On 11 February 1858, 'a petite damsel' spoke to 14-year-old Bernadette Soubirous in the grotto of Massabielle about a mile from the southern French town of Lourdes. The lady, who appeared 17 further times, revealed herself to be Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception and asked that a chapel be built on that spot.

Bernadette's vision has similarities to that of Anglèze de Sagazan, a 12-year-old shepherdess who in the 16th century saw the Virgin at a spring in nearby Garaison. Pilgrimages to Garaison were soon eclipsed by those to Lourdes.

The Virgin revealed a spring to Bernadette and directed pilgrims to drink from and wash in it. The water, provided free of charge to pilgrims, is a popular memento of a trip to Lourdes. Some have claimed to have been cured by it.

Millions of pilgrims, many suffering from illnesses, travel to Lourdes each year. Lourdes now is a major pilgrimage site and has more hotel rooms than any other place in France, with the exception of Paris.

The Lourdes *Bureau Médical*has documented around 70 miraculous healings at the site. Bernadette was canonized as a saint in 1933. The apparition at Lourdes is also recognized by the Anglican church, which has its own Marian Shrine at Lourdes.



