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The Solitude of Saint Catherine Labouré

BY

FRANCES RYAN, D.C.

Although Pius XI did not endear himself to womankind with his remark at Catherine Labouré's beatification ceremony in 1933, he captures a central theme in her life when he said: "To think of keeping a secret for forty-six years and this by a woman."¹ The fact that Catherine Labouré kept her secret for forty-six years created a sense of mystery, not just in the reflections on her life, but during her life. The secret of her identity intrigued her contemporaries. Endless guesses, endless wondering, were made to find the sister who received the apparitions. There was something about someone living close by, maybe in the same house, who had been the favored soul of Our Lady to bring the Miraculous Medal to the world.² Sister Rosalie Rendu was one of these Daughters of Charity who often passed the motherhouse treasuring devotion to the Miraculous Medal.

It was Catherine's solitude that caught the eye of Cardinal Masella, prefect of the Congregation of Rites, in 1895, and set in motion the cause for her beatification.³ This occurred when Father Antoine Fiat, C.M., superior general of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity, asked for the celebration of "votive masses" without even mentioning the medal. Cardinal Masella passed on the request but granted him the Little Office of the Medal including readings, relating to the apparitions. Twenty-seven November 1894 was the first liturgical feast of the medal. He wrote to Father Fiat that "he was scandalized by the excessive modesty of the Vincentians. I censure them loudly. When are you going to introduce a canonization petition? She was an eminently saintly religious! If you won't do it, I will!"⁴

¹Joseph Dirvin, C.M., *St. Catherine Labouré of the Miraculous Medal* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1958) 104.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴René Laurentin, *Vie de Catherine Labouré* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1980); English translation by Paul Inwood: (London: Collins Co. 1983), 254.

Dirvin maintains that without this solitude in Catherine's life, it is questionable that she would have been able to live a life of sanctity.⁵ Catherine shows a naturally quiet, introverted temperament. The demands of being known as the favored one by Our Lady would place her in a position that would not allow privacy and hiddenness and this would have been intolerable to her nature. Even in Fain le Moutiers, Catherine concealed her time spent off the farm. Tonine, her sister, remarked that Catherine had become "a mystic" since her first communion.⁶ Her love was for the church at Fain le Moutiers, close to the Labouré farm. The church did not have a priest because of the French Revolution of 1789, and the village depended on a traveling priest. One of the traveling priests was Father Jean, who introduced Catherine to the needs of the rural poor around Fain le Moutiers.⁷ The Labouré family had paid for all the renovations in the church so that it was known as the "Labouré Chapel."⁸ She would take care of the church and the care of the linens. Catherine was astonishingly contemplative for a young age. She loved to take care of the church and visit Fain le Moutiers' rural poor.⁹ She was quiet from her earliest years and seemed to love obscurity, treasuring moments of solitude.

Laurentin and Dirvin both suggest in their accounts of her life that Our Lady protected her from the suffering of being placed in the limelight from the apparitions: "Though we have no evidence from Father Aladel that Our Lady imposed silence on the sister, we have a very definite statement from Catherine herself in the last months of her life. When she found herself bereft of her confessor in 1876, she said to Sister Jeanne Dufès, D.C., her superior: "Since I haven't much longer to live, I feel that the moment to speak out has come. But, as the Blessed Mother told me to speak only to my confessor, I shall say nothing to you until I have asked Our Lady's permission in prayer."¹⁰

The irony of Catherine's solitude was that it was also her greatest suffering in the continuous and strained refusals on the part of Father Jean Marie Aladel, C.M., Sister Dufès, and Father Jules Chinchon, C.M., to fulfill the requests of Blessed Mother through her. Catherine had to wait two years for the medal to be struck through the interven-

⁵Dirvin, *St. Catherine*, 105.

⁶Laurentin, *Vie*, 35.

⁷Josepha Wimbe, D.C., *Little Catherine of the Miraculous Medal* (New York: Benziger Bros.: 1937), 58.

⁸Laurentin, *Vie*, 33.

⁹Wimbe, *Little Catherine*, 60.

¹⁰Dirvin, *St. Catherine*, 106.

tion of Father Aladel and forty years for the statue of the Virgin with the globe (Virgo Potens).¹¹ Coste points out that because the statue of Virgo Potens was not cast as was the Miraculous Medal, there began an interior struggle for Catherine. She served the aged and infirm in Reuilly yet she wanted to bring to the world the Virgo Potens statue. Coste cites her humility in “waiting it out” as a lesson for other Daughters of Charity.¹² Nevertheless, both the striking of the Miraculous medal and the Virgo Potens statue had its price for the quiet Catherine.

Apparitions and the Medal

The apparitions were during the months of April to December 1830.¹³ In one apparition, Our Lady tells Catherine: “When the Rule is once again vigorously observed, there will be a Community which will come to join itself to yours. This is not normal, but I love this Community. Say that it should be accepted. God will bless the Community and it will enjoy great peace.”¹⁴ At this time, Mother Seton had requested that the Sisters of Charity in Emmitsburg, Maryland, join the Daughters of Charity in Paris, though the union was not formalized until 1850. Nevertheless, this request of Blessed Mother to Saint Catherine Labouré was granted. Another interesting side note is that on Trinity Sunday, 6 June 1830, Catherine Labouré was the “first saint in modern times to be vouchsafed a vision of Christ as King.”¹⁵ This vision seemed connected with the changes of established monarchies in the French Revolution of 1830 yet greatly signified the present-day devotion to the kingship of Christ.¹⁶ “Our Lord appeared to her robed as a king, with a cross at his breast, during the gospel of the mass. Suddenly, all his kingly ornaments fell from him to the ground—even the cross, which tumbled beneath his feet. Immediately, her thoughts and her heart fell. Too, she understood clearly that the change in government involved the person of the King, and that, just as Christ was divested of his royal trappings before her, so would Charles X be divested of his throne.”¹⁷

¹¹Laurentin, *Vie*, 280.

¹²Pierre Coste, *Les Filles de la Charité* (Paris: Descles de Brouwer, 1933), 70.

¹³Laurentin, *Vie*, 66.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁵Dirvin, *St. Catherine*, 77.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 75.

The vision of the Miraculous Medal was 27 November 1830¹⁸

Catherine was twenty four years old. She confided to Father Aladel the request of the Blessed Mother. Assigned to Reuilly in January 1831, several months went by and the medal was not made. Our Lady sent a message to Father Aladel: "A day will come when Father Aladel will do what I wish. He is my servant and he would fear to displease me."¹⁹

Dirvin points out that Father Aladel's task was made doubly difficult by Catherine's insistence that her identity remain secret. He alone was responsible for the task because he could not have her testify to a competent ecclesiastical tribunal. Aladel alone had to decide upon Catherine's character and reliability.²⁰ "In the formal inquiry into the origin of the medal held at Paris in 1836, Father Aladel testified that the very first time Catherine told him of the apparition of the Miraculous Medal, she extracted from him the promise that he would never reveal her name or identity in any way. No doubt it was a promise easily given, because at the time the priest put no credence in her visions. Catherine held him to it."²¹

After two years, Father Aladel went to the archbishop of Paris and the first 2,000 Miraculous Medals were made.

Virgo Potens Statue

Father Aladel seemed quite content with the success of the Miraculous Medal bringing great devotion to our Blessed Mother. Catherine attempted to speak with him in 1841 about the statue, even bringing a drawing of the apparition, but it did not materialize at that time. "For ten years, I have felt myself driven to tell you to have an altar erected to the Blessed Virgin on the spot where she appeared. Every indulgence will be granted. Ask, ask; everything you ask will be granted."²² Ironically, in 1840, Our Lady appeared to Sister Justine Bisqueyburu, to give her the Green Scapular and in 1846, appeared to another Daughter of Charity, Sister Appolline, for our Lord in His Passion, and the Red Scapular.²³ Father Aladel was instrumental in

¹⁸Laurentin, *Vie*, 79.

¹⁹Wimbey, *Little Catherine*, 123.

²⁰Dirvin, *St. Catherine*, 104.

²¹*Ibid.*, 105.

²²*Ibid.*, 160.

²³*Ibid.*, 164,165.

bringing both devotions of the Green and Red Scapulars in honor of Blessed Mother to the Church. The statue of Virgo Potens was delayed.

In 1860, Sister Jeanne Dufès came to Enghien as Sister Servant.²⁴ She was to be a source of trial and suffering for Catherine. "Sister Dufès was to prove the perfect wheel upon which every last vestige of self-love and self-will in Catherine and traces of both remained until the end was to be broken. From their first encounter, these two women felt a natural antipathy to each other. The basis of it lay in the fact that they were very much alike. Both were practical, competent women of irascible temperament."²⁵ Catherine could regain calm faster than Sister Dufès. Sister Dufès captures this, herself, when she says "She is as hot, or quick-tempered, as milk-soup. I do not know how she is able on an instant to capture such absolute calm."²⁶

In 1865, Father Aladel died. Catherine was to wait until 1876, the year of her death, to go to Sister Dufès and ask to see her confessor, Father Chinchon. One of the Daughters of Charity at Reuilly had testified: "Sometime between 1864 and 1873, Fr. Chinchon publicly humiliated Sr. Catherine. He told her off for wanting to pass off her dreams as reality and ridiculing an entire community. Sr. Catherine remained humble, quiet, in her place without replying nor showing any sign of discontent. It was very striking. Was he talking about the apparitions?"²⁷

It seemed that with failing health, time became precious for Catherine, and once again she was able to leave her solitude and try to bring to reality the Virgo Potens statue. Father Chinchon had been relieved of his duty as confessor at Reuilly to work with students and novices. Sister Dufès refused the request, but told Catherine she suspected she was the recipient of the Miraculous Medal. Catherine then prayed to Blessed Mother and afterwards revealed to Sister Dufès what was needed for the Virgo Potens statue. After consultation with major superiors, Sister Dufès did have the statue struck, but Catherine was disappointed in it. Four years after Catherine's death, Father Fiat, the new superior general, had a larger version made of the statue produced by Sister Dufès. "He put it on an altar erected on the spot indicated by Catherine."²⁸

²⁴Laurentin, *Vie*, 139.

²⁵Dirvin, *St. Catherine*, 189,190.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Laurentin, *Vie*, 210.

²⁸Ibid., 216.

Thus, the mission that Blessed Mother gave Catherine, paradoxically, had her leave the solitude that fostered her asceticism, at certain critical moments in her life, in order to bring marian devotion to the Church.

