

One of the most popular medals you may have seen is the Miraculous Medal, with Mary on the front crushing a serpent with her feet, and rays shooting out from her hands. The reverse has the cross-and-bar with a bond M and 12 stars. But while you might have seen this medal many times, you might not know the story behind it, and how it came to be, and the answer to that is through a vision given to a woman who lived a life of incredible devotion and prayer; someone who had a clear focus on Jesus, Saint Catherine Laboure.

The daughter of Pierre and Madeline, she born May 2, 1806 and baptized the next day. She was nicknamed Zoe after a saint who's feast was on her birthday.

As a child, in what was written about her during the canonization process when people were researching her life, it was said she always had this focus on Jesus as a child. Long before her first communion, at Mass she knelt up straight, had her hands joined, and her eyes fixed on the altar where Mass was offered, looking at Jesus in the Holy Eucharist. But so too did she have a devotion to Jesus' mother, Mary.

On October 9, 1815, when she was just nine, her mother died.

It was on a day shortly after her mother's burial that she saw a statue of Our Lady that stood on a shelf in the bedroom of her father and mother. Zoe was alone in the bedroom; Zoe pulled a chair over beneath the shelf, for it was too high for her to reach, even if she stood on tiptoe. Climbing up on the chair, she stretched overhead and took down Our Lady's image. Throwing her arms around the statue, she prayed: "Now, dear Blessed Mother...now you will be my Mother!" She put the statue back in its place and climbed down off the chair. From this day forward Zoe Laboure was truly the child of Mary and Mary was truly her mother. She wanted to see her face to face one day. She clung to that desire, made it the constant petition of her prayers, and, most amazingly of all, was confident that it would be realized. She knew some day she would see the Mother of God. Having made her choice, Zoe was no longer lonesome.

She made her first Communion at the age of 12, and, according to her biographer, "the first meeting of Jesus and Zoe Laboure seemed to effect a perpetual contract of mutual love and service. Zoe, who was already good

and kind and devout even to a degree of heroism, began to display more and more the outward trappings of her love for God. Her sister was quick to notice the change. In later years she would tell her children how their Aunt Zoe had become "entirely mystic" from the time of her first Communion."

Zoe began to attend Mass daily and to receive Holy Communion frequently. Given the circumstances, these were acts of devotion approaching the heroic. There was no daily Mass her small village; there was not always Sunday Mass either. The only priest in the district said his daily Mass in the chapel at a hospital in a nearby town. It was not a question, therefore, of Zoe's rolling out of bed and tumbling into church. The hospital was a good, brisk half-hour's walk and the Mass was at six o'clock. Daily Mass for this young girl just entering her teens meant an early rising—an earlier rising even than farm life called for, because she had chores to do before she left—and a long walk in all kinds of weather and, half the year, in the dark. She was determined to go, however, and she never faltered. She went to a daily rendezvous with God, who was her whole life. Attendance at daily Mass was but the start of Zoe's day-long devotion. At home she quietly began the practice of slipping away from the others to some out-of-the-way corner of the house, there to keep her numerous appointments with God.

She'd also spend time in a nearby chapel, and frequently make the Stations of the Cross.

As she aged and became a young woman, she eventually went to live with her brother in Paris, where she received an education from her sister-in-law. She wanted to become a religious sister. But, her father, who by all accounts wasn't that nice of a person, didn't want her to enter religious life at first, but eventually when she visited with the Sisters of Charity, her confessor said to her "Saint Vincent de Paul Calls you - he wishes you to be a Sister of Charity." Her father relented after her sister-in-law convinced him, and even though she hadn't had much formal schooling other than some tutoring from her sister-in-law, she was received by the Mother Superior. It wasn't an easy life; The sisters rose at four o'clock; (so had she, all her life.) They cooked and scrubbed and labored hard; she had known no other way of life. They observed long silences. But she became a model right away. It was rather the way she did things. She added an indescribable, intangible something to the commonest action that made others see her and be attracted to this life of holiness. Whether she made beds or scrubbed floors or washed windows, she performed the duty with such care, such complete absorption, that she seemed wholly dedicated.

All her life it was to be the same: she did the most ordinary things extraordinarily well. Even how she prayed was seen by the other sisters there as inspirational.

In her prayer life, she would have visions of Saint Vincent de Paul and also of Christ the King. On Trinity Sunday, June 6, 1830, she was given a special vision of Jesus as Christ the King. Our Lord appeared to her, robed as a king, with a cross at His breast, during the Gospel of the Mass. Suddenly, all His kingly ornaments fell from to the ground—even the cross, which tumbled beneath His feet.

But she is most known for perhaps is her visions of Mary.

Awoken one night to go to the chapel in the convent, it was here she encountered Mary. Mary told her of the difficulties ahead, but that God had a plan for her and that she would recognize at all times the will of God. Mary said to her have confidence, and do not be afraid, I will be with you.

Not too long after this in 1830, violence again erupted in Paris, but she was kept safe. And it was then that she had her second vision of Mary.

Catherine lived the normal life of a novice of the Daughters of Charity until Advent. On Saturday, November 27, 1830, at 5:30 p.m., she retired to the Chapel with the other Sisters for evening meditation. Raising her eyes to the main altar, she saw her beautiful Lady standing on a large globe.

The Virgin Spoke, this time giving a direct order: "Have a Medal struck after this model. All who wear it will receive great graces; they should wear it around the neck. Graces will abound for persons who wear it with confidence."

Catherine asked how she was to have the medal struck. Mary replied that she was to go to her confessor. He at first did not believe Catherine; however, after two years, he finally went to the archbishop who ordered two thousand medals struck on June 20, 1832. When Catherine received her share of these first medals from the hands of the priest she said: "Now it must be propagated."

The spread of a devotion to the medal urged by Saint Catherine was carried out so swiftly that it was miraculous itself.

She wanted to be left alone to carry out her humble duties as a Daughter of Charity. For over forty years, she spent her every effort in caring for the aged and infirm, not revealing to those about her that she had been the recipient of our Lady's medal. The Sisters with whom she lived held her in the highest esteem, and each one longed to be her companion.

In 1876, Catherine felt a spiritual conviction that she would die before the end of the year. In prayer, she discerned that it was now the time to break the silence of forty-six years. To her Sister Superior, Catherine revealed the fact that she was the sister to whom the Blessed Mother appeared. On the last day of December 1876, Saint Catherine passed on—once again to the hands of Mary—this time, however, in heaven.

All of this happened because throughout her life, Catherine kept her eyes focused on God. She knew that He would provide; that even though she had a difficult life, that she had endured suffering, that neither Jesus nor His Blessed Mother would ever abandon her. She understood what our first reading hits home: “For Zion’s sake I will not be silent; for Jerusalem’s sake I will not be quiet until her vindication shines forth like the dawn, and her

victory like a burning torch...nations shall behold your vindication, and all the kings your glory...your builder shall marry you...your God rejoice in you.” The point Isaiah makes, writing at a time of giving the people hope in returning from the exile, is that God is with you. Our God is not distant, not removed, but is right here with us.

That too is at the heart of the Gospel, the wedding at Cana, the first miracle of Jesus. It might seem a little anti-climatic at first, but in the Bible, especially with John’s Gospel, there’s also symbolism there. The marriage is also that of the divine with the human. Jesus, practically speaking, helps in a rather unfortunate situation, as running out of wine at the big event of a wedding would be a major faux pas. But when Mary says they have run out of wine, she’s also speaking in a sense for humanity. Like a heartbroken Catherine who had lost her mom; like us when we have suffered, or made bad decisions in life, we’ve run out spiritually. And this is where God comes into the picture. Jesus words sound harsh in English; “woman what concern is it of mine?” But He is in no way being dismissive of His mother; the translation from Greek to English makes it sound tough, and it also leads Mary to say do whatever He tells you. In this statement she represents all of humanity as the new Eve saying we need Divine Help.

That's what led Catherine to walk to daily Mass; to spend long hours in prayer; to persevere with her vocation even when it was difficult. She knew that God was with her every step of the way. She knew she needed Him. And so He came. He gave her His mother when she was in pain. He helped her find her vocation. He gave her strength.

The takeaway for us is that we, like Catherine, need to realize that God will take what we offer to Him, and make it so much better. But that can only happen when we make first the effort to pray and come to Him. One of her sayings about her prayer was: "Whenever I go to the chapel, I put myself in the presence of our good Lord, and I say to him, Lord I am here. Tell me what you would have me to do. If he gives me some task, I am content and I thank him. If he gives me nothing, I still thank him since I do not deserve to receive anything more than that. And then, I tell God everything that is in my heart. I tell him about my pains and joys, and then I listen. If you listen, God will also speak to you, for with the good Lord, you have to both speak and listen. God always speaks to you when you approach him plainly and simply." The first step is to do as she did, to listen to what God has to say to us by making prayer a daily part of our life. It's important to look at

different ways of praying and then to figure out what works best for us and keep up at it. Because just as you don't eat once a week or even once a day without feeling hungry later on, the same is true for our souls. They need constant nourishment.

But what she did though was to not only listen, but to act. To do whatever God told her. When we pray and meditate, God listens to us, but like Catherine, the prayer will also require us to do things that can be challenging. It's tough to overcome sin and addictions. It's tough to live out a vocation. It's tough to talk about the faith in a world where so many, sometimes the very people we live and work with, might be un-catechized or not care about the faith. But we can do it, because God is with us.

Lastly, we also must serve. God takes our water if you will and changes it into a sweet wonderful wine not just for ourselves but for service. Notice the detail that the servants know where the wine came from. The others obviously enjoy the wine giving the credit to the hosts. But the servants? They were paying attention. But they are also doing acts of service to the other guests. And later on in the miracle of the loaves and fishes, Jesus will have the disciples feed the hungry people. Saint Catherine prayed, but she

also acted doing so many simple loving actions in caring for her siblings and her father, caring for older sisters in the convent, scrubbing floors and doing laundry in working at the convent quietly, and in simple actions doing amazing things. As the servants are the instruments of the changing of Jesus miracle by serving the wine, we follow them by being the instruments who bring God's love into the world through our actions of love to one another.

As life goes on, inevitably our spiritual well will run dry, even if we don't know it. Whether it's sins we battle, trying to find our way, or just running into difficulties as we live out our vocations, the peace of feeling safe and secure and that all is right without God is elusive. Only God through Jesus can change things. Only Jesus can redeem the world from sin, and the wedding feast demonstrates that power. And so too with us is our Blessed Mother who is the mother of us all, the new Eve who leads us to her Son just as she did for a young heartbroken Saint Catherine. And so as we prepare to come forth for Holy Communion and let Jesus into our hearts, may we know that when we run to Him, the love and grace that is the good wine given to us will never run out.