

## THE WEeping VIRGIN OF THE ALPS

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OD is ever manifesting His love for men. Creation, the Incarnation, Redemption, Salvation—all are the work of Divine Love. In His plan of Redemption, He has assigned a unique position to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Her role was first revealed in the Book of Genesis when God said to the serpent, "I will put enmities between thee and the woman, and thy seed and her seed; she shall crush thy head, and thou shalt lie in wait for her heel." Mary was the *Woman*, and her Son, the God-man, Jesus Christ, paid the price of man's redemption. It is by reason of her divine maternity that Mary becomes Mother of men and the mediatrix of all graces. Charged with this twofold office, the Virgin Mary exercises a maternal solicitude in our behalf. To her God has communicated the knowledge of all that pertains to the Church, the Mystical Body of her Divine Son. From her heavenly throne she sees the good and the evil in the world. She hears the prayers of saints and sinners. She waters the earth with the dew of God's grace, and she stays His avenging arm, heavy because of man's injustices. So efficacious is her loving solicitude for men that St. Bernard felt compelled to pray, "never was it known that anyone who fled to thy protection, implored thy help, or sought thy intercession, was left unaided."

Moreover, in her great love for the members of Christ, she has even deigned to appear on earth to lead men back to the way of salvation. Not waiting to be invoked, Our Blessed Mother came when famine was driving men to blasphemy, when science was usurping the power of the Gospel of Christ, when war was plunging men into the depths of despair. Souls were being lost! Souls, precious souls, which Her Son had purchased with His Blood, were waging a losing battle with the Prince of this world! The *Woman* came and crushed the head of the serpent.

This very year marks the centennial anniversary of one of Our Lady's singular victories over Satan. On September 19, 1846, Our Blessed Mother appeared to two children, as they were tending a herd of cows on one of the mountains in the Alps. Mont-sous-les-Baisses, the scene of the celestial drama, is located in the district of La Salette, a small country parish of the diocese of Grenoble in southern France.

High up the rugged and rocky mountain side, a lovely terrace breaks into view. The naked and barren cliffs are contrasted against the verdant pasture land of the plateau with its background of the beautiful mountain slopes. The other-worldliness of this picturesque spot is a fitting setting for the heavenly visitor.

Chosen to play the leading roles were two humble, uneducated, children, Maximin Giraud, aged eleven, and Melanie Mathieu, aged fifteen. It was these two shepherds, "the foolish things of the world" whom God selected "to confound the wise." Having lost his mother in his infant years, Maximin had never attended school, and, at the time of the apparition, knew only the *Our Father* and the *Hail Mary*. Melanie also lacked religious instruction, and, though capable of reciting the *Our Father* in French, she scarcely knew the meaning of the words. Unlettered and unknown, but possessing the simplicity and innocence of childhood, they became the bearers of Mary's message to a sin-sick world.

On the morning of the eventful day, Maximin and Melanie drove their herds to the green pastures of lofty Mont-sous-les-Baisses. At noon, having eaten their frugal meal of dry bread and cheese, and being tired from their labors and their play, they both fell sound asleep. When they awoke, they immediately began to search for the herd which had wandered away. Suddenly, Melanie turned to see a dazzling light appear on the spot where they had eaten their noon day meal. She called to Maximin, and together they saw the light part and reveal a Beautiful Lady seated on a stone seat. The Lady's attitude was one of profound sorrow, her hands resting on her knees, her head buried in her hands.

While the children stared in rapt amazement, the Lady rose and slowly walked towards them. "Come near, my children, be not afraid; I am here to tell you great news." The words fell sweetly from the lips of the Beautiful Lady, and they hurried to meet her. Looking up into her sweet and gentle face, they saw tears flowing from her eyes. The Beautiful Lady was weeping! The cause of her sadness was made known to the children. "If my people will not submit, I shall be forced to let go the arm of my Son. It is so strong, so heavy, that I can no longer withhold it. For how long a time do I suffer for you! If I would not have my Son abandon you, I am compelled to pray to Him without ceasing. And as to you, you take no heed of it. However much you pray, however much you do, you will never make recompense for the pains I have taken for you." The Lady then reproved the impiety of Christians, especially blasphemy and failure to attend Holy Mass. Great afflictions would befall the people if they

did not repent; but the Divine Mercy would be extended if they returned to God. Afterwards she confided a secret to each of the children separately. Then addressing them both as she was about to leave, she said, "Well, my children, you will make this known to all my people." The apparition began to disappear, but the children once more heard her commission, "Well, my children, you will make this known to all my people."

The children, who early that morning had climbed the mountain as shepherds, returned that evening as messengers of the Beautiful Lady. They were not slow to announce the "great news"; and the news spread rapidly. The parish priest told the children that they had been favored with a vision of the Blessed Virgin, and the very next day exhorted the parishioners to faithful attendance at Mass. Increasing numbers of people gathered on the beautiful terrace on Mont-sous-les-Baisses. Miracles were wrought through prayers to the Weeping Virgin, and the suffering faithful found a remedy for their bodily ailments in the water which had begun to flow from a once dried up spring.

Following a mandate of the Bishop of Grenoble, Philibert de Bruillard, issued within a few weeks after the Vision, the clergy of the diocese maintained a strict silence on the subject of the Apparition. Yet the noble and very prudent Bishop bent his every effort to ascertain the truth of the matter. Commissions were appointed to make thorough investigations. Five years later, Mgr. de Bruillard, published a pastoral letter confirming the Apparition. The letter, which had previously received the approval of the Sacred Congregation of Rites, was issued in September, 1851, and stated that "to testify our lively gratitude to God and to the glorious Virgin Mary, we authorize the cultus of Our Lady of La Salette. We allow it to be preached, and permit practical and moral conclusions to be drawn from this great event." Before the ensuing year had reached its close, the first stone of the Basilica of Our Lady of La Salette was laid, and the new sanctuary became a fountain of graces for suffering souls, "mourning and weeping in this valley of tears."

Opposition to the veracity of Maximin and Melanie was, of course, never lacking. Even as in the days of Our Lord, there were those who "seeing see not, and hearing hear not, neither do they understand." And just as the Wonder Worker of Nazareth was scoffed at and ridiculed, so too were the messengers of Our Lady. Through all the contemptible slander, the children remained undaunted and unshaken. They had to announce the "great news." The twice repeated commission of the Beautiful Lady must have rung in their

ears, "Well, my children, you will make this known to all my people." The dark clouds gathered and the storms of criticism broke with full fury over the flower of La Salette. It trembled momentarily, but, with the simple faith of countless pilgrims bringing the sunshine of love and devotion, the flower grew more beautiful. The pastoral letter of the Bishop was the answer to the skeptics and freethinkers whose hearts were cold to the tears of the Virgin.

Rome too has not been silent on the matter. Numerous spiritual favors have been bestowed on La Salette, giving ample testimony that the Church's highest authority accepts the authenticity of the Vision. The then reigning Pope Pius IX sent his paternal blessing and accorded many privileges to the new shrine of Our Lady. Permission was received from Leo XIII for the solemn crowning of the statue of Our Lady of La Salette. The Bishop of Grenoble had established a group of priests to care for the pilgrims who came to visit the shrine and to preach to them the word of God. The institute, under the title of "Missionaries of La Salette," expanded rapidly; and, in June 1926, Pope Pius XI gave full approval to their constitutions. Today the society, through its zealous priests, continues to announce the "great news" of La Salette. Melanie and Maximin have long since gone to their Beautiful Lady. In their stead, the Missionaries of La Salette have accepted the commission and, in the words of their founder, Bishop de Bruillard, stand as a "perpetual remembrance of the merciful Apparition of Mary." The present Holy Father, Pius XII has sent his encouragement to the Congregation and expressed the confidence that the Most Holy Virgin will "obtain for them a great abundance of graces for the fruitfulness of their ministry, now so varied and reaching to fields of the Apostolate among the hardest and farthest away." It is evident that the Church does not demand that the faithful accept the apparition as a doctrine of Faith. It is also evident, however, that She proposes this private revelation as worthy of credence and as containing a message of utmost importance.

The secrets which Our Lady confided to each of the children have never been fully divulged. Prior to sending his blessing to the sanctuary, His Holiness, Pope Pius IX, requested that the children make known to him their secret messages. At first they were hesitant, but, on the advice of their beloved Bishop, they consented to reveal the hidden information to one who had every right to know it, the Common Father of Christendom. Written independently and before witnesses, the records were placed in separate envelopes and stamped with the seal of the Bishop. Special delegates were appointed who carried the messages to Rome and delivered them into the hands

of the Holy Father. In the presence of the delegates, the Pontiff broke the sealed envelopes and read the secrets of La Salette. As he read Maximin's account, he remarked, "Here is all the candour and simplicity of a child." When he finished both letters, he turned to the delegates, "These are scourges with which France is threatened, but she is not alone culpable. Germany, Italy, all Europe is guilty and merits chastisement."

It was during the following year, that Pope Pius IX showered La Salette with spiritual favors. Although the Holy Father never made public the messages, books and pamphlets were published in great numbers, purporting to contain the text of Melanie's account or its adaptation to particular periods. Despite the prohibitions of Bishops, these continued until the latter part of 1915 when the Holy Office issued a decree forbidding further publications on the subject. Though the complete text of the documents was to remain hidden, the heart of the secrets was revealed. In a private audience with Pius IX, the Superior General of the Missionaries of La Salette humbly requested the Holy Father to tell him something of the secret messages. The kindly Pontiff's answer has been carried throughout the world by the Missionaries. "You wish to know the secrets of La Salette? Well, here are the secrets of La Salette: Unless you do penance you shall all perish."

Perhaps La Salette has been overshadowed by Lourdes and Fatima. Perhaps the Weeping Virgin has slipped into the background while the Immaculate Conception and the Lady of the Rosary have come to the fore. Perhaps Maximin and Melanie have been replaced by Bernadette and Lucia, Francisco, and Jacinta. Yet, high up on the Mont-sous-les-Baisses, a spring gushes forth sparkling water whose healing power has been experienced by the faithful throughout the world. Countless pilgrims still climb the rugged mountain side to the beautiful basilica to find peace and comfort for their restless souls and to beg pardon for the sins of mankind. A congregation, whose sole reason for existence is the commission given to it by Our Lady of La Salette through a shepherd boy and girl, has grown under persecution and faithfully preaches the "great news." In his recent letter to the Superior General of the Institute, our own saintly Pius XII predicts that the celebration of the centenary of the Apparition "will contribute powerfully, by a revival of spiritual fervor, to a rehabilitation of a world still torn and disordered by the effects of war."

No, La Salette has not been superseded by Lourdes and Fatima. Mary came to La Salette because she was needed. At that time the venerable Cardinal Fornari spoke these thought-provoking words:

"I am terrified with these prodigies. We have everything that is needed in our religion for the conversion of sinners; and when Heaven employs such means the evil must be very great!" How well might these words be said of Lourdes and Fatima also. And how wrong are they who regard these apparitions as isolated incidents with no connection. Rather are they successive chapters of one book, sequential scenes in one play, whose message is so important that it needed to be thrice repeated. "Unless you do penance you shall all perish" was the secret of La Salette. "Penance. Penance. Penance," cried Bernadette to the throngs at Massabielle. To the three shepherds at Fatima, Our Lady said, "Pray, pray much and make sacrifices for sinners." *Prayer and penance!* That is the message which the Mother of God in her loving solicitude for men brought to the world a hundred years ago. It is the message which is terribly needed today. It is the message with which the Woman will crush the head of the serpent, when her children heed her cry.