

The Medal Called Miraculous

It is realised that the Medal of the Immaculate Conception, popularly styled the Miraculous Medal, was strikingly associated with the beginnings of the Legion. But many may not be aware of the fact that it was also entwined with what I may call the roots or pre-history of the Legion. The statue which formed the centre of the first meeting of the Legion, and which is now contained in a showcase at Concilium headquarters, was of the Miraculous Medal model. It belonged to a little society called the Guild of the Immaculate Conception – which was engaged in that direct defence of the Faith which we call anti-proselytism. Innumerable Protestants agencies had set themselves to the attempt to draw the poor of Ireland from Catholicism by crude methods based on the 'buying' of them in one form or another.

One of those agencies operated in the premises No 6½ Whitefriar Street, Dublin, using the medium of free food conditional on attendance at a service. The Guild of the

Immaculate Conception was started by a shoemaker, J.J. Gabbett, to induce the victims of 6½ Whitefriar Street not to attend there and at the same time to provide for their necessities. The statue had been purchased by Gabbett out of a fund contributed by girls only. The subscription was one penny each. No man was permitted to contribute!

After some years the guild ceased, its purposes being otherwise provided for. Its modest effects, including the statue, came to Myra House and each item was destined to play a part in the history of the Legion. On the fateful first evening of the Legion's life the statue was used as the centre-point of the Legion altar. Those first members were urged to have devotion to the Miraculous Medal and to utilise it in their contacts. Likewise they were recommended to use the invocation of the Medal: 'Mary conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee.'

These injunctions were heeded. The legionaries did thus rely upon the medal, so that at a later date, when the Catena became a part of the legionary obligation, the invocation more or less automatically took its place in it.

The Vexillum was not part of the original equipment. When the first model of it was produced it was of silver and handmade. Its design was precisely as you see it today, with the exception that the oval did not depict the Miraculous Medal but a conventional Immaculate Conception. The original is now preserved in the showcase already referred to. It might be expected that this design would harden into tradition and as such be difficult to alter. But no. When the Vexillum was mass-produced for use by the praesidia, the oval, both front and reverse switched back to starting point. It was made the Miraculous Medal.

Sensational Anniversaries

Not long afterwards, a sensational occurrence once again made this pointing to a bond between the medal and the Legion. At the centenary moment of the medal, that is precisely 100 years after Our Lady had appeared to Catherine Labouré, the audience began with Cardinal Verdier, the Archbishop of Paris, in which was discussed the founding of the Legion in France. As the Church liturgy shows, God has regard to anniversaries and presumably in a special way to centenaries. So here would seem to be a definite linking of the Apparition of 1830 with the Legion.

There was more to come. Shortly after the above date in 1930, the Rev. Dr Joseph P. Donovan, CM came to Paris to attend a Chapter of his Congregation. While there, he visited his compatriot, the Rev. Sister M. Reeves, in the Rue du Bac. She gave him a copy of the Legion handbook and some other items of Legion literature and suggested to him that he try to start the Legion in the USA where she suggested it was much needed. He read the handbook at once. We are told what his reactions were. He said: 'If this is true, then it is the society that we have long been waiting for.' Immediately he set out for Dublin to investigate. He was so impressed by what he found that on his return to America he wrote the celebrated article which started the Legion there. The day on which the first praesidium began was the 27 November 1931. That day is the Feast of the Miraculous Medal. Let it be explained that this date was not deliberately selected by the originators of that praesidium; they did not advert to the coincidence. Therefore once again we seem to be witnessing a supernatural pointing to the facts that it was on the 1930 feast that the Rev. Sister Reeves first heard of the Legion, and that it was in the Convent of

the Miraculous Medal that she subsequently interested Dr Donovan, a fellow member of the Vincentian (Lazarist) Congregation.

Those intriguing events were described in *Maria Legionis*, July 1945, pp. 8 and 9. To suggest that all of these many coincidences represented the operation of chance would be straining the strings of coincidence unduly.

Origin of the Medal

Now let us go back to the origin of the medal itself. This was at the time when the long disputation over the Immaculate Conception was drawing to its formal end; that is towards the definition of the doctrine. On the Saturday before the first Sunday of Advent 1830 in the Convent of the Sisters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul, Rue du Bac, Paris, Catherine Labouré had a vision of Our Blessed Lady who instructed her to have a medal made after a pattern which she minutely described to the sister. 'Those who wear that medal when it is indulgenced,' then declared Our Lady, 'will receive great graces, especially if they wear it round their necks. Graces will be abundant for those who have confidence.'

Catherine communicated the details to her Spiritual Director, Père Aladel. He watched her very carefully after that with a view to detecting any instability in her or any inconsistency in her story. When he had satisfied himself he imparted the circumstances to the Archbishop of Paris Msgr de Quélen. This was at the beginning of 1832. The archbishop's judgement was that the question of the medal could be viewed apart from the question of the authenticity of the apparition, and that there was nothing inconsistent with the Faith in the proposed design. He gave permission for the making of the medal.

On 30 June 1832, two thousand medals were delivered to Père Aladel. Some of them he at once gave to the archbishop who resolved to put to the severest test the alleged promise that great graces would follow from the use of the medal. At that time the Archbishop of Malines, Msgr de Pradt, was in open warfare with the Church and appeared to be quite hardened. Msgr de Quélen judged that this would represent a test case. So he went to Msgr de Pradt with the medal, but was refused admittance – only to be sent for immediately afterwards. The sequel was a complete triumph; Msgr de Pradt was reconciled to the Church.

The Archbishop of Paris, though astounded, was not yet satisfied. He put the medal to other exacting tests, and he declared that he had never given it without the happiest results. Also he investigated cases where it had achieved successes through other hands than his own. As a consequence he was completely convinced as to its efficacy.

The medal took on like wildfire. In Naples the king caused one million of them to be distributed during an outbreak of cholera there. The Pope himself gave it out to many.

In 1836 a Diocesan Enquiry into the circumstances of the Apparition and Medal was held in Paris. As a result of it the medal was approved. Likewise sanctioned were images and statues of the Blessed Virgin which would represent the Apparition of 1830. Then on 1 January 1839, the Diocese of Paris was consecrated to the Immaculate Conception. The widespread use of the medal unquestionably gave stress to the doctrine itself and thus may have had a bearing on the important step which soon followed, i.e. that of 1854 when Pius IX

declared the Immaculate Conception to be a dogma of the Faith. Then in 1858 followed Lourdes, which at one stroke confirmed the Immaculate Conception and the action of the Pope in defining it.

The Medal and The Legion

The use of the medal soon became general throughout the world. The victories of grace which attended it were so many and so striking that by universal acclaim the name 'Miraculous Medal' was bestowed on it. The Legion's adoption of it in 1921 was no case of a new discovery; the Legion was simply tuning in to a general belief in the power of the medal.

The medal has continued in vigorous use among legionaries. This fact suggests the influence of grace. In the first place if it had been no more than an initial enthusiasm or a fad, it would not have remained in such vogue. This was all the more the case as the legionaries had to face a certain amount of mockery on its account. One wit invented the name: 'Miraculous Meddlers' for them.

Secondly – and this has much importance – there has been for several years past a campaign against the medal and like things. There has been in many circles the imputation that they are primitive and not a little superstitious. Broadly speaking this has been among those who have been seeking to bring Protestants into the Church in bulk, but who do not seem to be interested in individual conversions. Some indeed go so far as to repudiate the idea of seeking those individual conversions as being an obstacle to a mass conversion! So far they have gained neither the individual nor the bulk conversions.

This school of thought has no patience whatever with the medal. They see it as an exercise in superstition and

apart from this as a demonstration of excessive devotion to the Blessed Virgin. Their idea is that she is a barrier to the entry of Protestants and therefore that there should be no emphasis on that barrier. They tone her down. They seem to talk of her only to depreciate what they call 'excesses'. They regard the Marian sacramentals (scapulars, medals etc.) as relics of a simpler, bygone age which should be brought up-to-date, by which they mean abolished.

Those minimisers have a high sounding phrase on their lips: 'Every doctrine must be rethought in order to bring it into line with modern requirements.' Of course within due limits there is correctness in this. Everything in the Christian doctrine must be ever meditated on for the purpose of drawing fresh lights from it. But this is a totally different thing from a casting of everything into the melting-pot. Such would mean that the careful thought and growth of the time honoured formulae and instruments of grace are to be abruptly replaced with new ones to which those outside the Church will not object! Theology is to become a branch of tactics!

To this process of making things approvable to the non-Catholics, Our Lady is to be subjected. Nothing about her need be accepted but what has been formally defined! And the extraordinary statement proceeds from certain quarters that the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption were defined *inopportunately* – as if when talking of the operation of the Holy Ghost there is any difference between 'inopportune' and 'incorrect'.

The formal teachings of the popes on the subject of Mary's place in grace are rudely put aside by that section on the grounds that they are not *ex cathedra*. But this disregard of the *magisterium* or ordinary teaching authority of the Church would lay waste the Catholic Church as we know it.

One exponent of this new school of thinking tells us that the 'revival of theology in 1950' has knocked the bottom from under all that discussion about Our Lady's mediation!

Here I have to repeat what has already been said: that the chief and real reason why the medals and scapulars are objected to is that they are expressions of the popular belief in Mary's influential role, and that they safeguard and foster that belief.

Contemplating those minimisers one is struck by the fact that the Legion is really the very opposite to them. And that section has not been slow in perceiving the fact and in loading the Legion with their contempt. It is old fashioned, benighted, and it must be completely reformed! It is strange that such minds would wish to keep even the name of the Legion in existence, but many of them do. In spite of themselves they recognise that there is a power in it. But they want to reform it. They say that this would only be a matter of changing its clothes. We say it is a matter of such drastic alteration as would leave behind nothing of the essential of the Legion of Mary.

Our Lady is Defender of the Faith

Of course Our Blessed Lady is a barrier to those who will not believe in her. In that sense she *is* keeping the unbelievers out. But likewise she is keeping us in. Obviously, if the main barriers and tests of belief are done away with then there is no longer any Catholic Church. If people come in without accepting Mary and all that she stands for, it is not really into the Catholic Church that they come, but into a Church of their own imagining, equivalent to a High Anglican or High Lutheran one.

The position is that Our Lady is fulfilling her old role of defender of the Faith. It is a commission entrusted to her by God very long ago: 'I will set enmities between Satan and the woman.' She has always been the test of orthodox doctrine. Holding on to her we are safe.

Those anti-traditionalists would not admit that they want to omit Mary. They say they only want to remove the non-essentials, the excrescences, and the superstitious elements which have like barnacles attached themselves to devotion to her! But we have seen what this boils down to. Those same persons have told us that we need only accept in regard to her what was prescribed in 431, 1854 and 1950. This would mean that we would be left without guidance in respect of her role in the Catholic dispensation; the extent of the part played by her in relation to the soul is to be determined by the individual! But if it is indeed to be left optional, why has a campaign been waged in many places towards the abolition of the Rosary and the Legion altar in praesidium meetings! It will be agreed that this campaign does not allow much freedom! Moreover, it is uncomfortably like similar type of action taken by the Reformation 500 years ago.

It is history that Luther, Calvin and the other leaders of the Reformation, while denying to Our Lady any real role in the realm of grace, retained a sort of devotion to her. But their successors made short work of her. Full Protestantism came in and in due course proceeded to their denial of the Incarnation itself.

But is it not possible for one to be completely correct in one's Marian doctrine and at the same time to reject such Marian items as her medals and scapulars?

In the first place I would suggest that there would be in that rejection a great laceration of the ordinary Catholic

outlook which has through the centuries received those things and believed in them as aids.

Secondly it would strike hard at much else of the traditional usage of the Church. For into that category of the medals etc. would also have to go such items as the crucifix, statues, pictures, holy water, the rosary, relics, shrines and a multitude of devotional practices which have represented a growth endorsed by the Church, its popes and saints, and by the evidence of many wonders worked. Unquestionably a successful attack on the Miraculous Medal would place all those other things in peril because they are akin.

Here is an instance which would typify a whole section. A Reverend Mother wished to do away with all the statues in her chapel. She did not dare to knock them to pieces, so she placed them in a row outside on the footpath. Nobody would take them as they were too big for their houses. Eventually the OFM Fathers rescued them lest they be taken away in the refuge wagon.

Many of the newer churches have not a single Marian item in them.

Our minds are forced back to the iconoclasts, the Reformers and the various heresies of the past.

By hitting at the medals and other sacramentals it is possible to make ordinary people nervous about devotion to Mary in general. Where is one to stop? What is an extravagance? But those persons who cast her into improper shade are playing a deadly game as history so emphatically tells. Denial of Mary leads inevitably to the denial of the Incarnation.

A vital fact which has to be taken count of is that all those devotional items and practices cater for a side of our human nature. It is a help to us to be able to pin

our faith to something visible. The Incarnation and the whole sacramental system of the Church show that God himself has taken this element in human nature into the Christian Plan. The sacraments are signs of Christ's action. The Marian sacramentals signify Mary's intervention. It is interesting to observe that those people who spurn these aids and reminders which are based on real faith are commonly found to be materialistically minded or else addicted to idols and charms which are based on real superstition.

A Courageous Adventure

In the hands of legionaries, the Miraculous Medal has demonstrated its efficacy in ways that cannot be denied, so many and so remarkable have they been. Its effective use in an unexpected field is worth recounting. Approach was planned to an extensive area where the inhabitants were exclusively non-Catholic and where there was no priest or church. The people had the reputation of such hostility to Catholicism that it was universally accepted that they would use physical violence towards any who would come to them in the name of the Church. Undeterred the legionaries went to the territory and spoke to the people individually asking to be permitted to explain the Catholic faith. In almost every case this opportunity was granted. The legionaries did not follow a policy of reserve in regard to Our Lady. On the contrary they sought to explain the fullness of her position. Incidentally they offered the Miraculous Medal which gave admirable opportunity to explain Our Lady. It was readily accepted and subsequently worn. This is an astounding circumstance for Our Lady had been alleged to be a focus point of the hatred of the Church. Let me add that in the entire extensive operation

carried out by nine priests and 88 legionaries, hardly anything but a kind reception was experienced. And there was no case of physical molestation.

Legionaries must not let themselves be caught up in any of these 'minimising' tendencies whether those are directed against the Blessed Virgin herself or against those holy things which she uses as means of manifesting her power; and which at the same time are her panoply, which is to say her armour of defence. This is in the sense that if these are pierced then the next onslaught is against her own person.

So let us continue to believe in the Miraculous Medal and to utilise it. It bids us to think of Our Lady in many important ways. It is a representation of her Immaculate Conception, of her motherhood of grace and of her company with us in our apostolic missions. We go confidently into the worst situations and to the ultra-difficult people. Is it not a thought compelling fact that it has been the Legion which has taken the chief part in the approaching of non-Catholics for the purpose of converting them? One would imagine that the Legion, by reason of its name and pronounced devotion to Mary, would be the least fitted to secure success in that field. The contrary has been the case. Conversions have been realised in great numbers. In many of those conversions the medal has played an initiating part.

It is to be noted, therefore, that Mary not only preserves the integrity of the Faith, but also is the giver of the Faith as many of her titles testify.