



# OUR LADY OF LOURDES SCHOOL

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## School History



Three years before the Civil War erupted, an unusual event occurred in a small village in the northern foothills of the French Pyrenees. On Feb. 11, 1858, a poor peasant girl, Bernadette Soubirous, searched for firewood to help her impoverished family and encountered instead a miraculous incident that changed her life and eventually created the most famous shrine in the world at Lourdes.

Four years before that, Pope Pius IX had proclaimed the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. It was that title that Mary used to identify herself to Bernadette, and that finally resolved the acceptance of the 18 apparitions Bernadette encountered as a matter of faith.

St. Bernadette—who died in 1879 at age 35—was canonized in 1933 on the feast of the Immaculate Conception. In 1907 Pope Pius X extended the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes on February 11 to the entire church. From the time the Virgin first appeared, there have been more than 64 approved miracles at the shrine.

In 1910, just 52 years from the time Bernadette first saw the Blessed Mother, Bishop Thomas Conaty of the young diocese of Monterey-Los Angeles established the first parish in the city named for Our Lady of Lourdes in the Belvedere area of what is now East Los Angeles. The religious roots that found fruition were first

planted by the Benedictine monks who came as missionaries from Oklahoma in 1899. Father Leo Gariador and Father Gratian Ardans traveled from San Diego to San Francisco ministering to the spiritual needs of the Basque settlers.

Eventually Father Gariador established a parish in La Puente and Montebello, and Father Ardans (the first Benedictine to come to the area in 1905) developed the parish of Our Lady of Lourdes. He found a location between Montebello and Los Angeles that could serve those who lived too far from the only other church in the area, St. Mary's. He built the parish church on Third Street and by Christmas Eve in 1910 celebrated the initial Mass in the frame structure that accommodated 400 persons. A year later a parish hall was completed. For many years a Sunday Mass was said in French and its mission church was dedicated to Joan of Arc. That mission is now St. Alphonsus Church.

The school opened in 1914, staffed for five years by Immaculate Heart Sisters and then the Presentation Sisters. Just 30 years later the enrollment of 1,000 students made Lourdes one of the biggest Catholic schools in the West.

Father Ardans, a native of France, served the new parish for 20 years, and died in 1953 at age 79. A new church was dedicated during the pastorate of his successor, Father Edmund Basel, the first church of modern design erected in the West. The next Benedictine pastor was Father Anthony Ronellenfisch, followed by Father Innocent Mangus, Benedict Ryan and Robert Dodson, who was pastor twice at Lourdes.

In 1958, the centennial year celebrating the apparition at Lourdes, a large mosaic mural depicting St. Bernadette and Our Lady was installed in an alcove chapel of the church. Joseph Young, the artist, consulting with Father Lawrence Spencer, the pastor, made an intensive study of the Lourdes apparitions that resulted in a 54-square-foot Byzantine and Venetian glass tesserae mosaic.

In 1976, Benedictine Father Martin Lugo, born and raised in Lourdes parish, became its tenth pastor, and led the church's more active involvement in community affairs. By this time, the congregation's ethnic character had changed with most liturgies celebrated in Spanish. Father Brendan Helbing was the last Benedictine pastor (1983-88), concluding 78 years of service by the order.

Minnesota-born Father Richard Siebenand, became the first diocesan priest to serve as pastor of Our Lady of Lourdes. During his 12-year pastorate the church was closed for a time to repair of earthquake damage, reopening in 1990. Father Siebenand died in 2001 at age 60.

That year the Divine Word Ministries took charge of the parish with Father Gerard O'Doherty as administrator. Father Eamonn Donnelly, a native of Dublin, Ireland, is the current pastor of the church dedicated to Mary under her title of Our Lady of Lourdes.

By- Hermine Lees

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