

The Miraculous Medal: Icon of Mary's Maternal Mediation

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Introduction

The Miraculous Medal is an image of the Mother of God under the title of the Immaculate Conception. It has been distributed in its millions since it was first struck in 1832. It is familiar to Catholics the world over but may not be so well known to those of other traditions, and even Catholics may not be fully aware of its symbolism and how it came to be. I would like therefore to give you a brief account of the origin of the Medal and go on to tell you about a more recent development.

The Medal is not an Icon in the specific way the Orthodox tradition understands an Icon. But it does portray an image and other symbols that require interpretation. I aim to show that the image on the medal might be described as an Icon of Mary's maternal mediation. The term 'maternal mediation' is one used by Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* to describe Mary's role in our redemption.

The Story of the Medal

Catherine Labouré entered the novitiate of the Daughters of Charity in the Rue de Bac, Paris, on Wednesday 21 April 1830 at the age of 24 years. She was a pious girl who came from Fain-les-Moutiers, Côte-d'Or, where her father ran the family farm. She was the eighth of ten surviving children. Her mother died when Catherine was nine years old. From the age of twelve she was given the responsibility of running the home. In addition to the housework, there was the cooking, the milking, the hens, the dovecote and the garden. There was no time for a formal education and she did not learn to read and write till she was twenty. It was a tough life, which prepared her for the equally tough life in the Convent.

Shortly after entering the Convent she had a vision of the heart of St Vincent de Paul, the founder of the Daughters of Charity, just above the reliquary of the Saint in the chapel. It appeared to her on three successive days. Throughout her time in the novitiate Catherine saw Our Lord in the Most Holy Sacrament except when she doubted. It was on the eve of the feast of St Vincent de Paul 18-19 July 1830 Catherine first saw the Blessed Virgin who told her:

My child, the Good Lord wants to entrust you with a mission . . . You will have plenty to suffer, but you will overcome it through the knowledge that what you do is for the glory of God.

As instructed she reported the vision to her confessor Fr Aladel. She was not well received. Fr Aladel put it down to 'illusion' and 'imagination'.

The Medal Apparition, 27 November 1830

Moving forward to 27 November of the same year we come to the apparition of the Medal. It took place in the convent chapel at half past five in the evening during the meditation time. The apparition appeared to the right of the altar where Catherine saw it from her place in the midst of the assembled community, but nobody else was aware of it.

For an account of the apparition of the medal I rely on two studies of the life of Saint Catherine Labouré. The first by Fr Joseph Dirvin published in 1958 considered at the time to be the definitive version, and the second by the Marian scholar, Fr René Laurentin, whose detailed study was published in 1980.

According to Fr Dirvin¹, the Virgin appeared standing on a globe. She held in her hands a golden ball surmounted by a small cross which she seemed to offer to God. Her hands were resplendent with rings set with precious stones from which came a cascade of light that flooded downwards so that the feet of the Virgin could no longer be seen. Catherine heard an interior voice say:

The ball which you see represents the whole world, especially France, and each person in particular. These rays symbolize the graces I shed upon those who ask for them.

The gems from which rays do not fall are the graces for which souls forget to ask.

Dirvin goes on to say: "The golden ball vanished from Mary's hands, her arms swept wide in a gesture of motherly compassion, while from her jewelled fingers the rays of light streamed upon the white globe at her feet. An oval frame formed around the Blessed Virgin and written within it, in letters of gold, Catherine read the words:

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

The voice spoke again:

Have a medal struck after this model. All who wear it will have great graces; they should wear it around the neck.

Graces will abound for persons who wear it with confidence.

The tableau revolved to reveal a large **M** surmounted by a bar and a cross. Beneath the **M** were the *Hearts of Jesus and Mary*, the one crowned with thorns and the other pierced with a sword. And then the vision was gone.

Sister Labouré confided her vision to Fr Aladel under the seal of the confessional. His response:

Pure illusion! . . . If you want to honour Our Lady, imitate her virtues and beware of your imagination!

One day during the following month Catherine witnessed a second and final apparition of Our Lady of the Medal. It was a virtual repeat of that on 27 November. This time Catherine was told:

¹ Joseph I. Dirvin, *Saint Catherine Labouré of the Miraculous Medal*, (New York: Farrar, Strous and Cudahy, 1958, Reprinted Rockford, Ill.: Tan Books and Publishers, 1984) pp. 93-4.

You will not see me any more, but you will hear my voice during your prayers.

Indeed this was so. For the rest of her time on earth Catherine would take her problems to Our Lady in prayer and would receive an answer.

After further prompting from Sister Labouré, Fr Aladel consulted his Superior about the medal. It was suggested they submit the idea to the Archbishop of Paris who to their surprise had no problem with the proposal. The Archbishop was known to have a particular devotion to the Immaculate Conception. Fr Aladel commissioned a design for the medal. For the obverse side the inscription: “O Mary conceived without sin” invited the engraving of a ‘classical’ rendering of the Immaculate Conception. The first fifteen hundred medals were delivered on 30 June 1832 – nineteen months after the first medal apparition.

The *Medal of the Immaculate Conception* was distributed. Soon there were stories of miracles associated with it, so much so, that it became known as the *Miraculous Medal*. Its popularity increased, and within seven years, ten million medals had been produced.

Catherine wrote three accounts of her visions at the request of her confessors but she makes no mention of the second phase. Dirvin states: ‘It was not the design originally intended, which was the first phase of the Great Apparition, the Virgin of the Globe.

Laurentin simply records Fr Aladel’s account.² We have to consider the possibility that Fr Aladel chose to substitute the image, ‘in the way that she is customarily portrayed under the title of the Immaculate Conception’ for pragmatic reasons:

Firstly, it is more compatible with the inscription: ‘O Mary conceived without sin’.

Secondly, this image was well known and would be more readily acceptable; and *Thirdly*, he was aware of the Archbishop’s devotion to the Immaculate Conception and would be more likely to approve of the proposal if the image were that of the Immaculata.

However the reason given at the Beatification process was that due to the technical difficulty of engraving a standing figure holding a ball with rays come from the fingers made it impractical.

The Statue of the Lady of the Globe

From 1839 Catherine began to agitate for the setting up of an altar and a commemorative statue on the spot where the first medal apparition had taken place and this statue should have a globe in its hands. Again Catherine approached her confessor in fear and trembling – the discussion was heated and Fr Aladel expressed his displeasure shouting, “You’re worse than a blasted wasp.”

Understandably Aladel was against the globe being introduced – a different image would be most confusing.

² See quotation pp. 25-6 below.

But Catherine was tormented by her need to fulfil this second part of the mission given her by the Blessed Virgin and could not rest till it was accomplished. By May 1876 Catherine was desperate. She had a premonition that she would die before the end of the year. Something had to be done.

For forty-six years Catherine had managed to keep her identity secret from her community, though some of those in authority knew and others guessed. She decided to reveal her identity to her Superior and ask her help. After seeking permission from the Blessed Virgin in prayer, she told Sister Dufès the whole story.

After much heart searching Sister Dufès was won round and set about ordering a statue of Our Lady of the Globe to Catherine's specification. Catherine was somewhat disappointed with the result but then no human creation could compare with the beauty of the apparition. The statue portrayed the Blessed Virgin holding the globe but it lacked the rays of light. Permission to place the new statue in the Chapel was not given until four years after Catherine's death. That statue was replaced by another sculpted by Real del Sarte in 1930.

On 31 December 1876: Catherine died and was buried at Reully. She was beatified on 28 May 1933. and canonized by Pius XII on 27 July 1947.

After her novitiate Catherine had spent her life at Reully, three miles from the Rue du Bac in the Enghein Hospice, a home for elderly men, where she worked in the laundry, the kitchen, the garden and for forty years cared for the old men. Though her achievements were not formally acknowledged by her superiors during her lifetime, she was known to be very prayerful, outstanding in humility and obedience, and carried out her duties in an exemplary fashion. The elderly men adored her and the young nuns sought her out for advice. She had great wisdom, a gift of prophecy and probably a gift of healing. She was canonized because of her holiness not because she was a visionary.

I knew little of St Catherine till I began this study but I have grown to be very fond of this caring, no-nonsense, woman who loved God and the poor.

The Rest of the Story

The story does not end with the death of Catherine. Let me tell you the rest of the story. In May 1992 Mary Kathryn Johnson, a 47 year-old widow living in the United States, came to understand that she was being commissioned by the Blessed Virgin to produce a medal depicting *The Virgin of the Globe* as first seen by Catherine Labouré.

Mary Kathryn was born in 1945 in Des Moines, Iowa. She was baptized and raised in a Catholic household. She married a young Marine who was killed in action in 1969 leaving her a widow at the age of twenty-three with two small children. She lapsed from the Church and the Sacraments. But a time came when she turned again to the Lord begging forgiveness and pleading,

'Lord, I have made a mess of my life. Please take it and do with it as you will'.

Mary Kathryn tells us that it was in 1986 the Lord spoke to her interiorly for the first time. Four years later Our Lady spoke to her in a similar way and from

September 1991 yet another interior voice that of Saint Catherine Labouré began to help and encourage her.

In May 1992, Mary Kathryn came to understand that the Blessed Virgin wanted another medal struck and was told:

You see, my child, that neither the medal nor the statue are complete . . . the medal portrays that *'I am full of grace'*. The statue portrays that the world has *'recourse'* to me. But to be complete the two must be as one. Now is the time of fullness. The world must be reminded of these truths, for now is the time of the serpent and those who have confidence in me will fall under the protection of my mantle in these days of battle.

Mary Kathryn met with the diocesan authorities. She was advised that though the Church could not give 'approval' nevertheless she was allowed to proceed with her mission. Soon expertise and finances became available.

It was decided that the Medal should have a dual title, *'The Virgin of the Globe – Virgin Most Powerful'*. It was produced on 17 September 1994 and a statue of *The Virgin of the Globe* was completed on 6 January 2001. Mary Kathryn stresses that it is **St Catherine's 'Other Medal'** and that in time people will come to understand its full significance.

I have met Mary Kathryn's spiritual director, Fr Stephen Valenta. He tells me she remains in good standing with the Church and he has no reason to doubt the validity of her claims. He is promoting this new version of the Miraculous Medal.

The Medal

In the Catholic tradition medals, statues and holy pictures serve to remind us of the person or events portrayed so that the original may be honoured – this in the spirit of 2nd Council of Nicea in its reply to the iconoclasts in AD 787. In Orthodox liturgy and spirituality the Icon has a more integral place. Let us look at the images depicted on the Miraculous Medal, the details of which do, I believe, have considerable significance.

I approach this in a way that one might examine an Icon. I am not well versed in iconography so I ask your indulgence if what I say is not entirely correct.

I understand that an Icon is never complete in itself, but has a spiritual dimension. An Icon expresses itself in a symbolic language to be understood in the light of doctrine and spirituality. Iconographers follow certain conventions – the images they present are standardised in form, so as to pass on the official teaching of the Church. The Icon depicts visually what the Church proclaims verbally. The Icon is also a focus of private devotion by which the person or event portrayed is honoured. An Icon is holy because of its subject matter whether it be of Christ, the *Theotokos*, or the saints. Though the subject of the Icon may well be identified by the characteristic style of the image, it is neither complete, nor legitimate as a holy image, without an inscription specifying the motif. Every Icon is unique. In the creation of an Icon the artist seeks inspiration through a discipline of prayer and fasting; it is a spiritual exercise.

In the case of the St Catherine's Medal the inspiration came direct from the Virgin herself. This was described by the Visionary to her Confessor who made his

own interpretation when drawing up a specification for the Jeweller, Vachette, who in the execution of the commission imposed his own artistic vision.

On the obverse side of the medal we have an image of a woman standing on a globe.

Fr Aladel, Catherine Labouré's confessor, left us this written account:

The novice, while she was at prayer, saw a picture representing the Blessed Virgin, in the way that she is customarily portrayed under the title of the Immaculate Conception, full-length and holding out her arms. [She was] dressed in a white dress and a silvery-blue mantle, with a veil the colour of the dawn. From her hands came rays of light, beautifully glittering, and as if in bundles. Surrounding the picture she read the following invocation in golden letters: O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee.³

In this instance the Woman on the Medal is identified as the Immaculate Conception because this is the way in which artists had by convention become accustomed to portray her since the seventeenth century, and confirmed by the first phrase of the inscribed text.

What is new, is the rays spreading out from the hands of the Virgin, from the jewels on her fingers. As Mary explains:

These rays symbolize the graces I shed on those who ask for them.

Catherine was made to understand how pleasing it was to pray to the Blessed Virgin and how generous Mary was to those who pray to her and what joy she had in granting their requests.

What doctrines of the Church are expressed in this Icon?

Firstly, the *Immaculate Conception*. This was a belief held and taught by the ordinary magisterium which would be defined in 1854 by Pius IX in the following words:

We declare, pronounce, and define that the doctrine which holds that the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instance of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin, is a doctrine revealed by God and therefore to be believed firmly and constantly by all the faithful.⁴

I am aware that this is a sensitive issue between the Orthodox Churches and those of the West. However we all hold that at the Annunciation, the Angel salutes Mary with the words:

<i>chaire, ke-charito-mene, ho kyrios meta sou</i>	(Nestlé, UBSGNT)
Hail, O favoured one, the Lord is with you.	(RSV)
Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee.	(Douay, from the Vulgate)

³ René Laurentin, *The Life of Catherine Labouré*, Trans. Paul Wood, (London: Collins, 1983). p. 79.

⁴ Apostolic Constitution *Ineffabilis Deus*, Pius IX 1854.

Mary stands in God's favour.

It is sin which prevents us from being in God's favour – so if Mary has found favour with God, the implication is that Mary was without sin at that time. In translating that phrase, Jerome would interpret it to mean that Mary was 'full of grace'. If by grace we mean, that out of the abundance of His love, God gave her a share in His life, then the Lord was truly with her; she possessed, or better, was possessed by the Holy Spirit. She had been made holy. We differ only in determining exactly when her *theosis*, her divinisation, took place, but we agree that she is the *Panagia*, the All Holy One. Holiness is a quality that belongs only to God – 'You alone are holy' as we say in the *Gloria* of the Mass. Her holiness is entirely God's gift.

In the Orthodox tradition the feast of Mary's *Presentation in the Temple* on 21 November signifies a recognition that the rightful place for the pure and holy child of Anne and Joachim was in the Temple of God, for she belonged to God – in this way the Liturgy recognizes Mary's holiness from her beginnings without specifying when her sanctification might have taken place. Whereas the Western Church believes in Mary's preventative redemption, that she was fully graced from the first instant of her existence, a fact celebrated on 8 December as the Feast of *The Immaculate Conception*.

Mary was privileged in this way so as to be able to respond to God's invitation to be the Mother of the Saviour:

"*Fiat mihi . . .*".

"O let it be done unto me according to your word".

Mary is the *Panagia*, the *Immaculata* so that she might be the worthy *Theotokos* and Mother of the Divine Child with all its responsibilities and consequences. Her *fiat* was unconditional, given in total freedom out of love and obedience to God's will – a commitment which would be tested and tried at the Foot of the Cross.

In giving her consent Mary was cooperating with God in His salvific will. In agreeing to become the Mother of the Saviour, she became the medium by which the One Mediator, the Mediator of salvation and the New Covenant came to dwell amongst us. This first step in our redemption was made possible by Mary's 'Yes'. As the Incarnation was in itself redemptive, we can truly say that Mary actively cooperated with God in our redemption which she did in her own name and as the first and representative member of the Church.

Let us now consider the *Second phrase* of the inscription:

"*Pray for us who have recourse to thee.*"

From the earliest times Mary has been held to be a powerful *Intercessor*, an effective *Advocate*. The 3rd century Ryland's Papyrus gives us the *Sub Tuum* prayer:

Under your mercy, we take refuge, Theotokos, do not reject our supplications in our necessity, but deliver us from danger. You alone chaste, alone blessed.

Christ promised another Advocate. The Holy Spirit is that Advocate. Mary is so at one with the Holy Spirit; her will so conformed to the Divine Will, her prayer is effectively that of the Sanctifying Spirit; she is His perfect instrument and our

effective Advocate, the *Omnipotentia Supplex*. By her intercession Mary is our Mediatrix obtaining grace for us with the risen glorified Jesus, the one Mediator before the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit.

This aspect of Mary's mission is perfectly portrayed in the image of *The Virgin of the Globe – Virgin Most Powerful*, in which the Virgin appears to be offering to God a golden orb, symbol of the world and every person in it; she is offering all the prayers, works and sufferings of the world to the Father through her Son. The rays of light streaming down on the globe of the earth on which the Virgin stands, symbolize the graces obtained for us by Mary's intercessory prayer. God, our loving Father knows what we need but expects us to acknowledge our dependency on Him by asking for His graces. Though we may pray directly to the Persons of the Holy Trinity, we may also ask the intercession of our maternal mediator, for as Frank Duff wrote in 1916:

*Do not treat her only as the Queen of all Saints. She is much more than that. She is the most beloved Daughter of the Father, the Mother of the Son, and the Spouse of the Holy Spirit. When you pray to any one of these Three Divine Persons, let her be near to recommend your prayer.*⁵

The Lower Globe

Mary is shown standing on the globe of the earth crushing the serpent beneath her foot; a reference to Genesis 3:15, which led the early Fathers to see Mary as the New Eve and which would come to be cited as a scriptural basis for the Immaculate Conception.

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel. (RSV)

Catherine described the serpent to her director as “green with yellow spots” – a rather offensive creature.

On the reverse side we see a large **M** surmounted by a bar and a cross. The ‘**M**’ stands for **M**ary, it is her monogram but may also stand for **M**other, and **M**ediatrix. It is placed under the **Cross** of Jesus to which it is joined by a *tie bar* representing the Holy Spirit. Below this device are shown the *Hearts of Jesus and Mary* united in suffering – the one crowned with thorns the other pierced by a sword as predicted by Simeon.

There is no textual inscription on this side of the medal, but around the periphery are twelve stars, symbol of the twelve apostles, the pillars of the Church

⁵ Frank Duff, *Can We Be Saints?* Dublin: Legion of Mary. Originally published 1916, reprinted 1998. p. 20.

of which Mary is the *Type*. They have been transposed, for purely artistic reasons, from the obverse side where they would have formed the Virgin's crown. Reminding us of:

A woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.
Revelation 12: 1

On this side is represented in symbolic form the fundamental message which gives meaning to the whole story. *It is the Cross of Christ with His Mother standing at the foot.* By Christ's sacrificial death on the Cross, in which the Mother participated by her presence and compassion, all the graces of our redemption were acquired. Mary who had made her unconditional commitment at the Annunciation fulfils it at the Foot of the Cross. No one forced her to stand with her son in His agony – she freely chose out of love to be there, to share in His suffering for the salvation of mankind. She knew this was His destiny and had absolute trust that this was in fulfilment of the Divine will. She co-operated with the Father in the initiation of our redemption and continued to do so as the associate of our Redeemer to the very end. The new Eve with the new Adam.

From the Cross Christ acknowledged her presence and gave her a new maternal responsibility.

*Mother behold thy son.
Son behold thy mother.*

It was her commissioning as *Mother of the Church*. Now assumed into heaven she continues her maternal mediation, interceding for us and distributing the graces thus obtained.

The doctrinal message of this Medal is that Mary shares in the universal Mediation of her Divine Son, the one Mediator of salvation and the New Covenant. She co-operated with the Redeemer in the acquisition of the graces of our redemption while on earth and now, united with her Son in heaven, participates in the distribution of those graces. As the Mother of the Church, it is part of her maternal function to be our Advocate before the throne of God and to obtain for us all the graces we need by her intercession.

Mary as the first and exemplary member of the Church is our model. She has shown us what we have to do as individuals and collectively as the Church. We too are called to cooperate with God in the salvation of mankind. As St Paul suggests in Col. 4: 11 we are called to be 'co-workers with Christ for the sake of the Kingdom' – a work that may involve much suffering – so that in a mystical way we can say with St Paul:

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church. Col. 1: 24

By offering our lives, our work, suffering and joy to God through Jesus, we join Paul in 'completing that which is lacking in Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his Body'. In so doing we bear witness to His perfect sacrifice making it ever present in a broken world. In this sense all members of the Body are co-redeemers with Christ. As a community, we belong together, bear each others burdens and have a

shared responsibility in regard to our salvation. The grace of salvation reaches one member through another; we act as intermediaries and, in this sense, we mediate grace to each other.

In brief: the Medal which was inspired by the account of a vision of the Blessed Virgin Mary given by Saint Catherine Labouré in 1830 has many of the characteristics of an Icon, the true motif of which is, I suggest, *Mary's Maternal Mediation*. By wearing this medal, we are reminded of God's mercy and Mary's role in our personal salvation, and in doing so we show her our love and appreciation. Ave Maria!

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