

A RE-READING OF THE MESSAGE OF THE RUE DU BAC FOR OUR TIMES*

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Introduction

This is not the first time that someone has been asked to discuss this topic: How to actualize the message of the Rue du Bac in today's world? This concern arose as a result of the 150th anniversary of the apparitions of the Virgin to St. Catherine and since then this theme has been discussed on numerous occasions by different authors.¹

When reading some of these writings, I have been able to verify, once again, not only the risks that one runs but also the temptations into which one can fall when celebrating the anniversary of certain events and persons of the past. It would seem that one might attempt to show that most of the problems of the present and of the future — and even solutions to these problems — have been clearly announced in specific events of the past.

I myself do not want to fall into such a temptation when discussing the subject of re-reading the message of the Rue du Bac for our times. I do not agree with those authors who attempt to re-read the message and who, at the same time, say that they can deduce from such an event specific social, political and religious implications. Such implications can only be discovered as people are faithful to following the way of Christ — a demand placed on all Christians. The political, social and religious implications of such events are also uncovered as one lives a life of faith that is rooted in the unfolding of history. Such implications are not expressly contained in the message that was given to St. Catherine or in the symbols that are shown on the Medal.

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¹ Cf. Michel Lloret. *Echoes of the Company*, June 1980, pp. 218-244; February 1988, pp. 52-59. A Feuillet, *Esprit et vie*, N° 49, 4 December 1980, pp. 657-675. J. P. Prager, C. M. "María de los Pobres; una relectura de la Medalla Milagrosa desde la periferia," in *Anales de la Congregación de la Misión y de las Hijas de la Caridad*, Madrid, December 1994, pp. 513-519. See also Jean Guitton, *La Rue du Bac ou la superstition dépassée*, published by SOS, Paris, 1974 and R. Laurentin, *Las Apariciones de la Virgen María a Santa Catalina Labouré*, Salamanca, 1981, pp. 127-157.

Certainly the Christian life is a new global way to conceive and live our lives in the likeness of Christ, and not a series of behaviors combined together with no connection between them. But it is also certain that the Christian life can have certain celebrations, commemorations, and meetings specifically orientated toward the cultivation and the actualization of some concrete dimension of faith. I do not want to exclude any particular gathering, commemoration or celebration here, but I am under no illusion that each one of these events has repercussions on every aspect of Christian life. A re-reading of the message of the Rue du Bac should be made for our times, but it does not have to impact, for example, the problems that exist in our world today: the problem of cloning human beings, the alarming deterioration of the environment and the network of international terrorism. The devotees of the Miraculous Medal are not unaware of these and other social, economic and religious problems. But no one puts forth the idea that said devotion is a remedy for atheism and religious indifference, or contains the solution to all the physical and moral sufferings that humanity experiences, or holds the answer for all the doctrinal, pastoral and moral problems that exist within the Church.

This long introduction allows me to set up the boundaries for this conference and also to briefly outline the points that will be discussed here.

In the first part I will try to show why it is necessary to re-read the message of St. Catherine for our times. Such a re-reading will attempt to understand the message in the way the Church does when dealing with private revelations. Here also I will use the contributions of human sciences.

In the second part I will speak of the message of the Rue du Bac and I will focus on the Medal as the privileged representation of said message.

In the third part I will make a re-reading of that message in light of the Pope's letter that was addressed to the whole Church on the occasion of the closing of the Jubilee Year (6 January 2001). In it, John Paul II points out some fundamental lines of action that should inspire all pastoral projects at the beginning of the third millennium.

In any re-reading of the message of the Rue du Bac, it will be necessary to keep before us St. Catherine's identity and our own identity in the Church, namely, followers of Christ in the footsteps of Vincent of Paul and Louise de Marillac.

I. Re-reading the message in light of the Magisterium of the Church and of human science

a) What does it mean to do a re-reading?

To re-read is to read anew the written story or an event of the past. I do not mean to imply here some simple repetitive act, but rather reading the story from a new perspective that helps us discover aspects and dimensions not uncovered in previous readings. To read stories or recapture events of the past in light of new and changing historical situations helps us to discover new aspects of the story and gives new meanings to the language and the symbols that were communicated to us in the original story.

Referring to the extraordinary spiritual experiences that St. Catherine has transmitted to us, it should not be forgotten that, like other similar cases, stories use a language that is marked with symbols and conditioned by personal experience, as well as by the culture, social situation, and politics of a particular moment in history. If the message or story is meant to call us to move beyond concrete circumstances then it is necessary to read the story from a new historical perspective. Only in this way can our re-reading move beyond personal whim and individual prejudice, move beyond the inconsequential aspects of time and place, literary genre, sensibility of the witness, etc., and ultimately arrive at the permanent and essential aspects of the message.

These extraordinary spiritual experiences, although they are gifts given to an individual person, are rooted within the Church and they are given as gifts that are meant to enrich the whole people of God. This Church, according to Vatican II, is sensitive to and in solidarity with the joys and hopes, with the fears and sorrows of all the People of God, but especially of the poor and those who are suffering.² In the life of this Church, in its drawing near to the world, in the new theological reflection, in the advances of biblical exegesis and of the human sciences, etc., we find new lights that help us to understand the content of the original stories, frequently expressed in symbolic language. For that reason we have to re-read these stories in light of these new discoveries and insights.

The philosopher and French Christian thinker, Jean Guitton, in his book on the message of the Rue du Bac says:

The veiled side of the apparitions has become more perceptible at the end of the 20th century ... The apparitions of 1830 take on a deeper meaning as time passes.³ ... The mystical iconography of the Medal of 1830 is anticipatory and synthetic by nature. The commentary on the Medal too is unfinished, but it is much richer than in 1830.⁴ ... The sign of the truth of its “prophecy” (of the

² Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 1.

³ Jean Guitton, *op. cit.*, pp. 69-70.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

Rue du Bac) is precisely that it reproduces itself, just like stone thrown into water produces ever more widening successive ripples; that is, it reverberates, it renews itself and it enriches itself like the musical theme of a symphony. In this case, the symphony is one of time.⁵

Also Mother Rogé, on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the apparitions, invited the Daughters of the Charity to re-read the message that the Virgin gave to St. Catherine.

b) The position of the Church is always one of caution in dealing with private revelations

The apparitions, especially of the Virgin, constitute a phenomenon that is characteristic of the modern age. In fact, they have become more frequent than in previous times in the history of the Church. The origin of several important spiritual currents has its origin in the concrete appearances of Christ or of the Virgin; for example, the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, or the Marian devotion movement that took place as a result of the Rue du Bac, Lourdes, Fatima, etc.

The cautious attitude of the Church is understandable in light of such numerous appearances and revelations. History has taught the Church to be critical and prudent before phenomena that can be deceiving and easily called into question. For that reason it demands guarantees of credibility.

Such a cautious position expresses the double warning of the scriptures. One from St. John: *Do not trust every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they belong to God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.*⁶ The other from St. Paul: *Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophetic utterances. Test everything; retain what is good.*⁷

The Church invites the Christian community to affirm the revelation contained in Holy Scripture and in Tradition. With regard to these appearances and other private revelations, when the Church judges them reliable from the testimonies of the persons involved and arguments that are put forth in favor of their authenticity, it allows them to stand as realities that can be believed piously by the faithful, but only with human faith. The expression “human faith”

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

⁶ 1 Jn 4:1.

⁷ 1 Thes 5:19-21.

indicates that the appearances or private revelations are different in nature and therefore require a faith that is also different from the faith which one uses to affirm the great revelation of God in Christ. This means that Christians can continue to be called Christian even though they might not accept the appearances or other private revelations. These “supernatural” phenomena, if they are authentic, are related to the Christian life, but are not part of the sphere of divine revelation on which the Catholic faith rests. The Church, properly speaking, does not approve any apparition or private revelation. When the Church judges them to be authentic, it recommends them to the faithful and as such, is saying that these events contribute to the development of the spiritual life. In affirming these cases the Church, by means of the magisterial ministry of its shepherds, gives them “the green light,” the “nihil obstat,” so that they can be accepted as “objects of pious belief.”⁸

Such a cautious position of the Church before the supernatural phenomena is wise and justifiable, today more than ever, given the proliferation of such phenomena and the ease with which many people are inclined to accept them without sufficient discernment. The inclination of human beings to stand in awe in the presence of extraordinary events is frequently expressed today in the credulity before so many diverse apparitions of the Virgin. Certainly, the Church and theology admit the possibility that the supernatural is manifested in history. They are not opposed to private revelations. They recognize that God can reveal, through Mary, some truth of Holy Scripture and that such revelations might very well be made to correct deviations from the truth, as well as to intercede on our behalf in face of certain dangers. They are extraordinary signs of the free action of the Holy Spirit in the Church and are expressions of the charismatic and prophetic dimension of the People of God.

On the other hand, to attempt to explain such phenomena from the theory of myths and from an analysis of the psyche of the visionary, or to reject them because they escape the understanding of human science, is to begin from a point of view that is rationalistic and close-minded. But to admit them without a critical examination and without serious discernment is to leave oneself exposed to deceit and manipulation. Jean Guitton, a serious intellectual who is neither suspicious nor a skeptic, has written:

In our day and time when the human sciences are developing more than ever, when psychoanalysis, sociology, metaphysics and in-depth psychology change the boundaries between that which is natural and that which is unlikely, it is all the more necessary that

⁸ This is the expression that the Sacred Congregation of Rites used when referring to the Apparitions of Lourdes in its declaration of 12 May 1877.

*ecclesiastical authority not pronounce the word “miracle” from the outset with regard to these messages and their spiritual effects.*⁹

II. The message of the Rue du Bac

a) Catherine’s story

St. Catherine told Fr. Aladel, at first orally and then 26 years later in written form, the details surrounding the various apparitions that she had seen in the chapel of the Rue de Bac between the months of April and December 1830: visions of St. Vincent’s heart on three consecutive days and in various forms and different colors, visions of Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament and of Christ the King and three apparitions of the Virgin (18-19 July, 27 November and December).

All these visions contained a message that was revealed to Catherine. She herself interpreted the message and transmitted to us the meaning of the different colors of St. Vincent’s heart, the clothing of Christ the King, the gestures and words of the Virgin and the symbols on the Medal.

The Virgin’s first two visions were accompanied by pronouncements. In the dialogue that lasted two and a half hours, during the night of 18-19 July, the Virgin communicated to St. Catherine the fact that some sad events in the political, social and religious order were drawing near. The Virgin also spoke of some abuses that were taking place in the two Companies and of the special protection that both would have from the Virgin and from St. Vincent.

The vision of 27 November, which occurred during Catherine’s evening prayer, had two distinct, though closely related, moments. In the first moment, she saw the Virgin with a dress of white silk and a veil of the same color draped to the floor. On her head was a crown of twelve stars. Her feet rested on a half sphere, trampling the head of a snake; in her hands she held a sphere with a cross on top of it and her eyes were lifted toward heaven. Her fingers were adorned with rings of various sized stones that sent rays of light toward the floor. The Virgin was surrounded by an oval, which contained the following words: *O Mary conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to you.* Catherine listened to the Virgin’s voice as she interpreted the meaning of the globe and of the rays. The Virgin asked her to have a medal struck, which would represent the vision that had just occurred, and finally the Virgin expressed her joy in bestowing abundant graces on those who request them and on those who confidently wear the Medal.

⁹ Jean Guittou, *op. cit.*, pp. 8-9.

The second moment of the same apparition was Catherine's vision of the reverse side of the Medal. She saw the letter "M" and two hearts united by a cross. Days later, also during prayer, Catherine heard the voice that responded to her concern on how the reverse side of the Medal should be: *The "M" and the two hearts say enough.*

Catherine remained silent about those visions during the 40 years of her hidden life and work in Reuilly. Except for her spiritual director, Fr. Aladel, and Sr. Dufès, at the end of Catherine's life, no one else suspected the identity of the visionary of the Virgin.

b) A re-reading of St. Catherine's visions

The same cautious position that the Church has taken with regard to so-called supernatural phenomena (visions, apparitions, private revelations) should be taken with regard to the narration of St. Catherine. From this position of the Church, one can undertake a re-reading that is both critical and respectful of the message of the Rue du Bac.

In-depth psychology has something to say in this respect, especially if we are attentive to certain circumstances that were recounted by the visionary.

On 21 April 1830 Catherine entered in the seminary. Four days later, she took part in the solemn translation of St. Vincent's relics from the Cathedral of Paris to the Chapel where they rest at the present time. Eight hundred Daughters of Charity participated in this event.

The translation of the relics was followed by a novena before the relics, a novena in which Catherine participated. It was during this novena that she saw the Saint's heart in a reliquary that had been placed on the altar of the chapel of the Rue du Bac. The exposed relic was a piece of the forearm, since at that time the heart was preserved in Lyon. The interpretation that Catherine gave to the vision of the different colors of Vincent's heart, and that she related to the tragic imminent events, was put in writing 26 years after these events had passed.

On 18 July, day of the Virgin's first apparition during the night, the Sister Directress of the Seminary had spoken to the Seminary Sisters about devotion to the saints and the Virgin. Catherine said that she was inspired by this conference and had a great desire to see the Virgin. The Directress had distributed to each sister a relic of the Saint — a piece of cloth — that Catherine swallowed. She said: *I fell asleep with the thought that St. Vincent would give me the grace of seeing the Virgin.* Then she immediately began her narration of the first apparition. With regard to the boy that accompanied the Virgin, Catherine said: *I*

*believe that the boy was my guardian angel ... because I had prayed often for the favor of this vision.*¹⁰

All these events raise some questions: Was this an authentic vision that Catherine narrated? Was it a dream? A subjective or objective vision? Was it symbolic or real? Did she really see the Virgin or was this a product of her imagination? Laurentin himself asked these questions.¹¹ The arguments and explanations that this theologian offers may or may not be convincing; in my opinion they are weak. But he assures us that he has studied these topics seriously and analyzed the documents rigorously and that he has reached the following conclusion: *The apparitions were sincere experience of St. Catherine ... The authenticity of her life confirms the truth of the apparitions,*¹² *and I myself consider them to be authentic.*¹³ Fr. Pierre Coste, secretary and archivist of the Congregation of the Mission (1873-1935), an historian whom some consider to be a rationalist, would be one of the first people to take an opposing position.¹⁴ At the beginning, Fr. Aladel did not give much importance to Catherine's story.

A reflection on the apparitions and visions, made by theologians who would not be labeled "rationalists," might arrive at the following conclusion. St. Catherine had extraordinary spiritual experiences. The visions that she had of the Lord and of the Virgin could not have been corporal because their condition of having been glorified surpasses corporality. That does not mean that they were not real. They were subjective sincere experiences that could have been stimulated by external supernatural causes. That is, they were not produced by the visionary's imagination but were the result of a special intervention of God. It must also be noted that Catherine might have been psychologically predisposed for such visions. Such personal mystical experiences could only have been perceived and experienced by her, and not the other sisters who were gathered together in community prayer. For such spiritual phenomenon are not perceived through the eyes or the ears but through an interior personal perception. Laurentin affirms that:

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹¹ Cf. R. Laurentin, *op. cit.*, pp. 140-145.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 139.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

¹⁴ A note was directed to the Sacred Congregation of Rites (2 July 1930), asking it not to go forward with the canonization of Catherine. This note listed Catherine's defects, which were seen as impediments to canonization. The note gave no credence to the apparitions.

*... a private revelation, when it is auditory in nature, does not come from vibrations transmitted in the atmosphere and then captured by a third person. It goes directly to the sensations rather than the senses, to the perception itself rather than the organ of perception.*¹⁵

One could affirm then that the visions do not belong to the objective physical and corporal order but to the subjective and spiritual order.

On the other hand, it is necessary to state that although the Church has approved the liturgical celebration and the use of the Medal, this does not mean that the Church has recognized the authenticity of the apparitions. It simply means that said devotion is not contrary to the faith, and that such devotion can foster growth in the Christian life. St. Catherine was canonized because of the holiness of her life and not because of the apparitions that she narrated.

c) The sign of the Miraculous Medal

Under the title “the message of the Rue du Bac” one would have to include, logically, all that Catherine recounted in her stories concerning the different visions that she had. In fact, later history has been focused solely on the message surrounding the Medal. Catherine herself, during the period after the apparitions, was more concerned about being faithful to the Virgin’s request to have a medal struck than in the messages that she received in the other apparitions.

We are surprised by two facts about the medal: the richness of the symbols and the rapid diffusion of the medal.

*Let us suppose, writes J. Guitton, that someone requested a painter or a poet ... to make a Medal that contained the maximum number of teachings and that at the same time would entail the least number of design strokes and fewest symbols, and that the medal had to be intelligible for all Christians regardless of their culture ... Let us suppose that a competition was held for such a medal. It is probable that the results would have been inferior to the design of the Medal described by Catherine as a result of the apparitions. For it is difficult to concentrate more thoughts than are counted on this Medal.*¹⁶

¹⁵ R. Laurentin, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

¹⁶ J. Guitton, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

One of the arguments in favor of the authenticity of the vision of the Medal that St. Catherine has passed on to us is the fact that it is almost impossible that this young country woman, uncultured and with little knowledge of biblical and theological questions, could have invented such a story.¹⁷ The Medal contains the totality of Marian theology and the essential elements of Christian revelation. Some have called the Medal “a small bible” and “the catechism of the people.”

Without forcing the words of the text nor the symbols, certain biblical texts come to mind when reflecting on the Medal: the woman with the twelve stars, with the moon under her feet and crushing a snake as described in the book of Revelation;¹⁸ the promise of a descendant of a woman conquering Satan as made in the book of Genesis;¹⁹ the prophecy of the elderly Simeon in the temple: *And you yourself a sword will pierce* (the pierced heart);²⁰ the active presence of Mary at the culminating moment of the redemptive work of Jesus on Calvary²¹ (the cross with the “M” and the two hearts); the Immaculate Conception’s mystery proclaimed in the ejaculation “O Mary conceived without sin”; Mary’s function as intercessor and distributor of the gift of divine grace as seen at Cana²² (the globe in her hands and the open arms shedding rays of light on the earth); Mother of the Redeemer and of the redeemed (the Church) or the new Eve united to the new Adam announcing the birth of a new humanity (the two hearts and the cross with the “M,” the gesture of the extended arms and open hands shining light on the sphere at the Virgin’s feet, or the circle of twelve stars as symbol of the twelve apostles etc.).

As we said before, when a private revelation is authentic, the only thing that has to be done is confirm its basis in Biblical revelation. In the case of the Medal, it reminds us of the redemptive work of Christ — the mystery of love and suffering — and the inseparable collaboration of the Mother of God, which the Medal represents in a symbolical and simple manner.

¹⁷ In the Church at Fain-les-Moutiers there is a painting of the Immaculate Virgin with characteristics that are very similar to the Virgin depicted on the Medal. During her childhood, Catherine was able to contemplate on this image of the Virgin.

¹⁸ Cf. Rv 12.

¹⁹ Cf. Gn 3:15

²⁰ Lc 2:35.

²¹ Cf. Jn 19:25-27.

²² Cf. Jn 2:1-12.

A re-reading of the Medal must take into consideration the Church's teaching on Marian devotion and cult. Paul VI published the Apostolic Exhortation, *Marialis cultus* (1974) for the purpose of promoting renewal of devotion to Mary. In it he emphasized a solid devotion based on the figure of Mary in the Scriptures and in the Liturgy. At the same time, he defended the manifestations of Marian devotions that the simple people practice.²³

John Paul II published the Encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* in 1987 as a preparation for the Marian Year of 1988. In it he highlighted the place of Mary in the mystery of Christ and the Church and he put the focus on her condition as a pilgrim of faith. These two documents of the Popes are simply an echo of what had been proclaimed and taught in the eighth chapter of *Lumen Gentium*. A re-reading of the Medal's symbols in light of this new teaching of the Church can give a solid biblical foundation to Marian devotion and place this devotion in the broader context of our faith, that is, in the mystery of Christ and the Church.

Another fact that is surprising in the history of the Medal is the quick dissemination of this among the people. On 30 June 1832, the silversmith Vachette handed over the first 1500 medals. He had received the order for these medals from Fr. Aladel. Catherine, when she saw it said: *do not change anything and begin to distribute them*, even though she expressed her disagreement because the globe was not presented in the hands of the Virgin in the way that she had seen it in the apparition.²⁴ Many more medals were struck, not only in Paris but also in other cities and nations. Between 1832 and 1836, 12 million medals were distributed in France alone. It is impossible to calculate the number of medals that have been distributed throughout the world. To acquire and wear a medal of the Virgin is synonymous with devotion to the Miraculous Medal.

The Daughters of Charity were responsible for this rapid dissemination of the Medal for they distributed it in their hospitals and schools. In 1836, the Archbishop of Paris wrote a letter inviting all the faithful to wear the Medal. On 7 December 1838, Pope Gregory XIV gave his approval to the distribution of this Medal.

Yet all of this does not explain the rapid and prodigious dissemination of the Medal. First of all we must look at the need for symbols that poor simple people have in expressing their faith. Through symbols and signs one passes from the visible to the invisible — this same movement from the visible to the

²³ In a letter dated 31 December 1976, Pope Paul VI wrote to Mother Rogé: "I am happy to invite the Company of the Daughters of Charity and the Congregation of the Mission to use your great inheritance (the Medal) in such a way that it enriches the People of God and thus brings to life the points that I have outlined in my Apostolic Letter, *Marialis cultus*."

²⁴ Cf. R. Laurentin, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

invisible through use of symbols is also a reality in the celebration of the sacraments. Psychology and theological reflection point out today the importance of symbols and signs as people attempt to express their faith and root their faith in every day realities. The medal presents people with clear and simple symbols: the heart, the cross, the maternal gesture of the open arms that receive and give, good and evil, grace, sin, joy and pain. Jean Guitton writes:

*The Medal consists in this: it is a symbol of everything; ... it is a sign of union. ... A wise person and an ignorant person, a believer and a non-believer can wear it. ... Ratisbonne mockingly thought that the medal meant nothing and in an instant, it meant everything for him.*²⁵

Guitton made the following affirmation that inspired the title of his book: *The meaning of these symbols, the surpassing of all superstition.*²⁶

Many conversions and cures were attributed to the Medal and this also accounts for the rapid spread of this devotion. This sign, which helped to bring about the proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception (1854), become known among the people as the Miraculous Medal. It cannot be denied that God allowed the Medal to serve as a mediator for his action and his saving grace. Nevertheless, a re-reading of the message of Rue du Bac should not focus on the miraculous aspect of the Medal for in doing so one runs the risk of presenting the medal as a superstitious or magical object. A re-reading of the message of the Medal ought to include a revision of certain expressions and devotions that focus on the miraculous aspect of the Medal and at the same ought to emphasize the fact that Mary is the path that leads to Christ — the same as is seen at Cana: *Do whatever he tells you.*²⁷

A re-reading of the actual message of Rue du Bac that is focused on the Medal as its privileged expression ought to consider the following two affirmations. The theologian R. Larentin states:

The medal is an auxiliary sign of contemplation and commitment. It is not an obligatory sign or a necessary sign for salvation. It is one of those helps that Christians can use to assist them in their journey

²⁵ Jean Guitton, *op. cit.*, pp. 81-82.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

²⁷ In the dialogue with Laurentin that followed the conference he gave in Salamanca during the Ninth Week of Vincentian Studies (9-13 July 1980), he spoke of leaving aside the miraculous aspect of the Medal and focusing on the hidden life of service of Catherine. It was this life of service, he said, that proved the authenticity of the apparitions. He added: the visionary, after the last visit she made to the chapel of the Rue de Bac, on returning to her house in Reuilly, fell and broke her arm.

*of faith. It is like those signs of friendship — a photo or a letter kept in the wallet or desk drawer.*²⁸

The second is from Guitton “*No one is obliged to go to Rue de Bac, nor to admit that Sr. Catherine saw the Blessed Virgin, nor that this Medal is miraculous, that it brings good luck or even less that it controls the laws of the cosmos.*”²⁹

But the same author wrote a book about the message of the Rue du Bac to show the necessity of faith in external revelation. The Miraculous Medal is one of these revelations. Intentionally, the book is entitled, *The Rue de Bac or the Superstition Surpassed*.

III. A re-reading of the message at the beginning of the third millennium

Any re-reading of the message of Rue du Bac must be done in the light of new situations in the world and in the Church. God speaks to us through the signs of the times. As said in the beginning of this conference, a re-reading of the message of the Medal should not attempt to answer all the challenges of the third millennium. Rather, a new reading of the message should help us to interpret, listen to and respond to these new situations. This re-reading of the symbols and their meaning in light of the historical realities at the beginning of this third millennium gives coherency to the Medal’s message.

Where should the Miraculous Medal Association today put its emphasis as a response to the call that John Paul II directed to the entire Church in his letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (6 January 2001)? Because it is a Church association it must embrace all the joys and hopes and missionary concerns and pastoral orientations of the Church. This is stated very clearly in the letter that the Pope wrote to bishops, priests, religious and laity

In this letter, John Paul II invites us to give thanks to God for all the graces that have been bestowed on us during the Jubilee year 2000. Also, the Pope looks to the future and formulates some *lines of action* that will renew and revitalize the mission of the Church in the third millennium. So that this might become a reality the Pope calls *for an effective post-Jubilee pastoral plan*.³⁰ From all of the suggestions of this letter, what are the ones that the Association ought to assume as we re-read the message of the Medal?

²⁸ R. Laurentin, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

²⁹ Cf. J. Guitton, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

³⁰ *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 15.

Reflecting on two different moments of the message of the Rue du Bac, we will attempt to organize these suggestions in two groups.

a) “Come to the foot of the altar; here graces will be given to those who ask”

St. Catherine listened to these words of the Virgin on the night of 18 July 1930.

In Catholic liturgy, the altar represents Christ. Therefore, drawing near to Christ and the way to achieve this closeness and the consequences of this encounter with Christ constitute the central part of the Pope’s letter and form the first lines of action that ought to enlighten all the pastoral projects of the Church in the third millennium.

The Pope encourages us to *use all our resources of intelligence and energy in serving the cause of the Kingdom*, but at the same time, he warns us of the danger of “*doing for the sake of doing*” and the danger of believing that the results depend on our efforts and plans. Without Christ, we can do nothing.³¹ *We are certainly not seduced by the naïve expectation that, faced with the great challenges of our time, we shall find some magic formula. No, we shall not be saved by a formula but by a Person (Christ), and the assurance that he gives us: I am with you!*³²

Therefore, the second chapter of the Pope’s letter is dedicated to the theme of the contemplation of the face of Christ because, *the men and women of our time — often perhaps unconsciously — ask believers not only to “speak” of Christ, but in a certain sense to “show” him to them.*³³ By this Christ act of contemplation and love, the Christian life will be renewed and strengthened. Jesus is the only firm rock upon which we can build our lives and this same Jesus invites us to continue his mission.

Admitting the centrality of Christ, all pastoral programs ought to prioritize and promote holiness as the vocation of all Christians from the time of their baptism.³⁴ In other words, *to ask catechumens: “Do you wish to receive*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

³² *Ibid.*, 29.

³³ *Ibid.*, 16.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

baptism?” means at the same time to ask them: “Do you wish to become holy?”³⁵ Immediately the Pope presents prayer as the pedagogy for holiness.³⁶

At the start of this third millennium, the Pope invites all Christians to a *renewed commitment to prayer*.³⁷ Being persons of prayer is not something that is reserved only to consecrated religious.

It would be wrong to think that ordinary Christians can be content with a shallow prayer that is unable to fill their whole life. Especially in the face of the many trials to which today’s world subjects faith, they would be not only mediocre Christians but “Christians at risk.” They would run the insidious risk of seeing their faith progressively undermined, and would perhaps end up succumbing to the allure of “substitutes,” accepting alternative religious proposals and even indulging in far-fetched superstitions. The Pope then goes on to say: It is therefore essential that education in prayer should become in some way a key point of all pastoral planning.³⁸ That is why he asks the Christian communities to become genuine “schools” of prayer.³⁹

The call to holiness and the call to be people of prayer ought to orient the life of every Christian.⁴⁰ The same can be said of the sacraments of Eucharist and Reconciliation: [participation in these sacraments] *is a fundamental duty, to be fulfilled not just in order to observe a precept but as something felt as essential to a truly informed and consistent Christian life.*⁴¹ In light of the temptation to develop a spirituality that is individualistic, and otherworldly, the Pope reminds us of the ethical-social demands of the faith and of the need to be witnesses of the faith — this being demanded of us by Christian charity and the mystery of the Incarnation.⁴²

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 35-37.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 52.

All these lines of action that the Pope sets forth for the whole Church in the third millennium are not foreign to the message of the Rue de Bac. Certainly, the Association of the Miraculous Medal has to promote authentic devotion to Mary. But the invitation *to come to the foot of the altar and to ask for abundant graces* is above all an invitation to draw nearer to Christ and to pray. The symbols on the reverse side of the medal, the cross and the “M,” confirm the expression *to Jesus through Mary*.

The Association has to promote authentic devotion to Mary. This means in the first place to locate this devotion in the place that it rightly occupies within the mystery of Christ and the Christian faith. There, she is the perfect follower of her Son, the first Christian, on a pilgrimage of faith like us. She was totally committed to the Lord and, therefore, an example for all the disciples of her Son.

Here I will make two brief observations and deductions in relation to what has been said so far. First, devotion to Mary is an important part of our faith. For this reason we have Marian dogmas — and this is not some mere coincidence as might be devotion to some particular saint. For while we can revitalize devotions, such as the Miraculous Medal, the Brown Scapular, etc, the same cannot be said of our Marian devotion and cult. Second, the Virgin promised St. Catherine that abundant blessings would be given to those who asked with confidence and who wear the Medal. This, however, does not give them any security with regard to their temporal or eternal life. The Medal and the prayers do not excuse us from living a Christian life nor do they free us from the risks and dangers to which all human beings are exposed. It has been said that authentic devotees of the Miraculous Medal “have moved beyond mere superstition.” It is hoped that these words express a reality and not simply some good intention.

Besides the lines of action presented by the Pope, we must also consider the challenges presented by our Superior General, Fr. Maloney, to lay Vincentians: *Be authentic believers of the Word of God and practice it. Be well formed. Be Saints*. Directing himself directly to the lay people of the Association of the Miraculous Medal he says:

*Practice an authentic devotion to Mary whom the Vincentian Family knows as the Miraculous Virgin (...). Make your local community a place of prayer and of ongoing formation — including the social doctrine of the Church — and a place of mutual support in the faith.*⁴³

b) “She held in her hands a sphere that represented the world”

⁴³ R Maloney, “Mensaje a la Asociación de la Medalla Milagrosa de España” in *Anales*, July-August 1994, p. 290.

St. Catherine's description of the second apparition of Mary, that which gave origin to the Miraculous Medal, highlights two aspects of Mary: the Virgin presents the world to God symbolized by the sphere that she holds in her hands and the rays of light emanating to the sphere upon which her feet rest.

Several of these priorities have a direct relationship with our identity as Vincentians, and with our mission in the world and in the Church. An important aspect of the message of Rue de Bac is that the one who received and transmitted the message of the Virgin was a Daughter of Charity, a member of the Vincentian Family.

To speak of the Vincentian Family is to talk about people who are sent to the poor, about people who are called to take on the role of an "apostle of charity" both in the Church and in the world. Such is the sign of our Christian Vincentian identity.

The third part of the Letter of the Pope is entitled "Witness of Love." It begins with these words of Jesus: *this is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*⁴⁴ If we have truly contemplated the face of Jesus, our pastoral programs will be inspired by the new commandment. *Love one another as I have loved you.*

John Paul II echoing the words of St. Paul says: *Many things are necessary for the Church's journey through history, not least in this new century, but without charity (agape), all will be in vain.*⁴⁵ To be witnesses of love at the start of the third millennium and in the situations in which the Church finds itself, means, as the Pope states, that the world is bound together in a *spirituality of communion among all the people of God*,⁴⁶ is bound together through the ecumenical movement,⁴⁷ through interreligious dialogue,⁴⁸ and through pastoral ministry that is focused on the promotion of family life, vocations and lay ministry.⁴⁹ The attitude of Mary, offering the world (which she holds in her hands) to God and the bright rays descending from her hands to the sphere on which her feet rest should not be seen as unintelligible symbols. These spheres and the twelve stars are symbols that express totality and unity.

⁴⁴ Jn 13:35.

⁴⁵ *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 42.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 43-45.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 55-56.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 46-47.

Two affirmations of the Pope ought to find an echo in the Vincentian Family:

1st: The century and the millennium now beginning will need to see, and hopefully with still greater clarity, to what length of dedication the Christian community can go in charity toward the poor.⁵⁰

The fidelity of the Church to Christ is revealed in the preferential option for the poor and in a charity that is practiced as much as or more than in faithfulness to doctrine.

2nd: Charity demands a greater creativity. Now is the time for new “creativity” in charity, not only by ensuring that help is effective but also by “getting close” to those who suffer, so that the hand that helps is seen not as a humiliating handout but as a sharing between brothers and sisters.... The proclamation of the gospel, which is itself the prime form of charity, risks being misunderstood or submerged by the ocean of words which daily engulfs us in today’s society of mass communication. The charity of works ensures an unmistakable efficacy to the charity of words.⁵¹

Even with a limited knowledge of Vincentian doctrine, the words of the Pope bring to mind the words of Vincent de Paul. For example, “greater creativity” and “creativity in charity” are an echo of “love, inventive unto infinity”; “the humiliating handout” reminds us of the fact that “our work for the poor must not be just charity but justice”; “the charity of works ensures an unmistakable efficacy to the charity of words” seems to refer us to Vincent’s words “affective love becomes effective in our service to the poor.” We see, then, that the Pope himself is suggesting to all Vincentians a re-reading of the message of the Rue du Bac.

The globe in the hands of the Virgin represents the world. The rays of light extending from the Virgin’s open hands are symbols of God’s grace. These symbols represent the hopes and desires of the Pope to promote in the world “the civilization of love” and “a culture of solidarity.” Fr. Maloney echoes these words when he invites all lay Vincentians:

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 50-51.

*Be creative ... be inventive in the service of the needs that you discover ... Let the works of charity and justice and peace shine forth from the missions of our Vincentian Family.*⁵²

The Vincentian Family is composed of millions of members who belong to the distinct branches of the great tree of charity. It is not an impossible dream to imagine the formation of a network of charity that embraces the whole world. Indeed, an example of this dream can be seen concretely in the attempts by the Vincentian Family to form such a network to eliminate hunger from the face of the earth. In light of the globalization of the economy — and consequently the globalization of poverty — the Vincentian Family desires to take up the challenge of globalizing charity.

Are not the advances in technology calling us as Vincentians — and especially the millions of members of the Miraculous Medal Association — to bind ourselves together in a network of creative charity on behalf of the poor?

Conclusion

A re-reading of the message of the Rue de Bac is necessary if we do not want the message to remain restricted to a certain time and place in the past. While it is true that the private revelation of St. Catherine is not part of the truths of the Great Revelation, nevertheless, it is part of the charismatic and prophetic dimension of the Church.

A re-reading that attempts to make the message come alive in our time must respect the essential elements of the message and not fall victim to individual whims and fancies. At the same time, if the re-reading of this message is to be truly prophetic and avoid archeological sclerosis and fundamentalism, then it must be re-read in light of the “signs of the time,” of the new situation and teaching of the Church and in light of theology, biblical exegesis and the human sciences. We have attempted to re-read the message with the above in mind.

Perhaps we have forced the meaning of two textual phrases of the message, but I believe we have not introduced anything foreign into the symbols of the Medal. Above all, we have emphasized the coherency of these symbols with the lines of action that the Pope has proposed to be included in all pastoral programs of the Church community. The Miraculous Medal Association is one of these programs. It is good to end this conference by restating our confidence in the powerful intercession of the Virgin of the Miraculous Medal and to ask her for the grace to know how to concretize the lines of action that the Pope has set before the Church at the beginning of this third millennium.

⁵² Cf. Robert P. Maloney, *Anales*, March-April 2001, pp. 187-188.

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