



OUR LADY OF HUMAN AFFAIRS

Mother, I rejoice to see
the globe held between your hands.

But it is so small!

I sometimes fear that our great problems,
our great agonies, will never be solved.

When I see the globe
held by the maternal hands of Our Lady,
I realize that this little globe
symbolizes the true scale
of the problems which seem so immense to us,
but which fit so well
into the palms of your two hands.

DOM HELDER CAMARA

Saint Catherine Labouré and the MIRACULOUS MEDAL



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1. FOREWORD

This small book tells the story of an apparition, an appearance of Mary, the Mother of God. The words 'apparition' or 'vision' can produce different reactions within us, from mild disbelief and cynicism to great interest and excitement. Some explanation, therefore, is required before the story of St Catherine Labouré and the Miraculous Medal can be told. We might also ask: Is the Medal truly miraculous? This question needs consideration, if our wearing of the medal and our attitude towards its place within our Christian living has a solid and true foundation. As we strive to deepen our understanding and appreciation of this gift from God, we also seek to place devotion to Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal within the context of our Catholic Faith. We need to place devotion to Mary within the challenge of the Gospel for all Christians today.

Mary, the Mother of God

*"But when the time had fully come,
God sent forth his Son,
born of a woman, born under the law
to redeem those who were under the law,
so that we might receive adoption as sons (and daughters)."*
(Galatians 4:4-5)

The Second Vatican Council did not prepare a separate document on Mary. Instead the Council included one chapter on Mary in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*). This chapter 8 was entitled "The Role of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the Mystery of Christ and the Church". The very title portrays Mary in an intimate relationship with her Son and his body, the Church. Mary has been referred to as the 'mediatrix of all graces', that all graces come to us through her. How does the Church consider this today? The Second Vatican

Council was careful to place Mary's mediation within the framework of Christ and the Church. Christ is the one mediator drawing all believers to himself. He is the one priest of the New Covenant whose priesthood is shared by all the people of God. Mary is situated in the whole Church, among the living and the dead who are centred in Christ. Mary is one with all human beings in their need of salvation while she remains a "pre-eminent and altogether singular member of the Church" (*Lumen Gentium*, 53).

True Devotion to Mary

True devotion to Mary will always lead us to her Son, Jesus. We do recognise Mary's privileges, the special graces that she received, her response to God's invitation that she be the Mother of the promised Messiah. The very graces and prerogatives uniting Mary so closely with Jesus bring her into an intimate union with each one of us. Mary, so closely associated with her Son, who became flesh and won our salvation, is also closely associated with us all, the members of his body.

Mary is the Mother of Jesus, the Son of God, and therefore is rightly called the Mother of God. We recognise her also as our mother. However, Mary is also seen as the first disciple of Jesus. She is a woman of faith, and provides us with the example of a life of faith. Mary, as "a pre-eminent and altogether singular member of the Church", is the one who heard the Word of God and acted upon it and thus became the Mother of the Son of God. But she always remains a daughter of Adam and Eve and one with all human beings in their need of salvation.

For Pope Paul VI (in his exhortation *Marialis Cultus*) devotion to Mary must find its "origin and effectiveness with Christ, find its complete expression in Christ and lead

through Christ in the Spirit to the Father". (*Marialis Cultis*, Introduction) Where should devotion to Mary be based? Paul VI directs us to the great themes of salvation history. Devotion to Mary should be shaped by the feasts of the liturgical year, be ecumenically sensitive, especially to the centrality of Christ, and be attuned to the historical and cultural situations of time and place. Mary's active and responsible consent is stressed, and she is presented to us as "a woman of strength, who experienced poverty and suffering, flight and exile". (28) Mary is offered as a model disciple for both women and men who work for justice and for freeing the oppressed, who assist the needy and who actively witness to the "love that builds up Christ in people's hearts." (29)

Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* (1987) stresses the "singularity and uniqueness of Mary's place in the Mystery of the Church" (31) and her active and exemplary presence in the life of the Church." (32) How does Mary mediate God's graces to us? Her mediation in Christ is linked to her motherhood. It is mediation within and not from above the Church, which embraces the whole of humanity. (33)

It is within this context, Mary's role within the Church, that we read the story of the apparitions of Mary to St Catherine Labouré.

2. THE STORY OF THE APPARITIONS

Who was Mary's Confidant?

Catherine Labouré was born in Fain-les-Moutiers, France, on the evening of 2nd May, 1806. She was the eighth child of her family. Catherine's mother, Madeleine, died in 1815 when Catherine was only nine years of age. Catherine was very attached to her mother and after her mother's burial a servant

saw Catherine climb up on a chair and hug a statue of Mary saying, "Now dear blessed Mother you will be my Mother". Catherine's devotion to Mary dated from this time.

After his wife's death, Pierre Labouré agreed to his sister's suggestion that she care for the two youngest children, Catherine (age 9) and Tonine.(age 7). Marie Louise, the eldest daughter, took over the mother's place in running the family and the home. However, after two years, Pierre arranged for his daughters to return. Catherine was overjoyed to be reunited with her father, and she developed a close bond with her little brother Auguste, who had been disabled in a carriage accident.

Marie Louise taught her younger sister how to clean house and how to cook, and how to do the other chores around the farm. When she received her father's permission to enter the Daughters of Charity, the charge of the household was then left to Catherine. Catherine was 12 years of age when the management of the household, with the help of a servant, was entrusted to her. She had the care of her younger sister and invalid brother, the live-in hired farm workers, and was responsible for the cooking, washing and ironing and all the other household chores.

After having made her First communion in 1818 Catherine often attended daily Mass in the town of Moutiers-Saint-Jean, four kilometres from her village. From this early age she considered entering an order of Nuns. She became a very prayerful young person and began fasting twice a week. The strong willed Catherine continued these practices, even though Tonine considered her too young to do so and threatened to tell her father.

When the servant, who was assisting Catherine, announced she was leaving to get married, Pierre offered to replace her. However, the two girls, Catherine and Tonine, stated firmly that they would manage on their own. Catherine was now fourteen years old and Tonine twelve.



Catherine Labouré's Home, Fain les Moutiers, France



Restored Interior of the Labouré Home

The Dream

When Catherine was eighteen years old she had a dream. In her dream she was in the village church assisting at the Mass of an old priest she had never seen before. After Mass the priest beckoned to Catherine to follow him. She was suddenly frightened and ran from the church.

On the way home (still dreaming) Catherine visited a sick lady in the village. When she entered the lady's room there was this same priest. He said: "You do well to visit the sick. My child, you flee from me now, but one day you will be glad to come to me. God has plans for you." She left the house and fled home. Then Catherine awoke from the dream.

At age twenty-two Catherine decided she had done the right thing towards her father and her family. Tonine could now capably take over the running of the house. However, when Catherine asked her father's consent to enter the convent, to her surprise he resolutely said, "NO".

Catherine's brother, Charles, was involved in the catering trade. He wrote to his father saying he was in dire need of domestic help in the restaurant he was running in Paris. Pierre decided to send Catherine to help her brother, hoping this would distract her from ideas of entering the convent. Catherine obeyed her father and worked in her brother's restaurant for a year.

Now living in Paris, Catherine had contact with her other brothers and they knew of her longing to enter the convent. The family hatched a plot to release her. She would go to live with her brother Hubert and his wife at Chatillon. Catherine's sister, Marie Louise, now a Daughter of Charity, was taken into their confidence. She wrote to Catherine stating: "If God speaks to your heart no one has the right to prevent

you from entering the service of so good a Master.” All this gave Catherine great solace and encouragement.

Marie Louise stated her complete approval of the family plan to circumvent her father. Hubert’s wife, Jeanne, agreed to contact Pierre and request the permission Catherine needed to become a Sister. Reluctantly he gave his consent, but he refused her a dowry. So now Catherine was able to follow the path to which God was calling her.

Learning there was a house of the Daughters of Charity in Chatillon, Catherine decided to pay a visit there. She wished to open her heart to the Superior. When she entered the parlour, she saw a portrait of a venerable old priest. Catherine recognized him as the priest in her dream and asked who he was. The Sister answered that he was St. Vincent de Paul, their founder. The Superior, however, was hesitant to accept as a postulant a girl of twenty-three years so completely uneducated. However, another Sister in the Community of Chatillon saw the innate goodness in Catherine and urged the



**St Louise de Marillac and St Vincent de Paul
Co-founders of the Daughters of Charity**

Superior to accept this good village girl, the kind St. Vincent loved. Indeed village girls had initially been the very first Daughters under St. Louise de Marillac.

In January 1830 Catherine followed her desire and entered the Daughters of Charity, first as a Postulant at Chatillon. Three months later, on April 21st, 1830, Catherine was ready to begin her time of formation, and passed through the great door of the Mother House of the Daughters of Charity at 140 Rue du Bac, Paris.

Mary comes to Catherine

On the night of 18th – 19th July Sister Catherine and the other Seminary Sisters were all in their beds sound asleep. Suddenly Catherine heard her name called and awoke to find a small child surrounded in light saying to her “Sister Labouré, Sister Labouré come to the Chapel. The Blessed Virgin awaits you.” She hesitated thinking, “We shall be discovered by the other sisters.” The radiant child responded to her thoughts, “Do not be afraid it is half past eleven, everyone is asleep. Come! I will accompany you.”

Catherine jumped out of bed, threw on her clothes and walked with the child leading the way. The lights came on at his approach and locked doors opened at his touch.

The altar was bathed in light as if for midnight Mass. Catherine waited at the altar rails until about midnight when the child exclaimed “Behold the Blessed Virgin!”

Catherine heard a slight sound coming from the right side of the altar like the rustling of a silk dress. At that moment a lady of dazzling beauty appeared in the Sanctuary and seated herself in the chair the Spiritual Director used when talking to the Seminary sisters. The lady was dressed in a white robe of

a golden tinge and a blue veil.

Catherine then entered the Sanctuary and knelt on her knees at the feet of the Blessed Virgin and placed her hands on Mary's lap.

"There passed the sweetest moments of my life" Sister Catherine related. "It is impossible to express all that I experienced. She instructed me how I was to act in moments of trial and pointing with her left hand to the altar she told me to come to the foot of the altar adding that I should receive there all the consolations I needed".

The Blessed Virgin continued. "My child I am going to confide to you a mission; you will suffer many trials but you will surmount them, knowing that you endure them for the glory of God. You will be contradicted, but you will be given grace. Do not fear. Tell him who is charged with your direction all that passes within you with simplicity and confidence. You will see certain things, you will receive inspirations. Render an account of them. Have confidence. Do not fear. My child, the times are very evil. Misfortunes are about to fall upon France. The throne will be overturned, the entire world will be afflicted by misery of every kind." Catherine relates that when Mary said this she was very sad.

"But come to the foot of this altar; here graces will be bestowed on all who ask with confidence. They will be given to the rich and to the poor. At a certain time the danger will be very great indeed; it will seem as if all were lost, but do not fear I shall be with you. Have confidence, do not be discouraged, you are in my special keeping." (The Blessed Virgin shed tears when she said this.) "Among the clergy of Paris there will be many victims. The Archbishop will die. The cross will be despised, blood will flow in the streets." (Again Our Lady's emotion was so great that she could not speak for a time). "The whole world

will be in tribulation."

Catherine wondered in her mind when all this would happen and an interior voice clearly told her that it would be in about forty years time. Catherine said "I could not tell how long I remained with the blessed Virgin; but after talking with me for a long time she disappeared like a shadow that vanished."

Catherine turned now and saw the child still there. "She has gone", he said, and he then accompanied her back to the dormitory. "Having returned to bed", Catherine related, "I heard the clock strike two. There was no more sleep for me that night".

Mary's first apparition to Catherine in the form of the Miraculous Medal

Catherine describes it all:

"On November 27th, whilst making my meditation in profound silence at 5.30 in the evening, I seemed to hear on the right hand side of the Sanctuary something like the rustling of a silk dress, and looking in that direction I saw the Blessed Virgin, her height was medium and her countenance so beautiful it would be impossible for me to describe it.

She was standing clothed in a robe the colour of dawning light. Her head was covered with a white veil which descended on each side to her feet. Her hair was smooth on her forehead and above was a coif ornamented with a little lace and fitting close to the head. Her feet rested upon a globe. Her hands were raised about as high as her waist and she held another globe. Her eyes were lifted up to heaven and her countenance was radiant as she offered the globe to the Lord.

Whilst occupied contemplating this vision the Blessed Virgin looked at me and a voice said in the depths of my heart, 'The

globe that you see represents the entire world and each person in particular’.

Suddenly her fingers were filled with rings and most beautiful precious stones; the rays gleaming and reflected on all sides, enveloped her in such a dazzling light that I could see neither her feet nor her robe. The stones were of different sizes and the rays coming from them were more or less brilliant according to the size. Mary said, “Behold the symbol of the graces I shed upon those who ask me for them”. There now formed around the Blessed Virgin an oval frame upon which appeared in golden letters these words.

‘O MARY CONCEIVED WITHOUT SIN PRAY FOR US
WHO HAVE RECOURSE TO THEE’

Then I heard a voice which said ‘Have a medal struck like this. People who wear it will receive great graces especially if they wear it around the neck. Graces will be bestowed in abundance upon those who have confidence.’

Suddenly the picture seemed to turn. Mary then gave me a vision of the reverse side of the medal, still within the oval frame, the letter ‘M’ in the centre of the frame. There was a bar on top of the ‘M’ and a cross resting on the bar. Beneath the ‘M’ were two hearts, the first encircled with a crown of thorns, and the other pierced with a sword.”

This Apparition took place at the right hand side of the high altar in the Mother House of the Daughters of Charity, 140 Rue du Bac, Paris, on the 27th November, 1830. Mary was elevated about three meters from the floor. In December of the same year these visions were repeated with the Mother of God standing above the high altar. The invocation was again traced in letters of gold and again the reverse side was shown;

and again Mary said “Have a medal struck on this model”.

After the Apparitions

In obedience to the Blessed Virgin, Sister Catherine related all this to her confessor, Father Aladel, who did not readily accept all this from so young and inexperienced a Sister. Father Aladel couldn’t be sure this young Sister was a victim of



Statue at the Mother House of the Daughters of Charity
Depicting Mary’s First Apparition to Catherine.

delusions. He was actually quite severe and told her to return to her prayers and walk the path of all the other Sisters.

Poor Catherine struggled between the requests of the Mother of God and the attitude of her confessor. In her prayer she said to Mary : “My good Mother you know well that Father Aladel does not believe me.” Mary urged Catherine not to be anxious . “A day will come when he will do what I desire. He is my servant and he would fear to displease me.”

When Sister Catherine related this to Fr. Aladel his attitude changed. He approached the Archbishop of Paris, Monseigneur de Quelen, who responded, “There is nothing in this contrary to the approved practice of the Church. The medal will spread devotion to Mary, it will strengthen belief in her Immaculate Conception. Go ahead with it and please give me the first one.” The first medals were made in June 1832.

The propagation of the medals was prodigious. The demand exceeded the supply. There were amazing graces, conversions, cures and miracles so that the people converged on the Sisters asking for this “Miraculous Medal”.

Sister Catherine after the apparitions

Shortly after Sister Catherine received the habit, she left the Mother House. She was assigned to the Hospice for old men at Enguien. She remained there for the rest of her life. Sister Catherine, as at Fain-les-Moutiers, was not daunted by any work, no matter how hard. Severe on herself, regardless of fatigue, she accepted all with the calm of those souls whose peace stems from their union with God; even the rebuffs of the old men of the Hospice, of whom she had charge for nearly forty years, did not disturb her serenity.

Sister Catherine passed her life in humble and uninterrupted labours; her hands at work, and her heart with God! She went from the old men to the poultry yard, of which she had charge also, and when she was restricted by old age, she became the portress of the hospice, always calm in her disposition, and her face expressing that serenity that struck those around her, and her lips closed on her “secret”.

At the time Mary spoke to her in July, 1830, the Blessed Virgin informed Catherine that in about forty years time tragic things would happen in France through hatred of religion. She would remember Mary’s words, “The moment will come when the danger will be great; all will seem to be lost ... But have confidence!”



St Catherine Labouré

She lived through the painful times that Mary had predicted. During the civil war, with the other Sisters, she supported and protected the Superior, Sr Dufes, when she was almost taken prisoner. Sr Dufes had to flee Paris. Eventually, all the sisters, including Catherine, had to leave until the civil war ended. When calm was restored, Catherine once more took up her post as portress.

Catherine the Saint

St. Catherine’s secret was kept all her Community life until she was near death when she spoke about it to her Superior, Sr Dufes,

Chapel of the Miraculous Medal
140 rue du Bac, Paris.



because the statue of Mary holding the globe had never been made.

On December 31, 1876, after having received the last sacraments, Sister Catherine died peacefully at Reuilly. She was seventy years old. Her incorrupt body lies under the statue of Mary of the Globe, in the Chapel of the Apparitions in the Mother House of the Daughters of Charity, 140 Rue du Bac Paris. On July 27th, 1947, His Holiness Pius XII declared Catherine Labouré a Saint, referring to her as “The Saint of Silence”.

Have a medal made

1834 witnessed the rapid spread of the use of the medal. At the beginning of March, 50,000 medals were struck, then later that year another 150,000, and later again, 500,000. Devotion to Mary, under the title ‘Immaculate Conception’ spread throughout the world. This incredible expansion was accompanied by conversions, healings, clear interventions by God. The medal was very quickly called “miraculous”, a sign of Mary’s loving and powerful protection within the communion of Saints, under the sign of love symbolised by the Cross of Christ and the two hearts of Jesus and Mary on the reverse side of the medal.

There are many people who have worn the medal and have prayed sincerely and have experienced significant life changes. The most famous of these is Alphonse Ratisbonne, who experienced conversion from Judaism to Christianity while wearing the Miraculous Medal, a gift from a Catholic friend. He had the experience of seeing Mary exactly as she appeared on the medal.

3. IS THE MEDAL MIRACULOUS?

Mary’s power of intercession is not to be doubted. But we do not relate to her, pray to her, in isolation. We pray to her as the Mother of her Son, Jesus, and we recognise her power of interces-



sion within the community of the faithful. Mary will obtain graces for us from her Son. True devotion to Mary will always lead us to her Son and following Mary's example, we will daily face the challenges of deepening our union with Christ in prayer, pondering his word, and of responding in real, concrete ways to the challenges of our time in faith, hope and love.

But, is the medal truly miraculous? The true name of the medal is 'The Medal of the Immaculate Conception'. Because many who wore the medal with faith received many favours and graces from God through the intercession of Mary, it did not take long for people to refer to the medal as the 'Miraculous Medal'.

Perhaps the following extract from the directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy: Principles and Guidelines (2002 Libreria Editrice Vaticana) may assist our understanding of the Miraculous Medal and our approach to wearing this Medal with confidence.

MEDALS

The faithful like to wear medals bearing effigies of the Blessed Virgin Mary. These are a witness of faith and a sign of veneration of the Holy Mother of God, as well as of trust in her maternal protection. The church blesses such objects of Marian devotion in the belief that "they help to remind the faithful of the love of God, and to increase trust in the Blessed Virgin Mary." The Church also points out that devotion to the Mother of Christ also requires "a coherent witness of life."

Among the various medals of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the most diffuse must be the "Miraculous Medal". Its origins go back to the apparitions in 1830 of Our Lady to St Catherine Labouré, a humble novice of the Daughters of Charity in Paris.

The medal was struck in accordance with the instructions given by Our Lady and has been described as a "Marian microcosm" because of its extraordinary symbolism. It recalls the mystery of Redemption, the love of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and of the Sorrowful Heart of Mary. It signifies the mediatory role of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the mystery of the Church, the relationship between Heaven and earth, this life and eternal life.

Like all medals and objects of cult, the Miraculous Medal is never to be regarded as a talisman or lead to any form of blind credulity. The promise of Our lady that "those who wear the medal will receive great graces", requires a humble and tenacious commitment to the Christian message, faithful and persevering prayer, and a good Christian life.

To wear the medal with faith

This document clearly warns against our using the Miraculous Medal as a "talisman", that is like a lucky charm, something

capable of working wonders.

We are invited to wear the Medal with faith, being humbly and firmly committed to the Gospel message, being, like Mary, people of faith, of prayer, and of action.

4. REFLECTIONS ON THE EXPERIENCE OF CATHERINE LABOURE

The life of St Catherine and the message of the Medal are intimately related. It is in the lived experience of Catherine that we can truly grasp the fullness of the message given in 1830. What can we learn from the experience of St Catherine Labouré?

Discipleship: There is a clear call to live a life of discipleship, evidenced in Catherine's own life of humble service. The apparitions were an inspiration to Sister Catherine's life of service.

The Virgin Mary had revealed to her the face of God in those who suffered. As her biographer, Fr Laurentin said, "Catherine's clairvoyance, with the exception of the visions that were limited to several months of her seminary, was contained within her ability to see Christ in daily life: especially in the poor, in accord with how she had learned to serve him: I was hungry and you gave me to eat." (Filles de la Charité Website)

Saint of Silence: The cross and suffering are part of human life and the mystery of redemption. We are reminded in the medal of the sacrifice of Jesus and Mary and indeed our own call to suffer for service. Catherine's life is testimony to this. The medal also reminds us to pray in times of sorrow and distress, to trust in God, to share our burdens with Mary.

Some find it easier and more comforting to share their pain with a mother figure. Accessing the maternal and feminine is important in our spiritual journey. Catherine herself lost her mother at a

young age and asked Mary to be her mother. Many Christians find great support and nurture in their relationship with Our Lady. The medal reminds us of this powerful help.

Do not be afraid! One spiritual writer claims that the core message of the Scriptures is "Do not be afraid, I am with you." The small child who led Catherine to the chapel said, "Do not be afraid! Come! I will accompany you." Catherine was known all her life for her serenity, her calmness in all circumstances. She truly lived as one who walks with God. Her simplicity was because her life was focused on God alone.

Grace: The medal is a powerful tool to remind us of God's infinite and freely given love—grace. We are reminded to live our lives in a way that keeps us open to receive the grace of God. It is a reminder to pray, to recall the central message of redemption and to reflect on the place of Mary in our redemption. This is expressed in the title of the Immaculate Conception. The grace is universal—for the whole world, for the Church and for each person—for all who are loved by God.

May this simple story of St Catherine Labouré, her life, and of the apparitions of Mary to her, renew our faith in God's redeeming love. May we all, through the intercession of Mary, draw strength daily from the Gospel, and may our life of faith, hope and love be a sign to the world that the Risen Christ, who died to save all people, continues to draw all people to himself. For God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, "born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons (and daughters)." (Gal 4:4-5)

*O Mary conceived without sin,
pray for us
who have recourse to you.*