

The Pioneer Priest Of The Miraculous Medal

Father Aladel, C.M.

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I. EARLY LIFE OF “THE PRIEST OF THE MIRACULOUS MEDAL”.

FATHER ALADEL was born at Les Termes, in the department of Cantal, Southern France, the 4th May 1800. It was fitting that he should be born in the month of Mary, as he was one day to become one of her most devoted servants. He received at his baptism the names John Mary; the former after the “the beloved disciple,” the latter in honour of Our Lady.

His father was a small farmer who had to work hard to support his family. As the children grew up, they assisted him in the farm work. The same field was sometimes used partly for tillage and partly for grazing, so someone had always to be present when the cattle were turned in to graze on the pasture, to prevent them from trespassing on the tillage. This was John’s duty, and as he was engaged on the work for hours at a stretch, his father gave him religious books to read, among which were the lives of the saints of his own country. His days were spent in ideal surroundings. He had only to lift his eyes from his books to see the beauty of Nature everywhere — a reflex of the uncreated beauty of Nature’s God. In the month of May for which he had a special love, the orchards were white with blossoms, “the fragrant snow of spring,” and the, cream and rose blossoms of the horse-chestnut, crowded close together, reminded him of the array of candles on the High Altar for Benediction. All around him a great silence reigned, broken only by the occasional bleating of sheep, the lowing of cattle, or the song of birds. He loved the silence and the peace of the great open spaces where the zephyrs blew; causing the growing corn to bend gracefully as if bowing in lowly reverence and homage to its Creator.

The Aladel family lived in frugal comfort. In the home, which was furnished with artistic French taste, there was order and cleanliness. Outside, the roses clambered over trellised arbours, and the lilac and laburnum perfumed the neatly kept garden.

John’s parents were good, pious Catholics, whose great aim was to encourage their children by word and example in the practice of their holy faith. During the long winter evenings, the father taught them their prayers and instructed them in Christian doctrine, and the work of the day was brought to a close by the recitation of the Family Rosary. It was in this ideal Catholic home and in this religious atmosphere, that John Aladel was brought up. Here was laid the foundation of those eminent virtues and qualities for which in after-life he was distinguished. The leading characteristics of his boyhood days were his great devotion to Our Lady (he was often seen saying the Rosary on his way to and from the fields), his love of reading spiritual books, his studious habits, and his love of solitude.

He received his elementary education at Saint-Flëur, a few miles from his own home. Here he made his First Communion for which he had prepared with great diligence, earnestness and piety. He

always looked back on the day of his First Communion as the happiest day of his life. He then consecrated himself to Mary Immaculate. It must be remembered that the dogma of the Immaculate Conception had not then been defined. During this period, his vocation for the priesthood was clearly shown, and his whole aim was to acquire the knowledge that would be necessary and useful to him as a priest. He attained brilliant success as a student, and his talents were acknowledged by all, yet he was never known to boast. He was thoughtful and serious, but not dour and was a general favourite. The habit of concentration, which he cultivated, contributed much to his success.

Having graduated with distinction in the preparatory school, he was admitted to the Diocesan Seminary, which was also situated in Saint-Flëur, in the month of November, 1817. Four years later, when he was in the second year of the theology course, an event occurred which changed the whole course of his life. Having read the life of Saint Vincent de Paul, he began to evince an interest in the Congregation of the Mission founded by that great saint.

Gradually, young Aladel's interest in the Congregation increased, and rightly regarding a vocation to the religious life as a favour that must be merited, he prayed every day to the Blessed Virgin to obtain for him the grace of admission to the Congregation of the Mission. In return for such a great favour, he promised to serve her more faithfully all his life. His desire to enter the Congregation was greatly increased, when he learned that the Children of Saint Vincent de Paul had from the beginning a particular and special devotion to the Immaculate Conception. After a period of prolonged and anxious consideration, he decided to ask for admission, and had now to face the practical difficulties following on that decision. In order to obtain the permission of his Bishop it was necessary to advance weighty reasons for his action, but to the credit of the Bishop, it must be stated that he placed no obstacles in the way of this young man, who was obviously actuated by the highest motives. So, Our Lady, to whom he committed his cause, enabled him to surmount all difficulties.

There was, however, a further and more painful trial in store for him. He had come to this decision without consulting his parents. He knew that his departure from Saint-Flëur to Paris, would be a cause of great disappointment to them. It was their dearest wish to have him a priest in his own diocese, and to accomplish this, they were prepared to make great sacrifices. It grieved him to disappoint his parents whom he dearly loved, but he felt bound to respond to the call of God, so clear and unmistakable. "Follow Me," sounded in his ears, and it was a matter of duty for him to obey that call. Distressed at disappointing his parents he confided his troubles to a fellow-student and friend. To his surprise, he found that his friend had also decided to ask for admission to the Congregation of the Mission, and was experiencing the same difficulties as he himself. They made no hasty decision, but prayed to God for light and guidance. They also consulted their superiors, and, finally, with their approval, it was decided that the two students should write to their respective families, and inform them of their resolution. This was accordingly done and, without seeing their parents again, they set out for the Mother-House of the Congregation, Saint Lazare, Paris, where they were received on the 12th November, 1821.

II. A SON OF SAINT VINCENT.

Aladel's first impressions of the Mother-House were not favourable. There was no chapel, and the studies were badly organised. This condition of things can be accounted for by the fact that France was only then recovering from the disastrous effects of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars. In 1790 the Congregation of the Mission was, like all other religious communities, suppressed

and the priests expelled. Some were put to death, others donned lay attire and went into hiding, and some escaped to foreign countries. It was only in 1804 that the survivors, few in number and old, crept back timidly from their hiding places to resume the work which had been so rudely interrupted. They did not return to the old Mother-House known as “Saint Lazare,” but to new premises in the Rue de Sèvres, which lacked the facilities of the old establishment. This explains the disorganisation, which existed when John Aladel arrived at the new Mother-House, which was also dedicated to Saint Lazare.

Some of the students, disheartened, returned home. Not so, young Aladel, whose strong, resolute character would not allow the first breath of adversity to divert him from his purpose. He faced all difficulties and overcame them. Bringing to his studies the same sustained effort that distinguished him at Saint-Flèur he met with the same success. After two years study, he was allowed to take the four Community Vows — Poverty, Chastity, Obedience and Stability — and his joy was complete when, in 1824, he was ordained priest. Henceforth, we shall know him as Father Aladel.

Had his own personal wishes been consulted, he would have expressed a preference for Missionary work, but he was appointed, instead, Professor of Philosophy in the Seminary at Amiens. At the end of a year however, he was recalled to the Mother-House and the opportunity, for which he longed, was given to him — he was sent on the Missions. For the Apostolic work now entrusted to him, he had long prepared, with his customary thoroughness and efficiency. He who would sanctify others must himself be sanctified, and Father Aladel had sanctified himself by prayer and mortification. The beauty of his interior life and his deep spirituality are revealed in the following extract taken from notes which he had written for his own guidance.

“I will practise humility, repressing promptly all thoughts of pride and vanity, opposing them by sentiments of self-contempt. To God alone be the glory of my works, and of my sufferings, I will devote myself to the humble submission of my will in perfect obedience to my superiors, and to an exact observance of the Rule. I want to find my happiness in being forgotten by creatures; to study my defects, in order to correct them; and to know my innumerable weaknesses, so as to feel humble. I will do all for the love of Jesus and Mary.”

His success as a missionary was phenomenal; nevertheless at the end of a year, he was recalled to the Mother-House and at the early age of twenty-eight, he was appointed Spiritual Director to the Sisters of Charity in the Rue du Bac. As Director, he had certain fixed principles to which he faithfully adhered. His method was to guide his penitent, not by extraordinary means, but by making her reach perfection along the ordinary road of service of the poor, for there is but ‘one royal road to Heaven, the way of the cross’. He was distrustful of anything that was out of the ordinary. It is well to bear these facts in mind in view of subsequent events.

He celebrated Mass at an early hour each morning, in the chapel of the Rue du Bac, and then walked back to Saint Lazare, where he heard confessions until 11.30 am. It was usually mid-day before he broke his fast. He conducted spiritual exercises in the various houses of the Sisters in Paris, and attended Conferences at Saint Lazare. He regarded time as so precious that he did not wish to avail even of the recreation hour, and it was only under obedience that he joined his confreres during, the short period of relaxation. His love of solitude and silence was such that, when not engaged on his priestly duties he retired to his own room for study and prayer. He seemed to have constantly before his mind the maxims laid down — by Saint John of the Cross:

“Wisdom enters through love, silence and mortification.”

“Keep silence and have continual converse with God.”

“Walk in silence with God.”

Leading such an active, busy life, how could he observe silence? He did so by setting apart a sanctuary in his heart, which he consecrated to silence. The door of that sanctuary was closely curtained, so as to exclude the least possible sound from the outside world, and within it, he conversed continually with God, without fear of distraction or interruption. Freed from things of earth, his soul soared to heavenly heights and traveled far on the path of Christian perfection.

It was no wonder then that this young chaplain, so recollected and grave, so earnest and zealous, so austere and holy, gained the respect and confidence of his spiritual subjects. It seemed indeed as if he were specially raised up by God to accomplish some great mission in the world. And so it was.

III. FATHER ALADEL’S MISSION.

Father Aladel, as chaplain, took an active part in the processions and religious ceremonies connected with the-transfer of the holy relics of Saint Vincent on the 25th April, 1830, from the Community Chapel in the Rue du Bac to the new Vincentian Church in the Rue de Sèvres. One of the religious exercises was a Novena conducted in the latter church.

The Novena had only just ended when a young novice came to Father Aladel and related to him a very wonderful story. The name of the novice was Catherine Labouré, who had arrived at the Mother-House on the 21st April. [She was to be canonised in 1947.] She said that she had seen the heart of Saint Vincent in the Community Chapel on three consecutive days during the Novena above the place where the relics had rested. On the last day of the Novena, she again saw the heart, and she understood that great misfortunes would overwhelm France; that the King would be deposed but that the two Vincentian communities would be preserved from harm. Her Director, who was noted for his prudence, told the novice that this was a delusion and advised her to banish all such thoughts from her mind.

But Divine favours to Catherine did not cease. On Trinity Sunday, Our Saviour appeared to her during Mass as a King with a cross on His breast. At the reading of the Gospel, the cross slipped to His feet and all His kingly jewels fell from Him. She understood from this that the King of France would be dethroned. She again went to her Director and informed him of this revelation, but he only repeated his previous advice that it was a delusion. He began to have fear for the sanity of this young visionary.

Father Aladel heard nothing more from Catherine until she came to tell him of further revelations made to her on the night of the 18th July. She told him that the Blessed Virgin had appeared to her in the chapel and conversed with her for two hours, during which Our Lady said that a mission would be entrusted to her; that she should tell her Director everything; that she would see certain things, and that she should give an account of them to him. Our Lady also revealed to her that misfortunes were about to overwhelm France, that the throne would be destroyed, and that the whole world would be convulsed by manifold calamities. Father Aladel listened to her story with coldness and indifference; again told her that it was a delusion or dream, and sternly advised her to think no more about it. The fact that the King [Charles X] was dethroned on the 30th July did not shake Father Aladel’s unbelief.

Months passed and the Director thought that the incident of the revelations had closed. To his surprise, however, Catherine came to him again with an account of another vision, which took place

on the evening of the 27th November. She told him that she was in the chapel for the evening meditation when she again saw the Blessed Virgin in the Sanctuary. There appeared about Our Lady an oval on which was written in letters of gold: "O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to you." On the reverse side was the monogram of the Blessed Virgin composed of the letter "M" surmounted by a cross with a bar at its base, and under the "M" were the two hearts of Jesus and Mary: one was encircled by a crown of thorns and the other pierced by a sword.

A voice said to Catherine: "Have a medal struck after this model. All who wear it will receive great graces, especially if they wear it suspended round the neck. Graces will be showered on all who wear it with confidence."

But Father Aladel did not believe this story either, and repeated the same advice as before. After a time, however, there were signs of weakening in his opposition, for one day, he asked his young penitent was there any writing on the reverse side of the medal. She replied that she had not seen any writing. "Then," said he, "ask the Blessed Virgin what she wishes to be inscribed on it." Catherine promised that she would do so, and after some days, she heard during the meditation an interior voice saying:

"The 'M' and the two Hearts say enough."

She duly informed her Director, but he still took no action.

At the end of her year's novitiate, Catherine was transferred to the Enghien Hospice for old men; but Father Aladel still remained her Director, as he was chaplain to that institution also. Seven months passed and nothing was done. Then one day Our Lady informed Catherine that she was displeased because her commands were not carried out. "But dear Mother," said the Sister, "you see he (the Director) does not believe me." "Do not fear," was the reply, the day will come when he will do what I desire, for he is my servant and he would not wish to displease me."

When the Director heard this he was very much troubled and said to himself: "if Mary is displeased, it cannot be with the young Sister, who in her position is powerless to do anything, so it must be with me."

In these circumstances, he could no longer take on himself the responsibility of rejecting the communications made to him by his penitent. So he consulted his Superior, Father Etienne, without however disclosing the name of the Sister, who desired to remain unknown. It was then decided that such an important matter should be submitted to the Archbishop. Accordingly, the two priests called on Monsignor De Quelen, Archbishop of Paris, to whom a detailed account of the visions was given. Having listened with great interest to the wonderful story, His Grace said that he could see no objection to having the medal struck, as it was in no way opposed to the Catholic Faith. On the contrary, it was conformable to the devotion of the faithful to Our Lady that he felt it would contribute to her honour, and he requested to have some of the medals sent to him.

Ecclesiastical authority having now been obtained, Father Aladel took steps to have the medal struck. There was however, considerable delay, and it was not until the end of June, 1832, that the first lot of 2,000 medals was received. The Director gave one of the medals with his own hand to Catherine as if to make an amende honorable to her of his prolonged opposition. Her only remark was: "It must now be propagated."

As requested, some of the medals were sent to Monsignor De Quelen, who was then much troubled about the spiritual condition of Monsignor De Pradt, an Archbishop who had fallen into serious

error and had incurred the penalty of excommunication. His Grace had done all in his power by prayer and personal appeal to secure Monsignor De Pradt's conversion, but without avail. So when he received the medals he determined to make a final attempt to reconcile the wanderer to the Church. Taking one of the medals, he went to visit him, but was refused admission and returned home. Soon afterwards, he received a message requesting him to return, and the Archbishop again went to De Pradt's house where he was received with courtesy and respect. The unhappy man retracted all his errors, expressed deep sorrow for the scandal he had caused, and was there and then reconciled to the Church. Later the same evening he received the Last Sacraments and died that very night in the arms of the Archbishop. This, a death-bed repentance, is the first miracle attributed to the medal. His Grace informed Father Aladel at once. This was in 1837.

There was now no longer any room for doubt or hesitation. The medal must be made known to the public, so Father Aladel wrote a pamphlet in which he gave a detailed account of its origin without in any way indicating the Sister to whom Our Lady had appeared. The book was eagerly read and in the first year alone, six editions were published. A true picture of the rapid spread of the medal may be obtained from the following extract from his book:

"The medals of the Immaculate Conception were propagated in a truly marvellous manner, among all classes and in all provinces. We received the most consoling accounts from every side. 'They are reviving fervour in both town and country', we are assured by priests, themselves filled with the spirit of God; while distinguished prelates testified to their sure confidence in these medals which they looked on as a means designed by Providence to revive the enfeebled faith of our country. And truly, they are reawakening it day by day in many hearts in which it seemed extinct. They are restoring peace and unity in families rent with discord; in fact, none of those who wear them fails to feel their salutary effect. In all parts of France, there appears a growing eagerness among the faithful of all ages and conditions to procure the miraculous medal. Indifferent Christians, hardened sinners, Protestants, unbelievers, the Jews themselves, beg for it, receive it with delight, and wear it with devotion. Nor is it propagated in France alone; it has spread rapidly over Switzerland, Italy, Spain, Belgium, England; America, the East, reaching as far even as China. In Naples, no sooner was it known, than the Cathedral chapter made application for it at one of our houses; the King had a number struck in silver for himself and his court and family, and ordered a million for distribution during the outbreak of cholera, with the result that it is held in honour in nearly every house and many of the churches. In Rome the Generals of the Religious Orders took an active part in the propaganda, while the Holy Father himself placed the medal at the foot of the crucifix and gave it to people as a special token of his blessing."

It is, perhaps, desirable at this stage to be clear as to the precise meaning of the word "miracle." A miracle may be defined as a wonderful thing performed by supernatural power as a sign of some special mission or gift and explicitly ascribed to God. Saint Thomas Aquinas teaches that "those effects are rightly to be termed miracles which are wrought by Divine power apart from the order usually observed in nature, and they are apart from the natural order because they are beyond the order or laws of the whole created nature."

In the Christian view of the world, miracles have a place and a meaning. They arise out of the personal relation between God and man, and are so interwoven with our religion, so connected with its origin, its promulgation, its progress, and its whole history, that it is impossible to separate them from it. Beyond the sphere of nature there is another realm of existence peopled by spiritual beings and departed souls. Both realms are under the over-ruling Providence of God. A miracle is a factor

in the Providence of God over men. Hence, the Glory of God and the good of men are the primary and supreme ends of every miracle.

In the Scriptures and Church history, we learn that inanimate objects are instruments of Divine power, not because they have any excellence in themselves, but through a special relation to God. Thus, we see that the medal, an inanimate object having no excellence in itself, is made an instrument of Divine power. The miracle is due to the intervention of God, and its nature is revealed by the utter lack of proportion between the effect and what are called means or instruments.

IV. OTHER HEAVENLY MISSIONS.

The work accomplished by Father Aladel in connection with the introduction and propagation of the Miraculous Medal was so immense and so far-reaching in its results, that his labours in other directions are apt to be overlooked. He was in fact entrusted with two other Missions:

- (1) To restore the Rule to its original rigour;
- (2) To found an Association to be known as “the Association of the Children of Mary Immaculate.”

On the occasion of the first apparition, Our Blessed Lady said to Sister Catherine:

“Tell him who directs you that, though he will not be Superior, he will one day be charged, in a particular manner with the Community, and he is to do his utmost to restore the Rule in all its rigour. When the Rule has been restored, another Community will wish to be united to yours. This is against the ordinary custom, but that Community is dear to me, so tell them to receive it. God will bless the union and all will enjoy a great peace and the Community will increase.”

Sister Catherine duly informed Father Aladel that ‘Our Lady wished to entrust the mission to him’ and enumerated the reforms that Our Lady desired. It may be asked what was the cause of the non-observance of the Rule? It must be remembered that we are dealing with the year 1830. The Community had passed through all the horrors of the French Revolution. One would have thought that the Sisters would have been spared, but, in the eyes of the Revolutionaries, they were guilty of one great crime: they stood for religion, and therefore they could not be tolerated. Hence, they were driven from their convents and hospitals, but their love for the poor was such that they had assumed lay attire and thus disguised, they carried on their blessed work. In these circumstances, community life was rendered practically impossible and therefore the Rule could not be observed. By 1830, however, conditions had become normal and the time seemed to be ripe for a return to the primitive spirit of the Community.

The strict observance of the Rule was, indeed, in harmony with Father Aladel’s own wishes, and he lost no time in placing the matter before his Superior, Father Etienne who warmly approved of the reforms suggested. Sometime afterwards, Father Etienne was appointed Superior-General, and during his term of office, he introduced the reforms, and in that task, he received the co-operation and whole-hearted support of Father Aladel. We can see the loyal spirit in which the reforms were accepted by the Community by the following extract from a letter written by a Sister at that time:

“It seemed as if we had returned to the time when our Saintly Mother, Louise de Marillac, under our holy Founder, laid the foundation of the Community. The direction of our Superiors, inspired by the tender love of the Divine Master, was gladly followed by the Sisters of Charity, who without question, submitted to all their desires. In the Mother-House, the fervour, recollection, and harmony which reigned shone in all the happy faces.”

It will thus be seen that the introduction of the reforms was accompanied by a renewal of the spirit of the Founders. It was a second Spring. There abides in the Church the Divine gift of perpetual youth. With her, it is always Spring, and her vitality is such that she continually puts forth fresh shoots of devotion and charity, age after age. The Spring belongs as of right not only to the Church at large, but to the life of every individual Catholic. It is the life of grace, and if we could only see it, there is a perpetual burgeoning of new life, which is, not restricted to a particular time, as, for instance, Retreats, but is present with every worthy reception of the Sacraments. There is a perpetual renovation of our nature, if we could only catch the hour of grace, utilize it, and make it our very own. What fair flowers bloomed in the Community during this second Spring. Let Father Etienne himself tell us:

“The Congregation of the Mission increased and developed. On their part, the Sisters of Charity were still more remarkably favoured by a wonderful prosperity, for, in the greatest shrines of Christendom no greater privileges were bestowed than in their humble Chapel, consecrated by the august Presence of the Queen of Heaven. There, a great number of girls, irresistibly attracted, went to be clothed under the eyes of Mary Immaculate, in, the habit of the Servants of the poor, and then, as valiant soldiers, they went forth to far-distant lands, their heroism and devotedness causing great exultation to the Church and wonder to the world.”

Saint Magdalen of Canossa was inspired by the example of these followers of Saint Louise de Marillac. In 1808, Saint Magdalen began charitable work in Verona, and in 1828 set up the Institute of the Daughters of Charity, the Canossian Daughters of Charity, Servants of the Poor (briefly Canossian Sisters), which is a Catholic religious order in which they strive "To Make Jesus Known and Loved" addressing the needs of the poor and abandoned through sharing bread, understanding, education, evangelization, pastoral care of the sick, formation of the laity and spiritual exercises. Saint Magdalen was beatified in 1941 and canonized in 1988.

A Community of Sisters of Charity, founded in the United States by Mother Elizabeth Seton, who was beatified in 1963, [and canonized in 1975,] was anxious to unite with the French Sisters of Saint Vincent de Paul, and as far back as 1810, arrangements had been made to bring about the union. Difficulties, however, were placed in the way by the French Government of the day, and the negotiations were in consequence abandoned. However, in 1849, the matter was again taken up, and, early, in 1850, the union was happily effected. On the 25th March of that year, the Feast of the Annunciation, the American Sisters renewed their vows, for the first time, with the formula used by the French Sisters, and on the 8th December, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, the American Sisters assumed the habit and white Cornette of the French Sisters, thus completing the union. The prophetic words of Our Lady were thus fully verified.

The part played by Father Aladel in bringing about the reforms so earnestly desired by Our Lady has been gracefully acknowledged by Father Etienne, Superior-General. In a letter to the heads of the Community, announcing the death of that devoted priest, he stated,

“He has been to me what Father Portail was to Saint Vincent. If the former took a large part in the work of the foundation of your Community by Our Blessed Father, Father Aladel did not render me less cooperation in the great work of its restoration, and of its return to the primitive spirit.

“I cannot refrain from saying this to you.”

In one of the written accounts of the Apparitions, Sister Catherine stated:

“One day I remember saying ‘Father Aladel, the Blessed Virgin has another Mission for you. She wishes you to begin an Order. You are to be its Founder and Director. It is to be an Association of Children of Mary Immaculate. The Blessed Virgin will bestow many graces on it, and Indulgences will be granted to it. It will be a great joy to her,”

It will be observed that no indication was given respecting the persons who were to be enrolled in this Association, nor how it was to be constituted. One thing only was known — the members were to be called “Children of Mary Immaculate.” Everything else was left to the holy Founder; he was to exercise his own judgment and discretion to try to discover by prayer God’s Will in the matter. For a long time he had been anxious to find some means of protecting the innocence of the young girls, who, on leaving the schools of the Sisters, took up positions in offices, workshops, factories, etc. Here, in the big city of Paris, their faith - and morals - were exposed to great danger. Many of them had lost contact with the Sisters, and there was no one to take any interest in their spiritual welfare. Father Aladel was well aware that many fell away, and this grieved his heart. Here then was a means inspired by heaven, to remedy the evil — an Association which would bind the girls together in one large family, under the protection of Mary Immaculate. This wise and prudent Director would arrive at no hasty decision, but having carefully thought out the matter, he placed his views before his Superior and friend, Father Etienne, who warmly approved of them, and encouraged him to proceed with the good work. Of course, he had difficulties to contend with, but he faced them with quiet confidence and ultimately overcame all obstacles.

His first care was to draw up Statutes and Rules for the government of the Association, which he placed under the special protection of Mary Immaculate, in whose honour it was founded. He explained that exterior honour is not sufficient: that the truest honour consists in imitating her virtues, especially her angelic purity, her profound humility, her perfect obedience, and her incomparable charity. He decided that he would begin with the girls attending the schools conducted by the Sisters. The task he set himself was, not to prepare them for the Cloister, but to safeguard them against the snares and pit-falls of the world. They would be no longer like the proverbial bundle of sticks, easily broken, when separated, but they would be bound together in sweet bonds by Mary Immaculate, and in that unity, they would be unbreakable. They were to meet every Sunday for the recitation of the Little Office of the Immaculate Conception, and perform the other spiritual exercises, as required by the Rules. Not every girl would be enrolled, but only those who were deemed worthy. At the Reception, which would be a solemn religious function, they would be invested with the Miraculous Medal attached to a Blue Ribbon, which would be worn round the neck.

In due course, they would leave school and go out into the world to take up positions, or to return to their homes. This would be the testing time. Would they be faithful to their promises and good resolutions? Would they continue amid the distractions of the world the spiritual exercises to which they were accustomed in the school? In short, would they remain faithful Children of Mary? Happily, the success of the new Association exceeded all expectations, and gave great joy and consolation to the heart of its founder and director. By their exemplary conduct, their robust Catholic Faith, their Christian virtues, their charity, and their good works, they exercised a profound influence on all with whom they came in contact. They were in the world, but not of it. They were as a light shining in the midst of the darkness of materialism, irreligious and unbelief. Quietly, firmly, without ostentation, they held aloft the torch of Faith, and amid an appalling spiritual desolation, they were living witnesses to the joy, and peace, and beauty, of the full Catholic life.

Their aim was personal holiness, but it was never interpreted in a narrow, self-centred piety, but was animated by an all embracing charity which sought every opportunity to win souls for God, and thus to extend His Kingdom on earth. In this way, they exercised a veritable Apostolate, and may be regarded as pioneers of Catholic Action.

The years passed: the Association grew and prospered.

There was only one thing now needed to ensure its permanence and future success, the approval of the Holy Father, and Canonical sanction. This was sought in 1847 by Father Etienne, then Superior-General. On 20th June of that year in a private audience granted to him by the Holy Father (Pope [Blessed] Pius IX) he requested “the power to establish in the schools conducted by the Sisters of Charity, an Association of the Most Holy and Immaculate Virgin, with the same Indulgence as had been granted to the Children of Mary established in Rome, for boys in the colleges under the Society of Jesus.” His Holiness readily granted the faculties and indulgence requested, and he himself signed the Brief, as a special mark of favour.

A few years later (19th July, 1850), Father Etienne again approached the Holy Father to solicit power to enroll in the Association the boys in the Vincentian Colleges, and also those attending the schools of the Sisters. His Holiness graciously granted this favour also. A further step in its development took place in 1876, when the Association was extended by Papal Authority to include young girls, not attending the schools, who were members of clubs established by the Sisters. Nor was this all, for, on 25th March, 1931, the Holy Father gave permission for the establishment of the Association in every parish and Institution, when requested by the Parish Priest or Chaplain. It is, therefore, world wide now.

Such, in brief, is the story of the origin, growth and present position of the “Association of Children of Mary Immaculate.” From its humble beginnings in the school of the Sisters in Paris, it had grown by 1933 to an active membership of 200,000. Did not Our Lady say that she would bestow many graces on it? In that promise and its fulfilment, we find the secret of the success of the Association which characterized it, from its very inception.

Father Aladel addressed the Children of Mary shortly before his death, in the Chapel of the Apparitions, Rue du Bac. He little thought that he was speaking to them for the last time, as he then appeared to be in his usual good health. Nevertheless, the address reads like a valedictory one, as if he had some premonition of his approaching end. It was fitting that his last meeting of the Children of Mary should be held in this privileged Chapel, for it was here that Our Lady commissioned Sister Catherine to convey to Father Aladel her wish to found this Association. So, in this hallowed sanctuary, they were to hear his striking address, which in part, has been preserved for us. It is as follows:

“My good children, I speak to you in the name of Our Lord, and to the glory of Mary, and it is not only to you I speak, but to all existing Associations, and I say to all:

“You are objects of admiration, not only to God and His Angels, but to the whole world, which has a right to expect in you piety, modesty and every good example. In the midst of scandals and corruption of the world, in the midst of temptations and dangers, guard and save your souls; maintain purity of sentiment, treasure your innocence and keep up a tender devotion to Mary. Under the mantle of the Immaculate Virgin, exercise your spirit by the study of her virtues, and your heart by a love for them, with a holy ambition to acquire and imitate them. Ask her particularly for the

virtue which each one of you knows is most necessary for you. Thus only will you be Children of Mary in time and eternity.”

The words we have quoted bear testimony to the marvellous success of the Association, of which he was the founder, the law-maker and the Director. That testimony has been confirmed by the highest authority on earth — the Vicar of Christ. Children of Mary to the number of 7,000 flocked to Rome from all parts of the world for the Beatification of Sister Catherine, and on the following day (29th May, 1933), the Holy Father (Pius XI) addressed them. He reminded them of their high and holy vocation and its true meaning and said:

“You are in our eyes, dear Children of Mary, a sight of great joy, a vision in white — a vision of snow — a spectacle of innocence and purity, blessed from on high by Blessed Catherine Labouré.

“You are wearing this Miraculous Medal which has worked so many miracles, which works the very miracle we see at this moment, and makes a reality of this vision of which one would not have thought the world capable.

“You remind us that the Blessed Virgin said that she wished for an Association on which she would shower her graces. Her wish has been magnificently granted since numerous though you be, you are here but the representatives of 200,000 Children of Mary Immaculate.

“You are the elite of the Blessed Virgin.”

The three-fold mission of Father Aladel has now been accomplished with complete success. As he passed before us, in the different scenes we have described, we have learned to revere and admire and love him, yet his beautiful character has been revealed only in part.

V. THE DEATH OF FATHER ALADEL.

On the morning of Monday, 24th April, 1865, Father Aladel celebrated Mass as usual in the Chapel of the Apparitions, and appeared to be in his usual good health. Although only 65 years, the long white hair, falling in great profusion on to his neck and over the ears, gave him the venerable appearance of a much older man. During the day he attended to his customary duties; hearing Confessions, giving instructions, etc. Towards evening, he received a message from Dax that Father Etienne had been taken suddenly ill, and was in imminent danger of death. Father Etienne had gone to Dax to attend the religious ceremonies in connection with the anniversary of the opening of the Vincentian College and Church, which had been erected there in memory of the great Saint, Vincent de Paul, whose birthplace it was. The receipt of this news caused Father Aladel the deepest distress. On recovering from the shock, he at once took steps to obtain the prayers of his own community, and of the Sisters for their beloved Superior. In a conversation which took place that evening, between himself and the Mother-General some words escaped him, which, taken into account with other circumstances, gave the impression that he offered to God, from the altar of his heart, the sacrifice of his life for his friend. Such a sacrifice was in keeping with the character of one, whose whole life was one grand act of self-sacrifice. It was, too, only following in the footsteps of Him Who said:

“Greater love than this no man has than that he lay down his life for his friend.”

He retired to rest that night as usual. It is surmised that he was taken ill during the night, and that he made a supreme effort to get up at the hour for rising — 4 a.m. His fellow-priests, assembled as usual for morning prayers and meditation, were astonished to find that Father Aladel (who was

never known to be absent) was not present. There was, however, no undue alarm as it was assumed that he had gone on direct to the Rue du Bac for his early morning Mass. The Sister Sacristan awaited his arrival there; but as Father Aladel, who was noted for his punctuality, did not arrive, she became alarmed and went in haste to Saint Lazare to inquire as to the cause, feeling some premonition of evil. When she had explained the object of her early morning visit, one of the priests went to his room, knocked at the door, and, receiving no answer, entered. He was horrified to see Father Aladel lying unconscious on the floor, face downward. How like His Divine Master in His Agony in the Garden!

He summoned assistance and the stricken priest was tenderly lifted off the ground and placed on the bed. The doctor, who was sent for, quickly arrived, and expressing his opinion that it was a case of apoplexy, he, according to the treatment at that time, bled him; but there was no hope, so Father Aladel was anointed as soon as possible. The sad news of his serious illness soon spread quickly, and people came from all parts of the city to inquire for him. The priests and the Sisters assembled in the sick room offered up prayers for him, without ceasing. The sweet and holy names that he loved during life: “Jesus, Mary, Joseph,” were now invoked on his behalf. He lingered on, without regaining consciousness, until 3 o’clock in the afternoon, when he breathed forth his soul to God.

It was observed that his soutane was only partially buttoned, and that his breviary was open at the Litany of the Saints. It was the feast of Saint Mark, the Evangelist, when, according to the Rubrics, the Litany had to be recited, and Father Aladel was evidently preparing to do so, when struck down. May we not believe that he gave his life for his friend, Father Etienne, who recovered from his serious illness, and lived many years more to continue, as Superior-General, his great work for the two Communities?

In the letter to the Mother-General, announcing his death, from which we have already quoted, Father Etienne pays him this noble tribute:

“Our Congregation has lost one of its most worthy members, one of the most vigilant guardians of its spirit and traditions, and one of the most perfect models of the virtues of Saint Vincent. Your Community loses a Director as enlightened as he was filled with devotion. During the years that he occupied this important position, he has constantly shown himself as worthy of your respect as of your confidence. Endowed as he was with a robust constitution, and having never been attacked by any illness, I was persuaded that he would have a long career, and preserve for us for a long time his precious services; but he was a martyr to duty and devotion, and he refused to take any rest. So a life, that gave every promise to attaining to extreme old age, was brought suddenly to a close at the comparatively early age of 65. Our consolation is that he was ripe for Heaven. He has gone to receive the recompense, which must crown his virtues and labours. I have no doubt that he will be for me before God a powerful friend, and the support of my weakness; and for you, a protector who will obtain for you new graces and abundant blessings.”

There is a Spanish proverb, which says that “the soul of a people is the soul that blossoms from the soil.” So we can say that Father Aladel — a farmer’s son — more truly represented the soul of France than the false prophets whose spirit is alien to the soil. His character reflected those specifically French virtues, to which the Church has owed so much. The Catholic tradition was his heritage, and the Faith of the Saints and Martyrs of France was in his blood. It was obvious that, even in his tender years, he was destined to labour as a priest in the Vineyard of the Lord. There he worked unceasingly, with a zeal that never flagged. He had one object in view, and one only, to be

always about his Master's business. Neither in the noonday heats, nor when the burdens of the day pressed heavily on him, did he seek any rest. As the shadows lengthened and evening came, one would expect him to take a little relaxation, but no, the weary body might crave for rest, but the indomitable spirit which ruled it, would allow no respite. It had to bear the burden while strength remained, even if he should fall in the furrow. And so he fell as the ripe fruit falls from the tree, for the work that he was sent into the world to do was accomplished and he was ripe for Heaven. The Good Master, therefore, His heart filled with a great Love for such a faithful servant, took pity on the weary toiler and translated him to the Heavenly Vineyard to rest for ever in the Eternal Peace of God. Of this great and holy Priest, it can be said:

“He was beloved of God and man, and his memory is in Benediction.”

O Mary conceived without sin,

Pray for us who have recourse to you.

PROTESTATION.

In obedience to the Decree of Pope Urban VIII, the author protests that, unless it is expressly stated that the Church or the Holy See has recognised the truth of miracles, or other supernatural manifestations referred to in the preceding pages, no credence is claimed for them beyond what the available historical evidence may warrant.
