

# Lourdes Cures

Healing powers attributed to the shrine of Lourdes in southern France are said to have brought about miraculous cures from a range of debilitating diseases. Scrutiny has revealed methodological flaws and subjective biases in the evaluations but confirms that at least some of the cures are medically inexplicable.



## Origin and History

On February 11, 1858, a fourteen-year-old girl from the village of Lourdes in the French Pyrenees, Bernadette Soubirous, was gathering firewood at the nearby cave at Massabielle when, according to her own account, she saw an apparition of a lady dressed in white. Over a period of five and a half months she experienced eighteen such visions in the same spot. As word of this spread, she was accompanied by growing crowds of people. The figure in the visions eventually identified herself as ‘the Immaculate Conception’ (Virgin Mary), telling Bernadette that she wanted many people to come to this place and that the local priests should build a chapel. She also instructed the girl to dig at a certain spot, at which a spring of water appeared, and that she should drink it and bathe in it.<sup>[1]</sup> No mention was made of healing in these encounters.

The first healing incident is said to have occurred on March 1, when movement was restored to a woman’s injured arm after she immersed it in the water. Another contender for ‘first cure’, presented by contemporary Lourdes doctor Gustave Boussarie, is that of a quarryman whose eyes had been injured in an explosion.<sup>[2]</sup>

A total of thirteen cures were claimed in 1858, of which seven were deemed miracles by the bishop of the diocese. A chapel was built, and the number of annual visitors increased, becoming hundreds of thousands, then millions. Today’s shrine is a large complex that received a record nine million visitors on its 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2008.<sup>[3]</sup> About 80,000 sick or disabled people visit each year.<sup>[4]</sup> Special baths are available for pilgrims seeking cures ([video](#)) and tours can be made through the Massabielle Grotto ([video](#)).<sup>[5]</sup>

The Catholic Church authorities have recognized 70 cures as ‘miraculous’. However, the Lourdes shrine puts the total figure of reported cures at around 7000. The number of people who feel they have been cured at Lourdes could be as much as ten times higher, because most do not report their cures, but instead leave behind plaques or votive offerings including unneeded crutches, canes and prostheses.

## Internal Medical Assessments

Lourdes maintains a committee of physicians to verify claims of potentially miraculous cures. The committee first examines the claim for indications of mental illness or fraud and to discern whether the cure is clearly untypical for the ailment. If this test is passed, the person’s medical records before and after the claimed cure are scrutinized to determine whether health has truly been restored in a way considered uncharacteristic for the ailment. Outside specialists are also consulted.<sup>[6]</sup> The process typically takes several years. The doctors conclude whether the improvement is ‘explicable medically’, leaving the term ‘miracle’ to the Church to decide.<sup>[7]</sup>

## Independent Assessments

Lourdes cures were the subject of an 1898 study by Frederic Myers, a co-founder of the Society for Psychical Research, and his brother AT Myers, a medical doctor. The Myers based their evaluation on resources available at the time: the *Annales de Notre Dame de Lourdes* (the shrine’s official record published from April 1868 to June 1944) and works by Gustave Boissarie and other doctors associated with Lourdes.

A 2014 assessment by Bernard Francois, Esther M Sternberg and Elizabeth Fee was published in the *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* (available here).<sup>[8]</sup> It examines cures reported between 1858 and 1976, the date of the last certified cure of the twentieth century, discussing clinical criteria and the reliability of medical records.

## Number of Cures

According to Francois and colleagues, in the early years, cures known to the local authorities numbered between two and

eight each year; the actual number may have been larger.<sup>[9]</sup> But there was little data; diagnoses were based on dubious medical criteria and reports of cures were often taken at face value. A more methodical system was created with the founding of the *Annales de Notre Dame de Lourdes* in 1868 and in each of the following ten years between 11 and 47 cures were certified (again, the actual figure of cures may have been larger).

By the 1880s, medical certificates were routinely used in diagnosis. As a rough assessment, from the *Annales* and other published sources between 1859 and 1889, the authors identify 91 patients said to have been cured after bathing in the Lourdes water or drinking it at home. They were mostly women and the illnesses were for the most part tuberculosis or infections, or related to the nervous system, sight and hearing and the gastrointestinal tract.

The authors call the period 1890-1915 the shrine's 'golden age', with as many 140 cures reported each year. Cross-checking available data from 1858 to 1976 they reached a total estimate of 4516 acknowledged cures, roughly in line with the sanctuary's own claim of about 7000 to the present day. However, they note that most of these occurred before WWII and are based on inadequate evidence, making it difficult to assess the true number prior to 1947.

The authors observe a 'steady, exponential' decline in the number of cures over the last century,<sup>[10]</sup> and attribute this to the increasing efficiency of modern medicine and the application of new rules imposed by the Church in 1908 that required

- the disease be severe, incurable, or difficult to treat
- the disease not be in its final stage
- no curative treatment given
- the cure be instantaneous
- the cure be complete and without relapse<sup>[11]</sup>

## Sample of Recorded Cures

The case of Mademoiselle Blondel (born 1839) is summarized by Myers and Myers (not counted as one of Lourdes' 70 official miracles).<sup>[12]</sup> In 1863, Blondel contracted a chronic sore throat, followed in 1873 by a spinal rheumatic attack that paralyzed her legs. Many doctors and treatment methods were tried in vain. In 1879, she bathed twice in the spring water of Lourdes, to no effect, her leg muscles remaining 'atrophied, flaccid and powerless', their skin 'sallow and ill-nourished'. In 1882, Blondel bathed in Lourdes water again, and felt cured in moments. 'Without the least hesitation she could get out of the bath, stand on her feet, sit down or walk about, and full powers of sensation had returned to all parts'.<sup>[13]</sup>

However, the authors note that there is no record of whether the cure held, or any examinations or tests of the muscles. They conclude that Blondel's case is one of 'hysterical paraplegia terminated by strong emotion'.<sup>[14]</sup>

Francois and colleagues cite an unusual two-stage cure experienced by Pierre Terrier, a 66-year-old man whose leg was injured when his horse-drawn cart overturned in February 1873.

One of the wheels crushed his leg, the soft tissue was torn to pieces, the tibia was fractured, and soon gangrene set in. The patient's wife resolved to wash the wound with Lourdes water. The next day, the gangrene had disappeared, but the fracture did not heal and the twisted leg made walking very difficult, even with the aid of a stick. Nine years later, on August 29, 1882, the patient went to Lourdes and was surprised to be able to follow the evening procession. On August 30, as soon as Mr. Terrier was plunged into the Lourdes baths of spring water ("piscines"), he had a strange perception in his leg and noticed that his leg stood straight. From then on, walking was problem-free.

Other cures cited by Francois during the period 1890-1915 include

- Gabriel Gargam, cured of post-traumatic paraplegia in 1901 at the age of 31, still living in 1958
- Cécile Douville De Fransu, cured instantaneously of severe peritoneal tuberculosis in 1905, lived to the age of 105
- Virginie Haudebourg, cured of renal tuberculosis in 1908 aged 22, lived at least another fifty years<sup>[15]</sup>

The latter two cases were deemed miracles by the religious authorities.

Patients who were cured in the period 1918-1945 and who were still alive in 2008 include

- Louise Jamain, cured in 1937 of pulmonary and peritoneal tuberculosis
- Francis Pascal, cured in 1938 of post-meningitis paraplegia and blindness at age four
- Yvonne Fournier, cured of a post-traumatic neurological syndrome of the left arm in 1945<sup>[16]</sup>

These cures too are recorded by the Church as miracles.

## Sister Bernadette Moriau

In 2018, religious authorities officially declared the cure of Sister Bernadette Moriau, a French nun, to be a miracle.<sup>[17]</sup> In 1980, she became wheelchair-bound with a twisted foot due to acute sciatica. In 2008, she made a pilgrimage to Lourdes; by her own account she did not ask for a miracle cure, but she did attend a blessing for the sick at the shrine. A few days after returning home, she felt a change. She recalled

I felt a [surge of] well-being throughout my body, a relaxation, a warmth. I heard a voice saying, “remove the apparatus”. In an act of faith, I took it off. And to my great surprise when I took away the brace and splints, my foot was straightened out and I could move without feeling any pain. I cried a lot because sometimes we are overwhelmed by what happens to us. The following day I walked five kilometers in the forest with my sister-in-law.<sup>[18]</sup>

She was also able to cease taking morphine for the pain. The doctors of the Lourdes internal committee carried out an assessment and concluded that her recovery could not be explained scientifically.

## Skepticism

### Joe Nickell

Joe Nickell notes that St. Bernadette (Bernadette Soubiros) herself received no benefit from the waters of Lourdes, dying at age 35 of tuberculosis of the bone. He writes ‘Independent medical investigators have found... that virtually all of the diseases that were supposedly cured were those that were susceptible to psychosomatic influences and/or were known to show spontaneous remissions’<sup>[19]</sup> (but gives no source for this statement). Referring to faith healing in general, Nickell attributes claimed successes to the body’s natural ability to heal, misdiagnoses, misreporting, psychosomatic illness and fraud. He adds that apparent successes are often found to be short-lived when followed up (but see below, Francois, Sternberg & Fee (2014)).

### Robert Todd Carroll

Robert Todd Carroll objects that none of the reported cures have involved ‘dramatic, unambiguous events like the growing back of a severed limb.’ He also suggests that it is pointless for a sick person to visit Lourdes in expectation of a cure, since statistically the chances of this are remote, at one out of every three million visitors.<sup>[20]</sup>

Carroll’s calculation is based on the number of declared ‘miracles’ (67 at the time of writing), when the number of reported cures is around 7000, and the figure of actual cures (including those that are never reported) may be several times higher still. His figure also refers to the total number of visitors, including tourists and healthy pilgrims, not the smaller number who travel there seeking medical cures.

## Critical Evaluations

### Myers and Myers (1898)

Myers and Myers note that Bernadette’s visions of Mary are not evidential (since they rest on her word alone), do not coincide with an objective event and contain no veridical predictions.

Several Lourdes cases are then evaluated. The authors attribute the case of a woman cured of a chronic and worsening pain in her left calf, to traumatic hysteria, since that condition is mentioned in the *Annales*, implying a natural recovery. The case of a soldier with blindness caused by retinal detachment is questioned due to lack of direct evidence of this, and to the fact that retinas can re-attach naturally.

Cases of visible lesions provide visible evidence of cures, the authors note, summarizing the cases of Amelie Chagnon and Clementine Trouve, both deemed miraculous by the church. However, they also observe that such lesions can be removed by self-suggestion, citing the case of warts on the hands of a 13-year-old boy, so severe that he could not bend his fingers, that were cured by a doctor using placebos.

Myers and Myers also challenge the claim given in the *Annales* that five maladies cannot be cured by suggestion: phthisis (pulmonary tuberculosis), atrophy, organic paralysis, ulcers and cancers. Phthisis, they note, can resolve naturally;

atrophy can be the result of nervous stimulus. The one organic paralysis cure cited, they write, can be explained as having already resolved naturally, leaving a functional paralysis that merely required an emotional stimulus to heal. They go on to cite a case of a breast cancer cure by hypnosis to illustrate that the Lourdes cancer cures are not unique.

The authors are cautious in their conclusions, stating that no cure they examined could be considered 'miraculous', however surprising it seems, and that although the number of cures associated with Lourdes is large, it does not necessarily exceed the proportion of such cures that is generally reported by 'faith-healing'.<sup>[21]</sup>

### **Francois, Sternberg & Fee (2014)**

Francois and colleagues examined 25 cures recorded between 1947 and 1976 with the help of Dr Theodore Mangiapan, who was head of the Lourdes Medical Bureau from 1972 to 1990. They found that 13 of the patients lived between 19 and 57 years after the cure, and without relapse. Nine subjects still living in 2008 had survived between ten and 54 years following the cure. They write:

Considering the lengthy observation periods, it may be claimed that four cases of tuberculosis were actually cured. This series provides three examples of multiple sclerosis with remissions of at least forty-year duration, synonymous with cure; the speed with which the cures occurred is impressive and without known equivalent. Two of the most recent cases... are related to osteosarcoma and this diagnosis seems beyond dispute.<sup>[22]</sup>

The authors conclude that while auto-suggestion and the placebo effect likely played a role in a number of the improvements and cures, visits to Lourdes have 'induced exceptional, usually instantaneous, symptomatic, and at best physical, cures of widely different diseases'. They conclude that an understanding of these processes could bring about new and effective therapeutic methods, and that the Lourdes cures 'concern science as well as religion'.<sup>[23]</sup>

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## **References**

### **Footnotes**

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