

Commentary on the *Maxims*

Beginnings are wonderful times. This is when dedication is at its height, when obstacles have no meaning, and failure seems impossible. Later on, the very best ideas become institutionalized; rules, formalized, and practices, stereotyped. Jean-Pierre Médaille recognized this profound truth and unconsciously predicted the fate of his own brilliant ardor, when it passed on to succeeding generations. He tells us that our initial burst of enthusiasm is due to grace (Maxim 80), and urges us to be always alert to the moment when God will visit us, as a sort of insurance policy against apathy and self-satisfaction. These and other spiritual counsels ensure the permanence of a message that has survived since the seventeenth century.

Jean-Pierre Médaille was born in Carcassonne, a medieval fortified city in southern France, in 1610, where he received his early education from the Jesuits. He joined them in 1626, and after his ordination served as teacher, assistant to the directors of schools, and missionary. In 1650 he guided the six women who became the first Sisters of St. Joseph. He excelled in spiritual direction and preaching. He died at Billom in 1669. His principal writings include the *Constitutions of the Little Institute*, the *Règlements (Rules)*, the *Eucharistic Letter*, and the *Maxims*. While the first three pertain chiefly to the Sisters of St. Joseph, the *Maxims* reflect a spiritual message appropriate for all who seek union with God.

The first group of women who undertook the mission envisioned by Médaille were hardly distinguishable from their neighbors. They came from ordinary backgrounds, only two of them literate. Likewise, only two could promise any sort of meager dowry, one of the main reasons why they could not even consider entering a monastery. None of the first Sisters was a native of Le Puy, but came from the surrounding villages, noted for their poverty. The superior, Françoise Eyraud, could not read or write, but she did manage the hospice of Montferrand with such competence that she was elected a member of the Town Council! Moreover, the countryside around Le Puy in south-central France, is rugged and poor, and the climate harsh, hardly conducive to agriculture. Yet most people were, and still are, farmers. Le Puy has been a center of Marian pilgrimages since medieval times, thus receiving many travelers. Lace-making, practiced by the first sisters and many other townspeople, also contributed to the importance of the city. However, these factors did not alleviate the harsh conditions of the people. Thus the work of the new institute found fertile ground.

The women who composed the early congregations of St. Joseph in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries consisted of three groups: the more highly organized “city or town” members, the less-structured “country” members, and a third group of women, who lived in their own homes, but were associated with the first two in various ways. While the members of the first two groups tended at first to come from the working or peasant classes, and later from the rising middle class, the women associated with the congregation came from all social classes, some even affluent. Their wealth contributed to the success of the projects undertaken by the sisters. Their status according to the social norms of the time did not permit them to become full members, although Father Médaille seems to have considered them as such if they possessed the spirit of the congregation. Two centuries later, the Sisters of St. Joseph might never have come to America without the help of the Countess de la Rochejaquelin, who funded the expedition. Others participated in less dramatic, but equally important roles.

Commentary on the *Maxims*

When Médaille wrote the *Maxims*, a literary form popular at the time, he intended them for all three groups whom he called “daughters of St. Joseph.” While he does not speak of “sons,” it is hardly possible that the women “associates” did not share the same spiritual instruction with their husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons. In fact, Médaille recommends that the women in the confraternities guide their husbands in the practice of virtue. Naturally, this would be through the spirituality of the “Little Design,” so well summarized in the *Maxims*. They all partook of the same spiritual heritage which has inspired many generations.

Médaille used a literary form prevalent in his day, called a *maxim*. This is a short pithy sentence which expresses as clearly and concisely as possible a general truth or observation. Like proverbs, maxims can easily be memorized and repeated. The most famous Maxims of the period were published by Jean de La Rochefoucauld in 1665. Médaille wrote his in 1657, but they were not published until 1672 in a posthumous edition at Clermont by H. Jacquard, who praised the eminent sanctity of the author. Although Médaille’s *Maxims* contain many repetitions and abstract expressions, and are written in a somewhat archaic style, they reveal his gentle yet firm soul, his eminent respect for his readers, and his boundless trust in them. He has touched a nerve of truth in each of his Maxims, thereby enabling future generations to make the application to their own situation with relative ease.

In the *Maxims*, Médaille invites women and men to a life of holiness through simple means. He proposes a life-style that gives witness to kindness and simplicity. He emphasizes trust in God and attentiveness to grace at all times. While expecting his readers to aspire to great sanctity, he recognizes that they must proceed one day, and one moment at a time, and not worry about the future. He does not recommend unusual enterprises, but encourages everyday occupations done extraordinarily well. It is the attitude that counts. He believes in right relationships with others, in moderation, and humility. He calls all Christians to love of God and neighbor, through union with them.

In the first place, Médaille reminds his readers of the life-style they have chosen, and the witness they should give. While full of enthusiasm for their works of service, they should give God all the credit for what they accomplish. Their lives should radiate kindness, simplicity, and zeal. "Witness . . . humility," he tells them (3). "You profess (or witness) . . . a life of simplicity, of kindness, and holiness" (1). "Witness . . . before everyone that no one less than God has any power over you" (54). He also reminds his audience to perform their works of service, or zeal "carefully and diligently, "to trust God's grace and not their own merits, to imitate the most zealous people particularly in desire" (7). He tells them, "Serve your neighbor as you would Christ" (49); "Serve your neighbor out of pure love, without looking for any reward. Be motivated solely by a desire to be of service to others . . ." (55).

The great ideal of seventeenth-century France was the classical *aurea mediocritas*, the golden mean, or moderation, nothing to excess. Médaille was an educated man of his own era. His family had been recently ennobled and held a high position in the legal ranks; therefore he was well trained both before and after his entrance into the Jesuits. When he urges his readers to "govern (their) lives by reason and moderation" (86), he is echoing the great Greek thinkers, Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle, and his own contemporaries, such as Descartes and Pascal. These people considered moderation as the highest good. Therefore, in the same spirit, Médaille instructs his readers to "mistrust over-powering desires"

Commentary on the *Maxims*

(68), in other words, to control their passions (60). He realizes that self-mastery leads to true interior greatness and makes one available to address the needs of the day (39).

However, moderation never means compromise. "Allow no exceptions on this point" (90) could follow every Maxim, for the spiritual life requires total giving. Thus words that mean: 'always', 'at all times', 'constantly', or 'everything', 'nothing', 'everyone' reappear throughout. There is no question of practicing any one of the virtues he counsels once or twice, or even most of the time. We must be alert at all times, always attentive to grace or to the needs of our neighbor, "always . . . aware of the reason why (we) practice a spiritual life" (1). We must always work for the glory of God, and never for our own interest. Although Médaille considers virtue as an absolute, it must be tempered by moderation and prudence. Especially in the practice of mortification, or penance, he recommends common sense and discretion (76), with no harsh fasts or deprivations.

The *Maxims* contain no rigidity or abrasiveness. They express another seventeenth-century ideal, the *honnête homme/femme*. This term refers to a person who manifests courtesy, refinement, and culture in his or her external conduct, but at the same time possesses a sense of values and is generous and loyal. In reading the *Maxims*, one cannot help noticing Médaille's own personal qualities, where the refined exterior reflects the virtuous soul. He thus becomes a model for his readers. He insists upon appropriate exterior conduct, but never makes this an end in itself. Rather, interior virtue must overflow into external behavior. Because of their union with God at all times, the women and men who follow his counsels will remain calm and at peace, never agitated or disturbed (60). Since they value God's glory and the service of their neighbor so highly, they will never give any outward indication of difficulty in serving others. Moreover, they will "look pleasant and gracious, as if what actually causes (them) pain really gave (them) great pleasure" (49). Their social interactions should provide occasions to be "discreet, but at the same time pleasant and respectful. Let (others) see how simple and gracious you are" (45).

The emphasis on external refinement excludes vanity or superficiality. On the contrary, Médaille never tires of calling his readers back to an ideal of humility which at first sight seems frightening and exaggerated. He uses the word *s'anéantir* which means literally "to make oneself nothing." In the longer version of the *Maxims*, he also uses *vider* which means "to empty." The modern concept of the self emphasizes the value of each individual, the necessity of believing in one's own worth. Consequently, Médaille's ideal of making ourselves into nothing or of emptying ourselves may seem outdated and irrelevant. However, a closer examination indicates that his advice reflects the timeless truth of the Gospel message.

The kenosis of Christ, "the Incarnate Word, who emptied himself because he loved you" (3) becomes the model of our self-emptying. Saint Paul (Phil. 2:6, 7) explains how Christ freely gave up his glory to become human, and that paradoxically he received everything back when God exalted him. His obedience even to the death on the cross is a sign of contradiction and a stumbling block to women and men, but it remains an inescapable condition for attaining perfection. As only an empty bottle can be filled with a liquid, so God can fill us only if we are empty. Grace cannot fill a soul that is bound by any attachment at all, or that contains a single overpowering desire. If we have any uncontrolled passions,

Commentary on the *Maxims*

we are bound to something: to the place where we live, to a person we love, or an object we protect. This does not mean that we cannot love, enjoy, or possess, but it does mean that the inspirations God gives us, the values God indicates, and the sacrifices God inevitably requires must invariably take precedence. If Christ had wished to protect his reputation, or his family and friends, he would not have risked death by proclaiming a revolutionary and uncompromising message. This is the type of "self-emptying" Father Médaille preaches.

If we fail in humility, we are "incapable of receiving (God's) goodness and grace" (14). The many *Maxims* that urge us to be totally indifferent to the outcome of our projects, accepting success or failure with perfect peace of mind (34), reiterate the need for "self-emptying." The recommendation to welcome misunderstanding and opposition (78) merely means detachment from our opinions. Detachment means less "separation from" than transcendence, rising above everything that is less than God (86). Moreover, Médaille never tells us to despise ourselves, but rather to place no value on the seductions and attractions of the world (5). He places the greatest emphasis on the person, in urging us to serve others with love and devotion, but he warns us repeatedly against seeking our own advantage and interest. He adds that we should not have a high opinion of ourselves, for in reality everything we have and are comes from God (14), not from ourselves. What we have as our very own is sin and failure (87), imperfections, which would make us completely dissatisfied with ourselves if we knew them (10). At first sight this seems a harsh blow to self, yet Médaille recalls the power of God's grace.

If we were always completely faithful to grace, we would be perfect. However, Médaille observes that we often fail, placing self-interest above Gospel values. When we are responsive to grace, the credit is primarily God's, not ours. "Give God the credit he deserves when you succeed in any good work" (15); also, "If God withdrew grace for only a moment, all your good works would fade away like smoke" (96). This does not mean that our efforts are meaningless; on the contrary, our virtue "depends solely on the uninterrupted graces God offers us and on our own cooperation with them" (99).

The concept of grace has fascinated many scholars, and provoked frequent interpretations throughout the ages. In the seventeenth century Jansenists and Jesuits engaged in a famous controversy on this subject. The Jansenists maintained that human nature is basically evil and that grace alone, by itself and without human efforts, makes a person holy. God gives grace when and where he chooses, and decides from all eternity who is to receive it and who will be deprived of it. The Jesuits, on the other hand, taught that human nature has a tendency to evil, but that it is basically good, capable of virtue. Moreover, God gives grace to everyone, "as much as we are willing to accept" (99). Although grace must precede every good action, it is ineffectual without our active cooperation. Therefore it is vital to remain alert to grace at all times. We should be willing to suffer any evils in the natural order rather than resist grace, risk being deprived of it, or fail to respond to even the slightest indications of God's will (12,13).

Médaille's writings support the Jesuit concept of grace. In fact, he seems quite aware of Jansenist- Jesuit debate on the subject, and insists on our response and on the fact that God always gives us grace, while we must be alert to cooperate with it. He is wise enough to know, however, that we may fail to recognize it, so he urges us to be constantly attentive to God's inspirations. He also realizes that this constant state of vigilance may be very difficult to sustain, since we cannot foresee when God will

Commentary on the *Maxims*

speak. Therefore he reminds us frequently not to be upset but to trust firmly in God, who can do everything and will always help us (8). This is far from the Jansenist anguish that shows human beings as eternally preordained to be saved or lost, but always ignorant of their fate. Father Médaille insists that we must work for our salvation, but that at the same time we should place all our trust in God whose providence will guide us.

In recognizing these difficulties of life, Father Médaille is realistic. He knew that he was dealing with ordinary people, who would probably never be involved in any great enterprise, much like his own work. We must not think of him as a great spiritual director who spent all his time setting up this new institute. On the contrary, he had other full-time work, and this was just a "little project." He was never missioned at Le Puy, but rather in less important cities, and preached chiefly in rural areas. When he assembled the first Sisters in 1648, he lived at Saint-Flour, about 60 km. (36 ml.) away, a good distance in those days, especially since the terrain was rugged. He mentioned one day to Bishop de Maupas a little plan he had. He had met some young women and widows in his travels throughout the outlying villages. They wanted to do something to serve God but were too poor to enter a monastery, as we have seen. After the group was assembled, Father Médaille seldom returned to Le Puy. In fact, he was assigned to Aurillac in 1650, about twice the distance as Saint-Flour. Evidently his superiors did not consider his "little project" as any more than an added activity, subordinated to his primary work of procurator at various private secondary schools directed by the Jesuits in the area. In a letter he wrote shortly before his death in 1669, he indicates his disappointment at failing to receive news from the Sisters, but at the same time he accepts this as God's will. He probably did not consider this foundation as anything great, but this did not prevent him from wanting each person in it and associated with it to become as holy as possible.

As a true spiritual guide, Médaille knew that the greatest accomplishments were to come from within, in the realm of desire. "Imitate the most zealous people particularly by your ardent desires" (7). Poverty of spirit supersedes actual poverty: "Wish to be the poorest . . . and most obedient (people), if you cannot be so in reality" (43). He encourages people to do the best they can: "Whatever you do, . . . ordinary or extraordinary, do it extraordinarily well" (90). He reminds all that they have a sublime vocation (1), but a very humble profession (7). In other words, the emphasis is on being, rather than on doing. He realizes that it is not what we do, but how and why we do it that will make us great, and that if we trust in God, God will bring us to our desired end.

The *Maxims* give no specific rules about the choice of work, but say much about how to work. People should look for no praise or reward for their good works (21), since God's glory is all that matters. They should be satisfied that good is done, but not worry about who does it. In fact, they should prefer to see someone else do it rather than themselves (25). Everything they do should conform to the ideal of holiness (44). They should be totally available to their neighbor, especially when he or she does not seem to appreciate their kindness (50, 51). Finally, their works of service should overflow from an interior life of prayer, which they should love to practice whenever their duties permit (27, 100). "Model your lives on Jesus whose holiness and virtues should shine forth in you. You can help many people in this way." (6).

Commentary on the *Maxims*

Obviously, these counsels are not for people who are interested in seeking their own advantage. Indeed, Médaille tells us not to seek our own pleasure but to put others ahead of ourselves at all times, to do what they want (50). Many Maxims apply particularly to our relationships. Here the same principle holds: choose the least appealing task for yourself (47), always affirm other people's good qualities (11), but let your own less desirable traits be evident (76). The rule of total selflessness, of availability, generosity, and complete respect for the sensitivities of others stands out in his recommendations.

On the other hand, it is hard, almost impossible, to place yourself always in a position of deference and consideration for others. Therefore you should not think of it in terms of always, but rather in the light of the present moment. He reminds us often not to "worry about the future, unless it is definitely connected with the present" (69). We should not be concerned about our future work (70), otherwise our anxiety will work to the detriment of the duty at hand (20). His recommendations about the future are always combined with the assurance that God will help us and God's providence will guide us. Hope is very important, and we should trust in God the most when we seem least likely to succeed (30).

Médaille no doubt realized the difficulties in the spiritual program he proposed. Grounded in the spirit of the Gospel, he frequently recalls the presence of the cross in our lives. He reminds us to live a mortified life in honor of Christ Crucified (46), and speaks often of dying to the world and to self-love (6). He knows that we shall be abandoned as Christ was on the cross and urges us to accept our loneliness and sufferings as our Savior did (32). He encourages us to greatness of soul (91), and this invariably includes the cross. However, he makes no apologies or compromises for the austere doctrine he preaches, for he realizes that if God will not console or rescue us, God will inevitably accomplish his will in us and through us, and this alone is necessary (31).

Médaille's preaches a message uniquely his own, yet one with roots in the Scriptures, in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius and in the spirit of the seventeenth century. The motto of St. Ignatius, "for the greater glory of God," recurs frequently throughout the Maxims. The Ignatian spirit permeates them, for example, the concept of working as if the success of our enterprises depended on us alone, yet maintaining trust in God. Ignatius also encouraged the so-called third degree of humility, which makes us willing to be ill-thought of, opposed, and misunderstood for the love of God (75, 76, 78). We may also trace the emphasis on indifference to our state of mind or body and to the outcome of our efforts (72, 34) to the spiritual doctrine of St. Ignatius. Yet Médaille tempers this rather austere doctrine by emphasizing the importance of relationships modeled on the Trinity.

Médaille took his greatest Biblical inspiration from St. Paul. "Divest yourselves . . . of what you were, and be clothed anew" (6) comes from the Letter to the Galatians. There are four additional direct references to St. Paul, not to mention the doctrine of Christ's emptying or kenosis, which is based on the Letter to the Philippians. Finally, St. Paul's doctrine of freedom marks the Maxims profoundly. Although there are only two direct Gospel quotations, we cannot fail to recognize the evangelical doctrines of humility, detachment, and obedience among the most significant virtues which Médaille counseled.

Finally, Médaille extols the Gospel primacy of love. He tells us to love God as purely and perfectly as possible. In fact, our lives should simply be an act of love (4). If we love God with all our hearts, we

Commentary on the *Maxims*

will do all that is necessary and automatically practice every other virtue (77, 61). This is the perfection that he not only encourages every person to attain but expects them to reach. Since they are truly free, unencumbered by self-interest, and completely dedicated to the service of others, he does not doubt that these ordinary people, who practice the simplicity he recommends, will attain true greatness, for their great love of God will compensate for any lack of natural gifts.

Above all, Médaille understood Christ's message, "Love your neighbor as yourself, and love God above all persons and all things." Every Maxim could be tested by this Gospel teaching, and not be found wanting. If we are to empty ourselves, it is because Christ gave us the example, and in following him we go to God in the perfect freedom of love. Unquestioning obedience (61, 74), recalls Christ's limitless love of the Father and of his will. If Médaille were living today, he would be pleased to meet ordinary people who in all humility accept themselves for what they are and aim for holiness by doing ordinary things exceptionally well. Finally, he would commend them for their love of God, for this automatically includes all virtues (61).