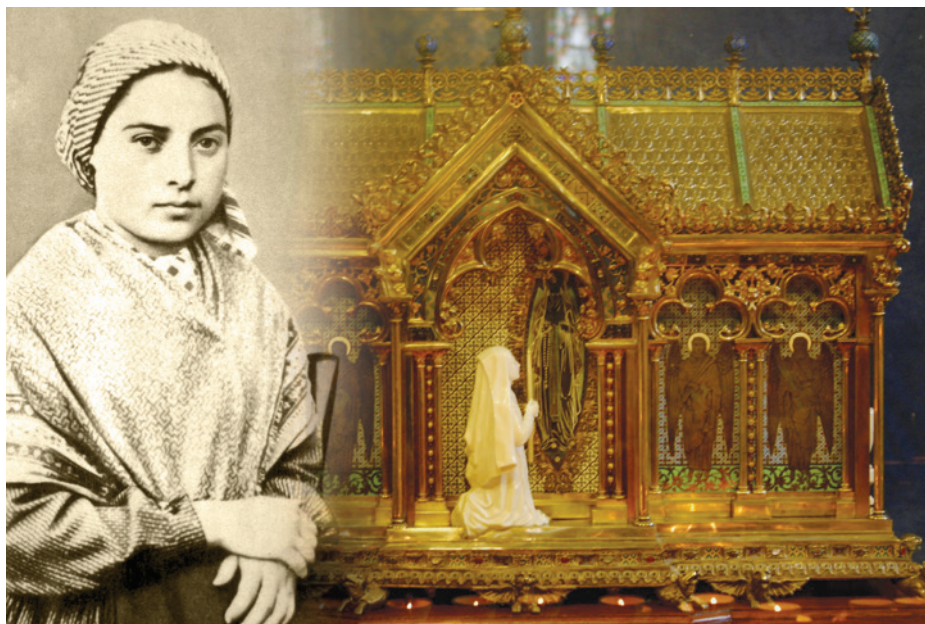


Day of the Relics

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Reliquary of St Bernadette Soubirous, Basilica of the Immaculate Conception, Lourdes

It was a glorious Sunday, last September, when the relics of St Bernadette visited Mallow parish church. Throughout the day, long queues came up the centre aisle to touch the gilded reliquary. Some left a written intention, and others bowed their heads in a moment of silent prayer. Even though St Mary's Church was crowded, there was an atmosphere of hushed reverence, an unspoken solidarity, the kind that comes from shared experience. As I sat there, I imagined that each person had an important story to tell, a reason to be

grateful or worried or mindful of their responsibilities before God. It felt like the Catholic Church of my youth, when on occasions like Christmas Eve there would be a packed church and a palpable sense of devotion.

That nostalgia quickly dispelled as I stepped out into the afternoon sunshine. Mallow was bustling that Sunday afternoon. The supermarkets were busy. Some people were enjoying a coffee at one of the new sidewalk cafés, others were coming from the gym. As I sat into my car, I could hear gospel singing from an evangel-

ical congregation in a warehouse on the edge of town. The rich diversity of the new Ireland came home to me in all its jarring complexity.

The Irish visit of the relics of St Bernadette reminded me of a by-gone era when churches provided the pillars of society. Even Catholics whose personal belief was not strong felt an affiliation to the Church, because of the central role it played in the community. That kind of national cultural attachment to the faith is fast becoming a thing of the past. We live in a time that values freedom above all else. Decisions around religious practice have reverted to the family and ultimately the individual.

Like most people of my generation, I grew up in a family that still cherished its religious inheritance. I began to make my own decision to follow Christ after the Irish visit of St John Paul II in 1979. Back then, the Pope hailed Ireland as '*semper fidelis*, always faithful'. But even then, the Church was feeling the cold winds of change. The clerical abuse crisis, which had been latent for many years, was about to be made manifest.

For all the years I have been a priest, it seems like the Church has been on a trajectory of decay. We have done our best to stem the tide, but the effects of secularisation are overwhelming. This decline in the Church's fortunes used to worry me, but nowadays I am coming to the view that attendances at Sunday Mass or the numbers entering the seminary need not be the measure of a vibrant Church. Jesus did not ask his disciples to achieve great things but to do small things consistently well.

He compared God's reign to salt

That hidden way was evident in the life of St Bernadette (1844–1879). She eschewed the special attention she received following the extraordinary revelations she experienced at Lourdes in 1858.

and yeast, items of little consequence in themselves but invaluable when included in the mix of things (Mt 5:13; 13:33). In the gospel for Ash Wednesday, he tells his followers not to be ostentatious about their faith but instead to go into their heart room and make acts of prayer, abstinence and charity that only God will notice (Mt 6:1–6, 16–18).

That hidden way was evident in the life of St Bernadette (1844–1879). She eschewed the special attention she received following the extraordinary revelations she experienced at Lourdes in 1858. Instead she joined an enclosed convent over 700 km away and confined herself to the simple but tough, daily monastic routine. She compared herself to a sweeping brush, useful in its purpose but then put away behind a door.

I sensed something of that humility before the Lord in the crowds that attended Bernadette's relics. Her day in Mallow was a throwback to the Church of yesteryear, when public displays of religion were the norm. Nowadays religious faith is rooted in an entirely different context, one that invites our personal decision for Christ.