

STUDIES

The Miraculous Medal

A Proposal for Interpreting
the Message and Role of the Vision of the Virgin with the Globe

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“You have made notable, well-researched, unprecedented analyses. The advantage of this study is to present a new, coherent, solution.”

RENÉ LAURENTIN

This study is made up of five sections as follows:

1. The vision of the Virgin with the Globe
2. The symbolism of the back of the medal
3. The symbolism of the front of the medal
4. Historical conclusions
5. The theological message of the medal

INTRODUCTION

In 1830 a novice of the Company of the Daughters of Charity, Catherine Labouré, received the grace of meeting the Blessed Virgin on at least three occasions.¹ According to her own account the second vision took place on 27 November 1830, and in the course of it she was told to have a medal struck with an image of the Blessed Virgin

¹ See R. LAURENTIN - P. ROCHE, *Catherine Labouré et la Médaille Miraculeuse*, Paris 1976, pp. 71 ff. Compare R. LAURENTIN, *Fecha, número y autenticidad de las apariciones de la Medalla Milagrosa*, in: *Las apariciones de la Virgen María a Santa Catalina Labouré* (Various authors), Evangelizare 13, Salamanca 1981, pp. 72-102.

distributing divine graces, and the inscription: *O Mary conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to you* on the front, and on the back the letter *M* surmounted by a cross, and underneath these a pair of wounded hearts, those of Jesus and Mary. The vision was repeated at least one more time, in December 1830.² The minting of the Medal in 1832 and its subsequent popularity gave rise to many miracles, especially cures and conversions;³ that is why it came to be called “miraculous.”

At the time the Medal was made available Sister Catherine was not at ease. It was on 27 November 1830 (and again in December) that she saw the Blessed Virgin holding in her hands a globe surmounted by a cross, enveloped in rays of graces streaming from rings which she wore on her fingers. In the following years Catherine was upset that this vision was not reproduced on the Medal.⁴ As far as we know, once the Medal was minted and widely circulated her confessor, Father Aladel, did not want to re-open the matter. It was only in the final year of Catherine’s life (1876) that, according to her instructions, a statue was sculpted by D. Froc-Robert illustrating that vision.⁵ If this vision was not immediately accepted it was because it was different from what was on the front of the medal: in the former the Virgin holds the globe of the earth in her hands, while in the latter she has her hands stretched downwards and the globe is under her feet.

All who have studied this question stress the difficulty of reconciling the two images. Some have tried to resolve the problem by supposing that there were two successive stages in the vision, the vision of the Virgin holding the globe in her hands, and then the vision of the front and back.⁶ In that way they posit a certain development in the apparition (a sequence of images and content). Others suggest that, after the vision of the Virgin with the Globe, Catherine immediately saw what was on the back.⁷ In that case the

² LAURENTIN - ROCHE, *Catherine Labouré*, pp. 85-86.

³ *Op. cit.*, pp. 39-69.

⁴ See 1.2.a., below.

⁵ A photograph of it is on p. 83 of LAURENTIN - ROCHE, *Catherine Labouré*.

⁶ The best examples are: [J. CHEVALIER], *La Médaille Miraculeuse. Origine – histoire – diffusion – résultats*, Paris 1878, pp. 74 ff; L. MISERMONT, *Les graces extraordinaires de la bienheureuse Catherine Labouré*, Paris 1934, p. 107; E. CRAPEZ, *Le Message du Cœur de Marie à Sainte Catherine Labouré*, Paris 1947, pp. 34 ff.

⁷ R. LAURENTIN, *Vie authentique de Catherine Labouré*, vol. 2: *Preuves*, Paris 1980, pp. 183-187. The same author: *Descripción de la aparición y Virgen del Globo*, in: *Las apariciones*, pp. 103-124, especially p. 117. This possibility is not excluded by I. ZEDDE, “Lettura dottrinale della Medaglia Miracolosa

present front was the work of Aladel and those whom he consulted (especially Fr J.-B. Étienne), basing himself on the then usual way of representing the Blessed Virgin as conceived without sin. So it is the vision of the Virgin holding the globe which should have been on the front. There are some who, like Fr P. Coste, deny the vision of the Virgin with the Globe (just Catherine's imagination).⁸

The first aim of this present study is precisely the problem mentioned above, which gives rise to certain doubts. The theological message of the Medal remains the principal purpose of this study. The matter as a whole will be developed on the historical and theological levels.

The analyses which follow will be based on an un-packing of the sources published in Laurentin's two volumes: the first, quoted above, was with Roche's collaboration; the second was entitled *Procès de Catherine* (Paris 1979). Apart from these, another work by Laurentin will be referred to.⁹ Most studies present mainly the pastoral aspect, and do not pay sufficient attention to historical precision with regard to the facts to be described.¹⁰ With the passage of time the authentic evidence was overlaid with stories which were not there at the time of the apparition.¹¹ It is therefore indispensable to base oneself on sound information in order to attain the reality of the matter.

alla luce della storia della salvezza," in: *Annali della Missione* 88, 1981, No. 3, p. 236.

⁸ See his *Mémoires* (unpublished); also LAURENTIN - ROCHE, *Catherine Labouré*, pp. 35-37. In the article *La Médaille miraculeuse (Annales de la CM 95: 1930, pp. 453-564)*, written at the time of the centenary of the apparitions, Coste gives the facts as generally accepted, without revealing his personal opinions.

⁹ *Vie authentique*, vol. 1: *Récit*; vol 2: *Preuves*.

¹⁰ MISERMONT, *Les graces extraordinaires*; CRAPEZ, *Message*; J. GUITTON, *Rue du Bac ou la superstition dépassée*, Paris 1973 (especially chs. IV and V); W. ŁASZEWSKI, *Cudowny Medalik. Klucz do skarbnicy łask [The Miraculous Medal. A Key to the Treasure of Graces]*, Częstochowa 2004; I. Zedde proceeds differently (*La Medaglia Miracolosa. Il dono della madre*, Roma 2005); in an article of a similar type he believes in being historically correct but pastoral reasons prompt him to pass over in silence some historical questions.

¹¹ Some of these, though they are the stuff of legend, may in fact be true. Such, for example, is the case of the description of the serpent, which is greenish with yellow spots, as referred to, for example, by Crapez (*op. cit.*, p. 35) or Łaszewski (*op. cit.*, p. 22). On this matter see: **Historical Conclusions e**, point 4.

1. THE VISION OF THE VIRGIN WITH THE GLOBE

It has already been mentioned that right at the start of the apparition of Mary on the 27th of November 1830 Sister Catherine saw the Blessed Virgin holding in her hands the globe of the earth, as well as seeing the rays shining from the rings on her fingers.¹² The account given by her is rather enigmatic in the description of the move from the vision of the Virgin with the Globe to the Medal;¹³ available evidence confirms that she grasped the meaning of the apparition without explaining its development. We will begin our study by explaining precisely the significance of the white half-globe under Mary's feet. With regard to Coste's opinion, dealing also with the vision of the Virgin with the Globe, we will give a response only after having worked through a theological study.

1.1. The Theme of the White Half-Globe

Sister Catherine states that during the first phase of the apparition of the Blessed Virgin she saw under her feet "a white globe, or at least half of one";¹⁴ she does not, however, give an explanation of it, as she does for the globe held by Mary in her hands. We can take it that she either did not know, or was not sure, what the half-globe meant.

A commonly-held opinion is that the white half-globe must symbolise the earth.¹⁵ That is how Mgr B. Thiel will report the matter to Pope Leo XIII.¹⁶ Chevalier, quoted above, while taking the white

¹² Some authors find it odd that the rays shining from the rings on Mary's fingers are spreading out in the opposite direction with regard to the globe held by her (see LAURENTIN - ROCHE, *Catherine Labouré*, pp. 78 ff.). This problem will be dealt with below in **Historical Conclusions**.

¹³ See the 1841 accounts in Catherine's handwriting in LAURENTIN - ROCHE, *op. cit.*, pp. 290-296. From now on, each time there is reference to quoted sources in that work, as well as in the second volume *Procès de Catherine*, only the initials of the section will be given, DChD (Dossier Chronologique des documents). The numbers in the first volume run from 1 to 664 (DChD 1), in the second volume from 645 to 1029 (DChD 2). (However, each volume has its own pagination!).

¹⁴ The handwritten accounts of 1841 and a handwritten note of April 1876, in DChD 1, Nos. 455 and 456 (pp. 292-293), and also Nos. 635-636 (p. 351) (the final document on the December apparition).

¹⁵ CHEVALIER, *Médaille Miraculeuse*, p. 78; CRAPEZ, *Message*, p. 50; see also the evidence of Chevalier dated 17 June 1896 (PO, sess. 10), in DChD 2, No. 878 (p. 200) as well as the notice of Sister Geoffre in the necrology, dated 1 January 1878, No. 655 (p. 90).

¹⁶ DChD 2, No. 718 (p. 127).

half-globe as symbolising the earth, refers to Catherine's own words (to be developed below in 1.2.b.), where she says that she saw, in the developing of the apparition of the Virgin with the Globe, a globe of the earth under her feet. The white half-globe, understood as meaning the earth, explains why the rays were mainly directed downwards. It is accepted, of course, that the earth later appeared under Mary's feet, but one does not, at the same time, believe that it was the same white half-globe which the sister had previously seen. It is difficult to accept that the white half-globe under her feet is really the earth, for it would be necessary to agree that the idea of the earth, present when Mary was holding the globe in her hands, was there twice in the same appearance of the vision (a doublet of the same symbol).¹⁷ On top of that, why would the globe of the earth be shown once in white and once in gold, at the same moment in the same picture of the vision?¹⁸ According to Catherine's account, and how Chevalier, quoted above, understood her, the white half-globe underwent a change, that is to say that an unspecified¹⁹ half-globe became the earth, clearly seen (with the serpent). As regards the rays being directed downwards, Catherine wrote, in 1876, that they were spread out in all directions;²⁰ in observing this phenomenon she noticed that they were directed downwards because she was struck by the fact that their light shone over Mary's feet and the entire lower part of her stance.

We can accept that what Sister Catherine saw under Mary's feet was, indeed, the half-moon; there is reference to it in Rev. 12:1. The moon is the body ruling night time and, together with the serpent, symbolises the powers of evil. That sort of representation of this vision exists; it is the classic way of portraying the Immaculate Virgin.²¹ To say that the white half-globe under Mary's feet is indeed a half-moon is a way of not duplicating the symbol. With regard to the half-moon there is some doubt about the white colour of the half-globe. The half-moon in the pictures representing the Immaculate Virgin is more of a silverish colour. Is it the shining light which suggests that the colour is white? It is hardly likely that a

¹⁷ Compare LAURENTIN - ROCHE, *Catherine Labouré*, p. 78.

¹⁸ With regard to the golden globe in Mary's hands, see a note of Catherine's from Spring 1876, in DChD 1, No. 632 (p. 345).

¹⁹ Even Chevalier (*Médaille Miraculeuse*) recognises that, as regards its being the earth, it "had an indefinite appearance."

²⁰ DChD 1, No. 635 (p. 351).

²¹ A sketch made by Letaille in 1841, with a note attached referring to it, in DChD 1, Nos. 460 and 461 (pp. 300-301).

divine intervention brings secondary effects, disturbing the previous symbolism. Moreover, in representations of the Immaculate Virgin, with the moon under her feet, we see the lower half-globe but not the upper one.

The difficulties in interpreting the symbolism of the half-globe cause certain authors to avoid the matter; others think it is not of any importance with regard to the message of the apparition.

At last it is time to give a completely different interpretation. The white colour in Sister Catherine's two visions symbolises innocence. That is also the case in the vision of St Vincent's heart,²² and also the later vision of a Cross.²³ In the first of these Catherine takes the white colour to be a sign of union (and also of peace and calm). With regard to Mary, the white colour means her innocence, the fundamental message of the Medal, her conception without sin. The second meaning of the colour white, in the vision of St Vincent's heart, means the union of Mary with her Son through the divine maternity (on the back). The two qualities, innocence and union with the Son, stem from the heavenly glory of the Blessed Virgin and her mission, shown on the occasion of the apparition.

It is to be noted that in all the descriptions given by Catherine of the vision of the Virgin with the globe in her hands, the Virgin's clothing is dominated by the colour white ("clothed in white"), which is to say that she is wearing "a dress of golden-white silk" and "a white veil."²⁴ Catherine does not say anything about the mantle which, in our opinion, did not form part of the Virgin's clothing at the time of the apparition.²⁵ The appearance of the Blessed Virgin, in the vision in which she is holding the globe, shows a composition in white harmonising with the white half-globe.

In our opinion the white half-globe represents, in a symbolic way, Mary's conception without sin and her union with the Son, which is the fundamental point of her mission shown in the vision in which she is holding the globe.²⁶ The disproportion between the dimensions

²² Handwritten account of 1856, in DChD 1, No. 564 (p. 335).

²³ Letter to Aladel in 1848, in DChD 1, No. 544 (p. 324).

²⁴ DChD 1, Nos. 455-456 (p. 292) and also Nos. 635-636 (p. 351). We are giving the correct version; in the original text there are mis-spellings such as *abilliez, vetue et voile*. With regard to the white veil, see another account below in **Historical Conclusions, c**.

²⁵ See **Historical Conclusions, i**.

²⁶ The fact that in the vision there is a half-globe and not an entire one is explained by Mary's sharing in the glory of God (her mission comes from Him): He remains the sole fullness of perfection.

of the white half-globe and the small golden one which she holds in her hands becomes obvious; by reason of her maternal relationship with the Son of God Mary far outpasses the whole of redeemed humanity.

The above outlined position of the Blessed Virgin agrees with Catherine's wish that Mary be praised as Queen of the World. That is how Catherine understood her image in the vision in which she was holding the globe.²⁷ The same idea of a globe, held by Mary in her hands, was understood by Catherine as the "Blessed Virgin offering" redeemed humanity "to our Lord."²⁸ That is definitely the central theme of the vision: Mary, by reason of her exaltation, of her immaculate conception and her divine motherhood, presents to the Saviour the world redeemed by Him, because she is its queen. Mary's rank and mission stem from the reasons given above (innocence and union with the Son of God), and were symbolically explained by this image in which she is supported by the white half-globe.

1.2. The Vision of the Virgin with the Globe and the Front of the Medal (Unfolding of the Apparition)

We mentioned in the Introduction that certain authors are doubtful whether Sister Catherine, on 27 November 1830, saw Mary with her arms extended downwards, as she is at present shown on the front of the Medal. This demands that we give our personal point of view before continuing to develop the study.

a) *Sister Catherine's Notes and the Evidence of Witnesses*

In going through Catherine's notes about the apparition of 27 November 1830, two notes written independently in 1841,²⁹ we get the impression that the vision of Mary holding the globe in her hands was followed by the vision which at present is on the back of the Medal. There is no trace whatever, even in the notes written later by herself, that Mary had her arms stretched downwards. The mention of the invocation cannot be quoted in support of the posture of Mary on the front; someone who is not acquainted with the Medal might believe that the inscription and the vision of the Virgin holding the globe in her hands make up one single unit.

²⁷ Handwritten account from Spring 1876 in DChD 1, No. 632 (p. 345).

²⁸ Handwritten note from April 1876 in DChD 1, No. 635 (p. 351).

²⁹ DChD 1, Nos. 455-456 (pp. 290-296).

Even if Catherine were not intending to change the content of the front of the Medal³⁰ she was, at the same time, convinced that Aladel's way of showing the Virgin did not correspond to the apparition; that is confirmed by some persons, and firstly by Fr J.A. Chinchon,³¹ Catherine's confessor during the last quarter of her life (apart from the final year). In his evidence, given at the Informative Process for the beatification, he stated that Catherine had regretted that the posture of Mary, on the front, did not properly represent what she had seen during the apparition. He tried to convince her that her first confessor, Aladel, had perhaps believed that it would be too difficult to represent on a medal Mary holding a globe in her hands slightly forwards. During the same process Fr J. Chevalier,³² in whom Catherine confided, made an identical statement. He stated that during the last year of her life Catherine had declared to him, as Assistant Director of the Daughters of Charity, that she had received extraordinary graces. According to him she regretted "the alteration" introduced by Aladel. Chevalier also stated that he did not understand the reasons why Aladel "had suppressed" from the Medal the vision of the Virgin with the Globe, in other words he did not accept it. To explain this he expressed a desire to simplify the front, which may have been caused by pastoral reasons, and even political ones.

That is how Sister Dufès, Catherine's superior in Enghien, reported to Sister Tanguy her conversation with Catherine on this point, confirming that Catherine was convinced that the vision of the Virgin with the Globe should have been on the front.³³ This conversation took place in the year of Catherine's death, and the main point of it was the vision of Mary holding the globe in her hands. Sister Tanguy's evidence is reliable: Sister Dufès reported the conversation to her on the day on which it took place, with Catherine's permission.³⁴ Sister Tanguy reports her informant's citing Catherine's words that the Blessed Virgin was not shown "exactly" on the Medal, that is, not as she had appeared to her, and further "as long as I live I will always say that that is how the Blessed Virgin appeared to me," that is, with the globe in her hands.

³⁰ "Oh, we must not touch the Miraculous Medal": statement of Sister Tanguy, 24 May 1897 (PO, sess. 24) in DChD 2, No. 906 (p. 229).

³¹ Statement of 19 January 1897 (PO, sess. 17), in DChD 2, No. 894 (p. 219).

³² Statements of 17 June 1896 (PO, sess. 10) in DChD 2, No. 878 (p. 201).

³³ Statement of 24 May 1897 (PO, sess 24) in DChD 2, No. 906 (pp. 228-229); see also the statement of Sister Consard of 28 December 1897 (PO, sess 34) in DChD 2, No. 932 (p. 252).

³⁴ PO, sess. 24 in DChD 2, No. 906 (p. 228).

With regard to Sister Dufès, she seemed embarrassed by this matter and avoided answering the question during the Informative Process. Instead of that, we find in her statements a report on the sculpting of the statue of the Virgin with the Globe, which was a lifelong mission of Catherine, during the year of her death; at the time she told her superior "It is the martyrdom of my life."³⁵

b) An Attempt to Explain the Discrepancies Between Catherine and Aladel

We ask the question: Was the vision of Mary holding the globe in her hands immediately followed by the vision which nowadays is on the back of the Medal? Firstly, according to the statements of Frs Chinchon and Chevalier, and Sister Tanguy, it is by no means clear that there never was a vision of Mary with her hands extended downwards (Aladel's invention), but perhaps simply that Catherine never noticed it. Secondly, it is difficult to solve this problem if we rely solely on notes made by Catherine. Her accounts are not complete; for example, there is no mention even of the earth under Mary's feet, nor of the serpent. All her emphasis is on the vision of the Virgin with the Globe (see **Historical Conclusions d., e. and f.**). Thirdly, the notes of the most important of the witnesses, Aladel, Catherine's first confessor, are useless. His official accounts, published in the *Notice Historique*, are very different from Catherine's account, and are deliberately so (*ibid*, **f., g. and i.**). There are very few of his private notes, and they are not of much use.³⁶

In the past authors such as Chevalier, Crapez or Misermont tried, with varying results, to prove that there were no substantial discrepancies between the accounts of Catherine and Aladel. The most professional critique of the unravelling of the problem, the above-mentioned work of Laurentin and Roche, states that any attempt to harmonise the two accounts is impossible.³⁷ We share this opinion: that is why we believe research from a different angle is necessary.

For this reason we recall a very valuable account by Chevalier,³⁸ which gives a departure point for the solution of the problem. It was in him that Catherine confided about the apparition of the Blessed Virgin. In his book, when he is giving an account of one of his conversations with Catherine, he writes that in answer to the

³⁵ Statement of 18 May 1896 (PO sess. 6) in DChD 2, No. 874 (p. 186).

³⁶ CHEVALIER, *Médaille Miraculeuse*, p. 66.

³⁷ *Catherine Labouré*, p. 82.

³⁸ *Médaille Miraculeuse*, p. 78. The same account is quoted by Sister de Geoffre in DChD 2, No. 655 (p. 91).

question whether she still saw the globe in Mary's hands at the moment when "the waves of light were springing out from all sides," she said that at a certain moment "there remained nothing except the rays," so that as soon as the Blessed Virgin was speaking about the globe she "indicated" the globe which was under her feet; there was no longer any question of the first one (the one she had been holding in her hands); it had disappeared in the rays of light.³⁹ The fact of the globe of the earth remaining under the Blessed Virgin's feet, after the globe in her hands disappeared in the rays of light, gives a piece of very important information. We may doubt whether Chevalier properly understood Catherine with regard to the unfolding of the apparition, or whether she expressed herself with enough precision; anyway, it seems difficult to accept that there could be a mistake as regards the position of the globe of the earth after the "disappearance" of the globe from her hands; it was under Mary's feet.

Sister Catherine's written accounts do not contain any mention of the globe of the earth under Mary's feet; (her accounts are not complete; see above). On the other hand, we read in them that, when she saw the Blessed Virgin, Mary had a white half-globe under her feet and that she was holding the globe of the earth in her hands. She then noticed rings on her fingers, from which rays of light sprang (divine graces). A very bright light covered her feet and "all the lower part,"⁴⁰ including the white half-globe (at least to a considerable extent, for that was what supporting Mary's covered feet). The globe of the earth, however, was visible all the time in her hands. The Virgin then turned towards Catherine, who heard an interior voice. When she heard Mary speaking about the globe of the earth it was obvious that she meant by that the globe she was holding in her hands. The remainder of the account deals with the command to have the medal minted.

So, basing ourselves on these two pieces of evidence from Catherine (one through an intermediary, Chevalier) we are going to attempt to reconstruct the way the unfolding of the apparition of the Virgin probably took place.

At first sight the accounts of Catherine and Chevalier are contradictory with regard to the location of the globe of the earth. Let us begin with what is common to both accounts. The accounts of Catherine and Chevalier agree about an intensification of the light which partially obliterated the stance of Mary. According to

³⁹ CHEVALIER, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

⁴⁰ The account and note from 1841 and 1876, in DChD 1, No. 455 (p. 293) and No. 632 (p. 345).

Chevalier the Virgin indicated the globe of the earth under her feet at the moment when Catherine no longer saw the globe in her hands. Catherine, however, speaks of the globe, visible in Mary's hands, that is, before the disappearance of the rays of light. It becomes obvious that, in Catherine's notes and in the account quoted by Chevalier, two different moments in the apparition are being referred to. The second describes its ultimate phase, not dealt with in Catherine's notes. We can therefore conclude that the covering of "all the lower part" and the globe of the earth remaining visible in the Virgin's hands (a moment described by Catherine) changed subsequently: the globe in Mary's hands became invisible, while the globe of the earth appeared under her feet (Chevalier's account).

The unfolding of the vision of the Virgin with the Globe should be considered on three levels: the lower part (Mary's feet resting on the white half-globe); the central part (the globe of the earth held in her hands at the level of her heart); and the upper part (Mary's face).

During the vision of the Virgin with the globe in her hands, an exceedingly bright light at first covered the lower part so that Mary's feet were no longer visible, nor was the white half-globe (Catherine); then it was the central part which was covered, and the globe of the earth appeared under her feet (Chevalier). The globe in her hands was no longer visible, and it was not behind the bright light, because when Mary was addressing Catherine she was thinking of the globe of the earth under her feet; there was no longer question of the globe in her hands.⁴¹ Otherwise, we would have had a doublet of the same symbol (see 1.1. above). The unfolding of the vision up to that point also confirms that the globe of the earth was not concealed in the Blessed Virgin's hands behind the bright light. When Catherine sees a globe in Mary's hands there is a white half-globe (imprecise) under her feet; later when the globe of the earth is under Mary's feet Catherine no longer sees it in her hands. If the white half-globe is not the globe of the earth (everything seems to indicate this) we have no knowledge of such a phase of the vision where the two globes would be present at the same time. Such an unfolding of the vision suggests that not only were they not visible at the same time, but also that they were not present at the same moment.

A presumption which claims that the globe in the hands was hidden all the time in the bright light (a symbol of humanity flooded by graces) is tenable up to the moment when the globe of the earth is

⁴¹ "[...] and there was no longer any question of the first" (CHEVALIER, *Médaille Miraculeuse*, p. 78).

not yet under Mary's feet. As soon as it appears, this interpretation is no longer viable.

At this stage we formulate a conclusion which is the foundation of the analyses which are to follow: *The unfolding of the apparition of the Blessed Virgin set out above proves that there was a phase (before the appearance of the back of the Medal) during which Mary was not holding the globe of the earth in her hands; it was under her feet.* In the following section we will call it the "median" phase (between the vision of the Virgin with the Globe and the vision of the back of the Medal).

We will now ask a question about the moment when the "median" phase of the vision began. Our starting point is the moment when the completed image took on, according to Catherine, an oval appearance (the shape of a medal) and an invocation appeared. Catherine locates the two facts after the very bright light covered "all the lower part" and immediately before the apparition of the back. According to the account, the vision of the Virgin with the globe in her hands had already lasted a certain time when she saw an oval frame. If the image of the front revolved into the back, the former must include the final phase before the appearance of the back, in other words the "median" phase, namely the vision of Mary with no globe in her hands and the globe of the earth under her feet. This permits us to formulate a new important conclusion: *the image which Catherine saw, which was going to be perpetuated on the front of the Medal, must include the "median" phase.*

The fact that the "median" phase formed part of the vision of the front does not automatically mean that the oval shape (shape of a medal) appeared after the disappearance of the globe from Mary's hands. The image seen could have become medal-shaped during the vision of the globe in the hands, and then include the "median" phase. Given the sources, this is not to be excluded. But the content of the back would then be ambiguous (two different images). Such a possibility could be accepted on condition that the light shining on the central part did not fade until the "median" phase was over.

The conclusions already reached permit our asking the question about the presence, in the course of the apparition, of the vision resembling, or identical with, the image on the front of the Medal. We proved already the presence of the earth under the Blessed Virgin's feet and the absence of the globe in her hands during the "median" phase (concerning the vision of the front). So, what was the position of her hands? If Mary was no longer holding the globe her arms should no longer remain in the same position as previously. A question arises: what would be the point of the covering, and the disappearance of the globe from the Virgin's hands and its

appearance under her feet? It is certainly a transformation of the image which is going to move on to proclaiming a new message. In spite of the absence of the globe from Mary's hands, the rings on her fingers would not cease spreading the rays of light (see Chevalier). If we take this fact into consideration, the attitude of her hands resembling, or identical to, that on the front of the Medal seems possible. In that context, it is interesting to note Chevalier's account, which says that Mary took "various attitudes" during her apparition.⁴²

Why, then, does Catherine make no mention of it anywhere? It seems, furthermore, that she expressed her reservations in a different way. In order to reply to this question we must decide whether the central level, covered by the bright shining light, was uncovered again before the change to the image on the back, or not. We have already proved that the white half-globe was not the later globe of the earth (see 1.1.), which means that, on the lower level, behind the shining light, a transformation took place: a change from the undefined white half-globe into a definite globe of the earth. This means that at the lower level the covering of the central part could have been to allow the transformation of the image of the globe in Mary's hands (it disappeared). If the globe of the earth appeared under the Virgin's feet, in place of the white half-globe, we cannot exclude that the central level was also uncovered again, and that the Blessed Virgin appeared without the globe in her hands. In both cases the bright shining light would have played the part of a curtain, behind which a transformation of the image would have been produced.⁴³

The account of Aladel's interrogation, drawn up by P[ierre] Quentin, contains a piece of information which could prove a vision similar to the one at present on the back of the medal, as well as a dimming of the light at the central level of Mary's stance. The account states that the invocation "O Mary conceived without sin..." starts at the level of the Virgin's (extended) right hand and,

⁴² *Op. cit.*, pp. 85-86. We do not know if he heard it directly from Catherine, but what is clear is that he formed such an opinion after his conversations with her. "[V]arious stances" does not mean that there were others than those reported by Catherine and Chevalier, otherwise Catherine would have described the apparition differently.

⁴³ We do not know at all whether the upper level was covered again. We must doubt that that took place, because for a certain moment the entire stance of Mary could have been invisible. If, then, she had a crown of twelve stars on her head, in the vision with the globe in her hands, she kept it until the final moment when Catherine saw the back of the medal. A single change on that level is the appearance of the invocation.

passing over her head, ends at the level of the left hand.⁴⁴ But the reliability of this is doubtful. Étienne, who was told about it by Aladel himself (and by him only),⁴⁵ gave evidence three days later (19 February 1836) that the invocation was “at the top” of the vision of the front.⁴⁶ This corresponds well with what Catherine recorded five years later (“at the top”).⁴⁷ Étienne merely reports facts; Aladel’s version is just his own interpretation. He gave Étienne an account of what he had heard from Catherine, whereas with Quentin he probably tried to accommodate Catherine’s account (“at the top”) to what was on the Medal (around the entire posture of Mary).⁴⁸

We accept that the reasons given above are not sufficient to conclude that the central part was again uncovered before Catherine saw the back of the Medal. To give a final answer to this question we must also take into consideration another possibility, namely the possibility of a vision of the front when the light over the central part does not disappear until the apparition of the back. This means that Mary’s posture, with the earth visible under her feet, in the central part (no globe in her hands, and the arms, for example, stretched downwards) was concealed by the shining light. Although this is somewhat complicated, we mention it because it is confirmed by a non-written proof, and better explains the discrepancies between Catherine and her confessor in the interpretation of the vision.

We are referring to a statue of the Blessed Virgin, sculpted, in the final year of Catherine’s life in accordance with her instructions; this is the non-written proof. The statue shows Mary holding a globe in her hands (the vision of the Virgin with the Globe), and under her feet she has the globe of the earth with the serpent (the “median” phase). On the statue the two phases form one single vision! This proves that Catherine understood the “median” phase as an extension of the vision of the Virgin with the Globe (in the sense of the same image). Chevalier’s account proves this. For him, on the lower level the white half-globe and the later globe of the earth are the same thing (1.1.). In this we find agreement with Catherine’s conviction about the unity of the image before seeing the back,

⁴⁴ DChD 1, No. 298 (pp. 235-236).

⁴⁵ DChD 1, No. 299 (p. 240).

⁴⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 241.

⁴⁷ DChD 1, No. 456 (p. 295).

⁴⁸ The arrangement of the invocation is the work of a medallist, A. Vachette, who minted the first batch of the Medals (to see them cf. I. ZEDDE - A. ZANGARI, *La Medaglia della Madre*, part. 2: *Iter storico numismatico*, Genova 1980, pp. 66-68; LAURENTIN, *Vie authentique*, vol. 1: *Récit*, pp. 106 & 113).

which probably represents his opinion; he had discussions with her about this.

The proof given above allows us to formulate this conclusion: *If the “median” phase was, for Catherine, an extension of the vision of the Virgin with the Globe, that is, the same image, the light at the central part of Mary’s posture was not extinguished until the conclusion of the “median” phase, for otherwise she would have noticed a visible change in the central and principal theme of the vision, namely the absence of the hand-held globe.* Chevalier’s account confirms this, that from a certain moment on, she did not see anything in the central part other than the shining light.⁴⁹ Sister Tanguy’s account has a similar assertion: Catherine was unable to explain what happened with regard to the globe in [Mary’s] hands.⁵⁰ Catherine therefore did not see anything except the rays of very brilliant light springing from Mary’s hands, but she was unable to see what was concealed, (what happened), behind.

This state of affairs allows us to understand Catherine’s perception of the vision: she thought (most probably) that the globe in Mary’s hands remained hidden in the bright shining light,⁵¹ and that the globe of the earth under her feet was simply a continuation of the image of the white half-globe (see the statue of the Immaculate Virgin mentioned above).

The above interpretation explains certain matters: 1) it is obvious why the invocation appears “at the top”; the central part of Mary’s stance was covered by the bright shining light until the conclusion of the “median” phase; 2) We can understand why Catherine never once mentions in her notes the theme of the earth under Mary’s feet (a part of the “median” phase being visible); if, according to her conviction, the apparition up to the moment when she saw the back constituted the same image, the theme of the earth was part of the image of the white half-globe (see Chevalier); 3) Such a state of affairs conforms well to Catherine’s words, that the position of Mary’s hands on the front of the Medal does not correspond (exactly) with what she saw during the apparition of the Virgin.

Something which supports our interpretation above is that an extinction, or a lessening, of the light at the central part of Mary’s posture in the “median” phase brings one of the following

⁴⁹ See note 38.

⁵⁰ PO, sess. 24, in DChD 2, No. 906 (p. 229).

⁵¹ This comes from the account quoted by Sister Tanguy (*idem*); that depends also on how to understand Catherine’s statement quoted in connection with note 41.

conclusions: 1) Catherine must have missed this stage of the apparition of the Virgin (the absence of the globe from Mary's hands); 2) she forgot, or 3) she was deliberately silent on this point. The first does not explain why she missed the same vision for a second time (she repeated herself in the same way at least once, in December 1830).⁵² The second does not explain why she forgot such an important part of the apparition of the Virgin. Her excuses of a poor memory are marginal, and in most of the cases refer only to details (**Historical Conclusions, c.**). The third possibility does not explain why, in her accounts, she passed over in silence this stage of the vision; her reaction to Aladel's attitude does not justify omitting a real element of the apparition.

We can now formulate another important conclusion: *If the central part of Mary's posture remained covered until the end of the "median" phase (with the appearance of the back of the medal), it is not possible to ascertain the precise position of her hands; they could have been stretched downwards or, for example, joined in prayer.* The concealment of the Virgin's hands proves it was not their position that constituted the basis of this part of the apparition, but the distribution of requested graces in the image of the bright shining light (symbol of abundance). Whatever the position of her hands may have been, nothing is changed concerning the fact of the streaming from them, that is to say from Mary's person, of divine graces.⁵³

While avoiding non-documented hypotheses (lacking other sources), we are satisfied with the reconstruction presented up to this point, and we present the developing of the apparition, as confirmed in the sources. During the vision of Mary with the globe in her hands, the bright shining light (symbolising divine graces) gradually covered her stance: at first the lower part, then the central part. At the moment of the covering of the central part, and the lower part

⁵² CHEVALIER, *Médaille Miraculeuse*, p. 80; see also LAURENTIN - ROCHE, *Catherine Labouré*, pp. 85-86. The December vision is described in DChD 1, Nos. 635/636 (pp. 350-352). Sister Pineau's evidence of 27 October 1896 (PO, sess. 15) in DChD 2, No. 886 (p. 213), that during the December vision Mary's arms were stretched downwards is, according to other sources, her interpretation of the events (an attempt to eliminate the discrepancies between Catherine and Aladel) and does not correspond to the facts.

⁵³ The covering of the central part during the "median" phase allowed the vision to take on an oval shape, that is the shape of a medal, during the vision of the Virgin holding the globe in her hands (there is no longer any ambiguity in the image, namely two different images) Given such a view of the matter we may believe that Heaven led Catherine to the conviction that during the "median" phase no change took place. That is why we believe it more probable that the vision took on the shape of a medal as soon as the hand-held globe ceased to be visible.

becoming uncovered, Catherine saw the Blessed Virgin with the globe of the earth under her feet. The central part remained covered until the end (till the apparition of the back). Even if this could not be perceived by the eyes, Mary no longer held the globe in her hands. Her arms may have been in any position: stretched downwards, or joined in prayer. At this moment the image being contemplated (probably) took on the oval shape, and an invocation appeared in the upper part; Catherine heard a command to have the medal minted. Then the image turned around and she saw nothing except the back.

We can, therefore, risk an evaluation of Fr Aladel's contribution to the present form of the Medal, as well as of Sister Catherine's claims about this.

With regard to Aladel's share, if the apparition of the Virgin unfolded as set out above (or came close to it), it does not seem odd that he saw in the vision what is now on the front of the Medal. If, according to Catherine's account, he reconstructed in the same way the unfolding of the event, that is to say that at a given moment the globe in Mary's hands became invisible and nothing remained except the rays of light and, under her feet, the globe of the earth (with the serpent) appeared (in place of the white half-globe); and then, that in the final phase, before Catherine saw the back, the image took on an oval shape,⁵⁴ and an invocation appeared in the upper part, and a command to have the Medal minted was given, the confessor, not even knowing at that moment what was the position of Mary's invisible hands, restored to the front of the Medal what had been seen (the globe under the feet and not in the hands). But, even if the image of the front had started during the vision of the globe in Mary's hands, Aladel well understood that she no longer held it in the phase immediately preceding the appearance of the back (the "median" phase). His contribution is restricted to the supposition about the position of her hands at that moment. Given that Catherine was unable to explain this part of the vision (what took place with regard to the globe), he found a solution in remembering how the Blessed Virgin, under the title of Immaculate, was conventionally represented at that period.⁵⁵ There is no argument about the arms extended downwards; moreover, it is merely a

⁵⁴ The "median" phase was part of this image.

⁵⁵ In spite of this, he expresses himself in only a general way about the position of the hands: Mary ("stretching her hands": DChD 1, Nos. 17, 38 & 52, or "having both arms extended": DChD 1, No. 298). Not even once does he state that the hands were extended downwards. That is how later authors interpreted his words (extended downwards, or towards the ground). It is to

secondary theme which, in accordance with Heaven's intention, remained unseen (the emphasis being on the symbolism of the light).

The fact of accusing Aladel of arbitrary meddling in Mary's apparition, that is, to allege that he introduced an extraneous element into its make-up, does not seem to be founded on solid evidence. (He introduced a merely secondary element; see **Historical Conclusions**). In the light of the analyses used (the "median" phase) the confessor came to a reasonable conclusion about the apparition of the Virgin. We must not, therefore, ask for the reasons why he did not make a decision about the vision of the Virgin with the Globe on the front.⁵⁶

With regard to Catherine, a lack of interest in the "median" phase does not prove that, according to her conviction, there was such a phase during the apparition of the Blessed Virgin. The authors defending the vision of Mary extending her hands downwards believe, most often, that Catherine lacked the vision of the front (she did not see it). As we said already, the vision was repeated at least once (in December 1830). It seems difficult to prove that she again missed the same part of the vision of the Virgin. Neither do we accept the thesis that she forgot such an important part, or kept quiet about it (see above).

It is true that Catherine found it difficult to explain the unfolding of the apparition of the Virgin (see **Historical Conclusions "a"**). That does not mean that we should exclude that she perhaps did not understand certain elements of it. It was her confessor who came to her aid (idem "**b**"): in so far as he was a professor of philosophy he had suitable qualifications. We must not forget that before the apparition of the back, the unfolding of the apparition of the Virgin with the globe in her hands, followed by the "median" phase, were part of a dynamically changing image (Chevalier suggests several postures). There was, though, a stable element in this image, the posture of the Blessed Virgin, which united the two phases. They were strongly linked together, for example, by Mary's voice which was audible the whole time. It is thanks to the accounts of Catherine and Chevalier that we are able to state that Mary spoke to her, starting at a certain moment of the vision in which she was holding the globe in her hands (Catherine's account) right up to the

be noted that Aladel mentioned the downward extended arms to the medallist, Vachette, because that is how he portrayed Mary on the front of the medal.

⁵⁶ Later on, in 1842, he made an effort to show the vision of the Virgin with the Globe (as a picture?) (a sketch done by Letaille; see DChD 1, Nos. 460-461, pp. 300-301), but he gave up, disappointed by a rather unsatisfactory result (CHEVALIER, *Médaille Miraculeuse*, p. 83). The point of this attempt was to perpetuate the vision of Mary, and not to alter the image on the front.

appearance of the globe under her feet (the account of Catherine's confidant), and then right up till the moment that part of the vision which preceded the appearance of the back: the command to have the Medal minted (Catherine's account). Mary's continuously audible voice, being one of the elements of the vision, allows us to consider the entirety of the vision, right up to the appearance of the back, as one single whole. Given that the "median" phase had no distinct form at its central part, because of the bright shining light, Catherine interpreted this image through the prism of the Virgin holding the globe in her hands. Apart from that, it was the vision of the Virgin with the Globe which made the strongest impression on her.⁵⁷ Anyone other than Catherine who would have experienced the same vision would have probably formed the same opinion as she did.

Why had Catherine no problem in recounting the transition of the image into the vision of the back? It is quite obvious. The content of this phase was not linked to the earlier ones (a new image), and followed in a visible way, namely by revolving the foregoing one.

We arrive, then, at the conclusion that Catherine interpreted the vision in her own way; Aladel interpreted it in the context of his relationship with her, also in his own way. As regards Catherine, she did not (fully) understand what was happening in the so-called "median" phase (the disappearance of the globe from her hands, and therefore an alteration in the position of Mary's arms, and, in addition to that, the globe of the earth under her feet was no longer the previously-seen white half-globe). This influenced her perception of the "median" phase in as much as it was a prolongation of the preceding image; according to her account, then, it was the vision of the Virgin with the Globe which should be on the front.

Aladel was aware of a new image (the "median" phase) and, according to him, that is what constituted the image for the front, independently of the position of Mary's invisible hands (a secondary theme). We think Aladel's interpretation is correct, because he was not hampered by not fully understanding, and therefore could reflect on the historical fact.⁵⁸

Going on with this point, we can state that between the vision of Mary with the globe in her hands and the vision of the back of the Medal, there was the so-called "median" phase. Therefore, that the "median" phase, (rather than the vision Mary holding the globe in

⁵⁷ See DChD 1, Nos. 455-456 (pp. 292-294), and also No. 635 (p. 351).

⁵⁸ The problem of the position of Mary's hands still remains unresolved. We will deal with it extensively in **Historical Conclusions**, point "j."

her hands) was seen as part of the front. It was, then, right that the globe of the earth on the front of the Medal, should be under Mary's feet and that she should not be holding the globe in her hands. We are not, however, certain (just some level of probability) of the exact position of the invisible hands. Basing ourselves on an analysis of existing sources we formulate the final conclusion about Catherine's dissatisfaction: she complained not only about Aladel's publicising something which, according to her, did not constitute the major element of the phase of the apparition which came just before the appearance of the other side (the globe of the earth under Mary's feet and not in her hands), but also that he had arranged for the front of the Medal to show the Virgin in an attitude (arms extended downwards) which she was not certain had been shown in the course of the apparition.

1.3. Two Points About Mary's Mission, in the Vision in which She is Holding the Globe.

The analyses used up to this point allow us to undertake a theological investigation which will be worked out in points 2, 3 & 5. In presenting the Blessed Virgin in the vision in which she is holding the globe, we note two aspects of her mission to the world.: 1) Catherine understood the apparition of Mary holding the globe as one in which, in this gesture, she was offering humanity to the Lord (point 1.1.): 2) she interpreted the rays of light springing from Mary's hands as graces for the world, requested by her.⁵⁹ The two positions follow one another in the vision of the Virgin with the Globe: Catherine sees first the Blessed Virgin holding the globe in her hands; then, after a certain time, the rays of light start springing from her hands. Mary's mission appears under two forms: in the name of the human race she addresses the Lord (she offers him the globe); 2) in the name of the Lord she addresses the human race (the distribution of graces). This twofold aspect of Mary's mission, in the vision in which she is holding the globe, is confirmed by her countenance: when she makes the offering of the human race she raises her eyes towards Heaven (relationship with the Son of God);

⁵⁹ Catherine's handwritten accounts, as well as a letter, manuscript and text in Aladel's *Notice Historique*, in addition to accounts based on his own testimony, and that of Étienne, to the delegate of the Archbishop of Paris, Quentin, during the Ordinary Process, in DChD 1, Nos. 455-456 (pp. 294-295), No. 632 (p. 345), No. 635 (pp 351-352); then No. 17 (p. 200), No. 38 (p. 209), No. 52 (p. 219), No. 298 (p. 235), No. 299 (p. 241), No. 368 (p. 264).

when the rays of light are already springing forth from her hands she lowers her eyes and looks towards Catherine (relationship with the human race).

This means that in the sequence of images she first presents the human race to the Lord, then a shower of graces happens. This allows us to interpret the gesture of offering: the Blessed Virgin presents the human race to her Son, in order to ask Him for graces for humanity. Finally, the graces are given to people, as symbolised by the rays of light springing from her hands.⁶⁰ The spread of the graces was increasing (the light becomes more and more brilliant); they bring victory over evil (the serpent under Mary's feet). The request for graces for redeemed humanity, by means of the gesture of offering the globe to her Son, links up with the period of combat with enemies whom one meets on the road towards the heavenly homeland. It is in this sense that the "median" phase, which follows the vision of the Virgin with the Globe, is a continuation of it with regard to the content of the message; the graces asked for lead on to the overthrow of Satan. We probably should consider the gold of the globe held by Mary in the sense of the value put on redeemed humanity by the Son (and by his mother).

We are convinced, and we intend to prove it, *that the mission of the Virgin with the Globe, in both its aspects, is reflected on both faces of the Medal: the distribution of divine graces to humanity (on the front) and the offering of this humanity to the Lord (on the back)*. The two aspects, with respect to the vision of the Virgin with the Globe, are shown on the Medal separately and contrastedly. Firstly, the image of the victory over Satan, due to the graces which have been granted, is a concrete visualisation of the prayer heard during the vision of the Virgin with the Globe (the rays of light). We will speak of this again in this study, as well as about the significance which the gesture of Mary's offering humanity to the Lord takes on the back (the second aspect). If, on the Medal as it was revealed, this gesture follows the request for graces (on the front), this means that it is no longer the same gesture as that in the vision of the Virgin with the Globe, but that this gesture receives a new content.

Thus the Medal evokes the two themes, joined by the double aspect of Mary's mission in the vision in which she is holding the

⁶⁰ Chevalier (*Médaille Miraculeuse*, p. 82) is acquainted with the account of the expression on Mary's face in the vision in which she is holding the globe, namely "gravity mingled with sadness, which disappeared during the vision [...] when the face shone out with a radiant brightness of love, especially at the moment of her prayer."

globe, namely innocence and union with her Son (indicated by the white half-globe). The two aspects of the Blessed Virgin's mission will be the subject of our analyses in the context of these two themes

2. THE SYMBOLISM OF THE BACK OF THE MEDAL

The apparition of the Miraculous Medal was recognised by the Church as the heavenly wish that the Mother of God be praised on earth as being conceived without sin; this is expressed clearly in the invocation. Were it not for this inscription the entire content shows the results of her immaculate conception rather than herself. We start our analysis of the theological content of the back of the Medal because it involves a theme which directs our thoughts directly to the vision of the Virgin with the Globe. A correct understanding of the back is, in our opinion, a key for understanding the whole message of the Medal. Independently of the historical process of the formation of the Medal as it now is, already mentioned and to be returned to later, its present appearance will form the basis of the theological analyses.

The commentators on the symbolism of the back of the Medal⁶¹ most frequently see, in the image of the hearts, the sufferings of the Mother associated with those of her Son. In the letter M and the cross on top of it with a horizontal bar underneath they see a perfect union with her Son in the entirety of his life. In the twelve stars they see a symbol of the Church. The back of the Medal should include a paschal aspect, namely suffering.

2.1. The Symbolism of the Letter M and the Cross with a Bar Underneath it

a) *Attempts at Explanation*

The theme of the letter M and the cross on the bar seems evident enough to commentators on the Medal (see note 61), — apart from a horizontal bar supporting the cross. As evidence of this there is an

⁶¹ The authors quoted in this note do not always agree on all the themes on the back of the Medal. See A. ZANGARI, *Simbologia della Medaglia Miracolosa*, Genova 1976; E. CID, *La Medalla Milagrosa, expression gráfica de la mariología*, in: *Las apariciones*, pp. 161-189, especially pp. 169-177; A. FEUILLET, *La doctrina mariana del Nuevo Testamento y la Medalla Milagrosa*, in: *Las apariciones*, pp. 191-232; V. DE DIOS, *Milagrosa (Virgen de la Medalla)*, in: M. PÉREZ FLORES - B. MARTÍNEZ - A. ORCAJO - A. LÓPEZ (eds.), *Diccionario de espiritualidad vicenciana*, Salamanca 1995, pp. 370-377, especially pp. 373-374; ZEDDE, *Medaglia Miracolosa*; compare also CRAPEZ, *Message*, pp. 51-52.

interpretation of the bar as the capital letter "I," signifying the name "Jesus,"⁶² as an image of the perfect union of Mother and Son,⁶³ or passing it over in silence.

Following out the first suggestion, Bomba makes a link, by means of one single expression, to the iconography of primitive Christianity (of the fourth century), without, however, citing sources. It is Zingari, already referred to, who tries to put forward evidence of that sort. We find, though, that in reality there is not any. The horizontal or transverse bar is present in certain iconographic signs (for example, with the letter P: at its centre, and even at its tip), but never at its base.⁶⁴ In the known examples it forms, with the vertical bar, the sign of the cross. In the case of the Greek cross, the horizontal bar (its arms) sometimes indicates the name of Jesus, but we do not know of any examples where the monogram of the name of Jesus is found at the base of the cross. All we accept is that the arms of the Greek cross form the monogram of the name of Jesus (the letter "I"), and that the entire cross is certainly the monogram of the name of Christ (the Greek letter "X").

When we look at elaborations of the problem, such as H. Leclercq's article,⁶⁵ we find that the transverse bar at the base of the cross indicates the ground on which the cross of Christ was erected; the apostles, the Roman soldiers, etc, are standing on it. As in the case of the Medal, it is wider than the arms of the cross. Leclercq does not give a single piece of evidence to support the thesis that the transverse bar is the letter "I." Nor do works which we have consulted back it up.⁶⁶ We are not, therefore, dealing with a documented hypothesis.

In a conversation with S. Kobielius, professor of Christian Iconography (UKSW, Warsaw), I understood that the search for a

⁶² See ZANGARI, *Simbologia*, pp. 58-85; W. BOMBA, *Cudowny Medalik jako znak i jego sens teologiczny* [*The Miraculous Medal as a Sign and its Theological Meaning*], in: B. BEJZE (compiler), *W nurcie zagadnień posoborowych* [*With Regard to Post-Conciliar Questions*], vol. 15: *Kontemplacja i działanie* [*Contemplation and Activity*], Warszawa 1983, pp. 337-338.

⁶³ FEUILLET, *La doctrina Mariana*, in: *Las apariciones*, p. 208; CID, *Medalla Milagrosa*, in: *Las apariciones*, p. 170.

⁶⁴ See S. Kobielius: *Krzyż Chrystusa. Od znaku i figury do symbolu i metafory* [*The cross of Christ; from sign and figure to symbol and metaphor*], Warszawa 2000.

⁶⁵ *Croix et crucifix*, by the same author in *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, vol. III/3, Paris 1907, pp. 3045-3131.

⁶⁶ V. Grossi, the article *Croix, crucifix*, in A. DI BERARDINO - F. VIAL (eds.), *Dictionnaire encyclopédique du christianisme ancien*, vol. 1, Paris 1990, pp. 592-594; Y. CHRISTIE, *Croce*, in: L. CASTE - I. FRANCHI - M.A. CRIPPA, *Iconografia e arte cristiana*, vol. 1, Milano 2004, pp. 548-553.

link, in this case, with the tradition of primitive Christianity, was a mistake, and that to see the letter “I” in the horizontal bar was totally without foundation. There is nothing unusual in that type of cross.⁶⁷ It is merely a free composition which must be interpreted in the overall context of the apparition. This opinion is in line with the account of Catherine herself, who did not take the bar to be the letter “I,” but, according to Quentin’s account, took it in a very general way, as being just a bar.⁶⁸ It was in the same way, towards the end of the 19th century, that Chevalier, Catherine’s confidant, understood it.⁶⁹

When we look at Feuillet and Cid’s suggestion, that the meaning is the union of Mother and Son, it seems strange that the back of the Medal emphasises the same thing twice: the second example is the image of the hearts (point 2.2.). Given that there is a theological side to this proposition, this study will give a later response.

b) Proposition of Interpretation

The two opinions presented above, which see in the cross the symbol of Christ, show an important weak element, namely that the revelation shows the M and not the cross. The cross remains in its shadow. After the apparition of the Medal, when Catherine wonders whether, as in the case of the front, there should also be an inscription on the back, around the two central symbols, she heard simply that “the M and the two Hearts say enough.”⁷⁰ (We will return to this in 2.3.a.). Applying an intellectual short-cut, the choice falls on the letter M, because it is the more important; the cross is passed over in silence (a secondary theme), which is difficult to explain, seeing that it must indicate Christ.

The two other pieces of evidence which we are going to present confirm not only the lesser symbolic importance of the cross with respect to the M, but lead us to the correct interpretation of the theme of the cross on the bar. Fr Aladel, referring to Sister Catherine’s account of the medal, states clearly that the cross was small, smaller than the letter M: “[...] the letter M surmounted by a

⁶⁷ In connection with this, see his study, already referred to, *Krzyż Chrystusa [The Cross of Christ]*.

⁶⁸ The account of the interrogation of Frs Aladel and Étienne, in DChD 1, No. 368 (p. 264). The French word “barre” also means a rail, or a stick or rod., which in this context would indicate a thick line (as it is most commonly understood). In our opinion it is more a question of a different meaning of “barre,” namely a mark (made by the pen), a line.

⁶⁹ The cross “[...] underlined with a bar”: “deposition on 17 June 1896 (PO, sess. 10), in DChD 1, No. 878 (p. 200).

⁷⁰ DChD 1, No. 456 (p. 296).

small cross.”⁷¹ That is the same way in which the cross, on the globe of the earth held by Mary in her hands, was described by Catherine: “[...] the globe surmounted by a small cross.”⁷² In this second instance she had no doubt whatever that there was question of the whole of redeemed humanity; she understood this to be the explanation.⁷³ The cross being smaller than the letter M is contrary to the position of Christ in the work of redemption, and the resemblance to the description of the cross in the vision of the Virgin with the Globe, lead us to the conclusion that what we are dealing with is the image of redeemed humanity. Furthermore, we can see here an analogy with Christian iconography. There the horizontal line at the base of the cross (wider than the arms) indicates the earth.

We believe that in the symbol in question on the back, the horizontal bar indicates the globe of the earth, over which rises the cross of Christ (Checking with Kobiellus will show that he considers this interpretation to be the natural one for the symbol). From the origin of Christianity the cross is the sign of salvation. In our opinion it symbolises on the back, with the horizontal bar indicating the globe of the earth, the whole of humanity redeemed by Christ⁷⁴ (just like the globe surmounted by a small cross held by Mary in her hands).

Taking the cross on the back of the Medal as a symbol of Christ, as we have done, raises certain doubts about over-emphasising the role of Mary. That is why, right from the beginning, the cross shown on the Medal had the same dimensions as the letter M.⁷⁵ Moreover, the cross on the horizontal bar is interlaced with the letter M as if embraced: if the cross had symbolised Christ it would have sprung directly from the letter M, or even would have been placed on the same level. We see this type of representation in certain illustrations of the Medal (allusion to Mary at the foot of the cross). We regard

⁷¹ “Notice historique” dated 20 August 1834, in DCh 1, No. 52 (p. 219).

⁷² Handwritten note dated 10 April 1876, in DChD 1, No. 635 (p. 351).

⁷³ Handwritten accounts from 1841, in DChD 1, Nos. 455-456 (pp. 293-294).

⁷⁴ The symbol of the cross on the back includes the person of Christ in the sense that he is the author of redemption.

⁷⁵ See in: LAURENTIN - ROCHE, *Catherine Labouré*, pp. 61 & 63; ZEDDE - ZANGARI, *Medaglia*, part 2: *Iter storico numismatico*, pp. 66-149; Zangari (*Simbologia*, pp. 26 and 5 3ff.) suggests a rather obscure hypothesis that the cross, at the start, was not interlaced with the monogram of Mary (above the letter M), and that is why, because of lack of space on the back, it had to be small (Greek cross). It seems that Zangari understands by “small cross” the Greek cross in order to be able to see, by making a link with the iconography of early Christianity, the monogram of the name of Jesus in the horizontal bar (see above).

these, and similar modifications, as evidence of an inappropriate understanding of the symbolism of the cross on the bar in the context of the letter M. The horizontal bar plays an absolutely fundamental role in the overall context of the symbol: its purpose is to point to a correct understanding.

There is no doubt that the letter M indicates Mary in the disputed theme of the back. We do not however agree that, in the case of the cross on the bar, there is question of the letters I (horizontal bar) and X (cross), monograms of Jesus Christ. Nor is there, either, a question of the union of Mary and her Son in the work of redemption (horizontal bar linking M to the cross). It is the vision of the Virgin with the Globe considered above, which clarifies the matter of the horizontal bar and the entire symbolism of which it is a part. We consider as fundamental the accounts, referred to above, which speak of the small cross rising above the globe of the earth held by Mary and above the letter M. In the disputed symbol, therefore, we see Mary (letter M) presenting redeemed humanity (cross on bar) to the Lord, as that took place in the vision of the Virgin holding the globe in her hands.

We believe that *the letter M with the cross on the bar is really a symbolic way of representing the Mary of the vision of the globe, in which she is holding the redeemed world in her hands and presenting it to the Lord.* The suggested interpretation is deduced from the apparition itself and responds to the Blessed Virgin's ardent wish, expressed through this apparition, that she be honoured as the one who presents the world to the Lord (see **Historic conclusions b**, note 117). We will be able to explain in detail, in the later part of our study (point 5), the significance of this offering of the golden globe in the disputed symbolism of the back.

2.2. The Theme of the Wounded Hearts of Jesus and Mary

The theme of the two wounded hearts of Jesus and Mary fits in well with the symbolism already dealt with. Mary's heart transfixed by a sword, placed beside her Son's heart crowned with thorns, recalls her sharing in his redemptive work (within the limits of the mission God set out for her). This agrees perfectly with Simeon's prophecy (Lk 2:35),⁷⁶ and also with the testimony of Jn (19:25-27),⁷⁷

⁷⁶ For example, I.H. MARSHALL, *The Gospel According to Luke*, Grand Rapids (MI) 1978, pp. 122-123; C.F. EVANS, *Saint Luke*, London-Philadelphia 1993, pp. 219-220.

⁷⁷ For example R.E. BROWN, *The Gospel According to John*, vol. 2, AB 29A, New York 1970, pp. 922-927; I. DE LA POTTERIE, *Gesù verità. Studi di cristologia*

Jesus speaking from the cross: Mary has her share of the sacrifice connected with our sins, because she is mother of the Redeemer. The linked suffering of Mother and Son reaches its culmination on Calvary; the representation of the two wounded hearts refers primarily to that moment.⁷⁸

The union between Mother and her Son at the key moment of the redemption of the human race is expressed by the linkage of the two hearts, one beside the other, on the same level. The relationship of motherhood with respect to the Son of God, in which the Son recognises the priority of the Mother, in accordance with the order of human maternity (cf. Lk 2:51), is the only reason for locating them on the same level. The Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium* sees Mary's motherhood as her "supreme dignity" which makes her "the beloved daughter of the Father" (§ 53). We understand this locating of the two hearts on the same line as an extraordinary degree of unity with her Son "by a close and indissoluble tie" (*ibid*) which arises from Mary's divine maternity and forms the basis of her role and her rank in the work of redemption.

In this image of the two wounded hearts we draw close to the truth of the perfect union between the Mother of God and the Redeemer. The theme of her union with the Son is based on her divine maternity and is already present in the vision of the Virgin with the Globe, in the image of the white half-globe, and it is from that that it may be deduced.

a) The Theological Message of the Themes Treated Already

The perfect union of the Mother and the Son of God (the image of the two hearts) forms the reason for the link, and Mary's mission towards the human race (the letter M with the cross on the bar). We have already mentioned that the cross on the horizontal bar does not rest directly on the letter M, but that it interlaces with it as if it were a folding of arms. In the work of salvation the mother of Jesus plays a protective role with regard to the human race. This is the way

giovanna, Torino 1973, pp. 158-164; by the same author: *Marie dans le mystère de l'alliance*, Paris 1988, pp. 240-257. X. LÉON-DUFOUR, *Lecture de l'Évangile selon Jean*, part. 4, Paris 1990, pp. 134-148; Y. SMOENS, *Selon Jean. 1. Une traduction, 2. Une interprétation*, Bruxelles 1997, and other authors, especially Catholic ones.

⁷⁸ According to Lk 2:35 Mary's suffering is linked not only to her Son's destiny but also to that of the Jewish nation, to its hostile attitude towards Jesus. That is why her suffering begins at the moment her Son's mission begins and continues after his death (cf. W. RAKOCY, *Święty Łukasz wobec niewiary Izraela – krytyka i nadzieja* [*St Luke Confronts Israel's Unbelief – Criticism and Hope*], RSB 24, Warszawa 2006, pp. 22-23).

that Sister Catherine understood the gesture of holding the globe of the earth in her hands: Mary offers all human beings to the Lord. The truth about Mary's protection of Christ's redeemed children is portrayed on the back by a symbolic presentation of this gesture in the letter M and the cross on the bar. We cannot understand this concern for the human race other than in the context of her perfect relationship with her Son; she completely enveloped in her care the Author of redemption, and now, with the same care, the children redeemed by him.

Mary's divine maternity forms the basis of her relationship with her Son in the image of the hearts (even up to her sharing in his sacrifice). Her link with the children of her Son, which we have classified also as maternal, arises from this relationship. Her spiritual maternity extends over every redeemed person, whom she receives as her sons and daughters at the moment when Christ, on the cross, entrusted John to her (Jn 19:25-27).⁷⁹ The two images, of the hearts arranged one beside the other, and the letter M interlaced with the cross on the bar, namely the unity of Mother and Son and then of the Redeemer's mother and redeemed humanity, allow us to understand why the work of the Son of God is entrusted to her care by such an expressive gesture, in which she holds redeemed humanity in her hands: the maternal link between Mary and Christ forms the reason for her link with humanity. This is shown in a striking way by placing the two hearts as the support, the base, for the symbol of the letter M with the cross.

Mary, on the back of the Miraculous Medal, is really the Mother of the Redeemer, who by her childbearing and her mission towards the human race, becomes the spiritual mother of the redeemed. In the presentation of the maternal link of the mother with her Son, and by extension with humanity, the idea of mediation is conveyed: Mary, while remaining in perfect union with the Son of God, offers to Him everything concerning the human race (the link: humanity-Son of God). Her motherly mediation towards the redeemed will be completed on the front.

2.3. The Symbolism of the Twelve Stars

All that remains to be explained with regard to the back of the Medal is the symbolism of the twelve stars. It is generally believed that the twelve stars are a symbol of the Church, which is linked to the twelve Apostles, namely the renewed people of the old covenant,

⁷⁹ See note 77.

who comprised twelve tribes.⁸⁰ An understanding of this theme, and its role in the Medal's message, demands that we first go back to the unfolding of the vision of 27 November 1830.

a) *The Historical Context*

In one of her accounts written in 1841 Sister Catherine wrote that after the apparition of the Medal she wondered if there should not be an inscription around the two central symbols on the back, as there was on the front. An interior voice told her that "the M (with the cross) and the two hearts say enough."⁸¹ This fact is confirmed three times by Fr Aladel in his accounts, drawn up seven years earlier (1834).⁸² Catherine's words suggest that she did not see, on the back, anything other than the two central themes, and, therefore, did not see the twelve stars. Chevalier⁸³ expresses moral certitude that the stars were there during the apparition, and that Catherine passed on this fact to Aladel. This seems hardly likely. The "question" addressed to Heaven, about a possible later invocation around the hearts and the monogram of Mary with the cross, presumes that there was a vacant space! We consider that to be sufficient proof. The theme of the twelve stars on the back is not present in any of the sources which tell of the unfolding of the apparition. Catherine surely obeyed the voice which she heard.

We go back now to Aladel. When, in 1832, he decided to have the Medal minted, he based himself on the information which he had already heard from Catherine (because of the reservations he had on this matter); the only thing he was going to ask Catherine was about a possible inscription on the back.⁸⁴ She did not say anything to him about the stars on the back of the Medal, because there were not any; what is more, he understood from her that the two hearts and Mary's monogram with the cross were sufficient. That is the reason why he, too, does not seem to have been responsible for having put the theme of the twelve stars there. It is not just that Aladel never speaks about this anywhere, but furthermore, in 1848, he had a medal, without the stars, minted for the Children of Mary.⁸⁵ This being so, it was the person who prepared the model for the medal who most

⁸⁰ See the authors mentioned in note 61.

⁸¹ DChD 1, No. 456 (p. 296).

⁸² DChD 1, No. 17 (p. 202), No. 38 (p. 213), No. 52 (p. 221).

⁸³ *Médaille Miraculeuse*, p. 76.

⁸⁴ See the statements of witnesses on this subject in LAURENTIN, *Vie authentique*, vol. 2: *Preuves*, p. 223, note 16.

⁸⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 199. See also different traditions about the number of twelve for the stars (from 9 even up to 32), in ZANGARI, *Simbologia*, pp. 218-231.

probably placed the stars on the front, around Mary's head (because of Rv 12:1).

We know that Vachette, the silversmith and medallist, who produced the first model of the medal, introduced certain minor elements on the back, for example two horizontal lines which separated the hearts from the monogram of Mary with the cross;⁸⁶ also, on the front he put an almost invisible veil on Mary, and arranged the invocation in his own way. He is the only person who could have introduced the theme of the twelve stars:⁸⁷ He probably transferred them from the front (the stars around Mary's head), because they are not present on the first medals he produced.⁸⁸ As he was a professional he had regard for the aesthetic element, the horizontal lines or the arrangement of the invocation, for example, but he brought a theological context for the message of the Medal. Aladel allowed him a certain amount of freedom in this matter; he concentrated on the content, which he regarded as being the most important.

b) The Theological Aspect

The symbolism of stars in the Bible is quite multiple and nuanced.⁸⁹ For twelve stars we have only Rv 12:1. The interpretation that the stars symbolise the Church, proposed by certain authors, calls for precision on our part.

In Nb 24:17 there is a foretelling of the appearance of a star rising from Jacob, namely of the Messiah; this interpretation is supported by several Jewish authorities.⁹⁰ In the NT, the star of Bethlehem (Mt 2:2) refers back to this foretelling, in which is also seen the fulfilment of the promise that the Messiah will be the sun of justice (Ml 3:20; see Lk 1:78), and the morning star (Rv 2:28, 22:16; 2 P 1:19). The brightness shining from him will darken all other lights in heaven and they will even become useless, because the Lamb will be the only light (Rv 21:23): "I am the light of the world" (Jn 8:12). Bringing this evidence together we draw close to what

⁸⁶ They can still be seen today in certain illustrations of the back of the Medal.

⁸⁷ A similar opinion is expressed by ZANGARI, *Simbologia*, pp. 26 and 211 ff., and LAURENTIN, *Vie authentique*, vol. 2: *Preuves*, pp. 199 and 226-227, note 25.

⁸⁸ An aureole around Mary's head is present, in the form of a thin line (see LAURENTIN, *op. cit.*, vol. 1: *Récit*, pp. 106 and 113; ZEDDE - ZANGARI, *Medaglia*, part. 2, *Iter storico numismatico*, pp. 66-68).

⁸⁹ See, for example, Gn 15:5, 37:9; Nb 24:17; Ob 4; Jb 22:12.

⁹⁰ See H. STRACK - P. BILLERBECK, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, vol. 1, München 1922, pp. 76-77.

is generally accepted, namely that the symbolism of the star (and, by extension, of light) with respect to the Messiah is well rooted in biblical tradition.

It is difficult to connect this symbolism to the Church. It is only in Rv 1:20 that seven stars represent the seven angels of the Church, namely the bishops; the individual churches are symbolised by the lampstands. Other images appear, such as the wall, the gates and the precious stones (Rv 21),⁹¹ always with the number twelve. The Woman in Rv 21, who represents the New Jerusalem, in other words the Church, is enclosed by the wall with twelve foundation stones (with the names of the twelve apostles on them) and twelve gates (with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel on them). The foundation stones under the wall are decorated with twelve precious stones. There is one stable element in the changing image, namely the number twelve. The theme conveyed by twelve goes back to the twelve tribes of Israel and then the twelve apostles, representing the new people of God. The analogy with the Church comes from the number twelve and not from the star theme.

A linking of the number twelve with the star theme, unique to Rv 12, in the form of a wreath, adds an element of glorification to the symbol of twelve.⁹² The meaning of the twelve stars on the back of the Medal differs, however, from that of Rv 12. We think that in the twelve stars on the back a blending of the divine and human elements has taken place: *Christ, as the light of the world in the image of the star, and the Church as the People of God in the image of the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles*. The twelve stars are certainly Christ and his members, his people. The symbolism of blending the star theme with the number twelve emphasises the indissoluble union of Christ and the Church. The star theme is the basis of the image, not the number twelve, and that is why the twelve stars, first of all indicate Christ. We must, therefore, see the crown of stars on the back of the Medal as one single great light which enlightens all humanity, and being Christ, shines in his members.

The twelve stars represent, above all, Christ as the Lamb of God. It was through his redemptive death that the Church was born (Jn 19:25-27; compare 1:35-36), and then the Lamb of God remains the sole light for her (Rv 21:23). In this context the title "Lamb of God" best corresponds to Christ's role in the work of redemption and

⁹¹ Cf. Eph 2:20-22.

⁹² It is at the same time an announcement of the definitive victory of the Church; see P. FARKAŠ, *La "Donna" di Apolisse 12. Storia, bilancio, nuove prospettive*, Tesi Gregoriana – Serie Teologia 25, Roma 1997, pp. 205-229.

definitive salvation. In the image of the twelve stars we see, first of all, him who was pointed out by John the Baptist with the words ECCE AGNUS DEI, and who later triumphs with his Church in the final chapters of Revelation as LUX MUNDI. The twelve stars represent a mystical union of the Lamb of God and redeemed humanity resplendent in his light. On the back of the Medal the central role in the work of redemption and the salvation of humanity is attributed to Christ.

Unlike Mary's monogram, with the cross and the two wounded hearts, the theme of the twelve stars has no equivalent in the vision of the Virgin with the Globe. And even if the crown of stars around Mary's head was probably present in that vision,⁹³ it does not correspond to the theological message of the twelve stars on the back of the Medal. The theme of the stars on the back, for the reasons that it represents the mystery of Christ (and the Church), can have an equivalent only in Him who is there behind the Blessed Virgin's mission. Christ in the image of the twelve stars is the light of the world. Although the appearance of a crown around Mary's head suggests that she goes forth in the Lord's name, her position, unique to herself, is not equal to that of Christ, who dominates the back. Neither must we look for the theme of the twelve stars in the rays of light springing from Mary's hands in the vision in which she is holding the globe, because they already have their equivalent in the same form on the front. The absence of an equivalent of this theme in the vision of the Virgin with the Globe becomes evident, given the fact that it was not there during the apparition of the Medal (being introduced by Vachette, the medalist).

2.4. The Theological Message of the Back (Continued)

Mary's role in the work of redemption, indicated in the foregoing conclusions, now appears more clearly. Because of the mystical union of the Lamb of God and the Church (the stars symbol), the central section of the back of the Medal brings out two truths: 1) the union of Mother and Son (the image of the hearts) and, given this, 2) the link and the mission of the mother of the redeemed with respect to the people of God, entrusted to her protection (the letter M interlaced with the cross). The back of the Medal stresses at the same time that Mary belongs to the Church, being redeemed by Christ,⁹⁴

⁹³ See **Historical Conclusions e.**

⁹⁴ In the sense of her protection against contracting faults (see *Lumen gentium*, § 53).

as well as the relationship between the Son of God and the redeemed world, and her privileged, and even exceptional, position.⁹⁵ We characterise this position as a perfect union with the Son of God from which resulted in the mediation between humanity and the Lord (a link symbolised by her holding redeemed humanity in her hands). Because on the back of the Medal she is shown, *par excellence*, as Mother (in relation to her Son and humanity), we characterise her position with regard to the redeemed as a maternal relationship with Christ's Church. She is shown in this role by a symbolic motherly gesture, offering humanity to the Lord.

The whole image of the back of the Medal is a representation of the Mystical Body of Christ: the indissoluble union of Christ and the Church, and it is against that background that we emphasise the privileged position and mission of the Mother of the Redeemer, our mother.

3. THE SYMBOLISM OF THE FRONT OF THE MEDAL

The commentators on the symbolism of the front⁹⁶ draw attention to the invocation around the image of the Blessed Virgin, indicating her conception without sin, then to the crushing of the serpent's head, which announces the definitive victory over Satan, and also to the distribution of graces in the rays springing from her hands. The front of the Medal should include the glorious aspect.

The representation of Mary on the front goes back to the biblical tradition (Gn 3, Rv 12) and refers to the themes which are found there. John's vision seems closer to her representation on the front than does the text of the Protoevangelium; however, the front is not an exacreflection. The theme of Mary' sharing in the victory over Satan was taken from the Protoevangelium (the crushing of the serpent's head). The two texts are the basis of the vision of the Virgin with the Globe. The content of the front, like the vision known as "with the Globe," is linked to the biblical tradition, and it is only in that light that we can rightly understand its message.

⁹⁵ *Idem.*

⁹⁶ ZANGARI, *Simbologia*; CID, *Medalla Milagrosa*, in: *Las Apariciones*, pp. 177-189; FEUILLET, *La doctrian Mariana*, in: *Las Apariciones*, pp. 208-209; DE DIOS, *Milagrosa (Virgen de la Medalla)*, in: PÉREZ FLORES - MARTÍNEZ - ORCAJO - LÓPEZ (eds.), *Diccionario de espiritualidad vicenciana*, especially pp. 373-374; ZEDDE, *Medaglia Miracolosa*; compare also CRAPEZ, *Message*, pp. 41-50.

3.1. The Theme of the Crushing of the Serpent's Head

The text of the Protoevangelium (Gn 3:15) foretells victory over the powers of evil, namely over Satan: the woman will play her part in the eschatological victory of her posterity (the Saviour) through the fact of her having brought him into the world. If Eve, conquered by Satan, represents a specific woman, then the one who will play her part in bringing victory over the serpent should also be a person who really exists.⁹⁷ In the Woman of Gn 3:15 we can see the New Eve, that is to say, the Mother of the Redeemer. Mary gives birth to the Saviour, who, being her "Posterity," will crush the serpent's head. The word "posterity" is not confined just to the Redeemer, but includes all her children, including Mary,⁹⁸ who bring about the victory over Satan. Mary appears in this combat as the strongest refuge among human beings, totally united to the Son of God and collaborating with him (the image of the two hearts on the back). In the person of the Mother of Jesus, humanity already appears stronger in the real world than Satan's efforts.

What we have just said is not explicitly formulated in the extant accounts of the apparition (Catherine, Aladel). Once we have accepted the interpretation of the white half-globe under Mary's feet, it does not seem that the theme of the serpent was there before its disappearance in the rays of light and the appearance of the earthly globe (see **Historical conclusions c** and **e**). We can deduce indirectly the theme of the serpent from the message of the white half-globe, the symbol of Mary's Immaculate Conception and her perfect union with the Son of God. The Blessed Virgin, the unique person of the entire human race free from the efforts of the Evil One, from all taint of sin and the slightest moral imperfection, brings about the decisive victory over him, towards whom all others turn, following the path of being freed from sins.⁹⁹ Mary's victory over Satan, namely her perfection never being touched by sin, foretells the ultimate renewed perfection of the redeemed. The representation of the Blessed Virgin in the vision in which she holds the globe and that on the front of the Medal is a consequence of the definitive victory over Satan; her personal victory is the effect of her sinless conception (the invocation); her sharing in the victory of the remainder of the redeemed is the distribution of the graces merited by her Son. With this point we are ready to pass on to the next theme of the front of the Medal.

⁹⁷ FEUILLET, *op. cit.*, p. 223.

⁹⁸ By virtue of the grace of her sinless conception which was attributed to her in advance (compare *Lumen gentium*, § 53).

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

3.2. The Theme of the Distribution of Divine Graces

We see, in the representation of the Blessed Virgin on the front of the Medal, striking references which go back to Rv 12:1. Christian tradition was inspired by this image in presenting her Immaculate Conception. However, the distribution of graces which concerns us is not present in Rv 12, and constitutes a new Marian tradition in the Church. Moreover, a predominant opinion among biblical exegetes is that the Woman of Rv 12 is first of all a representation of the People of God of the Old Testament, and secondly of the New, that is of the Church (the ecclesial interpretation).¹⁰⁰ We will first take a closer look at the text from Revelation, and then return to the vision of the Virgin with the Globe.

The vision in Rv 12 mingles the collective and individual elements, that is, those which refer to the people of God and those which directly indicate Mary.¹⁰¹ In certain passages of chapter 12 references to the Woman do not match the Church, or are relevant to her alone. The Woman who is spoken about in verses 4.b.-5. is a definite person, Mary about to give birth to the Messiah; an allusion, in verse 13, may also link the two themes, Mary and the Church. In the Semitic world the passage from the individual to the collective, and vice-versa, is a well-known phenomenon.

In Rv 12 the interpenetration of the image of The Woman-Mary and the image of The Woman-Church lets us see the entire vision as an integral unity of the Mother of God and the Church,¹⁰² and more precisely of the mother of the redeemed with the Church of her Son, entrusted to her care. That is why Rv 12 shows the struggle of the children of Christ and Mary with the powers of evil, before they achieve the definitive victory over them: Mary shares in all the adversities which afflict the Church. The message of Rv 12 allows us to draw an important conclusion from it about the mission of the Blessed Virgin on the front of the Medal: in sharing in all the adversities which afflict the Church Mary is totally united with it, following the example of her perfect union with her Son (the image of the hearts).

In the temporal struggles of this world against adversities, Mary supports the human race, entrusted to her protection, by dispensing to it the graces merited by her Son (the image of the rays on the front of the Medal). The mission of distributing divine graces is closely

¹⁰⁰ See FARKAŠ, *La "Donna" di Apocalisse 12*.

¹⁰¹ See DE LA POTTERIE, *Marie*, pp. 261-283.

¹⁰² Within the framework of the union of Christ and the Church (the symbolism of the twelve stars on the back).

linked to the theme of victory over evil, for this victory, which consists in perseverance with God, or not falling into the wiles of Satan, is brought about by God's grace. The effect of the graces sought, in the vision of the Virgin with the Globe (the brightly shining light), is represented on the front by the victory over Satan. The front of the Medal draws together the theme of the dispensing of graces and that of victory over evil by the graphic positioning of the twin themes: the serpent on the earth's surface and the rays which spread down to earth. The Blessed Virgin, with the globe of the earth under her feet, appears in the role of Queen of the World.

The mission of distributing the graces sought through the Blessed Virgin, leading to victory over Satan, is the central theme of the front of the Medal. Because of the fact that she never gave in to the seducer, having collaborated in a perfect way with divine grace, she becomes, by God's will, the distributrix of these graces by reason of the Son-humanity relationship. The theme of the distribution of the divine graces is explicitly present in the vision of the Virgin with the Globe: Catherine states very clearly that the rays shining from Mary's hands are definitely the graces sought from the Blessed Virgin.¹⁰³ Her Immaculate Conception is the reason why things are as they are on the front, which, in the vision of the Virgin with the Globe, expresses the theme of innocence in the symbol of the white half-globe.

The distribution of the graces sought from her Son introduces another link with Mary's mission represented on the Medal, the inverse of what is on the back, namely a mediation between the Lord and the human race. Given that the gesture by which Mary offers humanity to the Lord is on the back (the letter M with the cross on the bar), the distribution of the divine graces is present on the front. Both aspects of Mary's mission, present in the vision of the Virgin with the Globe, form the entirety of the Medal (and constitute a development of the message of this vision).

The two aspects of Mary's mission, in the vision in which she is holding the globe, constitute the heart of the apparition of 27 November 1830, and are found on the two faces of the Medal: 1) The Immaculate Virgin's mission, in the Lord's name, towards the human race (front), and 2) the mission of the Mother of God, in the name of the human race, towards the Lord (back). Mary's mission on the Miraculous Medal has a twofold approach to mediation between the Lord and humanity.

¹⁰³ The accounts and handwritten notes from 1841 and 1876, in DChD 1, Nos. 455-456 (pp. 294-295), No. 632 (p. 345), and Nos. 635-636 (pp. 351-352).

3.3. A Summary of the Historico-Theological Aspects

The messages on the front and back of the Medal are not equal in importance. The theme of the twelve stars, that is of the symbol of Christ and the Church, embraces the whole message of the front, namely the dispensing of graces by the Immaculate Virgin and victory over Satan. It is in the nature of things that the importance of the message on the back outstrips that on the front: Mary's mission is part of the mystery of Christ and the Church. With regard to the Blessed Virgin's personal mission, it seems that what is on the back also outstrips the front: the graces sought lead to victory over Satan and to her offering of humanity to the Lord; moreover, the subject of her sinless conception is a foundation of her perfect union with her Son by reason of her divine motherhood. That is why the image on the front should be considered in the context of the back, and not the other way round.

The victory over Satan, prince of this world, achieved thanks to her Immaculate Conception, gives Mary the right to hold the title of Queen of the World. That is how Catherine understood the representation of the Blessed Virgin in the vision in which she is holding the globe, and it is mainly this role which she shows on the front of the Medal. The back shows her maternal relationship to the Son of God and humanity. Because we can, from the vision of the Virgin with the Globe, deduce the messages of both the front and back (apart from the twelve stars), Mary appears to us in the vision known as "with the Globe" not merely as Queen of the World but also as Mother of Christ and of all the redeemed. With regard to Mary-Mother on the back, the theme of the twelve stars makes clear her motherly relationship with humanity in the context of the mystery of the Church and Christ, and leads to the conclusion that she is Mother for the Church (point 5.). We do not want to make artificial divisions, but Mary of the vision in which she holds the globe is represented on the front of the Medal above all as Queen,¹⁰⁴ on the back as Mother.¹⁰⁵ Given that the importance of the message on the back is greater than on the front, she has, above all, the role of Mother in the way in which the Miraculous Medal is constructed.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Because of her sinless conception there took place a perfect collaboration with divine grace and, as a result, the victory over Satan (the theme of innocence in the vision of the Virgin with the Globe).

¹⁰⁵ Because of her divine maternity there took place a perfect maternal relationship with her Son, Redeemer of humanity, and then a similar relationship towards the redeemed (the theme of union).

¹⁰⁶ Zedde (Medaglia Miracolosa) gives the same opinion, although as a result of a different logical process.

The apparition of the Miraculous Medal on 27 November 1830 is a shift from the truth about Mary, Queen and Mother (the vision called “with the Globe”), to the plane of cult (the medal), that is, of the everyday life of the People of God. The unfolding of the apparition becomes logical: *What Sister Labouré had seen (the vision of the Virgin with the Globe) was contained in the message of the two sides of the Medal,¹⁰⁷ and was given to be believed.* The conclusion presented, which is the fruit of theological analyses, bears witness to an historical coherence in the representation of Mary on the front of the Medal (independently of the position of the invisible hands: see point 1.2.b.) with the vision seen by Sister Catherine.

The state of “dependence” of the front and back (of the Medal) on the vision of the Virgin with the Globe changed at the moment when Vachette introduced the theme of the twelve stars. The back, which presents the mystery of Christ and his Church, now constitutes (in the sense of the importance of the message) the apogee of the apparition of 27 November 1830: it includes not only the message of the front but also the entire vision of Mary holding the globe. This vision became subordinate to the content of the back of the same Medal. The theme of the twelve stars deepened the theological message of the Medal but, at the same time, shattered the relationship between the vision of the Virgin with the Globe and the two sides of the Medal.¹⁰⁸

At this point we must certainly pay attention to the successive steps, during which the process of the formation of the Medal was enabled to be finalised. If Catherine’s wish had been carried out, the back would have repeated in a symbolic way everything that she wanted on the front (Marty holding in her hands the globe of the earth and enveloping it with graces), that is, the twofold aspect of her mission. Aladel’s interpretation caused the twofold aspect of Mary’s mission, in the vision in which she holds the globe in her hands, to be split, and is present on each of the faces of the Medal; (Front: distribution of the graces. Back: the gesture of offering humanity to the Lord). The medalist’s definitive support for the twelve stars on the back shifted the emphasis from the vision of the Virgin with the Globe to the back of the Medal. If the Medal had been made according to Catherine’s wish she probably would not have

¹⁰⁷ With the support of secondary persons such as Aladel.

¹⁰⁸ We are not going into the task of explaining historically the way matters are at present, namely why the stars were not immediately on the back, or the reason for their being there. Neither must we link this question to Aladel’s contribution to the form of the Medal, because that did not upset the sense of the apparition (point 1.2.b.).

demanded the statue of the Immaculate holding the globe in her hands. Then, in the context of what is actually on the back, the existence of the statue is significant only in the sense of Marian devotion, and not in the sense of the theological message (the content of the back and of the entire Medal surpass it).

4. HISTORICAL CONCLUSIONS

The following conclusions are partly the result of applied analyses and partly the fruit of reading the source texts.

a) If the message of the Miraculous Medal is a transformation of the content of the vision of the Virgin with the Globe, namely of Mary's mission with its twofold aspect, a conclusion of a historical nature is demanded, things being that way. Sister Catherine, who upheld that what the vision of the Virgin with the Globe was should have been on the front of the Medal, did not realise that her message is contained on the two sides of the Medal (front: distribution of the graces; back: the gesture of offering the human race to the Lord). Is that startling? No. What is described above seems acceptable, taking into account the uncertainty of Catherine in questions about the apparition (especially what took place with regard to the hand-held globe);¹⁰⁹ this is confirmed by her interpretation of the vision up to the moment of the apparition of the back (point 1.1b). Furthermore, the history of apparitions teaches us that the person who experiences an apparition does not necessarily have to be its interpreter.

Catherine's determination to get the vision of the Virgin with the Globe portrayed, in spite of Aladel's opposition (conclusion **g**), served an end determined by God's providence. The vision remained completely unknown, because the confessor wanted it that way. Sister Dufès was flabbergasted by this information when Catherine, in the final year of her life, confided in her.¹¹⁰ If, once the medal had been minted, Catherine had kept silent right up to the end (she broke silence with the Blessed Virgin's consent),¹¹¹ we would not have known today about the vision itself, and would be deprived of the key to understanding the symbol of the letter M with the cross, and, as a consequence, the key to complete understanding of the back, and of the Medal as a medal. We think, therefore, that ignorance of

¹⁰⁹ See the evidence of Sister Tanguy, dated 24 May 1897 (PO, sess. 24), in DChD 2, No. 906 (p. 229).

¹¹⁰ Evidence of Sister Tanguy in DChD 2, No. 906 (pp. 228-229).

¹¹¹ See the evidence of Sister Dufès dated 29 April 1896 (PO, sess. 3), in DChD 2, No. 870 (p. 180).

this vision right up to the year of Catherine's death brought about a greater appreciation, right from the beginning, of the cross on the back of the Medal.

b) Aladel was the most important interpreter of the revelation. In spite of his contribution to the message of the revelation of certain elements (see conclusions **f**, **g** and **i**), he kept the essential point of the revelation, namely the distribution of graces, which, at that time, was a new way of presenting the Immaculate Virgin. With regard to the vision of the Virgin with the Globe, Aladel was correct in not placing it on the front (point 1.2.b.). That is why he has the role of not just being its interpreter, but also, with Catherine, the intermediary of the content of the apparition. It seems that such a role for the confessor was foreseen by Heaven, contributed to by the fact that Catherine remained totally hidden with regard to the public.¹¹² Apart from that, according to the words of Sister de Geoffre,¹¹³ Mary had said to Catherine, when she complained of her confessor's reserve about the Medal which was about to be minted, that he was her servant and why "[...] a day will come when he will do what I want." We must also look at Aladel's contribution to the message of the revelation through the prism of the Blessed Virgin's words.

It is not just the interpretation of the apparition which is nearer to the truth which lies behind the confessor's decision, but also a justifiable precaution. In spite of the favourable acceptance of the Medal the Congregation of Rites itself refused, in 1837, permission for showing in churches images of the Immaculate Virgin based on the front (!), because it "differed considerably" (the image of the rays) from her traditional picture.¹¹⁴ Later on it forbade completely any showing of the statue of Mary holding the globe in her hands, sculpted in the year in which Catherine died, because of too elevated a role being attributed to the Virgin:¹¹⁵ previously, only Christ had been portrayed in this fashion. These are the same reasons, along with others, by which Aladel¹¹⁶ allowed himself to be guided and, given Sister de Geoffre's note already referred to, we can come to the

¹¹² According to Sister Dufès (1877 notes, in DChD 2, No. 645 [p. 54]) Catherine was going to ask the Blessed Virgin for permission to remain unknown.

¹¹³ Obituary notice, 1 January 1878, in DChD 2, No. 655 (p. 95).

¹¹⁴ DChD 1, No. 374 (pp. 273-276).

¹¹⁵ DChD 2, No. 701 (and the correspondence linked with this: Nos. 702-706); Nos. 718, 720 & 724 describe the future allowing of this statue for devotion, but with definite conditions.

¹¹⁶ See also LAURENTIN, *Vie authentique*, vol. 2: *Preuves*, pp. 188-189.

conclusion that Heaven accepted not just the actual form of the Medal but even, perhaps, was expecting such an outcome; Catherine's understanding of the vision and her determination (conclusion **a**) served to keep the vision of the Virgin with the Globe from being forgotten. If that is true, research should veer towards an explanation of the vision known as "with the Globe" with respect to the actual form of the Medal (which we have tried to do). Moreover, we do not exclude that it still has a role to play in the Church's life, namely in the sense of Marian devotion (see the summary of point 3.).¹¹⁷

The communitarian aspect of the Medal comes through in the development of its formation. It can be explained, though in a somewhat simplified manner, as follows: Catherine experienced the apparition, Aladel interpreted it, the medallist switched the twelve stars from the front to the back. The community of the Church shared in the acceptance and spread of the content of the apparition (the fruit of collaboration).

c) A matter which merits our attention is that Sister Catherine, in describing what was under Mary's feet in the vision of the Virgin with the Globe, was not influenced by the painting in her native parish church, well known to her, which had links with Rv 12 and showed her with a half-moon under her feet.¹¹⁸ She often prayed in front of this picture over a ten-year period, and kept a clear recollection of it in her memory, for she had the vision of the Medal less than a year after her entry as a postulant (January 1830). She asserts, however, that she saw a white half-globe under Mary's feet; not being sure what this meant, she did not put her own interpretation on it and did not make a link with her own personal associations. In the next phase of the apparition she speaks, according to Chevalier's account, of the earth under her feet, which confirms that she was not influenced here either by the painting in her native parish. This witnesses to the absence of any piecing together in her way of reporting the facts; she tells things the way she saw them, telling only what she saw.¹¹⁹ This conclusion may cover every other aspect of the apparition.

¹¹⁷ What leads us to believe this is Sister Cosnard's evidence (PO, sess. 44, in DChD 2, No. 955); Sister Catherine, a month before her death (November 1876), told her very firmly that the Blessed Virgin wants "absolutely" to be praised as offering the world to the Lord because she "has prayed so much for the world" — this will be the source of many graces.

¹¹⁸ This painting is reproduced in LAURENTIN, *Vie authentique*, vol. 1: *Récit*, p. 33; also LAURENTIN - ROCHE, *Catherine Labouré*, p. 111.

¹¹⁹ This differs from Coste (*Mémoires*).

The openness with which she admitted that she no longer remembered something, together with her knowledge of the subject of the apparition, needed at a given moment, contribute to Catherine's credibility. When in 1835, five years after the apparition, L. Lecerf, at Aladel's request, was preparing a painting of the Blessed Virgin, he asked him about the colour of her veil. Her confessor could not recall the colour but he did not ask Catherine a direct question, just asking her to describe exactly Mary's appearance during this apparition. Catherine gave a written answer, saying she no longer recalled the details apart from one, the colour of her veil ("golden white"),¹²⁰ which is what Aladel was expecting. It can be seen, therefore, that it is by the will of Heaven that it was given to her to recognise, at any given moment, what was indispensable; her memory was selective but certain. Her lapses of memory were about details and were transitory. In later years she recalled exactly details about Mary's clothing during the same apparition (notes dated 1841 and 1876); she remembers in detail the vision of a Cross (1848), the vision of St Vincent's heart (1856), or the apparition of the 18th and 19th of July 1830 (1856). According to eye-witnesses some temporary lapses of memory were graces from the Blessed Virgin;¹²¹ they allowed Catherine to decline meetings with persons who asked, for example the archbishop of Paris or A. Ratisbonne, and to remain unknown.

There remains the matter of the statue of the Blessed Virgin, holding the globe in her hands, sculpted according to the instructions of Catherine herself, showing a serpent under Mary's feet. This proves its presence during the apparition on the one hand (see conclusion e), and on the other that the theme of the serpent does not fit in with the symbolism of the white half-globe, and it must, then, be placed on the globe of the earth which rose up in its stead (point 1). The presentation which we find again on the statue is the result of the application-association of the two images in Catherine's consciousness (point 1.2.b.). The consequence of this is that, at the same moment, there are two globes of the earth, in the hands and under the feet.¹²² That is the only reason why the Holy See

¹²⁰ See Sister Pineau's notes, dated 18 March 1877, in DChD 2, No. 646 (p. 57); also CHEVALIER, *Médaille Miraculeuse*, p. 25.

¹²¹ Quentin's account from 1836, containing the evidence of Aladel and Étienne, in DChD 1, No. 368 (p. 265); also Chevalier's evidence on 22 June 1896 (PO, sess 11), in DChD 2, No. 879 (p. 201).

¹²² This conclusion is present in many instances in later accounts, as a result of having taken the white half-globe and the globe of the earth as being identical.

had reservations (conclusion **b**). The statue of Mary holding the globe should have been accompanied by the white half-globe under her feet, and not the globe of the earth with the serpent, having been part of the “median” phase (the front of the Medal).

d) Reading Sister Catherine’s account about the Miraculous Medal apparition can give rise to some astonishment, because she hardly connects herself with it. We learn more about it from the accounts of Fr Aladel, and from others to whom he had spoken of the apparition.¹²³ Catherine, in the accounts she wrote at the request of her confessor, centres on the vision of the Virgin with the Globe; she does not say anything about the form the front has at present, and she refers to the back in a superficial way. Nine years after the medal had been minted, when it was widely known, Catherine did not think it necessary to go back over the known facts (moreover, she was not convinced about what was on the front). Instead of doing this, she concentrated on the representation of Mary holding the globe in her hands, the vision which she still had not succeeded in having carried out.¹²⁴ We are paying less attention to what we have said in the second part of conclusion **c**.

e) In the accounts of Sister Catherine and Aladel there is never any question of stars around the Immaculate Virgin’s head. Catherine claimed to have seen her as being the Blessed Virgin, which could mean with the crown of stars. We know of only one piece of evidence which confirms this theme, namely Letaille’s sketch from 1841 (with the attached note),¹²⁵ allegedly based on Catherine’s indications (but see conclusion **i**). We are not overlooking that this theme was omitted from the notes based on his evidence, or, for the same reason, he did not attract the attention of, above all, Aladel. A deliberate omission of certain themes can be confirmed by Catherine’s confessor repeatedly stating that she saw the Blessed Virgin in the way that she was portrayed as the Immaculate Conception.¹²⁶

¹²³ Aladel’s letter and accounts are in the “Notice historique” of 1834 in DChD 1, No. 17 (pp. 199-202), No. 38 (pp. 208-213), No. 52 (pp. 217-222); the account of the evidence of Aladel and Étienne, established by Quentin, from December 1836, is in DChD 1, No. 368 (pp. 261-270).

¹²⁴ Compare LAURENTIN - ROCHE, Catherine Labouré, p. 85.

¹²⁵ DChD 1, Nos. 460-461.

¹²⁶ Aladel’s 1834 accounts are in DChD 1, No. 17 (pp. 199-200), No. 38 (pp. 209-210), No. 52 (pp. 218-219). There is question of it also in the 1836 account, established by Quentin, of the evidence of Aladel, and later of Aladel and Étienne, in DChD 1, No. 298 (pp. 235-236) and No. 368 (pp. 263-264).

Neither is there any question of the serpent in Catherine's and Aladel's accounts which are still extant.¹²⁷ This theme, in the same way, was taken as obvious, being known from the way in which Mary was portrayed as the Immaculate Conception. The applied study does not exclude it and even proves its existence (it is found on the statue of the Immaculate Conception, conclusion c). According to an oral account by Catherine's superior, to which Chevalier refers in his book, Catherine spoke to her clearly about the serpent in the context of the statue above.¹²⁸

The absence of the theme of the twelve stars on the back of the Medal will be dealt with in point 2.3.a.

f) In Aladel's accounts there is no mention of the earth under Mary's feet (front), which makes us wonder, because this theme diverges from pictures of her from that period, linking in with Rv 12:1. With regard to the effect of Aladel's passing over in silence the theme of the earth, we subscribe to the following explanation. We are not excluding that, following his own conviction, the motif of earth was opposed to the widespread image of the Immaculate Virgin, namely with the moon under her feet. Even if the Medal was minted, a barely visible half-globe under the feet of the Immaculate Virgin was not going to provoke questioning nor undermine the contemporary portrayal of her, in the way that a concise statement, published in the "Notice Historique," that the globe of the earth was there, would. That is why Catherine's confessor could deliberately pass over in silence any mention of the earth; he conceals it cleverly in a vague statement that Mary appeared as she was commonly portrayed as conceived without sin (at the same time, he did not say that there was the moon). This explanation becomes more likely in the light of his silences on the question of the Virgin with the Globe (the next conclusion).

g) It appears that there was a certain lack of precision in Aladel's transmission of what he heard from Catherine of the content of the apparition. Mention of showing France on the globe is often linked, in the popular account, to the globe under Mary's feet.¹²⁹ This is

¹²⁷ Chevalier (*Médaille Miraculeuse*) already adverted to this.

¹²⁸ *Idem*. She was going to say that it was "of a greenish colour, with yellow spots." Her message about the colour may be likely: in Jewish apocalyptic the colour green symbolises incurable, mortal illness, and is also present linked with the colour yellow (see for example 3 Hen 44:5; OracSib 1, 240).

¹²⁹ Also, for example, MISERMONT, *Les grâces extraordinaires*, pp. 111-112. When we speak of the theme of France, we are thinking of a representation of Catherine's own country, for example in the sense of its geographical shape and not its lettering. This is based on the verb "to represent," used by

suggested by the accounts of the questioning of Fathers Aladel and Étienne (not directly stated) when presenting their evidence with regard to the apparition;¹³⁰ (on the margin: we are dealing with an inconsistency on the confessor's part, as he passes over in silence the question of the globe of the earth under Mary's feet). When we go through Catherine's notes, something to the contrary emerges. We can even deduce, from an account from 1841, not very clear on this matter, that the theme of France was present on the globe held by Mary in her hands; the notes from Spring 1876 confirm it in an unequivocal way.¹³¹

It is Aladel who seems to be responsible for this divergence with regard to Catherine's accounts. He is on record as being reluctant about portraying the Virgin with the Globe; there is no reference to it in any of his accounts.¹³² In addition to this, Quentin's report, drawn up after the questioning of Catherine's confessor, makes no mention of this vision, which means that once again he passed over it in silence.¹³³ However, with the delegate of the archbishop of Paris he mentioned special graces for France, because that finds a place in the report.¹³⁴ Being a Frenchman, mention of France seemed interesting, to the extent that he did not wish to exclude it. As a result, it is in the report drawn up in the context of the vision of the front. That is the origin of the divergence, and of the reproduction of a fault; given the fact of the passing over in silence of the vision of the Virgin with the Globe, mention of graces for France had, perforce, to be associated with the front of the Medal, where the globe was located under Mary's feet.

We accept that the theme of France was present on the globe which Mary held in her hands.¹³⁵ Sister Tanguy's evidence is also

Catherine, which means "to show," "to exhibit," "to evoke." Some persons, in interpreting what Catherine said, begin later on to claim that "France" was written, for example Sister Tanguy (PO, sess. 24, in DChD 2, No. 906 [p. 229]).

¹³⁰ The accounts from 1836, in DChD 1, No. 298 (p. 235), No. 299 (p. 241), No. 368 (p. 264).

¹³¹ DChD 1, No. 456 (pp. 292-295), and No. 632 (p. 345).

¹³² Although he had asked the visionary to write down her experiences he did not publish them. That is how he acted in the case of the apparition 18-19 July 1830, the vision of the Cross or of St Vincent's heart.

¹³³ Even if he referred to it, it was not, for whatever reasons, included in the report.

¹³⁴ DChD 1, No. 298 (pp. 235-236). In all his previous accounts he never mentioned it, because it was linked to the vision of the Virgin with the Globe, which he did not accept. He did not mention it until the diocesan process ordered by the archbishop of Paris, H. Quelen.

¹³⁵ The same opinion is put forward, for example, by CRAPEZ, *Message*, pp. 34-36; LAURENTIN - ROCHE, *Catherine Labouré*, pp. 76 and 78.

helpful here;¹³⁶ from what she says about the conversation between Sister Dufès and Sister Catherine we learn that the rays of light were falling on the hand-held globe, and especially on the spot representing France. Even if this is second-hand testimony it agrees with the statements of Catherine herself, quoted for this very reason. Was the theme of France also present on the globe of the earth under Mary's feet? We cannot exclude this in an unequivocal way. In fact, even if Mary speaks of graces for France and the world before the vision takes on the oval shape (medal shaped), while the globe under the feet is in the "median" phase which follows, Catherine does not approve, and does not deny, that the theme was not still there. If the theme of France had also been present on the globe of the earth under the feet of the Blessed Virgin, this would have been one more proof that the globe switched position and, therefore, that Mary no longer held it in her hands at the moment when the central part had been covered.¹³⁷

h) The conclusion about the theme of France on the globe held by Mary in her hands permits an explanation for a problem brought up by several authors, namely that the rays springing from the rings on Mary's fingers are pointing in the opposite direction with respect to the globe in her hands. Catherine states unequivocally that the rays fall, most strongly, on the spot indicating France.¹³⁸ If the theme of France appears on the hand-held globe (it is at this moment that the phenomenon of the dispensing of graces makes its appearance), the rays spreading in all directions should also fall on the hand-held globe of the earth. That is how Sister de Geoffre understood it; the explanatory note about Letaille's sketch is attributed to her.¹³⁹ The question about the rays going in the opposite direction with respect to the hand-held globe introduces a non-existent problem.

i) It is commonly accepted that during the apparition of November (and December) 1830 the Immaculate Virgin was wearing a blue-

¹³⁶ PO, sess. 24, in DChD 2, No. 906 (p. 229). On the matter of the credibility of the evidence, see point 1.2.a.

¹³⁷ Was the globe of the earth, under Mary's feet, also golden? More likely not. In that case, Catherine would have been convinced that the Blessed Virgin was no longer holding it in her hands.

¹³⁸ The 1876 notes, in DChD 1, No. 634a (p. 349); see also the handwritten accounts from 1841 and 1876 in DChD 1, No. 456 (p. 294), No. 631 (p. 344), No. 632 (p. 345); see also the Quentin account of the questioning of Aladel, in DChD 1 No. 298 (p. 235).

¹³⁹ "[...] brightly lighting up the earth, especially against the hands, from which the intensity of light comes," in DChD 1, No. 461 (p. 301).

coloured mantle. The earliest witnesses to this are: Lecerf's picture (1835) and a note by Catherine's confessor, Aladel ("silver blue").¹⁴⁰ Laurentin also quotes the note, mentioned above, which describes Letaille's sketch.¹⁴¹ According to him, the source of these pieces of evidence is Catherine's account. It is not quite as clear as that. Firstly, Catherine never says what colour Mary's mantle was, or that there was a mantle in any of the apparitions! Secondly, Chevalier suggests in his book that, the colour blue for the mantle could come from Aladel (the Blessed Virgin's colour), based on the common belief.¹⁴² He also admits that Aladel could have confused the apparition of the Medal with the apparition of 18-19 July 1830, when Mary wore a garment of white and blue.¹⁴³ Chevalier's statements reveal serious doubts on the matter of the blue mantle. If Aladel's account is not exact, then Lecerf's picture is not a proof, because it is Catherine's confessor who was the source of the information obtained by the artist (see conclusion c).

We can say the same thing about Letaille's sketch, and the accompanying note written by Sister de Geoffre. The description attached to the sketch gives "sky blue" as the colour of the mantle, but that refers back to Aladel's indications and not to Catherine's account. As well as that, the note contains discrepancies with respect to Catherine's account: the half-moon placed under Mary's feet, which was not there during the apparition (point 1.1.). And then again, in the note, there is not complete agreement with Catherine's version on the matter of the colour of the veil (Catherine remains consistent in her three accounts: "A white veil"; the note is less precise: "Golden veil"). With regard to the colour of the mantle, the note, in a similar way, does not stay strictly faithful to the content of the apparition. And on top of all this, Aladel, who asked Catherine the colour of the veil (conclusion c), in his accounts avoids any mention of this and its white colour; only once does he write, and then enigmatically, that it was the "golden veil."¹⁴⁴ All this generates doubts which cast their shadow over the story of the blue mantle.

¹⁴⁰ Evidence dated 16 February 1836, in DChD 1, No. 298 (p. 235); see also the necrology notice by Sister de Geoffre, 1 January 1878, in DChD 2, No. 655 (p. 86).

¹⁴¹ *Vie authentique*, vol. 2: *Preuves*, p. 191, note 110.

¹⁴² *Médaille Miraculeuse*, pp. 78-79.

¹⁴³ A question arises, namely where did Chevalier get this information? In the notes relating to Catherine there is no mention of a mantle (see DChD 1, Nos. 564, and 637-638); does this come directly from her?

¹⁴⁴ See LAURENTIN, *Vie authentique*, vol. 2: *Preuves*, p. 191, note 111.

It is Catherine who produces the decisive proof. In describing the vision of the Virgin with the Globe she stresses that Mary was “clothed/dressed in white,”¹⁴⁵ and for each occasion she mentions only her “dress and veil.” If she never mentions the mantle even once, the following conclusion is inevitable, that there was not one, or that it also was white. It is the description of Mary’s clothing that argues for the absence of the mantle: she was wearing a “[...] high-necked” dress, up to the neck, down to the ankles, with long sleeves; moreover, the veil on her head reached down to her feet on both sides!¹⁴⁶ In the description of what Mary was wearing there is no room for a mantle; the veil is her outermost garment. Nor is there a mantle on the statue of the Immaculate Virgin, made according to Catherine’s instructions. We find the same situation, for example, in Lourdes or Fatima (the differences are merely in details): Mary is wearing a white dress and a white veil which reaches down to her feet.

We think it less probable that Catherine later kept quiet about the mantle (her notes of 1841 and 1876) to fudge the divergence between her description and Aladel’s with regard to the colour “blue” for the mantle, already widely known. In that case, the mantle would surely have been white. The first explanation is more convincing to us: in the description of Mary’s clothing there is no place for a mantle. It is Aladel who adds the mantle (and its colour), basing himself on the contemporary Marian iconography. We accept that what the Immaculate Virgin was wearing during the apparition of 27 November 1830 constituted a white ensemble (blending with the white half-globe; see point 1.1.).

j) Here in our final conclusion we wish to come back to the position of Mary’s hands during the “median” phase. In point 1.2.b. we said that if the central part remained covered, up to the moment when Catherine saw the back, we cannot define unequivocally what the position of her arms was after the globe disappeared from her hands. Fr Aladel, basing himself on contemporary iconography, says they were stretched downwards and that is what we find on the front of the Medal. Here we want to present another possibility touched on above, namely that Mary’s hands were joined in prayer.

¹⁴⁵ In her conversation with Chevalier (*Médaille Miraculeuse*, p. 79), in answer to his question, Catherine described the white of Mary’s clothing as “plain white” similar to the dawn (a faint shade of yellow? That is how Lecerf understood the colour of the veil; see conclusion c.).

¹⁴⁶ DChD 1, Nos. 145-146 (p. 292).

In the first place, according to Catherine, all during the vision known as “with the Globe,” Mary was in prayer to God. After the disappearance of the globe from her hands her arms would naturally assume the position for prayer, as, for example, in Lourdes or Fatima (she is wearing the same white clothing: conclusion *i*).

Secondly, the rays of light, cast by the rings on her fingers, went to create, in the vision of “the Virgin with the Globe,” a sort of pair of fans, or two half-globes of light (one complete globe).¹⁴⁷ With the disappearance of the globe, if her hands were joined in prayer, no alteration was caused to the shape or position of the light. This would be caused at the moment when the arms would be directed downwards; the central part would have been partly uncovered and therefore Catherine would have been able to see the absence of the globe at the height of Mary’s heart.

Thirdly, as eyewitnesses confirm, Catherine often repeated that the apparition in Lourdes took place because her superiors had not carried out Mary’s request, especially the opening up of the chapel in the rue du Bac to the laity.¹⁴⁸ Catherine complained to Mary about this and was going to say at the beginning of 1858 that she would appear in some other place.¹⁴⁹ One month later, 11 February, the first apparition in Lourdes took place. According to Catherine, Lourdes was a complement to what could have happened in the chapel of the Daughters of Charity.¹⁵⁰ If we accept such a dependence of the Lourdes apparition on that of the rue du Bac, Mary could have had her hands joined in prayer in the same way in the “median” phase.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁷ See DChD1, No. 456.

¹⁴⁸ Her superiors took this decision in view of the character of the house (a novitiate) and the huge number of Sisters, namely about 500 (including almost 300 novices).

¹⁴⁹ After Catherine’s death Sister Dufès found, among her effects, a note written by her with words of complaint, ending with a statement: “[...] show yourself somewhere else!” (the account by Fr E. Mott in DChD 2, No. 770 [p. 137]; see also a letter of Fr P. Hamard, dated 25 September 1878 in DChD 2, No. 676 [pp. 112-113]).

¹⁵⁰ Sister M. Cosnard’s evidence, dated 3 February 1898 (PO, sess 39), in DChD 2, No. 942 (p. 265); also Sister A.M. Transchemer, 1894 (DChD 2, No. 819 [p. 159]). Moreover, Catherine was definitely opposed to Sisters going on pilgrimage to Lourdes, to La Salette or some other sanctuary, saying that they had all that in the rue du Bac (notes of Sister Dufès from 1877, in DChD 2, No. 645 [p. 48]; Sister Transchemer’s account, in the same reference).

¹⁵¹ When we compare the rue du Bac apparition with later Marian apparitions (for example La Salette, Lourdes or Fatima) we get the impression that, in conformity with what Catherine said, they constitute a complement to the first, which surpasses them on certain points. The major importance of

On the basis of the reasons presented we think that behind the bright shining light, when Mary was no longer holding the globe in them, her hands were joined in prayer.



To finish off, we wish to draw attention to the fact that the two aspects of the Blessed Virgin's mission in the vision "with the Globe," suggested in the foregoing points, which has its reflection on the two faces of the Medal, confirms that the content of the front (independently of the position of Mary's arms) accords with the real unfolding of the apparition. This allows us to reject Coste's doubts with regard to the existence of the vision in which the Blessed Virgin held the globe in her hands: the latter constitutes a "matrix" with regard to the Medal, and furthermore a key to explain the symbolism of the letter M with the cross on the bar (otherwise this would not have been possible).

Admitting the phase similar to what is the present form of the front does not mean we are compelled to understand the unfolding of the apparition in the same way as the authors quoted in note 6. As we said, it is the two faces of the Medal which, according to our conviction, comprise the content of the vision of "the Virgin with the Globe" (not a simple sequence of the images and the content).

5. THE THEOLOGICAL MESSAGE OF THE MEDAL

We will draw attention to the two aspects of the message. We will base ourselves mainly on the content of the back, because that of the front leads to what is on the back (see the summary of point 3).

the rue du Bac apparition is shown in the following ways: 1) The location: the chapel, in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament; at La Salette, Lourdes, Gietrzwałd, Fatima and in other cases, it was in the open air. 2) The degree of intimacy at the meeting; during the first vision (in the night of 18-19 July 1830) Catherine placed her hands on the Blessed Virgin's knees, and had a cordial conversation with her for about two hours. In the other cases we have visual contact at a certain distance. 3) The message of the apparition: the vision of the Virgin holding the globe in her hands, and the Medal (especially the back), constitute, because of their content, a heritage unequalled in later Marian apparitions. Even if at Lourdes Mary said of herself that she was the Immaculate Conception (not just having been conceived without sin) this results from the fact that the rue du Bac apparition took place before the proclamation of the dogma, while at Lourdes after the dogma. The truth of Mary's Immaculate Conception was, nevertheless, revealed for the first time in the rue du Bac, which is the source of the Lourdes apparition.

This is the way in which we will present the unfolding of the message, indicated earlier with respect to the vision of the Virgin with the Globe.

5.1. Towards the Ultimate Perfection of the Church

We said that a difference emerges between the Blessed Virgin's mission on the front of the Medal and that on the back. In the first case she asks for and distributes the graces merited by the Son of God (the link: the Son to the human race); in the second, she offers redeemed humanity to the Lord (the link: the human race to the Son). In this latter case there is no question of overcoming the forces of evil. Following the key which we have adopted it is difficult to consent to seeing the same theme, of the battle against the forces of evil, being present a second time on the back. Moreover, if the asking for the graces was separated, on the Medal, from the gesture of offering the human race to the Lord, and even preceded it, we no longer have, in the gesture of offering the human race in the vision of the Virgin with the Globe, a prayer for the graces in the combat against evil. We believe that the gesture of "offering" on the back focuses on a different aspect. Basing ourselves on the applied analyses we have the right to believe that the mystery of Christ's Church, expressed on the back of the Medal, is an announcement of its ultimate perfection. After the combat against the forces of evil by means of the distributed graces, and the announcement of the definitive victory over them (front), we have on the back the image of the perfect union of Christ and his Church (image of the stars); understood in this is the union of the Mother and the Son (image of the hearts), as well as of Mary and redeemed humanity (letter M with the cross). The back of the Medal, which by its symbolism surpasses the content of the front, and of the whole vision of the Virgin with the Globe, constitutes the culminating point of the apparition, in the image of the ultimate perfection of the Church.

The image of the two wounded hearts does not contradict the above interpretation, because it does not relate only to the event of Calvary, but rather to its always present effects. It is because of the suffering of the Son, with whom Mary suffered through perfect union, that the ultimate victory and the perfection of Christ's Church are possible.

We can therefore define the sense of the golden globe offered by Mary in the symbolism of the letter M and of the cross (link with the offering of humanity to the Lord in the vision known as "with the Globe"; see point 2.1.b.). If the Blessed Virgin's mission, expressed on the front, leads (by God's power) to the state of complete perfection

of the Church on the back, we see in the gesture in which she offers the golden globe the ultimate perfection of the saved. If the white symbolises Mary's antecedent intact innocence ("clothed in white"), the gold symbolises the recovered innocence of all the rest of the redeemed (image of font and purification: compare Ws 3:5-6, 1 P 1:7, Rv 3:18 & 20, Rv 18:21). We must wait for the fulfilment of the content of the symbolism of the letter M with the cross on the bar, in so far as it is the announcement of the ultimate total perfection of the redeemed, at the moment of the parousia. It is in this context that *the gesture of holding humanity in the hands and offering it to Christ takes on, in the symbolism of the back, a special significance: it is like a supplication by the Mother and Queen for the definitive accomplishment of the history of salvation.*¹⁵² In the key-portion of the vision of the Virgin with the Globe, Mary has her eyes directed upwards;¹⁵³ all the more so as this links up with the message of the symbolism of the letter M with the cross. Moreover, Catherine writes that what she felt is impossible to express.¹⁵⁴

The above interpretation allows us to deepen the symbolism of the twelve stars: the Lamb of God, having the care (with regard to Mary's protection) of redeemed humanity, it is the victorious, triumphant, Lamb of Rv 21 & 22, who is represented there as the light of the world. Thanks to the analogy of the front with Rv 12, the analogy of the back with Rv 21 & 22 seems admissible; in the first case redeemed humanity, accompanied by the mother of Jesus, battles against the difficulties on the road to Heaven; in the second we are dealing with the Church Triumphant, that is with the Church which reaches its ultimate goal, perfection. The link to Rv 21 & 22 becomes probable thanks to the theme of the stars and of the light (a divine attribute) which is found on the back.

The revelation of the mystery of the Immaculate Conception, in the words given on the front, takes on a deepened meaning: Mary's perfection (symbolism of "white") constitutes the announcement of the ultimate perfection of all the rest of the redeemed (symbolism of "gold"). The Mother of Jesus takes an active part in the pilgrimage of redeemed humanity towards Heaven: she helps it, thanks to God's strength, to combat Satan's wiles, distributing to it the graces merited by her Son. Mary's heavenly mission, symbolised on the

¹⁵² This is why we pray "Our Father" (Mt 6:10a); see also *Didache*, X, 6. This sense would not have been brought out if the Medal had been made according to Catherine's wishes. The back would have repeated symbolically Mary's asking for graces in the battle against evil (see point 1.3.).

¹⁵³ Catherine's 1841 account, in DChD 1, No. 456 (p. 293).

¹⁵⁴ Her handwritten account from April 1876, in DChD 1, No. 635 (p. 351).

front, leads redeemed humanity to complete harmony with Christ (back), just as the state of the Church presented in Rv 12 leads to the state of Rv 21 & 22. The Miraculous Medal affirms not only Mary's present role in the Church but announces also, in it, the ultimate position of the Mother of Jesus: Mary, in the gesture of lifting up and presenting to the Lord the redeemed world, appears as Mother of the redeemed on their way to Heaven and for eternity. With this conclusion we lead in to the second theological conclusion.

Before passing on to it we wish to draw attention to the fact that, contrary to what is commonly believed,¹⁵⁵ the front has an aspect which is not so much glorious as the sense of the temporal battle against the forces of evil on the road towards the heavenly fatherland (compare Rv 12); as regards the back it does not emphasise the aspect of suffering, but rather the union through previous suffering (image of the hearts), namely, a perfect harmony with Christ to which the entire Church aspires, and it announces its ultimate triumph (compare Rv 21 & 22).

5.2. Mary's Motherly Relationship with the Church

This subject accentuates once more what is on the back: Mary, from the fact that she is Mother of the Son of God remains in perfect union with him (image of the hearts); this relationship constitutes the basis of her motherly link with the redeemed (the letter M and the cross). Mary's divine maternity is present in the foundation of her relationship with the Son and with humanity. The supreme importance of the message of the back with regard to the front¹⁵⁶ leads to the conclusion that Mary, as she is presented in the totality of the Medal, appears principally as Mother: first and above all by relationship with the Son of God (actual motherhood), then by relationship with redeemed humanity (spiritual motherhood). The Miraculous Medal confirms this theological truth that Mary is Mother of the Founder of the Church, and spiritual mother of all the redeemed. If the symbolism of the twelve stars expresses the indissoluble union of Christ and the Church (point 2.3.), Mary's motherhood with respect to Christ also embraces the Church founded by him. The perfect union of the Mother and the Son is written into her perfect union with the Church, and allows us to expand the maternal relationship with the Son to include all the

¹⁵⁵ See, for example, FEUILLET, *La doctrina Mariana*, in: *Las apariciones*; ZEDDE, *Medaglia Miracolosa*, and others.

¹⁵⁶ See the summary of point 3.

redeemed. Mary, being indissolubly united with the Church, is at the same time Mother of the Church. It is the back of the Medal which shows this truth, in presenting the reciprocal relationships and the position occupied by Mary.

The theme of the twelve stars, as we have shown, transfers the emphasis from the vision of the Virgin with the Globe to the back of the Medal (and to the Medal itself). In the same way, it transfers it from the title "Queen of the World" (Catherine understood the vision in that way) to the title "Mother of the Church." In the overall message of the Medal (in its present form) the truth of Mary's maternal relationship with the Church is superior to the title "Queen of the World."

In spite of the state of affairs presented above, the titles "Queen of the World" and "Mother of the Church" have the same perimeter: if Christ's Church embraces the entire world, the title of queen of the world covers the same area as her maternal relationship with humanity. That is why Mary's maternal relationship with the Church, on its way towards the state of ultimate perfection, is also there in the composition of the front of the Medal: the motherly care for the people of God on pilgrimage is shown by her powerful sharing, by means of the graces asked for, in this people's combat against the forces of evil. The message of the front remains in agreement with the way the Blessed Virgin is presented on the back. The two faces of the Medal, although with differing emphasis, make up a guarantee of Mary's motherly protection.

Mary's maternity with respect to the Church has a hint of mediation. Her mediation, in what concerns the distribution of graces on the front of the Medal, does not give rise to doubts: we see it as being part of God's will, which is the result of the role she played in the redemptive mission of the Son of God and the position she occupies in the mystery of the Church. We are dealing with the mission of the heavenly Auxiliatrix in the present stage of the history of salvation. The second type of mediation is the accomplishment of the present mission, a temporal one. By the gesture of offering, she presents humanity, redeemed from its sins, to the Lord, which attains its ultimate perfection. This second aspect of her mediation reveals Mary's unusual position, which goes far beyond that of all the rest of the redeemed.¹⁵⁷ Mary's mediation, in so far as she is Mother

¹⁵⁷ *Lumen gentium*, § 53. Note the contrast between the symbolism of the golden globe and the white of her clothing (and of the white half-globe), that is to say, of the symbol of her intact innocence and of her perfect union with the Son of God (see point 1.1.).

of the Church, is characterised by her twofold mission and the two-way link between the Saviour and humanity.

The Blessed Virgin's maternal mission on the front leads to what is on the back: Mary, as Queen of the World and Mother of the Church, shares the lot of redeemed humanity, and by dint of the graces merited by Christ, supports it on the way towards perfect union with him.

PS: To the Redeemer of humanity and to his mother and ours, in gratitude for the grace of holy baptism which was administered on 27 November 1960, the First Sunday of Advent, and the one hundred and thirtieth anniversary of the apparition of the Miraculous Medal.

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