

Boundless Blessings

By Jane M. Bailey

I had been meaning to visit the Our Lady of Lourdes Shrine in Litchfield, Connecticut, so one day this spring I went online to find their hours. I glanced at pictures of the beautiful stone grotto, saw times for Mass, and within the calendar of events read a small note: *May 19—Annual Blessing of Motorcycles*. I did a double take. I'd heard of blessing animals, but blessing motorcycles? I jotted the date and time on my calendar and decided to find out what this strange event was all about.

My gut reaction was that motorcycles aren't deserving of blessing. My dislike of their deafening roar and my stereotype of the Hells Angels led me to question, "Shouldn't blessings be reserved for those things or people who do their part in adding good to the world? Is everyone and everything deserving of a blessing?"

A blessing is a means of securing God's favor and protection. Blessings provide a cloak of safety from the evil lurking within the darkest corners of our lives. Scripture makes it clear that blessings aren't just for those who are good, or who we think are good: "But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:44). We are charged to bless even those we deem unworthy of a blessing.

Blessings are the foremost of the sacraments, special prayers that prepare a person to receive grace—to "cooperate" with grace, so to speak. There are two types of blessings: An invocative blessing is asking for divine favor for good, with no change in a person or thing. There are the usual day-to-day blessings we ask for or have. Constitutive blessings are permanent, such as sanctification for a sacred purpose like marriage or ordination. While a priest is necessary for giving constitutive blessings, any one of us can give invocative blessings.

There is no one way to bless someone or something. Blessings can be invoked by prayer, chant, or song. My father had a beautiful bass voice. When I was a teenager, he handed me music by May H. Brahe for the beautiful "Bless This House" with words by Helen Taylor. As I played the piano, Dad's deep voice rang through the house: *Bless this house, O Lord, we pray, make it safe by night and day. Bless us all that one day we may dwell, O Lord, with Thee*. Even now when I play that music, I hear my father's voice resonating blessings throughout our home.

If given just a few minutes, most of us can make a long list of blessings in our lives—family, friends, home, health, harvest, shoes, tooth-



Our Lady of Lourdes Shrine, Litchfield, Connecticut

paste, medicine, artificial knees, computers, safety, a good teacher, and on and on. It is easy to forget how much blessed existence is not dependent on material things. In her article "What Does It Really Mean to Be #Blessed?", available at DesiringGod.org, Vaneetha Rendall Risner cites 112 references to blessing in the New Testament, with none connected to material prosperity. Christ in the Beatitudes challenges our notions of who shall obtain blessing: "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed they who mourn, blessed are the meek...*" Our material values are turned inside-out. We are reminded that life's trials are channels for blessings and for grace.

I tend to scatter the word blessing as if I am sowing seeds in a garden. I'll close a card with it, and to newlyweds I'll write, "All blessings

from Thy bounty, through Christ our Lord, to the ancient Jewish benediction found in Numbers 6:24–26 (The Lord bless you and keep you! The Lord let his face shine on you and be gracious to you! The Lord look upon you kindly and give you peace!), to the blessing of the 14th surah of the Qu'ran (And He gave you all you asked of Him. And if you should count the favors of Allah, you could not enumerate them).

Once I was asked what my favorite word is. I responded, "Grace. It's so peaceful and alights without asking." If someone were to ask me that question today, I would respond, "Blessing." I've learned that blessings are intertwined with grace. Blessings are delivered through grace, and grace is delivered through blessings.

That's exactly what the bikers

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ahead." To friends who share a challenge I'll commiserate with "God bless you," as if they have just sneezed. My husband has what I consider an abnormally loud sneeze, to which I usually respond "God bless you!" in a shout that indicates "Dear God, give me patience!" (An aside: the "God bless you" sneeze response became customary by 750 AD, though it was used much earlier in time. During the plague of 590 AD, Pope Gregory I ordered "unceasing prayer" for God's help. Part of that order was that anyone sneezing should be blessed immediately, as a sneeze might be a sign they were coming down with the plague. Even earlier, the blessing was used as a shield against the folkloric belief that the body was open to the devil during a sneeze.)

Blessings cross all religious, secular, cultural, and geographical boundaries, from the traditional Christian blessing before a meal (*Bless us, O Lord, and these Thy gifts which we are about to receive*

showing me the high-tech ways he listens to music, takes pictures or videos, and easily follows his GPS while cruising across the country. He proudly shared that he rode in all 50 states in 50 days—a state a day—for his 50th birthday. He had to fly to Hawaii and Alaska and rent bikes there to reach his goal. "So why are you here?" I asked.

"I put a lot of miles on this bike and I want to be safe. I'm visiting the area and saw this as an opportunity to get some help staying safe. Oh, and I missed Mass this morning, so maybe this will count for that too . . . though I doubt the priest will agree." He added, "Even though I ride a ton of miles, I don't consider myself a 'biker.' I'm an avid motorcyclist who loves the open road. I've never done this blessing thing, but I'm looking forward to it."

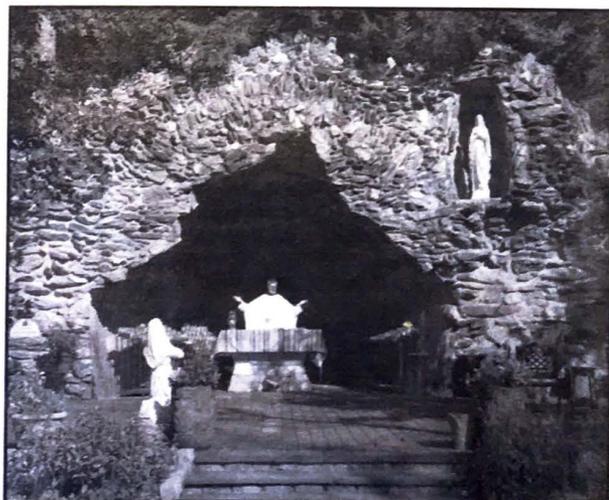
I watched the Blessing of Motorcycles with wonder and awe. The beautiful breadth of humanity streamed through the grotto to be blessed, bikers as different as the Harley or Honda bikes they rode. Tattooed and not, gentle and strident, Catholic cross-bearers and Warlocks—all roared to a stop for the blessing that every one of us needs as we travel our ride through life, the blessing Father Bill repeated as he sprinkled holy water—blessed water—on each cyclist and motorbike:

Go out in safety; come back in peace and joy:

May God bless you

*in the name of the Father,
and of the Son, and of the
Holy Spirit. Amen.*

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