



Central Association of the Miraculous Medal
475 East Cheltenham Avenue
Philadelphia, PA 19144-5785
www.MiraculousMedal.org
Phone 800-523-3674

Contact:

Rev. Carl L. Pieber, CM
Executive Director
215-848-1010 work
215-498-1372 Cell
cpieber@cammonline.org

The Miraculous Medal Shrine

James W. Foley, the American journalist and war correspondent who was the first American beheaded by ISIS in August, 2014, once said:

“Drop a pebble in the water:
Just a splash, and it is gone;
But there's half-a-hundred ripples
Circling on and on and on,
Spreading, spreading from the center,
Flowing on out to the sea.
And there is no way of telling
Where the end is going to be.”

What ripple effect could a medal made in the image of Mary Immaculate have, either in Paris, or France, or even the world? Yet what was initially called the Medal of Our Lady of Grace became the peoples' “miraculous medal” by 1836. By 2015, there were 45 national Miraculous Medal Associations and innumerable billions of people wearing this medal. And the ripple of 1830 is still circling!

The Miraculous Medal Shrine of Philadelphia is dedicated to Mary Immaculate, but is only a piece of the great history of this medal. That history starts with a French sister, a Daughter of Charity, in Paris, France, in 1830.

Zoe Labouré was born on May 2, 1806, a French farm girl. When she was 23 years old, she entered the Catholic group of women called the Daughters of Charity in January, 1830. Three months later she became a formal member entering their seminary, and her first name became Catherine.

Catherine Labouré received the Miraculous Medal from Mary, the Mother of God, that same year in the summer and fall of 1830 during three apparitions. The first apparition to St. Catherine Labouré happened on the night of July 18, 1830.

Sleeping in the roof dormitory with the other young sisters, she was awakened around 11 pm by a young child of about five years of age, dressed in white. “Come, get up,” said the child holding a lit candle. “Mary is waiting for you in the Chapel.” Though the child called Catherine three different times to get up, Catherine noticed that none of the other sisters was awake. Yet the light around the child was bright and vivid. Hurriedly dressing, Catherine

followed the child down the wooden circular staircase. She saw that all the candles on the walls were aglow with light. When she arrived at the Chapel, it was radiantly lit and reminded her of Midnight Mass.

The child took her to the priest's Director's Chair in the front of the Sanctuary. Catherine knelt there. Soon she heard a rustling, like that of a silk dress in a breeze, and there before her was the Blessed Mother. Sitting in the chair, Mary placed Catherine's hands on her lap. They spoke for two hours.

This apparition is commemorated at the Miraculous Medal Shrine in Philadelphia. On the main level, to the left of the altar, is the precise replica of that chair where the Blessed Mother sat. In the chair, there is a piece of the cloth from that same chair where the Blessed Mother sat. It is a relic from that apparition. Declared a saint in 1947, St. Catherine Labouré is the only known person to have touched Mary after her Assumption.

Before we continue on, it is important for you to know why we call it a Shrine and not a church. In general, a shrine is a place erected or established by people because something very holy and important happened there.

Shrines of all types are popular today. People place flowers or mementos like stuffed animals or lit candles at a place where a loved one may have been or may have died. People create shrines on the side of the road.

People want to remember and venerate that place because it is sacred. Perhaps a life deeply loved was there and went to heaven. People who go to that place are empowered by the memory and may feel, touch or experience the divine and human life that was there, if only momentarily.

A part of where God has momentarily manifested his love, through his Mother in Paris, has been brought to Philadelphia for the love and veneration of all who go to this Shrine, a sacred place. Besides the replica of the chair and piece of cloth denoting this as a place that God has visited, besides the daily Mass and tabernacle of God's presence, there have been many favors granted to those who pray here. Something very divine and human happens here *all the time*.

People come to this Shrine because the Blessed Mother intercedes with God for people here. Every public Novena prayed in this Shrine details favors that people prayed for here and were granted or given by Mary Immaculate. Though there are no crutches, etc., I would like to share with you a few of the favors received here.

One woman wrote to me: "Dear Father, Please thank the Blessed Mother with me. After praying the Novena at the Shrine, my husband received a positive pet scan. He was diagnosed with stage 4 melanoma in January, and as of present his cancer cells are completely gone. Thank you, Mary, for this favor."

Or a man wrote to me, "Dear Father, Please Thank Mary for her intercession for my wife. I prayed the Novena nightly at the shrine, begging our Blessed Mother to help her. My wife had a nodule on her lung, but after praying to Mary, the second scan showed the nodule was gone."

More importantly than the cures from Cancer or diseases, people have regained their faith or have been reunited with their family after years of hatred by praying here or just walking through. Experiencing Mary's open arms of love, many are moved to make a heartfelt confession. It was these "miracles" of everyday life that caused the people in 1836 to proclaim the Medal of Our Lady of Grace as Mary's Miraculous Medal. For it seemed to them, as it does to us today, that those who put on this medal receive many graces of faith and have a change of heart.

Returning to our story that explains the Miraculous Medal, the second and third apparitions of the Blessed Mother to St. Catherine Labouré happened on the evening of November 27, in 1830. That evening, while St. Catherine was at evening prayer with the other sisters, Mary appeared to her in the Chapel of the Daughters of Charity in Paris, France. The other sisters did not see Mary but knew something was happening from the great light that appeared in the Chapel.

Catherine states that Mary first appeared holding a globe. Mary said that the globe represents the whole world – which she offers to God Almighty. This part of the second apparition is commemorated in the Miraculous Medal Shrine on the lower level with the figure of Mary holding the globe. She is surrounded by many vigil lights. This Shrine is dedicated to Mary under the title of *Virgin Most Powerful* or, in Latin, *Virgo Potens*.

St. Catherine explained this vision. Appearing in a white gown and veil and holding the globe, Mary said that this Globe represented the world for whom she constantly pleaded to God for help. Sanctified by His Redemption, the globe represents the Mystical Body of her Son Jesus Christ, whom she gives to God as she gave Jesus Christ to the world. The world still wanting, Mary gives this body to God, pleading for His grace and aid to all who ask her for help.

Mary is considered the most powerful of all human persons because she was chosen by God above all others. Her response to being chosen, her “Yes” at the Annunciation, began the redemption of her son Jesus Christ. Through Mary, humanity said “yes” to God entering into their life.

Mary never said no to God, and God never says no to her. Her pleading is always answered. She is our eternal and most perfect model of life in and with God. Thus, many vigil lights, representing hundreds of intentions sent to us at the Miraculous Medal Shrine, are placed in this room for her globe, begging Mary to seek God’s graces for them.

Vigil lights represent the person because the person owns them before they give them to Mary. They gave something of themselves, such as coins, buying the light for themselves. They also represent the donor’s intention. They are given to Mary as a gift to her and to keep their intention before her always.

In this Shrine also, there are pictures of the events of the apparition and of the life of St. Catherine Labouré. Installed in 1928, they are the sole mosaics in the Shrine.

Returning to our second apparition of November 27, 1830, there was another part of the apparition, sometimes called the third apparition. When St. Catherine looked up, Mary was seen as she is depicted on the medal and in the statue on the main level of the Miraculous Medal Shrine today.

She stood on the world, crushing the head of Satan, the devil, reminding us of the verse in Genesis 3:15 – “I will put enmity between you and the woman, between her seed (Jesus Christ) and you. She will crush your head, and you will lie in wait for her heel.”

During this second part of the apparition, Catherine saw around her the words of the famous Miraculous Medal prayer: “O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee.”

The glow around her became streams of light from some of her fingers. “These are the graces that flow to people who have asked for God’s favor,” Mary said. “Those fingers where there is no light, represent graces that no one has asked for from God. Come to the foot of the altar and with confidence ask God, through my intercession, for these graces.”

As Mary turned, Catherine saw the cross coming up from the large ‘M’ representing Mary at the foot of the cross. Underneath this were the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Around this were twelve stars representing the 12 apostles and the 12 tribes of Israel.

Mary then commanded Catherine, “Have a medal struck in this image. For all who wear this blessed medal around their neck, shall receive special graces eternally from God through me.”

In 1832, over a thousand medals were struck and promoted by the Congregation of the Mission or Vincentian Fathers and Brothers. They were founded in 1625, by St. Vincent de Paul. They staff the Miraculous Medal Shrine today.

By 1836, over a million medals were being worn by faithful devotees of Mary. It was around this time that this medal of our Lady of Grace became popularly known as the Miraculous Medal for all the miracles, both physical and spiritual, that were reported by its wearers.

Today, Mary commands us to go to this altar, too. The use of the word “altar” is also the symbol of the Holy Mass, where Mary’s flesh and blood, her Son, Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection are celebrated. We, too, are called to offer ourselves to God at Mass, and there ask God, through Mary, for what we need. This is not a new command for us but the most important command ever given to us. Recall what Mary commanded us to do at the Wedding Feast in Cana, (Jn. 2:5) “Do what he tells you.”

God worked totally through Mary to give himself to the world in Jesus Christ, and continues to this day to work through her to give us Divine Life. The open arms of Mary constantly invite us to stand at this altar and see in her the compassion, the mercy and love of God just for you.

These great Shrines and places of prayer and solitude are all contained in this building that today is called the Miraculous Medal Shrine. It took four years to complete, beginning in 1875. The model of the Shrine, first called the Chapel of the Immaculate Conception, was very ambitious, imitating, on a slightly smaller scale, the great Church of Eastern Christianity, Saint Sophia, in Istanbul, Turkey. Dominated by a large center dome held up by massive archways, the Shrine is a yet a crucifix form with the nave and altar being crossed by a chapel on each side.

The Shrine seats 400 comfortably and expands with the choir loft to 500+. However, pictures of Novena Services during World War II and later pictures of sermons from the pulpit by Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, the first TV evangelist, show people sitting on the sanctuary and side steps near the main altar and side shrines. They packed in as many as possible. As an aside, St. Katherine Drexel, with 5–8 African American students, prayed in this Shrine almost every Monday at the Novena Services. She sat in the third pew from the front on the right side toward the Marian Shrine.

The Stations of the Cross on the walls around the Shrine are oil, painted on copper plates with metal frames finished in polished gold. They are imported from France and are unique, as the artist never made another set like them. He died before the stations reached this Shrine.

The Large Rose Window above the choir loft uses a distinct and rare stained glass called Bernardini blue. The window is modeled after the stained glass of Sainte Chappelle in Paris that was built in 1248 by St. Louis, King of France. The window was installed here in 1935.

The stained glass windows of the saints that are above and on either side of the pews are presently being evaluated and researched. Initially they were believed to be from the school of the famous New York glass maker, John La Farge. However, recent tests indicate that they may be the work of Louis Comfort Tiffany. The difficulty stems from the fact that both men trained in the same school of glass-making at the same time.

On a sunlit day, if you go to the side of the window on your right (left side of Shrine as you look at altar) and look up at the window, the cut glass sparkles as if it is a gem. This indicates the Tiffany type and style of inlaid glass.

Most places of worship have one style of stained glass. This Shrine has four different types of stained glass, making it very distinct. As we have just said, the Saints are American stained glass; the rose window is French; the Sacred Heart on the left side of the Shrine, is German; and the stained glass that is in the dome above the sanctuary that depicts the seven Christian virtues (faith, hope, love, etc.) is Italian.

The Shrine was remodeled from 1979-1980, in response to the decrees of the Second Vatican Council that ended in 1964. At this time, the mural painting of *Mary, Mother of the Church*, the title that the Council gave to Mary, was installed in the great dome in the center of the Shrine. As a tease to viewers, Emmanuel F. Utti purposely painted this mural to look like a mosaic, which, of course, it is not.

The main altar is the original altar from 1879. It is composed of Italian white Carrara marble from the northern Tuscany region and red marble from the Numidia, Northern African area in Algeria.

The tabernacle, modeled on the onion domes of the Churches of Eastern Christianity, celebrates the unity of Eastern and Western Christianity. It is a reminder to pray for the Eastern Church after the onslaught of Communism.

Finally, the three major mural paintings encircling the sanctuary are nationally registered paintings and are patented. The panels in order from the left depict the Annunciation, the Immaculate Conception, the original namesake for the chapel, and the Nativity. They are each 13 feet wide and 18 feet tall.

The American Italian artist, Virgilio Tojetti (1849-1901) was commissioned to paint these three murals. He completed them in the late 1890's and are some of his last works.

Tojetti studied with the famed Philadelphia artist Thomas Eakins, whose painting of the first surgery, called *The Gross Clinic*, was bought in 2009 for \$68 million by the Walmart Company.

The statue of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal on the upper level to the right, was sculpted by the Italian artist Georgio di Giovanni Udny. He learned marble sculpting from his famous uncle, Giovanni Strazza. It was sculpted in Pietrazanta, Italy, in 1925. It is of first quality Carrara marble.

This Shrine is dedicated to the Mother of God, Mary, as depicted by this Statue. It is a depiction of the Blessed Mother as she appeared in the second part of the second apparition on November 27, 1830.

On the lower level of the Miraculous Medal Shrine are other smaller shrines to the Blessed Mother under her different titles. The first is the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe, just to the right of the Virgin Most Powerful Shrine. The first apparition of our Lady of Guadalupe was December 9, 1531, almost 300 years before the apparition of our Lady of the Miraculous Medal.

This is a precise reproduction of the Tilma, the poncho, of St. Juan Diego in Mexico City. It is painted on the same fabric as was his cloak at that time. This is attested to on the back side of the painting. Of special devotion to the Mexican people, Our Lady of Guadalupe is the patroness of all of the Americas.

To the right is the statue of the Sacred Heart. The Sacred Heart is on the back side of the Miraculous Medal and holds an honored place in the Shrine. The Sacred Heart represents the Love and Mercy of Jesus Christ for us. Of course, these Virtues were taught to him by his mother, Mary.

To the right of this is the Shrine of Our Lady of Vailankanni. She is the patroness of India. This Shrine was a gift of the Indian People who come to the Shrine. Mary is very dear to the people who call her "MaMa Mary." The story of her three apparitions with Jesus, as the Madonna and Child in India, can be found on the left side as you enter this small Shrine.

To the right of this is the Miraculous Medal itself. Designed by the Blessed Mother, the medal is detailed in this shrine for everyone's veneration. This shrine reminds us also that the Miraculous Medal is a type of portable shrine, as you are able to place this shrine around your neck to go with you everywhere.

Just touching the medal reminds you of the Mother who loves you and waits for you with open arms. Hanging on a chain in front of your heart, it denotes the sacred place where God dwells in you. We hope that no one leaves the Miraculous Medal Shrine without one.

Finally, there is the shrine with the unique statue of St. Joseph, spouse of Mary. Seated on a chair, Joseph is holding the implements of Christ's Crucifixion in one hand and the child Jesus in the other. He lovingly looks at Jesus as Angels at Joseph's feet hold fast to Jesus.

The Miraculous Medal Shrine is a wonderful gift of prayer and solace to all. Celebrating Mary, it intercedes with God for all who enter.

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

Rev. Carl L. Pieber, CM
September 4, 2015