

ABEL



*Our
Lady
of the Miracle*

Abel

“OUR LADY
OF THE MIRACLE”

ROME

Minimi — 2 — booklets

The General Postulation of the Minimi

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Preface

We intend with this little booklet to respond to the expressed wishes of the pilgrims and faithful devoted to the shrine of Our Lady of the Miracle — in the Basilica di S. Andrea delle Fratte in Rome, who want to find out in a concise but integral manner, the full story of the apparition of the Immaculate Virgin to the Jew Alphonse Ratisbonne and his consequent instantaneous conversion — and who would like to have a brief, illustrated guide to the Shrine.

We prefer to commence with Ratisbonne's own words, quoted from his autobiographical letter. The subheadings (not found in the original) have been included for an easier comprehension.

The second need has been met by a resume of parts «La meraviglia romana dell'Immacolata».

The illustrations taken from the family album of Ratisbonne, and those presenting parts of the shrine and its paintings, will accompany the devout reader in his visit to the shrine, which for him too, can be an entry into the road of grace.

A JEW KNEELS
A CHRISTIAN RISES

At midday, January 20, 1842 there was a miracle in the Roman parish of the Minimi Fathers.

A 27 year-old Jew from Strasburg, after witnessing in the church of Sant'Andrea delle Fratte, an apparition of the Immaculate, in the form known through the Miraculous Medal, was instantaneously illuminated by grace and became a convert to Catholicism.

Ratisbonne himself described precisely what happened at the moment of grace in one of his letters and also in a sworn testimony made before the Vicariate of Rome.

The visionary declared at the trial: « I saw as if a veil in front of me. The church seemed to me to be shrouded totally in darkness, with the exception of one chapel, as if the whole light of the church was concentrated in this chapel. I raised my eyes towards the radiant chapel and *I saw the live, grand majestic, most beautiful, merciful and most*

holy Virgin Mary, standing on her altar. She was similar in form to the image that can be seen on the Miraculous Medal of the Immaculate. She signaled me to fall on my knees. An irresistible force pushed me towards Her. She did not say anything, but I understood.

I fell on my knees on the spot where I stood; several times I attempted to raise my eyes to the Most Holy Virgin, but the splendour and reverence forced me to lower them; this did not prevent me from being totally aware of the apparition.

I gazed at her hands, and I saw in them an expression of pardon and mercy. In the presence of the Most Holy Virgin — even though she did not say a word to me, I understood the horrible state in which I had been, the deformation caused by sin, the beauty of the Catholic religion — in other words, I understood everything ».

* * *

Alphonse Ratisbonne wrote a more detailed description of his trip which led him to Rome, and of his interior experience in an autobiographical letter, written in the College of Juilly in April of that same year, to M. Dufriche-Desgenette, the President of the Archconfraternity of Our Lady of the Victory in Paris.

Ratisbonne is converted by Mary
The College of Juilly, April 12, 1842

I began my schooling on the benches of the grammar school of Strasburg, where I made more progress in the corruption of the heart, than in culture. That was about 1825 (I was born on May 1, 1814); my brother Theodore on whom great hopes were made declared himself a Christian; shortly afterwards in spite of the fears and sadness which he caused, he went even further; he became a priest and exercised his ministry in the same city before the unconsolated eyes of my family. I was young at the time, and this conduct of my brother revolted me, and led me to hate his customs and character. Being educated among young Christians who were as indifferent as I was, I had so far, neither a sympathy nor an antipathy for Christianity; but the conversion of my brother which I saw to be an unexplicable folly, led me to believe in the fanaticism of the Catholics, and I was horrified by it.

I was withdrawn from the college and sent to a Protestant institute, about the programme of which my relatives were enthusiastic... I attained a Bachelor of Arts there.

I was the owner of my family inheritance, because I lost my mother in infancy, and several years later, my father. I was left with a kind-hearted uncle, the patriarch of my family, who being childless, lavished all his affection to the children of his brother, and became a second father for me.

This uncle, who was well known in financial circles for his integrity and talent wanted me to join the banking company of which he was the director; I studied law in Paris, and having attained my degree and gown, I was called to Strasburg by my uncle who tried everything to retain me with him. I cannot number all the signs of his prodigality: horses carriages, voyages. I was treated by his generosity, and he would not refuse any caprice of mine. To these proofs of his affection was added a further, most positive sign of his confidence. He gave me an open cheque of his company and promised me the title and advantages of a partner... This promise came into effect on January 1, 1842. I received news of this in Rome.

My uncle reproached me only one thing — my frequent trips to Paris. «You like the Champs-Elysées too much», he would say kindly. And he was right. I loved pleasures only: business irritated me, the atmosphere of offices suffocated me; I thought that we



The banker uncle

are in the world to delight in it; even though a certain natural sense of shame kept me away from pleasures and ignoble company, I dreamed only of feasts and luxuries and I gave myself to them in passion.

Fortunately, I found a good undertaking, to keep me occupied. I took it to heart. It was the assistance to poor Jews, as it was inappropriately called; now I understand that there is more than money and charity lotteries that are needed to regenerate a

people... But then I believed in the possibility of this renewal and I became one of the most zealous members of the *Society for the Encouragement to Work for Young Jews*. This was a society that my priest-brother had founded in Strasburg, fifteen years ago, and he participated in it despite the scarcity of means that he had at his disposal.

So I occupied myself actively for the needs of my poor co-religionists, even though I myself was not devout. I was a Jew by name, and that was all. I did not even believe in God. I never opened a prayer-book: neither in my uncle's house, nor in that of my brothers and sisters, we never practised even the most minor precepts of Judaism.

The love for Flora, the promised spouse

In my heart there was a void, and I was not happy at all: amongst so many riches, I missed something, but this was finally given to me.. at least I thought so.

I had a niece, the daughter of my eldest brother, and she was destined to me, when we were both children. I could see her grow and become gracious, and I believed that all the happiness, all my future was to be found in her. I do not think that it is convenient to praise here my fiancée. It would be useless for those who do not know her; but those who have seen her, know that it

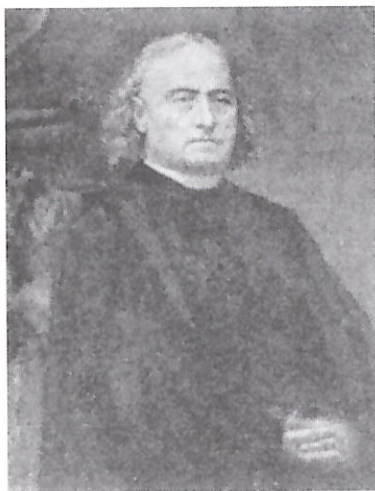


Flora Ratisbonne (the fiancée)

would be difficult to imagine a sweeter, more lovable and gracious girl than Flora. For me she was a special creature, that seemed made uniquely so as to fill my existence; and when our whole family, in accord with our mutual sympathy, fixed finally this manage, which was desired for so long, I thought that nothing was missing in my happiness.

My aversion for Theodore

I hated only one person in my family:
my brother Theodore. But he loved us; his religious dress repelled me; his presence bored me; his solemn and serious words made me angry. A year before my engagement, I could no longer withhold my feelings and I expressed them in a letter to him which should destroy forever our mutual relationship. This was the occasion: a baby was dying; my brother Theodore had the courage to openly ask the parents permission to baptise the child, and maybe was about to do this, when I found out about



Theodore
Ratisbonne
(the brother priest)

this. For me it was a mean villainy. I wrote to the priest, telling him to approach adults and not children, and I added so many invectives and threats, that I wonder even today, why he has not answered me with a single word.

I had no more contacts with Theodore, I no longer thought of him, I forgot him... but he prayed for me!

I must note a certain change that came about in my religious thinking during my engagement. As I said, I did not believe in anything; in this absolute nihilism, in my denial of any faith, I felt myself to be in harmony with my Catholic and Protestant friends; the sight of my fiancée awakened in me a sentiment of human dignity. I began to believe in the immortality of the soul; instinctively I began to pray to God; I thanked him for my good fortune, but nevertheless I still remained unhappy... I could not account for my sentiments; I regarded my fiancée as my guardian angel; I often told her that, and truly, the thought of her arised my heart to the God, that I did not know, to whom I had not prayed, whom I had not invoked.

Awaiting the wedding

It was appropriate to delay the date of my wedding, due to the young age of my

fiancée. She was sixteen years old. I was to undertake a tourist trip, awaiting for the wedding. I did not know where to go; my sister who lived in Paris wanted me to stay with her; a good friend of mine invited me to Spain. I resisted the insistence of many others who came up with seducing projects. I finally decided to go directly to Naples, to spend the winter in Malta, to strengthen my delicate health, and then to return via the Orient. I had letters for Constantinople, and I left towards the end of November 1841. I was to return the following Summer.

Oh how sad was my departure! I left my beloved fiancée, an uncle who loved me above anybody else, sisters, brothers and nephews, the company of which was dear to me.

I remember two details which marked the last days before my departure; these two memories strike me vividly today. Before my departure, I wanted to sign a large number of receipts of the *Society for the Encouragement...* I anticipated the date January 15, and as I was writing it on a pile of documents, I relaxed for a moment, and putting down my pen, I said to myself: «God knows, where I will be on January 15, and maybe that will be the day of my death!».

That day, I found myself in Rome, and it became the dawn of a new life!

Another interesting circumstance was the

meeting of a number of notable Jews, who came together to study the ways in which to reform the Jewish cult, and adapt it to the spirit of the times. I went to the meeting, where everyone gave his opinion on the proposed changes. There were as many opinions as there were people present; the discussion was long, all the human conveniences were discussed, all the exigencies of the times, all the social ideas. All types of considerations were taken into account. Only one was missing — the divine law. That was not mentioned; neither the name of God, nor of Moses, nor of the Bible, was mentioned even once.

The stages of my trip

I finally left. On leaving Strasburg, I wept. I was agitated by a number of fears and a thousand strange presentiments. As I reached the first exchange post (for the horses), I was awoken by cries of joy mixed with music, coming from the outside. It was a wedding cortège, that came out of a church, feasting and noisy, with the company of peasant flutes and violins. They surrounded my carriage as if inviting me to participate in their joy. «I shall soon experience the same!» I exclaimed. This thought aroused my joy.

I stopped for a few days in Marseilles,

where my relatives and friends arranged a feast in my honour. I could not free myself from their hospitality.

Before my arrival in Naples, my boat stopped at Civitavecchia. On our arrival in the port, the canon of the fortress fired at full blast. I inquired with malign curiosity, what was the reason for this bellicose noise in the peaceful papal states. I was answered:

«It's the feast of the Immaculate». I shrugged my shoulders and did not want to leave the boat.

The following day, we approached Naples, in the magnificent sun that ligned with gold the smoke of Vesuvius. I had never been so enchanted by natural scenery; I contemplated avidly the glamorous images of the sky, that artists and poets had described.

I spent a month in Naples so as to see everything and to note everything; above all I wrote against religious and priests, who seemed to be out of place in this city. Oh, how many blasphemies in my diary! If I speak about them it is only to portray the perfidy of my soul. I wrote to Strasburg, that I had drunk at the Vesuvius the *lacryma Christi* for the health of Rev. Ratisbonne, and that these tears have done me good. I do not dare to write the terrible play of words that I allowed myself to use in this occasion.

My fiancée asked me, if I agree with those who say: See Naples and die! I answered:

No, see Naples and live! Live to see it again. This was the state of my mind.

To Rome, no!

I had no intention of going to Rome, even though two friends of my family whom I often saw, invited me insistently. They were M. Coulmann, a Protestant, ex-deputy from Strasburg and baron Rotschild, whose family in Naples cared for me and offered me all sorts of pleasures. I could not cede to their suggestions... My fiancée wanted me to go directly to Malta, and she sent me a prescription from my doctor, who advised me to spend the winter there, and positively prohibited me from going to Rome, because of the — as he said — epidemic of malaria.

There were motives for a visit of Rome, if I had planned it in my itinerary. I thought of going there on my way back, and I booked a place on the *Mongibello* to go to Sicily. A friend of mine accompanied me to the deck and promised that he will return at the moment of departure to say good-bye. He came, but did not meet me. If M. de Réchecourt finds out the reason why I was not there to meet him, he will understand my impoliteness, and, no doubt, will pardon me.

Coulmann presented me to a dear and worthy man, who was to go to Malta with me. I was happy to meet him and said: «Ah, here is the friend sent to me from heaven! »

The boat did not leave, however, by New Years Day. It was a sad day for me. I was alone in Naples, I was not greeted by anybody, I had nobody to embrace. I thought of my family, of the greetings and joy that surrounded my uncle that day. I wept and the joy of the Neapolitans increased my sadness.

I went for a walk following mechanically the flow of the crowd. I reached the piazza di Palazzo and found myself, I do not know why, at the door of a church. I entered. The Mass, I believe was being celebrated. How did it come about, I do not know, but I stopped for a moment leaning against a column, and my heart seemed to open and breathe a known atmosphere. I prayed in my own way, without analysing what was happening to me. I prayed for my fiancée, my uncle, my dead father, my dear mother who left me as an orphan when I was young, all my close friends, and I asked God for inspiration that could guide me in my projects of improving the lot of the Jews — an idea which I had always cherished. My sadness left me, as a dark cloud that is blown away by the wind; in my whole interior,

inundated with an ineffable calm, I experienced a consolation as if a voice had told me: *Your prayer has been granted*. Oh yes, my prayer has been heard one hundred per cent and beyond all expectation, because on the last day of that same month, I solemnly received the sacrament of baptism in a church in Rome!

But how to go to Rome?

Rome, the turning-point of grace

I don't know how, I cannot explain it. I believe I had mistaken the road, because instead of coming to the reservation office for Palermo, as I intended, I arrived at the stage-coach office for Rome. I entered and ordered a seat. I sent a note to M. Vigne, the friend who was to accompany me to Malta, to tell him that I could not resist to make a short trip to Rome, and that I will certainly return to Naples, to continue my journey on January 20. It was unfair of me to commit myself, because God disposes everything, and this date, January 20, was to be marked in a different way in my life.

I left Naples on the 5th and arrived in Rome on the 6th, the feast of the Three Kings.

I travelled with an Englishman called Marshall who entertained me greatly with his original conversation during the trip.

At first sight, Rome did not make the impression on me, which I had hoped for. I had a few days for this untimely excursion, in which I hastily devoured the ancient and modern ruins that the city offers to the tourist. I piled them freely in my memory and diary. I visited in monotonous admiration the galleries, circuses, churches, catacombs and countless other marvels of Rome. I was accompanied by my English friend. I do not know to what religion he belonged, because neither he nor I showed any sign of being Christians, in the churches, but if I am not mistaken, he demonstrated a respect for them.

On January 8, I was called by name on the street; it was a childhood friend — Gustavo de Bussières. I was happy to meet him, because my isolation weighed heavily on me. We went to his father for breakfast, and in this happy company, I experienced the joy that is felt when, in a foreign country, you discover the memories of your native land.

When I entered the parlour, Theodore de Bussières, the eldest son of this distinguished family was leaving the room. I did not know baron Theodore personally, but I knew that he was my brothers friend, and his homonym, and I knew that he left Protestantism to become a Catholic; this was enough to provoke my deepest antipathy. It seemed that he felt the same towards me. As it turned out he had travelled in the Ori-



Theodore de Bussières

ent and Sicily, so it was useful for me to ask him for some advice before undertaking the same trip; either for this reason, or just of simple politeness, I expressed my desire to visit him. He answered kindly and added that he had received a letter from the Rev. Ratisbonne, and that he will give the new address of my brother. « I will take it willingly » — I answered — « even though I will not make use of it ».

We stood there, and while I was saying good-bye, I murmured something to myself

about the useless visit that I forced myself to make and about the valuable time that I will waste.

During a visit to the monuments

I continued to run around Rome all day, except during the two hours of the morning that I spent with Gustavo, and the evening entertainment when we went to the theatre or a ball. My conversation with Gustavo was animated, because, as we had been in the same boarding school, the smallest memoires furnished inexhaustible motives for laughter and chatter. But he was a zealous Protestant and an enthusiast of the type of the pietists of Alsace. He boasted about the superiority of his sect over all other Christian sects and attempted to convert me, which amused me exceedingly; I thought that only Catholics had the mania for proselytism. I answered always jokingly, but once wanting to encourage him in his vain attempts, I promised him that if I were to convert, I would become a pietist. I promised him, and he promised me to come to my wedding in August. His insistence that I should remain in Rome was futile. Two other friends Edmondo Humann and Alfredo Lotzbeck urged me to spend the carnival in Rome. I could not come to a decision; I feared to displease my fiancée, and M. Vigne

was waiting for me in Naples, from where we were to part on January 20.

I profited from the last hours of my stay in Rome to finish my strolls. I went to the *Campidoglio* and visited the church of *Aracoeli*. The impressive build of the church, the solemn chants which echoed in its naves and the historical memories that awakened in me, as I stood there, all this made a deep impression on me. I was moved and overwhelmed, and my guide discovering my abashment, told me coldly that he noticed several times the emotion of foreigners as they visit the *Aracoeli*.

Descending from the *Campidoglio* my cicerone made me pass through the *Ghetto* (the Jewish quarter). There I encountered an entirely different emotion, of compassion and indignation. Lo! I asked myself visiting this spectacle of misery, is this the so-praised charity of Rome?

I shuddered with horror and asked myself whether a whole people deserved a barbarian treatment and so unending prejudices solely for the killing of a single man eighteen centuries ago! ... Oh! I did not yet know that man! I knew nothing of the bloody cry that this people had thrown at him... a cry that I do not dare to quote here, and that I do not want to repeat myself. I prefer to remember that last cry from the cross:

My God! Forgive them, because they

know what they do!

I informed my family about what I had seen and felt. I remember that I wrote, that I would prefer to remain with the oppressed than with the oppressors. I returned to the Campidoglio, where there was a large movement, in preparation for a ceremony in the *Aracoeli* the next day. I asked what was the reason for the preparation. I was told that they are preparing for the ceremony of the baptism of two Jews, M. Costantini and M. Ancona. I did not know how to express my indignation at these words, and when my guide asked me whether I would like to assist at the ceremony, I cried: « Me! assisting at such an infamy! Never, I will not be able to withhold myself from swearing at the baptisers and the baptised! »

I must say, without exaggeration, that I have never been so bitterly against Catholicism, as after my visit of the *Ghetto*. I could not stop blaspheming.

The good-bye visits

I had to make several last visits, and the visit to baron de Bussières always came to my mind as a visit into which I pushed myself. Fortunately, I did not ask his address and that circumstance seemed to me to be final. I was satisfied that I had an excuse for not fulfilling my promise.

It was January 15, and I went to book a place in the stage-coach for Naples; the departure was assigned for the 17th at three o'clock in the morning. I had two days left and I spent them strolling in the city. Coming out of a bookshop, where I saw some works on Constantinople, I met on the *Corso* a servant of the Bussières senior; he saluted me and came up to me. I asked him the address of Theodore de Bussières, and he answered in an Alsatian accent — Piazza Nicosia, 38.

It was, appropriate, therefore, for me to pay a visit, even though I still had my doubts. So I decided and scribbled a note on my name-card. I looked for the Piazza Nicosia, and after a long search, I arrived at no. 38. It was exactly the door besides the stagecoach office, where I had booked my place that very same day. I had made a long road, only to arrive at the point of departure; it is the itinerary of more than one human existence! From the point where I stood, I left to take a completely different road.

My entry into the house of de Bussières made me laugh, because the servant instead of taking the name card, which I had in my hand, announced my entry and introduced me in the parlour. I simulated my resistance, but for the good or evil, I entered smiling and sat by the baroness de Bussières, who was surrounded by her children — gracious

and sweet, like the angels of Raffaello. The conversation at the 'beginning, light and general, very soon became coloured by the emotions with which I related my impressions of Rome.

The «Miraculous Medal»

I imagined baron de Bussières to be a «devout» in the worst sense of the word, and I was most happy to have the occasion to contradict him, about the state of the Roman Jews. This encouraged me; but such a reproach directed the conversation onto the field of religion. De Bussières spoke about the grandeur of Catholicism; I answered with the irony and accusation about which I had read and which I often felt; I restrained, however, the nerve of my godlessness out of respect for Madame de Bussières and the faith of the children that were playing around us.

— «Nevertheless», said M. de Bussières, «even though you detest superstitions and profess so liberal a doctrine, even though you have so enlightened a spirit, would you have the courage to undertake an innocent test? »

— « What test? »

— «Do this: wear on you an object that I want to offer you... There you are. It's a medal of the Holy Virgin. It sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? I see great value in this medal ».

The proposition, I confess, surprised me with its childish singularity. I did not expect such a conclusion. The first reaction



*The «Miraculous Medal»
given to Alphonse*

was to shrug my shoulders and laugh; but I thought that this scene will be an interesting chapter of the impressions of my voyage, and I agreed to take the medal as a proof, to offer to my fiancée. They placed the medal around my neck, and not without difficulty, because the noose was too short. By a shot of luck, I had a medal on my chest, and I burst out laughing: «Here am I, a Roman, apostolic Catholic!»

It was the demon that prophesied through my mouth.

De Bussières was triumphant in his victory and wanted to celebrate it clamorously.

«And now» he said, «you must complete the test. Every morning and evening recite the *Memorare*, a short and efficacious prayer which St. Bernard composed to the Virgin Mary».

— «What is this Memorare?» I exclaimed. «Forget this stupidity!» At this moment I felt all my obstinacy boil within me. The name of St. Bernard brought to mind my brother who wrote a history of that saint, a work which I did not want to read; this memory awoke all my resent towards proselytism, jesuitism and what I called the hypocrites and apostates.

I asked de Bussières to leave it at that; and joking to him, I regretted not having a Jewish prayer to offer him as a counter present; to tell the truth, I did not know any Jewish prayer.

But my interlocutor insisted: he told me that refusing to recite this short prayer, I will make the test invalid, and that by this I prove the truth about the voluntary obstinacy which is attributed to the Jews.

Not wanting to give more importance to the matter, I said: «Let it be! I promise to recite this prayer. If it will not do me any good, it will not do me any bad!» De Bussières brought the text and invited me to copy it. I agreed, on the condition that I

shall give him my copy, and retain the original! My intention was to enrich my notes with this new souvenir.

We were then totally satisfied with each other; our conversation seemed to be bizarre, but I enjoyed it. We parted and I went to the theatre, where I forgot about the medal and the *Memorare*. On my return, I found a note from de Bussières, who came to return my visit and invited me to see him again before my departure. I had to return him his *Memorare* before my departure the next day. I packed my bags and prepared myself; I then sat down to copy the prayer, which was written exactly in the following words:

«Remember, O most loving Virgin Mary, that it is a thing unheard of, that anyone ever had recourse to your protection, implored your help, or sought your intercession, and was left forsaken. Filled, therefore, with confidence in your goodness I fly to you, o Mother, Virgin of virgins. To you I come, before you I stand, a sorrowful sinner. Despise not my poor words, o Mother of the Word of God, but graciously hear and grant my prayer».

I copied these words of St. Bernard mechanically, without any special attention. I was tired, it was late, and I needed to rest.

The following day, January 16, I collected my passport and completed the formalities

of my departure; but while I was doing other things, I repeated in my mind the *Memorare*. My God! How did these words become so vividly impressed in my spirit. I could not free myself from them. They returned continuously; I repeated them like the musical tones that persecute and force you to repeat them despite your efforts to forget them.

Around eleven, I went to de Bussières, to return him his indestructible prayer. We spoke about my voyage to the Orient, and he offered me excellent information. «But it's strange» he exclaimed suddenly, «that you leave Rome at a moment when all people are going to assist at a ceremony in St. Peter's! Maybe you will never return, and you will regret having missed an occasion for which so many people come and look forward to with avid curiosity».

I answered that I had booked and paid for my ticket; that I had already written to my family and I was waiting for letters in Palermo; that it was too late to make a different decision, and that I have decided to leave. The conversation was interrupted by the servant, who presented de Bussières with a letter from the Rev. Ratisbonne. He gave it to me, and I read it without particular interest, because it dealt with a religious publication that de Bussières was having printed in Paris. My brother was unaware of my presence in Rome. This episode should also

shorten my visit, because I fled all memories of my brother. But, through some incomprehensible reason I decided to extend my Roman visit. I followed the insistence of a man whom I hardly knew; I did what I had often refused to my closest friends.

A mysterious influence

My God! What was this irresistible influence that forced me to do what I did not want to do? Was it not the same that pushed me from Strasburg to Italy, even though I was invited to Valence and Paris?

Was it the same that sent me from Naples to Rome, even though I planned to go to Sicily? And now, the same in Rome, when in the hour of my departure, I felt compelled to make a visit which I found repelling, and which meant I would not have the time to do what I had preferred? What a providential behaviour on my part! Is there a mysterious influence that accompanies man throughout his life? When I was born I was given the name of Tobias as well as Alphonse. I forgot my first name, but the invisible angel has not. He was the real friend sent to me from heaven; but I did not know him. There are many Tobiases in the world who do not know their guides and resist their voices!

I did not intend to spend the carnival in

Rome; but I wanted to see the Pope; M. de Bussières assured me that I will see him the first day in St. Peter's. We went there together. We talked about everything that our eyes could see: a monument, a painting, the country costumes, and throughout the day all these subjects were mixed with religious arguments. De Bussières would insert religious themes in our conversation with such a naturalness, and he insisted with such a lively ardour, that several times I said to myself that if anything could distance a man from religion, it was the insistence of those who wanted to convert him. My natural gaiety led me to laugh at the most serious things and the sparks of my jokes were joined with an infernal fire of blasphemies about which I do not dare think today, since I am so terrified by them.

But de Bussières, even though he was saddened, remained calm and indulgent. Once, he told me: «Despite your behaviour, I am convinced that one day you will be a Christian, because there is a basis of honesty in you, which reassures me and convinces me that you will be illuminated even if Our Lord will have to send an angel from heaven ».

«Now», I answered, «because otherwise it will be difficult ».

Passing by the *Scala Santa* de Bussières was full of enthusiasm. He stood up in the

carriage and lifting his hat cried out aloud:

«Hail, holy steps: Here is a sinner, who one day will climb up these steps on his knees».

It would be impossible for me to describe the reactions that this unexpected gesture, this extraordinary honour offered to stairs, produced in me. I laughed as if I had seen a madman; when shortly afterwards we passed by the delightful *villa Wolkonski*, whose gardens eternally decorated with flowers are divided by the aqueduct of Nero, I cried out in parody of the previous exclamation: « Hail, o true marvel of God! It is before you, and not before a flight of steps that we should prostrate ourselves»!

These trips in the carriage were repeated during the two successive days, for two hours each. On Wednesday the 19th, I saw de Bussières again. He seemed sad and depressed. I retreated discreetly, without asking the reason for his sadness. I would find out the next day at noon in the church of Sant'Andrea delle Fratte.

A strange cross

I was to leave on the 22nd, because I booked a seat to Naples anew. De Bussières' business moderated his ardour for proselytism, and I thought that he had forgotten his

miraculous medal, even though I murmured with an unconceivable impatience the perpetual invocation of St. Bernard.

But at midnight from 19 to 20, I woke up suddenly: I saw in front of me a black cross in a strange form, without Christ. I tried to forget this image, but I could not, and it remained before my eyes, as I tossed from side to side. I cannot say how long this struggle lasted. I went to sleep again, and waking up in the morning I did not think about in anymore.

I had to write several letters and I remember that in one of them, addressed to the youngest sister of my fiancée, I ended with the words: *May God protect you!* Later I received a letter from my fiancée, dated also January 20, which by a strange coincidence, ended with the same *May God protect you!*

That day was really under divine protection. Nevertheless, if anyone had told me that day: *You got up as a Jew and you will go to bed as a Christian*, I would have thought him to be insane.

January 20, 1842

On Thursday January 20, after breakfast in the hotel, I posted my letters and went to my friend Gustavo, the pietist, who had returned from a hunting excursion, which had kept him away for a few days.

He was surprised to see me in Rome. I told him why: I wanted to see the Pope.

«But I will leave without seeing him», I said, «because he did not assist in the ceremony at St. Peter's, as I was told that he would».

Gustavo cheered me up ironically, letting me know about another very curious ceremony that was to take place — I believe — in Santa Maria Maggiore. It was the blessing of the animals. You could imagine the reaction shared between a Jew and a Protestant.

We separated around eleven, after arranging to meet the following day: we were to go and examine a painting made by our compatriot baron Lotzbeck. I entered a *café* at the Piazza di Spagna to glance through the newspapers, and as soon as I sat down, Edmondo Humann, the son of the minister of finances came and sat beside me, and we chatted merrily about Paris, art and politics. Shortly afterwards, another friend, the Protestant Alfredo di Lotzebeck came by, with whom I had an even more useless conversation. We spoke about hunting, entertainments, the carnival, the brilliant evening which the duke Torlonia had offered the night before. I could not forget my wedding feast and I invited Lotzebeck to it and he promised me expressly to be present.

Imagine a third interlocutor coming at that moment (it was noon), and saying: «Alphonse, in a quarter of an hour, you will adore Jesus Christ your God and Saviour. You will be on your knees in a poor church, and you will strike your chest at the feet of a priest in a Jesuit church. You will spend the carnival to prepare for baptism, ready to die for the Catholic faith. You will renounce the world its grandeur, your entertainments, money, all your hopes and future; maybe you will renounce your fiancée, the friendship of the Jews... and you will aspire only to follow Jesus Christ and carry his cross to your death!»! If a prophet had made a similar prophecy, I would have thought him to be the most preposterous man in the world; only a madman could believe such an absurdity!

With «the angel of Mary»

It is that folly that constitutes today my wisdom and happiness. Leaving the caffè, I bumped into the carriage of de Bussières. He stopped and I was invited to join him for a short ride. The weather was fine and I agreed with pleasure. But de Bussières asked me to stop kindly for a few minutes by the church of Sant'Andrea delle Fratte, which was on our left, because he had some

business to do; he suggested that I wait in the carriage; I preferred to come down and visit the church. They were preparing a funeral, and I asked the name of the person who was to receive the last rites. De Bussières answered: «It's one of my friends,



Count Laferronnays

count Laferronnays; his sudden death is the reason for my sadness that you could notice these last two days».

I had not known Laferronnays; I never saw him, and I had no feelings except the

general feeling that we always feel at the news of a sudden death. De Bussières left me to send a note to the family of the deceased. «Don't be impatient» he said, entering the cloister, «It's only matter of two minutes ».

It was She!

The church of S. Andrea is small, poor and deserted. I think I was alone there, no object of art attracted my attention. I strolled mechanically, looking around without stopping, without any thought in particular. I remember only a black dog that jumped up and down before me... Suddenly the dog disappeared, the church disappeared, and I did not see anything... and suddenly, my God, I saw only one thing!!!

How can I describe it? Human words cannot attempt to explain the unspeakable; every description, however sublime, will only be a profanation of the ineffable truth. I was there, on my knees, in tears. My heart was outside me as M. de Bussières tried to bring me back to life.

I could not answer his rapid questions; but I took the medal that he had placed on my chest and kissed passionately the image of the Virgin radiant with grace. It was She!

I did not know where I was; I did not

know whether Alphonse was somebody else; I experienced an almost total change, that I believed I was somebody else. I tried



The Apparition

to find myself and could not... The greatest joy burst from the depths of my soul; I could not speak. I did not want to reveal anything. I felt something solemn and sacred within me that I called for a priest... I was led to one and only after a positive order I spoke as far as I could about what happened, and I spoke on my knees with a trembling heart.

My first words were thanksgiving to M. Laferronnays and to the Archconfraternity of Our Lady of the Victory. I knew for sure that Laferronnays had prayed for me; but I could not say how I came to know this, I could not account for the faith and awareness that I had acquired. All that I could say is that in the moment of this phenomenon, the band fell from my eyes; and not one band, but a whole collection of them, and they disappeared rapidly, one after the other, as snow, mud and ice disappear under the influence of the burning sun.

The visionary and convert

I came out of a tomb, out of the abyss of darkness and I was alive, perfectly alive... But I wept! I saw in the bottom of the abyss the extreme misery from which I was torn out by an infinite mercy. I trembled at the sight of all my iniquities, and I was stupe-

fied, emotionally moved and shocked in admiration and gratitude... I thought of my brother with an unheard of joy; but the tears of love mixed with tears of pity. Oh, how many descend calmly into this abyss with their eyes closed by pride and recklessness! ... They descend alive into the chasm of terrible darkness... And my family, my fiancée, my poor sisters!!! Oh heart-rending anxiety! I thought of you, you whom I love! For you I offered my first prayers. Will you not lift up your eyes to the Saviour of the world whose blood cancelled the original sin? Oh, how terrible is the imprint of that stain! It renders the creature made in the image of God unrecognizable.

I wondered how I came to know this truth, since it is sure that I had not opened a religious book, I had not read a single page of the Bible, and the doctrine on original sin, that is totally forgotten and denied by modern Jews, had not occupied my mind even for an instant; I doubt if I have ever heard the term. How did I arrive at this knowledge? I do not know. I know this:

that entering the church I knew nothing; leaving it, I saw everything clearly. I can only explain this change with the image of a man who awoke from a deep sleep, or with that of a man born-blind, who sees

the light in one blow; he sees but cannot define the light that is the source of his illumination, and in which he contemplates the objects of his admiration.

Even though the language is imprecise and incomplete, the positive truth is that I found myself to be a new being, a *tabula rasa*. The world was nothing for me. The prejudices against Christianity no longer existed; those from my childhood no longer left a trace. The love of my God had so totally replaced all other love, that my fiancée appeared to me in a different light. I loved her as an object that God holds in his hands, as a precious gift, that makes one love even more the donor.

I repeat that I pleaded my confessor, the reverend Father Villefort and M. de Bussières to retain an absolute secret about what had happened to me. I wanted to bury myself in a Trappist monastery to occupy myself only with eternal things. I confessed and thought that my family would believe I was insane and would have ridiculed me, and so I preferred to flee totally from the world, its chatter and its judgments.

But my ecclesiastical superiors convinced me that the ridicule, the abuse and false judgments form a part of the chalice of a true Christian; they invited me to drink it, telling me that Jesus Christ had forewarned



Rome: *The Basilica of S. Andrea delle Fratte*

his disciples that they will be punished, tortured and put to death. These serious, words far from discouraging me, enflamed my interior joy; I felt ready for everything and insistently demanded baptism. They wanted to delay it. «But how», I exclaimed, «the Jews who heard the preaching of the Apostles were baptised immediately, and you want to delay it, even though I heard the Queen of the Apostles!» My sentiments, my sincere desire and demands touched the pious men who heard me and they promised baptism!

The Catechumen at the «Gesù»

I could not wait for the day fixed for the fulfilment of this promise. I felt so deformed in the sight of God! How much goodness, how much charity was offered me in the days of my preparation? I entered the convent of the Jesuits to make a retreat under the guide of Father Villefort, who nourished my soul with the sweetness and persuasiveness of the divine word. This man of God is not a human! He is a heart, a personification of the heavenly charity! As soon as I opened my eyes, I saw around me men of such quality, that the world has no idea of. My God, how much goodness, how much gentleness and graciousness is in the hearts of these real Christians! Every evening, during my retreat, the Most Reverend Superior General of the Jesuits came to me and poured into my soul a heavenly balsam. He said a few words that seemed to open and magnify in me, as I heard them and they filled me with joy, light and life. This priest who was so humble and at the same time so powerful, could have not said a single word, because his sole presence produced in me the effect of his words. The memory of him today is enough to remind me of the divine presence and alight my most vivid gratitude. I have no words to described my gratitude, I would need a much greater heart and a hundred mouths to ex-

press the love I feel for these godly men: de Bussières, who became an angel of Mary; the Laferronnays family, for whom I have a devotion and affection beyond words!

Ineffable graces

Finally, January 31 arrived, and not just a few souls, but a great crowd of charitable and pious souls surrounded me with a special tenderness and sympathy. How would I like to know them and thank them! They can always pray for me, as I pray for them.

Oh, Rome, what a grace I found in your midst!

The Mother of my Saviour arranged everything and led a French priest come and speak to me in the solemn moment of my baptism. It was Monsignor Dupanloup, whom I will record with the deepest emotion. Blessed are those who hear him! The echo of his words has never the effect of his words only. Oh, it could be felt that they were inspired by Him, who was the object of his discourse. I will not relate the details of my baptism, confirmation and my first Holy Communion — the ineffable graces that I received all on that day from the hands of His Eminence Cardinal Patrizi, the Vicar of His Holiness.

The *last consolation* was reserved for me. You remember my desire to see the Holy Father — my desire and curiosity that re-

tained me in Rome. I could hardly suspect the circumstances in which this desire would be realized.



The baptism of Alphonse Ratisbonne

The papal audience

I was presented to the Father of all faithful as a newborn of the Church. It seemed to me that from the moment of my baptism I experienced sentiments of respect and filial love towards the Supreme Pontiff. I was extremely happy when I was told that I will be presented at the audience by the Father General of the Jesuits; nevertheless, I shuddered, because I have never been before the great of this world, and those great seemed so small before this grandeur. I confess, that the majesties of the world seemed to me to be united in him who possessed here the power of God, in the Pontiff, who by an uninterrupted succession descends from St. Peter and the high priest Aaron, and succeeds Jesus Christ himself, from whom he holds his unshakable throne.

I cannot forget the fear and trembling of my heart as I entered the Vatican passing through the long corridors and the impressive halls that lead to the papal apartments. But all my anxiety disappeared and ceded away, at my surprise and marvel, when I found him so simple, so humble and so paternal! He was not a monarch, but a father, whose extreme goodness treated me as a dear son.

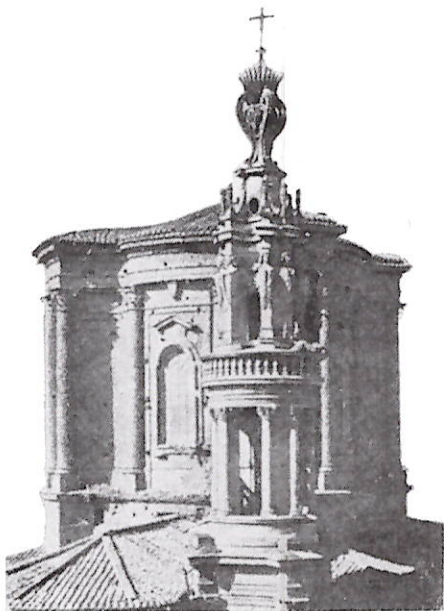
Gratitude, this will be now my law and my life!

THE BASILICA-SHRINE
OF «S. ANDREA DELLE FRATTE»

The beginnings of the church go back to the XIth century when a building of modest proportions and art was raised. In the XVth century it was served by the Scots, but with the anti-Catholic revolt in England, the church passed under the direct dependence of a Confraternity. It received the title of a parish church, that was transferred from S. Giovanni della Ficozza. Finally, the Minimi Fathers of St. Francis di Paola were asked to take over the church by the "Breve" of Pope Sixtus V dated August 7, 1585. These religious, who held it ever since, served there with appreciated zeal. They used to own the grand complex of the church and convent of the Trinità dei Monti, but they made the new church and the adjacent convent that they constructed the centre of the ministry and studies of their Italian religious.

Art

They began by moving their General Curia here in 1605, and then they transformed



Rome: *S. Andrea delle Fratte* (exterior)

radically the old church, according to the projects of Gaspare Guerra. Only two frescoes, attributed to the painter Avanzino Nucci (+ 1629) were retained, those representing the Annunciation and the Nativity. A new reshaping that gave greater breath to the nave and a grandeur to the whole church was undertaken by the restless and bizarre architect Francesco Borromini. He enriched the church with a pulpit and dome worthy of his genius. To this was added the daring

tower, a toy of baroque art, with its airy and chaining lines. According to his very original idea, the tower gave a specific touch to the existing architecture. In a height of genius, the tower was topped by the artist with a stone crown (later substituted by a metal one). The tower was to be an original element, but finally it remained in the shade.

Other illustrious artists had left their works in the Roman Shrine of the Immaculate. In 1731 the monumental complex was definitively finished, through the efforts of Fra Giulio Casali, the lay brother and sacristan, who as an artistic patron acquired the works of the architects Filippo Barigioni, Luigi Vanvitelli and Valadier for the two spacious chapels in the transept. Amongst the works worth mentioning are the Angels of Bernini, a St. Anne of Maini, the sepulchral monument of cardinal Calcagnini del Bracci, the frescoes in the pinnacle of the dome, the canvases of St. Joseph and St. Charles by Cozza, the St. Francis di Paola by Nogari, the canvases of St. Michael the Archangel and the baptism of Jesus by Geminiani, and the three great icons in the apse presenting the passion of St. Andrew the Apostle, by Lazzari, Leonardi and Trevisani. But the most original and attractive of the works are the dome and bizarre tower, the toys of Borromini's genius. By the side entrance are buried the famous artists Zucchi, Angelica Kaufmann and Caffarelli.



One of the Angels of Bernini

Most recent changes

In the last thirty years, with the rise of importance of the Shrine-Basilica, the church has acquired a new image due to the consolidation works and general renovation, which began with a total renewal of the chapel of the Madonna of the Miracle. The present chapel of 1950 replaces that of 1849, which was built by the architect Sarti, of the academy of St. Luke, who had enriched the chapel with light stuccos of artistic value but who had followed the style of the times and used imitation marble, and so his work did not correspond fully to the importance of the extraordinary shrine.

Through the zealous devotion of Fr. Paolo Rapa, the parish priest of S. Andrea, works were conducted following the projects of the architect Marcello Piacentini. In a genial way, it was possible to create a harmonious fusion of classical and modern lines, which gave a sense of elegance and graciousness. The monumental work was enriched even more, when the sculptor Alfredo Biagini constructed the tabernacle made of silver, gold and precious stones, and the bronze monogram.

Other works complete the most precious chapel, like the fine and richly gold-plated stuccos in the vault and major arch; despite the scarcity of space, a grand monument for the Madonna of the Miracle has been

raised through the generous charity of the faithful and the aid of distinguished artists.

More recently, further works have been undertaken in the exterior and interior of the church, in the foundations, walls, and also in the tower, cloister, sacristy and attached convent; all this was possible through the enterprising zeal of the parish priests Fr. Giulio Nicolini and Fr. Pasquale Clemente. An atmosphere of prayer and recollection overcomes the visitor from the moment of passing through the threshold of the church.

In this new form, the ancient Basilica of S. Andrea delle Fratte reveals harmony and beauty, and in a worthy manner appears among the churches of the historical centre of Rome.

The Queen

Indeed, more than the attraction of works of human genius, the true motive of your visit to the shrine should be that which comes from the memorable Heavenly Queen. Appearing at an altar in the church, the silent Virgin, in a delicate, but efficacious manner, had made us aware of a new method of spreading the Catholic Faith. The new shrine of the Madonna of the Miracle has become the precursor of the modern apostolate.

Truly, from the first miraculous conversion, the history of the shrine has been woven into a series of Marian marvels and triumphs.

An extraordinary number of conversions that followed even though without the dazzling and exceptional circumstances of the



The crucifixion of St. Andrew the Apostle (icon in the apse)

first, prove that the Immaculate has chosen S. Andrea delle Fratte, to make it into a Shrine for petition and reparation.

Moreover, there were many cures granted for the body and numerous graces received by souls. The many «ex voto» left after heavenly favours witness to the deep and devoted gratitude towards the sweet Madonna of the Miracle.

*Saints and servants of God at the feet
of Our Lady of the Miracle*

Not only simple faithful, but also apostolic souls and authentic saints and servants of God have venerated the Immaculate of the Shrine of S. Andrea delle Fratte.

St. John Bosco understood the importance of the apparition of Mary and told the boys of his Salesian Oratory about it that very same year, 1842. He also mentioned it in his short history of the Church. During his frequent visits to Rome, and in particular when he stayed with M. Sigismondi, who lived at Via Sistina, he would go to prostrate himself by Our Lady's altar, moved by faith and devotion to her.

A visit of the saint was noted in 1880 by his secretary Gioacchino Berto: «March 27, 1880, Holy Saturday: a visit to the church of S. Andrea delle Fratte».

Such visits profited in the benevolence

of the Queen of Heavens.

He had offered the Constitutions of the new Salesian Society to the competent Roman Congregation, but the opposition was so great that he feared that the Constitutions would not be approved.

Inspired by a deep faith, he sent *Don Berto* to S. Andrea delle Fratte, to light two candles by the altar of the Madonna and asked him to celebrate Mass there; finally the desired approval came.

Just as St. John Bosco, St. Maria Crocifissa di Rosa, the founder of the Ancelle della Carità, came to plead the intercession of Our Lady of the Miracle. Contrary to all prevision, and despite a wave of opposition, the procedure of approbation by the Congregation went through rapidly and happily. On September 19, 1850 she came to S. Andrea delle Fratte to venerate the Immaculate, and she assisted at Mass several times and received Holy Communion, entrusting everything to Mary's hands. « Our first visit was to the altar of the Immaculate, where Ratisbonne was converted » wrote the saint to the Vienna of Cremona on September 24. « Please pray. Everything is being studied by the Congregation ».

Two months later she returned to the Shrine with her assistants to express her thanksgiving to Mary.

Also St. Teresa of the Child Jesus, the humble pilgrim accompanied by her daddy,

went several times to S. Andrea delle Fratte and received Communion at the altar of apparition, during her short stay in Rome. It is possible that she entrusted her vocation to enter the Carmelites to Mary.

We should not forget St. Vincent Pallotti, a contemporary of many other devotees of Mary, blessed Don Luigi Guanella, the Venerable Fr. Bernardo M. Clausi of the Minimi, bl. Maria Teresa Ledòchowska, and Don Orione.

And we come to the founder of the Militia of the Immaculate, the first idea of which came on hearing about the event of January 20, 1842, the Polish Franciscan Fr. Maximilian Kolbe, canonized by John Paul II on October 10, 1982. On January 20, 1917, Kolbe was a Conventual Franciscan seminarian studying at the International College of S. Teodoro in Rome. That day Fr. Stefano Ignudi, his director suggested as a theme for meditation, the apparition of the Immaculate to the Jew Ratisbonne.

It was the spark of a Marian fire.

After his first Mass celebrated on April 29, 1919, at the altar of the Miracle, Fr. Kolbe initiated the medley of activities, that through the press and the cities of Mary led him to the height of sanctity, that was crowned with heroism when he offered himself out of charity to replace a fellow prisoner condemned to death in the Nazi concentration camp in Auschwitz (now Oświęcim) on August 14, 1941.

CORONATION, CELEBRATIONS, TITLES



«Our Lady of the Miracle»

In May 1842, only a few months after the apparition, a painting of Our Lady of the Miracle was placed for veneration in exactly the same spot, and in the same form as she appeared. The canvas was painted, by the artist Natale Carta, who according to tradition followed the indications of

Ratisbonne himself.

In that same year, after a formal inquest about the apparition of January 20, the Vicar General of Pope Gregory XVI, Cardinal Patrizi, declared on June 3, 1842 that it was a divine miracle operated through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and permitted the publication and spread of texts recording the miracle. The same Cardinal Patrizi erected canonically with a new decree the «Pious Union of Our Lady of the Miracle», for a perpetual memory of the fact and for an increase of Marian devotion.

There were so many miracles operated by Mary in the Shrine, that on the fiftieth anniversary of the apparition, after a request presented by Fr. Gaspare Dellepiane, Superior General of the Minimi, the Vatican Chapter, on order of Pope Leo XIII, coronated the venerated icon with a diadem. It was January 17, 1892.

Later, on April 25, 1942, Pius XII after a request presented by Fr. Giacomo Tagliaferro, the Superior General of the Minimi, and taking into account the artistic values of the Roman church of S. Andrea delle Fratte, and the most uncommon privilege of an apparition of the Immaculate, elevated the title of the church to the rank of a basilica. The munificence of the Holy Father for the Marian shrine in the heart of Rome did not end there. On December 21,

the following year, he conceded new proof of his continual predilection, by ordering that the Indulgence «Toties quoties» is to be granted to all in the Basilica on the feast of Our Lady of the Miracle, on January 20, from midday, the preceding day, on the usual conditions.

The Basilica-Shrine witnessed several great celebrations. Particular mention should be made of the thanksgiving services on the day of the solemn canonization of St. Catherine Labouré on July 27, 1947. This Daughter of Charity (who a century before was granted an apparition of the Immaculate) was chosen by Mary as the apostle of the Miraculous Medal, the efficacy of which has been proved again at S. Andrea delle Fratte. Other ceremonies worth mentioning are the pilgrimage of the sick, and the services and «pilgrimage» of the Marian Year of Lourdes (1954) to this, as Pope Benedict XV had called it, « Lourdes of Rome ».

In recent times, Pope John XXIII elevated the Basilica of S. Andrea delle Fratte to the title of a cardinal's church, with a «Breve» dated March 12, 1960. There were many Italian and foreign pilgrims who came on foot to Our Lady of the Miracle. Special mention should be made of the visit of Papa John Paul II that took place on February 28, 1982.

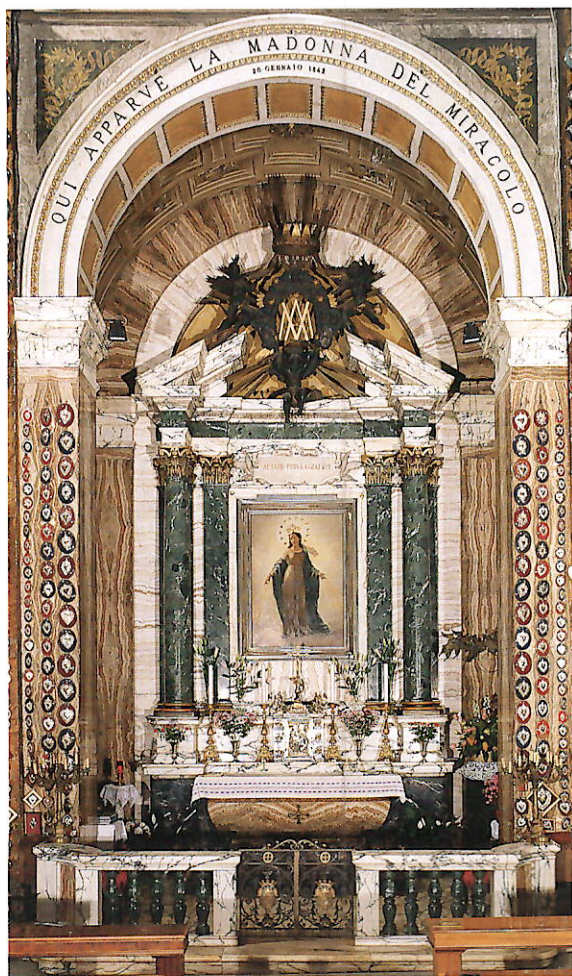
THE MIRACULOUS MEDAL

The apparition's appearance to Ratisbonne is one with the appearance of the Madonna to St. Catherine Labourè. During this apparition, which occurred in Paris on rue du Bac in 1830, the Virgin invited the nun, a novice from the Daughters of Charity Institute, to have a medal coined with an image illustrated by Our Lady herself, promising enormous graces to those who would wear it. True enough, Alphonse Ratisbonne was wearing this same medal on the day of the apparition. He was not certainly wearing it due to his devotion but as a gesture of courtesy to his friend, Count De Bussière, and guided by a secret wish, upon returning to Paris of having some light hearted fun with his betrothed about the silly stories that the Catholics believed in. De Bussière, however, was a firm believer in the promises of the Madonna and urged his young friend to wear the medal, secretly hoping that it would be an instrument of his friend's conversion. Even Alphonse's brother, Theodore Ratisbonne, already converted to Catholicism and at the time a priest, insistently prayed to

God for his brother's conversion.

The first apparition occurred during the night between the 18th and 19th of July in 1830: Sister Catherine is guided by a child (her guardian angel) into the Chapel of the Institute where the Virgin awaits her. It is here that a conversation between the Saint and Our Lady takes place announcing that God wanted to assign her an important mission.

Another apparition occurs the same year on November 27, in which there are two phases. In the first, the young novice sees Our Lady upright upon a globe surrounded by coils of serpents while in the act of offering to God another small golden globe, symbol of the world and of each and every soul, held at the heart level: two bands of light fall from the hands of Our Lady and bath the lower globe. The second phase is when the smaller globe disappears, the Virgin's hands are lowered, ever emanating bands of light, symbol of the grace of God for her intercession, and as if to form a halo around the head of Our Lady were golden letters forming the words of the short prayer: *Oh Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse you.* Then the picture seems to be seen from the backside: the figure of Our Lady disappears and standing out in the center is a luminous letter "M" above which was a cross and under which the most Holy Heart of Jesus and Mary, with twelve radiant stars in the shape of a crown. At the same time, Catherine hears a



The chapel of the Apparition

commanding voice: *have a medal coined according to the model that you have seen, to those who wear it after it's having been blessed, and while repeating the short prayer: Oh Mary, conceived, etc... will receive enormous graces. Many will be the graces received for those who have faith... the rays are symbols of grace that I will grant to those who ask.*

The first thousand and five hundred pieces were coined on the 30th of June, 1832. The medal was immediately called *miraculous*.

The nun Catherine lived in the most humble circumstances and in the most absolute silence, serving the poor in the hospice of Enghien in Paris for forty six years. She died on the 31st of December in 1876; when her remains were exhumed, the hands that had touched the Madonna and the eyes that had seen her were in an extraordinary well-preserved state. She was beatified by Pio XI on May 28, 1933 and canonized by Pio XII on the 27th of July, 1947.

The marvel continues

More than 160 years have gone by since the appearance of the Virgin to Ratisbonne. An image of the Virgin, a masterpiece of the painter Natale Carta from Messina, has been placed upon the altar of the apparition. The image was painted according to the indications given by Ratisbonne himself; the altar-cloth covering the altar at the time of the ap-

parition has been jealously kept in a precious reliquary for worship by the faithful.

Not only the souvenirs of what happened on the 20th of January, 1842 rest in the church of St. Andrea delle Fratte, *because the Marvel still goes on!!*

This parish basilica silently and devotedly hosts the history of many other conversions which have happened without much exterior clamor, as they are often without verifiable prodigious elements, without sworn documentation. They occur through the mystery of grace, which moves man and brings him along to the path of good. The mediator and Mother of this grace is always Her, the Holy Virgin, better invoked today thanks to the mediation of grace, as the Mother of conversion.

The clergy and priests, who operate out of the St Andrea delle Fratte as mediators of reconciliation, can testify to the numerous cases of conversion occurring in the same manner as on the 20th of January, in 1842, to Ratisbonne. There are people, distant from the religious world, who having gone for a walk found themselves, by mere circumstance, passing near the St. Andrea church, and devoid of any religious intention, have found themselves obliged by simple curiosity to enter and *idly admire some works of art*, only to find themselves kneeling and to the point of tears in front of a confessional reconciling themselves with the Lord. Some have mentioned that they were not aware

of how, so many years ago, Ratisbonne was wondrously converted in the same church.

"I had left home only for an aimless walk, and I found myself on my knees to confess to a priest ... after so many years!"

Here's a tale of a recent conversion.

"I was going through a period of deep moral depression... moral values, those in which I had believed in for over fifteen years were gone, inexistent... God, religion, my brothers... didn't exist anymore. Only I was left... One Sunday afternoon in the month of March, 1999, I met an acquaintance by chance in Piazza St. Silvestro... We met and I was filled with an enormous joy. I offered that we go for a coffee and he instead asked me to keep him company on the way to church, St Andrea delle Fratte. With some effort, I accepted and while entering I found myself carefully avoiding any sight of the images of Jesus and the Madonna... mass finished. My friend asked me to follow him into the sacristy. He wanted to give me the "miraculous medal". 'The same old propaganda' I thought to myself. 'It would take much more than that. How was it that I was in such a bad state? And how, if God exists, had he let me do so much harm to myself? As if a medal could be the solution to all my problems!'... In the end I accepted the medal. My friend gave it to me as if it were a magic potion. It would have been too rude to tell him that I already had a saint in my wallet... which,

moreover, had been of no use up till now. 'Thanks friend, I'll accompany you to work'... and once again alone, my conscience made itself heard again. I started to cry and headed back into my car. I gazed at the medal and read the Graces... how can you believe in the Graces in these times? How much time lost. Once home, however, I reread those 'instructions' regarding the medal. I thought of how wearing it couldn't be all that bad: at the worst, nothing could happen. There I was in bed, thinking again about the church. The next day, in the office, time just wouldn't pass. I was stir crazy all day. I could only think of the church's chapel of the Madonna of the miracle. I wanted to go back there and stay in the silence. Finally, I finished my shift. I freed myself from some previous engagements with an excuse and went the Church. The Lady and I. 'We two have to talk.' But can I talk to a picture? I light a candle in your honor and I already know that you have won. Before, I never would have left an offering in Church. I recite a few prayers and fall immediately into anguish and sadness. I don't know if you have called to me or if I am only a silly superstitious person, but at this point I'll hang in there. How many people are around me and how much pain they all carry with them. I, oh Lady, am not even worthy enough to look at you, but I feel you. You are there, at my side. I look at your picture and my head

spins. I feel your presence. As I kneel at the last pew, I speak to you. I tell you all about myself. I know that you are there and that you are listening to me. I was so embarrassed to tell you about my life! And Jesus was there, next to you. And to you, Lord, I will get to you afterwards. You, oh Mary, are my mediator to Grace and so it must be you that will bring me to Him. Our conversation becomes so intimate that I have to force my mind back to earth and into the cozy church where I was and had for a few moments forgotten even my name ... Lord, I thank you. I often come back to this wonderful chapel for the Rosary and holy mass. It was there where after almost fifteen years I re-found Jesus in my heart. Mary, your presence and your goodness have been fine gifts. Mary, after the Eucharist -I am certain- you looked to me smiling. I am not the same, only my name remains from my past. I wish only to talk with You, of Jesus and of Your Great Love. How much pain I feel when I think of my past!"

As of a few years ago, the Rosary for the conversion is recited at the altar of the apparition, every first Saturday of the month and holy mass is regularly celebrated for this same purpose. The faithful passing by, even the Friday before, leave their written intentions of prayer: there are an uncountable amount of requests for the blessing of conversion. Who can imagine how many prayers are heard by Our Lady, therefore bringing many souls to Jesus!

THE MINIMS RELIGIOUS ORDER AS CUSTODIANS OF OUR LADY OF THE MIRACLE SANCTUARY

The safekeeping of Our Lady of the Miracle Shrine is still entrusted to the Minims religious order, the spiritual offspring of St. Francis of Paola (Paola 1416 – Tours 1507).

The Minims order was founded by St. Francis of Paola, a Calabrian hermit, during the XV century. He sought a sense of penitence for his religious family, indicating to his followers the discipleship of the penitent Christ and announced, the gospel of penitence within the church; in this manner he gave the church of that era, a church in so much need of reform, an indication of how to renew oneself in the light of the Gospel.

The order is made up of three branches: the monks (the I Order) who are united with one another through a life of contemplation and a commitment to the apostolic path; the nuns (the II Order) who live a cloistered life dedicated to contemplation; the laity of both genders (the III Order) who live in the world following the evangelical commitment to conversion which animates life on earth.

The Rule that St. Francis left for his followers were later established by Pope Julius II who approved of them as “*a light that illuminates the penitents within the church*”. In the Rule of the I and II Orders, the particular commitment

to spiritual penitence highlights the importance of the IV vow stipulating a life of Lent; to live life holding fast to the abstinence of meat, as has been called for already by the Church during the yearly period of Lent.

The Minims have always considered the appearance of Our Lady in St. Andrea delle Fratte not only as the Virgin's benevolence but also, in a certain sense, as a confirmation of their mission of penitence within the church. The conversion of Ratisbonne is a sign from God that their mission is to call men towards penitence in the effort to bring them back to the way of the Lord. For this reason even the Minims love to refer to the Virgin with the title of "*Lady of conversion*".

On the 20th of January, 1993, towards the end of the 150th anniversary festivities marking the prodigious event, the entire religious family of the Minims order was reunited around the altar of the apparition with an offering to Our Lady in the form of an artistic lamp, which now constantly burns as a witness to the love and recognition this offspring of St. Francis of Paola has for the Mother of God; she had honored them by choosing their church for her historical apparition. It is to her that they look to in faith and in the hope to live out their lives as living examples of her strength, and to continue as a witness within the church, during their incisive mission, of being the light that illuminates the penitents of the church.

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