
A story to tell

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Telling a story sets the heart on fire

Storytelling has existed as long as humanity has had language. Crafting stories as a means of entertainment and education is an ancient art that has been present in every culture. Stories have shaped worldviews and values of the major civilizations in history.

Even today, an increasing number of famous motivational speakers keep on highlighting the relevance and importance of good stories as part of an effective and involving verbal communication.

We all know and have experienced the power of stories. Stories keep alive our attention, stir our emotions and feelings, encourage us to remember. Good stories move us deeply, and we end up sharing them. Rightly, the American poet, novelist, dramatist, essayist and James B. Duke Professor of English at Duke University, Edward Reynold Price (February 1, 1933 – January 20, 2011), stated that “the sound of story is the dominant sound of our lives.”

Stories imbue the entire Bible. Stories are at the heart of the Bible and at the heart of Jesus’ communication style. Whether walking on the roads of Galilee and beyond with his disciples or preaching to the crowds, Jesus of Nazareth used stories to share his message. It is not a coincidence that Matthew reminds us that storytelling was Jesus’ preferred technique when speaking to the crowds (see Matthew 13:34). Yes, Jesus appears to be a great storyteller. Interesting enough, when the well-known American writer Mark Twain was asked who he thought was the greatest storyteller, he answered Jesus of Nazareth.

Not only Jesus used stories to speak about the Father and His Kingdom, but his stories were told in simple language. They were both relatable and understandable. Pharisees, fishermen, and farmers all heard Jesus’ stories and metaphors drawn from their everyday life. His teaching included birds, flowers, lost coins, and a lot of other everyday objects that the people of his time could easily relate to.

Through stories Jesus was able to capture the attention of his audiences, inspire their imagination, and communicate a compelling and life-changing message. Through stories he revealed the merciful face of the Father and touched the deepest chords of the people. Indeed, Jesus told powerful stories: they challenged and changed lives. As a result, many of those who heard his stories started to follow him and become part of His-Story.

Following the example set by Jesus of Nazareth, his followers have been telling his story century after century. From generation to generation, the story of God’s goodness and mercy made flesh in Jesus the Christ has been told and preached.

Jesus' final words to the Gerasene man "Return home and recount what God has done for you" (Luke 8:39) encouraged him to go off and proclaim throughout the whole town what Jesus had done for him. At La Salette, the "Beautiful Lady" invested the two little shepherds, Maximin and Melanie, with the mission of recounting the story of their encounter with her. This story too, like the one concerning the Son, has been handed down from generation to generation. Both have transformed a great multitude of men and women. And we, Missionaries of Our Lady of La Salette, are the custodians of these two stories: not to guard them jealously, but to make them resonate in the lives of our brothers and sisters that we meet while pursuing our earthly pilgrimage to the heavenly Jerusalem. Today as yesterday, the Church and the world need to hear both stories told. People need to hear them from those who have been transformed by both the Son and the Mother.

Mary tells us a story about her Son

While the two witnesses thought that their first mission was to convey the news of the glorious apparition to the inhabitants of the vicinity of Corps, the concern of Mary, Mother of the Divine Redeemer, was to remind the Church of her duty of being the herald of the Good News of Salvation. This is why Marie is not concerned with exalting herself, even though she deserves this honor. The Mother of the Church seems to remind us of submission as a fundamental condition for deserving the graces that her Son has left us as an inheritance, through his abnegation to the human condition and culminating in the outpouring of his blood on the cross. The Apparition of Mary in La Salette is not an end in itself. Mary intends to awaken in all the baptized, starting with those to whom was given the greatest responsibilities in the Church, the awareness of the urgency of announcing to all the mystery of her Son, who was buried and was raised on the third day. She does not place herself at the center of her message. The purpose of his glorious apparition, as during the wedding feast in Cana, is to ask obedience from his Son: "Do whatever he tells you" (Jn 2:5).

In 2001, John Paul II, in his message for World Mission Day, encouraged the people of God to set out to bring the Gospel of Jesus to all peoples. What story should we tell then? The luminous crucifix that Mary wears on her chest during the apparition answers precisely this question, since it was the one thing that most attracted the attention of Maximin and Melanie because of the light emanating from it. This shows and confirms Paul's missionary call: "For Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified" (1 Cor 1:22–23). It is this story, this message that we must tell until the final coming of Christ. In order for this "great adventure of evangelization" to be effective, John Paul II proposes new methods, new models and new paradigms. In this mission common to all, it is important to make present the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ in the lives of our brothers and sisters.

Remembering helps us to move forward for a better future

In her last recommendation to the visionaries at La Salette, Mary asked them to make “this” known to all Her people, and she repeated it twice in French (precisely: *“Eh bien, mes enfants, vous le ferez passer à tout mon peuple”*). That “this” which has been transmitted for 175 years is contained in the entire La Salette event. Here, details are important: the country in which the apparition took place (19th century France); the place of the apparition (a village in the Alps); the time (about 3. 00 p.m. on Saturday, September 19, 1846); the time after the first vespers of the liturgical feast of Our Lady of Sorrows (celebrated on the third Sunday of September¹); the dress of the Beautiful Lady, modeled on that worn by the peasant women of the region of La Salette, and other elements she had on her (the crucifix with Jesus², the pliers and hammer³, the two chains⁴, the multicolored roses); then the sadness, the hidden face, the tears, the way Mary moved and her gestures in the presence of the children. But also, the message itself and the two languages in which it was communicated, the spring that emerged and continues to run at the place of the Apparition, where the sphere of light appeared with the person of Our Lady sitting inside, and finally the fact that both children received secrets, which they did not even talk about between themselves.

All of these elements are known to us. We talk about them at every possible opportunity. As long as the Basilica of the Blessed Virgin Mary exists on the mountain near the village of La Salette in France, and as long as the Congregation of the Missionaries of Our Lady of La Salette exists, the continuity and actuality of the message of the Beautiful Lady, communicated to Melanie and Maximin, will be assured. The transmission of the story of this event supposes a continuation until the end of time, but it could have ended earlier, if men would convert and by their conduct make useless the call of the Lady in tears to conversion and penance.

¹ This feast was first introduced by the Servites. From 1667 onwards, it was celebrated in some dioceses. In 1814, Pope Pius VII (1800-1823) established it in the calendar of the Universal Church and set the 3rd Sunday of September as the feast day. Pope Pius X (1903-1914) established the actual date of the celebration of the feast on September 15.

² It was from that crucifix that the light that enveloped the whole figure of Mary came, while Jesus Himself was alive on the cross, but - as the children said - He was now in agony. He did not yet have the wound in His right side, which was opened with a spear only after His death.

³ These instruments were located UNDER the arms of Mary's cross, not ON her arms, as is depicted in our missionary crucifix. This is not a technical problem, related to how to attach them, but their placement has a symbolic value.

⁴ A large chain with big rings hung on the Beautiful Lady's shoulders, while the smaller one held the crucifix on Her chest.

Our Lady's true spiritual children surely consider the conversion of humanity to the paths of the Divine Will more important than the existence of the Basilica of Our Lady of La Salette and of the Congregation of the Missionaries of La Salette itself.

One element remains unresolved and is the subject of useless controversy: what is the significance of the secrets entrusted to Melanie and Maximin⁵?

The fact that Mary entrusted secrets to these two children constitutes an important element in the transmission of the story of the event at La Salette. They are a guarantee that the encounter had the character of mystery and therefore requires respect. We should not be worried about discovering their content, but in giving the account of the apparition, we should always mention their existence in humbly acknowledging our ignorance as to their content.

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⁵ We know that in the children's comments about the vision of the Beautiful Lady, a small incident emerged, which confirms the fact that at the moment when they were listening to the secrets, the children were neither in ecstasy nor deaf. When Maximin listened attentively to the Beautiful Lady, Melanie did not hear her, but at that moment she did not give signs of boredom or impatience. She waited patiently, not hearing any voice. Then the roles were reversed: when Melanie listened to the Beautiful Lady entrusting her with the secrets, Maximin did not hear Maria's voice. He was bored and began to throw small stones in the direction of the Beautiful Lady, hitting them with a stick. If he had been deaf, he would have noticed immediately that the stones made no noise. Then, in front of Melanie who scolded him, he justified himself by saying that no stone touched the Beautiful Lady. It seems that while listening to Mary Melanie and Maximin, were always well aware of what was happening around them, they were not in ecstasy.