

The Miraculous Medal



- The History, Apparitions, Symbolism
- Conversions through the Miraculous Medal
- The Biography of Sister Catherine Labouré



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www.kolbepublications.com
sales@kolbepublications.com

www.militia-immaculatae.info

Edition I



Introduction

A few days after atheist Alphonse Ratisbonne agreed to wear the Miraculous Medal, he converted to the Catholic Faith. His story inspired St. Maximilian to make wearing the Miraculous Medal a condition of membership in the Militia Immaculatae.

St. Maximilian Maria Kolbe wrote:

“Distribute Her Miraculous Medal, wherever possible. To children, so they always wear it around their necks, to elderly, and to young people in particular, so that under Her care they have enough strength to resist so many temptations and pitfalls lying in wait for them in our times.

And to those who do not visit the church, are afraid to come to the confession, sneer at religious practices, laugh at the truths of faith, are stuck in moral mud or stay apart from the Church in heresy – it is absolutely necessary to offer the Miraculous Medal to them and ask them to wear it, and beg the Immaculate for their conversion in the meanwhile.

Many find the way, even when someone absolutely does not want to accept the Miraculous Medal. Simply sew it in secret into their clothes and pray, and Immaculate Mary sooner or later shows what is She able to. So, the Miraculous Medal is a bullet of the Knights of the Immaculata”.

(Hrodna, before May 1926)

On 27th of November 1830 Blessed Virgin Mary appeared to Catherine Labouré, who at that time was a novice from the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul. Sister Labouré had three apparitions of Our Lady at Rue de Bac 140 in Paris.

During the second apparition Immaculata instructed Catherine to mint and distribute the Miraculous Medal after the pattern revealed.

This booklet contains three apparitions of Our Lady to Sister Catherina Labouré, a few stories about conversions through the Miraculous Medal and the biography of Sister Labouré.



*The chapel at Rue de
Bac 140 in Paris*

The history

The history of the Miraculous Medal began in 1830 at Rue de Bac 140 in Paris in the chapel of the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul. Catherine Labouré, who was a novice, was blessed with the apparitions of Mary Immaculate to which we owe the Miraculous Medal.

Blessed Virgin Mary appeared to Catherine Labouré three times. During the second apparition in Paris the Immaculata instructed Catherine to mint and distribute the Miraculous Medal based on exactly the pattern revealed to her.

July 18, 1830

First Apparition of the Blessed Virgin Mary

The first apparition in Saint Catherine's own words:

"And then came the Feast of Saint Vincent when our good Mother Martha, on the evening before, gave us an instruction on devotion to the Blessed Virgin, which gave me a desire to see the Blessed Virgin, such that I went to bed with that thought on that same night, that I should see my good Mother whom I had desired to see for such a long time. As a piece of linen from a surplice of Saint Vincent had been distributed, I cut off half of it which I swallowed, and I went to sleep, in the thought that Saint Vincent should obtain for me the grace to see the Blessed Virgin.

Finally, at half past eleven in the evening I heard myself being called by name: **'Sister Labouré, Sister Labouré'**. Waking up, I looked in the direction where I heard the voice ... I pulled aside the curtain. I saw a child four or five years old, who said to me: **'Come to the chapel, the Blessed Virgin is waiting for you.'**

I dressed quickly and made my way alongside this child, who had remained standing, without coming any further than the head

of my bed.... I followed him, keeping him always on my left. Everywhere we passed was lighted up, which astonished me a lot. But I was even more surprised when I went into the chapel and the door opened itself, though the child had scarcely touched it with his fingertips. My surprise was even more complete when I saw that all the tapers and candles were alight, which reminded me of the Midnight Mass. However, I saw nothing of the Blessed Virgin.



The child led me into the sanctuary; to the side of the director's chair, where I knelt down, while the child remained standing the whole time. As I found the time rather long, I looked around to see if the sisters who kept watch in the house were passing through the gallery.

At last the time had come. The child let me know. He said to me, **'Here is the Blessed Virgin. Here she is!'** I heard a sound like the rustle of a silk gown coming from the side of the tribune near Saint Joseph's picture, which finally came and alighted on the altar steps on the gospel side and went to sit in a chair like that of Saint Anne's.

Catherine continues her account: It was not the same face as Saint Anne... I doubted whether this was the Blessed Virgin.

However, the child who was there said to me, **‘Here is the Blessed Virgin!’** It would be impossible for me to say what I experienced at this time, what was happening within me. It seemed to me that I did not see the Blessed Virgin. It was then that the child spoke to me, no longer as a child, but as a very strong man and in the strongest terms. Then, looking at the Blessed Virgin, I just made one leap towards her, and knelt down on the altar-steps, with my hands resting on the lap of the Blessed Virgin...

Then there took place the sweetest moment of my life. It would be impossible for me to tell all that I experienced. She told me how I was to behave towards my director and several things which I must not tell, how I was to behave in my troubles, that I was to come (pointing with Her left hand to the foot of the altar) and throw myself at the foot of the altar and there to pour forth my heart, that there I should receive all the consolations that I needed... I then asked her to explain to me the meaning of all the things I had seen, and she explained everything to me.

‘My child’, Our Lady said, ‘the good God wishes to entrust you with a mission. You will have much difficulty, but you will overcome these difficulties by thinking that you are doing it for the glory of the good God. You will know what comes from the good God. You will be tormented by it till you have told it to him who is entrusted with your guidance. You will be opposed, but you will always have the grace. Do not fear. Tell everything which happens within you with confidence... with simplicity.

You will see a certain thing. Give an account of what you will see and hear. You will be inspired in your prayer.

Come to the foot of this altar. There graces will be poured out on all those, rich or poor, who ask for them with confidence and fervor. I will be with you myself; I will always keep my eyes upon you, and I will enrich you with many graces.'



Graces will be bestowed, particularly upon all who ask for them, but they must pray. They must pray!

I do not know how long I stayed. All I know is that after 'She had gone', I only noticed something which was fading away. Finally, no more than a shadow that was moving in the direction of the tribune, the side from which she had come.

I got up from the steps of the altar, and I saw the child where I had left him. He said to me, '**She has gone.**' We went back by the same way, which was still illuminated, and this child was always on my left.

I believe that this child was my guardian angel who made himself visible so that I should see the Blessed Virgin, because I had often prayed to him that he would obtain this favour, for me. He was dressed in white and bore a miraculous light with him, that is to say, he was resplendent with light. He was either four or five years old.

When I got back to bed, it was two o'clock in the morning, for I heard the clock strike. I did not go to sleep again."

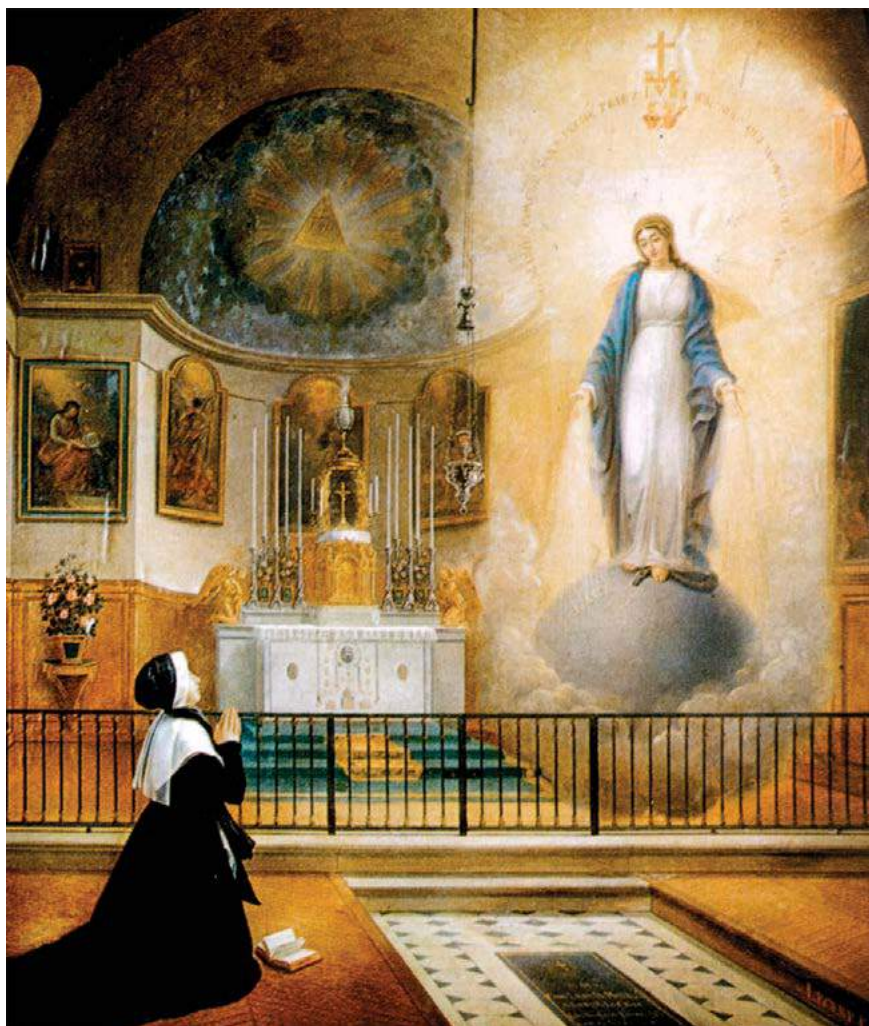
November 27, 1830

Second Apparition of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Four months passed, and Our Lady returned to Rue du Bac. On the day of the second apparition, Catherine was once again seized with a great desire to see the Blessed Virgin. Here is the story in her own words.

“I thought that the Blessed Virgin would grant me this grace, but my desire was so strong that I was convinced that I would actually see her at her most beautiful.

On the 27th of November, 1830, which was a Saturday, and the eve of the First Sunday of Advent, while making my meditation in profound silence, at half past five in the evening, 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 Saint Joseph’s picture. Her height was medium, and her countenance indescribably beautiful. She was dressed in a robe the colour 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. She wore a narrow lace band



round her hair. Her face was not concealed. 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.

Suddenly, her fingers were covered with rings and most beautiful precious stones. Rays of dazzling light gleamed forth from them, and the whole of her figure was enveloped in such radiance that her feet and robe were no longer visible.

The jewels varied in size as did also the rays of light they threw out. I could not express what I felt, nor what I learned, in these few moments.

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.’**

I would not know how to express the beauty and brilliancy of these rays. The Blessed Virgin added: **‘Behold the symbol of the graces I shed upon those who ask me for them.’*** And she made me understand how pleasant it was to pray to the Blessed Virgin, how generous she is to all who implore her intercession... How many favours she grants to those who ask her for them with confidence and the joy that she experienced in granting graces! At this moment I was not myself, I was in raptures!

There now formed around the Blessed 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’.**

*Sister Catherine noted that some of these precious stones did not emit rays, and when she expressed her astonishment at this, she was told that they were a figure of the graces we neglect to ask of Mary.

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 transpierced 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.’**



No mention is made in Sister Catherine’s notes of the twelve stars which surrounded the monogram of Mary and the two Hearts. However, they are always figured on the back of the medal. It is certain that this detail was given by the sister at the time of the apparitions.

December, 1830

Third Apparition of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Catherine felt sure that she would see Our Lady again. Sometime during the month of December her hope was realized. At the afternoon meditation, she had another vision similar to that of November 27th. There was one remarkable difference however. Our Blessed Mother, who according to Sister Labouré appeared to be about forty years of age, instead of remaining near the picture of Saint Joseph, passed in front of it and stood at the back of the tabernacle, a little above it.

The invocation ‘O Mary conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to Thee’ was traced in letters of gold and encircled the apparition as before. Catherine saw again at the back of the oval the monogram of the Blessed Virgin surmounted by the Cross, and beneath, the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary.

In Catherine’s own words: “I saw the Blessed Virgin near the tabernacle, to the back of it. She was dressed in white... under her feet was a white ball. She was so beautiful that it would be impos-

sible for me to describe her beauty. Her hands, which were raised to the level of the waist, in a very easy fashion, were holding a ball which represented the globe, surmounted by a little golden cross.

Suddenly her fingers became adorned with rings and with precious stones of great splendor. The rays which issued from them showered a dazzling light on all sides and filled the area below them, so that one could no longer see the feet of the Blessed Virgin.



The larger stones gave larger rays, and the smaller ones, smaller rays. To tell you what I learned at the moment when the Blessed Virgin was offering the globe to Our Lord would be impossible to repeat... what I experienced.”

Saint Catherine again received the order to have a medal struck according to the model. This was the last time Our Lady was to

appear to her and she distinctly heard this message. **‘You will not see me any more, but you will hear my voice during your prayers’**. And then, Catherine tells us, everything disappeared from my sight, like a candle that is blown out.

And from that day forward, till she departed this world in 1876, with only those few exceptions authorized by Heaven above, for a period of forty six years, the Saint of Silence was to keep these visions a secret, pondering them in the depths of her heart.

She terminates her account in these words: „To tell you what I understood at the moment the Blessed Virgin offered the globe to Our Lord, would be impossible, or what my feelings were whilst gazing on her! A voice in the depths of my heart said to me: “These rays are symbolic of the graces the Blessed Virgin obtains for those who ask for them’.” These few lines, according to her, should be inscribed



Statue under gate to the chapel at Rue de Bac 140 in Paris

at the base of the Blessed Virgin's statue. On this occasion, contrary to her usual custom, she could not refrain from an exclamation of joy at the thought of the homages which would be rendered Mary! „Oh! How delightful to hear it said: ‚Mary is Queen of the Universe, and particularly of France!’ The children will proclaim it, ‚She is Queen of each soul!’.”

Symbolism of the Miraculous Medal

FRONT

A prayer to honour the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady:
"O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us, who have recourse to Thee."



Rays coming forth from the hands of Mary, falling on all over the world. These are the graces She has begged from Her Most Holy Son Jesus, to help us overcome Satan and endure his temptations. Mary is a Mediatrix of all graces.

Mary stands on an orb, which is a symbol of the earth. Under Her feet is a serpent, representing Satan. Mary is crushing head of the serpent. (Gen. 3:15)

BACK

Twelve stars refer to John's vision in revelation, "*and on her head a crown of twelve stars*" (Rev. 12:1). The stars symbolize the Church, founded by Jesus on the Twelve Apostles.

The Cross stands for Jesus and His sacrifice for us.

The Capital **M** below the Cross stands for Holy Mary, our Mother, who stood by the Cross on Calvary, as Her Son suffered for our sins. The Capital **M** may also be a reference to the Holy Mass, because when we assist at Mass, we stand like Mary at the foot of the Cross.



The two hearts burning with love for humanity.
On the left is The Most Sacred Heart of Our Lord Jesus Christ, crowned with thorns — our sins.
On the right side is The Immaculate Heart of Mary — pierced by a sword.



The first medals were struck

Catherine spoke to no one about her visions and her mission except her Spiritual Director, Fr. John Marie Aladel. He was only thirty years old in 1830, and this was no small task that was thrust upon him. He and Catherine had many confrontations before the first medals were struck in June 1832. Eventually, at his request, Catherine wrote out three full accounts of her visions. She was a person of sound common sense, had a great eye for details and a gift for describing well what she saw and heard.

After almost two years of stormy discernment Fr. Aladel took advantage of a visit to Archbishop Hyacinth de Quelen of Paris in January of 1832 to discuss his penitent, her visions, and the request of the Blessed Virgin for a medal to be struck. The Archbishop listened carefully and questioned Fr. Aladel in detail, and finally gave his permission for the medals to be made. He himself was very devoted to the Immaculate Conception of Mary and asked that he be given some of the first medals that would be made.

The first two thousand medals were delivered on June 30, 1832. The spread of the Medal was almost like a miracle in itself. The first batch disappeared very quickly. Pope Gregory XVI put one of them at the foot of the crucifix on his desk.

The Redemptorist Founder of the Sisters Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in America, Fr. Gillet, had the design of the medal placed on his ordination card in 1836. The stories of the cures and wonders of the medal helped to spread its use far and wide.

By 1836 the firm of Vachette had sold several million medals. Eleven other engravers in Paris had done the same. And four engravers in Lyons were hard pressed to meet the demands for the medal.

Archbishop de Quelen instituted a Canonical Inquiry starting on 11th February, 1836. The conclusions of the Inquiry were that the Medal was of supernatural origin, and that the wonders worked through it were genuine. This Inquiry helped win the approval of the Holy See in 1895 for a feast in honor of the Medal, and helped in the process of Beatification and Canonization of Sister Catherine.



First conversion through the Medal

Archbishop de Quelen attributed to the Miraculous Medal the deathbed conversion of a publicly impenitent sinner, Monseigneur de Pradt, former chaplain to Napoleon and unlawful Archbishop of Mechlin (Malines) who had accepted his office from the hands of the Emperor and now lay dying, defiant and unreconciled to the Church. The Archbishop had tried to see him on several occasions and had been rebuffed. So he took a Miraculous Medal with him, and was finally allowed in to see the Baron, who was so touched by grace that he repented and confessed his sins. The next day he received the Sacraments from the Archbishop and died in his arms in 1837. This was the first great triumph of the Miraculous Medal.

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 Saint Catherine's death in 1876, over a billion medals had been distributed in many lands. This sacramental from Heaven that at first was simply called the Medal of the Immaculate Conception, 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.

This account describes to Christian souls how the Miraculous Medal has been a source of precious benedictions. Many conversions have been reported as a result.

Conversion of Alphonse Ratisbonne

He was a Jew in name only. He did not even believe in God. In bravado and mockery, he allowed a Miraculous Medal to be hung about his neck. He himself would later write: *“This marked the dawn of a new life for me.”*

Intimately connected to the very beginnings of the Miraculous Medal is the story of the conversion of Tobie Alphonse Ratisbonne (1814–1884) who was born at Strasbourg (Alsace, France) on the first day of May in the year 1814. He was the ninth child of a family of bankers, rich and charitable, who were related or allied to the Rothschilds and other wealthy Jewish families. Although Ratisbonne belonged to a rich family he was entirely free from the love of money for its own sake. It is said of him, as a striking example of his detachment, that when leaving a hired cab, he would hand his wallet to the driver, urging him to help himself to the price of the journey. Returning the wallet to his pocket, he never bothered to take account of what had been removed.

Grace builds on nature and Alphonse was of a noble spirit, generous and kind of heart. Endowed with artistic talents, he was imaginative and possessed an air of distinction, good looks and charm. He had a great capacity for loving family and friends.



From Strasbourg to Naples

Towards the end of November, 1841, Alphonse set out on an excursion that was to last nine or ten months. This journey included the following cities: Marseilles, Naples, Malta and Constantinople, and he was to return to Strasbourg in time for his wedding celebration set for the month of August in 1842.

Ratisbonne writes: *“Before arriving at Naples, the ship put in at Civita Vecchia, the port of the Papal States. The cannon on the fort boomed loudly. ... I inquired the meaning of these warlike sounds in the peaceful lands of the Pope. I was told, ‘This is the Feast of the Conception of Our Lady!’ I shrugged my shoulders, and did not disembark.”*

In this way Ratisbonne made light of the Immaculate Virgin in the days just prior to his remarkable conversion.

To Rome, by Accident?

The ship on which he was to sail for Malta broke down and remained in dock at Naples. The passengers had to make other arrangements.

Ratisbonne had no desire whatsoever to visit Rome. He refused when Neapolitan friends of the family tried to persuade him to go there after his stay in Naples. His fiancée had expressed the wish that

he go at once to Malta and she sent instructions from his physician positively forbidding him to go to Rome because of the alleged fever in that city. Therefore he had more than enough to deter him from such a visit.

Ratisbonne later mused: But how did I go to Rome? I find it impossible to explain it even to myself. I left Naples on the 5th of January and reached Rome on the 6th, the Feast of the Three Kings.

Among the foreign families who then resided in the Eternal City were the de Bussi res, from Alsace, and the La Ferronnays, Breton Royalists, who were to play an important part by their prayers and zeal, in the miraculous events in which Ratisbonne became immersed.

Baron Theodore de Bussi res, a convert most ardent in his devotion to the Church, pitied his unfortunate friend and resolved to lose no opportunities of impressing upon him the necessity of becoming a Catholic. He tells us in his journal: *“I sought to lead Alphonse to share my own convictions. He retorted, ‘A Jew was I born, and a Jew shall I die.’”*

A Medal Worn in Bravado

‘Well then, since you are so strong-minded and sure of yourself’, I said to him, ‘promise me to wear something I am going to give you.’ I showed him a Miraculous Medal. In a combination of indignation and surprise, he thrust it vigorously aside. ‘But’, I said, ‘as you look at things, this should be an indifferent matter in your eyes, while it will give me a great deal of pleasure.’

‘Oh! It is really but a small matter,’ he cried out laughingly and he began to joke blasphemously.

Alphonse declares: ‘No sooner was this agreed to, than it was accomplished ...and I burst out laughing as I exclaimed: ‘Ah! Ha! I am

now become Catholic, Apostolic, Roman.’ It was the devil who prophesied through my mouth.’

M. de Bussi res rejoiced inwardly over his victory, and he tried to take advantage of it. ‘Now,’ he said to me, ‘you must not shirk the rest. Each morning and evening you must say the Memorare, a very short and effective prayer written by Saint Bernard in honor of Our Lady.’



After copying in his own handwriting this beautiful prayer, somehow, in the next few days, Alphonse found the unforgettable words of Saint Bernard rolling like ceaseless waves in the darkness of his mind. The Star of the Sea was soon to shine through the fog of his indifference and disbelief.

On Sunday evening the Baron went to dine with his friend the Comte de La Ferronays. He spoke of his current project and earnestly commended the young Israelite to the Count’s prayers.

‘Do not worry’, replied La Ferronays with the confidence of one who knew Our Lady’s power. ‘If you have him saying the Memorare, you already have him fast!’

De La Ferronays promised to pray for Ratisbonne. Twenty four hours later he went for a walk to the church of Santa Maria Maggiore where he spent a long time in prayer. Shortly thereafter, he died of a heart attack, but not before confiding to his wife he had recited more than twenty *Memorares* for the conversion of Alphonse Ratisbonne.

The Apparition of January 20, 1842

But Ratisbonne's visit to Rome was drawing to a close. Only while remaining in the Eternal City did he feel obligated to wear the medal and say the Memorare as he had promised the Baron de Bussières he would do.

Ratisbonne writes: However, in the night between the 19th and 20th, I awakened with a start and saw before me a large cross of a special shape without the body of Christ being attached to it. Later, he was to identify this cross with the cross of the Miraculous Medal.



I made attempt after attempt to dispel this picture, but I was unable to avoid it, for turn as I might from side to side, it was ever before me. I cannot say how long this lasted. Finally, I fell asleep again and the next morning on awakening I thought no more of it.

On the following day, Ratisbonne emerged from a café, just as the carriage of M. de Bussières was passing by. The day was beautiful, and with pleasure he assented to join his friend in a drive. M. de Bussières was on his way to the nearby Church of Sant' Andrea delle Fratte, to make arrangements for the funeral of his dear friend the Comte de La Ferronnays. He suggested that Alphonse wait for him in the carriage outside. But the latter preferred to get out in order to see the church.

Ratisbonne relates: *"The Church of Sant' Andrea seemed to me small, poor and forgotten; I felt as if I were alone in it. There were no works of art to draw my attention. I walked about aimlessly, without*

seeing anything to arouse a thought. I can recall only that a black dog sprang into my path, bounding to and fro, impeding my progress... but soon he was gone. Then the church itself seemed to disappear; and I saw nothing at all...or I should rather say, O my God, that I saw one thing alone!

How can I speak of this? No! Human words cannot even try to convey what is beyond expression... When M. de Bussièrès recalled me to myself, I was in tears and unable to answer his questions... But I seized the medal which was on my breast and I fervently kissed the image of the Virgin...Oh! It had indeed been she! I was not able to speak; I did not wish to discuss what had happened; I felt within me something so solemn and so sacred as to require me to ask for a priest."*

Alphonse continued to kiss his Miraculous Medal which was wet with tears. He begged the Baron to take him immediately to a priest, saying he did not know how he could continue to live without Baptism. He now saw clearly why he had come to Rome.

De Bussièrès tells us: *"Ratisbonne declared that he would not explain himself until after he had obtained permission to do so from a priest, 'For what I have to say can only be said when I am on my knees.'*

I took him immediately to the Church of the Gesu, to Pere de Villefort, who tried to draw an explanation from him. Ratisbonne again grasped his medal. And kissing it he said, 'I have seen her! I have seen

*The Baron de Bussièrès had gone to another part of the church to make the funeral arrangements for his friend, the Count. After an absence of no more than ten to twelve minutes, he returned, to find Ratisbonne in an ecstasy. Coming to himself, Alphonse exclaimed: "Ah! How this man has prayed for me!" He was referring to the Comte de La Ferronnays who had just died after praying so fervently for Ratisbonne's conversion.



her!’ ... These are his own words. ,I had been in that church for only a brief time when all at once I felt myself in the grip of a disturbance impossible to describe. I raised my eyes. I could no longer see anything of the building. All the light seemed as if it were concentrated in one of the chapels and in the midst of its shining there stood upon the altar the Virgin Mary as she is shown on the Medal, beautiful, glorious, and embodying at once both majesty and kindness. A force which I could

not resist drew me toward her. The Virgin made a sign with Her hand that I should kneel and She seemed to say: ,It is well.’ She did not actually speak to me, but I understood all.”

Baron de Bussièrès continues: “Ratisbonne and I left Pere de Villefort to go and give thanks to God, first at the church of Santa Maria Maggiore and then at Saint Peter’s.

He not only believed in the Real Presence. He felt its reality. When he was approaching the altar of reservation, he seemed quite overcome and as though he ought at once to withdraw, for it seemed to him a horrible thing to come before the living God in the state of original sin. He went to take refuge in the chapel of Our Lady, saying, ‘Here, at least, I am not fearful, for I know myself to be under the protection of boundless mercy.”

Ratisbonne declared: “It was She Herself that I beheld in reality; I saw Her just as I now see you!” But his eyes were unable to bear

the brightness of this heavenly light. Three times he tried to look at her face again. Each time he was unable to raise his eyes beyond her hands from whence there poured, just as on the medal, torrents of grace in the appearance of rays of light.

Ratisbonne continues: *“I could not express what I saw of mercy and liberality in Mary’s hands. It was not only an effulgence of light, it was not rays I distinguished. Words are inadequate to depict the ineffable gifts filling our Mother’s hands and descending from them, the bounty, mercy, tenderness, the celestial sweetness and riches, flowing in torrents and inundating the souls she protects.”*

Child of God, Heir of Heaven

“Once you have been baptized,” the Father General of the Society of Jesus said to Alphonse, “you must not only adore this Cross which was shown to you during your sleep; you must carry it as well.”

Alphonse tells us concerning his conversion: *“I had come out of a dark pit, out of a tomb... and I was alive, completely alive...I thought of my brother Theodore* with inexpressible joy. But how I wept as I thought of my family, of my fiancée, of my poor sisters. I wept indeed, as I thought of them whom I so loved and for whom I said the first of my prayers... Will you not raise your eyes to the Saviour Whose blood blots out original sin? Oh! How hideous is the mark of this taint, and how does it alter beyond recognition the creature made in God’s own likeness!”*

*Alphonse had an older brother, Theodore, whom he had detested for years, vehemently resenting the fact that he (Theodore) had become not only a Catholic, but a priest as well. The patient prayers of this man of God eventually won out over the rancor and resentment of his younger brother.

How remarkable it is to find in Ratisbonne this almost physical horror of original sin. It is true that he had just been confronted with the Immaculate Conception. When the priests wished to defer his Baptism, he exclaimed: ***“The Jews who heard the preaching of the Apostles were baptized immediately, and you want to put me off, after I have „heard” the preaching of the Queen of the Apostles?”***

The date for Alphonse’s Baptism was set for the 30th of January, following a one-week retreat at the Jesuit Church of the Gesu, in Rome. Most certainly it was unusual to proceed so hastily, but this was a case hitherto unheard of. Without uttering a single word, Our Lady had enlightened the mind and changed the heart of this modern-day Saul of Tarsus with the infused knowledge of all the mysteries of religion.

Through Mary to Jesus

The Abbe Dupanloup, one of the great orators of the era, thus describes the conclusion of the Baptism ceremony which was attended by all the higher ranks of Roman society: *“Mass was then said and during it, Ratisbonne received his first Holy Communion. He went before the altar to receive the Sacred Host. This last grace caused his soul to overflow. Until now, he had been entirely the master of his emotion, but at this point he was unable to control the strange new feeling of happiness that welled up within him, and all at once he burst into sobs and had to be supported, half-fainting, back to his place.”*

News of this miraculous event spread quickly all over Europe, especially in diplomatic and financial circles, where Ratisbonne, de Bussi res and de La Ferronnays were widely known. The city of Rome itself was in a stir and a special Church commission was established to study the astonishing conversion. Faced with the overpowering

evidence, the court ‘fully recognized the signal miracle wrought by God through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the spontaneous conversion of Marie Alphonse Ratisbonne from Judaism to Catholicism.’ It was a major triumph of the Miraculous Medal.

Alphonse Ratisbonne later went on to become a priest, taking the name of Father Alphonse Marie. Working for thirty years in the



Altar in the church of Sant' Andrea in Rome

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.

The conversion of Claude Newman (1944)

Claude Newman was an African American man who was born on December 1, 1923 to Willie and Floretta (Young) Newman in Stuttgart, Arkansas. In 1928, Claude's father Willie took Claude and his older brother away from their mother for unknown reasons, and they are brought to their grandmother, Ellen Newman, of Bovina, Warren County, Mississippi.

In 1939, Claude's beloved grandmother, Ellen Newman, married a man named Sid Cook. Soon Sid became abusive toward Ellen, which deeply angered Claude. In 1940, Claude worked as a farmhand on Ceres Plantation in Bovina, Mississippi. The plantation was owned by a wealthy landowner named U.G. Flowers, and Sid Cook was born and raised on this plantation. Claude got married in 1940 at the age of 17 to a young woman of the same age.

On December 19, 1942, Claude was apparently still very angered by Sid's abusive treatment towards his grandmother Ellen, and egged on by a dominant friend named Elbert Harris, Claude lay in waiting at Sid Cook's house (Sid Cook and Ellen Newman having since separated). Claude shoots Sid as he enters, killing him, and takes his money, then flees to his mother's house in Arkansas, arriving on December 20th.

Claude is arrested and sent to prison on death row

In January 1943, Claude was apprehended in Arkansas and was returned to Vicksburg, Mississippi and made a coerced confession on January 13. Despite the protests of Claude's lawyer Harry K. Murray, his confession was admitted as evidence, and he was found guilty by jury, and was initially sentenced to die in the electric chair on May 14, 1943. Later an appeal to retry the case was rejected by State Attorney General and he was rescheduled to be executed on January 20, 1944.

Claude receives the Miraculous Medal

The majority of the information that will now be presented comes from a tape recording of a radio show interview of Father O'Leary – a priest who came to know Claude very well during Claude's imprisonment. While Claude was in jail awaiting execution, he shared a cell-block with four other prisoners. One night, the five men were sitting around talking and eventually the conversation ran out. During this time, Claude noticed a medal on a string around one of the other prisoner's neck. Curious, he asked the other prisoner what the medal was. The young prisoner was a Catholic, but he apparently did not know (or did not want to talk) about the medal, and seemingly embarrassed, he appeared angry and suddenly took the medal off from around his own neck and threw it on the floor at Claude's feet with a curse and a cuss, telling him to „*take the thing*”. Claude picked up the medal, and after looking it over, he placed it around his own neck, although he had no idea whose image it was on the medal; to him it was simply a trinket, but for some reason he felt attracted to it, and wanted to wear it.

The Blessed Virgin Mary appears to Claude in a vision

During the night while sleeping on top of his cot, he was awakened with a touch upon his wrist. Awakening with a start, there stood, as Claude told Father O'Leary afterwards, 'the most beautiful Woman that God ever created'.

At first he was quite frightened, not knowing what to make of this extraordinary beautiful glowing Woman. The Lady soon calmed Claude down, and then said to him, „*If you would like me to be your Mother, and you would like to be my child, send for a priest of the Catholic Church.*” And after saying these words she suddenly disappeared. Excited, Claude immediately started to yell „*a ghost, a ghost*”, and started screaming that he wanted a Catholic priest.

Father Robert O'Leary SVD (1911-1984), the priest who tells the story, was called first thing the next morning. Upon arrival he went to see Claude who told him of what had happened the night before. Deeply impressed by the events, Claude, along with the other four men in his cell-block, asked for religious instruction in the Catholic faith.

Claude and some of the other prisoners receive instruction in the Catholic faith

Father O'Leary returned to the prison the next day to begin instruction for the prisoners. It was then that the priest learned that Claude Newman could neither read nor write at all. The only way he could tell if a book was right-side-up was if the book contained a picture. Claude told him that he had never been to school, and Father O'Leary soon discovered that his ignorance of religion was even more profound. He knew practically nothing about religion or the Christian faith. He knew that there was a God, but he did not know that Jesus was God. And so Claude began receiving instructions, and

the other prisoners helped him with his studies.

After a few days, two of the religious Sisters from Father O'Leary's parish-school obtained permission from the warden to come to the prison. They wanted to meet Claude and hear his remarkable story, and they also wanted to visit the women in the prison. Soon, on another floor of the prison, the Sisters began to teach some of the women-prisoners the catechism as well.



Several weeks passed, and it came time when Father O'Leary was going to give instructions about the Sacrament of Confession. The Sisters too sat in on the class. The priest said to the prisoners, „Ok boys, today I'm going to teach you about the Sacrament of Confession.”

Claude said, „Oh, I know about that! The Lady told me that when we go to confession we are kneeling down not before a priest, but we're kneeling down by the Cross of Her Son. And that when we are truly sorry for our sins, and we confess our sins, the Blood He shed flows down over us and washes us free from all sins.”

Hearing Claude say this, Father O'Leary and the Sisters sat stunned with their mouths wide open. Claude thought they were angry and said, „Oh don't be angry, don't be angry, I didn't mean to blurt it out.” The priest said, „We're not angry Claude. We are just surprised. You have seen her again?” Claude replied, „Come around the cell-block away from the others.”

Proof that the Blessed Virgin Mary was appearing to Claude

When they were alone, Claude said to the priest, *„She told me that if you doubted me or showed hesitancy, I was to remind you that lying in a ditch in Holland in 1940, you made a vow to Her which she’s still waiting for you to keep.”* And, Father O’Leary recalls, *„Claude then told me precisely what the vow was.”*

Claude’s revelation absolutely convinced Father O’Leary that Claude was telling the truth about his visions of Our Lady. The promise Fr. O’Leary made to Our Lady in 1940 from a ditch in Holland (the proof Claude gave the priest that Our Lady really was appearing to him) was this: that when he could, he would build a church in honor of Our Lady’s Immaculate Conception. He did just that in 1947. He had been transferred to Clarksdale, Mississippi in 1945 when a group of African American Catholic laymen asked to have a church built there. The Bishop of Natchez, Mississippi had been sent \$5000 by Archbishop Cushing of Boston for the “*Negro missions.*” The Bishop and Father O’Leary commissioned the church of the Immaculate Conception to be built, and it is still there today.

Father O’Leary and Clark then returned to the catechism class on Confession. And Claude kept telling the other prisoners, *„You should not be afraid to go to confession. You’re really telling God your sins, not the priest.”* Then Claude said, *„You know, the Lady said that Confession is something like a telephone. We talk through the priest to God, and God talks back to us through the priest.”*

A heavenly lesson about Holy Communion

About a week later, Father O’Leary was preparing to teach the class about the Blessed Sacrament. The Sisters were again present

for this lesson too. Claude indicated that the Lady had also taught him about the Eucharist, and he asked if he could tell the priest what she said.

Fr. O'Leary agreed immediately. Claude related, *„The Lady told me that in Communion, I will only see what looks like a piece of bread. But she told me that It is really and truly her Son, and that He will be with me just as He was with Her before He was born in Bethlehem. She told me that I should spend my time like she did during Her lifetime with Him – in loving Him, adoring Him, thanking Him, praising Him and asking Him for blessings. I shouldn't be distracted or bothered by anybody else or anything else, but I should spend those few minutes in my thoughts alone with Him.“*

Claude is received into the Catholic Church and scheduled to be executed

As the weeks progressed, eventually they finished the catechism instructions and Claude and the other prisoners were received into the Catholic Church. The St. Mary's parish (Vicksburg, MI) baptismal log has recorded his baptism on January 16, 1944. Fr. O'Leary officiated and a young nun, Sr. Bena Henken, served as his godmother.

Soon afterwards the time came for Claude to be executed. He was to be executed at five minutes after twelve, midnight, on January 20, 1944.

The sheriff, named Williamson, asked him, *„Claude, you have the privilege of a last request. What do you want?“*

„Well,“ said Claude, *„all of my friends are all shook up. The jailer is all shook up. But you don't understand. I'm not going to die; only this body. I'm going to be with her. So, then I would like to have a party“.*

„What do you mean?“ asked the sheriff.

„A party!” said Claude. „Will you give Father O’Leary permission to bring in some cakes and ice cream and will you allow the prisoners on the second floor to be freed in the main room so that we can all be together and have a party?”

„Somebody might attack Father,” cautioned the warden. Claude turned to the men who were standing by and said, „Oh no they won’t, right fellas?”

The warden consented and posted additional guards for the party. So, Father O’Leary visited a wealthy patron of the parish, and she generously supplied the ice cream and cake, and everyone enjoyed the party. Afterwards, because Claude had requested it, they made a Holy Hour, praying especially for Claude and for all of their souls. Fr. O’Leary brought prayer books from the Church, and they all said together the Stations of the Cross, and made a Holy Hour, without the Blessed Sacrament.

As the time neared for Claude’s execution, the men were put back in their cells. The priest then went to the chapel to get the Blessed Sacrament so that he could give Claude Holy Communion in the moment before his execution.

Father O’Leary returned to Claude’s cell. Claude knelt on one side of the bars, the priest knelt on the other, and they prayed together as the clock ticked toward Claude’s execution.

A two week stay of execution is granted

Fifteen minutes before the execution, Sheriff Williamson came running up the stairs shouting, „Reprieve, Reprieve, the Governor has given a two-week reprieve!” Claude had not been aware that the sheriff and the District Attorney were trying to get a stay of execution for Claude to save his life. But when Claude found out, he started to cry.

The priest and the sheriff assumed Claude's reaction was that of joy because he was not going to be executed. However Claude said, *„But you don't understand! If you ever saw her face, and looked into her eyes, you wouldn't want to live another day!“* Claude then continued, *„What have I done wrong these past weeks that God would refuse me my going home?“*

Father O'Leary then testified that Claude sobbed as one who was completely brokenhearted. Bewildered, the sheriff then left the room. The priest remained and Claude eventually quieted down, then Father O'Leary gave Claude Holy Communion. Afterwards Claude said, *„Why Father? Why must I still remain here for two weeks?“*

Claude generously sacrifices himself in an offering for a fellow prisoner

Father O'Leary then had a sudden inspiration. He reminded Claude about James Hughs, a white prisoner in the same jail who hated Claude intensely. This prisoner had led a horribly immoral life, and like Claude he too was sentenced to be executed for murder. James was raised a Catholic, but now he was a reprobate, and rejected God and all things Christian.

Father O'Leary then said *„Maybe Our Blessed Mother wants you to offer this denial of being with her for his conversion.“* And the priest continued, *„Why don't you offer to God every moment that you are separated from your heavenly Mother for this prisoner, so that he will not be separated from God for all eternity.“*

Claude thought for a moment, then agreed, and he asked Father O'Leary to teach him the words to make the offering. Father O'Leary complied, and he later testified that from that moment on the only two people on earth who knew about this personal offering were

Claude and himself, because it was a private matter between God, the Blessed Mother, Claude and himself.

A few hours later (still on the morning after his reprieve of execution) Fr. O'Leary came once again to visit Claude, and Claude said to the priest, „*James hated me before, but oh Father, how he hates me now!*” (This was because James had heard about Claude's reprieve and was jealous) To encourage him the good priest said, „*Well, perhaps that's a good sign.*”

Claude's execution

During his two weeks reprieve, Claude generously offered his sacrifice and prayers for his fellow prisoner, the reprobate James Hughs. Two weeks later, Claude was finally put to death by the electric chair on February 4, 1944.

Concerning Claude's holy death Father O'Leary testified: „*I've never seen anyone go to his death as joyfully and happily. Even the official witnesses and the newspaper reporters were amazed. They said they couldn't understand how anyone could go and sit in the electric chair while at the same time actually beaming with happiness.*”

Claude's death notice was printed in the Vicksburg Evening News on the day of his execution February 4, 1944. His last words to Father O'Leary were, „*Father, I will remember you. And whenever you have a request, ask me, and I will ask her.*”



The conversion of James Hughs (1944)

Three months after Claude's execution, on May 19, 1944, the white man named James Hughs — the one whom Claude had offered his sacrifice for, was to be executed. Father O'Leary said, *"This man was the filthiest, most immoral person I had ever come across. His hatred for God and for everything spiritual defied description."* He would not allow a priest or any clergyman in his cell. Just before his execution, the county doctor pleaded with him to at least kneel down and say the *"Our Father"* before the sheriff would come for him. The prisoner spat in the doctor's face. When he was strapped into the electric chair, the sheriff said to him, *"If you have something to say, say it now."* The condemned man started to blaspheme.

All of a sudden he stopped speaking, and his eyes became fixed on the corner of the room, and his face turned to one of absolute horror. Suddenly he screamed in terror — a horrible scream that shocked everyone present. Turning to the sheriff, he then said, *"Sheriff, get me a priest!"* Now, Father O'Leary had been in the room because Mississippi law at that time required a clergyman to be present at executions. The priest, however, had hidden himself behind some

reporters because the condemned man had threatened to curse God if he saw a clergyman. Upon calling for a priest, Father O'Leary immediately went to the condemned man. The room was cleared of everyone else, and the priest heard the man's confession. The man said he had been a Catholic, but turned away from his religion when he was 18 because of his immoral life. He confessed all of his sins with deep repentance and intense fervour.

While everyone was returning to the room, the sheriff asked the priest, "*Father, what made him change his mind?*" "*I don't know*" said Father O'Leary, "*I didn't ask him.*" The sheriff said, "*Well, I will never sleep tonight if I don't ask him.*" The Sheriff went to the condemned man and asked, "Son, what changed your mind?"

The prisoner responded, "*Remember that black man Claude – the one whom I hated so much? Well he's standing there [and he pointed], over in that corner. And behind him with one hand on each shoulder is the Blessed Virgin Mary. And Claude said to me, 'I offered my death in union with Christ on the Cross for your salvation. She has obtained for you this gift of seeing your place in Hell if you do not repent.' I have been shown my place in Hell, and that's why I screamed.*"

James Hughes was executed as scheduled, but the heavenly appearance of our Blessed Mother with Claude Newman and the subsequent vision of hell had instantly converted his soul in the last moments of his life. With the help of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Father O'Leary had taught Claude to unite himself with the suffering of Jesus by offering his own sufferings to Him, just as we all can do for others, and Claude's suffering helped to pay the price for James' remarkable last minute conversion and repentance. Therefore we must never under-estimate the value of our suffering joined with that of Jesus Christ's, and also the power and loving intercession of Our Blessed Mother in heaven.

How the Miraculous Medal changed my life

by Fr. John A. Hardon, S.J.

One of the most memorable experiences that I ever had was with the Miraculous Medal! It changed my life.

In the fall of 1948, the year after my ordination, I was in what we call the Tertianship. This is a third year of Novitiate before taking final vows.

In October of that year, a Vincentian priest came to speak to us young Jesuit priests. He encouraged us to obtain faculties, as they are called, to enroll people in the Confraternity of the Miraculous Medal. Among other things, he said, *“Fathers, the Miraculous Medal works. Miracles have been performed by Our Lady through the Miraculous Medal.”*

I was not impressed by what the Vincentian priest was saying. I was not the medal-wearing kind of person and I certainly did not have a Miraculous Medal. But I thought to myself, *“It does not cost*

anything.” So I put my name down to get a four page leaflet from the Vincentians, with the then-Latin formula for blessing Miraculous Medals and enrolling people in the Confraternity of the Miraculous Medal. About two weeks later, I got the leaflet for blessing and enrollment, put it into my office book and forgot about it.

In February of the next year, I was sent to assist the chaplain of St. Alexis Hospital in Cleveland, Ohio. I was to be there helping the regular chaplain for two weeks.

Each morning I received a list of all the patients admitted into the hospital that day. There were so many Catholics admitted that I could not visit them all as soon as they came.

Among the patients admitted was a boy about nine years old. He had been sled-riding down hill, lost control of the sled and ran into a tree head-on. He fractured his skull and X-rays showed he had suffered severe brain damage.

When I finally got to visit his room at the hospital, he had been in a coma for ten days, no speech, no voluntary movements of the body. His condition was such that the only question was whether he would live. There was no question of recovering from what was diagnosed as permanent and inoperable brain damage.

After blessing the boy and consoling his parents, I was about to leave his hospital room. But then a thought came to me. *“That Vincentian priest. He said, ‘The Miraculous Medal works.’ Now this will be a test of its alleged miraculous powers!”*

I didn’t have a Miraculous Medal of my own. And everyone I asked at the hospital also did not have one. But I persisted, and finally one of the nursing sisters on night duty found a Miraculous Medal.

What I found out was that you don’t just bless the Medal, you have to put it around a person’s neck on a chain or ribbon. So the

sister-nurse found a blue ribbon for the medal, which made me feel silly. What was I doing with medals and blue ribbons.

However, I blessed the Medal and had the father hold the leaflet for investing a person in the Confraternity of the Miraculous Medal. I proceeded to recite the words of investiture. No sooner did I finish the prayer of enrolling the boy in the Confraternity than he opened his eyes for the first time in two weeks. He saw his mother and said, “*Ma, I want some ice cream.*” He had been given only intravenous feeding.

This Experience Changed My Life

Then he proceeded to talk to his father and mother. After a few minutes of stunned silence, a doctor was called. The doctor examined the boy and told the parents they could give him something to eat.

The next day began a series of tests on the boy’s condition. X-rays showed the brain damage was gone. Then still more tests. After three days, when all examinations showed there was complete restoration to health, the boy was released from the hospital.

This experience so changed my life that I have not been the same since. My faith in God, faith in His power to work miracles, was strengthened beyond description.

Since then, of course, I have been promoting devotion to Our Lady and the use of the Miraculous Medal.

Biography of Saint Catherine Labouré

Saint of the Miraculous Medal

Catherine Labouré was born on May 2, 1806 in the village of Fainles-Moutiers, France. The very next day, the feast of the Finding of the Holy Cross, she was baptized, and her name entered on the books of the Church. Catherine's baptismal name was rarely used by her family. They called her Zoe after an obscure saint whose feast fell on the day of Catherine's birth. On October 9, 1815, Madeleine Labouré, mother of Catherine, died. Zoe was nine now, her sister Tonine — seven, and her brother Auguste — six.

“Now You will be my Mother”

Zoe adopted Mary as her Mother. It was on a day shortly after her mother's burial that an extraordinary thing happened. A statue of Our Lady stood on a shelf in the bedroom of her father and mother. Zoe was alone in the bedroom. Zoe pulled a chair over beneath the shelf, for it was too high for her to reach. Climbing up on the chair,

she stretched overhead and took down Our Lady's statue. Throwing her arms about the statue, she hugged it close to her little body, as a child might hug her favorite doll or teddy bear. But this was no doll. In a sense, it was no longer just a statue of Our Lady. It was Mary herself. Zoe's words showed that very clearly.

"Now, dear Blessed Mother," she said aloud with childlike fervour, *"now you will be my Mother!"* That was all. She put the statue back in its usual place and climbed down from the chair. The Blessed Virgin arranged for the servant to be quietly on the scene and to observe it all.

From this day forward Zoe Labouré was truly the child of Mary and Mary was truly her mother. The reality of their relationship is evident in Zoe's simple, straightforward acceptance of it. Mary was as real to her as her father and brother and sister. This is the literal truth and it is the key to Zoe's life. It explains her intimate, her almost casual communion with the Mother of God. It explains how – whether now or a little later, we do not know – she could foster a desire that seems at first glance presumptuous, preposterous, nearly blasphemous: the desire to see the Blessed Virgin. She clung to that desire, made it the constant petition of her prayers, and, most amazing of all, was serenely confident that it would be realized. This little village girl knew that some day she would see the Mother of God.

The First Communion

On January 25, 1818 Zoe received her Lord for the first time, in the village church of Moutiers-Saint Jean. The first meeting of Jesus and Zoe Labouré seemed to effect a perpetual contract of mutual love and service. Zoe, who was already good and kind and devout even to a degree of heroism, began to display more and more the outward trappings of her love for God.

Zoe began to attend Mass daily and to receive Holy Communion frequently. Given the circumstances, these were acts of devotion approaching the heroic. There was no daily Mass in Fain; there was not always Sunday Mass. The only priest in the district said his daily Mass in the chapel of the Hospital of Saint Sauveur in Moutiers-Saint Jean. Daily Mass for this young girl just entering her teens meant an early rising — an earlier rising even than farm life called for, because she had chores to do before she left — and a long walk in all kinds of weather and, half the year, in the dark.

Zoe had decided, even at so early an age, that she was going to enter religion. Attendance at daily Mass was but the start of Zoe's day-long devotion.

The dream

One night in 1824, when she was eighteen, Zoe had an extraordinary dream. She dreamed that she was in her favorite oratory, the chapel of the Labourés in the village church, assisting at the Mass of an old and venerable priest she had never seen before. Each time the priest turned from the altar for the "*Dominus Vobiscum*", he raised his eyes to Zoe's face and held her gaze. Each time she was forced to lower her eyes, blushing, unable to hold the steady and compelling eyes of the priest. When Mass was over and the old man had started for the sacristy, he turned back and beckoned to Zoe to follow him. She was suddenly very frightened and, jumping to her feet, ran from the church. She glanced back over her shoulder as she ran, and the priest was still there, standing by the sacristy door, looking after her.

Then the thought came to Zoe in her dream to stop to visit a woman of the village who was sick. On entering the sickroom, she came face to face with the same venerable priest. Wild fright seized

her again, and she began to back away. For the first time, then, the priest spoke directly to her: *“You do well to visit the sick, my child. You flee from me now, but one day you will be glad to come to me. God has plans for you; do not forget it”*.

At these words Zoe awoke and lay wondering what it could all mean; and, strangely enough, there was no more fear in her, only peace and comfort and a great happiness. Although she did not understand it then, this dream was sent to Zoe by God to point out with certainty the vocation of His choice. Zoe told no one about her dream. She recounted it for the first time to her confessor in Châtillon some four years later, when she began to realize what it meant. Dreams and their interpretation are a slippery business, especially in spiritual matters.

When Zoe had reached the age of twenty-two, she sat down and took stock of her situation. She decided to act upon her vocation. Nor would it be rash to state further that God was nudging her to action, for she never undertook anything unless she was convinced that it was the Will of God. Her father said *“No!”*. The father told her to go to Paris to work in a restaurant of her brother Charles. Then she went to her brother Hubert and his wife in Châtillon.

Awakening

Some weeks after her arrival in Châtillon, Zoe stopped one day at the Hospice to speak with the Sister Superior. She had scarcely



St. Vincent de Paul

seated herself in the parlour to wait, when her eyes were caught by a portrait on the wall. It was a portrait of a venerable priest, plain-featured, even homely, but with shrewd and smiling eyes that held Zoe's gaze, even as they had done four years before. It was indeed the old priest of Zoe's youthful dream. When the first shock of recognition had subsided, Zoe was in a fever of excitement, eager to ask the question that trembled on her lips. Then, finally, Zoe spoke the few words that were the climax to all her years of seeking. "*Sister, who is that priest?*". "*Why, my child, that is our holy founder, St. Vincent de Paul*".

She lost no time in seeking out her confessor, M. Vincent Prost, to tell him of her mysterious dream and its sudden unravelling. When she had finished, he said without hesitation: "*St. Vincent de Paul calls you. He wishes you to be a Sister of Charity.*"

Two stones yet lay in Zoe's path, though they worried her little, for not long ago there had not even been a path. The first of these was to obtain the consent of her father. Reluctantly, he gave his consent. Then Zoe had to remove the second stone in her path, the persuading of the Superior of the Hospice at Châtillon to receive her as a postulant. This was a harder task. Fortunately, Zoe found a champion in the Assistant of the house, Sister Francoise Victoire Sejole. It is comforting to recognize the true friends God gave Zoe when she needed them most. Sister Sejole was to be the closest friend of Zoe's religious life. This good sister was a remarkable soul, and she had the supernatural gift of discerning the souls of others. On January 22, 1830 Zoe Labouré entered upon her religious life at the Hospice de la Charite in Châtillon-sur-Seine.

In the short time of her postulancy Zoe made a remarkable impression at Châtillon. Zoe performed a daily act of devotion in honor

of Our Lord's Passion. According to their rule, the Sisters of Charity pause in their work every afternoon at three o'clock and repair to the chapel, there to adore the dying Christ and beg Him to apply the merits of His Death to the agonizing, to poor sinners, and to the souls in purgatory.

Return of St. Vincent de Paul

Zoe came to the Motherhouse on April 21, 1830. The Mistress of Novices welcomed her warmly, showed her a bed and a place at table, instructed her briefly in the rules of the house, and informed her that from now on she would be known as Sister Labouré.

During a novena to St. Vincent, his heart appeared Catherine. The heart appeared to her above a little shrine containing a bone from the right arm of St. Vincent, in the chapel of the Sisters. It hovered over this precious relic, in front of St. Joseph's altar and slightly higher than the picture of St. Anne that hung on the sanctuary wall. It appeared to her on three successive evenings in



three different guises. On the first evening, it was of a flesh-white color. Inwardly, Catherine understood that the color foretold peace, calm, innocence, and union for the two Communities, the priests and the Sisters of St. Vincent.

On the second evening, it was a fiery red, and Catherine again, in the depths of her own heart, understood its symbolism: charity would be enkindled in all hearts, the Community would renew its fervour and extend itself to the utmost bounds of the earth.

The next evening was a different story. The heart of St. Vincent took on a dark red hue. On seeing it, Catherine was plunged into sadness, a sadness which presaged misfortune for herself and for the King of France. She understood by this strange, spiritual sadness that she would have much to suffer in surmounting the obstacles that would be put in her path; and she understood, without looking deeper, that there would be a change in government. Then, for the first time, Catherine heard a voice speaking to her interiorly: *“The heart of St. Vincent is deeply afflicted at the sorrows that will befall France,”* it said.

The apparition of St. Vincent’s heart, with its various changes of color, was repeated eight or nine times, each evening when Catherine returned from St. Lazare. On the last evening, the final day of the novena, it appeared, bright vermilion, and once more Catherine heard the interior voice *“The heart of St. Vincent is somewhat consoled because he has obtained from God, through the intercession of Mary, that his two families should not perish in the midst of these sorrows, and that God would make use of them to reanimate the Faith”*.

There can be no doubt that the visions of the heart of St. Vincent were a prelude to the great apparitions of Our Lady. They hinted at what Mary was to predict and promise more fully, they foretold what Mary was to confirm: God’s protection of the Double Family of St. Vincent in times of national disaster.

A Vision of Christ as King

Sister Labouré was given *“another great grace”*, during the whole time of her novitiate: the visible presence of Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. She does not say whether this vision was a constant thing, that is, vouchsafed each time she entered the chapel, whether it was

only during Mass, or during a certain portion of the Mass. She says only that she “*saw Our Lord in the Most Holy Sacrament.*” She continues: “*I saw Him during the whole of my time at the seminary, except when I doubted; the next time, I saw nothing, because I had wished to penetrate the mystery, and, believing myself deceived, had doubted*”.



On Trinity Sunday, June 6, 1830, Sister Labouré was given a special vision of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, or more specifically of Christ as King. This time she is precise as to the moment of the vision. Our Lord appeared to her, robed as a King, with a cross at His breast, during the Gospel of the Mass. Suddenly, all His kingly ornaments fell from Him to the ground – even the cross, which tumbled beneath His feet.

The Dark Night of a Soul

The years 1830–36 were eventful ones for her. This then was the crucial period of Catherine’s life, when she came to a full knowledge of what God wanted of her and set about accomplishing it. True to character, she threw herself wholeheartedly into the task. There were no half-measures with Catherine. She was a thorough workman.

The spiritual life, like any work of God, has its rules; and any saint, no matter how distinctive his holiness, must observe them. Ascetical writers define three great stages in spiritual development which they call the Purgative, Illuminative, and Unitive Ways. While these three stages are successive in general: the soul first purging

itself of sins and faults and the perverse movement of the passions, then advancing to a fuller knowledge of God with the help of divine illumination, and finally uniting itself wholly to Him in faith and hope and love, there are points of contact where all three of these stages may be experienced at the same time. The extreme instrument of purgation is contradiction, and the supreme example of contradiction is the state spiritual writers call "*the dark night of the soul*," a period when the soul, having abandoned the things of earth, feels itself abandoned in turn by God. It is accompanied by a horrible dryness and distaste for prayer, and a feeling very like despair; it can only be ridden out by clinging with blind faith to the hem of God's garment.

Catherine, too, had her "*dark night*"; just when, we don't know, but have it she did, for it was essential to the heroic sanctity she attained. She herself speaks, in passing, of "*periods of dryness*," but these may have been the ordinary trials common to all who embrace the religious life. Both God and Catherine got right down to business in this matter of sanctity. Catherine knew in theory that it would not be easy. She had learned in the seminary, from books and conferences, that it consisted essentially in the subjugation of the will, the citadel of the soul. It was a teaching she accepted without demur, a teaching indeed she actively endorsed, for she had sought the Will of God from earliest childhood. It is one thing, however, to accept a theory; it is another thing entirely to practise it. It is one thing to bow to God's Will directly; it is another thing to bow to it indirectly, hidden behind the will of a superior as human as oneself.

This was the essence of the holiness of Catherine Labouré: unswerving obedience to superiors, even under stress; and the stress usually lay in the fact that very often Catherine was more competent to do the work than the superior who ordered it, and both knew it.

Her work

Not that it was done intentionally to humiliate her. After all, her superiors did not know all her capabilities. They could discover them only by trial and error. So, when she came to Enghien she was tried first in the kitchen, and then in the laundry, and finally in the charge of caring for the old men of the house.

In 1836, Sister Catherine Labouré was thirty years old. Now she took up a pattern of life that was to change very little throughout forty years: she was given charge of the old men who had come to Enghien to end their days. The little farm attached to the



house was also given into her keeping. She worked there for 40 years. The story of how she cared for her beloved old men is, exteriorly, the story of her life: serving their meals, mending their clothes, supervising their recreations, providing them with snuff and smoking tobacco, bringing them into line when they broke her wise regulations, nursing them in their illnesses, watching at their deathbeds.

The “Cross of Victory” Vision

On February 22, 1848, there erupted the first of the bloody Parisian battles that marked that year of Revolutions. Catherine was not involved in any direct way in the Revolution of 1848. She had a vision of the cross. A cross, covered with a black veil or crape, appeared in the air, passing over a section of Paris and casting terror into hearts [she wrote]. It was carried by men of angry visage, who, stopping

suddenly in front of Notre Dame, let the cross fall into the mire, and, seized with fright themselves, ran off at full speed. At the same instant, an outstretched arm appeared which pointed to blood, and a voice was heard, saying: "*Blood flows, the innocent dies, the pastor gives his life for his sheep*".

She went on to recount how the cross was lifted up anew with respect and placed upon a base some ten or twelve feet square, where it stood to a height of fifteen or twenty feet. Around it were carried some of the dead and wounded who had suffered "*in the grave events which transpired*." The cross was then held in great reverence and was called the "*Cross of Victory*." People came to see it from all parts of France and even from foreign lands, led both by devotion, since many miracles of protection were attributed to this cross, and by curiosity, because it was also a great work of art.

After Catherine's death, note concerning this "*Cross of Victory*": The enemies of religion carry a cross, covered with a black veil, which casts terror into souls; the cross triumphs. It is called the Cross of Victory, and wears the livery of the nation. It is set up alongside Notre Dame, in the place of Victories. It is made of a strange precious wood, magnificently ornamented, with golden apples at its extremities; the great Christ nailed to it leans His head to the right side and there streams from the wound on his right side a great deal of blood.

The badge of the nation is fixed at the height of the great beam of the cross; white, symbol of innocence, "*flickers*" upon the crown of thorns, the red symbolizes blood, the blue is the livery of the Blessed Virgin. Heaven — and Catherine — were still preoccupied with France. What nation has been given to see its colours part of a miraculous vision, or explained in such mystic symbolism? This vision of Catherine's has been all but forgotten.

“It is our own Blessed Mother, the Immaculate!”

On a certain morning about the year 1850 when the rising bell rang at 4 o'clock, the Sister who slept in the bed alongside Catherine's noticed with alarm that Catherine was missing. Worse, her bed had not been slept in. Dressing quickly, the Sister ran to the Superior with the disturbing news. Other Sisters noticed the commotion and joined the search. Catherine was found in the garden, on her knees before the statue of Our Lady, hands joined in prayer. Apparently she had been there all night. She was in a state of ecstasy, for she heard no one approach her, nor did she rouse when they spoke to her. Then she came to herself, visibly embarrassed at discovering her audience. She got to her feet without a word of explanation and went to the chapel for the morning meditation. Although she showed signs of great fatigue from the night-long vigil she knelt up straight as ever at her prayers, heard Mass, and began the day's duties, as if nothing had happened.

This garden statue of Our Lady was a favorite of Catherine's. It was her custom — and the whole house was aware of it — to pray before it often. It came to be a sort of game with the orphans of the house, to hide in the bushes and watch the holy Sister at her prayers. Not many years after the incident the statue was replaced by a new one. This replacement was shattered by the Communists in 1871, and the old statue restored to its place of honor, to the evident joy of Sister Catherine.

The miracle of bilocation

On the day of the first national pilgrimage of France to the grotto at Lourdes (1873), a group of the Sisters of Enghien were standing at the front door of the house, deep in conversation. Catherine joined

them, and, before they knew what was happening, she had launched into a detailed description of the ceremony taking place at that moment at Lourdes. Several days later, the Parisian papers verified everything she had said. It is interesting to conjecture whether Catherine had her knowledge of an event occurring several hundred miles away by clairvoyance or whether she was bilocated, being actually present at Lourdes and Enghien at one and the same time.

In the last year of her life, Catherine sat sewing at recreation, listening to the small talk but saying little herself, as was her wont, when suddenly she was shocked to hear one of the young Sisters advance, in scoffing tone, the opinion that the Sister who saw Our Lady saw only a picture. Swiftly Catherine raised her head and fixed the thoughtless Sister with stern, compelling eyes. “*Sister,*” she said slowly and clearly and in a tone of voice that caused everyone to turn and listen, “*the Sister who saw the Blessed Virgin, saw her in flesh and bone, even as you and I see each other now*”.

Death and Glory

In 1876 sister Catherine began to take to her bed with more and more frequency. All of Catherine’s symptoms would seem to point to some cardio-vascular failure, a condition not uncommon at her age — she was past seventy — and to the complications induced by chronic asthma.

Catherine was still able to go out occasionally, usually to the Motherhouse to attend the monthly conference. Once, as she climbed into the omnibus to return home — it was a feast day of Our Lady — Catherine slipped and fell. She said nothing, but a few minutes later one of the Sisters noticed that she held her hand wrapped in a handkerchief. She undertook to tease her about it. “*What treasure have you*

there, Sister Catherine?”. “It is a bouquet from Our Lady,” Catherine said, smiling. “She sends me one like it on every one of her feasts.” Upon examination, it was discovered that she had broken her wrist.

Two weeks before Christmas, Catherine became so ill that she retired to her room, never to leave it again. She was not confined to bed exclusively; she found it easier to breathe if she sat in a chair from time to time. It was the beginning of the end, but her sufferings were not to be wholly physical. Every day, Catherine grew weaker. She continued to remind the Sisters that she would die before the year was out, but there were so few days left in the month that the Sisters could still not believe that she would die so soon. One of them ventured to ask her whether she was afraid to die. Catherine answered, with genuine astonishment: “*Why should I be afraid? I am going to see Our Lord and the Blessed Virgin and St. Vincent*”.

The last day of the year came, December 31, 1876, and Catherine was no worse than usual. Shortly after six o’clock, she took a sudden weak spell. The Sisters were hurriedly summoned and the prayers for the dying begun. At seven o’clock, with no struggle, with scarcely a sigh, Catherine Labouré died.

The funeral was set for January 3, 1877, at 10 o’clock. A few days later, the first cure took place. A child of ten, deprived from birth of the use of his limbs, was brought to Catherine’s tomb. Hardly had the child touched the stone when he stood erect and firm upon his feet. He was suddenly and wholly cured. And so, for the time, no thought was given to the introduction of Sister Catherine’s Cause of Beatification. In 1895 the Cause of the Servant of God, Sister Catherine Labouré, was introduced at Rome. The Beatification of Catherine Labouré, held in St. Peter’s on May 28, 1933, ranked in magnificence

with those of Jeanne d’Arc and Therese of Lisieux, ceremonies which left a lasting memory in Rome.

The Church now ordered the exhumation of the body of the saint. It had lain, sealed in the vault beneath the chapel at Reuilly, for fifty-seven years. The coffin was carried to the rue du Bac, and there opened in the presence of Cardinal Verdier, Archbishop of Paris, and a number of civil officials and doctors. As the lid was lifted, Catherine lay there, as fresh and serene as the day she was buried. Her skin had not darkened in the least; the eyes which had looked on Our Lady were as intensely blue as ever, and – most remarkable of all – her arms and legs were as supple as if she were merely asleep.

Fourteen years later, on July 27, 1947, Catherine Labouré was formally declared a saint and raised to the full honors of the altar. At the close of the magnificent rites, Pope Pius XII spoke words which might well be engraved as the epitaph of Catherine Labouré, for they were, in effect, the story of her life.

“Favoured though she was with visions and celestial delights, she did not advertise herself to seek worldly fame, but took herself merely for the handmaid of God and preferred to remain unknown and to be reputed as nothing. And thus, desiring only the glory of God and of His Mother, she went meekly about the ordinary, and even the unpleasant, tasks that were assigned to her in the bosom of her Religious family. She was always willing and ready to give diligent attention to the sick, ministering to their bodies and their souls; to wait upon the old and the infirm without sparing herself; to act as portress, receiving all with a serene and modest countenance; to cook; to mend torn and tattered clothing; to carry out, in a word, all the duties laid upon her, even the unattractive and onerous ones. And while she worked away, never idle but always busy and cheerful, her heart never lost sight of

heavenly things: indeed she saw God uninterruptedly in all things and all things in God. Impelled by the urging of love, she hurried eagerly before the tabernacle as often as she could, or before the sacred image of her holy Mother, to pour out the desires of her heart and to make an offering of the fragrance of her prayers. Accordingly, it was evident that while she dwelt in earthly exile, in mind and heart she lived in Heaven and sought, before everything else, to mount with rapid steps to the highest perfection, and to spend all her powers in reaching it. She loved the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary with a special warmth of piety; and she was ever on the watch to influence, by word and example, as many other persons as she could to love Them. And thus when she came to the end of her mortal life, she did not face death with fear but with gladness. Confident in God and the most holy Virgin, she took time to distribute, with a weak and tremulous hand, the last of her Miraculous Medals to those standing by, and then, content and smiling, she hastened away to heaven.”

We recommend the book “Saint Catherine Labouré of the Miraculous Medal” by Fr. Joseph Dirvin(1958)

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