

DECEMBER 30, 2019: THE 350TH ANNIVERSARY OF FATHER MÉDAILLE'S DEATH ¹



*The life and death of each of us has its influence on others;
if we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord,
so that alive or dead we belong to the Lord (Romans 14:7-8).*

This scripture verse came to mind as I sat down to write this reflection for the 350th anniversary of the death of Jean-Pierre Médaille. Possibly no other person has had the same grounding influence in our lives as Sisters of St. Joseph than this French Jesuit priest, Jean-Pierre Médaille. His life, his writings, his experiences and even his death have left a lasting legacy that many of us still find spiritually enriching.

Is that what it means to be a founder.... when years later... people still hold fast to the spiritual teachings one imparted in one's lifetime?

Truly the life of Jean-Pierre Médaille is the story of one man's daily fidelity to the inspirations of grace and his deep personal commitment to model his entire life and death on that of the Incarnate Son of God. From his birth in Carcassonne on October 6, 1610 to his death in Billom on December 30, 1669 this humble man of God held fast the desire "to be and to become the person God wanted him to be, in nature, in grace, and in glory for time and for eternity" (M.P. 10:6).

Father Médaille spent most of his adult life teaching, preaching Missions, and directing men and women in the parishes throughout the dioceses of south-western France. He strove to awaken the contemplative dimension that was dormant in many lives. He believed that God's indwelling grace had the power to effect miracles in them and by the energy and force of that Divine Love whole environments and neighbourhoods could be transformed. The world of seventeenth century France was desperately in need of such a rebirth. The wisdom, zeal and insight Jean-Pierre Médaille brought to his world reality was truly remarkable.

His apostolic zeal for souls sprang from a great love in his heart - from the heart of God - with whom he shared an intimate communion. He was a mystically-active man, loving Love and letting Love love through him. With his "sublime knowledge of the interior life", we are blessed to have in his writings of the *Maxims of Perfection, Part 1 and Part 2* and *The Eucharistic Letter*, a spirituality that has proved timeless in guiding persons to self-emptying union with God. At the same time, he was equally capable of effective administration of the temporal affairs he was asked to manage. He was known for his skill in handling difficult situations when he served as the minister at their Jesuit Colleges. With skill and personality, he could restore order, reconcile differences and handle efficiently those practical, temporal affairs. Jean-Pierre showed aptitude for all the works of the Society of Jesus. He placed all his gifts of vision, discretion and compassion in the service of humanity. During a most dark and difficult period of history, Jean-Pierre lit up his world of seventeenth century France with a new hope and a new direction.

Médaille dreamed his dream, lived his dream, shared his dream, and wrote down his dream - for all time to be discovered. In the fall of 1669, his spiritual journey on earth was climaxing to its apex in his personal death. Three short months of enfeebling health at the Jesuit retirement home in Billom precedes his death on December 30, 1669. For the three months he was at this house of retreat he was assigned to be a confessor. This "traveler on the road of God's glory" came home to rest after fifteen years of active missionary service to his own people in southwestern France. We have some insight into his expansive soul when he shares his Contemplation on the Passion and Crucifixion of Jesus:

Above all, good Jesus, grant that throughout my life, and especially at the time of my death, I may fulfill in every instance the last will of your Father, and with such exactitude that with my last breath I may be able to say: "*Consummatum est.*" It is finished. I have fulfilled the

¹ Jean-Pierre Médaille, S.J. A detail from the larger painting found in the Archives of the Sisters of St. Joseph, Le Puy. France.

designs of divine Providence concerning my life and my death. I have spent myself in the service of my Creator and in the gratitude I owe to the boundless love of my Saviour Jesus. This is the only desire of my soul.²

The final archival statement in his necrology reads:

Father Jean-Pierre Médaille of Carcassonne, professed of four vows, died at Billom, December 30, 1669, at the age of fifty-nine. He had been in the Society for forty-three years. The greater part of his life was spent in the missions of the Province (Toulouse) and with such zeal and so great a reputation for holiness that here and there he was called “the saint”, “the apostle”; nor were the fruits of his apostolic labors of every kind less than his reputation, so much so that he was highly esteemed by rich and poor alike, but especially by the bishops in whose dioceses he labored.³

The people called him “the saint” and “the apostle”. At age fifty-nine, this humble man of God disappears into silence leaving a legacy in word and example that still speaks to the heart. He gave us words for life.⁴ “After his death, his Jesuit brothers indirectly confirmed the reputation for sanctity that Father Médaille had been accorded by the simple people whom he evangelized. By having his *Maxims of Perfection* published in 1672, particularly the second part, Exercise for being stripped of self and putting on Jesus Christ, they demonstrated, that even if it is not exceptional as a literary work, the contents reveal an uncommon experience of spiritual realities. For his Jesuit brothers, too, Father Médaille was a man of God.⁵ The Jesuit archives in Rome contain the yearly reports on Father Médaille written by his Provincials. In 1975 the Federation of the Sisters of St. Joseph Research Team with Marius Nepper S.J. shared in *Origins: The Sisters of St. Joseph*:

In what we know of his acts and his writings, we can affirm that nothing would prevent his canonization and that there are many favourable and convincing indications if we could supplement them by two miracles. (Cf. R.F. Aubenas, 1958, “Towards the Beatification of Father Médaille?”) Different pictures, with officially approved prayers, have been published: in Brazil (1953); in France, (1954 and 1962); and in the United States of America (1958), to obtain either the beatification of the Founder or some special grace through his intercession.⁶

It is our joy and mission to spread this expansive charism to the ends of the earth. Thanks to the generous response of multitudes of men and women, who for almost four centuries have followed his spirituality, we are striving to make our world a better place. All of us in the family of Joseph are now a worldwide community, sharing as one, all the gifts of creation, all the spiritual gifts, and all in the service of humanity, to the greater glory of God. I sense our beloved Father Médaille commending us for our faithfulness: “You will shine in the world like bright stars because you are offering it the word of life” (Phil 2:16).

In this graced moment as we come together to sit in the presence of our founder and spiritual father, Jean-Pierre Médaille, may we experience that we are truly in the presence of an authentic mystic and prophet. Let us be united in prayer and communion around the world in the fifty-three different countries where we, his spiritual daughters, live and minister today. Let us continue to Love Love and let Love love through us to the glory of God.

Rosemary O’Toole, CSJ

² Jean-Pierre Médaille, S.J., *Writings of Jean-Pierre Médaille, S.J. 1610-1669* (Toronto, ON: Sisters of St. Joseph, 1985) 124-125.

³ Anne Hennessy, CSJ, *In Search of A Founder: The Life and Setting of Jean-Pierre Médaille, S.J., Founder of the Sisters of St. Joseph*, PhD Thesis (Berkeley Graduate Theological Union, 1988) 197-198.

⁴ Rosemary O’Toole, CSJ, *Words for Life* (Ottawa, ON: Discern Products, 2019). Purchase four volumes on amazon.

⁵ Marguerite Vacher, CSJ, *Nuns Without Cloister, Sisters of St. Joseph in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (trans. Patricia Byrne and the United States Federation of the Sisters of St. Joseph; New York: University Press of America, 2019) 112.

⁶ Marius Nepper, *Origins, The Sisters of St. Joseph* (Federation of the Sisters of St. Joseph Research Team with Marius Nepper S.J., USA; Erie: Villa Maria College, 1975) 108.