

The Exquisite Timing of Lourdes

By John Kippley | February 11, 2008

The timing of the apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Lourdes beginning on February 11, 1858, was not only providential in the sense of God's loving kindness to us sinners, but was absolutely exquisite in terms of what was going on in European intellectual circles at that time.

The sex scandals involving priests and bishops, the very low rate of acceptance of *Humanae Vitae*, the continuing liturgical abuses, the surveys purporting to show the unbelief of Catholics, and other negative indicators lead many of us to dream of living in more faith-filled times. The times in which Bernadette Soubirous lived in Lourdes were not such times.

For 70 years there had been a steady attack on orthodox Christian faith. In 1778 a work of Hermann Samuel Reimarus was published posthumously by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. In "The Aims of Jesus and His Disciples," Reimarus expressed a bad dream in which Jesus was only an unsuccessful politician and his disciples remade his image and invented the Resurrection.[1] Such claims make it more evident than ever why Jesus chose simple fishermen instead of Jewish intellectuals to be his disciples, but even lying intellectuals wouldn't go to their death just for their wishful thinking.

Next came the French Revolution with its reign of terror and widespread destruction of the Church, but physical damage is easier to repair than widespread loss of faith. To restore faith in the clergy and the Church, God raised up the most humble priest imaginable, Jean Marie Vianney, whom some believe almost single-handedly restored faith in the Church—but that's another story.

In 1828, Heinrich Eberhard Gottlob Paulus, a professor of theology at Heidelberg from 1811-51, wrote a completely rationalistic hypothesis about Jesus. He completely denied the possibility of any and all supernatural elements both in general and in the life of Jesus.

In 1835-36, David Friedrich Strauss wrote a two-volume *Life of Jesus* in which he claimed that the gospels were a compilation of myths. By "myth" he meant that the gospel writers invented persons and events to express religious ideas. Certainly most readers have heard either firsthand or secondhand about the interpretation of the feeding of the 5,000 as being this sort of myth, or that the real miracle was not physical but was the moral miracle of the opening of the hearts of the audience to share their hidden loaves. If you have wondered where some modernist preachers get this sort of skepticism, it goes back to this period of time.

Very close to the events at Lourdes, Bruno Bauer in 1850-52 went the furthest in his denial of the faith. In his "Criticism of the Gospels and History of their Origin," he postulated that the evangelists had simply created the image of Jesus who never existed.

Why they would want to engage in such an effort that brought them martyrdom instead of honors and riches is beyond my imagination.

A Holy Rebuke

Two years after Bauer's low point in skepticism, the Church completed some 18 centuries of doctrinal development, and on December 8, 1854, Pope Pius IX formally proclaimed the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in *Ineffabilis Deus*. I haven't checked the newspaper accounts of the time, but I doubt that the proclamation had any beneficial effect on the skeptics. After all, if they didn't believe even in the historicity of the humanity of Jesus, of what interest could it be to them that his mother was conceived without any stain of original sin? Can you imagine what at least some informed Catholics must have been thinking at the time? "Well, God, I believe this, and it's all very nice, but when are you going to raise up some great theologians to rebuke the skeptics?"

Three years, two months, and three days later, on February 11, 1858, God gave His answer. If the skeptics didn't believe in supernatural events and denied every miracle in the Bible because they didn't see miracles happening in front of their own eyes, He would give them something that they could deny only by becoming liars. A peasant girl, Bernadette Soubirous, was visited by a beautiful lady who later identified herself with these words: "I am the Immaculate Conception." To answer the skeptics, the Lady told Bernadette to start digging where there was no spring. She did as she was told. Water started to flow, and the miracles started to happen.

Did the miracles convert the skeptics? It may have converted some, but others would not open their minds to the possibility of the miraculous. Emile Zola, a prominent late 19th-century writer, visited Lourdes in 1892 and actually heard testimony from one woman who had been cured a year earlier and from a second who had been cured the very day of his visit. Instead of undergoing a conversion, Zola wrote a novel that completely distorted the realities he had witnessed. Challenged by the doctor who had also witnessed these events and called Zola a liar, the novelist claimed that as a novelist he could create any characters he wished. The doctor agreed but pointed out that no one has a right to falsify actual history, which is what Zola had done.[2]

The miracles at Lourdes demonstrated for the whole world to see that skepticism toward the supernatural events in the Bible is not based on any sort of scientific evidence. Rather, such skepticism flows from strong negative presuppositions, so much so that a famous skeptic was reduced to lying when confronted with the miraculous cures of people whom he saw and with whom he actually talked.

Timing is Everything

The second incident that illustrates the exquisite timing of the apparitions at Lourdes was the publication of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of the Species* in 1859. This publishing event reinforced the idea that everything can be explained by natural causes. It undermined belief in the Bible as historical for those who made no distinction between the first 11 chapters of Genesis and the Gospels; it produced theories of polygenesis, and it led to completely atheistic theories of the origins of life and the universe.

Informed Catholics of the day could reaffirm their faith with the traditional act of faith, but even the best of them may have wondered as the skeptics grew bolder and noisier. But God gave them a tangible support. They could not explain how God could make water flow out of a rock in Exodus, nor could they explain the miracles of Jesus, but they could say, “Come to Lourdes. Bring your most important scientific instruments, your own eyes and ears. Come and see the same thing happening today.”

Miraculous Intervention

Over one hundred and fifty years after *Ineffabilis Deus*, Lourdes is still with us as a constant sign of God’s mercy, love, and providence, and a never-ending sign of God’s miraculous intervention in history. The skeptics are still with us, boring and unrealistic, but they are getting more interesting. They have, of course, tried to find alternative visions of man and creation, but they keep running into reality. The “beauty” of Communism with its denial of God simply hasn’t worked. Parents know that every hypothesis that denies the reality of original sin is false as they experience not only their own weaknesses but see their own sweet little children sometimes doing their best to prove that they, too, are affected by the lasting effects of the Fall.

At the level of contemporary intellectual theory, some anti-religious philosophers continue to demonstrate the unreality of their Darwinian or materialistic biases. In the August/September 2004 issue of *First Things*, one article analyzed the inconsistencies of a committed Darwinist [3], and another showed how the modern skeptics keep coming up against the great sign of contradiction, the Lord Jesus.[4]

On this December 8th, as we celebrate the anniversary of the proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, the Mother of God, we have good reason to be thrice thankful. First, we should be consciously grateful for the reality of the creation of Mary without the stain of original sin. Second, we need to be consciously grateful for the formal proclamation of that reality by Pius IX in 1854 both for its truth and for the bulwark it provided against the onslaughts of Darwinism. Lastly, we should be grateful for the events of Lourdes that provide a never-ending statement about the reality of God’s intervention in human history, both directly and through the mediation of the Virgin Mary and other saints. I suggest that we can also thank God for the exquisite timing of these events as His concrete answer to the unbelievers of every age and to the skepticism that sometimes distracts even the most religious of souls.

[1] Cf. John H. Elliott, “The Historical Jesus, the Kerygmatic Christ, and the Eschatological Community,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* (September 1966), 470-477.

[2] Edward O’Brien, “Zola and Lourdes,” *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* (August/September 2004): 71.

[3] Stephen M. Barr, “The Devil’s Chaplain Confounded,” *First Things* (August/September 2004): 25.

[4] Paul J. Griffiths, “Christ and Critical Theory,” *First Things* (August/September 2004): 46.