

“OUR LADY OF LA SALETTE”

Retold By

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On Saturday afternoon, September 19, 1846, two children– Maximin Guiraud (aged 11) and Melanie Calvat (aged 14) – were tending cattle for their employers near LaSalette in the French Alps. They both came from the town of Corps, near Grenoble, in a very poor part of south-eastern France. It was here, high up on the pasture above LaSalette, a village near Corps, that they both saw a wonderful apparition of Mary. The experience had changed both the children’s lives and those of the town forever.

The effects of the French Revolution before this had put fear and confusion in the church, and people lost trust in their church leaders. Thousands of people were killed in the wars during the power of Emperor Napoleon; the rich and poor massively divided in education and in work; with the poor struggling to survive day by day. The lack of strong leadership in France had weakened the faith of the people. In the parish of LaSalette, fewer and fewer people attended mass and the sacraments were forgotten. Only a handful of people had come to Sunday Mass, with little or no disturbance to the thick dust that had settled in God’s Holy House. Cursing the Lord’s name instead of praising Him; wicked and immoral behaviour instead of fasting and abstinence took over; greed and selfishness overtook charity and prayer. The French people were angry and hurt; and instead of turning to God for help, they turned against Him, to help themselves.

LaSalette was a poor town of about 200 people just outside the village community of Corps. Corps had just a little over 1,300 people living there, and even though it was small, Maximin and Melanie had never met. The town was full of history, a place of beautiful mountains, as far as the eye could see, snow topped mountain peaks reflecting the shining gleam of the sun. Herds were often seen grazing the thick, fresh green grass on the meadows. The valleys were restful and peaceful, the purest streams and rivers were flowing, taking on their journey to crystal, clear waters. But this was just a memory, a faded picture in the townspeople’s minds. France had fallen on hard and depressing times after the wars; leaving a grey, lifeless town without hope, without dreams, their hearts empty without faith in God.

Melanie, one of eight children, came from a poor family and began working at age seven. She had no schooling, knew only bits of the catechism, rarely attended mass, and struggled through the prayers of the Our Father and the Hail Mary. Maximin too, was poor, although his father was a carpenter and had many projects, he would often spend his earnings drinking and away from home. His birth mother had died when he was very young, and did not like his stepmother, who was always unkind and cruel to him and never took him to school. His father paid little notice of Maximin, but only to teach the little boy to smoke tobacco and drink alcohol just to make fun of him in front of his old friends. His grandmother would bring the boy to church now and then, but he would always slip away to play outside with his playmates before mass had barely started. He often spent his time playing in the streets well after dark with his dog, Loulou. Sometimes, though, he did have jobs to do, collecting horse manure from the side of the roads and watching over the family’s goat.

Back in Corps, a farmer from LaSalette had employed a child to look after his cows daily to graze high in the mountain meadows; making sure the herd didn't wander off and to keep them safe from danger. One day, the farmer's herder had become ill and he had to find another child to tend the cows for a week. Though Maximin had no experience in herding, the farmer was desperate for a replacement, and agreed with Maximin's father to let his son take the job in exchange for a large amount of butter and cheese as well as the boy's payment at the end of the week.

It was Monday, and Maximin came into the town of Ablandins, in the parish of LaSalette, along with his little dog Loulou and the family goat to meet with the farmer to begin his work herding cows each day on the mountains. It was here, on the evening of Thursday 17th September, 1846, that Maximin met with fourteen year old Melanie for the first time.

Like Maximin, Melanie rarely attended mass; her mother tried to teach her the Our Father and Hail Mary and some of the catechism. Melanie knew very little french and only spoke the local french dialect, called patois, and it made learning for the shy girl very difficult. She found going to church was time that could be spent working or begging for money, money to survive. Melanie was almost 15 years old and hadn't even made her first Holy Communion; but that took time to prepare for, time that could be spent on making money, no matter how small the amount.

Melanie's childhood was not so different than Maximin's. Though her mother was in her life, her attention was very little and was shared between the 8 young brothers and sisters. Little time did Melanie have at home, at around 7 years old, her parents sent her out into the streets to beg, and as she got older she was always busy looking after babies from many different families, or working on farms many months of the year. She spent time looking after the cows belonging to a farmer at another town, herding the cattle to pasture on the mountains. Melanie, unlike Maximin, was experienced in her work with cattle.

Only a day before life changed for the children, both Melanie and Maximin took off together high in the mountains; Melanie would tend to her cattle on her employer's meadow, and nearby was Maximin, his dog Loulou, and the family goat, along with the cows on the farmer's property. The children didn't have much in common, and with great attempts did the cheerful and cheeky Maximin try to chat and laugh with Melanie, the shy and quiet girl kept much to herself most of the time. All day they would watch over the animals, and not much else to do, trying not to fall asleep. It was not very exciting at all. At the end of the day as the sun came down, they too, would make their way down to the town together. The next day, they will return to the mountain for another long day. A day like any other day.

Maximin didn't pay much attention to his duties often being reminded of his tasks by his employer, every day. However Melanie, was always the professional. He was always fooling about with Loulou, joking and laughing, throwing sticks for her to fetch. Even without the love and nurture every child should receive from their parents, Maximin was full of life and without a care. Melanie found his behaviour annoying, and couldn't wait for the week to end for him to return home. There would be no reason to ever meet with the boy again.

It was a bright morning, on Saturday, 19th September 1864. The sun flooded the beautiful blue sky with a little chill in the air, but it soon warmed up as both children quickly gathered their cows up to the mountain. Maximin passed the morning playing by himself and with Loulou, watching over only one of his cows nearby. It was noon, and the Angelus bell of the much forgotten LaSalette church rang, sending out a call to prayer. "The angel of the Lord declared unto Mary, and she conceived of the Holy Spirit. Hail Mary, full of grace....Mother of God, pray for us sinners."

With the ringing of the church bell echoing through the mountain tops, Maximin and Melanie payed no attention to it, together driving their herd toward the fountain near the ravine to water the thirsty animals. There were three drinking places near the ravine, the first spring was called fountain of the beasts- where the cows would drink from, the second was called the men's fountain, because for many generations, herders would come here to eat their lunch and sit by the rocks that looked like a small table and stools gathered together. Between the two drinking places, was a third spring, simply called 'the little fountain'. The little fountain only gave water after a heavy rainfall or snow, but now, it was completely dry.

They were tending to their herd, when they saw a brilliant light, brighter than the sun. As they approached, they noticed a "beautiful lady" seated on a rock and crying, with her face in her hands. In tears, she stood and spoke to them in their local french dialect. She wore a headdress topped by a glowing crown with a band of roses, a dress with beams of light, and slippers edged with roses. Around her neck hung a golden crucifix: on one end of the cross beam was a hammer and nails, and on the other, a pair of pliers. Over her shoulders was a heavy chain.

She said, "Come to me, my children. Do not be afraid. I am here to tell something of the greatest importance." She continued, "If my people will not obey, I shall be made to loosen my son's arm. It is so heavy, so strong that I can no longer hold it back. How long I have suffered for you! If my son is not to cast you off, I am asked to let him go without holding him back. But you take not the least notice of that. No matter how well you pray in the future, no matter how well you act, you will never be able to make up to me what I have suffered for your sake.

I have given you six days for working. The seventh I have reserved for myself. And no one will give it to me. This is what causes the weight of my Son's arm to be crushing. The cart drivers cannot swear without bringing in my Son's name. These are the two things which make my Son's arms so strong for me to hold back.

If the harvest is spoiled, it is your own fault. I warned you last year by means of the potatoes. You paid no attention to the warning. When you discovered that the potatoes had rotted, you swore, and abused my Son's name. They will continue to rot, and by Christmas this year, there will be none left.

If you have grain, it will do no good to sow it, for what you sow the beasts will eat, and any part of it that springs up, will crumble into dust when you harvest it. A great famine is coming. But before that happens, the children under seven years of age will be taken, and die in their parent's arms. The grownups will pay for their sins by hunger. The grapes will rot, and the walnuts will turn bad."

Truly a message of warning! Then Our Lady said, "If people change their wicked ways, the rocks will become piles of wheat, and it will be found that the potatoes have sown themselves." She then asked the children, "Do you say your prayers well, my children?" "No, we hardly say them at all," they mumbled. "Ah, my children, it is very important to say them, at night and in the morning. When you don't have time, at least say an Our Father and a Hail Mary. And when you can, say more."

Our Lady then returned to her scolding of the people: "Only a few rather old women go to Mass in the summer. All the rest work every Sunday throughout the summer. And in winter, when they don't know what to do with themselves, they go to Mass only to poke fun at religion. During Lent they flock to the butcher shops, like dogs." She finished saying, "My children, you will make this known to all my people." She then walked away, up a steep path, and disappeared in a bright light.

The children repeated the story to each of their employers. When the people confirmed that the stories matched exactly, and several religious people confirmed and believed that this had been an apparition of the Blessed Mother, the children were sent to the parish priest of La Salette. The priest told the children's story at Mass. Very important people that worked for the government began an investigation, and the children repeated their true story even though they were threatened to be taken from their families and locked away. Once when investigating the area that the apparition took place, someone broke off a piece of the rock on which Our Lady had sat; and a spring of water started to flow in the place that was dry, except for when the snows were melting. The spring called the little fountain, flowed steadily and plentiful. Some of the water was given to a woman suffering from a long-term serious illness; she drank a little of the water each day as she prayed a novena, and on the ninth day, she was cured.

The case was then given to Bishop Bruillard of Grenoble, who started a thorough investigation of the Apparition of the Blessed Mary. Meanwhile, more miracles at the little fountain were happening. The greatest miracle was truly spiritual: people started to attend Mass faithfully and confess regularly, they stopped working on Sundays, and they returned to living a holy and religious life. Pilgrimages to the site became more and more popular. Five years later, on September 19, 1851, Bishop Bruillard determined that the apparition "bore in itself all the marks of truth and that the faithful are justified in believing it to be certain and absolutely true." A real conversion of the people had taken place.

The following year, a new religious community was founded, the Missionaries of La Salette. Also, Bishop Bruillard laid the cornerstone for a new basilica. Pilgrims increasingly visited the site of the apparition, and Our Lady was referred to as "Reconclatrix of sinners." Great saints have been devoted to Our Lady of La Salette, including St. John Bosco, St. John Vianney, and St. Madeleine Sophie Barat.

As we think about this apparition, the message of our Blessed Mother is as important now as it was then: How many people abandon Sunday Mass but take time for social media, sporting events, or shopping? How many have not been to confession in years? How many use our Lord's name in vain? How many fail to pray each day? How many entertain such actions against God as *The DaVinci Code*? Oh yes, the message is still important and true. The world and each of us is in need of change.

People of the Parish, together, let us turn to Our Lady of La Salette, and honour her memory:

Remember, Our Lady of La Salette, true mother of Sorrows, the tears you shed for us on Calvary. Remember also the care you have taken to keep us faithful to Christ, your Son. Having done so much for your children, you will not now abandon us. We come to you pleading, with our unfaithfulness and ungratefulness. Virgin of Reconciliation, do not reject our prayers, but help us, give us the grace to love Jesus above all else. May we find comfort in you by living a holy life and so come to share the eternal life Christ gained by His cross. Amen.

The merciful Mother of La Salette wears on her chest the image of Christ crucified. To one side of it, is a hammer. The hammer, branded by sin, drove in the nails which fixed His hands and feet to the cross. To the other side of it, is a pair of pliers. The pliers, branded by remorse and faithful love, can draw out the nails. Let us all who used the hammer, now use the pliers.

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