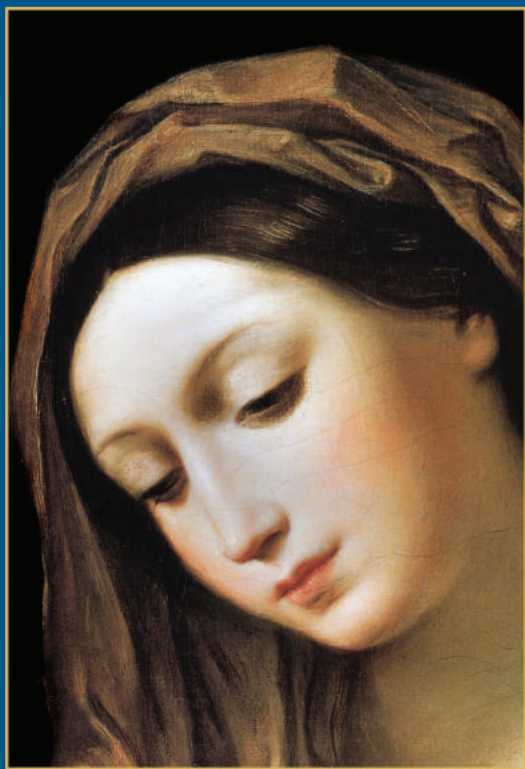


MARY

Help in Hard Times



Stories & Prayers

Mary

Help in Hard Times

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Trouvé, Marianne Lorraine.

Mary : help in hard times / written and compiled by Marianne Lorraine Trouvé, FSP.

pages cm

ISBN-13: 978-0-8198-4939-7

ISBN-10: 0-8198-4939-1

I. Mary, Blessed Virgin, Saint. 2. Catholic Church--Doctrines. I. Title.

BT603.T76 2014

232.91--dc23

2013037990

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Cover design by Rosana Usselmann

Cover art: Detail of the Virgin Mary by G. Reni

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Published by Pauline Books & Media, 50 Saint Pauls Avenue, Boston, MA 02130-3491

Printed in the U.S.A.

www.pauline.org

Pauline Books & Media is the publishing house of the Daughters of St. Paul, an international congregation of women religious serving the Church with the communications media.

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Introduction

What difference can Mary make in our lives of faith?

Who is Mary, and how can she still help us today?

Why is it that after Jesus himself, Mary is probably the one figure in our Catholic tradition who stands out the most? She was a young Jewish maiden who lived in an obscure village, in a remote area whose people had heard the tramp of Roman boots and who had been forced to pay taxes to Caesar. Yet, in this unlikely place, God chose to come to the earth, to take on flesh and become one of us in order to be our Redeemer, our Savior. And he chose to do this with Mary's willing, loving cooperation. When the angel whispered God's invitation in her ear, Mary said yes and never took it back. She kept on repeating it even to the day she stood under the cross, even as she saw the blood of

Jesus flowing from his wounds. In that moment, Mary became the intercessor and mother for the whole human race.

Since then, Catholics and other Christians have held Mary in a unique place of honor. Her journey of faith is a model for our own. Through the Communion of Saints, as members of the one Body of Christ, she still helps us now. It's as if every time we ask her help, the curtain between earth and heaven is drawn back and blessings flow more abundantly, like a vast waterfall of grace.

This book is about making Mary more a part of our life of faith. If you already have devotion to her, it can grow; and if until now you have not had such devotion, this is an invitation to explore it. Mary is always ready to help us, to intercede for us, and to obtain graces for us from God. In 1830, she appeared to Saint Catherine Labouré in a convent in Paris, France. As Mary held out her hands in supplication for the world, Catherine saw streams of light as bright as sunbeams flowing from beautiful rings on Mary's fingers. Mary told her, "These rays symbolize the graces I obtain for all those who ask for them." But not all the rings gave light. Mary explained, "The gems from which rays do not fall symbolize the graces that people forget to ask for." If we want to receive

graces and obtain favors through Mary's intercession, all we need do is ask.

Mary is our model of faith, and the key moments of her life are like milestones in which we can also see our own history. Pope Benedict XVI spoke of this in a homily he gave on the feast of the Assumption.* The Pope noted four moments in particular: Mary's Immaculate Conception, the Annunciation, her divine Motherhood, and her Assumption. He said that Mary's Immaculate Conception points us back to God's original plan of creation, when man and woman were filled with grace and lived in loving union with God. Their sin jeopardized this plan but did not destroy it. At the Annunciation, Mary consented to God's plan, and this brought about the Incarnation of the Son of God. Thus Mary became the Mother of God. Finally, Mary's Assumption shows us the ultimate goal of our earthly journey: eternal life through Christ our Lord.

The first four chapters of this book follow the outline of Pope Benedict XVI, starting with Mary's Immaculate Conception. Looking at Mary through

* See Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, August 15, 2009, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2009/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20090815_assunzione_en.html.

the lens of these four moments is a way to read our own story of faith. It's also a way of reviewing the main teaching of the Catholic faith about Mary, and of seeing how she is always so much a part of our lives. The book then offers real-life stories of how some people have experienced Mary's intercession and help in their lives, followed by a section of prayers and devotions.

Mary, Helper of the Sick



*“If you only knew how good the Blessed Virgin is!
If people only knew!”*

SAINT BERNADETTE

Our Lady of Lourdes and the Immaculate Conception

High in the Pyrenees, the ice-cold water of the river Gave rushed along on the morning of February 11, 1858. Fourteen-year-old Bernadette had stopped to take off her stockings before wading across. Her younger sister, nine-year-old Toinette, and their friend Marie Abadie had already waded across the river. The three girls were collecting branches for firewood.

Bernadette suddenly heard a strong wind whistling through the nearby grotto, carved out of a huge rock formation. The shrubs swayed in the wind, including the delicate roses that graced the grotto. Looking up, Bernadette could hardly believe her eyes.

Standing before her, high in the grotto, was a beautiful young woman wearing a white robe with a blue sash and a long white veil. Rosary beads hung from her right arm and yellow roses rested on her feet.

Bernadette rubbed her eyes in disbelief. But when she looked up again, the lady was still there. Not knowing what to do, Bernadette pulled out her rosary beads and began to pray. The lady followed the prayers, but joined in only for the Glory Be. After the prayers, the lady disappeared.

Still in awe, Bernadette told Toinette what had happened but made her promise to keep it a secret. However, it wasn't long before Toinette told their mother, who thought it was all nonsense. She forbade Bernadette to go back to the grotto. But nothing could keep her away, and on February 14 she saw the lady again. The lady still said nothing about who she was. On February 18 the lady appeared for the third time, and she asked Bernadette to come every day for two weeks.

In the meantime, word had gotten out and crowds began to go to the grotto as well. They had concluded that the Blessed Virgin Mary was the one appearing to Bernadette, but she had never said that. In referring to the lady she used only the word "aquero," which means "that."

During the vision on February 24, the lady said, "Penance! Penance! Penance! Pray to God for sinners!" The next day, February 25, a crucial event occurred. The lady told Bernadette, "Go and drink

at the spring and wash yourself in it.” Bernadette was confused because there was no spring there, only the nearby river. When Bernadette went toward the river, the lady called her back. It wasn’t the right place. Bernadette began to dig in the ground near where the lady had indicated. She found only mud. Three times she threw away the muddy mess. Finally, on her fourth attempt, she started to see a little bit of water trickling out of the ground. The people, meanwhile, thought she was crazy because she had washed her face with the mud. Although it was only a trickle at first, by the next day it could be clearly seen that a spring had begun to flow. There had never been one there before.

The visions continued for two weeks as the lady had promised. And after that, she appeared once more, for a total of eighteen apparitions.

On March 25, Bernadette finally asked the lady who she was. The lady looked up to heaven and said, “I am the Immaculate Conception.” Bernadette didn’t know what that meant, because she had not had much schooling. Trying her best to remember the words, she went and told the parish priest, Father Peyramale. He was astounded, for a little over three years earlier, on December 8, 1854, Pope Pius IX had declared the dogma of the Immaculate

Conception of Mary. So now there was no doubt that the beautiful young woman was indeed Mary, the Mother of God.

Events moved quickly after that. Mary had requested that a chapel be built there, and it was. Miraculous healings and cures had begun to occur. Larger and larger crowds flocked to Lourdes, which today is still one of the best-loved shrines in the Catholic world.

As for Bernadette, she later entered the convent, becoming a Sister of Charity at Nevers, France. In her short life—she died at thirty-five from tuberculosis—she had to endure many trials, such as poverty, illness, and misunderstanding. Mary had told her: “I do not promise to make you happy in this life, but in the next.” Bernadette was canonized by Pope Pius XI on December 8, 1933, the feast of the Immaculate Conception.

The apparition of Mary to Saint Bernadette is one of the most famous accounts of how Mary has helped people. The story of Lourdes offers us many points for reflection.

Mary picks the lowly ones

Bernadette was considered a “nobody” in Lourdes, just another girl in the town. No one paid any attention to her. But Mary chose Bernadette as

the one to bear her message. Mary didn't appear to the priest or any of the civil officials in the town, those who would have been thought of as "important." No, Mary looks on the lowly ones. In this, she is really only imitating God, who had chosen her. For in her own time Mary, too, was one of the lowly ones.

In her beautiful song of praise, the Magnificat, she praised God for this:

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his
servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me
blessed;

for the Mighty One has done great things
for me,

and holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their
hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their
thrones,

and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry
with good things,

and sent the rich away empty." (Lk 1:46–53)

This is good news for us, too, because most of us are not counted among the mighty ones of the world. But we are extremely important in the eyes of God, for each one of us is made in God's image and likeness. This gives us great confidence in approaching God through our tender mother Mary.

Mary asked not only for prayer but for penance

It's very striking that Mary repeated three times, "Penance! Penance! Penance!" The first apparition, on February 11, took place one week before Lent started that year. Most of the remaining apparitions to Bernadette happened during Lent. So we can see a certain connection between Lourdes and Lent, one that goes far beyond wearing ashes on our foreheads.

Traditionally, the three most common works of penance during Lent are prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. This last one can be thought of in a wider sense than that of simply making monetary offerings, though that has its place. Almsgiving can mean doing works of mercy, such as feeding the hungry or giving clothes to the needy.

Penance can certainly help us get our own lives in order. It can help us to be more disciplined and so become more spiritually fruitful in our lives. But

it can also help others, and this is what Mary was speaking about. She not only asked for penance, but told us to pray to God for sinners. In some mysterious way, because we are members of Christ's Mystical Body, the Church, we can help sinners when we pray and offer penance for them. Saint Paul wrote, "I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church" (Col 1:24). So our sufferings don't go to waste, because God can use them when we join them to the sufferings of Jesus Christ.

Mary brings healing and peace

Lourdes has become famous as a shrine for healing, where physical diseases have been cured in a miraculous way. So far the Church has officially approved sixty-seven of these miracles, which have gone through a very rigorous process to ascertain their authenticity. But many thousands of pilgrims have been helped physically, emotionally, and spiritually by their prayers to Our Lady offered in faith. Mary obtains these graces for us through her intercession.

We don't have to go to Lourdes in order to experience Mary's loving care for us. All we need

do is turn to her in prayer and ask for her help. This can be as simple as spontaneously saying, “Mary, help me!” when a need arises, or it can mean praying the Rosary or meditating on Mary’s example in the Gospels. (A later section of stories recounts some ways in which various people have turned to Mary for help). Just as any loving mother will rush to the side of her child who has fallen and scraped her knee, Mary will rush to our side as we pray and bring our petitions to Jesus, her Son.

The Immaculate Conception

The story of Bernadette and Lourdes is closely connected to the Immaculate Conception, a Marian feast the Church celebrates every year on December 8. But what does that teaching mean? First, let’s clear away a common misunderstanding. It’s not to be confused with the Virgin Birth, which means that Mary conceived and gave birth to Jesus while remaining a virgin. Instead, the Immaculate Conception means that Mary herself was free from original sin from the very first moment she was conceived (in the normal way by her mother Saint Anne). Her soul was filled with grace.

Original sin is the burden of sin that we all carry as members of a fallen race. It is not any personal sin that we commit. It means that we are born into the world without the gift of sanctifying grace that makes us holy. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains:

Still, the transmission of original sin is a mystery that we cannot fully understand. But we do know by Revelation that Adam had received original holiness and justice not for himself alone, but for all human nature. By yielding to the tempter, Adam and Eve committed a personal sin, but this sin affected the human nature that they would then transmit in a fallen state. It is a sin which will be transmitted by propagation to all mankind, that is, by the transmission of a human nature deprived of original holiness and justice. And that is why original sin is called “sin” only in an analogical sense: it is a sin “contracted” and not “committed”—a state and not an act. (CCC, no. 404)

By God’s grace Mary was preserved from this sinful state, in view of her special mission to be the Mother of God. She received this grace through the merits of Jesus, by his suffering, death, and resurrection. So she was redeemed, too, but in a different way. “In order for Mary to

be able to give the free assent of her faith to the announcement of her vocation, it was necessary that she be wholly borne by God's grace." (CCC, no. 490)

In other words, Mary was completely dependent on God, who gave her the gift of holiness. God's grace enabled her to cooperate with the divine plan of salvation. So what does this mean for our life? It reminds us that through our Baptism we have been freed from original sin and restored to God's friendship through grace. Should we have the misfortune to fall into sin again, we have access to grace and forgiveness through the sacrament of Reconciliation. One day we, too, will be free of all sin when we reach eternal life in heaven. Our task on our earthly journey is to turn away from sin now, to make it less a part of our life. As long as we are on earth we will never be completely free of it. But aided by God's grace, we can make good choices today, right now, choices that will lead us closer to God and away from sin. In doing this, we can turn to Mary for help. Precisely because she was free of sin, she is compassionate and loving. She understands the trials we face and the difficulties we must go through in life. And she is right there by our side, walking

with us to encourage us when we feel like we want to quit. Mary will never let us down.

For Reflection and Prayer

1. Mary makes clear that God looks with favor on the lowly ones of the world. Yet the values of the world tend to focus on notoriety, success, and money. In your own life, how do you find a balance between the values of the Gospel and the need to make a living?
2. Why do you think that Mary asked for penance? What are some ways that you can practice penance in your daily life?
3. A highlight of any pilgrimage to Lourdes is going to the baths at the spring. This immersion in water can recall our Baptism, which takes away all sins. Take some time to renew your baptismal commitment, perhaps the next time you go to confession. If you have ever visited Lourdes, what impressed you most?