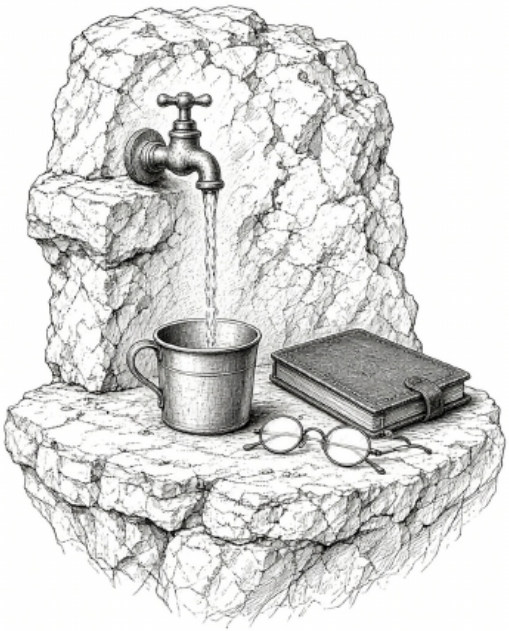
SILENT HOMILIES

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

†

Somebody comes home from a pilgrimage with a small plastic bottle, puts it on the kitchen shelf, and then is not quite sure what they have brought. A friend asks whether there is something special in it. A daughter is going into hospital, and her mother wants to give her a little of the water before the operation. The questions are ordinary, and they deserve an ordinary answer.

What follows is that answer. Lourdes water is real water. The doctors who work there are real doctors. The Church is slower with the word miracle than most visitors expect. None of that makes the spring meaningless. It makes it more interesting.

I will say which facts belong to the history, which belong to the medical files, and which belong to the Church's judgement. They are not the same thing.

Contents

Before You Begin 4

1. The Girl Who Was Told to Drink 6

2. The Water That Failed the Spa Test 8

3. Why the Church Brought in Doctors 10

4. Doctors Do Not Declare Miracles 12

5. What the Doctors Look For 14

6. Thousands of Claims, Very Few Recognitions 16

7. What Alexis Carrel Saw 18

8. John Traynor, and a Long Wait 20

9. The Baths 22

10. Not Only at the Grotto 24

11. When Medicine Can Already Explain More 26

12. How to Use the Water without Superstition 28

A Last Word 30

Sources and Further Reading 31

A Small Way to Keep the Spring Flowing 32

Chapter 1

The Girl Who Was Told to Drink

†

On the 25th of February 1858, Bernadette Soubirous was at the grotto of Massabielle for the ninth time. She was fourteen, poor, and not in charge of the crowd that had begun to follow her. The Lady, as she called her, told her to drink at the spring and to wash there. Bernadette looked for a spring and could not see one. The ground at the back of the grotto was muddy. She scratched at it with her hands, because she had been told to drink, and a little dirty water gathered. She tried to drink it. The people watching thought she had lost her mind.

She did not know how the afternoon would end. That is worth saying, because later pictures make the scene look planned. It was not planned. The trickle cleared over the next days, and a spring began to run where she had scratched. Massabielle was not a beauty spot. It was a rough place on the edge of the town, used for pigs and for rubbish. The Church had not yet judged the apparitions. The bishop's enquiry came afterwards.

The mayor of Lourdes, Anselme Lacadé, was a practical man. In the France of the 1850s, a new spring could mean visitors, hotels and a spa, the way other towns had grown rich on mineral water. He was not being cynical. He was reading the century he lived in. What he could not yet know was that the chemists would find nothing in the water worth bottling for a cure.

Reflection

Bernadette obeyed before she understood. That is not an argument against asking questions. The Church asked a great many afterwards, and she was right to. It is an argument against waiting until every consequence is clear before you do the next small thing you have actually been given.

Most of us are not at a grotto. We are at a sink, or in a queue, or beside a bed. The next obedience is usually smaller than a spring. It is still the same shape. You do the thing in front of you, and you do not pretend you already know what it will become.

A Short Prayer

Our Lady of Lourdes, teach us to do the next small thing without demanding the ending. Amen.

Chapter 2

The Water That Failed the Spa Test

†

A spa town in the nineteenth century lived on what the chemists could find in the water. Sulphur, iron, salts, a smell, a taste, something a doctor could put on a label. Visitors came for the chemistry as much as for the air. Lourdes had a new spring and a mayor who hoped it might join that trade. Professor Filhol of Toulouse examined the water. He did not find a mineral cure. The water was drinkable, and in composition it was like most of the springs in the limestone hills: a little carbonated lime and magnesia, traces of other salts, nothing a spa of that century would have bottled as medicine.

That is the irony, and it is worth sitting with. Lourdes became one of the most famous places in the world connected with healing, and the water failed the ordinary test of the spa. People still come. They still fill bottles. The label they are trusting is not a chemist's label.

You can see the same surprise in the Bible, and it is older than Lourdes. Naaman the Syrian was told to wash in the Jordan. He objected, because the rivers of Damascus looked better. The Jordan was not a superior medicine. It was the water he had been told to use. The man born blind was sent to wash in the pool of Siloam, with mud still on his eyes. The power was not a secret ingredient in the pool. Ordinary water can be the place where somebody obeys.

Reflection

A wedding ring is ordinary metal. A photograph is paper and ink. A rosary may be plastic. None of them is meaningless, because meaning is not the same thing as chemistry. The ring carries a promise. The photograph carries a face. The beads carry a prayer that has been said often enough to wear them.

Lourdes water is not a sacrament. It does not do what Baptism does. It can still carry a memory, and a prayer, and the day somebody stood at the grotto. Ordinary does not mean empty. It means the meaning is not in the minerals.

A Short Prayer

Lord, You are not embarrassed by water. Teach us not to be embarrassed by ordinary things. Amen.

Chapter 3

Why the Church Brought in Doctors

†

Long before Lourdes, the Church had already decided that an alleged miracle should be questioned. Prospero Lambertini, later Pope Benedict XIV, wrote the treatise the causes of saints came to rely on, and he wanted doctors in the room before a healing was called miraculous. A healing that could be explained by the illness itself, or by the treatment, was not to be called a miracle for the sake of a good story. That habit is older than the grotto.

At Lourdes the habit took a local form. In 1883 the sanctuary opened the Bureau des Constatations Médicales, the office where doctors could examine people who said they had been healed. It was not a court. It was a place to write down what had actually happened, while the person was still there and the notes could still be checked. The Church was not afraid of the file. She asked for it.

If your aunt came home from Lourdes and got better, that is a reason for thanks. It is not yet a reason to use the Church's word. The next question is the one the Bureau was built to ask. What was the diagnosis, what was the treatment, and what can still be explained without a miracle?

Reflection

Truth does not need protection from honest questions. A story you are not allowed to examine is not a stronger story. It is a story that has started to be afraid.

Catholics sometimes defend Lourdes by sounding cross with doctors. The sanctuary did the opposite. It invited them in. If a claim cannot survive a medical file, it was never going to survive as a miracle. The prayer can continue either way.

A Short Prayer

Lord, give us the patience to ask, and the honesty to hear the answer. Amen.

Chapter 4

Doctors Do Not Declare Miracles

†

This is the distinction that clears most of the confusion. Doctors do not declare miracles. They say whether a recovery is complete, lasting, and unexplained by the medicine they know. The Church then asks a different question. Is it reasonable to receive this healing as a sign of God's mercy, through the intercession of Our Lady? That judgement belongs to the bishop of the person who was healed, not to the doctor who signed the notes.

The path is slow on purpose. A file begins at the Bureau. If it still looks serious, it can go to the International Medical Committee of Lourdes, doctors of different countries and specialities, who vote. A favourable vote is not a canonisation of the water. It is a medical opinion. The bishop at home decides whether the Church will use the word.

The slowness annoys people, and sometimes it should. A missing letter can hold a true story for years. But the distinction itself is a kindness. It stops a grateful family from having to pretend that the surgeon was irrelevant, and it stops a sceptic from having to pretend that the Church is only collecting rumours.

Reflection

Catholics should be careful with the word miracle. It is a large word. If we use it for every good scan result, we empty it, and then we have nothing left for the day when the scan cannot explain what happened.

You can thank God for a healing the bishop will never see. Thanks does not require a decree. The decree is for the Church's public speech, not for your kitchen.

A Short Prayer

Lord, keep us grateful, and keep us accurate. Amen.

Chapter 5

What the Doctors Look For

†

The questions are plain, which is why they are hard. Was the illness real, and properly diagnosed? Was it the sort of illness that does not usually reverse itself? Had the treatment already failed, or was the recovery the treatment working at last? Did the change last, or did it fade when the person went home? Is there a medical explanation that fits the notes, even if it is less exciting than the story?

A cure that leaves no paper is very difficult to judge later. That is not cruelty. It is how evidence works. The Bureau wants the diagnosis from before, the notes from the day, and the follow-up from after. Families who are simply glad do not always gather those pages. The file then stays thin, and the Church will not build a miracle on a thin file.

We all know the temptation. A story we badly want is easy to improve in the telling. A detail is sharpened. A doctor's hesitation becomes a certainty. The criteria are there to slow that down. They are not an insult to the person who got better.

Reflection

The sick person whose case will never become a file is not a failure of Lourdes. Most recoveries, and most enduring illnesses, will never be examined in that room. They still deserve the Church's prayer, and a parish's attention, and a visit.

A miracle list is not a league table of who was loved. It is a short public record of cases the Church was able to check. The unchecked are not outside the mercy.

A Short Prayer

Lord, remember the people whose notes were never gathered. Amen.

Chapter 6

Thousands of Claims, Very Few Recognitions

†

At the time of writing, the sanctuary has records of something like 7,300 claims of healing since the Bureau opened, and the Church has recognised 72 of them as miracles. The latest, at the time this book was written, is Antonietta Raco of Francavilla in Sinni. On 16 April 2025 the bishop of Tursi-Lagonegro declared her healing the 72nd, after the international committee had voted in November 2024 that her recovery from primary lateral sclerosis was unexpected, complete, lasting and unexplained. Before her, on 8 December 2024, came John Traynor of Liverpool, the 71st. The numbers will move. The proportion is the point.

Seventy-two out of thousands is not a scandal, and it is not a proof that nothing happens. It is what you would expect if the Church means what she says about evidence. Most files stop. The illness was not certain. The recovery was partial. The notes were missing. A treatment could explain it. The person is still glad, and the Church still will not use the formal word.

If you have a bottle on the shelf, it is not a ticket to one of the seventy-two. It is a reminder of a place, and of a prayer. The recognised cases are the ones the Church was able to say in public. They are not the only graces the pilgrimage has held.

Reflection

Numbers can be used to sneer, or to boast. Neither fits. A short list of recognised miracles does not mean Our Lady has been idle. It means the Church would rather under-claim than invent.

The person who comes home no better in body, and somehow more able to pray, will not appear in the table. That life is not a rejected file. It is a pilgrimage doing a different work, and the Church has never said the different work does not count.

A Short Prayer

Our Lady of Lourdes, pray for the ones who will never be a number. Amen.

Chapter 7

What Alexis Carrel Saw

†

Alexis Carrel was a young French surgeon, not yet famous, when he went to Lourdes in 1902. He was not a pilgrim in the pious sense. He wanted to see whether the stories survived a doctor's eye. On the train was Marie Bailly, a young woman the doctors with her regarded as dying of tuberculous peritonitis. Carrel watched, and he wrote down what he saw. At the grotto, water from the spring was poured over her abdomen. The swelling that had been hard and distended began to go down in front of him, within minutes. He did not have an explanation that satisfied him. Later writers have argued about the exact diagnosis. What is not in dispute is that he recorded a change he could not account for, and that the Bureau never put her case forward for recognition.

The case made his name awkward in the medical world of the time, which did not want a scientist speaking well of Lourdes. He went on to win the Nobel Prize in 1912, for work on stitching blood vessels, not for the grotto. Marie Bailly's healing was never officially recognised as a Lourdes miracle. That last fact is the one to keep. A famous doctor, later a Nobel laureate, said he had seen something he could not explain. The Church did not stamp the file because he was famous.

You can hold both halves without forcing them. He saw what he saw. The process did not bend around his reputation. That is a stricter kindness than a quick decree would have been.

Reflection

There is a humility in saying, "This is what I saw. I do not yet know what it means." Carrel's notes have that tone, even when the later arguments around him became loud. Most of us are not asked to diagnose a miracle. We are asked not to tidy a story until it fits the ending we prefer.

If you have watched a recovery you cannot account for, you are allowed to say so. You are also allowed to stop before you announce what the Church has not announced. The gap between the two sentences is where honesty lives.

A Short Prayer

Lord, keep us faithful to what we saw, and slow about what we claim.
Amen.

Chapter 8

John Traynor, and a Long Wait

†

John Traynor was a Liverpool sailor, wounded in the First World War. By 1923 he was paralysed, epileptic, and unable to use his right arm. He went on the archdiocese's first official pilgrimage to Lourdes. On the 28th of July he came back through the town pushing his own wheelchair. The people who met him at Lime Street did not need a decree to be glad.

The decree took just over a century. A panel of doctors at Lourdes had written, in 1926, that the healing was beyond what they could explain. The later review found that those papers had not been sent to Liverpool. An attempt to reopen the case in 1993 failed for lack of the contemporary evidence. In 2023 Dr Kieran Moriarty, an English member of the international committee, was asked to look again, and the missing file was in the archives at Lourdes. On 8 December 2024, at Mass in the Metropolitan Cathedral, Archbishop Malcolm McMahon declared the cure a miracle, the 71st recognised at Lourdes, and the first person from England to be recognised.

What does it mean that people gave thanks for a hundred years before the Church had the papers? It means thanksgiving is not the same thing as a judgement. The family were right to be glad in 1923. The archbishop was right to wait until the evidence could be read. The delay was not a lesson. It was, as far as the archives show, a letter that never left Lourdes.

Reflection

Gratitude does not need a certificate. A certificate needs a file. If you have thanked God for a recovery that no bishop will ever examine, you have not been premature. You have done the part that belongs to you.

The part that belongs to the Church is slower, and it should be. Traynor's story is not an argument for impatience. It is an argument for keeping the papers, and for not confusing a station platform with a decree.

A Short Prayer

Our Lady of Lourdes, remember the people who gave thanks before the letter arrived. Amen.

Chapter 9

The Baths

†

The baths are the part of Lourdes that most surprises a modern visitor, and they have not always been as clean as they are now. Émile Zola came in the 1890s and described what he saw without affection. The pools were crowded, the linen was poor, and a novelist looking for squalor did not have to invent it. Improved hygiene since then is not a loss of faith. It is what you do when sick bodies are entrusted to you.

Christ washed feet. He used mud. He sent a man to a pool. None of that is an instruction to keep a bath dirty. The Church can learn from a critic without handing him the doctrine. The water is still ordinary. The care of the person in the water is part of the pilgrimage, not a distraction from it.

Volunteers still help people into the baths, and into the pools that have replaced the old ones for many pilgrims. A person who pushes a wheelchair all week may never see a miracle. They have still done the work the place is for.

Reflection

The dignity of a sick body is not an optional extra. It is one of the things the Incarnation committed the Church to. A clean towel is not less Catholic than a candle. Sometimes it is the more urgent of the two.

If you have ever felt that care and prayer were competing, the baths are a useful correction. The prayer is said over a body that has been handled gently. The gentleness is not a rival to the prayer.

A Short Prayer

Lord, teach us to care for the body in front of us, and to pray while we do it. Amen.

Chapter 10

Not Only at the Grotto

†

Most of the water never sees the grotto again. It goes home in a bottle, and sits beside the tea bags. A grandmother gives a little of it to her daughter before an operation. A man who went to Lourdes twenty years ago still keeps his, because the week changed the way he prays, not because he expects the plastic to glow. This is normal, and it is not nothing.

Use the water as part of your prayer, not as a dose of medicine. You bless yourself with it, or you drink a little, and you ask Our Lady to pray. You do not stop the tablets. You do not cancel the surgeon. A person who wonders whether the bottle means they distrust their doctor has misunderstood both. The doctor is doing the doctor's work. The bottle is a way of asking.

The water from the side of Christ, in St John's Gospel, became for the Church a sign of the sacraments, not a recipe. Lourdes is not that water. It is allowed to remind us of it. A sign points. It does not replace the thing it points to.

Reflection

The bottle on the shelf is a memory you can touch. Pilgrimages end. The kettle still needs filling. What remains is a small object that says you were there, and that you have not decided the prayer is over.

You do not have to use it every day for it to be honest. You have to know why it is there. If it has become a charm, put it back into a prayer. If it has become dust, you have not failed. The spring is still running.

A Short Prayer

Our Lady of Lourdes, be with us in the kitchen as well as at the grotto. Amen.

Chapter 11

When Medicine Can Already Explain More

†

A family sits in a waiting room and prays. The surgeon comes out and explains what she did, and why it worked. Does the explanation mean God was absent? Of course not. Grace does not begin only where medicine ends. Catholic faith has never required a doctor to fail before God is allowed to act.

God can work through skill, through a drug, through a nurse on a night shift, through an ordinary recovery, and through a recovery nobody expected. A healing that medicine can explain may still be received with gratitude. A miracle is a more specific claim. It says that what happened goes beyond what the medicine accounts for, and that the Church is willing to say so in public. Most graces will never meet that bar. They are still graces.

This is why a person can take the prescribed tablets and ask Our Lady to pray in the same afternoon. The two requests are not rivals. One is the ordinary means God gave us. The other is the confidence that those means are not all He is.

Reflection

God is not the explanation left over when the textbooks run out. If He were, every medical advance would shrink Him. The history of Lourdes does not look like that. The doctors got better at explaining, and the Church did not close the grotto.

Thank Him for the operation that worked for a reason. Thank Him also if one day the reason is missing. Do not make Him wait in the corridor until the surgeon is confused.

A Short Prayer

Lord, we thank You for the skill of doctors, and for the mercies they cannot explain. Amen.

Chapter 12

How to Use the Water without Superstition

†

Superstition begins when we treat a sign as though it had power of its own. A bottle kept under a pillow as though the bottle itself could guarantee a cure has crossed that line. A promise that the water will cure, if only the person has enough faith, has slipped further. Faith is not a lever. The Church does not sell outcomes.

Use it simply. Make the sign of the cross. Ask Our Lady to pray for the person who is ill. Go to the doctor. If you can, go to Confession and to Mass, because those are the ordinary places grace has been promised, and Lourdes has always sent people back to them. The spring is not a second sacrament.

And if you come home uncured, you have not been refused. People return from Lourdes still ill, and some of them return having told the truth in Confession for the first time in years, or having let a family help them, or having received Communion when they had stopped expecting to. The body is not the only thing a pilgrimage can hand back.

Reflection

What happens when somebody is not physically cured? The question is the one the files do not answer, and it is the one most pilgrims will live. Illness has not removed them from the Church. The wheelchair was blessed at the same grotto as the bottle.

You can sit with that without pretending it is easy. Company, Communion, a reconciled family, a night's sleep: these are not consolation prizes. They are the life of the Church, continuing in a body that is still sick. The water was never meant to replace them.

A Short Prayer

Our Lady of Lourdes, if we are not cured, stay with us anyway. Amen.

A Last Word

†

If these pages have done their work, the bottle on the shelf will look more ordinary, and more serious. Ordinary, because the chemists were right. Serious, because the Church still asks doctors to look, and still goes on pilgrimage.

Use the water as a prayer. Do not use it as a spell. And if you know somebody who is about to go, or who has just come home, you now have something true to say to them.

So take the water home. Pray with it. Thank God for the doctors. And whether healing comes or not, do not leave the sick person alone.

Sources and Further Reading

†

Scripture: 2 Kings 5; John 5:1–9; John 9; John 19:34. Catechism of the Catholic Church, on miracles and on the intercession of the saints. Prospero Lambertini, later Benedict XIV, De servorum Dei beatificatione, on the medical examination of alleged miracles.

Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes, and the Bureau des Constatations Médicales, opened in 1883. The 1858 analysis by Professor Filhol of Toulouse, commissioned by Mayor Anselme Lacadé, concluding that the water was ordinary potable mountain water, not a therapeutic mineral water. Official announcement of the 71st recognised miracle, John Traynor, by Archbishop Malcolm McMahon on 8 December 2024, and of the 72nd, Antonietta Raco, by Bishop Vincenzo Carmine Orofino of Tursi-Lagonegro on 16 April 2025. Her illness was assessed, on the 2020 consensus, as primary lateral sclerosis. Figures of about 7,300 claims and 72 recognitions are given as they stood at the time of writing.

Alexis Carrel's own account of the 1902 journey and of Marie Bailly is in his later narrative of Lourdes. Her case was not entered on the list of recognised miracles. John Traynor's 1923 pilgrimage, the 1926 medical notes found in the Lourdes archives, and the 1993 attempt are recorded by the Archdiocese of Liverpool and by Dr Kieran Moriarty's review.

A Small Way to Keep the Spring Flowing

†

A bottle from Lourdes costs very little. Finding out what we can truthfully say about it takes rather longer. Someone has to read the medical file, check the date, and refuse the story that is only exciting.

These pages are free to read. A gift is not payment for them, and it is not payment for a prayer, a blessing, or a bottle of water. Nothing here is exchanged for a favour from God. They are already yours. What a gift adds, if you are able to give one through the Silent Homilies website, is help with the work itself: the history, the medical claims, Scripture, the Church's teaching, the writing and the rewriting, the editing, the design, and the time.

I would be truly grateful. It is a practical help, not a condition of reading. If you cannot give, nothing is owed.

If you know somebody with a Lourdes bottle on the shelf, or a family preparing to go, pass them this booklet. The spring does not need our money. The next honest page sometimes does. www.silenthomilies.com

© 2026 Silent Homilies.

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, stored, transmitted or republished in any form or by any means without prior written permission from the copyright holder, except as permitted by applicable law.

www.silenthomilies.com