

Miraculous Medal Association

Carl L. Pieber, C.M.

*Deputy Director General
International Miraculous Medal Association*

Introduction

James Foley, beheaded by the Islamic State (ISIS) on 20 August 2012 was a journalist and poet. He once wrote:

“Drop a pebble in the water: just a splash, and it is gone; but there’s half-a-hundred ripples circling on and on and on, spreading, spreading from the center, flowing on out to the sea. And there is no way of telling where the end is going to be.”

I quote this poem, because it so fittingly speaks about the Miraculous Medal, the Association, and the Charism of St. Vincent de Paul. What ripple effect could a medal made in the image of Mary Immaculate have, in a city, or France, or the world? Yet what was initially called the Medal of Our Lady of Grace became the peoples’ “miraculous medal” by 1836, and by 2015, established national associations in 45 countries with millions of people wearing that medal.

The story of that medal rings in the heart of every Vincentian as another indication of God’s blessings on the Double Family at first and subsequently the foundation of multiple organizations following the charism of service and of love of the poor of St. Vincent de Paul. Certainly the special love that Mary stated she had for Vincent and the two Congregations, the wearing of the medal by thousands, and their questions as to its origins with the poor, could imply that this medal had a positive effect on spreading Vincent’s charism to begin more foundations and communities of love and service to the poor.

For the medal, as stated by its first wearers, changed their hearts (conversion) and increased their faith (evangelization). We, who claim the charism of St. Vincent, must wear this medal of conversion and evangelization. With this medal, the poor can recognize immediately our conversion and evangelization, then look to us to love and then to serve them, St. Vincent’s charism.

The history of the Miraculous Medal and its Association starts with a French sister, a Daughter of Charity, in Paris, France, in 1830. Because many may not know this, I briefly summarize it here. If you are familiar with the story of the Miraculous Medal, please page forward to the next part of this article the *Miraculous Medal Association and the Charism of St. Vincent de Paul*.

Story of the Miraculous Medal

Zoe Labouré was born on 2 May 1806, a French farm girl. When she was 23-years old, she entered the Catholic group of women called the Daughters of Charity, in January 1830. Three months later she became a formal member entering their seminary with the name Catherine.

Catherine Labouré received the Miraculous Medal from Mary, the Mother of God, in the summer and fall of 1830 during two apparitions. The first apparition to St. Catherine Labouré happened on the night of 18 July 1830.

Sleeping in the roof dormitory with the other young sisters, she was awakened around 11 pm by a young child of about five years of age, dressed in white. "Come, get up" said the child holding a lit candle. "Mary is waiting for you in the Chapel." Calling Catherine three different times to get up, Catherine noticed that none of the other sisters were awake. Yet the light around the child was bright and vivid. Hurriedly dressing, Catherine, followed the child down the wooden, circular staircase. She saw that all the candles on the walls were aglow with light. When she arrived at the Chapel, it was radiantly lit and reminded her of Midnight Mass.

The child took her to the priest-Director's chair in the front of the sanctuary. Soon she heard the rustling like that of a silk dress in a breeze, and there before her was the Blessed Mother. Sitting in the chair, Mary placed Catherine's hands on her lap. They spoke for two hours.

In this conversation, the Blessed Mother told Catherine many things of which I will point out two that are important for us. Mary told Catherine that God had a special mission for her. And then Mary said that she herself had a special love for the two Congregations of St. Vincent de Paul, who take special care of her children, the poor.

The second apparition of the Blessed Mother to Catherine Labouré happened on the evening of 27 November 1830. There are two parts to this apparition.

That evening, while Catherine was at evening prayer with the other sisters, Mary appeared to her in the Chapel in Paris. The other sisters did not see the Blessed Mother but knew something was happening from the great light that appeared in the Chapel.

Catherine states that Mary first appeared holding a globe. Appearing in a white gown and veil. Mary said that this Globe represented the whole world for whom she constantly pleaded to God for help.

Sanctified by His Redemption, the globe represents the Mystical Body of her Son Jesus Christ, whom she gives to God as she gave Jesus Christ to the world. The world still wanting, Mary gives this body to God pleading for his grace and aid to all who ask her for help.

From this apparition Mary takes the title Virgin Most Powerful or in Latin, Virgo Potens. She is our eternal and most perfect model of life in and with God.

In the second part of this apparition of 27 November 1830, when Catherine looked up again, Mary is seen as she is in the Miraculous Medal today. This is sometimes called the third apparition.

She stood on the world crushing the head of Satan, the devil, reminding us of the verse in Genesis 3:15 – “I will put enmity between you and the woman, between her seed (Jesus Christ) and yours. She will crush your head and you will lie in wait for her heal.”

During this second part of the apparition, Catherine saw around her the words of the famous Miraculous Medal prayer: “O Mary conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee.”

The glow around her became streams of light from some of her fingers. “These are the graces that flow to people who have asked for God’s favor,” Mary said. “Those fingers where there is no light, represent graces that no one has asked for from God. *Come to the foot of the altar and with confidence* and ask God, through my intercession, for these graces.”

And as Mary turned, Catherine saw the cross coming up from the large M representing Mary at the foot of the cross. Underneath this were the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Around this were 12 stars representing the 12 apostles and the 12 tribes of Israel.

Mary then commanded Catherine, “Have a medal struck in this image. Give this medal to everyone. For all who wear this blessed medal around their neck, shall receive special graces eternally from God through me.”

In 1832, over a thousand medals were struck and promoted. By 1836 over a million medals were being worn by faithful devotees of Mary. As the people proclaimed, “This is a Miraculous Medal. For when they wear it, they are healed and changed, sometimes physically and always spiritually.” And so the associations started of those who wore the medal. The formalization of these associations into one Association came in the document, *Dilectus Filius* (Beloved Son) signed by Pope St. Pius X and dated 8 July 1909.

Reflection on the Apparitions

Today, Mary commands us to come to this altar too. The use of the word “altar” can also be a symbol of the Holy Mass, where Mary’s flesh and blood, her Son, Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection are celebrated. We too are called to offer ourselves to God at Mass, and there ask God through her, for what we need. “Come to the altar” should

remind us of the most important command given to us by Mary which was at the Wedding Feast in Cana, (Jn 2:5) "Do what he tells you."

Through Mary, all of humanity said "yes" to God entering into their life (just as Adam and Eve's "no" represented all of humanity). Mary never said "no" to God and God never says "no" to her. Her pleading is always answered.

That is why Mary is considered the most powerful of all human persons. Of all the women before her, of all the women who came after her, even of all the women who will come after us, God chose HER – Mary. This then is truly a singular and extraordinary person who, with the fullness of God, is most powerful for us and our intercession. Her response to being chosen, her "yes" at the Annunciation, began the redemption of her son Jesus Christ.

The Charism of St. Vincent de Paul and the Miraculous Medal Association

The challenge of our Association is living Mary's commands to us that encompass the charism of St. Vincent de Paul – "Come to the foot of the Altar." Go to Mass; pray! And God will convert you and evangelize you to the poor.

That conversion means first we must be emptied of our self so that God can act on others through us. It is the Mass that empties us or converts us to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, making us poor, like Mary and Jesus. Only then, bereft of self, can we begin to love the poor and serve them. Our hearts are changed.

Secondly, Mary commanded us to "Give this medal to all. For they who wear it will receive many blessings." Only the wearers can be evangelizers, those who bring good news to the poor. Just touching or feeling the medal gives one the strength of God's zeal for the poor.

This is a zeal born from the heart and love as shown by Mary's open arms on the medal. These open arms beg to embrace the person. These open arms remind us of the divine, incarnate love for each of us alone. This is unconquerable, invincible love.

Armed with this medal, with such love, every poor person we meet is loved and exalted. There is no poor person that we cannot love and serve. Wear the medal lest you are repulsed by the poor!

Recently in November 2014, at the International Miraculous Medal Association Assembly, the members from all over the world reflected on this challenge, especially in the light of "Vincentianism" – love of the poor. From their prayer and reflection they wrote the following statement that encapsulates what was said above:

"The Miraculous Medal is a great evangelizing and transforming force for all who wear it with faith. To come to the foot of the altar,

to receive the abundance of the graces of God through Mary, fortifies us in a world hungry for justice and mercy.”

Since 1909, we, the members of the Miraculous Medal Association, consciously aware of Mary as our Mother, promote Mary’s request to St. Catherine Labouré in 1830 – to wear this medal of her image. With this gift of God through Mary, we give the medal as ministry to all, especially the poor, the sick, the thirsty, the hungry, the naked, the oppressed, the imprisoned, and all who seek the Kingdom of God (Mt 25:31-46). The fruits of this ministry, that is, the deeper love of God experienced in the poor, evangelize us to receive God more fully, thus impelling creativity in our ministry unto infinity.”

The Association understands its mission not only to the poor but to the other members of the Vincentian Family. It is the medal that calls them to collaborate, work, and bring the unique ministry of the medal, that is prayer, to whatever project or mission is presented to help the poor. The Association itself has many ministries to the poor ranging from prayer to visitations to food pantries to name a few.

The “modern day” offers great challenges to the Association. The secularization of the world draws people away from Mary as unnecessary to life and salvation. Prayer is deemed useless and meaningless repetition. The technicalization of the world, from cell phones to social media, makes people long for instant gratification in an impersonal meeting or encounter. Even the poor have cell phones as a sign of their human dignity.

In the face of such opposition the Association looks to its Mother as it should for help. The story of the beloved Alphonse Ratisbonne, whose conversion from Judaism to Catholicism through the Miraculous Medal, compels them to believe the work of their Mother Mary.

Imbued with this strength they must bring the people of resources and the poor they serve to the open arms of Mary, the front of their Medal. Only there can the conversion happen and the evangelization begin.

As the closing words of their common statement so eloquently put it, they will never tire or quit as they grow deeper in the love of Mary who sends them to the poor. It is there that they become filled with the Holy Spirit. Thus as their Mother Mary told them, “Come to the foot of the Altar and be filled with the Graces of God through my intercession.” Full of the Holy Spirit the Association gives life to the poor and Christ to the world.

“O Mary conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee.”