

SACRAMENTALS –

The Miraculous Medal for instance!

This article was found among the papers of our founder, Frank Duff.

For a long time past, the gallant effort has been in progress to reduce religion to an intellectual dimension. This has acquired a special impetus since the Council. Probably it now represents the greatest menace to religion, and above all to Catholicism which is pre-eminently and essentially the supernatural religion.

The intellect and the supernatural are two different, almost opposite, things. Of course I do not mean that they will always be found in opposite camps. But there is a tendency in that direction. There should not be. But the supernatural is paramount. The intellect is a servant and should content itself with its own sphere. It is reluctant to do so and is found claiming to be supreme. It becomes perverse. The old defiant cry is trumpeted forth: "I will not serve." I remind you that this was the war cry of the first of all rebellions and that it was the bright angel, Lucifer, who uttered it.

Our faith is the full expression of the supernatural. Most of the things which it tells us are "hard sayings," that is to the uncurbed intellect which will not realise that it is no more than brain matter. It treats as infallible what it receives through its limited channels of perception and it tends to act at their bidding as if they were the only things which counted. But, in the department of religion, faith and revelation must be the guide.

It is, of course, praiseworthy to examine into the things of faith with the intention of giving ourselves and others a better insight into them. It aids our faith to realise that it has the backing of reason. But the fact that such a backing may not be in our possession or indeed may not exist, should not affect our faith. Faith is supernatural. Reason is natural. Their realms may, sometimes, not coincide, and then our reason must act submissively to faith.

But, as I have said, this latter course is not the recent trend. On the contrary, we are witnessing a universal tendency towards the ousting of everything that the intellectual cannot grasp. This effort to reduce the universe to a purely scientific formula contradicts the very well-springs of human nature and it has led to an unexpected reaction.

Faith having been ruthlessly expelled, a vacuum has been created in the human make-up. And it is not in practice the intellect which moves into that vacuum. No, the vacuum rejects the rule of reason and welcomes something which has

neither faith nor intellect for its foundations. It eagerly takes up with unmitigated superstition.

This is an interesting manifestation, pointing to the fact that in man is a department which eludes the intellect and which we Catholics would see as being the special sphere of faith. It is unattuned to the purely natural so that it rebels against the effort of the intellect to take possession of it. But it *will* attach itself to substitutes for faith and fakes, that is superstition.

Indeed, as I may have wearied you by previously repeating, the price of rejecting the true is that we will be plagued by the false. Drive out God and Satan elbows his way in. Deny what is real, though unsubstantial, and next thing we will be caught up by the unreal and the senseless.

A recent article in the *Time* magazine devoted itself to a survey of this phenomenon. It told an amazing tale, garnished by a multitude of examples, of the growth of superstitious practices among quite advanced sections of the American population. These, having emancipated themselves from faith, are now found groveling before a million idols of one kind or another. You will see that it was not reason which took over the territory left vacant by true religion.

This universal propensity in man to reach out through the medium of objects, signs, rituals to a potent Unseen must surely constitute to the thoughtful mind an indication that in the depths of his nature man acknowledges the need for what true religion offers, that is a power which he feels can do all things. In ordinary moments he is able to shut away that other world from too much attention. But at important junctures when his self-sufficiency wears thin, that instinct asserts itself. Instinctively, and in spite of himself, he reaches out for the protection of that Unseen whose power he needs.

The man going into battle; or at the zero moment when about to enter in the awful adventure of space; or in any other crisis – is found desperately stretching out for that unseen aid and putting his reliance on it. If he has religion, he will invoke it. If he has no religion, he will pin his need to some device.

The celebrated Atheist, Volney, in the face of apparently certain loss at sea, produced from a hidden recess in his clothing, a Rosary and applied himself to it energetically. When subsequently mocked for this performance, he retorted: “No one is an Atheist in a storm.”

His compatriot, Voltaire, who took away the faith of millions, cried piteously on his death bed for a priest. But his disciples around him saw that he did not get one.

Emergencies, great perils and anguishes open up the whole man, previously imprisoned by materialistic formulae, by indifference, by utter concentration on himself. Against this, it is glibly said that such emotions must be discounted as

belonging to the primitive origins of mankind. But, could it not be more legitimately argued that such emotions represent a distorted hand-down from Adam who knew God?

Having laid that groundwork, I now propose to you that the sacramentals of the Church are a preservative from the false. They are a divine catering for that human instinct to reach out to God through things belonging to Him which we can see and touch. The sacramentals are necessary to us to the extent that if we incorrectly despise them as superstitious, then real superstition will rush in. Those sacramentals have not even a tincture of superstition in them. They are solidly based on our belief in God. Not merely that: they teach us doctrine in detail, and that to such an extent as to bring this thought: Suppose we take the whole range of sacramentals and analyse the point of doctrine which each one presents, would we not discover in the end that the ambit of Catholicism was covered?

One of the special points of doctrine which the sacramentals teach is Mary. In many ways they bear on her and illustrate her varied sphere of intercession.

Many, perhaps all, of those potent spiritual devices come to us through revelations or high teaching. That should be enough to recommend them to us, apart altogether from the "human need" aspect which I have been discussing.

And now I give you something very important. It is that we find Our Blessed Lord Himself touching this particular string of the divine harp. Into His loftiest pronouncements He introduces the human note as if He had to in order to secure comprehension. I take some instances.

You will recall the trick whereby the Pharisees sought to ensnare Him. They asked Him if it were right to pay the tribute to the Roman Government. Our Lord could have contented Himself with speech alone: "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Mat. 22/17). But no. He asked that the coin of the tribute be produced, and a Denarius was held up. "Whose image and inscription does it bear?", He enquired. "Caesar's", was the reply, and on that declaration He based His masterly solution. You will see that He was using the Denarius as we would use a sacramental. He utilised it to simplify discussion. It spoke without words. To their eyes it said: "What other explanation is required?" And it was enough. The tricksters slunk away discomfited; their cunning plan had boomeranged upon themselves.

Another example is afforded by Our Lord's healing of the man born blind. This was prefaced by Our Lord's dramatic proclaiming of Himself as being the Light of the World. His statement must have sounded to many as an extraordinary presumption. He was now going to justify it by giving the natural light to one who had never seen it, and it is to be inferred, was incapable of receiving it. The importance of the occasion requires that we study its details.

“Then Jesus spat on the ground and made clay of the spittle and spread the clay on the blind eyes. And said: ‘Wash in the Pool of Siloe.’ The blind man went and washed, and he came seeing.” (St. John Chap. 9.)

Here, again, does Jesus introduce into a miracle material substances which He could have omitted; three items in fact: His own spittle, the clay, the water. Much could be written around the symbolism of those three substances. Here, it must suffice to say, that the Lord deliberately imported them into this healing transaction when He could have dispensed with anything of the kind as He so often did. Moreover, there is apparent unsuitability about the application of clay to the eyes. It is certainly an irritant; it could be infective. The water we can appreciate as a symbol of cleansing. The spittle we can see as most intimate to Our Lord, a very outpouring of Him. But I repeat that all of those things seem to us unnecessary to the working of the miracle. Yet, Jesus did not think so, but bound them into the miracle as if it depended on them. Also, He arranged that this example would be published to all future generations. So, here again, do we find Our Lord Himself indulging in a spectacular use of sacramentals.

As this idea is unfamiliar and attractive, perhaps I may put another case of a different kind before you. It is given in the Gospel of St. Mark (9-36) and St. Luke (9-47). Our Lord wished to dispel certain thoughts of worldly ambition which were rising in the Twelve. He took a child and embraced it and said to them that “whosoever received that child in His name received Him; and he who desired to be the first should be the last; and that he who is the least shall be the greatest.”

This little sermon of the Lord contains the pith of the Christian message. Littleness plus faith exceeds all the greatness of the world. Those who follow the Lord must be little in self-esteem. Then He will impart Himself and His power to them.

But why introduce the child, set it in the midst of them, and so formally embrace it? That child is made a human sacramental. But for that child, the Lord’s message might have registered insufficiently to those who were in the future to deliver that message to the world. Our Lord’s words might have been as evanescent as those He wrote upon the sand. But the introduction of the child makes things different. The Lord’s drastic message becomes visible; takes shape. It was the shortest of Our Lord’s discourses but we can be sure that the Twelve did not forget it.

Perhaps those three examples are sufficient to show that Our Lord’s own actions confirm the practice of the Church in regard to sacramentals.

There is another reason for having recourse to the sacramentals. It is what happens when we do use them. Let our friends, the intellectuals and the other critics say what they like, those sacramentals work. I suppose that this, rather than the recommendations behind them, explain why those articles continue in

use down the centuries in the teeth of the ridicule poured out so generously upon them.

I am now going to touch on one of them which has so importantly connected itself with the Legion. The Miraculous Medal was recommended to the Legionaries on the first night. Its use was attended by successes so that the Medal found its way into the Vexillum when the latter was subsequently approved. By reason of its extensive use, the Legionaries were mockingly referred to by a well-known wit as the Miraculous Meddlers. Really, it is a title which we need not resent, but rather enjoy as declaring much truth. If we do meddle, we do it effectively.

It was in simpler days that the Medal inserted itself into the Legion. As time went by, a section arose which was too superior in outlook to be bothered by such simple piety. They regarded it as mere superstition. In such circumstances, it might be expected that the Medal would fall into disuse. Strange to say, the opposite has taken place. The use of the Medal has been attended by definite favours which ended by creating in the minds of the Legionaries that conviction about its efficacy which is present today.

Moreover, various new aspects have been discovered. The Miraculous Medal has cashed in on that universal tendency towards superstitious practices. The Medal providentially inserts itself into the situation. It is eagerly received by all those people, forms an introduction to them and is unquestionably used by God as a channel of grace to them. All those weirdies and addicts of every sort eagerly seek it and wear it. Two of them were found during the Peregrinatio in Amsterdam to be wearing the Medals which they had been given in Rome the previous year. Moslems accept it and various other groups which have no connection with Christianity.

If this is what is happening, it is imperative that we exploit the opportunity to the maximum extent.

Here is a recent happening which is plainly beyond the reach of coincidence or any natural process. Stopping for a breather during a climb of a mountain at Melleray*, a story was demanded. I told the tale of the start of the Legion in Canada. It was among the Cowichan Indians of Colombia. A woman was drowned in the Great Cowichan river. The body was regarded as necessary to their funeral rites but it could not be found. The entire tribe took to their canoes and searched for very many days without avail. Eventually, all abandoned the search, save the two canoes containing the Legionaries. They agreed that at sunset on a certain day they would desist. That moment came. As a final gesture, they cast a Miraculous Medal into the rapidly flowing river. Immediately and on that spot the body rose to the surface.

*Mount Melleray Cistercian Abbey, Co. Waterford, Ireland where Bro. Duff and a party of Legionaries spent a holiday cum retreat each year.

That story told, our party moved on and descended into a deep valley so overgrown as to be a wilderness. When we reached the river at the bottom, one Brother discovered that he had lost a valued watch. Search for it would have been more futile than the proverbial one of looking for the needle in the haystack. But, remembering the Cowichan story which had just been told, someone hurled a Miraculous Medal far into the wilderness. The place of its fall was marked and search made there. The first fumble found the watch.

Those interconnected miracles are a divine endorsement of the Legion attitude to that Medal. One would have to be perverse to deny the detailed marks of design. We might repeat the Lord's words: "Hold up that medal. Whose image and inscription does it bear?" And the reply is given: "Mary's." And, again, adapting the words of the Lord, we might say: "Then render to Mary the honour that is hers."