

Saint Catherine Labouré and the Miraculous Medal



The sound of the evening Angelus bells floated across the fields and vineyards of Burgundy. It was the second day of the month of May in the year of Our Lord 1806. In the little village of **Fain-les-Moutiers** a child of destiny was coming into the world, a tiny instrument of God, who would one day be the confidante of the Queen of Heaven to usher in the age of Mary. Her name was **Catherine Labouré**, the ninth child of a family of eleven.

The following day, the **Feast of the Finding of the True Cross**, the small child was baptized. All her life she was to have a deep devotion to the Cross of Our Lord. It would not be long before she was to feel the weight of sacrifice with the death of her mother at the age of nine.

Early one morning shortly after her mother's death, a family servant came silently upon the little one standing on her tiptoes, stretching upwards, impelled by love, until she reached the statue of the Blessed Virgin.

As she held the statue in her arms and leaned her head against the Madonna, the servant heard the child say:

"Now, dear Blessed Mother, now you will be my Mother!"

Catherine received her First Holy Communion at the age of eleven on January 25th, 1818. From that day on, she rose at four o'clock each morning and walked several miles to assist at Mass and to pray for grace and strength before the start of her day's work. Her only desire now was to give herself without reserve to her dear Lord. Never was the thought of Him far from her mind.

By this time Catherine's elder sister, Marie Louise, had left to join the Daughters of Charity, and the little girl who had always been obedient now had to direct and supervise the homestead. She looked after everything: she made the bread, cooked and did the housework, carried daily meals to the workmen in the fields and cared well for the animals.

Once, when she was in the village church, she saw a vision of an old priest saying Mass. After Mass the priest turned and beckoned to her with his finger, but she drew backwards, keeping her eyes on him. The vision moved to a sickroom where she saw the same priest, who said:

"My child, it is a good deed to look after the sick; you run away from me now, but one day you will be glad to come to me. God has designs for you. Do not forget it!"

At that time, of course, she did not understand the significance of the vision.

As is the European custom, Catherine's father invited various suitors to seek her hand in marriage and always her reply was:

"I shall never marry; I have promised my life to Jesus Christ."

She prayed, worked, and served the family well until she was twenty-two, when she asked her father's permission to become a **Daughter of Charity**. He flatly refused, and to distract her, sent her to Paris to work in a coffee shop run by her brother Charles.

During the entire year spent there, she maintained her resolve to become the bride of Christ. Her aunt, Jeanne Gontard, came to Catherine's aid and enrolled her in the finishing school she directed at Chatillon. Since Catherine was a country girl, she was miserable at this fashionable school. One day, while visiting the hospital of the Daughters of Charity, she noted a priest's picture on the wall. She asked the nun who he might be, and was told:

"Our Holy Founder, Saint Vincent de Paul."

This was the same priest Catherine had seen in the vision.

Later, after much persuasion from her Aunt Jeanne, her father granted permission for Catherine to enter the convent.

In January of 1830, Catherine entered the hospice of the **Daughters of Charity at Chatillon-sur-Seine**. This was just after the Reign of Terror in France, where sacrileges were committed in the name of freedom. Licentious women danced on the main altar of Notre Dame. Even the body of St. Genevieve, the Patroness of France, was desecrated. Saint Vincent de Paul's body had been hidden, but four days after Catherine's entry into the Mother House, his remains were transferred back to his own church with joyous processions and ceremonies.

Shortly after her entrance, God was pleased to grant Catherine several extraordinary visions. On three consecutive days she beheld the heart of Saint Vincent each time under a different aspect. At other times she beheld Our Divine Lord during Mass, when He would appear as He was described in the liturgy of the day.

In 1830 Catherine was blessed with the apparitions of Mary Immaculate to which we owe the Miraculous Medal.

The first apparition came on the eve of the feast of St. Vincent, July 19. The mother superior had given each of the novices a piece of cloth from the holy founder's surplice. Because of her extreme love, Catherine split her piece down the middle, swallowing half and placing the rest in her prayer book. She earnestly prayed to St. Vincent that she might, with her own eyes, see the Mother of God. That night, a beautiful child awoke her from her sleep, saying:

"Sister Labouré, come to the chapel; the Blessed Virgin is waiting for you."

When Catherine went to the chapel, she found it ablaze with lights as if prepared for Midnight Mass. Quietly, she knelt at the Communion rail, and suddenly heard the rustle of a silk dress. The Blessed Virgin, in a blaze of glory, sat in a chair like that of Saint Anne's. Catherine rose, then went over and knelt, resting her hands in the Virgin's lap, and felt the Virgin's arms around her, as she said:

"God wishes to charge you with a mission. You will be contradicted, but do not fear; you will have the grace. Tell your spiritual director all that passes within you. Times are evil in France and in the world."

A pained expression crossed the Virgin's face.

"Come to the foot of the altar. Graces will be shed on all, great and little, especially upon those who seek them. Another community of sisters will join the Rue du Bac community. The community will become large; you will have the protection of God and Saint Vincent; I will always have my eyes upon you."

(This prediction was fulfilled when, in 1849, Fr. Etienne received Saint Elizabeth Seton's sisters of Emmitsburg, MD, into the Paris community. Mother Seton's sisters became the foundation stone of the Sisters of Charity in the United States.)

Then, like a fading shadow, Our Lady was gone.

Four months passed until Our Lady returned to Rue du Bac. Here are Catherine's own words describing the apparition:

" On the 27th of November, 1830 ... while making my meditation in profound silence ... I seemed to hear on the right hand side of the sanctuary something like the rustling of a silk dress. Glancing in that direction, I perceived the Blessed Virgin standing near St. Joseph's picture. Her height was medium and Her countenance, indescribably beautiful. She was dressed in a robe the color of the dawn, high-necked, with plain sleeves. Her head was covered with a white veil, which floated over Her shoulders down to her feet. Her feet rested upon a globe, or rather one half of a globe, for that was all that could be seen. Her hands which were on a level with Her waist, held in an easy manner another globe, a figure of the world. Her eyes were raised to Heaven, and Her countenance beamed with light as She offered the globe to Our Lord.

" As I was busy contemplating Her, the Blessed Virgin fixed Her eyes upon me, and a voice said in the depths of my heart: ' This globe which you see represents the whole world, especially France, and each person in particular. '

" There now formed around the Bl. Virgin a frame rather oval in shape on which were written in letters of gold these words:

' O Mary conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to Thee.'

Then a voice said to me:

" Have a medal struck upon this model. All those who wear it, when it is blessed, will receive great graces especially if they wear it round the neck. Those who repeat this prayer with devotion will be in a special manner under the protection of the Mother of God. Graces will be abundantly bestowed upon those who have confidence. "

"At the same instant, the oval frame seemed to turn around. Then I saw on the back of it the letter 'M', surmounted by a cross, with a crossbar beneath it, and under the monogram of the name of Mary, the Holy Hearts of Jesus and of His Mother; the first surrounded by a crown of thorns and the second trans-pierced by a sword. I was anxious to know what words must be placed on the reverse side of the medal and after many prayers, one day in meditation I seemed to hear a voice which said to me:

" The 'M' with the Cross and the two Hearts tell enough. "

The Miraculous Medal



The Mother of God instructed Catherine that she was to go to her spiritual director, Father Aladel, about the apparitions. At first he did not believe Catherine, but, after two years, approached the Bishop of Paris with the story of the events that had taken place at Rue du Bac. Our Blessed Mother had chosen well Her time for the apparitions as the Bishop at that period was an ardent devotee of the Immaculate Conception. He said that the Medal was in complete conformity with the Church's doctrine on the role of Our Lady and had no objections to having the medals struck at once. The Bishop even asked to be sent some of the first.

Immediately upon receiving them, he put one in his pocket and went to visit Monseigneur de Pradt, former chaplain to Napoleon and unlawful Archbishop of Mechlin who had accepted his office from the hands of the Emperor and now lay dying, defiant and unreconciled to the Church. The sick man refused to abjure his errors and the Bishop of Paris withdrew in defeat. He had not left the house when the dying man suddenly called him back, made his peace with the Church and gently passed away in the arms of the Archbishop, who was filled with a holy joy.

The original order of 20,000 medals proved to be but a small start. The new medals began to pour from the presses in streams inundating France and the rest of the world beyond. By the time of St. Catherine's death in 1876, over a billion medals had been distributed in many lands. This sacramental from Heaven was at first called simply the Medal of the Immaculate Conception, but began to be known as the Miraculous Medal due to the unprecedented number of miracles, conversions, cures, and acts of protection attributed to Our Lady's intercession for those who wore it.

In 1841, the most remarkable miracle occurred - the conversion of Alphonse Ratisbonne, a wealthy Jewish banker and lawyer and also a blasphemer and hater of Catholicism. M. de Bussieres, gave him a medal, daring him to wear it and say a Memorare.

After considerable persuasion he agreed to do so.

Not long after, Alphonse accompanied M. de Bussieres to the Church of Sant' Andrea delle Frate to make funeral arrangements for a dear friend. There Alphonse saw a vision of Mary as on the Miraculous Medal. He was converted instantly and immediately begged for Baptism.

Alphonse Ratisbonne later went on to become a priest, taking the name of Father Alphonse Marie. Working for thirty years in the Holy Land, he established several institutions. Out of reverence and gratitude to Our Savior, he built the expiatory sanctuary of the **Ecce Homo** on the spot where Pilate displayed Jesus to the Jews. So great was the love he had for his people, that he dedicated the remainder of his life, as did his brother, Father Theodore, to work for the conversion of their immortal souls.

Among the converts of these two priest brothers were a total of twenty eight members of their own family.

Sister Catherine died on December 31, 1876.

For the forty-six years from the year of the apparitions until her death, only she and her confessor knew who it was to whom the famous Miraculous Medal was revealed, despite many pressures she received to reveal the secret.

The years passed by, Catherine performed daily her mundane and very ordinary tasks of sewing and door keeping, unknown to the world around her, which was buzzing with the miraculous effects of the medal. Because of this humility, she is often called the **Saint of Silence**.

In 1895 her cause for Beatification was introduced in Rome.

She was beatified on May 28, 1933. When her body was exhumed, after fifty-seven years of burial,, it was found to be completely incorrupt and supple.

Catherine was canonized a Saint on July 27, 1947.

This approval by God and the Church was like a seal on the apparitions of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal.

Her incorrupt body can still be seen today at the Mother House of the Daughters of Charity in:

The Chapel of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal, 140 Rue du Bac in Paris.

"All who wear this medal will receive great graces . . ."