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“Mary’s Central Shrine”
Archdiocese of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA

by James Kiernan, C.M. and John Hodnett, C.M.

Province of USA-East

In 1912, Fr. Joseph Skelly, C.M., received a special project from the Provincial — the construction of a Minor Seminary in Princeton, New Jersey. In 1914, recalling the Miraculous Medals that his mother had placed on her 10 children, Fr. Skelly enclosed a Miraculous Medal with his fund-raising letters, asking Mary to bless his efforts. The response was so extraordinary that he felt that some special mark of gratitude to Mary was in order.

In March 1915, an organization devoted to Mary’s interests — the “Central Association of the Miraculous Medal” — came into existence, with Fr. Skelly as its Director. Its purpose was to propagate devotion to the Blessed Mother under the title of the Miraculous Medal and also to help in the formation of Vincentian students for the priesthood. *(Over the years the official “ends” of the Central Association have grown from two to four: spreading devotion to Mary Immaculate and her Miraculous Medal; the formation and education of our province’s seminarians; support of our aged and infirm confreres; support of our apostolic works on behalf of the poor.)*

In 1927, also in thanksgiving to Mary, Fr. Skelly introduced a nine-day Novena — four times a year — in the Public Chapel of the Immaculate Conception. *(The Vincentian Fathers built the Chapel in 1879 for their adjacent Seminary. At the request of Archbishop James F. Wood, it was built large enough to serve as a chapel of convenience for the surrounding neighborhood until 1902 when the local parish erected its own church. Bishop Ryan, C.M, of Buffalo, New York dedicated it.)* For three years, the Public Chapel hosted Solemn Novenas during November (Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal), February (Our Lady of Lourdes), May (Our Lady, Help of Christians) and August (Feast of the Assumption).

The idea of forming the Central Association had further consequences. In 1927, a change in the structure of the Public Chapel of the Immaculate Conception occurred. The cruciform chapel was slightly altered. The transept area (west side of the chapel), dedicated to St. Vincent de Paul, was removed and the area enlarged. In its place Fr. Skelly built “Mary’s Central Shrine.” He always spoke of it as the “center and heart of the Association.”

Surmounting the shrine altar is a statue of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal. The marble from which it has been sculptured is what is known as first quality statuary marble, so rare and so expensive that seldom is it used, and of such exceptional quality that effects are reproduced with it impossible to attain with other marbles no matter how fine. Truly has the sculptor of our shrine statue brought out in a wonderful manner the beauty and the purity we look for in her whom it represents.

At the center of the shrine altar and below the statue of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal sits a magnificent tabernacle made of Pavonazzo marble, Venetian mosaic and precious metal. Although the Blessed Sacrament does not reside in this tabernacle but in the main chapel sanctuary, this beautiful work of art draws the attention of sinners and saints alike to Mary the Mother of God.

The floor of the shrine presents a design artistically worked out in a rich combination of rare and semi-precious marbles, with inlays of Florentine marble mosaic. In the center is an especially noteworthy piece of mosaic work embodying the name “Mary” in honour of Mary the Mother of God. There is a rich marble altar rail that separates the shrine from the main chapel. To this day the exquisite beauty of the shrine attracts many people to it.

In May 1928, Fr. Skelly introduced the Association's quarterly magazine, *The Miraculous Medal*. In his first column Fr. Skelly stated: “Not long after the establishment of the Central Association of the Miraculous Medal, we saw the benefit, if not the necessity, of publishing a magazine which would be the organ of our Association, in order to bind by closer ties all workers for the cause of Mary Immaculate.” Printed four times a year, the magazine continues as an instrument of much good for all members of the “Central Association.” Over the years, it has been a vehicle for “telling the stories” about our province’s seminarians, missionaries and their varied works with and for the poor.

The devotions at the shrine became so popular and so fruitful that the Director of the Association made another momentous and courageous decision. While retaining the Solemn Novena in preparation for the feast of the Miraculous Medal, he decided to inaugurate a weekly Novena service. After consulting local parishes about their evening activities, he chose Monday as the day for the Perpetual Novena in honour of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal.

On Monday, December 8, 1930, in order to honour the 100th Anniversary of the Apparitions of our Blessed Mother to St. Catherine Labouré, Fr. Skelly himself initiated the first Monday Evening Novena Service. He used a “little Novena booklet” containing the prayers his confreres prepared especially for this Novena. In time, the number of Monday services grew to 12.

The Perpetual Novena is still alive and well today at Mary's "Central Shrine." Each Monday — at all ten Novena Services — two confreres are available for the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The shrine chapel underwent major interior renovation in 1979. More recently, we had to replace the tile roof and refurbish the steeple carillon.

In the millennium year, the Archdiocese designated the shrine chapel as one of six official pilgrimage sites. In the year 2002, upwards of 95,000 people visited the shrine church. We also hosted visits from 35 pilgrim group tours. In 2002, the Archdiocese of Philadelphia reported that the Miraculous Medal Novena is the most popular novena devotion in its parishes. The Eastern Province gives thanks to God and to his Blessed Mother for hearing the cries of the poor during these 88 years.

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