

The Conversion of Ratisbonne

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The triumph of the Church and the victory over errors and heresies: this is the victory that is reserved to Mary, of whom the Church sings: “You alone have destroyed the heresies of the entire universe.” Mary always had a decisive part “in the spreading, the battles, and the triumphs of the Catholic Faith”² and also, “the history of the triumphs of the Church is the history of the triumphs of Mary.”³ “Whenever it seemed that night was about to descend upon the world, Mary the Morning Star appeared in the sky.”⁴

In this perspective, the great Marian apparitions of recent centuries shine forth with an extraordinary light. The Rue de Bac, La Salette, Lourdes, Fatima, are all names that should be familiar to every faithful Catholic. As night fell on the world with the spread of the Revolution, the Blessed Mother opened people’s eyes to the gravity of the situation with a brilliant constellation of Marian messages that culminated in her apparition at Fatima, which has rightly been called the most important event of the twentieth century.

The City of Rome also had the privilege of being the place of a great Marian apparition that is less well known but no less significant than the others for the profound teaching that is still

through the added title of pain and glory became, according to the Spirit, the mother of all His members” (Pius XII, *Encyclical Mystici Corporis Christi*, June 29, 1943, http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_29061943_mystici-corporis-christi.html.)

² LEO XIII, *Encyclical on the Holy Rosary Adiutricem*, May 9, 1895, http://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_05091895_adiutricem.html.

³ PIUS XII, *Discourse Il vostro IV Convegno*, to the Young People of the Marian Congregations of Italy, April 26, 1958, in *Maria SS.*, Insegnamenti pontifici a cura dei monaci di Solesmes, Italian translation, 2nd updated edition, Edizioni Paoline, Rome 1964, p. 519.

⁴ *Ibid.*

gives to our present time. This was the miraculous conversion of the Jewish man Alphonse Ratisbonne on January 20, 1842, when the Blessed Mother appeared to him in the Roman church of Sant’Andrea delle Fratte.

In the chapel of the apparition, where today the image that the Roman people call the “Madonna del Miracolo” is venerated, there is a plaque on one of the pillars that recalls the event: “On January 20, 1842, Alphonse Ratisbonne

It only took the apparition of Our Lady, one single action on her part, to make Ratisbonne fall to his knees and instantly understand.

came here as a hardened Jew. The Virgin appeared to him just as you see her. He fell down a Jew and rose a Christian. Stranger: take with you this precious remembrance of the Mercy of God and power of the Most Holy Virgin.”⁵

⁵ This is a translation of the French text on the plaque.

The best account of the apparition is the short book by Father ALFREDO BELLANTONIO, *La Meraviglia romana dell’Immacolata*, 2nd edition, Rome 1973. The canonical investigation of the apparition is also accessible, in two handwritten volumes, at the historical archive of the Vicariate of Rome.

Alphonse Ratisbonne

Alphonse Ratisbonne was born in Strasbourg in 1814 to a family of rich Jewish bankers. His father was the president of the Jewish Consistory of Strasbourg. He grew up in a climate of anti-Christian hatred, which only intensified when his older brother Theodore converted to Catholicism.⁶ He was engaged to one of his cousins, and in order to improve his poor state of health he decided to go on a long journey that was to take him from Strasbourg through the French Riviera, Italy, Malta, and Egypt, and finally end up at Constantinople. He arrived in Rome for a brief stay, that was not in his plans, on the Feast of the Epiphany, January 6, 1842. While he was there, he happened to meet a childhood friend, the Baron Gustave de Buissières, a devout Protestant. While they were engaged in an animated religious discussion, the baron’s brother Theodore dared Ratisbonne to wear a medal showing the image of the Immaculate Virgin Mary as she had appeared at the Rue de Bac in Paris to Saint Catherine Labouré just twelve years earlier in 1830, and also to write down and recite the *Memorare*, the ancient Marian prayer traditionally attributed to Saint Bernard of Clairvaux that begins, “Remember, O Most gracious Virgin Mary...”

Ratisbonne, in order to show his superiority to Catholic “superstitions,” laughed and accepted the dare. As he

⁶ Théodore-Marie Ratisbonne (born in Strasbourg 1802, died in Paris 1884) was baptized in 1827 and collaborated with Msgr. Dufrique-Desgenettes at the church of Notre Dame des Victoires in Paris, one of the most vibrant spiritual centers of Paris. The Archconfraternity of Notre Dame des Victoires was founded by Charles-Eléonore Dufrique-Desgenettes (born in Almson 1778, died in Paris 1860). He made his church a center for the constant spread of devotion to the Miraculous Medal. In 1825 he was among those who most fought for the consecration of Charles X at Reims (cf. MARC BLOCH, *I re taumaturghi*, Italian translation, Einaudi 1973, p. 313).

put the medal around his neck, he said, sarcastically, “Look at me now, I am Catholic, Apostolic, Roman.” In the following days, as the Alsatian Jew continued his life of happy skepticism, the Buissières family prayed intensely for his conversion, asking several of their friends to pray for him. Among these was the count Auguste de La Ferronnays, a former minister of Charles X, who died suddenly on January 17. Meanwhile, an unexpected event forced Ratisbonne to postpone his departure from Rome. This brings us to January 20, 1842, a day which is best described using the account written by Ratisbonne himself.⁷

January 20, 1842

On Thursday, January 20, after eating breakfast at the hotel and taking my letters to the post office, I went to the house of my friend Gustave, the pietist,⁸ who had just returned from a hunting expedition which had kept him away for several days.

He was very surprised to find that I was still in Rome. I explained my reason to him: I had wanted to see the Pope. “But I went away without seeing him,” I said to him, “since he was not present for the ceremonies for the Feast of the Chair of Saint Peter [on January 18], where they had told me that he would make an appearance.”

Gustave sarcastically consoled me, telling me about another curious ceremony that was about to take place, I believe at Saint Mary Major, something having to do with the blessing of animals. And throughout the whole conversation, we were continuously joking and jesting in a way that you can imagine would happen in a conversation about this sort of thing between a Jew and a Protestant.

We spoke about hunting, the pleasures of life, the carnival entertainment, the brilliant dinner party that Duke Torlonia had given the night before. Nor could we forget the upcoming festivities for my marriage: I invited de Lotzbeck and he promised me he would attend.

If at that moment (it was noon) a third party had come up to me and said: “Alphonse, within a quarter of an hour you will adore Jesus Christ, your God and your Savior, you will be prostrate in a poor church, you will strike your breast before a priest in a Jesuit house where you

⁷ The account is taken from a letter that Alphonse Ratisbonne wrote from the college of Juilly to Msgr. Dufrique-Desgenettes on January 20, 1842. We have also partially drawn from and integrated the Italian translation contained in the work *La Madonna del miracolo*, in the care of the Postulazione Generale dei Minimi, Roma 1971 and the text reported in JEAN GUITTON, *La Vergine a Rue du Bac*, Italian translation, Edizioni Paoline, Roma 1977.

⁸ Pietism was a movement within Protestantism that emphasized individual piety and living a devout Christian life.

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had strong words to say regarding the reverence due to Our Eucharistic Lord. “All those are damned who see the Sacrament of the Body of Christ on the altar in the form of bread and wine by the words of Our Lord in the hands of the priest, yet do not see or believe in spirit and in God that this is really the Most Holy Body and Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ.”

By gleaning spiritual jewels from the works of Bishop Athanasius Schneider, we may acquire the interior strength, contemplative love, and dauntless valor we need to receive Holy Communion as the Church truly desires. As we journey along the road to Heaven, let us walk in the footsteps of the Saints and holy men and women who revered Almighty God’s presence in the Most Holy Eucharist with the utmost devotion and humility, until their dying day.

Hymn for the Feast of Corpus Christi, 1962 Breviary

*At birth our brother He became;
At meat Himself as food He gives;
To ransom us He died in shame;
As our reward, in bliss He lives.*

*O saving Victim! Opening wide
The gate of Heav’n to man below!
Sore press our foes from every side;
Thine aid supply, thy strength bestow.*

*To thy great Name be endless praise,
Immortal Godhead, One in Three!
Oh, grant us endless length of days,
In our true native land, with Thee!*

Amen.



Amanda Evinger is the grateful mother of five children (and two others who have died), whom she homeschools with her husband Michael in a “little house on the prairie” in rural North

Dakota. A convert from Calvinism, she spends her days in love with Holy Mother the Church and her vocation as wife and mother. She holds a dual Bachelor’s Degree in Theology and Spanish, and has spent about three years living with St. Mother Teresa of Calcutta’s sisters. She discerned in a traditional Carmelite Cloister, and is now a fully professed Traditional Third Order Carmelite.

Amanda has published several thousand articles through: Catholic Stewardship Consultants, the Latin Mass Magazine, the Dakota Catholic Action, Seton Home Study School Magazine and the National Catholic Register and, most recently, The Remnant Newspaper. Her book, *A Catholic Homeschooling Mother’s Lesson Planner and Devotional*, was published by TAN Books in the spring of 2019. ■

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