

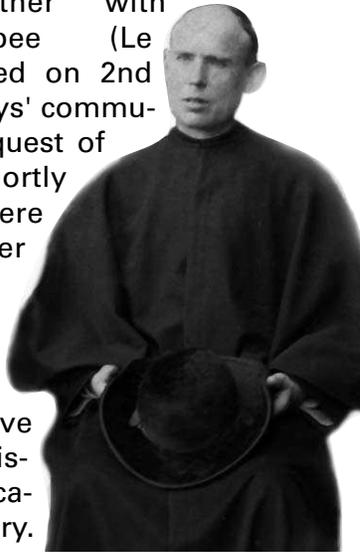
ARCHIVE PAGES (IV)

"Never do we tire of listening to talk of a cherished mother."

IN THIS YEAR OF 2008, the Church celebrates the 159th anniversary of the apparitions of the Virgin at Lourdes. It is not necessary to recall the circumstances and the sequence of events that passed unnoticed on this 11th February 1858. But they would have a universal impact to the point of having statues of the Virgin of Lourdes and reproductions of the grotto of Massabielle everywhere in the world (including in the Vatican gardens.)

The Brothers do not ignore that the Congregation was already present in Lourdes for nearly three years before the commencement of the apparitions. Brother Leobard (Bourgneuf), together with Brother Macchabee (Le Guellaut) had opened on 2nd November 1855 a boys' communal school at the request of Mayor Lacade. Shortly afterwards they were joined by Brother Cerase (Escoubas).

Since then a number of Brothers (a total of 198) have exercised their ministry, whether in education or in the Sanctuary.



Some remained for a short while (a few weeks for those soldier-brothers who sought refuge in 1940, during the exodus at the time of the defeat of June) others remained much longer (Brother Ephrem Etcheverry being the champion of this category, with 66 years of presence.)

To highlight the souvenir of the apparitions, the Chronicle presents an unpublished letter of Brother Leobard to Father de la Mennais. This letter accompanied a tale of the apparitions written by Brother Leobard himself. Unfortunately the text was lost but we possess the content. Evidently the brothers did not assist at the apparitions, still the testimony of Brother Cerase seems to indicate the contrary: fortuitous circumstances or objective coincidence? This is what he wrote: *"On the 1st or the 2nd Sunday after the 1st apparition, as we walked along the Pau road I saw in the surroundings of the grotto and in the grotto itself a crowd of children fidgeting like an ant hill. One among them was saying, while returning to the road: "Save yourself, save yourself...they follow." I thought that it was there that the children had seen the Lady."* This might refer to the apparition of 14th February, at the moment that Jeanne (one of the friends of Bernadette) threw a rock from the height of the trail thus provoking a general panic.

D+S

Lourdes 22nd June 1859

My Venerable Father,

Already 6 months have expired since I have expressed my wishes for a new-year. I was announcing the sending forthwith of a description of the apparitions of Lourdes. I certainly had the intention of accomplishing immediately my promise. But circumstances that I could not foresee distracted me from my work and it took a great deal of diligence to complete the work today.

Brother Hippolyte answering my letter for the new-year in your name told me not to worry about disturbing you by a too long letter. "Never, he said, do we tire to hear about a cherished mother."

On the strength of his words, I authorize myself to write the following but I hope that it does not go beyond measure.

However, dear father, I recognize that there are certain passages that may tire you. The reason is, as I have said in the above, my letter was not made at one go. I had to interrupt it a number of times and at times had to continue it at intervals of a month. Thus, after reviewing it I found some passages rather shocking, some particularities that I would have removed if I had had the time to rewrite the letter. Thus, venerable father, I claim your indulgence in view of the objective that I propose in favor of telling you the truth and all the truth.

And to tell you more surely, I went to good sources: I called Bernadette many times from whom I hold all that concerns her and whose information was confirmed by those who saw her at the grotto and heard her elsewhere. Naturally this will make you think that I am not one of the happy witnesses that had the opportunity to study at their leisure the physiognomy of Bernadette during the time that she set eyes on the Holy Virgin. In effect, I constantly refused to go to the grotto until the time when the miracles multiplied. I was thus sheltered from the ridicule that could have occurred by a too hasty action. However it was not a lack of envy to see the physiognomy that was said to be so striking, but I had, together with my brothers, to maintain the wise reserve of the clergy, who counseled me to maintain it.

Thinking to please you and my brothers, I am sending you, dear father, a few small vials of water from the grotto, a few fragments of the rock on which the Holy Virgin stood and a small branch of one of the bushes behind which she stood. All will reach you through the railway.

In two days it is the feast of Saint John. For more than 11 years I have not had the opportunity to embrace you on that day. But, my dear father, be sure that the distance that separates us does not remove anything from the strength of my sentiments. May your life be happy and may your glorious patron, receive your last breath and guide you to your immortal rest.

Dear Father, please accept the assurance of the entire submission of your humble child.

Br Leobard-Mie

This letter of Brother Leobard does not, without doubt, have an historical interest of the first order, but other than its congregational family interest, it may arouse some reflections.

The circumstances of the letter

It is dated on 22nd June 1859; the apparitions were over since nearly a year (16th July 1858), but Brother Leobard invokes for his defense "circumstantial coincidences". In fact during this entire period he was engaged in the construction of his school, destined to replace the infamous hovel in which he worked until then. The construction was the object of many battles with the municipality, one siding with expenses the other with economy.

The letter makes allusion to Brother Hippolyte who held the post of secretary at Ploermel. Within one year of his death, Father de La Mennais was no longer able to answer all the letters that he received.

The attitude of Brother Leobard in relation to the apparitions

Brother Leobard is proud to say that he himself interrogated Bernadette. He even affirmed in another text that he convoked her on 12th February through the intermediary of her Brother Jean-Marie, a pupil at the school. This appears unlikely, the news not having had time to be propagated. Also, Brother Leobard was at first rather skeptical according to Father Cros, the first historian of the apparitions, all the more so that the good Director was overwhelmed by

an epidemic of visions that the students experienced. Besides he affirmed: "I asked myself, more than once, when considering attentively, if she was not an able comedian rather than a visionary.

Was it to make amends for his early doubts that on 31st August 1858 he went so far as to scale the barriers blocking access to the Grotto? And this in full view of the guardian (half angry, half amused) accompanied by many honorable ecclesiastics of the Ger. All these important people making their way to the foot of the rock face to gather a few leaves and pieces of rock. Evidently no mention of this exploit was made to Father de la Mennais...courageous but not reckless.

The commencement of a popular devotion

It is interesting to observe how, at the very start, the popular fervor needs concrete actions. The small vials of water from the Grotto sent by Brother Leobard, foretold the sending of larger parcels actually made by our confreres of the Sanctuary, and sent to far away territories.

Otherwise, luckily the present pilgrims do not allow themselves to take branches or chips of stone. But when we consider with what fervor some embrace the rock of Massabielle, if we

remain sincerely admiring the simplicity of their faith, we cannot but ask ourselves to what extremities this could lead to, if it were not enlightened...

This letter written after the apparitions, but three years before the official recognition by the bishop of the diocese, is for us a living testimony of the humble faith of the contemporaries. Five years before the first pilgrimage to the Grotto we already see the action of the believers responding to the call of the Lady. "Go and drink at the fountain." "Go embrace the soil for the sinners." "The water of the Grotto and the rock of Massabielle appear as two major signs of the message of Lourdes, signs of the water of baptism and of the rock on which our faith must be built (the Christ).

Those who wish to read (or re-read) the interesting document of the apparitions, unfortunately incomplete, made by Brother Leobard and that of Brother Cerase (his interpreter in Gascony) can go to the Chronicle no 218 and 219. It is also possible to consult through the Internet, thanks to the FIC site :

(<http://www.ficplm.org>)

Br Joseph PINEL

The Brothers at the Lourdes Sanctuary

It was in 1884 that the first brothers arrived at the Lourdes Sanctuary. Brother Jerome (Dubarry) became director of a small primary school for the boys of Lourdes and the surrounding villages. The school transformed itself quickly into a choir school (maîtrise), in charge of animating the Sunday celebrations. The school lasted until 1975 when it was transformed, during a dozen or so years into a vocational center. Soon other brothers arrived to work in other services: masses desk, post office, sacristy, printing, animation,... All these services were well appreciated and many brothers (French, Spanish, English, Canadian) rendered them for a century. Most of them were retired teachers who found in Lourdes the possibility of continuing to be active, and being close to the Grotto of Massabielle of satisfying their Marian devotion, also for some, satisfying their attraction for the mountains.

However since some years it has been difficult to form a community sufficiently well rounded. Thus the superiors decided to **regroup the two communities of Lourdes** into one residence at 24 rue de Bagnères, close to the Saint-Joseph College.

On 3rd January 2008, the three brothers of the Sanctuary, helped by employees of the Grotto made their move. They continue to work as before but must make the daily back and forth trip every day. All the Chaplains regretted this departure, the Brothers being part of the landscape at the Sanctuary. We hope that they will be present for a long time.

Br Joseph Pinel