

La Salette – a Story Worth Retelling

“Make this known to all my people”! These were the parting words of the Blessed Virgin Mary to Maximin and Melanie on that afternoon of September 19, 1846 at La Salette, France. Then the Beautiful Lady disappeared into the clouds. For sure the message changed the children and those that heard her message.

The extraordinary manifestation of God’s ordinary presence

Fr. Roger Castel, M.S., noted speaker is one of the French La Salette Missionaries who defined apparition as “the extraordinary manifestation of God’s ordinary presence.” True enough, this ‘extraordinary manifestation of God’s ordinary presence’ by Mother of God, has affected, united, reconciled, and healed thousands of souls for the last 175 years.

The Congregation of the Missionaries of Our Lady of La Salette marks the anniversary of the merciful apparition of Mary, reflecting on the significance and relevance of the mandate that was given at first to the two cowherds and then to the Missionaries of La Salette. It is indeed a momentous occasion to dig deeper into the meaning and purpose of this ‘manifestation’ of God’s presence in the lives of people.

God never stops caring and accompanying God’s children even if people choose to distance themselves from God’s activity. The intervention and ‘intrusion’ of God in the plight of the people is clearly reflected in the Old Testament history of the chosen people of Israel. St. Paul would say, “where sin abounds grace abounds all the more” (Romans 5:20). God never abandons his children and Mary the Mother of God chose to intervene when people ‘run out of wine’ or when zest for life was lacking.

Mary’s compassionate presence

We see Mary, the Mother of God, in the ‘upper room’ of the life of the apostles in their moment of loss and grief praying with them and being with them in their hour of need (Acts 1:13-16). This compassionate presence of Mary and her involvement in the life of her children are clearly seen in the several apparitions. Mary chooses to convey a clear message of hope and mercy to the visionaries with the intention of drawing people back home to God.

Among the apparitions in the 20th century – especially at La Salette, Fatima, Lourdes and Kibeho – we can notice a deliberate choice of young people as her messengers or visionaries. Mostly she chose illiterate, uncouth, simple, ordinary folks from humble circumstances become the recipients of the extraordinary manifestation of God’s presence.

At the apparition near the village of La Salette, Maximin and Melanie were two cowherds, hired hands responsible for caring for the cows on the nearby mountain fields of the French Alps. Their encounter with the ‘Beautiful Lady’ and her message of prayer, penance and zeal changed their lives for the better. Her parting words to the children were: **“Make this message known to all my people”!** Let us examine how the visionaries themselves carried out this mandate.

They were questioned and examined by many people

There is no indication from the historical accounts that they understood the gravity, seriousness, meaning and impact of the message they heard from Our Lady. Maximin was more vocal about the event while Melanie went about doing her duties at the household. However, both Melanie and Maximin had to give an account of the events at La Salette numerous times beginning with their own families.

They were literally ‘grilled’ by the authorities but the children stood their ground and recited a portion of the events in classic French – a language that they never learned or had spoken. It is important to note that the children never faltered nor retracted the story no matter how much pressure the authorities inflicted upon them.

The children were true to Mary’s mandate

Young unrefined people cannot be manipulated nor bought by bribery or influenced by intimidation. The message of Mary was truly planted in the mind and heart of these young children and no one and nothing could destroy it. The children were simply following the mandate of Mary: “Make the message known to all my people.” Their ministry of ‘making it known’ began with their immediate family, and then with their employers, soon to the pastor of the parish in the hamlet of La Salette, then with the mayor of the hamlet and to the ecclesiastical authorities – all this from Mary’s heart to the children and on to the world.

Two people who immediately grasped and were touched by Mary’s message were Melanie’s employer, Baptiste Pra, and the pastor of the parish of La Salette, Fr. Jacques Perrin. Upon hearing the account of the apparition, they declared that “this Beautiful Lady can be none other than the Blessed Virgin” and how fortunate were these children! From then on, these fledgling children with very little religious upbringing, realized that the “Beautiful Lady” that spoke to them was indeed the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Examinations and bribery for these simple children

Monsieur Peytard, Mayor of the hamlet of La Salette during the time of the Apparition. The news of the extraordinary event reached the ears of the Mayor of La Salette Monsieur Peytard. He made a ‘friendly’ visit to Melanie and cross-examined her mercilessly, passing back and forth from threats to bribes. It was fruitless. He could not shake Melanie or get her to vary her account by a single word. He then interviewed Maximin in the nearby city of Corps. Maximin’s account was in perfect harmony down to the last detail with that of Melanie.

In addition, the cowherds had to tell the story many times to groups of pilgrims, skeptics, journalists, and delegates of civil and church authorities. In all these rigorous inquiries, these children conveyed emphatically and quite convincingly the message given to them by Our Lady. One the major lessons we learn from the character and strength of these visionaries is that you cannot break them because they evidently were anointed for a holy purpose. And they carried out their duty without fail.

The Bishop makes his decision

The final judgement on the authenticity of the apparition had to be determined by the Bishop of the Diocese in whose jurisdiction a reported apparition had taken place. For Maximin and Melanie the judgement day came after five years of diligent inquiries on September 19, 1851. Bishop Philibert de Bruillard of Grenoble published his decision:

“We judge that the Apparition of the Blessed Virgin to the two cowherds on the 19th of September 1846, on a mountain of the chain of the Alps, situated in the parish of La Salette, in the archpresbytery of Corps, bears within itself all the characteristics of truth, and that the faithful have grounds for believing it indubitable and certain.”

Now that the truth of the apparition is authenticated and after the message was made known, the mission assigned by Our Lady to Maximin and Melanie was completed. As the new bishop of Grenoble, Msgr. Ginoulhiac declared on September 19, 1855, “The mission of the children is now ended, and that of the Church begins.”

The La Salette message is now taken to the world

Pope Pius IX (1792-1878) The ministry of “make it known” takes on a new platform with the written account of the event at the kitchen table of Baptiste Pra and that transcript stands to this day. The cowherds wrote down the secrets of the apparition under the direction of the Papal delegate and sent to Rome and read by Pope Pius IX.

The story of the apparition was first transmitted by word of mouth by the visionaries themselves and later on gets published in numerous books. Telling the story is indeed a biblical and ancient form of communication. The founding of the Congregation of the Missionaries of Our Lady of La Salette was another historical milestone in the apparition of La Salette. The missionaries were “destined to look after the pious pilgrims, to preach the word of God to them, to exercise toward them the ministry of Reconciliation, to administer the Holy Sacrament of the altar, and to be, to all, the faithful dispensers of the mysteries of God and the spiritual treasures of the church... these religious priests shall be called Missionaries of Our Lady of La Salette” (Pastoral letter issued by Bishop Philip de Bruillard on May 1, 1852). These missionaries have brought the message of La Salette to twenty-seven countries through their ministries of reconciliation.

What was the core message that was being communicated by the visionaries at first and now by the Missionaries as well as the many believers of Mary’s merciful apparition? Mary was inviting (“Come nearer, my children”) the people of God to draw nearer to her Son, Jesus. The Church in France and much of Europe was going through a crisis of faith not unlike today. The faithful had to be reminded of their Sunday obligation as well as of other spiritual practices that were central to the Catholic faith and culture. Mary used the language of the local folks and employed images of walnuts, potatoes, grapes and wheat to bring the message to the level of ordinary people. This is in fact the same tool used by her Son Jesus to talk to the simple folks of Palestine. Mary drew attention to the need for reconciliation, prayer, penance and zeal. Mary was known as Mother of Reconciliation and addressed as reconciler of sinners. Pope John Paul II (1920-2005) The relevance of Mary’s message for today’s church and the world is more urgent than ever. The prophetic nature of Mary’s message was clearly understood by St. John Paul II as evidenced in his message to the Missionaries of La Salette on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the apparition.

“The message of La Salette was given to two young shepherds in a period of great suffering. People were scourged by famine, subjected to many injustices. Indifference or hostility toward the Gospel message worsened. As she appeared, bearing upon her breast the likeness of her crucified Son, Our Lady showed herself to be associated to the work of salvation, experiencing compassion for her children...”

“La Salette is a message of hope – a hope sustained by the intercession of her who is the Mother of all peoples... The arm of Mary’s Son will not weigh upon, will not condemn, the people who walk humbly in the pathway of the Lord. Christ will take the outstretched hand into his own and lead to new life the sinner reconciled by the grace of the Cross...”

“At La Salette, Mary clearly spoke of the constancy of her prayer for the world: she will never abandon the people created in the image and likeness of God, those to whom it has been given to become children of God. May she lead to her Son all the nations of the earth.” (Pope John Paul II on May 6, 1996)

Back to the basics of our Catholic faith

The message of La Salette is a call to ‘back to the basics’ or to the fundamentals of our faith journey. The parents have the responsibility to create an environment at home to facilitate growth in spirituality. Regular family prayer, attending Sunday mass as a family, opportunity for learning and deepening of faith are essential components in forming young disciples of reconciliation for now and for tomorrow. Devout families beget devout disciples of Christ with passion, purpose and joy. These families produce rich vocations to consecrated life and priesthood.

In conclusion, I want to reecho the words of St. Catherine of Sienna, “Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire.” Maximin and Melanie were chosen instruments of the Blessed Mother to let the world know the fire of God’s love, compassion, mercy and reconciliation. The fire that these young missionaries set ablaze in the village of La Salette now has spread all over the world. Many lives have been mended, healed and reconciled thanks to the heroic efforts of messengers of mercy and ambassadors of reconciliation. The courageous witness of the young visionaries inspired the establishment of the Missionaries of La Salette who carried the torch to as many as twenty-seven countries.

On this 175th anniversary of apparition, I look to the young church to be inspired by the call of Mary to be ambassadors of hope, mercy, and reconciliation. The young church has the passion, drive, motivation, energy, and tools to ‘make the message known.’ Parents, clergy and religious alike have the responsibility to believe in the power and enthusiasm of the young church to listen, prepare, form and send forth these ambassadors of hope and mercy to ‘draw near the lost children of the new Israel.’ We can’t be numb to the realities and dangers that the world faces today. Let us prepare an army of young people as ambassadors of hope. May our Blessed Mother continue to invite many young people to be a part of the ministry of reconciliation!

Our Lady of La Salette, reconciler of sinners, pray without ceasing for us who have recourse to you!

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