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In loving memory of our Foundress  
Sister Marie Bernadette Dugre  
of Our Lady of Lourdes



Discalced Carmelite Nun of the  
Carmel of the Assumption

**SR. MARIE BERNADETTE OF OUR LADY OF LOURDES DUGRE, OCD**  
January 29, 1909- December 8, 2000

Of the many things Sr. Marie Bernadette was proud of as she looked back over her 91 years, the one she boasted of most was that she had been a daughter of the Church from the first hours of her life — she was baptized the day she was born. When Ludger and Louisa (Bourassa) Dugre welcomed their third child on January 29, 1909, they lived next door to the Church in St. Thecle, Quebec, Canada, near Three Rivers. The godparents were hastily summoned and the undoubtedly frigid waters of the Sacrament were poured over the little one's head. She was called Marie Bernadette Eva.

Little Bernadette was to live in an era that was to see many changes. Stories of her childhood are those of a little girl who enjoyed her older brother Jean and sister Jeanne, and her younger siblings Philippe, Maurice, Germaine, Raymond, Therese and Georgette.

Her early childhood was punctuated by sleigh rides to her grandparent's farm in the winter, the horses adorned with bells and the children tucked snugly under heavy covers on straw in the sleigh. There they would party and dance with other relatives, accompanied by her grandfather's violin. Other times they would go to harvest the maple sap and help with the maple sugaring. The children would watch the big vats carefully and came running with their snowball to dip into the syrup to make a cold sugary treat.

Even at an early age, Bernadette had her own little ideas and opinions. She would tell us how she had been given a new haircut and, having climbed up on a chair to see the new creation in the mirror, expressed her disapproval of it. One could imagine this dark-haired child with her sparkly eyes and dimples making definitive statements to the amusement of her parents. Another time, electricity was installed in their home, with the bare wires strung uncovered across ceilings and down walls. Bernadette, ever one to do things right and perfectly, was highly critical of the work.

Ludger Dugre had several jobs. He ran a bakery and grocery store attached to his home. While the family was never in want, they never had excess. Nonetheless, Sister's stories of her home life were those of a tightly knit and deeply religious family. Bernadette received her first Communion on the feast of St. Joseph at the age of six and was confirmed a year later.

In 1918, the Spanish influenza was claiming the lives of many people, and Ludger became ill. Louisa feared that he would die and she would be unable to care for the nine children, so she offered herself in place of her husband. Miraculously, he recovered and she took ill and died on October 18. This was especially hard on Bernadette, who made it her duty to help her mother get bathed and prepared for the anointing of the sick.

Life changed greatly for the Dugre children after their Mother was laid to rest. Ludger knew he could not care for and still support his nine little ones, so the girls and boys of school age were sent to boarding school. Little Therese was given into the care of her grandparents and single aunt and four-month-old Georgette went to live with her Godparents. For the next few years the family saw each other as often as they could.

Sr. Bernadette spoke fondly of her days at St. Ursula Academy, where she spent 4 1/2 years. While life was regimented, Bernadette loved to learn and was quite skillful at needlework and other related crafts, which were taught along with the three R's. Her stitches were always small and even and she could knit, crochet and tat. Many of these skills were put to use after she became a Carmelite, and she would always admire the fine sewing others had done on articles given her for her feast day as Prioress.

Two years after Louisa's death, Mr. Dugre married again. This woman had often called the children into her house when they would be sledding to give them hot cocoa. Her husband died the same day as Louisa and was buried in the plot next to her. When Mr.

Dugre proposed marriage, she refused at first, then visited Louisa's grave and asked her to prevent the marriage if she would not be a good mother to the Dugre children. They were married soon after and she proved to be a loving and excellent mother. The children once again were together, with the exception of Therese. The grandfather had grown attached to the little girl and did not want to give her up, so Therese would visit her brothers and sisters, but continued to reside with her grandparents.

One of the favorite stories from that time was a visit of little Therese to the family after Sunday Mass. She was taken to the family grocery store and spied a large bunch of bananas hanging from the ceiling. She asked for one and was given it. When it was eaten she asked Bernadette to reach her another, but Bernadette refused, fearing her little sister would make herself sick. Therese thought her sister stingy, and much teasing was continued through the years about forgiveness over the denied banana.

In 1920, the church across the street from the family home burnt down and the Dugre home and business caught fire and burnt, too. Ludgar rebuilt on the same spot and the family were once more home.

Mr. Dugre was a friend of the parish priest who suggested that he start a little bank for the members of the parish. All went well for awhile, but soon the pastor began borrowing from the bank to rebuild the church until there was no money left. When the parishioners came to collect their savings there was nothing to repay them. Ludgar would not disclose where the money had gone, so the patrons believed he had stolen it. The grocery store and bakery were confiscated and the Dugre family was told to leave the country or Mr. Dugre would be imprisoned.

Shortly before this, Jean Marie had gone to Manchester, NH because of poor health, so the family, without Therese, joined him and relatives of his stepmother and other French-speaking families there to begin a new life. Bernadette was 14 and graduated from grade school in June.

Bernadette's education was furthered at night school so she could learn more English and some typing. Because of the language barrier and the new country, she was able to make very few friends and spent much of her time at home. She helped with the chores around the house and supervised her younger brothers, who liked to have rowdy fun when they should have been in bed. Bernadette would attempt to discipline them and establish some order, though she was not always successful, according to her brother Maurice. Her photo at eighteen shows a beautiful young woman with dark hair and large dark eyes, dressed simply but fashionably. By this time her older brother had married and Bernadette was a bridesmaid in the wedding.

Five of Bernadette's aunts were religious: 3 were Sisters of Divine Providence, one was a Sister of the Precious Blood and one was a Carmelite in Montreal. One of her uncles

was an OMI Brother. The visits with her Carmelite aunt were very special and impressive for the young adolescent. Sister spoke of the time her aunt got her mantle and put it on so that she could see what the complete habit of a Carmelite looked like. The seeds of her vocation were watered with each visit and soon she felt God was asking her to be a Carmelite.

A priest from Belgium became young Bernadette's spiritual director and encouraged her to pursue her desire to consecrate herself to Christ. He knew of a fledgling community of Carmelites in Pennsylvania that had been founded in 1926, and directed her to apply there. On December 3, 1927 she had her first train ride to enter this tiny Carmel at the age

Carmel was a house in Altoona, PA, founded by two Frenchwomen through the help of the Archbishop of New Orleans, who was the one foundress' uncle. On May 31 of the next year the postulant received the Carmelite Habit and became Sr. Bernadette of Our Lady of Lourdes. Life in the tiny house was difficult. Mother Marie Joseph demanded much from the community, who by that time was growing by leaps and bounds, but she made many concessions for the younger members. Bernadette told of breakfast in the novitiate for those under 21 during times of community fast, and finding macarons on their beds when they were deprived of evening collation as a punishment.

In spite of her lack of further education, Sr. Bernadette had a quick mind and a great thirst for spiritual formation. There were few books to be had and little time for formation. This was a source of frustration and temptation to her, and she would write her desires and thirst for the things of God to her spiritual director. He encouraged her to have patience and trust in God.

On June 24, 1929 she made her first Profession and received the black veil, as was the custom of the time. Final profession followed in 1932.

Because of some irregularities in the foundation of the Carmel the Sisters were asked to repeat their final Professions as Solemn Vows, which they did together on January 6, 1933. By 1940 Therese & Georgette had joined Bernadette in Carmel and would both be part of foundations — Georgette (Sr. Marie of St. Joseph) to Columbus, OH and Therese to Mt. Carmel (later Elysburg) PA.

One of the Sisters in formation with Marie Bernadette was Sr. Cecilia Schwab, a transfer to Carmel from the Sisters of Charity at Seton Hill. Her brother was the steel magnate, Charles Schwab. When he saw the little community crowded into the small house, he offered to build a Monastery near his mansion in Loretto, PA. The monastery was to be modeled on the monastery of Lisieux.

Shortly after the move to the new Monastery, the foundress had a stroke that left her unable to care for herself. Sr. Bernadette and another Sister would carry her up and down the stairs each day. The Sisters had no training in caring for an invalid and were becoming exhausted, so the Bishop brought two nursing Sisters in to help and to train the community in the needed skills.

Sister took her turn in the various labors of community, though she was a silent person because of her lack of command of English. After serving on the Council, she was elected Prioress in 1956. In 1959 she was granted American citizenship.

She was re-elected Prioress in 1959. In 1960 the Bishop of Altoona-Johnstown died suddenly and Bishop William G. Connare from the nearby Diocese of Greensburg was invited to celebrate the Eucharist on the feast of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel. Seeing the parlor crowded with 20 Carmelites, he asked Sr. Bernadette how many she would give him for his Diocese. There had been serious exploration and preparation for a foundation in Connecticut, which was abandoned when that Bishop was transferred to another See. The Bishop's invitation seemed an answer to prayer.

In June 1961, Sr. Bernadette and seven other Sisters set out for the short ride to the new Carmel in the neighboring Diocese. The house was a former mansion that had sunken on one corner because of mining too close to the surface under it. The Foundress and various of the Sisters had come by the day to get the house prepared, so the community was enclosed a week later. Sister served two terms as Prioress, and then served many years as one of the Council.

Sister's charming French accent and her lack of self-consciousness afforded many amusing incidents. When she saw the marbled pattern of the Formica on the counter tops she told us it was "mother-of-pearl" pattern. When she saw a larger pattern she declared it "grandmother-of-pearl." She would speak about an Abyss of a Monastery and it would take a moment to realize she meant an Abbess.

She insisted on learning to drive the riding mower and the farm tractor we had, giving us many moments of heart-stopping fear. She tried to be very careful and drove the riding mower only in second speed of the five, declaring that everyone could ride it only in second speed. Once we were standing in the garage door when a car came speeding up the drive. Sister gasped and said: "Did you see that? He was going in five!"

Because we were deeply in debt and could not afford a maintenance man or gardener, she asked the Bishop if we could leave the enclosure to care for the property. One of her great interests was landscaping and, armed with a big cross-cut saw, the farm tractor and shovels, the community would work until dark cutting brush and trees and hauling them away to burn, digging out the stumps and re-planting new little pines from the woods.

Another of her passions was the Liturgy. It would delight her to no end to find an aspirant who not only seemed to be sincere about her vocation, but had a good voice as well. The foundresses spent many of their noon siesta hours learning the Gregorian chant Mass for the feast of the Sacred Heart before they left Loretto so that they could sing it at the first Mass celebrated in the new Monastery. Once the foundation was established, many other Gregorian Masses were added to their repertoire. The changes brought about by Vatican II were difficult for her to accept, and she was very careful about the selection of hymns the community learnt and used. The organ was her instrument of choice but she came to appreciate the guitar and even chose the St. Louis Jesuits' "Mighty Lord" for the Entrance Hymn for her Diamond Jubilee Liturgy, since it spoke to her of St. Elijah, whose feast she chose as her day to celebrate.

In 1971 she was awarded the Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice medal at a ceremony in the Cathedral for her service of prayer to the diocese and the Church as the Founding Prioress of our Monastery.

In 1972 Sister discovered a lump in her breast and had radical mastectomy. Chemotherapy and radiation followed. This was the first serious illness in the community so the rest of the Sisters were very solicitous for her. When she would come home from her chemo treatment, we would ask: "Do you feel sick?" Her reply was inevitably, "No, I feel hungry." The doctor informed the Prioress at the time that we should not be surprised if the cancer showed up elsewhere and not to expect that Sister would have a long life. Sr. Bernadette was always certain she would beat the illness, and lived almost thirty more years. There were other surgeries, more chemo treatments and some other more frightening procedures she had to endure, but she never considered herself an invalid.

As age demanded she slow down she traded the physical part of labor for the more sedentary job of answering the community mail and planning the novena flyers. She would work with the resident artist, but she had her ideas and plans for each and often went to the printer herself to choose the paper and ink. A schedule would be posted outside the mailroom with her timetable for the production of the novena flyer and its mailing.

Shortly after her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday she decided she should retire from active duty, but only active duty. She had been given an electric cart to get from her room in the infirmary to the refectory and recreation room. She would sometimes drive outside on the paved areas, and once she had an excursion, one could expect that the gardeners and maintenance Sisters would be summoned to her room to hear her suggestions and reports on what improvements she thought should be made. If there was a tree or bush she considered out of place or had served its purpose, there was no peace until the offender was laid to rest on the burning pile.

Sister was very protective of the evergreens on the property. One year, the Prioress bought an artificial Christmas tree and put it up in the recreation room before the

community came for the evening recreation. Sister, who didn't realize it was artificial, began to scold: "What a shame! That beautiful tree! Think how long it took to grow to that perfection and then we cut it down. In a few weeks it will be out in the field to be burnt. God cannot be pleased with such waste." We were laughing and trying to interrupt to assure her we hadn't cut it down. Once we were able to reassure her she said: "Oh! Well! that's all right then."

In spite of her deterioration, Sister never lost her sense of humor. When a procedure was not progressing fast enough for her, Sr. Bernadette said: "Oh, let it be DONE. As Our Lady said in Scripture: Let it be DONE!" "Wait a minute, Sister, I think there was more to it than that. Wasn't it 'Let it be done to me... according to Thy Word'?" the infirmarian asked. Sr. Bernadette smiled sheepishly and said: "Oh, I guess I forgot about that part."

She found it amusing that her hair was still darker than Sisters thirty years her junior and would insist she didn't want it washed as often as the infirmarian thought it should be done, since she was convinced she would become gray with repeated washings.

By the beginning of 2000, Sr. Bernadette was quite crippled with arthritis and was using a walker to get around. She had therapy at home, but the deterioration was progressive and she needed help to bathe, dress and other personal needs, even through the night. There were only three Sisters who could support her and they were often busy on the far reaches of the property. The Sisters of Charity had just finished a retirement home for their own Sisters, and had invited us to contact them in our need. The idea leaving Carmel was hard for Sister, but the warm welcome the Sisters of Charity extended to her, the advantage the new facilities had to offer and the need for more help than we could give her convinced her that she should accept their offer.

It was important for her to mark the progress of her life with the feasts of the Church; so on the feast of the Visitation she said goodbye to everyone and began the last part of her sojourn at the new home called Caritas Christi. True to form, she won the hearts of everyone, especially two of the nurses who cared for her. One was a new convert and enjoyed talking to her about religion and asking her opinion about various questions she had. Sister always had an answer and once explained to her who she thought the next Pope would be.

She had been there only few weeks when we made a trip bearing some sad news. Her beloved brother, Fr. Maurice, died of liver cancer. He had been serving several parishes as a substitute even in his retirement and didn't tell Sister that he was ill until the last few days of his life. Sister took literally the Gospel passage that one should not mourn as those who have no hope, but the tears flowed freely at the sad news.

To give Sister some interest outside her room she was encouraged to attend some of the craft sessions they had for the other Sisters and Sister was given the task of arranging

the flowers for the Chapel and Blessed Sacrament oratory. We took her electric cart over to her, and she would deliver messages between the offices and nurses' stations on her floor. Sister liked to keep a box of candy on her table to have something to offer her visitors and she asked for the works of our Carmelite Saints, both to read and to share with others.

She was invited to attend an early autumn picnic with the Sisters at small State Park nearby. At first she declined, saying that "if the Big Mamma did things like that the others (rest of us in community) would think they could, too." In the end she agreed to go, so they loaded her on her electric cart in the van and took her there with her wheels. The nurses told us later that she drove around the lake on the paved walk singing "One Bread, One Body," to their amusement and delight.

When we had to do some remodeling and reconstruction because of termite damage, she was deeply interested in our progress and paid a visit here, her last, on the eve of the feast of Holy Mother. Part of the reconstruction was a porch over the front door with brick arches, which was in tune with her desire to make everything permanent and monastic. She often expressed her wish to come back, but it would have been impossible for us to give her the care she needed.

With each succeeding visit to her we saw her deterioration; still, it was a shock to get the call to come to Caritas Christi on the morning of December 7. Sister seemed to be in a coma and was failing. The Prioress and several Sisters went over immediately, while the rest left the Monastery in the care of the workmen who were finishing the new addition and joined them around Sister's bed. Sister Therese was informed and was to come by train to Greensburg later that evening. Sister had hoped that we would all be gathered around her bed when she went home, and her wish was granted. We prayed and sang, held her hands and talked to her. Though her eyes remained closed, she would smile sometimes at what we would say or nod that she knew what we were telling her. Her biggest smile came when we told her Sr. Therese would be with her in a few hours.

The nurses assured us she was dying, but it was hard to believe since her breathing was normal and her extremities were warm. After First Vespers for the feast of the Immaculate Conception around her bed, all but three of the Sisters went back to the Monastery. Sister Therese arrived in the late evening and sat near her holding her hand. We would teasingly ask her: "You are waiting for the feast of the Immaculate Conception to go to heaven, aren't you?" Her brother, Fr. Maurice, had announced in the last moments of his life that "the banquet was ready." This impressed Sister very much, so we repeated this to her as she lay dying. In the hours before dawn her breathing became shallow and finally ceased. Bernadette had made her final journey on the feast affirmed by the apparitions at Lourdes. It was so like her.



Even after death, she still made us laugh. The nurses had bathed her and got her ready for the mortician. When the Sisters came back into the room, one thought she saw her chest moving up and down and decided she was hallucinating after being up all night. The others watched and saw it, too. Finally we remembered the therapeutic mattress under her that inflated and deflated. A pillow had been thrown over the control box and it had been left on, causing Sister's body to move like she was breathing.

Sister had her everything ready for her funeral. Her habit and veil were in a box, her crucifix and rosaries were marked, and the hymns were chosen for the Mass. She had done this off and on for the last ten years of her life, so the hymns changed as we learned something that she liked better than she had previously chosen. Her first choice would have been the Mass of Easter for her funeral, but we told her that wasn't permitted.

Her funeral was a celebration of her life. The sanctuary was full of concelebrants and everyone was able to get to the grave. We were concerned about the hearse driving through the muddy field to get to the cemetery, but everything went off without incident. As her casket was lowered into the earth alongside Sr. Mary of the Incarnation, each Sister placed a rose on it. We think she would have liked that.

Sister Bernadette  
celebrating her  
60th Jubilee of  
Profession with  
her priest-brother  
Fr. Mauricel her  
Carmelite blood-  
sister Therese of  
Elysburg Carmel,  
and her brother  
Jean-Marie (she  
would live to  
celebrate her 70th  
as welll)

Sisters  
90th

celebration

Dugre family after their mother's death. Bernadette at 9 years old

photo on her naturalization papers

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