

## WORKS OF LIGHT

# For Which of These Works Do You Reject Me?...

Father Benoît PICARD, O.F.F.M.

*"He who acts in truth comes into the light, to make clear that his deeds are done in God." (Jn 3:21)*

Mother Paul-Marie would have liked to have published accounts of the beautiful things we were living in Hot Springs, but she would not do it because she knew that it would have marked the end of my apostolate in that beautiful part of the country. In fact, as soon as our good works are made known, there is a general outcry against us. However, my departure opened the way for such a publication.

When I arrived in Arkansas in October 1998, my health was precarious. My only task was to celebrate Mass and then to rest. That was all! I lived like a hermit in a mobile home a stone's throw away from the convent of the good Sisters of Our Lady of Charity, whose chaplain I was pleased to be. I had great desires in my heart for the good of souls, but I had to accept not being able to do as much as I would have liked to. It was in prayer and under the influence of Jesus in the tabernacle that certain projects came into existence.



Father Benoît with the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity

From the very beginning of my ministry as chaplain at the convent, the Sisters, thirsting for spirituality, asked me to give conferences to the entire Community. That was too much for my limited strength. I offered to give a short homily every day, which was immediately accepted. A short time later, the people from outside the convent began to also manifest their thirst... That is how I began giving spiritual talks every Saturday, continuing to do so as long as my health permitted. Subsequently, I was asked to preach a three-day retreat once a year. My apostolate was spreading slowly and attracting souls.

### THE YEAR OF THE JUBILEE OF THE REDEMPTION

In the year 2000, the year of the Great Jubilee of the



The Adoration Chapel at the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity

Redemption, in response to the Holy Father's appeal to make of this Jubilee year an "intensely Eucharistic" one, I was the humble instrument in the opening of a perpetual adoration chapel. There would be so many episodes to recount! The devil must have sensed all the good the Eucharist, adored and loved, would accomplish in souls. What beautiful fruits in such a short time! At the beginning, I had the joy of welcoming a division leader in the chapel's organization chart who was the Pastor of a Charismatic Episcopal Church. It was not long before he and his family (4 people) were converted. One of his sons is now studying theology in order to become a priest. Yes, there were so many conversions and so many souls were warmed and consoled by the Eucharistic Jesus!

One might be surprised to see with what care I made sure to observe the liturgical norms and to promote all that was written in the documents of the Church, in particular those dealing with the Eucharist. That was not by pure chance! It was because devotion to the Eucharist in all its forms is the source, center and summit of the life of the Knights of Mary and the members of the Community of the Lady of All Peoples, and has been since the very founding of the Army of Mary.

### EUCCHARISTIC PROCESSIONS

At the same time as the chapel opened, I was the instigator of a Eucharistic procession which has since become an annual tradition in Hot Springs. It was a first for that city. On the feast of Corpus Christi, we walked for one hour, going from one parish to the next where benediction was then held, and the crowd proudly proclaimed its faith in the Eucharistic Jesus. (One year the crowd was estimated at being between 500-600 faithful.) What a practical means of spreading the faith. The



June 13, 2004 - Eucharistic Procession

first year, given the proportion this event had taken and its great timeliness, Bishop Sartain accepted to carry the Blessed Sacrament himself. The people whom we passed along the path of the procession enquired about the Catholic faith. Over the years, the procession drew more and more people, some of whom even came from neighboring States. I hope that in this Year of the Eucharist, it will be a triumph. In fact, I do not doubt this, for the many collaborators who helped me prepare everything were well formed in order to be able to carry on even if I were not available, for I knew that one day I would be ousted. I am even surprised that I was not dismissed from the diocese sooner, for, towards the end of January 2005, Bishop Sartain told the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity that he had been thinking about it for almost two years. For my part and without disobeying, I always continued to do good. That was my great thirst: the salvation of souls! How many of them were lost and are still being lost because a providential Work given by Heaven for our time was refused them?

If it was not possible to make known the Work and to spread it, I consoled myself, at least, at the thought that my work was not entirely sty-

mied, and I tried to give God to souls as much as I could.

Presently, the personnel of the Adoration Chapel organizes a ceremony every year to commemorate the opening. A great many people participate in it and the Knights of Columbus form an honor guard accompanying the dais of the Eucharistic Jesus. Within the context of these anniversary celebrations, there is a triduum of prayer with special Masses animated by young people who have taken the time to learn beautiful hymns in four-part harmony. The thought also came to me to prepare, with the participation of the choir from Hot Springs Village, some 18 miles away, a Eucharistic concert which brought together the different parishes in our district. That was a first for the city of Hot Springs! Afterwards, the choir director told me how much he had appreciated this experience.

### INTERRELIGIOUS GATHERINGS

Modeling my action on that of Pope John Paul II, I conceived the project of an interreligious gathering preceded by a vigil of prayer, a project which became a reality on January 23-24, 2002. What beautiful collaboration on the part of the priests in the city, and what a beautiful openness on the part of the faithful from other religions! Providentially, a lady from the Jewish religion, Mrs. Mary Watermann, was present, and we quickly became friends. On the following March 15, she asked me to participate in the city's cultural and interreligious committee that was organizing an interreligious celebration for September 11, 2002, the anniversary date of the collapse of the World Trade Center towers. In spite of the horror that such a terrorist act inspired in us, it was really an opportunity to work towards the unity and harmony of all religions. It was as though my apostolic dreams aimed at unity in the harmony of hearts were becoming a reality.

### ECUMENICAL MEETINGS

At the same time that this was taking place and given that the members of several Protestant Churches did not want to mix with people from other religions, I thought to myself that ecumenical meetings (that is, between Christians only) needed to be



Sept. 21, 2004 - International Day of Peace Who will have the joy of carrying the statue? of The Pilgrim Virgin with the Grade 8 class at Saint John School. To the right: young people preparing to carry the dais of Our Lady of the Apocalypse.

From left to right: Pastor Cheryl Batts (no denomination); Rabbi Vicki Hollander, Jewish; Mrs. Susan Driggers, choir director, Community of Christ; Mr. Ron Sheffield, guest speaker; Rev. William T. Davis, Roanoke Baptist; Mrs. Mona Moustaffa, Muslim; Rev. Bill Seitz, Westminster Presbyterian; Mrs. Judy Heikes, Bahá'í; Rev. Boyce Rogers, Community of Christ; Rev. Jim Benfer, First United Methodist Church; at the microphone, Mr. Kent Myers, City Administrator for Hot Springs; hidden at the back on the right, Father Benoît Picard.

organized. So I began to contact several religious leaders in the city. I would have liked to invite all of them, but my health and the time available only permitted me to get in touch with a certain number, always too few for my liking. Subsequently, every year at Thanksgiving, we would get together for a celebration open to all Christians in the city of Hot Springs and surrounding districts. We were good collaborators for each other, in order to promote a spirit of openness and spiritual friendship. And once again, what beautiful fruit!

Following upon the impetus of these meetings, my good Lutheran friend, Mrs. Betty Corcoran, would accompany me when, after Sunday Mass, I would visit the different Churches in the city. In the United States there are more than 33,000 religious denominations and more than 50 different Churches in the city of Hot Springs alone. I thought it was high time that the brothers in Jesus Christ which we are, should tighten the visible bonds of their unity. The majority of these Churches welcomed us quite warmly. Often the Pastor, who could not miss me sitting in the gathering because I always wore my religious habit (white with the blue scapular), would ask me to address the gathering. On more than one occasion, I was deeply touched to see the openness of heart and mind of these people and the beautiful apostolic work being accomplished in these Churches. I gave thanks to God who permitted that our paths should cross in the light

of ecumenism.

MARIAN APOSTOLATE

At home, I took pleasure, periodically, in visiting the children from the preschool and primary grades at Saint Michael's school, inaugurated and run by the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity. Sister Mary Thomas, the school principal, asked me to found a Marian Center for the children. If you had seen how well our little animator looked after things! The Pilgrim Virgin, the consecration to Mary, the rosary often, there was such fervor among these children. The Sisters contributed greatly to this through their love and their intelligent and dedicated collaboration. At the end of the first year, without our having requested anything or alluded to anything of the kind, five children from among the twenty or so who participated in our weekly meetings, asked to become Catholics. Four of them even had the approval of their parents, while the parents of the fifth changed her school to remove her from our influence. The poor little girl wept so much! I told her not to rebel and to obey her parents with love. Later, if that was still her desire, God would see that it be fulfilled.

THE FRUITS OF THE APOSTOLATE

I also contributed greatly to spreading an authentic Marian devotion. One day, the nun who was the principal of Saint John's school in the neighboring parish asked me if I could visit their classes twice a week to speak to the children. As that was too much for me, I suggested that, instead, the Blessed Virgin be allowed to go first. She would accomplish the work of conversion and foster in them a deep love of God. The Pilgrim Virgin, introduced in the classrooms at the rate of one classroom a week, kept her promises. In a short while, the students, supported by receptive teachers, began saying the rosary every day. Certain Protestant teachers were even quite interested by this, to the point of manifesting a renewed interest in the Catholic Church. The Virgin was to visit every classroom in the school before going to the families of

children who would have first obtained permission from their parents, stopping there long enough for a novena. However, the teachers insisted on having the Virgin visit each classroom a second time, and their request was heard. They were beginning to taste the many fruits of Mary's presence and they wanted to benefit from it even more. In the meantime, a growing interest on the part of the mothers and teachers brought them to ask me for more information on Marian devotion. At a meeting with a dozen of them, I suggested they read *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary* and *The Imitation of Christ*, telling them that we would talk about it after they had read them. Of course, such a Marian advance would not go unnoticed. That is why I warned the ladies at that time that the Enemy would attempt to claw at or take hold of everything. And, in fact, it was not long before that happened.

This movement of the hearts grew so quickly and so well that several of these ladies manifested the desire to know more. A parish meeting was suggested. Over fifty people attended and they were so enthusiastic that they requested that such meetings be organized frequently.

THE PILGRIM VIRGIN

The parish priest, whom I deeply appreciate, had blessed the apostolate of the Pilgrim Virgin in the school. He became most receptive when he saw the very good and remarkable fruits. There was even an article in the diocesan Catholic paper, showing two young children who, without having been solicited by anyone, were praying the rosary before a statue of Saint Francis during recess. These dear young children wanted to save souls. One of them belonged to a Protestant Church, but he was just as fervent as his Catholic companion. Therefore, the parish priest consented to propose the Pilgrim Virgin to the whole parish. Already at that point, there was no longer question of my being invited for its enthronement. In spite of that and at a distance, I encouraged the

Marian victories. Three more Pilgrim Virgins had to be ordered to satisfy the requests. However, it all had to be done without any reference to the Army of Mary which was now being seen as a "bête noire". The booklet published by the Work which accompanied the Virgin in her visits had to be removed because there was mention of the Army of Mary in two places inside: the copyright and the Army of Mary's rallying hymn. I had never thought that this might pose a problem since no one knew this hymn anyway. What a mistake! The authorities intervened to remove the booklets and a new one was distributed that was "more adapted".

Another project was developed in preparation for the anniversary of the proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception: organizing Marian processions with the dais of the Virgin of the Apocalypse. Knowledge of Our Lady had to be spread, since it is through her that true peace will come. Thus, two candlelight processions illuminated the streets of Hot Springs, giving us an opportunity to make known the Immaculate to our Protestant brethren. The first procession took place at the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity. It was really a first, for as far back as one could remember, nothing like that had ever been seen in Hot Springs. There must have been over 100 participants. That greatly surprised me. The second procession started at Saint Mary's church and brought together all the Catholics and sympathizers in the city. A far greater number of people participated in that procession. People would come to their windows to watch the Virgin all lit up pass by. Along with the recitation of the rosary, Marian hymns were sung, and particularly the Ave Maria of Lourdes during which everyone raised his candle heavenward as a sign of fervor and love.

A short time later, the principal of Saint John's school obtained permission to organize a third Marian procession to be held during the day, this time, around the parish church. Led by the

young people from the Grade 8 class, all the students in the school participated in the procession; they were about 200. The children were so happy that the good Sister principal hoped to be able to do this every month, but then my departure from Hot Springs was announced before the end of the following month.

#### SISTER FAUSTINA

Since the beatification of Sister Faustina, the apostle of Divine Mercy, I have always tried to spread this devotion, to the point that there was a solemn novena every year in the Adoration Chapel as Jesus had requested of the Saint and as Pope John Paul II asked of the Church. That must be the reason why the Knights of Columbus

asked that the image of Divine Mercy which had been blessed by the Pope and had travelled throughout the Diocese of Little Rock be kept permanently in Saint Michael's Adoration Chapel. I was to have presided over that ceremony, along with a representative from the State, but it took place in the chapel of the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity four days after my departure.

I hope that the apostolic works which God permitted me to promote in this blessed land of Arkansas will provide as much lasting joy as they gave me in launching them. I had other projects in mind such as founding family Centers, proposing marriage preparation courses and courses on the spirituality of

marriage, etc. Besides, I was already collaborating with other religious leaders to come to the aid of families in distress in the city.

I thank God for all He permitted and especially for the good that may have been accomplished, but also for the crosses which tested and consecrated the quality of the gift. I know that the generous souls that took over will continue the work that was begun. So much more light would have radiated if I had not always had obstacles in my path, set up by those who take to backroom dealings and who never come to the light, and if the back door through which I had to pass had been left more than simply ajar! However, of all the places in which I have been

called to serve since my ordination to the priesthood, Hot Springs was the most open to the apostolic potential of the Work, with the results which you can see for yourselves. What radiance there will be when not only will a door be finally left wide open to the Work of the Lady of All Peoples but that, besides, it will be the front door!

I had asked the Lord for the conversion of Hot Springs. I knew there would be a price to pay... With my departure ordered by the Authority, I believe that God, in His infinite kindness, made me understand that far from having refused my humble prayer, He has accepted it. To Him all glory be given!

**Father Benoît Picard,  
a Son of Mary**