



Mosaic: "The Third Joyful Mystery, The Nativity of our Lord" located in the Rosary Basilica in Lourdes, France

The earliest known use of “mosaics” (a form of art where small pieces of colored glass, stone, or other materials, are assembled together to form larger, often intricately detailed images) date back to the third millennium BC in Mesopotamia. It was a preferred art form in the Greek and Roman empires. When Christianity blossomed in the ancient world, mosaic artistry was widely employed to decorate Christian churches, homes, and burial places. Mosaics remain a popular sacred art form to this day, and upon seeing them, modern viewers are still often captivated not only by their beauty, but also by the craftsmanship required to create them.

One truly breathtaking display of mosaic artwork can be found in the Rosary Basilica in Lourdes, France, which was built in 1883 – 1899. As visitors walk into this very impressive basilica, they are greeted by a massive mosaic image in the dome ceiling of a young Virgin Mary, surrounded by angels, with her arms outstretched in gracious welcome. Above her head are the words (in French): “Through Mary to Jesus.” Surrounding the central nave of this church are 15 beautiful side altars, one for each of the 15 traditional mysteries of the rosary – the 5 Joyful, 5 Sorrowful, and 5 Glorious Mysteries. Each altar is adorned with a dramatically large, exquisite mosaic that depicts one of these mysteries. Pictured here is the beautiful mosaic of the Third Joyful Mystery, the Nativity of Our Lord. Six million pilgrims from around the world visit Lourdes every year, and are edified viewing these impressive mosaics. What happened in Lourdes and why do so many people visit this remote town in the French Pyrenees Mountains every year? What inspired this tremendous sacred mosaic art that adorns the Rosary Basilica built there?

In 1858, fourteen year old French peasant Bernadette Soubirous, reported to her family, priest, and local bishop that a small young lady was appearing to her in a rocky grotto area by the local river. The beautiful lady prayed the rosary with Bernadette, instructed her to do penance for sinners, and told her to go to the local bishop and ask that a chapel be built on the site where she was appearing. Bernadette experienced a total of 18 apparitions of Mary from February 11 to July 16, 1858. In the apparition that took place on March 25th, the lady identified herself as “The Immaculate Conception” – words Bernadette had never heard before, nor understood. A spring sprang up within this grotto, water continues to flow from it to this day, and many have reported miraculous healings from it. There was much doubt, town commotion, confusion initially about these unusual events, but in time the local bishop and the Catholic Church officially approved the happenings as “worthy of belief,” something the Church grants rarely and only after strenuous investigation. (A Catholic is not obligated to believe a Church approved Marian apparition, because it is a private revelation to an individual. But in an official approval, the Church grants that the events as reported can be believed.) Eventually a beautiful basilica was built atop the grotto where Bernadette experienced her apparitions of Mary. Today, there are now actually four churches built atop each other over this grotto -- the small original crypt church (the only one Bernadette herself saw built before she left Lourdes to enter a convent), the upper Basilica of the Immaculate Conception (which Bernadette’s father played a part in building), the stunning Rosary Basilica (so appropriate, since Mary urgently instructed Bernadette to pray the rosary every day), and the massive Basilica of Pius X, completed in 1958, which can seat 25,000 pilgrims for large group Masses. Bernadette eventually entered a convent, lived a quiet life serving her sick sisters, and died of tuberculosis of the bones at age 35, while praying the rosary. She was canonized in 1933.

During this Advent and Christmas season, not only enjoy the beauty of this lovely Lourdes mosaic of the Nativity of Our Lord pictured here, but enjoy a virtual tour of Lourdes on-line at <https://lourdesvolunteers.org/what-is-a-virtual-pilgrimage/> and periodically view real time activity taking place in the Lourdes grotto at <https://www.lourdes-france.org/en/tv-lourdes/>. Maybe consider taking a pilgrimage to Lourdes someday. Why? Catholic author Sigrid Undset, puts it well: *“The reason for pilgrimage is of course, religious – away from the well-known of everyday surroundings and the monotony of everyday life, one can think of the welfare of one’s soul with fresh energy. The air of distant holy places can blow away the inactivity of the soul, and strengthen one to pray with new enthusiasm.”*