extra minutes matter because we forget the dead so easily, and because they cannot ask us to remember them. They matter because Catholics believe we still belong to one another in Christ. They matter because Mary's first act at Lourdes was to pray, and because every Hail Mary keeps us looking at the life of her Son.

If you put this book down and pray the same five decades you prayed last week, nothing has gone wrong. If, some evening, you add ten Hail Marys for a person who has died, you will have understood the title.

A Small Reflection

The most unusual thing in this story is not the number six. It is the fact that the first act at Lourdes was shared prayer, and that Catholics have kept finding ways to let that prayer include people who are no longer in the room. An extra decade is only one of those ways. The Mass is a greater one. Remembering a name at night is a smaller one. All of them say the same thing. We have not finished with the people who have died, and God has not finished with them either.

A Short Prayer

*Mary of Lourdes, keep us close to your Son. Remember the dead we name,
and teach us to pray as Bernadette prayed, with the beads we already have.
Amen.*

A letter to the reader



If you finish this booklet and continue praying exactly the same five-decade Rosary you prayed before, nothing has gone wrong. I hope only that you will know a little more about the history of the Rosary, look more carefully at Our Lady's beads the next time you see a Lourdes statue, and perhaps sometimes remember the dead when you take the beads into your hands.

You do not have to add a sixth decade. The people we have buried are still helped by the Mass, by a single Hail Mary, and by any kindness done in their name.

Sources and Further Reading



Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes, official accounts of the eighteen apparitions (11 February to 16 July 1858) and of Bernadette's first meeting at Massabielle.

Bernadette's descriptions of the Lady: white dress, blue sash, yellow roses, and a rosary of white beads on a gold-coloured chain. The usual Lourdes tradition that the Lady was silent during the Hail Marys and joined the Glory Be. Later retellings sometimes add further details; those should be treated more cautiously.

On the sixth decade: the Pyrenean custom of a six-decade rosary offered for the holy souls, described by Dominican sisters at Lourdes and in regional accounts; the six-decade rosary on the crowned statue of the esplanade; later claims by statue-makers, including the Raffl workshop, that Bernadette asked for six decades as the rosary of the Immaculate Conception. These are not all the same kind of evidence.

Basilica of Our Lady of the Rosary, Lourdes: designed by Léopold Hardy; consecrated 6 October 1901. See also the sanctuary note on the dedication of the basilica.

The Brigittine rosary: the six-decade crown associated with Saint Brigid of Sweden (d. 1373), with sixty-three Hail Marys following a traditional count of Mary's years. Discalced Carmelite use of a six-decade rosary on the habit is well attested; the story that Saint Teresa of Avila learned it in a Spanish Brigittine house is later and historically doubtful.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 958 and 1030–1032, on prayer for the dead and Purgatory. 2 Maccabees 12:38–46. Luke 1:26–56. Matthew 6:5–13.



Silent Homilies

Little Treasures

A word of thanks

This booklet is free to read. If you wish, and if you are able, a voluntary gift to Silent Homilies helps the next small book to be written and left where someone else might need it. Please give only if you want to.

Printing tip

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.