

# Sacramentals 101

## The Blessings of the Miraculous Medal and Other Holy Things

by Donna-Marie Cooper O'Boyle

**Catholics should lead a sacramental life.**

The Church offers many kinds of sacramentals to assist us on our faith journeys, including sacred objects such as crucifixes, holy water, rosaries, religious medals, relics and statues. The role of sacramentals is to prepare us to receive "the fruit of the sacraments and sanctify different circumstances of life" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1677). Sacramentals are not to be confused with the sacraments, which confer the grace of the Holy Spirit. Sacramentals, as the Catechism tells us, are "sacred signs which bear a certain resemblance to the sacraments and by means of which spiritual effects are signified and obtained through the prayers of the Church" (1667).

### Special Blessings

Blessings of people and holy places and things are considered to be the first kinds of sacramentals. There are many kinds of blessings. Some blessings are for people (such as for abbots or abbesses of a monastery, priests and religious, readers or acolytes and catechists). Other blessings dedicate or bless a church, an altar, vestments, holy oils, bells used in sacred liturgy and more. The Church reminds us, "Every baptized person is called by God to be a 'blessing' and to bless others. Every blessing praises God and prays for his gifts. In Christ, Christians are blessed by God the Father 'with every spiritual blessing' (Ephesians 1:3)" (Catechism, 1671).

### Miraculous Medal

I was honored to know Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta for about 10 years and observed her continual use of sacramentals in evangelizing and blessing others. Specifically, she used blessed Miraculous Medals and gave them out to those within her reach. She sometimes used them to bless a person with an illness or injury. I speak about her use of Miraculous Medals in my books *Mother Teresa and Me: Ten Years of Friendship* and *The Miraculous Medal: Stories, Prayers and Devotions*.

St. Catherine Labouré, whose feast day is Nov. 28, was instructed by Mary to promote the Miraculous Medal. Mary told her, "All who wear them will receive great graces." St. Catherine herself noted: "One must see God in everyone." The Miraculous Medal became an integral link to my friendship with Mother Teresa, which began one summer day in 1987, after a private Mass in the Missionaries of Charity's modest chapel in Washington, D.C. As we met her for the first time, Mother Teresa handed each of my family members and me a blessed Miraculous Medal after devotedly kissing them. In the days to come, I felt interiorly prodded to send a thank-you letter to Mother Teresa to thank her for the Miraculous Medals and also for her time visiting with us at the Missionaries of Charity's convent.

Looking back, I believe the Miraculous Medals were the actual reason I ended up writing to Mother Teresa, and so, they, in fact, became the conduit to a blessed friendship with a living saint. A few years into our friendship, Mother Teresa gave me another blessed Miraculous Medal when I was on bed rest with a high-risk pregnancy. Mother Teresa instructed me to wear the medal and pray to Mother Mary. I am grateful for Mary's intercession, as that child is now 22 years old.

I began giving out blessed Miraculous Medals to folks I knew with illnesses or hardships and at speaking events and book signings, keeping in tradition with Mother Teresa's sacramental devotion. To date, I have given out thousands upon thousands of blessed medals. I have witnessed amazing transformations as a result. Father Carl Pieber, executive director of the Shrine of the Miraculous Medal in Philadelphia, has used Miraculous Medals in evangelizing. He believes that the Miraculous Medal is all about God's love. "Giving someone a Miraculous Medal," he explained, "is a powerful sacramental. The medal draws him or her to the love of God. When he or she accepts the love of God, this sacramental has done its job of helping him or her experience the love of God."

### Evangelization Help

"Perhaps there could be no better tool for evangelization than the Miraculous Medal," he said. "With her arms outstretched," Mary "embodies the love of God the Father for all of us, calling us to embrace this love. But the

medal could be nothing but this — because Mary embodied the love of God the Father in Jesus Christ in her womb, and it is he who calls us to embrace the Father's love, too. What a great medal and tool for telling others the real Good News."

Anticipating opportunities for evangelization, Father Pieber said, "As a priest and director of the Miraculous Medal Shrine, I always carry a few medals in my pocket." Recently, when enjoying a concert by the Children's Choir of Philadelphia, he spoke with the couple sitting beside him during intermission. He commented that he thought the concert was wonderful. "In the conversation that followed," he explained, "I gave them all a medal." The woman immediately stated that she was Jewish. The priest replied: "This is the image of a great Jewish mother in our faith. With her hands extended, she will help you whenever you ask her." Having listened to the brief story of the medal, she thanked me for the gift and said she would treasure it with her in her purse always, the priest recalled. "I thought to myself, 'Mary will do the rest.'"

"Mary's message of love is for people of all faiths," he told the Register. His conversation with the Jewish couple reminded him of the story of the Jewish aristocrat Alphonse Ratisbonne, who was miraculously converted by the Miraculous Medal (the story is told in *The Miraculous Medal*). As Father Pieber recounted for the Register, "Taking the medal from a friend on a dare, Alphonse entered the Church of Sant' Andrea delle Fratte in Rome, near the Spanish Steps, on Jan. 20, 1842. Mary appeared to him as the Miraculous Medal, and he was converted to Catholicism, became a Jesuit priest, went to the foreign missions and co-founded with his Jewish brother the Congregations (priests, brothers and sisters) of Our Lady of Sion, for the conversion of Jewish people to Catholicism."

This story — and the examples of Mother Teresa and Father Pieber — illustrates Church teaching (Catechism, 1678) on sacramental blessings, which "include both praise of God for his works and gifts and the Church's intercession for men, that they may be able to use God's gifts according to the spirit of the Gospel."

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