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Pierre Coste and Catherine Labouré: The Conflict of Historical Criticism and Popular Devotion

By Stafford Poole, C.M.

Since its first appearance in June 1832, the Medal of the Immaculate Conception, popularly known as the Miraculous Medal, has spread so widely and rapidly that it has become one of the most popular Marian devotions in the Catholic Church. At first nothing was known of its origins. Beginning in 1834 more and more information emerged, specifically, that the medal came about through a series of visions and revelations to a novice sister of the Daughters of Charity some time in 1830. Though the identity of the visionary became something of an open secret among the Daughters of Charity of France, it was not until 1876 that she was officially revealed to be Sister Catherine Labouré.

Catherine Labouré was born at Fain-les-Moutiers, Burgundy, France, on 2 May 1806. She was the ninth of the ten surviving children of Pierre Labouré, a well-to-do farmer, and Madeleine Louise Gontard. Though baptized Catherine, she was usually called Zoé after the saint on whose feast she had been born. Her mother died in 1815, and after spending 1815-1818 with relatives, Zoé began to manage the household for her father and siblings at the age of twelve. She had no formal education and was illiterate until the age of twenty-one or twenty-two. As a result, though her handwriting was graceful, her spelling remained haphazard and phonetic throughout her life. Intensely devout, she had an early desire to enter the religious life. To discourage this inclination, her father sent her in 1828 to work as a waitress in his brother's café in Paris. From there she fled to relatives in Châtillon-sur-Seine.

The most complete work on Catherine Labouré is Vie de Catherine Laboure Voyante de la rue du Bac et servante des pauvres 1806-1876, par R. Laurentin. Avec une equipe de Filles de la Charite et le concours de Dom Bernard Billet, 2 vols. (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1980), vol. 1, Récit, vol. 2, Preuves. Unfortunately, both volumes share the flaws and inconsistencies that characterize a work written by committee. For biographical data on Catherine, see Joseph J. Dirvin, C.M., St. Catherine Laboure of the Miraculous Medal (Garden City, New York: Echo Books, 1958); and René Laurentin, Vie de Catherine Labouré (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1980). Both books are hagiographical in nature and are written in an inflated, pietistic style. Laurentin’s Vie is an edited version of the Récit. The Laurentin work has no index, though it has footnote numbers that refer to the Preuves. The Dirvin book lacks footnotes for direct quotations. The documentation on the life and beatification of Catherine Labouré has been published in R. Laurentin - P. Roche, C.M., Catherine Laboure et la Medaille Miraculeuse (Paris: P. Lethielleux, 1976); and in René Laurentin, Catherine Laboure et la Medaille Miraculeuse 2. Procès de Catherine (1877-1900) (Paris: P. Lethielleux, 1979).

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2 Laurentin, Vie, 9, 12; Récit, 19-20; Preuves, notes 27-28, pages 39-44. Dirvin gives the dates as 1816-1817 (St. Catherine Laboure, 28).
Jean-Marie Aladel, C.M., initiated the striking of the Miraculous Medal, and authored *Notice Historique*, the popular account of Catherine’s vision. 
*Image courtesy of the collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute, Chicago, IL*

Partly in response to a dream she had experienced some years earlier in which Saint Vincent de Paul had told her that God had plans for her, she entered the Company of the Daughters of Charity, 22 January 1830, taking the name of Catherine. On 21 April she entered the seminary (the equivalent of a novitiate in religious communities) of the Daughters in Paris and almost at once began to experience visions, among which was that of the Miraculous Medal. In January 1831 she was sent to the Hospice d’Enghien, at Reuilly, in the environs of Paris, and died there on 31 December 1876. She was beatified by Pope Pius XI on 28 May 1933 and canonized by Pius XII on 27 July 1947.

Devotion to and popularization of the medal has been, in a special way, the work of the Congregation of the Mission (Vincentian Community) and the Company of the Daughters of Charity, which are often called the Double Family of Saint Vincent de Paul. It is surprising, then, to realize that one of the greatest Vincentian scholars and historians, Pierre Coste, challenged the veracity of Catherine’s visions and actively sought to prevent her beatification. *For an illustration of Coste, please*
The priest, who edited and published the monumental collection of Vincent de Paul’s writings and conferences, and who wrote the most comprehensive and magisterial biography of the saint believed that the medal, an acceptable devotion in itself, had its origins in a deluded mind.

Pierre Coste was born on 3 February 1873 at Tartas, not far from Dax, in Saint Vincent’s own homeland. Orphaned at an early age, he was received into the Congregation of the Mission at Dax in 1889, but because of poor health did not take his vows until 1895. He was so frail, in fact, that at the time of his ordination to the subdiaconate the house treasurer saw no point in spending money on a new breviary for him because he might soon die—a story that Coste himself enjoyed telling. After completing his studies at Dax, he was ordained to the priesthood in 1896. He remained at Dax where he taught scripture, dogma, and history, although he was largely self-taught in these areas. He had a distinct flair for history and soon became skilled in research and archival methods, although there are indications that he lacked a good general background. In 1909 he was named archivist of the motherhouse of the Congregation of the Mission in Paris and in 1927 secretary general. He died at Paris in 1935 after a long and painful illness.

Antoine Redier described Coste as a man of frail health, “his body a little stooped, his voice musical, with the pious intonation of a man of the Church, a look full of friendship, with wide and mischievous lips and dandruff on his shoulders.” He was frequently to be observed strolling along the Rue de Sèvres or the Boulevard Raspail, so lost in thought that “it was necessary to touch him in order that his spirit might come back to the sidewalk from the regions where it had been rummaging.”

Coste’s critical and historical mentality created a conflict for him. In the aftermath of the Modernist crisis at the beginning of the twentieth century, and in an atmosphere unfavorable to criticism of accepted practices, he found it necessary to dissemble. On at least two major questions, the veracity of Vincent de Paul’s captivity in Tunisia in 1605-1607 and the reality of Catherine Labouré’s visions, he held one position...
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in public and another in private.

Coste’s first experience with the difficulties involved in revisionist history centered on the year of Vincent de Paul’s birth. Coste’s research convinced him that the year 1576 given by Vincent’s biographers, and universally accepted, was erroneous and most probably a fabrication designed to avoid an obstacle to his beatification. In 1911 he published an article in which he used the saint’s own words to calculate his birthdate as 1581. The article was published without the permission of his superiors and caused a shocked reaction in some areas of the Vincentian Community. It also proved to be a hindrance to Coste’s great project of publishing all the documents by or about Saint Vincent de Paul.

After his appointment as archivist, Coste set about preparing a critical edition of Saint Vincent’s correspondence, which was announced in the 1911 volume of the Annales de la Congrégation de la Mission. Much of the saint’s correspondence, and many documents dealing with his life, were in the archive of the Vincentian motherhouse in Paris, but some were also scattered throughout other libraries and repositories. Coste began the laborious task of locating and cataloguing this material with the intention of publishing all the known papers by or about Saint Vincent. He immediately ran into an unwritten law: anything concerning Vincent de Paul was considered to be sacred territory, the private preserve of the Double Family. The outbreak of the first World War caused further delays. Complaints were made about spending so much money in wartime on a work of pure scholarship.

Because of the unwritten law and Coste’s revisionist tendencies, Father Émile Villette, superior general from 1914 to 1916, did not feel that he had the authority to permit publication, a permission that, he believed, could be given only by a general assembly. His successor, Alfred Louwyck, vicar general 1917-1918, did not live long enough to become involved in the question. In 1919, however, François Verdier, who had been vicar general 1918-1919, was elected superior general and gave permission to proceed with the publication, though there was still opposition from within the Community. The result was that


\footnote{6 I wish to thank Father Gerard van Wijnen, C.M., of Panningen, The Netherlands, for information on this aspect of Coste’s life.

\footnote{7 Redier, “Pêchés de jeunesse de M. Vincent,” 188.}
Antoine Fiat, C.M., superior general of the Congregation of the Mission. At Fiat’s request, Pope Leo XIII approved the first liturgical observance of the vision, the feast of the Virgin Mary of the Miraculous Medal, celebrated 27 November.

Portrait. Image courtesy of the collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute, Chicago, IL.

from 1920 to 1926 Coste published the fourteen volumes of his monumental *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondance, entretiens, documents*, which became the documentary basis for his classic biography *Monsieur Vincent*.8 Both were groundbreaking, even revolutionary works.

In his biography of Saint Vincent, Coste rejected some of the most cherished stories of the saint’s life, such as his taking the place of a galley slave or wandering the streets of Paris at night in search of foundlings. With regard to Saint Vincent’s supposed captivity in Tunis, however, he equivocated. In private conversations with Antoine Redier, he expressed his skepticism about the account, or, more precisely, his conviction that it was not true.9 Shortly before his death he wrote a letter, published anonymously, in which he offered a detailed critique of some aspects of Vincent’s account.10 Yet, when reviewing Redier’s biography of Saint Vincent for the *Annales*, Coste took the author to task for embracing some

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of his own ideas. Rather naturally upset over this, Redier wrote to Coste who replied that his own forthcoming biography would relate the story of the captivity as Vincent had told it and then cite some of the difficulties involved. He added, “It is all that I can do if I want to be given permission to publish it and to have it accepted in my own community [milieu]. It is good not to shock delicate and tender sensibilities in areas where truth provokes a certain scandal. I know my surroundings [entourage] and the state of mind of the sisters and very many of the priests and I was sure that your book would find criticism in that quarter.”

When he wrote his own biography of the saint, he defended the traditional story, which he did not believe, and gave a somewhat garbled defense of its veracity.

There exist several versions of the treatise in which Pierre Coste expressed his criticisms of Catherine Labouré’s visions and prophecies. This study makes use of two, both of them in the archive of the Motherhouse of the Congregation of the Mission in Paris. The first is the Cahier d’une étude critique de P. Coste, thirty-four typewritten and hand-woven pages, which, because of its references to Catherine as blessed and to the fact of her beatification, is to be dated after 1933. The other is Les apparitions de la Médaille Miraculeuse (2e édition), fifty typewritten pages. It is undated but is clearly later than the Cahier since many of the handwritten additions and notes in the Cahier have been incorporated into the typewritten text. It is also longer, more detailed, and more complete than the Cahier. The greater part of both documents consists of quotations from the sources, followed by brief criticisms. Despite the shock caused by his critique, his observations are sober and not at all inflammatory.

This study will examine Coste’s rejection of the visions and his opposition to the beatification of Catherine Labouré, which are classic examples of the tension that can exist between the demands of a dispassionate historical criticism and those of popular devotion. It will do so by following Coste’s own plan, that is, by tracing in chronological order the publications and testimonies of the visions, each of which will be followed by Coste’s criticisms and analyses.

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13 Life and Works, 1:40, n. 24.
The Beginnings of the Medal

Some time before June 1832 Jean-Marie Aladel, a priest of the Congregation of the Mission and assistant to Father François Richenet, the director of the Daughters of Charity, had an interview with Hyacinthe-Louis de Quélen, the archbishop of Paris. During the course of the conversation Aladel asked the archbishop's permission to have a medal struck. The design was that which is found today on the Miraculous Medal. Aladel later testified that he told the prelate the origins of the design. Though it seems logical that the archbishop would have instituted some kind of inquiry before giving permission for it, his response was that "it offered nothing in opposition to the law of the Church; rather, it was all very much in agreement with the piety of the faithful toward the Very Holy Virgin and thus it could only contribute to having her honored."15

There was some delay between Quélen's approval and the appearance of the medal, which was first struck on 30 June 1832. Aladel later attributed this to the cholera epidemic that broke out in Paris in March 1832, though that epidemic was still virulent at the end of June. The medal was made by Adrien-Maximilien Vachette, a jeweler. As of that time it seems that no one but Aladel and Jean-Baptiste Étienne, the procurator general of the Vincentian Community who had accompanied Aladel to see the archbishop, and probably the archbishop himself, knew the origin of the medal's design.16

14 Aladel was born 4 May 1800 at Ternes, near Saint Flour. After attending college at Saint Flour and spending two years in the diocesan seminary, he entered the Vincentian Community at Paris on 12 November 1821. He was ordained in 1824 and sent to teach philosophy at the seminary of Amiens. In 1828 he was recalled to Paris to take up duties as confessor and retreat master for the Daughters of Charity. On 21 November 1846, Aladel was named director general of the Daughters of Charity. He held this position until his death in 1865. Dirvin has a rather harsh verdict on his personality: "The best general impression of him is that he was one of those men who are hard on themselves and on everyone else. Certainly Sister Labouré had much to suffer at his hands; there is sworn testimony that she often approached his confessional in a fit of trembling. He was cold and aloof by temperament. . . . It must be admitted that Father Aladel leaves one with an impression of impersonality that at times approaches ruthlessness" (St. Catherine Labouré, 80). It should be remembered, however, that Dirvin was writing from Catherine's perspective as a hagiographer and hence might have lacked sympathy for what Aladel had to endure from Sister Catherine.

15 Laurentin - Roche, Catherine Labouré, 220.

16 Étienne testified that Aladel told him about the visions toward the end of September 1830. See Laurentin - Roche, Catherine Labouré, 240. 264; [Costel, "La Médaille Miraculeuse," Annales de la Congrégation de la Mission 95:1 (1930): 464-65. Aladel himself never mentioned this fact. In his testimony to the canonical inquiry of 1836 he said that after the third vision he was "the only one who had knowledge of the vision, since it was certain that she had not spoken to any other person" (Laurentin - Roche, Catherine Labouré, 237). Laurentin says that the two also "submitted the case to Monsieur [Dominique] Salbouagne, the superior general, who did not show himself in any way unfavorable" (Récit, 102). He gives as his source "no. 626, p. 33," referring to the papers of Catherine's beatification. Unfortunately, I have been unable to verify this citation. It is not included either in the Preuves, or the Laurentin - Roche, Catherine Labouré. This assertion contradicts Aladel's own statements about who knew of the medal's origin.
The first documentary account of the visions that gave rise to the medal came in 1833. On 3 August of that year a French Vincentian, Charles-François Lamboley, wrote an account of them to the Vincentian Community in Spain. Lamboley (1763-1847) had gone into exile in Spain at the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 and did not return to France until about 1812. He spoke Spanish well and was acquainted with his confreres in that country. His letter was written on 3 August, and its primary recipient may have been Father Buenaventura Codina, C.M., the visitor (provincial superior) of Spain and later bishop of the Canary Islands. At least there is a codicil to the letter with Codina’s name. There is no indication where Lamboley obtained his information. It may have come from Aladel, or it may have been in circulation among the French Vincentians. It does not reflect first-hand knowledge, since the chronology is vague and there are some minor errors or lacunae.

Lamboley spoke of two visions to a “person.” The first was of the heart of Saint Vincent de Paul, which appeared above the urn contain-
ing his relics during the octave of the saint’s feast, which at that time was observed on 19 July. The person saw the vision every day, except two, when visiting the relics. The person (whose gender was not identified) heard a voice saying that “the heart of Saint Vincent is deeply afflicted at the sight of the evils that were going to befall France.” On the last day of the octave the message was that “Saint Vincent is somewhat consoled because he has obtained through the intercession of the Most Holy Virgin that in the midst of the great evils, the double family will not perish.”

On that last day the person communicated the vision to his/her director, who did not take it seriously, thinking that it was a delusion. With the outbreak of the revolution of July 1830, which overthrew Charles X and replaced him with Louis Philippe, he gave more credence.

At the beginning of 1831 the same person had another vision during prayer. It was a tableau in which the Virgin had her arms extended, in the style of representations of the Immaculate Conception, with rays of an extraordinary splendor coming from her hands. An interior voice told the visionary that these were a symbol of God’s grace that would be obtained for people. Around the picture was the inscription, “O Mary conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to you.” The picture then turned around and the visionary saw the other side of the medal as it is now known. The vision was reported to the person’s director, who considered it a pious imagination and contented himself with recommending further devotion to the Mother of God. Some months later the person had the same vision and reported it to the director, with the same results. Six or seven months after that the vision was repeated again, but this time the Virgin expressed her discontent with the director for not carrying out her will. Thereupon the director, with the consent of the archbishop, had the medal struck. Since that time there had been numerous healings and conversions attributed to the medal.

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18 Laurentin, Vie, 44; Dirvin, St. Catherine Labouré, 75. Immediately after these words Dirvin adds the prophecy that “God would make use of them to reanimate the Faith,” but gives no source. They are not to be found in Aladel’s Notice nor in any of Catherine’s own testimonies. They appear in the caption to Lecerf’s painting of the vision of the heart of Saint Vincent (see Laurentin - Roche, Catherine Labouré, 231). They were also referred to in the “Act by which the Congregation of the Mission renews the Consecration of itself to the Blessed Virgin on the Festival of Her Immaculate Conception,” decreed by the general assembly of 1843 and probably written by Etienne. “Our little Company . . . had disappeared amid the disasters of a most frightful revolution; . . . its scattered members mourned in exile over its woes, thou hast gathered them together, that they might build up with their aged hands the house of their Father, and catch a glimpse when dying, of the new glories that were one day to surround the Company. They were filled with joy to hear the mysterious words, ‘that God would make use of the family of St. Vincent to re-animate the Faith.’”

19 On the problem of dates in this account, see Laurentin - Roche, Catherine Labouré, 188, n. 3.
This, then, was the first account of the origin of the Miraculous Medal. Some of the data, especially the date given for the vision of the medal, are not in agreement with what became known later on. Again this may have been due to the lack of direct or personal knowledge on Lamboley’s part, though at the time of writing he lived in the same house as Aladel. On 21 November 1833 Lamboley wrote a second letter, describing the cure of Father Joseph Boullanger, assistant general of the Congregation of the Mission. 20 This, however, did not contain any description of the visions.

In dealing with this first known account of the apparitions, Coste raised some questions that he admitted “it would be difficult to answer.” 21 Was the account written by Lamboley or was it a translation of one by Aladel? Was it spread among the Spanish Vincentians, or did it exist in only one copy? Coste’s only serious criticism of the account was that it gave the wrong location for Archbishop Quélen’s hiding place during the revolution of 1830.

Le Guillou’s Account of 1834

The next published description of the vision was found in a work by Corentin-Marie Le Guillou entitled Mois de Marie avec nouvelles prières (April 1834). 22 Le Guillou (1804-1890) was a professor of literature and mathematics at the seminary of Quimper at that time. In this work he reproduced a letter from Aladel, dated 17 March 1834, in which he said that the visions occurred toward the end of 1830. He also spoke of the vision of the medal as a picture (tableau) of the Virgin under the title of the Immaculate Conception. His account was similar to Lamboley’s, except that in his letter Aladel added that the visionary heard a voice that said “a medal on this model must be struck and the persons who will wear it will be granted indulgences and those who will recite with piety this little prayer will enjoy an altogether special protection of the Mother of God.” 23 Aladel did not take the vision seriously and simply encouraged the person to greater devotion to Mary. About six months later, according to Aladel, the same person had the same vision and he reacted as before. Finally, six months after that, the person had the vi-

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20 Ibid., 194-96.
21 Coste, Les Apparitions, 4. He did not deal with Lamboley’s letter in the Cahier.
22 According to Dirvin this work was written at the direction of Archbishop Quélen (St. Catherine Labouré, 122).
23 Laurentin - Roche, Catherine Labouré, 200.
sion for the third time, in which Mary expressed her discontent that nothing had been done about the medal. “That made me feel a certain fear of displeasing her who loves to be called the Refuge of Sinners.”

It was then that Aladel sought Quélen’s permission to have the medal struck.

In a later edition of his work, September 1834, in a note to Aladel’s letter, Le Guillou added that the person was “Sister N. . . . novice in one of the communities in Paris dedicated to the service of the poor.”

Coste did not direct any specific comments to Le Guillou’s account.

**Aladel’s Notice Historique, 1834**

The most important published account came from Aladel himself. He wrote a manuscript for his first published work which is in the archive of the Congregation of the Mission in Paris. The manuscript contains the basic story of the visions. However, the visionary is identified as a novice “in a nursing community in Paris.”

On 20 August 1834 this was published anonymously as *Notice Historique sur l’origine et les effets d’une nouvelle médaille en l’honneur de l’Immaculée Conception de la Très Sainte Vierge et généralement connue sous le nom de Médaille Miraculeuse, par M. —*. Ten thousand copies were printed. The work was immediately popular and went through eight editions. His account was the same as the one that he wrote to Le Guillou, and the sister was again identified as belonging to one of the communities dedicated to the service of the poor. He also told the story that one day the sister was reflecting on whether there should be some words on the back of the medal to balance those on the front, and an interior voice told her that the two hearts, the letter M, and the cross said enough to the Christian heart. Part of Aladel’s *Notice* consists of an account of cures. The second edition of Aladel’s work came out in the following October and a third in November.

Coste found what he considered to be an important variation in Aladel’s accounts. In 1842 Aladel replaced the vague dating of the vision of the medal, “toward the end of the year 1830,” with the more

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24 Ibid., 201.
25 Ibid., 199, n. 1.
26 Ibid., 211.
28 In the eighth edition of 1842 he finally identified the visionary as a novice of the Daughters of Charity (Laurentin - Roche, *Catherine Labouré*, 218).
29 Ibid., 221.
precise “during the course of the month of September 1830” -- not 27 November, which later became the accepted date. Aladel repeated this account in the 1836 canonical inquiry, though Coste mistakenly said that it was done under oath. However, he regarded Aladel’s account as having “all the value of an autograph account of Sister Catherine herself, in the aftermath of the apparitions, when her memories were still totally fresh.” Coste was at pains to point out that in Aladel’s accounts what appeared to Catherine was a tableau, not the Virgin herself. Also, Aladel’s account never mentioned the vision of the Virgin holding a globe at stomach level, which Catherine later claimed was what she saw.

The Canonical Inquiry of 1836

The popularity of the medal, and the increasing knowledge of the visions that were believed to support it, made it necessary to investigate the entire matter. In 1835 there was an attempt to have the visionary give testimony, but she refused. Very little is known about this. Perhaps at the prompting of Aladel and Étienne, Archbishop Quélen decided to institute a formal inquiry in 1836. The original initiative for this may have come from Aladel and Étienne, who on 11 February sent him an account of the apparitions. The next day the archbishop established a canonical inquiry (enquête canonique) which had nineteen meetings between 16 February and 13 July. The inquiry was carried out by Canon Pierre Quentin (1766-1847), the vicar general. There is no evidence of any other members of the inquiry, except Quentin. He took all the testimonies personally, which only he and the witnesses signed, and though the witnesses “promised” to tell the truth, there is no indication that he administered an oath. There were no other officials or witnesses present for the interviews, nor did he have a secretary or notary with him. Quentin questioned the witnesses about the spread of the medal and its effects, such as healings and conversions.

On 16 February Quentin went to the Vincentian motherhouse to question Aladel. Aladel said that the young sister who had undergone the vision had authorized him to speak but only on condition that her

30 Coste, Les Apparitions, 5.
31 Dirvin says that the canonical inquiry was the result of Le Guillou’s favorable account of the origin of the medal, but he gives no source for this claim, which is not to be found in other documentation (St. Catherine Labouré, 122).
identity not become known. He said that the sister was about twenty-two years of age, that she was from the country, had only a basic education, had been in the seminary about six months at the time of the vision, and that there was nothing outstanding or extraordinary about her devotion. Asked how many times the vision had appeared, Aladel said that “the sister spoke to him three times at two separate periods when she had had this vision, and that he thought that this vision had taken place several other times.”

Asked why there was such a delay in striking the medal, Aladel answered that it was because of his own initial skepticism. He did not mention the cholera. He also said that he told the archbishop about the three visions. Why did the sister wish to remain incognito? Because of her deep humility.

Q. Do you believe that this sister has an invincible repugnance to personally making the declaration to ecclesiastical authority about what concerns the origin of the medal?

A. Yes, because she had been asked more than a year ago to appear before the authority for the purpose of making this declaration which she had refused, but that now, this sister recalls almost no circumstance of the vision and that as a result every attempt to obtain information would be completely useless.

Aladel gave a second deposition on 18 March 1836. Quentin asked him again why the striking of the medal had been delayed, and Aladel repeated his former answer, again without reference to the cholera.

On 19 February Étienne testified that he had learned of the visions from Aladel in September 1830. The latter had told him that a young seminary sister (novice) had told him (Aladel) during spiritual direction that she had had a vision in which the Virgin appeared to her in a tableau. Étienne described the visions as Aladel had. There was one minor difference, that is, that when “the Virgin had told her to have a medal struck,” it was not an interior voice. Otherwise his description is identical to that of Aladel. The Virgin pointed out to the sister that part of the globe where the rays of light fell in the greatest abundance,

32 Laurentin - Roche, *Catherine Labouré*, 235.
33 Ibid., 236.
34 Ibid., 237-38.
Catherine Labouré, D.C. (1806-1876), a novice at the time of her visions in 1830 which inspired the creation of the Miraculous Medal, and ultimately her canonization in 1947, whose story remains shrouded in controversy.

Portrait. Image courtesy of the collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute, Chicago, IL.

saying to her, “These rays are the symbol of the graces that will flow by my hand on the earth and that place where they fall in greatest abundance is France.”35 Aladel had also mentioned France in his testimony.

Asked if he knew the sister or her name, Étienne replied that Aladel had never mentioned it. Étienne said Aladel had spoken of the sister as pious, simple in her ways and in her devotion, whose life was pure and marked by a special devotion to the Virgin, and whose imagination was calm and not given to extravagance. Étienne said that this vision had been repeated “often.” He had accompanied Aladel to see the archbishop, who observed to them that “since the subject offered nothing contrary to faith or morals and since he was naturally inclined to favor devotion to the Holy Virgin, he did not see that, without making any prejudgment about the nature of the vision, there was anything to prevent the striking of the medal, that one would see by its results what one should think of it.”36

Coste asserted that Aladel and Étienne had made their accounts agree totally with the former’s Notice historique, and the inquiry re-

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36 Ibid.
peated their accounts without a trace of variation.\textsuperscript{37} Étienne, of course, had no personal, first hand knowledge of the visions. His testimony was simply a repetition of what Aladel had told him. Hence, with regard to the visions and visionary, Aladel was the only witness in the inquiry.

Toward the end of 1836 Quentin submitted a summary report of his findings.\textsuperscript{38} A key question was that of the visionary’s failure to testify.

Without any doubt, for the integrity of the inquiry, the ecclesiastical authority should have received the details of the vision from the very mouth of the young sister; in this way it should have been informed of all the circumstances of the apparition of the tableau; finally, the fidelity and the truth of her account should have been assured and guaranteed by her oath. But for reasons that the promotor [Quentin] could not permit himself to go into, since God has his designs in all things, a very essential formality and condition could not be fulfilled in this inquiry.\textsuperscript{39}

This is a strange assertion. Quentin admits failing to carry out an essential formality and alleges reasons he cannot disclose. This in itself is sufficient to call into question the reliability of the entire proceedings.

Quentin cited a number of factors in Catherine’s failure to testify. First was the solemn promise she had exacted from Aladel never to divulge her identity, and the fact that she had not spoken of the visions to anyone but Aladel. He tried energetically to get her to testify but she had such repugnance that she consistently refused. Then there was the fact of her amnesia, which Quentin considered to be surprising. As a result Quentin had to be content with the testimonies that he received from Aladel.

Quentin concluded that the apparitions had objective reality. The good faith of the sister herself could not be suspect, at least according

\textsuperscript{37} Cahier, handwritten on the back of page 3; Les Apparitions, 7.
\textsuperscript{38} It can be found in abbreviated form in Laurentin - Roche, Catherine Labouré, 261-73; and in full in [Coste], “La Médaille Miraculeuse,” 453-90. Again, there is no indication of participation by anyone other than Quentin.
\textsuperscript{39} Laurentin - Roche, Catherine Labouré, 264-65; [Coste], “La Médaille Miraculeuse,” 465.
to Aladel’s deposition. From the first moment that he heard about the visions, Aladel had closely studied the sister’s character and manner. He testified that he saw in her “a great simplicity in manners, a coldness in her appearance, apathy in her character, neither liveliness nor feverishness in her imagination.” Quentin considered it highly improbable that a simple peasant girl who had only an ordinary education could have devised the design of the medal and formulated the invocation. At the very least, all duplicity and deceit had to be ruled out. Aladel’s character and reputation also eliminated the possibility that he could deceive or be deceived. “In this matter the conduct of Monsieur Aladel has been wise, prudent, and thoughtful.”

The opinion has been expressed that the vision could not have been imaginary or a fantasy, having been repeated many times during seventeen to eighteen months; that it was not the result either of a dream or the product of a heated imagination, having taken place during the day, during prayer or the mass; finally, it has been asserted in the same way that any thought of pride, vanity, self-love, that any project of ambition and that any view of human interest could not have intervened in the account of the vision, in view of the absolute ignorance in which the sister who was favored with it has wished to remain.

On the other hand, referring to Catherine’s amnesia, Quentin called it “a surprising thing” [chose étonnante]. Finally, he said that heaven seemed to have confirmed the vision by means of miracles.

Despite Quentin’s favorable view the matter did not go any further. The archbishop never gave a decision or judgment on the visions or the medal. The primary reason for this was, first of all, the steadfast refusal of the visionary to appear before the inquiry. The reason that Aladel gave to the commission was the sister’s loss of memory. Joseph Dirvin, C.M., gave a hyperbolic evaluation of Quentin’s report: “The findings of the Canonical Inquiry of Paris completely vindicated Catherine. The court extolled her character and virtue, and placed

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40 Laurentin - Roche, Catherine Labouré, 267; [Coste], “La Médaille Miraculeuse,” 472.
41 Laurentin - Roche, Catherine Labouré, 269; [Coste], “La Médaille Miraculeuse,” 475.
42 Laurentin - Roche, Catherine Labouré, 273; [Coste], “La Médaille Miraculeuse,” 489-90.
43 Laurentin - Roche, Catherine Labouré, 265; [Coste], “La Médaille Miraculeuse,” 466.
wholehearted credence in her visions. Two important conclusions were reached: that the Medal was of supernatural origin, and that the wonders worked through it were genuine.

While technically this is true, it must also be kept in mind that the "court" consisted of one person, that it never had a chance to address Catherine face to face, and that all of its knowledge of her "character and virtue" came from Aladel's testimony. The inquiry did not, as Dirvin asserted, give "solemn ecclesiastical approbation" to the Miraculous Medal, since that was the prerogative of the archbishop, not the court. Archbishop Quélen never issued a verdict and nothing ever came of the inquiry.

For Coste one of the key questions asked by Quentin was the number of visions that the sister had. Aladel replied that "the sister spoke of them to him three times on the different occasions when she had had this vision and he believed that this vision had taken place many other times." Coste found special significance in the fact that Catherine herself was not called to testify. "In not obliging Sister Catherine to appear, if necessary under threat of excommunication, Canon Quentin made a mistake. . . . No civil tribunal would leave aside the principal witness in a matter under judgment."

Coste, of course, was skeptical of the claim of amnesia. He pointed out that while Quentin, in his draft report, was favorable to the apparitions, the archbishop never made any pronouncement, though he had ample time to do so before his death. As will be mentioned below, Cardinal Gaetano Masella, the prefect of the Congregation of Rites who was principally responsible for the introduction of Catherine's cause, considered the canonical inquiry to be both irregular and worthless.

44 Dirvin, St. Catherine Labouré, 124. See a similar statement in his article in the New Catholic Encyclopedia, s.v. "Labouré, Saint Catherine."

45 According to Dirvin, Catherine's cause was languishing in 1931 when Father Quentin (not the one who conducted the inquiry of 1836), the relator of the Historical Section of the Congregation of Rites, "was somewhat anxious. Only three days before the second preparatory Congregation, held on March 17, 1931, his attention was suddenly drawn to the canonical inquiry made in 1836, by order of the Archbishop of Paris, Msgr. de Quélen -- a document of the first importance and inexhaustible source of information about Sister Catherine. He worked night and day, preparing the results of this great 'find,' overcame all opposition, and obtained by unanimous vote the triumph of the Cause of the Immaculate Conception" (Dirvin, St. Catherine Labouré, 227). Dirvin exaggerated both the oblivion into which the inquiry had fallen, and its importance. At the time that the first request for a feast for the Miraculous Medal was made, Cardinal Gaetano Masella, the prefect of the Congregation of Rites, wrote on 19 August 1894 that "if the process at Paris had been regular, one could have said, as for Lourdes, In festo apparitionis [on the feast of the apparition] rather than "manifestation." See Rene Laurentin, Procès de Catherine (1877-1900) (Paris: P. Lethielleux, 1979). 33. Masella considered the inquiry worthless as evidence, and somewhat unfairly blamed Aladel for the fact that it took place six years after the vision of the medal.

46 Coste, Les Apparitions, 8.

The First Accounts by Catherine Herself, c. 1841

Up to this point all the known accounts of the apparitions had come through Aladel. There was nothing in writing from the sister who claimed to have had the visions. There are, however, three documents in the hand of Sister Catherine Labouré that appear to date from the year 1841. One of these documents is a brief note about a request for an altar to be erected on the precise spot where the Virgin appeared. The other two describe one vision, that of the medal, but a form of the medal different from that which is known today.

The Document of 15 August

The first account begins “Today is the day of the Assumption of the very Holy Virgin Mary.” It continues “On Saturday, the vigil of the first Sunday of Advent, the day that our good Mother Marthe gave us such a beautiful instruction on devotion to the saints and to the Holy Virgin, which gave me such a great desire to see the Holy Virgin that I thought that she would grant me this grace. But I had the conviction that I would see the beautiful one at her most beautiful, I lived in this hope.”

At 5:30 P.M., that same day at the hour of prayer, after the point of meditation, in a profound silence, she thought she heard a sound like the rustling of a silk dress. It came from the side of the tribune. Looking over there, she saw the Virgin next to the table at the tableau of Saint Joseph. She had a white globe beneath her feet. She was dressed in white and was of medium height. Her dress was golden white [blanche aurore] silk. She had a white veil on her head that reached on both sides to her feet. At the level of her stomach she held a globe which represented the entire earth. Her fingers were filled with rings, from which rays spread out on all sides, so that Catherine was no longer able to see the Virgin’s feet. As Catherine watched, an inner voice said, “These rays are the symbol of the graces that the Holy Virgin grants to

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48 On the question of dating, and the tentative nature of any conclusions, see Laurentin - Roche, Catherine Labouré, 287-90.
49 According to Dirvin, Catherine sent Aladel a note in 1841, saying “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,” but he gives no source for it (Dirvin, St. Catherine Labouré, 163). See also Laurentin, Vie, 147. The altar was not erected until after her death.
50 Laurentin - Roche, Catherine Labouré, 290.
51 Ibid., 291.
persons who ask them of her.”52 The tableau turned and she saw the other side, which then disappeared.

A third time the Virgin appeared, but the sister did not note the time. She went on to request the erection of an altar at the precise spot where the Virgin had appeared. Though she referred to the vision as a “tableau,” she also spoke of it as a moving rather than static thing. In this account, as in the one that follows, she gave a later date for the visions than did Aladel, that is, the vigil of the first Sunday of Advent.

The Second Account

This account is substantially the same as the previous one, except for one important point: the sister specified 27 November as the vigil of the first Sunday of Advent. There were other variations. One was that the Virgin lowered her eyes to look at the sister, the first move away from the static tableau of the previous accounts. A voice said to her, “This globe that you see represents the entire world, especially France, and each person in particular.”53 Unlike the other account, this contained the command to have the medal struck. Then the sister went on to request the erection of the altar.

Aladel did not include any of this in the eighth edition of his Notice (1842). Perhaps he did not want to change the date of the vision or was embarrassed by it. Perhaps also these accounts were received too late, or even after the publication of the eighth edition, since dating the accounts is so difficult. It was in this eighth edition that Aladel first mentioned that the ravages of the cholera had made increased demands on his ministry and so delayed the striking of the medal.

Coste quoted Sister Catherine’s accounts at great length and pointed out the inconsistencies. He believed that Aladel was either embarrassed by the 1841 account of the Virgin with the globe or did not believe it. Similarly Aladel did not include the date of 27 November, now accepted as the date of the apparitions and also the feast day of the Miraculous Medal, in any of the later editions of the Notice historique. Coste ridiculed the assertion of Father Jules Chevalier in his deposition for the beatification process, that “Monsieur Aladel places the vision in the month of September 1830, whereas it took place on 27 November of the same year. This can be explained because M. Aladel would probably have reported

52 Ibid., 294.
53 Ibid., 294-95.
things from memory." Coste called that "a sad explanation." Finally, it should be noted that the "amnesia" of 1836 had been cured.

The Vision of the Cross, 1848

In 1848 Catherine wrote to Aladel with an account of a vision which, she said, she was telling him "for the third time." A cross covered with a black veil appeared in the air, traveled over Paris, and caused terror. It was carried by men with angry faces, who suddenly stopped before the cathedral of Notre Dame, let the cross fall in the mud, and seized by fear fled as fast as they could. Then an outstretched arm appeared which, with a finger, pointed to blood, and a voice made itself heard, "blood flows, the innocent one dies, the pastor gives his life for his sheep." This may refer to incidents connected with the sacking of the Tuileries palace during the revolution of 1848, as Coste suggested. Louis-Philippe abdicated 24 February 1848. The archbishop of Paris, Denis-Auguste Affre, was killed on 25 June 1848 at the barricades, trying to bring peace. Catherine wrote her account thirty-five days later.

Coste rejected this as a prophecy because it was written after the events it described. "It is unnecessary to add that nothing of what Sister Catherine predicted in 1848 came about and that Monsieur Aladel considered her vision a dream." This vision has created problems for Catherine's biographers, who appear to be at a loss as to its meaning.

The Account of 1856

This is an autograph account by Sister Catherine Labouré in which she describes the vision of the heart of Saint Vincent and the first apparition of the Virgin. She begins by saying that Father Jules Chinchon, her new confessor, was asking her for an account of something that happened twenty-six years before. Despite the lapse in time, she said she that would try.

Catherine wrote that she arrived at the seminary on 21 April 1830,
the Wednesday before the translation of the relics of Saint Vincent de Paul. The seminary sisters were accustomed to go to the Vincentian motherhouse each day to pray. Catherine prayed to Saint Vincent for the graces necessary for her, the Double Family, and all France. "Each time I returned from Saint Lazare, I had so much pain! It seemed to me that I found Saint Vincent again in the community, or at least his heart, which appeared to me every time I returned from Saint Lazare." She saw it in the chapel of the Daughters of Charity in the Rue du Bac, above the chest where the relics of Saint Vincent were exposed. These relics were a piece of arm bone, not his heart, which at that time was in Lyon.

The heart appeared to her three different times on three successive days. It appeared first as flesh colored, which announced peace, calm, innocence, and union. Then it became a fiery red, which symbolized the charity to be lighted in hearts. It seemed to her that the entire community was to be renewed and to extend to the ends of the earth. Then the heart turned a dark red, which saddened her. She did not know the reason for this sadness, or how it was related to a change of government. She talked to her confessor, who sought to calm her by turning her from these thoughts. In this account Catherine made no mention of the words of the Virgin, quoted by Lamboley, concerning Saint Vincent’s sadness, the woes to fall on France, and the safety of the double family.

Then, she wrote, she was favored with another great grace, that of “seeing Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament, which I saw all the time of my seminary, except all the times that I doubted; then, the next time I would no longer see anything because I wanted to go more deeply, and I had doubts about this mystery; I thought that I made a mistake.” On Trinity Sunday Christ appeared to her as a king, with the cross on his chest, in the Blessed Sacrament.

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59 Laurentin, Vie, 40; the reference is to the solemn procession that returned the relics to the Vincentian motherhouse on 24-25 April.
60 Laurentin - Roche, Catherine Labouré, 335; the reference is to the “new” Saint-Lazare at 95 rue de Sévres in Paris, not to the Vincentian motherhouse of 1632-1792.
61 Dirvin says that the vision was repeated eight or nine times each evening that she returned from Saint-Lazare (Dirvin, St. Catherine Labouré, 75); Aladel and Étienne dated this vision to 19 July.
62 “Et puis j'étais favorisée d’une autre grande grâce: c’était de voir Notre Seigneur dans le Très Saint Sacrement, que j'ai vu tout le temps de mon séminaire, excepté toutes les fois que j'ai douté; alors, la fois d'après, je ne voyais plus rien, parce que je voulais approfondir, et je doutais de ce mystère, je croyais me tromper” (Laurentin - Roche, Catherine Labouré, 335); Dirvin’s translation is free and somewhat misleading: “I saw Him during the whole time of my seminary, except when I doubted; the next time, I saw nothing, because I had wished to penetrate the mystery, and, believing myself deceived, had doubted” (Dirvin, St. Catherine Labouré, 81).
63 Laurentin, Vie, 48. Laurentin mentions another vision previous to this in which the host became as transparent as a veil, allowing Catherine to see Christ in the Eucharist. I have not found this in any of the documentation.
the gospel. She thought that the cross flowed under his feet, and he was stripped of all his ornaments. She then had the darkest and saddest thoughts. “It was at that point that I had the thought that the king of the earth would be lost and despoiled of his royal garments; and of all the thoughts that I had had, I would not know how to explain it with regard to the loss that was being done to him.”

On the night before the feast of Saint Vincent, at that time on 19 July, Mother Marthe, directress of the seminary sisters, gave an instruction on devotion to the saints, especially the Virgin Mary. It gave Catherine such a desire to see the Virgin “that I went to bed with this thought that, that very night, I would see my good mother. I had wanted to see her for a long time. Finally, I went to sleep. Since we had been given a piece of linen from Saint Vincent’s rochet [a surplice with lace], I cut off half, which I swallowed, and I went to sleep, with the thought that Saint Vincent would obtain for me the grace of seeing the Virgin.”

At 11:30 at night, she heard her name called. She saw a small boy, about four or five years old, dressed in white. He told her to go to the chapel where the Virgin was waiting for her. Her first thought was that she would be heard by the other sisters, but the child assured her that everyone was asleep. She followed him and wherever they went, the lamps were lighted. Catherine was surprised because the chapel door opened as soon as the child touched it with his finger. She was even more surprised to see all the candles lighted. The child took her to the sanctuary, at the side where the director’s chair was, and Catherine knelt down there, while the child remained standing. There was a long wait (she also looked to the tribune to see if the sister who took care of the night lights was there).

The child then told her that the Virgin was coming, and she heard a sound like the rustling of a silk dress. It came from the side of the tribune, next to the picture of Saint Joseph. It stopped at the steps of the altar, on the gospel side, in a chair like that of Saint Ann, but it was the Virgin, not the figure of Saint Ann. Catherine could not describe her

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64 Laurentin - Roche, *Catherine Labouré*, 335. Dirvin says that she understood clearly that the vision referred to the overthrow of Charles X in July 1830, and adds “it is a startling thing, this sacred vision of God Himself coming in majesty to foretell the fall of an earthly monarch. . . . Again we are confronted with the astonishing preoccupation of Heaven with the fortunes of France” (Dirvin, St. Catherine Labouré, 82, 84).

65 Laurentin - Roche, *Catherine Labouré*, 336. Dirvin attempts to put a benign interpretation on this rather bizarre incident. “It was a simple act of devotion, growing out of a simple faith. Sophisticated rationalists might sniff at it as ludicrous superstition, but those whose believing mothers have signed their brows with the sacred wedding ring and given them holy water to drink will understand” (Dirvin, St. Catherine Labouré, 87).
feeling, and she doubted that it was the Virgin, but the child, now speaking in a man’s voice, reassured her. Catherine leaped toward the Virgin, knelt down, and put her hands on her knees. The Virgin told her how to behave toward her directors “and very many things I must not say about how to behave in my future pains.” The Virgin explained the meaning of everything she had seen. Catherine did not know how long it lasted. Eventually the Virgin left. She saw the child again, and he led her back the way they had come. Catherine believed that the child was her guardian angel. When Catherine returned to bed, it was 2:00 A.M.

This account bears some resemblance to Catherine’s vision of 27 November 1830, as related in her account of 15 August 1841. In both, the exhortation of Mother Marthe gives Catherine a desire to see the Virgin, Catherine hears the sound like the rustling of a silk dress, and the Virgin comes from the side of the tribune, near the picture of Saint Joseph. Other than that, the dates are different, as are the visions themselves.

Coste says that while the vision of Vincent’s heart was not new to Aladel, the others may have been. The vision of the child was certainly new. There is no record of any comment or reaction on Aladel’s part. Coste also pointed out that in Catherine’s account, the vision of the heart takes place during the novena in preparation for the translation of the relics, April 1830, whereas Lamboley’s account of 1833, Étienne’s Notice sur le rétablissement de la Congrégation de la Mission après la Révolution de 1789, the text accompanying the painting by the artist Lecerf in 1835, and the biography of Aladel all said 19 July. Laurentin says that the latter dating was done “by confusion,” though given the closeness to both Aladel and Étienne to the events, there is reason to wonder where the confusion actually lay.

Coste commented:

There is room for thinking that Monsieur Aladel was more and more put out by the variations and the words, full of inconsistencies, of Sister Catherine. He had hesitated in 1830. The increasingly numerous wonders attributed to the medal inclined him toward

66 Laurentin - Roche, Catherine Labouré, 337.
67 Jean-Baptiste Étienne, Notice sur le rétablissement de la Congrégation de la Mission après la Révolution de 1789 (privately printed, 4 August 1870), 57, where he says it took place during the first days of the 1830 revolution; Gravure du tableau de Lecerf sur la Vision du Coeur de St. Vincent de Paul (Paris: L. Desgodets Editeur, n.d.).
68 Laurentin, Vie, 44.
belief in the visions. There are strong reasons for suspecting that the contradictions and false prophecies of the visionary caused him to fall back into his original hesitations. The edition [of the Notice historique] that he envisioned in 1856 never appeared, although there was great demand for a new one. Why?69

Coste found Catherine’s account of her visions of Christ in the sacrament to be intrinsically contradictory. “How could he [Aladel] have believed Sister Catherine when she affirmed that she saw Our Lord in the Most Blessed Sacrament almost every day and added that on certain days she doubted the real presence? Those who see do not doubt.”70

After Aladel’s death in 1865, his successor hoped to find a file on the visionary and her visions among his papers. He was disappointed. Chevalier wrote, “It is to be regretted that Monsieur Aladel’s notes have been almost entirely destroyed. One would undoubtedly have found in them interesting details. What remains for us is not in the least notable.”71 Coste believed that only Aladel or Étienne could have destroyed the papers, and asked why this destruction took place. “Clearly, Monsieur Aladel never retracted what he wrote in the Notice, but could he have done so without scandal and without hurting the spread of the medal, an excellent devotion in itself, independently of the circumstances that could have instigated it?”72

The Hidden Treasure

This story is known from a letter written by Sister Jeanne Dufès, who became superior of Reuilly in 1860 and stayed there more than twenty years. The original of the letter has not survived and is known only through the copy made by Coste, who said that it was in the archive of the Motherhouse of the Vincentian Community in Paris.73 The date is only approximate. Around 1880, she wrote to Antoine Fiat, the superior general, saying that she felt a certain repugnance to begin the

69 Coste, Les Apparitions, 25. Dirvin writes that in 1856 Catherine wrote to Aladel, predicting that a month would be dedicated to Saint Joseph, something that took place in 1864 (Dirvin, St. Catherine Labouré, 208). I have found no trace of this in any of the documents published by Laurentin Roche, Catherine Labouré, or Laurentin, Procès.
70 Coste, Les Apparitions, 24.
71 Chevalier, La Médaille Miraculeuse, 1895, 66; quoted in Coste, Les Apparitions, 25.
72 Coste, Les Apparitions, 26.
73 The complete text can be found in Laurentin, Procès de Catherine, 119-20; or Coste, Les Apparitions, 26-27. Dirvin, as far as I can ascertain, does not mention the incident of the well.
excavations in the area pointed out by Sister Catherine. Catherine had told her that at a certain point, they would see a flat stone like a grave-stone, and Sister Dufès should find a priest to move it. At that place would be found the means for building, not a chapel, but a church.

The excavations proceeded under Étienne by brothers from Saint Lazare, and under his successor, Eugène Boré (1874-1878), by hired workers. Nothing was found. What the workers uncovered was a dry well, of which there were many in the garden. Sister Dufès proposed employing the sisters’ architect, who had built their laundry, on the pretext of having a source of water for the laundry other than the river Seine. In that way the excavation could be made without the true reason being known. She submitted these ideas to the superior general because she wanted to carry out his will “but I am perplexed, I admit. My confidence is not complete enough, although God has already shown that many of the predictions of our Immaculate Mother to Sister Catherine have been verified, both for our dear community and for our house.”74 Nothing was ever found.

Coste quoted Sister Dufès’s letter almost in full. He summarized the question by saying that Sister Catherine had announced that by digging at a certain point in the garden of the house, one would find a rather considerable treasure which would finance the construction of a church. “They were foolish enough to believe her. Three successive superiors general -- Monsieur Étienne, Monsieur Boré, and Monsieur [Antoine] Fiat -- ordered the excavations and, obviously, nothing was found.”75 For Coste this fact alone was reason enough to believe that Catherine was unbalanced. This fact did not escape her fellow sisters. Coste quoted Chevalier as saying that he had sometimes heard “that her head was not on straight” (“qu’elle n’avait plus bien sa tête”).76

The Account of 30 October 1876

This is Sister Catherine’s account of a conversation with the Virgin at the time of the first apparition.77 It exists in two versions in the archive of the Daughters of Charity in Paris. According to both versions, the conversation took place on 18 July 1830 at 11:30 at night. The Virgin told Catherine that she had a mission. She would suffer because

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74 Coste, Les Apparitions.
75 Coste, Les Apparitions, 27.
76 Ibid., 27.
77 Laurentin-Roche, Catherine Labouré, 352-57; Coste, Les Apparitions, 28.
of it, but she should not fear. “The times are very bad. Evils will come upon France. The throne will be overthrown. The whole world will be overturned by evils of every kind. (The Holy Virgin looked very pained when she said that.) But come to the foot of this altar; there graces will be showered . . . on all persons who ask for them, great and small.”

The Virgin complained about the abuses and lack of regularity in the community. There was great relaxation among both the Vincentians and the Daughters. She should tell her director. Though he may not be a superior, he will be in charge of all the Community in a special way. He should do everything possible to see that the rule was once again in vigor. He should be told to be vigilant over “bad reading, the waste of time, and visits.” When the rule was again in vigor, another community would seek to be united with them. They should be received, though this had not been the custom. Other communities would not survive, “the Holy Virgin had tears in her eyes when she said that. . . . Monseigneur the archbishop will die (at that word, more tears).” The Virgin also predicted that Aladel would found a confraternity. Catherine understood that these travails would happen for forty years (or fifty according to one version) after which there would be peace.

Coste stated:

All these so-called prophecies were fulfilled, except one. Charles X was overthrown by the revolution of July 1830; Monsieur Aladel became director of the Daughters of Charity in 1846 and founded a congregation of the Children of Mary; Monsieur Étienne, named superior general in 1843, reformed the two communities; three communities, those of Madame Seton (in part) in the United States (1850), the Leopoldines of Brandis at Graz in Austria (1851) and Verviers in Belgium (1854) were united to the Daughters of Charity; great evils came, viz., the revolution of 1830, that of 1848, the defeat of 1871, and the Commune that followed; Monseigneur Darbois, archbishop of Paris, was assassinated.

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78 Laurentin - Roche, Catherine Labouré, 354.
79 Ibid., 354-56.
80 Dirvin considered this to have been an accurate prophecy made before the event (Dirvin, St. Catherine Labouré, 158).
81 Coste, Les Apparitions, 30. Georges Darboy, named archbishop of Paris in 1863, was executed as a hostage during the Commune of 1871.
The one prophecy that was not fulfilled was that there would be peace in France after the troubles (Coste gives the years 1880-1881), whereas there was continued hostility between Church and state. His conclusion was that “if Sister Catherine had written them [the prophecies] in 1830, the year of the visions, or even in 1856, when she related the nocturnal vision, we would have no choice but to bow down and recognize her prophetic spirit. Unfortunately, the document that relates them is from 1876, and by then all the events announced had been accomplished.” Coste cited a letter written by one of her superiors, who said, “Sister Catherine expresses her ideas to me with the simplicity of a child. When reality would not confirm her predictions, she would calmly say to me, ‘Ah, well, Sister, I was mistaken. I thought I had told you the truth. I am quite content that one knows the truth.’”

Coste brought up the question of the non-fulfillment of Catherine’s prophecies in the article that he wrote in 1930 for the centenary of the medal. He referred to this as “a bitter deception because faith was placed in her prophecies.” He quoted the 1878 edition of Chevalier’s La Médaille Miraculeuse in which the author offered some reasons for this. For example, Chevalier argued that some of the prophecies were threats and so conditioned on the prayers and penance of the faithful, and that successive events became confused because they were all presented in one tableau. None of these, remarked Coste, resolved the difficulty.

Coste was on shakier ground when he quoted another prediction attributed to Catherine, that is, that her nephew, Philippe Meugniot, would enter the Congregation of the Mission and become superior general. “He himself enjoyed telling that and he died without having risen so high.” In his testimonies at the process for his aunt’s beatification, Meugniot said only that she had predicted that if he entered the Congregation he might become a superior and go to China -- both of which happened.

Virgin with a Globe or with Arms Extended?

One of the most vexing questions about Catherine’s visions was the exact nature of the representation of the Virgin that should have

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82 Ibid., 30.
83 Chevalier, La Médaille Miraculeuse, 40; cited in Coste, Les Apparitions, 30.
84 [Coste], “La Médaille Miraculeuse,” 500, n. 2.
85 Coste, Les Apparitions, 31.
86 Laurentin, Procès de Catherine, 15-16.
Statue of the Virgin Mary with Globe. In later life Sister Catherine claimed that this was the image that should have gone on the medal.

Courtesy, Archives of the Daughters of Charity, Emmitsburg, Md.
been on the medal. According to her account of 1841, it should have been the Virgin with a globe held at stomach level, not the one with arms extended that is now on the medal. The rays descended in a fan-like shape from the hands holding the globe down to the second globe (or half of a globe, which was all the visionary could see) at her feet. In none of her autograph accounts did she ever say that the Virgin released the globe or extended her hands. 87

In the first edition of his Notice, Aladel wrote that the sister told him that the part of the globe where the rays fell in special abundance represented France. In her second account of 1841, however, Catherine quoted that statement in reference to the globe in the Virgin’s hand. 88 As will be seen below, she later said that the lower globe represented France. Chevalier claimed that Aladel had suppressed the globe, and that Catherine often complained to Aladel about this change. Chevalier believed that Aladel did this in order to simplify the representation that was to go on the medal “and to make it easier of acceptance by the public at a time when political passions exercised a great influence.” 89 He did not specify what these political passions were. Sister Sidonie-Amélie Tanguy, in her deposition for the beatification, said that Catherine had complained to Sister Jeanne Dufès that the Virgin was not depicted on the medal exactly as she had appeared. Rather, the Virgin had first of all held the globe, which represented the earth, in her hands seemingly to offer it to God the Father. 90

In a conversation in which Sister Catherine confided her secret to me, she repeated to me that the Holy Virgin appeared to her holding a globe in her hands at the level of her stomach. In a moment she saw this divine Mother offer this globe and her lips moved. Sister Catherine understood that the Holy Virgin was praying for the entire world. I protested, saying “there has never been a question of a globe; if we speak of this, they are going to say that you have lost your head.” “It would not be the first time that they have considered me mad,” she answered, “but I will say until my last breath: the Holy Virgin appeared to me holding the

87 See Laurentin-Roche, Catherine Labouré, 76.
88 Ibid., 294.
89 Quoted by Coste, Cahier, 5v; handwritten.
90 Laurentin, Procès de Catherine, 228-29.
globe of the world in her hands.” “What did the Holy Virgin say when she offered the globe?” “Ah, sister, I did not hear, but I understood that she was praying for the entire world.” “And afterward,” I added, “what became of the globe?” “Ah, sister, I know nothing about it.” Sister Catherine then made the gesture of extending her hands and continuing, “I saw only the rays that fell on the globe that the holy Virgin had under her feet, especially on a spot where the word France was. The holy Virgin had her hands extended.” “But,” I replied, “you would prejudice the medal by talking about a globe.” “No, no, sister, let nothing touch the medal, but let a statue be made with the globe and an altar erected at the place where the holy Virgin appeared. This statue has been the martyrdom of my life. I did not want to appear before the holy Virgin before it was made.”

Coste pointed out that Sister Dufès’ conversation contradicted Catherine’s account of 1841 on two points. The account said that it was a globe at the Virgin’s feet that disappeared, not that in her hands; that it was the globe in the hands that represented the world and France, not that at her feet.

Coste (Les Apparitions, 13-14) quotes this conversation from Edmond Crapez, C.M., La Vénérable Catherine Labouré, 6 ed., 195. This, however, differs in wording and details from the English translation, Venerable Catherine Labouré: Daughter of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul. 1806-1876. Translated from the French of Rev. Edmond Crapez, C.M. (Saint Joseph’s: Emmitsburg, Md., 1918).

The English reads as follows:

“During the memorable interview,” writes Sister Dufès, “when Sister Catherine gave me her confidence, she stated that the Blessed Virgin had appeared to her holding a globe in her hands. She then saw this divine Mother, her lips moving in prayer, offer the globe to her Son. Sister Catherine thereby understood that she was praying for the world.”

“Here I interrupted her with ‘There has never been mention of this globe in the hands of the Blessed Virgin. If you speak of this it will be said that you have lost your mind.’”

“It would not be the first time that I have been treated as insane” she replied, “yet even to my last sigh I shall maintain that the Blessed Virgin appeared to me holding in her hands a globe, representing the world.”

“What,” I asked, “did the Blessed Virgin say when she offered the globe?”

“Ahh my Sister” said Sister Catherine, “I did not hear but I understood that she was praying for the whole world.”

“Well, afterwards what became of the globe offered by the Blessed Virgin?”

“Ahh my Sister, I do not know.” Here Sister Catherine made a gesture extending her hands and then continued,

“I now saw only the rays that fell on the globe on which she stood, especially on a point marked France. The Blessed Virgin’s hands were extended.”

“But,” I replied, “you will discredit the medal by speaking of the globe.”

“No, no, my Sister, this does not concern the medal. A statue should be made of the Virgin holding the globe and an altar erected on the spot of the apparition. I should not like to appear before the blessed Virgin ere this design be accomplished.”
Sister Tanguy said that Sister Dufès informed her of this conversation that same day. Her version of the conversation was briefer than Sister Dufès', as recorded by Edmond Crapez in his biography of Catherine. It also added a detail not found in Crapez, that is, that Dufès asked Catherine if anyone could confirm what she said. Catherine told her to write to Sister Marie-Clémentine Grand, at that time at the secretariat in Paris, who had written some notes on the subject for Aladel. She replied to Sister Dufès on 24 June 1876, but spoke of two visions distinct in time, not two aspects of one vision. Sister Émilie Pineau also spoke of two quite distinct visions, as she said she had heard from Aladel. The first was that of the globe, which occurred “toward the end of November 1830,” and the second was that of the Virgin with outstretched arms from which rays fell on the earth, which took place in December.

Chevalier tried to harmonize the opposing accounts of the visions by combining them. Thus the vision would have had two phases: first the Virgin with the globe, then the Virgin with her arms extended. Chevalier quotes Catherine, when “asked if she again saw the globe in the hands of the Holy Virgin, when the luminous shower burst forth from all sides, answered that only the rays remained, and when the Holy Virgin speaks of the globe, she means that which is under her feet, and it is not a question of the first.” In his testimony for Catherine’s beatification, Chevalier added that it would have been difficult for the engraver to strike a medal with the image of the globe.

Coste was highly critical of Chevalier’s attempts at harmonization. He declared that it was quite clear from the Notice historique that Aladel had never accepted anything but the Virgin with the outstretched arms. That was the only one of which he spoke in all the editions of his book and in the canonical inquiry. According to Coste, Aladel paid no heed to the account of 1841.

92 Crapez, Venerable Catherine Labouré, 225-29. It is difficult to understand how she could have gotten this information from Aladel. She said that the vision of the globe took place toward the end of November 1830. Aladel, however, never referred to the globe and always placed the vision in September.

93 Laurentin, Procès de Catherine, 213.

94 Chevalier, La Médaille Miraculeuse, 1895, 77; Dirvin refers to them as two phases of the apparition of 27 November (St. Catherine Labouré, 100).

95 Dirvin accepts this as the reason for the change (St. Catherine Labouré, 100-01).
Coste summarized the problem with four possible variations:
A. Only one vision with the arms outstretched;
B. Only one vision with the two globes;
C. Two different visions: one of the Virgin with the globe, the other of the Virgin with outstretched arms;
D. Only one vision with two phases.

"This last solution is the most popular one today; it is also perhaps the weakest."96 He added one other comment about this. "If the holy Virgin is to be represented holding the globe at the height of her stomach, why do images and statues place the globe at the height of her breast? One must not obey the Virgin by halves."97 He did not point out another fact: when the medal was first struck in 1832 Sister Catherine made no objection to the altered design.98 In later life she did not want the medal changed, only that a statue of the original design be made.

Catherine's "Secret"

Though it has often been asserted that the identity of the visionary was known only to her confessor, and a few highly placed persons among the Daughters of Charity, this was not true.99 The emergence of her identity, which progressed from Lamboley's "a person," to a novice sister of the Daughters of Charity in the later editions of Aladel's Notice historique, had by the 1850s become something of an open secret among Catherine's fellow sisters.

In the process of beatification Sister Françoise-Christine Charvier testified that when she was in the seminary in 1855 many sisters told her that the visionary took care of the cows at a house in Paris.100 Sister Caroline Clavel testified that when she was sent to the house in Enghien, many sisters told her that she was being sent to the place where the sister who had seen the Virgin lived. When she arrived, she learned by common knowledge who that sister was.101 In 1859, when Sister Anne-Marie Lenormand was sent to Châtillon-sur-Seine, she learned from the superior that the sister who had experienced the vision made her
postulancy there. Sister Louise de Maurel d’Aragon, who entered the Daughters of Charity in 1861 and was stationed at Enghien, was told by one of the sisters that it was Catherine who had received the visions. She did not know how this sister knew it and gave the testimony for whatever it was worth. Sister Louise-Euphrasie Henriot, who went to Reuilly in 1861 as an orphan and joined the Daughters of Charity four years later, said the children sometimes told her, “There is the sister who saw the Holy Virgin.” In 1863, when Sister Sidonie Amélie Tanguy was appointed to the hospice of Enghien, she was told, “you are going to the house where the sister who had the revelation of the Miraculous Medal is. And someone added that it was Sister Catherine Labouré. I confess that I did not at that time attach very much importance to this communication.”

In 1896 Sister Dufès testified: “I entered the Community in 1839 and in it I very often heard Sister Catherine Labouré and the vision of the Miraculous Medal spoken of. In 1860 Monsieur Étienne, the superior general, sent me as superior to the hospice of Enghien, where I still am, and he said to me, ‘I am sending you to the house of Sister Catherine Labouré.’”

Sister Madeleine de la Haye Saint-Hilaire related the following story:

One day I received a visit from a family who were friends of my father, Monsieur and Madame d’Avenel, one of the most pious of families. At the moment when I was taking them to the door, we encountered Sister Catherine and I said into Madame d’Avenel’s ear, “This is the sister who had the vision of the Miraculous Medal.” Without any expectation on my part, Monsieur d’Avenel turned quickly and addressed Sister Catherine, “Oh, Sister, I am happy to see and greet the sister who had the great favor of the vision of the Miraculous Medal!” Not knowing what to do, I turned to Madame d’Avenel and said to her, “Madame, if you knew what your husband is doing, how it upsets me! The sister does not want anyone to know.” With great
self-possession, Madame d’Avenel said to her husband, “Joseph, you are wrong, sister does not say that.”
During this time Sister Catherine shook her head and feigned great surprise.107

Sister Madeleine later apologized to Catherine, saying that in the seminary she had been told that the sister of the visions was in charge of the chickens at Enghien.108

In the Cahier and Les Apparitions, Coste cited the testimonies of Sisters Dufès, Tanguy, Lenormand, and Henriot, all of which were to be found in the documents of the beatification. He added another that he learned in some way from the noted Vincentian scholar Guillaume Pouget. Before 1870 the students from Saint-Lazare sometimes went to Reuilly, where the more inquisitive would go by the chicken yard in order to encounter the sister who was said to have seen the Blessed Virgin.109

### The Miracles Attributed to the Medal

Coste devoted three pages of Les Apparitions to a discussion of the miracles associated with the Miraculous Medal, “from which the conclusion has been drawn that the visions of Sister Catherine are beyond discussion.”110 He believed that much of the credence given to the cures was a case of post hoc, ergo propter hoc, that is, that it was impossible to prove a causal relationship. He also cited psychological factors. “The medal, carried by those who saw a miraculous power in it contributes to the cure by a psychological phenomenon whose efficacy is recognized by all physicians: confidence. The quasi-certitude or the certitude that one will be healed contributes very much to creating in the sick person a moral state favorable to healing.”111 It was in that way that people were helped by mineral waters, such as those of Vittel or Vichy.

Others he considered to be sheer exaggerations, including one of the first miracles attributed to the medal: the deathbed repentance of Dominique de Pradt. According to the story that circulated and was given credence by Catherine’s biographers, and later cited by the Con-

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107 Laurentin, Procès de Catherine, 340-41.
108 Ibid., 341.
109 Coste, Cahier, 33; Les Apparitions, 48.
110 Coste, Les Apparitions, 33.
111 Ibid., 33.
gregation of Rites in the decree on the heroicity of virtues, de Pradt was the former constitutional bishop of Malines. The commonly accepted story was that up to his death in 1832 he had refused all reconciliation with the papacy. Archbishop Quélen attempted to see him many times but failed. Finally, he went to see him, armed with a Miraculous Medal. De Pradt’s servants refused him admittance, but when they informed him of the visit, he was immediately touched and converted. He had Quélen recalled and died in peace and reconciliation with the Church. “This was the first miracle of the new medal,” according to Lucien Misermont, C.M., one of Catherine’s biographers, 113

“What errors in this account!” exclaimed Coste. 114 De Pradt had never been a constitutional bishop, but had been exiled for refusing to take the oath. He died in 1837, not 1832. Before his death he suffered a stroke that left him speechless. Aladel never mentioned a word of the so-called prodigy in the 1842 edition of his Notice historique, though he cited many other conversions. Contemporary accounts made no mention of the medal. He added that the story appeared for the first time in Chevalier’s book. “Now the work of Monsieur Chevalier has no historical value.” 115

### The Honors of the Altar

#### The Medal in the Liturgy

On 27 August 1836, in response to a request by the provincial superior of Naples, the Congregation of Rites denied permission to erect an image of the Immaculate Conception, as it was shown on the medal, on one of the altars of the Vincentian church in Naples. The reason was to avoid iconographic novelties. 116 In a decree of 11 March 1837, the same Congregation said that the image on the medal differed from the traditional representation of the Immaculate Conception and so was a novelty. 117 This was a portent of problems to come later in the century.

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112 Constitutional bishops were those who had subscribed to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy during the French Revolution, or who had been rewarded with bishoprics after doing so. After the concordat between Napoleon, and the papacy in 1801, they were removed from their positions and given pensions.


114 Coste, Cahier, 23; Les Apparitions, 34. In an appendix (Cahier, 28-29; Les Apparitions, 42-43), he quotes contemporary descriptions of De Pradt’s death.

115 Ibid., 273-76.
arising from the Congregation of Rites’ aversion to innovations based on private revelations.

In answer to a request from the superior general, Father Antoine Fiat, 12 October 1880, Leo XIII issued a rescript that granted, to all priests who said mass in the churches or oratories of the Vincentian Community, the privilege of saying a votive mass of the Immaculate Conception on 27 November. This appears to have been the first grant of liturgical observance.

The introduction of the Miraculous Medal into the liturgy was initially hindered by problems in Rome, the nature and extent of which are still not clear. The prefect of the Congregation of Rites, Cardinal Domenico Bartolini, had been upset by events surrounding the apparition of La Salette, and this seems to have colored his attitude toward the Miraculous Medal. In 1865, as secretary of the Congregation, he had come into conflict with Bishop Fava of Grenoble, who seemingly had accused him of failing to keep some confidences. 118 In 1879, when Bartolini, as prefect of the Congregation, granted permission for a coronation of the statue of Our Lady of La Salette, he imposed a design for the statue that was different from that of the apparition and demanded the removal of all other images that did not conform to it. Fava managed to have the decree modified through personal intercession with Pope Leo XIII. The latter was not opposed a priori to this mode of representation; rather the permission had been refused because it would have been interpreted as an approval of the apparitions. Yet Rome had given approval for the devotion and, at the same time as the coronation, had raised the church to the rank of a minor basilica. If Rome was not approving it, it was certainly tolerating it. The difficulties encountered with regard to La Salette carried over to Catherine’s vision of the Virgin with a globe. In both cases the Holy See was opposed to supporting an image that was inspired not by established tradition but by a private revelation. 119

Similarly, on 22 January 1881 the Congregation of Rites forbade the public veneration of any image of the Virgin with the globe and ordered the removal of such a statue from exposition in the chapel of the Daughters of Charity in Paris. “Henceforth any image of this model can no longer be printed or represented in any way.” 120 In a separate

118 Laurentin, Procès de Catherine, 32.
119 This may have been Aladel’s reason for never commissioning the statue of the globe that Catherine wanted; this is similar to the case of the Neapolitan Vincentians mentioned above. Coste, however, claimed that Aladel never knew about the Virgin with the globe.
120 Decree of the Congregation of Rites to M. A. Fiat, 22 January 1881, in Laurentin, Procès de Catherine, 120-21.
letter to Fiat, Cardinal Bartolini called it a matter “of such great impor-
tance” and said that not even a prudent reason could interfere with the
execution of the order. On 2 February Fiat asked Bartolini to suspend
the order because of difficult conditions at the Daughters’ motherhouse
– they were being threatened with expulsion by the anticlerical gov-
ernment. In addition, he pointed out that the statue had been placed
there with the approval of the local ecclesiastical authority. Father
Giovanni Battista Borgogno, the procurator general at the Holy See in
Rome, took the request to Bartolini and then made the following re-
port (8 February 1881).

If, before installing [the statue], someone had informed
me, here, on the spot, I would have made some inves-
tigations, I would first of all have tested the waters, as
they say, and I would perhaps have obtained by way
of tolerance that it could be placed above the com-
memorative altar. But to do it according to the theory
of the accomplished fact, that is absolutely unaccept-
able here, and all the more so since Cardinal Bartolini
paid a personal price in the affair of Our Lady of La
Salette. When I spoke to him of the community’s new
statue, he became very incensed, so much so that I had
to remonstrate with him, saying that after all the
Lazarists\footnote{An older term for Vincentians.} had never caused him any headache, nei-
ther for this affair nor any other.

“It is true,” he answered me, “but all these new devo-
tions in France, what is causing them to appear? It is
not piety or devotion, but a simple computation of
interest, the love of money,” ‘it is a small commerce’ -
- his actual words.\footnote{Borgogno to Fiat, 8 February 1881, in Laurentin, \textit{Procès de Catherine}, 122-23.}

Borgogno concluded by saying that he saw no real hope for get-
ting the decree suspended. He was correct, for on 14 February Bartolini
rejected Fiat’s request. Borgogno summed up the difficulties: “all the
evil comes from Our Lady of La Salette. . . . That affair has irritated the
Holy Father and Cardinal Bartolini to such an extent that they are un-
approachable on this particular point.”\footnote{Borgogno to Fiat, 15 February 1881, ibid., 124.} Fiat, however, refused to give
up and asked Bernard Thiel, C.M., the bishop of Costa Rica, who was in Rome to see the pope, to intervene. The pope granted the request for retaining the statue for public veneration, but absolutely forbade that any reference be made to it in terms of the apparition.

After granting the permission, the pope asked Thiel what the precise relationship between the statue and the revelation was. Thiel was not sure. On 14 November 1884 Bartolini communicated the permission to Fiat, under the conditions that the image had to be approved by the local ordinaries and that it could not be exposed in churches in which any other image of the Virgin of the Miraculous Medal was exposed. Marie Derieux, the mother general of the Daughters, asked the pope to rescind the latter condition, and on 10 October 1885, he remitted the matter to the judgment of the archbishop of Paris. That apparently ended the matter on a good note.124

On 23 July 1894, again at the request of Father Fiat, Pope Leo XIII authorized the feast of the Virgin Mary of the Miraculous Medal, with proper office and mass, to be celebrated on 27 November.

The Beatification of Catherine Labouré

The story of Catherine Labouré and the Miraculous Medal belongs to what is known as “the apparition genre” in the Catholic Church. This genre, which originated in medieval times, consists of a generic framework or set of circumstances into which most apparition accounts fit. It is skeletal and there have been numerous variations, often notable ones, from one apparition story to another. In general the apparition account served to explain the origin of a shrine or devotion. The visionary was a lowly person who represented the poor and helpless in society: a herdsman, an Indian, or children. The vision usually involved the Virgin Mary or some local saint, and only rarely, in more recent times, Christ himself. The message might be apocalyptic or eschatological (a call to penance or reform), or it might be a command to have a church or chapel built at a particular place. The visionary was often fearful or skeptical at the beginning but was reassured and guaranteed solace for the sufferings entailed in carrying out the message. Church authorities were initially skeptical but were won over by some miracle or wondrous happening, after which they would assume control of what they had formerly doubted. Until the sixteenth cen-

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124 The documentation on this can be found, ibid., 125-31.
tury such apparitions were almost entirely local in nature.

In most versions of the apparition genre the visionary did not assume a major or commanding role. He or she was a conduit for a message and was often a rather shadowy figure. The visionary was not the object of cult but a way to it, and in medieval and renaissance times was almost never canonized. More recently the visionary has emerged as a figure in his/her own right, and holiness of life has also come to be seen as a verification of the truth of the seer’s message.

This has been true in the case of the Miraculous Medal because the question of Catherine’s virtue became linked to the veracity of her accounts and the authenticity of the medal. A Daughter of Charity wrote to Sister Dufès, “If by chance one would discover in her some weakness of nature or simply the absence of an exceptional virtue, one would immediately reject that the Holy Virgin would have chosen such an ordinary daughter.” As this attitude assumed clearer form, so too did the impetus to canonize Catherine Labouré.

The initiative for this came not from the Vincentian Community or the Daughters of Charity but from the Roman Curia. In 1889 Cardinal Gaetano Masella became prefect of the Congregation of Rites and brought to the position an attitude entirely different from that of Cardinal Bartolini. He encouraged the Vincentians to request a feast in honor of the Miraculous Medal, and he himself arranged that the feast would be in honor of the “manifestation of the Holy Immaculate Virgin of the Sacred Medal.” The term “apparition” could not be used for reasons explained below. This was granted by a decree of Leo XIII on 23 July 1894.

Masella was upset by the reluctance, or lethargy, of the Vincentians with regard to the medal, the feast, and the beatification. He wrote to Father Emilio Miel, the provincial of Portugal:

They told you in Paris what I am doing for the sons and daughters of Saint Vincent de Paul. But I do not know if they told you that I was scandalized by the Lazarist Fathers and that I blamed them in a loud voice. For what? Here it is sixty-four years since the Immaculate Virgin deigned to show herself to her humble servant, Sister Catherine Labouré; that the medal, the result of these apparitions, has worked innumerable

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125 [Coste] “La Médaille Miraculeuse,” 456, citing Chevalier, 30. This is in contrast to the two visionaries of La Salette, especially the boy, Maximin, whose later life was not entirely edifying.
prodigies in the five parts of the world, one of the most brilliant happened here in Rome itself more than forty years ago\textsuperscript{126} and the origin of all that is scarcely known and not at all celebrated liturgically. It was you who had me read in Lisbon the book by Monsieur Aladel . . . for it was he who spoiled the affair from the beginning by bringing about such an irregular process [the inquiry of 1836] without even calling the privileged sister before it. And I assure you that without the process at Rome, my efforts would have been useless. Encouraged by me, the Lazarists have finally proposed an office. But what office? What feast? The feast and the office de sacro numismate [of the holy medal]! I very plainly dispensed with them all and I asked and obtained the feast and office of the manifestation of the Holy Immaculate Virgin de sacro numismate! If the process at Paris had been regular, one could have been able to say, as for Lourdes, in Festo apparitionis [on the feast of the apparition]. There was fear, thanks to Monsieur Aladel, of even mentioning by name this Holy Daughter Labouré, who lived and died eighteen years ago, without being always worked up over it. Ah, well, I had her mentioned by name, as Bernardette was named in that of the apparition of Lourdes. . . . Admit that your confreres’ modesty was at least excessive.\textsuperscript{127}

There still seems to have been some reluctance on the part of Fiat and Mother General Marie Lamartinie to undertake the process of beatification. Again, it appears to have been the initiative of Cardinal Masella that turned the balance.\textsuperscript{128} The ordinary process was opened 13 April 1896 and lasted until 18 June 1900. The process de non cultu

\textsuperscript{126} The reference is to the conversion of Alphonse Ratisbonne through the workings of the Miraculous Medal.

\textsuperscript{127} Masella to Miel, 19 August 1894, in Laurentin, Procès de Catherine, 134-35.

\textsuperscript{128} Dirvin gives a somewhat saccharine account of this. “He [Masella] called upon Father Fiat, Superior General, and Mother Lamartinie, Superioress General of the Sisters of Charity, to begin the process for Catherine’s beatification. The Superiors hesitated. It was the spirit of their rule to shrink from glory. Catherine herself had hidden from it all her long life. Did God wish otherwise now? ‘If you do not undertake it,’ the Cardinal insisted, ‘I shall do it myself.’ There was no longer any doubt or holding back. God had spoken in His official.” (Dirvin, St. Catherine Labouré, 226.) Dirvin’s account of the beatification is highly simplified.
(which proved that no premature public veneration had been given to the candidate) began on 19 June 1905. The decree authorizing the introduction of the cause was issued on 11 December 1907. Other phases of the cause followed quickly until 1912. After that the cause seems to have languished until 1927, when it was revived. After another brief period of inaction, Catherine was beatified on 28 May 1933 and then canonized on 27 July 1947.

In 1930 Coste wrote an article in commemoration of the centenary of the apparitions. In it he spoke glowingly of Catherine's life. "She observed the rule perfectly, never spoke evil of anyone, always responded with a full and complete submission to the orders of those who had authority. Her simplicity and her humility reproduced with fidelity the simplicity of the good daughter of the country as described by Saint Vincent in his conference of 25 January 1643." Yet he went on to add a significant qualification. "There was, nevertheless, nothing extraordinary, no mysticism in her behavior. Common devotions were enough for her. She was pious, but pious in a simple way, to such an extent that some of her companions seemed more pious than she. Interior piety was more important to her than the appearances of piety." 29

Yet his real feelings were quite different. Given his views on the apparitions, it is not surprising that he was unsympathetic to the beatification of Catherine Labouré and even actively intervened to prevent it. His reasons can be found both in Les Apparitions and in the letter he sent to the Congregation of Rites in the same year in which he wrote the article cited above (2 July 1930). In both he dealt with the question of her virtue. 130

In the Cahier and Les Apparitions he began by pointing out that Catherine's companions had never noticed anything out of the ordinary in her. He quoted one of her fellow sisters who wrote, some time after 1876, "I spent six years with Sister Catherine and worked continuously for a year with her. It seems that I could cite a great number of details full of interest and edification, but, I am forced to admit, her life was so simple, so uniform, that I find nothing to remark. In spite of the assurance . . . that she was the sister so privileged by the Holy Virgin, I put little credence in it, since her life was similar to that of the

129 "La Médaille Miraculeuse," Annales de la Congrégation de la Mission 95, n. 376 (1930, n. 1): 455. The article was published anonymously.
130 The letter is to be found in the papers of the process. It is summarized in Laurentin - Roche, Catherine Labouré, 35.
According to Coste, Catherine’s faults were so well known to her superiors that they never gave a thought to her beatification, which was in reality the work of Cardinal Masella. “Mother Marie Lamartinie, superior of the Community, presented herself one day before him. They chatted. ‘Are you thinking about beginning the cause of the visionary of the Miraculous Medal?’ asked the cardinal. And seeing the embarrassment of the superior, he added, ‘She is a religious of eminent sanctity; if you do not do it yourselves, I will do it myself.’”

Coste found no “evident sanctity” in Sister Catherine, as he made clear in his letter to the Congregation of Rites:

It is said with assurance that the cause of Sister Catherine Labouré may be on the point of being resumed and that there may be a good chance of its succeeding. . . . I would regret that intensely. This Daughter of Charity was of an ordinary virtue. . . . Her companions at Reuilly saw nothing remarkable in her virtue. . . . She was impatient, gluttonous, of an altogether ordinary piety. . . . She made false predictions. . . . Her word offered no guarantee. She was inconsistent in her declarations, recounted extravagances. She fell into predictions only when the events were already an accomplished fact, she was always mistaken when it was a question of future events. I am ready to send you the documents if you so desire.

He added a request that his name not be revealed and that no one know that someone in Paris had spoken against the cause. As it turned out Coste was never called as a witness. He wrote, somewhat ruefully, “the process has succeeded. It can be regretted that the title of blessed wins out over the freedom of historians who love the truth and would be happy to defend it against error.”

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131 Cahier, 23-24, citing Chevalier, La Médaille, 30. See also Coste, Les Apparitions, 36.
132 Coste (Les Apparitions, 37-38) cites this as coming from Misermont, Soeur Catherine Labouré, 252.
133 This accusation seems to have originated in some of the testimony for Catherine’s beatification. See Laurentin - Roche, Catherine Labouré, 34.
134 Quoted ibid., 35.
135 Coste, Cahier, 25.
Conclusions

In order to draw conclusions from the material cited in this study, it is necessary to address three questions concerning the visions of Catherine Labouré: (1) Aladel’s role; (2) the difficulties and inconsistencies in the various accounts of Catherine’s visions; and (3) Coste’s own attitude. These in turn lead to the deeper issue, the relationship of historical criticism to popular devotion and the right of the historian to question time-honored beliefs and practices.

The Ambiguous Positions of Father Aladel

Jean-Marie Aladel is the most enigmatic figure in the history of the Miraculous Medal. He revealed little or nothing of his own feelings, at least in a way that would allow the historian to discern his inner, personal beliefs. The fact that his papers disappeared, or were destroyed, adds to the historian’s frustration. Popular writings view him almost solely as a conduit for messages from the Virgin, or as that figure so beloved of pious authors, the harsh confessor/director/superior whose lack of sensitivity both hurts and sanctifies the visionary.

Still, there are notable difficulties and troubling questions in what he did. There was the long delay of almost two years between the first vision and the request to the archbishop of Paris. The role played by the cholera in the delay between the request and the striking of the medal appears only later in his accounts. His claim that he finally took action to have the medal struck because of the Virgin’s discontent with his slowness is not convincing. He never made any reference to the vision of the Virgin with the globe, either because he did not know about it -- which hardly seems credible -- or because he did not accept it. This leads to the question, now unanswerable, about the extent of his responsibility for the present image on the medal. There is no indication of his reactions to the changes and inconsistencies in Sister Catherine’s accounts of her visions. Most striking, however, was his unwillingness to compel her to testify at the archdiocesan inquiry. As her subsequent accounts showed, her “amnesia” was not permanent. He did not even have her submit a written deposition. As a result he was the sole source of information for that inquiry.

Because of this, Aladel’s true role in the history of the Miraculous Medal can only be conjectured. As Coste hints, he may well have found himself caught up in the onrush of events over which he had no control, and from which he could not extricate himself without scandal.
René Laurentin, in a striking oversimplification, claimed that Catherine Labouré was criticized solely because “she was a poor woman, a peasant, and simple.” One need not be a rationalist to realize that the various accounts of her visions are full of inconsistencies regarding dates and the content of the visions. The major contradiction involves the image that is or should be on the medal. If Catherine is to be believed, the Miraculous Medal, throughout its history, has carried an incorrect image. Similarly there is no clear proof that she enjoyed the gift of prophecy. Aladel should not be faulted for his ambiguous, even negative attitude toward his penitent and her claims.

Similarly, a close study of the documentation shows clearly that Catherine Labouré was canonized because of the visions, and as a final seal of approval on the medal, not because she practiced heroic virtue.

Most of Catherine’s visions lacked a wider dimension. Many were concerned in a special way with France -- as even Dirvin admitted, “we are confronted with the astonishing preoccupation of Heaven with the fortunes of France.” Most were not social or ecclesial in character -- even the globe at the Virgin’s feet (or in her hands) represented France in a special way. Many of her visions, such as those of Saint Vincent’s heart, the cross of victory, and Christ in the Blessed Sacrament, were personal and carried no message. The fact that the Virgin would be concerned about the failure to observe the rule, and especially “bad reading, the waste of time, and visits,” would seem to be more a psychological projection of Catherine’s own attitudes than a heavenly message. For that reason their purpose and utility, even to Catherine, remain unclear. Perhaps one can see here more than a passing resemblance to modern visionaries whose messages deal with such minor questions as communion in the hand.

Coste’s analyses clearly show the shifting and unstable nature of Sister Catherine’s visions as found in the various sources. In the forefront is the question of the image that was or should have been on the medal, the Virgin with outstretched arms or the Virgin with the globe. The circumstances that led to the vision of the medal in 1830, that is, the intense desire to see the Virgin, the conviction that she would, and the swallowing of the relic cannot be explained, as Dirvin attempted to

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136 Laurentin, Vie, unpaginated.
137 Dirvin, St. Catherine Labouré, 84.
do, by deep faith. The visions of the heart of Saint Vincent, of Christ in
the Eucharist, and of the Virgin in the chapel lack any ecclesial or social
dimension. The prophecies connected with some of these are clearly
dubious. The vision of the cross of victory is both bizarre and macabre,
and has been something of an embarrassment to Catherine's biographers.
The story of the hidden treasure, as strange as it is, must be approached
with caution since the only source for it is a letter that was cited by Coste
but which is unknown today. Had it not been for the Miraculous Medal,
the other visions of Catherine Labouré would never have attracted the
least attention. On the contrary, she would probably have been regarded
as mentally unstable.

Coste's analyses also deliver a major blow to two legends that have
surrounded Catherine Labouré: that her identity was a secret until the
day of her death and that she was canonized because of her virtue, not
because of her visions. These two assertions, which have been commonly
accepted in the Double Family of Saint Vincent to the present day, are
simply not tenable.

Pierre Coste and the Role of the Historian

Quite clearly Pierre Coste's analysis of the visions of Catherine
Labouré, and all their attendant circumstances, led him to reject their
historical reality. Though he could not bring himself to reject the medal
entirely, calling it "an excellent devotion in itself," he put no credence in
the events from which it took its origins nor did he believe in the miracles
attributed to it. As happened with other studies of his, he reached a cer-
tain point and then stopped, unwilling to take the final step of outright
public rejection. As will be explained below, this is understandable in
view of the conditions in which he lived.

It is equally clear that he did not consider Catherine Labouré to be
worthy of beatification and canonization. He found no special holiness
in her life but, on the contrary, regarded her as an ordinary person with
all the faults and shortcomings of ordinary persons. His concept of san-
city was in accord with that of his times, that is, a heroicity of virtues that
transcended the ordinary. The efforts to canonize Sister Catherine arose
entirely from her visions and from the spread of the Miraculous Medal.
Since Coste rejected the former and placed only nominal faith in the
latter, he could not accept the possibility of Sister Catherine's becoming
Blessed Catherine.

Laurentin and Roche write of Coste, in a statement cited approv-
ingly by José María Román, that "he maintained, when encountering
the extraordinary, the repugnance of the cleric in the double sense of the
word, ecclesiastical and academic, because what is marvelous clashes
simultaneously with the scientific spirit and with the rigor of faith. The
apologetic ease of official authors . . . shocked and irritated him."138 In
this, they say, he was an heir of the nineteenth-century German historical
method, whose excesses he did not entirely escape. More strikingly,
they claim that both Coste and the official apologists derived from the
same “pseudo-rationalistic” principle that there was no middle ground
between illusion and the material truth of an apparition. For the apolo-
gists this meant that all was literally true, while for Coste it meant that
Catherine was sincere but deluded.

A more important question was how Coste could in the same year
(1930) write a laudatory article in the French Annales, and a denuncia-
tion to the Congregation of Rites. Laurentin and Roche answered: “In a
Church and society of rigorous norms, of minute conventions, in which
everyone watched his words and actions, Father Coste, like many oth-
ers, was a man with a sense of duty, faithful to the rules and the
conventions of his office. But in a secret garden he cultivated an internal
freedom all the more unrestrained insofar as it compensated for official
restraints and functioned as a form of safety valve.”139

The implication of Coste’s double life of the mind certainly has some
basis, since he had to be cautious about what he wrote. Coste’s revision
of the date of Saint Vincent de Paul’s birthdate caused a minor scandal
within the Vincentian Community. His rejection of some revered leg-
ends of the saint’s life caused similar distress in some quarters. Though
he personally was convinced that Vincent de Paul had never been a cap-
tive in Tunis, he dared not say so in his biography of the saint, fearing
that it would not be published.

This twofold approach is quite clear in the article written for the
Annales on the occasion of the centenary. It skillfully balances acceptance
of the visions with references to the inconsistencies and the non-fulfill-
ment of prophecies. Coste said nothing in that article about the Lamboley
letter, the vision of the cross, the visions of Saint Vincent’s heart, or the
hidden treasure. A careful reader, however, could not help realizing that
there were difficulties at almost every step. Another notable example of
this circumspect attitude is his acceptance of the medal as “an excellent
devotion” in itself, while at the same time he rejected everything that

138 Laurentin - Roche, Catherine Labouré, 35; José María Román, C.M., San Vicente de Paúl. I.
139 Laurentin - Roche, Catherine Labouré, 36.
gave rise to it.

Laurentin and Roche believe that Coste’s criticisms were not free of the excesses of a suspicious criticism, or of polemic impulses, and that his conclusions went beyond the premises. His “repugnance,” however, was not necessarily a negative trait, since critical analysis, even to the point of skepticism, is a key tool of the historian. Without it, history would be no more than an assemblage of legends, myths, and self-serving testimonies. Similarly the historian needs the independence of thought necessary to carry out his task. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries ecclesiastical authority sought to limit the freedom of historians to investigate the past, especially the Church’s past, in a dispassionate way. All too often, as is amply apparent in the reaction to the Modernist crisis in the first decade of this century, this meant that special interests, with particularistic agendas in no way involving the integrity of dogma, were able to hinder or even stop serious historical research. The fate of Louis Duchesne’s *Histoire ancienne de l’Église* (1906-1910), which was placed on the Index despite containing nothing contrary to Catholic teaching, is ample proof.\(^\text{140}\)

Coste failed in his attempt to prevent Catherine’s beatification. Yet his critique, for the most part, was balanced, thoughtful, and not at all incendiary. The times in which he lived were not receptive to revisionism or scientific criticism of popular devotion. In our own times, in which such critical analyses are less threatening, we can perhaps take a more measured view of the entire question, even to the point of accepting the possibility that the objective reality of Catherine Labouré’s visions is open to question.

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\(^{140}\) This took place during the pontificate of Pius X (1903-1914). A story is told that at some time after the indexing of his work, Duchesne was in Cairo. Walking down a street, he encountered a friend, who, surprised to see him there, asked why he was in Egypt. “I am waiting for Herod to die,” replied Duchesne.
### Chronological Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1806</td>
<td>2 May</td>
<td>Birth of Catherine Labouré</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1830</td>
<td>22 January</td>
<td>Catherine Labouré entered the Daughters of Charity</td>
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<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>April</td>
<td>Solemn translation of Vincent de Paul’s body to the Vincentian Motherhouse in Paris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td></td>
<td>Overthrow of Charles X. Accession of Louis Philippe</td>
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<tr>
<td>1831</td>
<td>January</td>
<td>Sister Catherine sent to the Hospice d’Enghien, Reuilly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1832</td>
<td>March</td>
<td>Cholera epidemic in Paris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td></td>
<td>Latest date for interview of Aladel and Étienne with Archbishop Quélen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 June</td>
<td></td>
<td>First Miraculous Medals struck</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1833</td>
<td>17 March</td>
<td>Letter of Aladel to Le Guillou</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 August</td>
<td></td>
<td>Letter of Lamboley to Vincentian Community in Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1834</td>
<td>April</td>
<td>Account of vision by Le Guillou</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 August</td>
<td></td>
<td>First printing of Aladel’s <em>Notice Historique</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td></td>
<td>Le Guillou adds brief description of visionary to his account</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1836</td>
<td>11 February</td>
<td>Aladel and Étienne send account of visions to Archbishop Quélen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 February</td>
<td></td>
<td>Archbishop Quélen decrees a canonical inquiry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 February</td>
<td></td>
<td>Canonical inquiry begins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 February</td>
<td></td>
<td>Interview with Aladel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 February</td>
<td></td>
<td>Interview with Étienne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 March</td>
<td></td>
<td>Second interview with Aladel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 July</td>
<td></td>
<td>Canonical inquiry ends. Verdict submitted toward end of 1836</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1841(?)</td>
<td>15 August</td>
<td>First account by Sister Catherine, vision of Virgin with globe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?</td>
<td></td>
<td>Second account by Sister Catherine, giving 27 November as date of apparition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1842</td>
<td></td>
<td>Aladel, in edition of <em>Notice Historique</em>, dates apparition as 30 September 1830</td>
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<tr>
<td>1848</td>
<td>February</td>
<td>Overthrow of Louis Philippe. Inauguration of the Second Republic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sister Catherine’s vision of the cross</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The good employment of time is so precious, and the time at our disposal on earth may be so advantageous to us that we should take great care not to waste it.

(Saint Vincent de Paul, conference to the Daughters of Charity, 14 June 1643)
# Comparison of the Visions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vision</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Two visions: (1) Heart of St. Vincent, without words “reanimate the faith.” (2) Vision of two sides of the medal as it now is.</td>
<td>During octave of 19 July 1830. Beginning of 1831, repeated twice at 6 months intervals.</td>
<td>Lamboley letter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vision of the medal.</td>
<td>Toward end of 1830, repeated twice at 6 month intervals.</td>
<td>Aladel to Le Guillou.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One vision, chapel of Rue du Bac, 5:30 PM. Virgin standing on globe. Virgin appears 3 times. Tableau reverses. Virgin’s request for an altar. No request for a medal.</td>
<td>Vigil of the first Sunday of Advent, 1830.</td>
<td>Catherine’s first account, 15 August 1841.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same vision but with command to have medal struck. Also request for altar.</td>
<td>27 November 1830</td>
<td>Catherine’s second account, c. 1841</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vision of the Medal, as it now is.</td>
<td>September 1830</td>
<td>Aladel, <em>Notice</em>, 1842.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vision of the Cross.</td>
<td>1848</td>
<td>Catherine’s account, 1848.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three visions of the heart of Saint Vincent on Three successive days. Changes of color in heart.</td>
<td>April 1830 (Catherine) 19 July 1830</td>
<td>Catherine to Chinchon, 1856. Lamboley, Lecerf, Aladel, Étienne.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vision of Christ in the sacrament.</td>
<td>Between April and Trinity Sunday, 1830.</td>
<td>Catherine to Chinchon, 1856.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midnight vision and conversation with Virgin. No mention of medal.</td>
<td>19 July 1830</td>
<td>Catherine to Chinchon, 1856.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midnight vision and conversation with Virgin. Virgin’s complaints about laxity.</td>
<td>19 July 1830</td>
<td>Catherine’s account, 30 October 1876.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Humility preserves charity.  
(Saint Vincent de Paul, conference to the Daughters of Charity, 14 July 1658)
The second station of the Cross.
The third station of the Cross.
The sixth station of the Cross.
The twelfth station of the Cross.
The thirteenth station of the Cross.


Courtesy of the artist, and the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill, Korean Province.
Our thanks to Sr. Jane Ann Cherubin, S.C., Seoul, Korea.