

Associations of the Miraculous Medal in the United States

by James G. Ward, C.M.

It was a “new world,” full of adventure, excitement, risks and dangers, when the first Italian Vincentian missionaries arrived in the United States in 1818. They settled in the small town of Perryville, Missouri, in the central section of the country, about 90 miles south of St. Louis, Missouri. This first house of the “little company” was named St. Mary’s of the Barrens, because of the confreres’ strong devotion to the Blessed Mother. Eventually, in this new land called the United States, two provinces were established: the first in St. Louis (Western Province) and the second in Philadelphia (Germantown), Pennsylvania (Eastern Province). This brief introduction gives us the historical context for the establishment of the two Associations of the Miraculous Medal in the United States. Both have experienced tremendous growth because of the vitality of the faith of immigrants to the United States and the faith of their children and grandchildren.

CENTRAL ASSOCIATION

Father Joseph Skelly of the Eastern Province was the first director of the Central Association, which was established in 1915 in Philadelphia. Father Skelly was director for over 35 years. Promoting devotion to Mary Immaculate and the Miraculous Medal Shrine was done in thanksgiving for favors received in helping to build St. Joseph Seminary in Princeton, New Jersey in 1912. For many years St. Joseph was the preparatory (high school) seminary where young students began their Vincentian preparation for the priesthood in the Eastern Province.

In 1927, four annual novenas were started to celebrate four special feasts of the Blessed Mother: Our Lady of Lourdes, Mary Queen of Heaven, the Assumption, and Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal. In 1930 the weekly Monday Novena was started. Only the Novena to Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal has continued. This Monday

devotional has been prayed continuously without interruption to this very day. This reality is referred to as the "Monday Miracle." The shrine was started in 1875 and completed in 1879. The statue of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal was added in 1927.

Today, Masses and novena services are celebrated every Monday, in keeping with the rich tradition of the shrine in the East. Confessions are heard at all Masses and services. Also, at these, the novena prayers are prayed, religious articles are blessed and new members are enrolled with blessed medals. The Miraculous Medal Shrine also contains a shrine to the "Virgo Potens" and a crypt chapel with Eucharistic Exposition. A small gift shop distributes medals and articles of devotion.

The promotion and devotion of the Miraculous Medal is an apostolate of the Eastern Province. Two confreres and approximately 20-40 lay staff are active in this apostolate. The present director is Father Carl Pieber, ordained in 1980 and appointed to his position in 2007.

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION

One hundred years after St. Mary's of the Barrens was established, the Association of the Miraculous Medal was begun in 1918 in Perryville, Missouri. Father William Musson was the first director and the seminarians handled the clerical work. Other confreres served brief terms as directors until 1926. In 1926 Father Joseph Finney was appointed director and served for 36 years. He was one of five brothers from New Orleans. Four entered the Congregation, were ordained to the priesthood and served in the Western Province.

In 1928 under the supervision of Father Finney, a new shrine was built to Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal. The new shrine was constructed inside the historic St. Mary's of the Barrens Church, which was begun in 1827 and dedicated in 1837. Two stained glass windows near the ceiling of the shrine depict the first two apparitions of the Blessed Mother to Sister Catherine. The large dome over the shrine has a painting of Sister Catherine distributing the Miraculous Medal.

Today, Masses and novenas are prayed on Monday at the Church of St. Mary's. Confessions are heard. The shrine church is also the site for the gatherings of the Vincentian Marian Youth. This group is part of the Vincentian Family, and it is devoted to sharing our Catholic faith and fostering Marian devotion among our young people. On the campus of St. Mary's there is also a gift shop and a museum of Vincentian memorabilia.

In past years and today, the generosity of the donors of the National Association assists the confreres in the formation of men for the priesthood and brotherhood, the care of elderly missionaries and the works of the confreres in mission areas. The Association in the West is an apostolate of the Mid-Western Province of the United States. One confrere and approximately 65 lay staff are active in this apostolate. The present director is Father James Garcia Ward, ordained in 1977 and appointed to his position in 2009.

THE FUTURE

With the changing life-styles and demographics of the people of the United States, both Associations are seeking to meet the needs of the Catholic community. In the East and West, as the Associations strive to promote devotion to Mary, conceived without original sin, they continue to reach out to various groups, especially the Hispanic community (over 40 million in the United States) and young Catholic adults who are more comfortable with computer/electronic information. Just as in 1818, there are new adventures and new risks as the confreres continue this ministry and work, given to the Congregation in 1830.