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The Chapel of the Rue du Bac

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1. Some historical markers

The former chapel of the Sacred Heart in the Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, on the rue du Bac, changed its name to the Chapel of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal in view of the manifestation of the Virgin Mary to Catherine Labouré in 1830. The spread of the medal confided to her began in 1832, and the people of Paris quickly began to call the medal “miraculous” at the time of the epidemics ravaging the city in those years.

The feast of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal, set for 27 November, was established on 23 July 1880, the 50th anniversary of its revelation. In 1897, Cardinal Richard, with the permission of Pope Leo XIII, went ahead with the coronation of the statue of the Virgin Mary.

Up to the year 1930, there was a constant presence of the faithful. They basically came from Paris to the chapel when it was open. They would pray there either individually or in groups that recited the rosary with the sisters, but they could not regularly participate in the liturgy since the very large community of sisters completely filled the chapel.

Sisters from different houses in Paris occasionally brought their young people to the chapel. At the time of the celebration of the novena, from 27 November to 8 December, participation was even more intense.

In 1930, the centennial of the apparitions was celebrated, particularly with the “International Pilgrimage of the Children of Mary,” which inaugurated the new era of large pilgrimages. Beginning that year, a series of pilgrimages began, adding to the regular presence of a certain number of people who came when the chapel was open, and for the annual novena. The sisters of the Paris houses continued to bring their youth, groups of the Children of Mary from France and elsewhere in Europe. In addition, there were pilgrimages of specialized groups, such as bus drivers, personnel from the Bon Marché department store next door, the Basque residents of Paris, parish pilgrimages celebrating Masses of thanksgiving for children who had made their solemn communion in Paris. This movement continued until 1940. In the recollection of people from the time, the high point of participation was reached in 1930 with the pilgrimages of the Children of Mary.

In 1940, the chapel began to be opened to the public for longer hours, since the sisters were fewer in number because of the departures occasioned by the war. From then on, the faithful in Paris were able to participate in the liturgies, as were the military ambulance personnel installed in the area. Whether led by the sisters or not, the pilgrimages of Paris schoolchildren continued.

From 1944 to 1953, increasing numbers of international pilgrimages arrived, for example, from Germany, England and America. Some of them numbered 400 members.

The “Perpetual Novena” began in 1953, celebrated in the chapel every Tuesday. Many Parisians attended the novena — four of them took place each Tuesday — and the evening Mass filled the chapel to overflowing. From 27 November to 8 December, extraordinary numbers of the faithful had to wait in line just to enter.

It should be noted that after the Council, a substantial change took place: at each novena, the Eucharist would be celebrated in order to unite it to the Marian devotion. A key text in the chapel reads: “Come to the foot of this altar.”

2. The evolution of the chapel

The chapel of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal is simultaneously a place of prayer, a pastoral center and a place of pilgrimage.

- *A place of prayer* for the people. The chapel has been this certainly since 1897, or at least since the first years of the 20th century. Currently, from 5000-6000 persons come to the chapel every day. A mixture of Parisians and foreigners come to pray individually. This is more or less the same population that we have on Tuesdays. The constant arrival of the faithful from all over the world is the sign of this current bringing people to prayer in the shrine close to the Virgin Mary. Also, the large number of priests arriving to celebrate the Eucharist should not be overlooked.

For the last 30 years, we have noticed an increasing number of pilgrims from the Antilles, Reunion, India, Africa and Southeast Asia, principally from Vietnam. The number of persons of color is very large, making up about half of the pilgrims. Those who come are from all walks of life, from all social and professional classes. However, the majority are simple people and, in general, despite their social or ethnic origin, they have a simple faith that they express in classical ways. For the majority, there is no attitude of rejection of a progressive evolution, nor of the necessary changes that have to be introduced from time to time. For our part, we have to be attentive to differences of culture and religious attitudes. The ways in which those from the Antilles express themselves reflect

the unique, even surprising, formation they received in their home country.

Since the reopening of the chapel on 11 June 1980 after major renovations, we have noticed a much larger number of men than in the past, and also that they are younger in age. Nonetheless, the largest group has always been the women.

- *A pastoral center* where the accent is placed on intercessory prayer to Mary and on prayer of thanksgiving. Since 1953, outside the specific celebrations on Tuesdays, every day there is a gathering for the Eucharist at least three times, for a Marian holy hour, with the rosary, finishing with Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, vespers with the community of the sisters; also regular Sunday Mass is celebrated in relation with parishes in an ecclesial perspective. On this point, it is good to mention that we are inserted into the pastoral ministry of the Diocese of Paris and that we attend pastoral meetings.

A pastoral team has been constituted, numbering five priests, about ten confessors, three full-time sisters, and a good group of lay and sister volunteers. These latter have their own work in the house, but they participate in various activities, such as welcoming individuals and groups, presenting audio-visual materials. We should not lose sight of the sisters who work elsewhere, such as in the sacristy, selling medals, and occupying various posts around the front entrance. More specifically, we have created a Vincentian environment that lets us warmly present the Vincentian Family in all its diversity.

- *A place of pilgrimage* presently frequented by groups from all over the world. Faced with this global phenomenon, we are looking for ways to respond with a Marian and Vincentian welcome in the spirit of fraternal collaboration where each one feels a part of the same mission in service of the message delivered here. To demonstrate our belonging to various ecclesial movements, we are members of the ARS (Association of Rectors of Shrines), the AOM (Association of Marian Works), and associate members of ANDDP (National Association of Diocesan Pilgrimage Directors).

As a pilgrimage center, the chapel presently receives, on average, about a dozen organized groups each week. They come from all corners of France and from all parts of the world. For France, there are school groups, catechism classes, Scouts, as well as retired persons. International pilgrimages are often composed of people who have come from Lourdes and are passing through Paris. Even there we find people of all ages. Despite the excitement of a foreign trip, we do not experience too much of a tourist mentality, since we find people who truly want to pray.

One other remark: although we might speak of a decline in Marian piety at

present, this is not really evident in the chapel of the Rue du Bac. The success of the novena begun in 1953 by Fr. Henrion and continued by his successors at the chapel seems to show that it responds to a deep need of the People of God relative to the presence of Mary in their life. In any case, we live amid a regular rhythm of participation. We can say today that, since the reopening of the chapel and the visit of Pope John Paul II, 31 May 1980, the number of pilgrims has been increasing and culminates at times on special occasions, such as the World Youth Days in 1997, when between 30,000-50,000 or more young people came each day; or at the time of major feasts, such as the Assumption, 15 August.

3. Current pastoral perspectives

We begin with the facts by making the following observations:

- The groups of those who frequent the chapel demonstrate what we normally refer to as “popular religion.”
- Their religious expression is that of the Catholic faith in its traditional form.
- We have taken special account of the religious approach of people from the Antilles, from Reunion, from Africa and elsewhere.
- We notice the presence of a certain number of young people without much doctrinal formation, but who demonstrate a large spiritual appetite.
- Even if at times we encounter attitudes that manifest formalism or even superstition, we are certain that the majority of the people are really praying and that many of them live an enlightened and active faith.

Although we are questioned less often by small numbers of people who react against our current pastoral approach, we have to affirm that the very large number of participants are resolutely faithful to the Council and who ask only to take part in the life of the chapel, such as by helping with the readings, by taking up the collections, and who take responsibility for other services, such as the sale of medals or greet guests at the entry. For a year, others have taken charge of the Internet site for the chapel:

<http://www.chapellenotredamedelamedaillemiraculeuse.com/>

- We see that the chapel is a place where many people come to bring to Christ and to Our Lady their troubles and difficulties, and it is a place where they come looking for peace. And just as wherever Mary has come to deliver a message, she brings the crowds to her Son in a movement of conversion and an approach to the Eucharist.

A priest is regularly present for the faithful who wish to approach the Sacrament of Reconciliation in a space arranged for this purpose at the back of the chapel; hundreds of persons receive the sacrament each day.

At least three times a day Mass is celebrated, and five times on Tuesdays, without counting the Masses of the groups of pilgrims in different languages. This is where we see the strong bond between Marian devotion and Eucharistic participation (more than 550,000 hosts are distributed each year, and this could easily be multiplied by four according to the criteria developed to estimate the number of those who enter the chapel.)

Far from decreasing, piety toward Mary is manifesting its dynamism here, and it is being enriched by actuating its reason for existing: to lead more to Christ.

With Mary, centered on Christ

We are trying, therefore, to have a pastoral approach clearly centered on Christ and fully consonant with an authentic Marian devotion, with the message of Our Lady at the Rue du Bac: “Come to the foot of this altar,” and the “M” with the cross and the two hearts depicted on the medal. This Christological concept is especially evident in the Eucharistic celebrations, which are an integral part of the Tuesday gatherings. But we are also careful to show clearly the link between Mary and her Son in all the celebrations, such as the rosary and the Holy Hour. In our fidelity to the Church, to its recent Council and to the teaching of Pope John Paul II, we attempt to carry out our pastoral ministry without misplaced initiatives but rather linked to the directions given and the open possibilities with regard to the liturgy.

. . . and on the Church

In the same spirit, we try to focus our pastoral outreach truly on the Church. We are intensely united to the great moments in the life of the Church and to its intentions, whether the universal Church, the local Church, or simply the parish. We do not wish to construct a spiritual refuge with a false security, a private “chapel” closed in on itself.

We attempt to shine a doctrinal light on the Christian life through our various activities. Thus, the Sunday homilies are oriented toward a deepening of the meaning of the Word of God. Likewise, when there is a question of the message of Our Lady, a message of faith, hope and charity, we attempt to highlight this in conferences or in youth formation on our web site, in the explanatory panels we exhibit for pilgrims, and in videos for sale.

We try to have a realistic and constructive pastoral approach. Rather than systematically countering what might appear as imperfect or even derivative, we try as much as possible to emphasize the positive to clarify and rectify.

4. Looking toward 2004

Our theme for the year will be “Witnesses to the faith, with Mary.” The Virgin Mary invites us to make our own the precious gift of faith handed on to us. We want this year to be particularly dynamic, since during the week of All Saints, 2004, Paris will host the international missionary congress, whose focus will be the new evangelization of Europe.

(JOHN RYBOLT, C.M., translator)