



Abbaye Saint-Joseph de Clairval

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April 9, 2006
Palm Sunday

Dear Friend of Saint Joseph Abbey,

“WHEN there are not enough Saints in a nation, night falls in the minds of men, and people do not see the way they must go,” stated Blessed Bronislaw Markiewicz. Saint Paul tells us, *For this is the will of God, your sanctification* (1 Th. 4 :3). “Since Baptism is a true entry into the holiness of God through incorporation into Christ and the indwelling of His Spirit, it would be a contradiction to settle for a life of mediocrity, marked by a minimalist ethic and a shallow religiosity. ... As the Council itself explained, this ideal of perfection must not be misunderstood as if it involved some kind of extraordinary existence, possible only for a few ‘uncommon heroes’ of holiness. The ways of holiness are many, according to the vocation of each individual” (John Paul II, *Novo millennio ineunte*, January 6, 2001, no. 31).

Bronislaw Markiewicz was born on July 13, 1842, in eastern Poland, at the time annexed to the Russian empire, into a modest household that would eventually include eleven children. At the age of 18, he lost his faith. “I wanted to adapt to my teachers’ views,” he would write... “Along with faith in God, I lost the peace in my soul and my sense of interior harmony. I was overcome by sadness.” In his despair, Bronislaw turned to the great Polish authors. Touched by one of them, he fell to his knees and exclaimed, “My God, if You exist, make me know You ! ... May I see the Truth, and spend my life in thanksgiving ! To gain this, I am willing to suffer any mortification.” The response from Heaven was not long in coming : “God has heard my prayer !” he wrote. “In the blink of an eye, my soul was bathed in light. I believed everything that the Holy Church teaches. I immediately made a general confession.” But this conversion brought with it a difficult struggle on the moral level : “I fell again, and even several times, but You, Lord JESUS, You did not abandon me !”

The most to be pitied

On May 3, 1863, a sixteen-year-old boy in a sort of rapture publicly prophesied the apostolic life of a Polish priest. Bronislaw wondered if the boy was talking about him. The following fall, he entered the seminary. But soon, a storm of doubts attacked him—was he really on the right path ? He turned with tears to MARY. On the feast of the Immaculate Conception, his worries subsided, and henceforth he remained convinced of his call to the priesthood. Ordained a priest on September 15, 1867, Bronislaw began his ministry as assistant priest in a parish where he spent long hours in adoration before the Tabernacle. Three years later, he was named vicar to the Cathedral in Przemysl, where his zeal for administering the sacrament of Penance was amply deployed.

Bronislaw went to those who could not go to him, first and foremost to prisoners. “Our prisoners are the most to be pitied,” he wrote... “Most of them do not know Christ or His precepts... As friend and confidant of these unfortunates, I have often witnessed heartrending scenes—scarcely are they instructed in the essential truths of our faith but they begin to weep bitterly, saying, ‘Why did no one ever speak to us about this ?’ ”

To make Our Lord JESUS CHRIST known by teaching the faith is one of the missions of the Church. It is in this perspective that the Supreme Pontiff Benedict XVI published a summary (*Compendium*) of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. “[H]ow necessary it is at the beginning of this third millennium,” affirmed the Pope, “that the entire Christian community, unanimously and of one accord, proclaim, teach and witness to the full to the truths of the Catholic faith, doctrine and morals ! May the *Compendium* of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* also contribute to the hoped for renewal of catechesis and evangelization so that all Christians—children, young people, adults, families and communities—docile to the action of the Holy Spirit, may become catechists and evangelizers in every environment, helping others to encounter Christ” (Address during the Angelus prayer, July 3, 2005).

Bronislaw expressed himself very simply in the pulpit. “Young and old neglect with equal thoughtlessness that which determines their salvation !” he would repeat. “It is necessary to constantly remind them of these words from the Lord : *For what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and loses his soul ?*” He would write, “I worked in Przemysl, with good results. Everyone knows me there—even the Jews showed respect to me. I visited all the prisons, all the hospitals, all the barracks, all the private homes. I constantly

circulated among twenty-some villages.” After three years of ministry, Bronislaw resumed university studies for two years, then served as a parish priest in two successive parishes. To eradicate drunkenness, he established the confraternity of abstainers which, after several months, brought together his entire flock. His care also extended to the material good of families. To improve agricultural production, he arranged for special inspections to answer farmers’ practical questions. Thanks to him, a sort of agricultural cooperative was established, as was a savings and credit cooperative.

The dynamism of the Exercises

At the end of eight years of parish ministry, Bronislaw was named by his bishop professor of pastoral theology at the seminary in Przemyśl. During his free time, he took the seminarians on apostolic rounds, which provided them with the opportunity to have direct contact with the people. At this time, he entrusted his soul to a Jesuit priest, and made Saint Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises* every year. These Exercises have been unceasingly recommended by the Popes. “The Christian,” said John Paul II, “in the strong dynamism of the Exercises, is helped to enter the realm of the thoughts of God and His plans, to entrust himself to Him Who is Truth and Love, so as to make decisions that engage him to follow Christ, by clearly weighing his talents and personal responsibilities” (November 16, 1978). Bronislaw derived from the Exercises a profound closeness to the Sacred Heart of JESUS and an ardent desire to follow Him in the way of poverty and mortifications, so as to imitate Him more perfectly.

These years with a more regular rhythm revived his former desire to enter religious life. In the fall of 1885, Bronislaw left for Italy. When he arrived in Turin he met Don Bosco, who welcomed him with open arms, kept him close to him, and introduced him to the Salesian Rule, the mission of which is the education of poor and abandoned youth. Father Markiewicz entered the Salesians and, the day of his profession, on the holy Founder’s request, committed himself with an additional vow to remain faithful to the Rule. On January 31, 1888, Don Bosco rendered his soul to God. Bronislaw’s task was to perform pastoral services in Turin, but he was soon struck by tuberculosis. He was on the verge of death when, suddenly, the illness weakened its grip on him. To facilitate his convalescence, in March 1892 his superiors sent him back to Poland, where he took charge of a long-abandoned parish in the Carpathians.

Shaped by the Salesian spirit, Bronislaw welcomed into the presbytery a poor boy who would soon be joined by others. The villagers soon became attached to these young people of their parish who ate and worked

like them. To make these very diverse children into a coherent and homogenous group, Father Markiewicz primarily relied on the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist. In the evening, adoration of the Blessed Sacrament brought together the boarders at the presbytery. “Not all of you are called to become priests, but all of you must become saints, for this is the will of God,” the priest told them. One of his fundamental ideas was sanctification through work. “By working with His hands, JESUS gave us an example,” he would remind them. By digging, ploughing, laying bricks, or handling a trowel, these youth were sanctifying themselves through the love, obedience, humility, and promptness they put into their work. However, their education was not without difficulties. “You tell me,” the priest replied to one of his disciples, “that it is hard to live this way from morning to night, in the company of poor children, ill-bred, sometimes uncouth, to endure their whims, to provide for their needs without a single penny in the bank, suffering deprivations. I don’t blame you. It takes a great deal of courage, even heroism, to follow this vocation.” He then encouraged him to see in these young ones the children of God and to treat them as such. He himself treated them with great kindness.

Service that provides consolation

With the number of children constantly growing, farmers from the village came to offer the priest their services. But soon, continuous assistance became necessary. Young women, wishing to devote themselves to God, knocked on the old presbytery’s door. They took on the household tasks, and the education of the girls. With their eyes fixed on Her Who wished Herself to forever be the “servant of the Lord,” they were for the children consolation, gentleness, and patience.

Since Father Markiewicz’s departure in 1892, the Salesian Institute in Turin had evolved. Its doors had been opened to boarders of all social classes, and its structures had changed as a result. The priest had not been able to follow these changes from afar and was adhering to Saint John Bosco’s original Rule, approved by Rome in 1874. In 1897, the Superior General of the Salesians, Don Rua, sent a priest to visit Father Markiewicz’s institute. With a profound lack of understanding of the situation in Poland, this visitor made a serious effort to bring into effect the mitigated rule adopted in Turin. Faced with the conditions that were being imposed on him, Father Markiewicz decided in his soul and conscience to leave the Salesian Institute. To give his institute a solid legal foundation, while waiting for approval by the Church, he founded a civil association, named *Temperance and Work*, aimed at saving abandoned youth. “The strength of our establishments lies in Christian mortification, which means in temperance, in the broadest sense of the word, and in

completely selfless work in the service of abandoned children,” he explained. On April 14, 1898, the bylaws were approved by the government. One year later, a Papal blessing was granted the association as a civil entity.

The good news spread about an establishment that received abandoned children at no charge, and little candidates flowed in from everywhere. Father Markiewicz turned no one away. To meet the needs of the Institute, he sent his sons to seek collections at the homes of the rich. “The Holy Spirit will whisper the appropriate words to you,” he told them. “Giving alms is a source of blessings, so do not hesitate to hold out your hand. Pray for those who greet you with charity, but even more for those who throw you out, for these are also your benefactors.” He himself warned the well-off: “Only the ‘permanent revolution’ of charity and justice can stop social revolutions—what you do not give of your own free will will be taken by force!”

To have nerves of steel

One day, though, the debts added up to an imposing amount, and no help came. They doubled their prayers. A very beautiful lady arrived at Father Markiewicz’s door and, smiling, offered him a bundle of banknotes. Overwhelmed, he thanked her profusely, and offered the visitor a cup of tea. He went to the kitchen but, when he returned, the lady had disappeared without anyone having seen her. The sum she had left corresponded exactly to what he needed to pay his debts... Providence, however, usually used more ordinary means to meet the institute’s needs, but sometimes with some delay. Those in charge got to the point of losing sleep in the face of bills to be paid, creditors threatening to take legal action, friends and benefactors who could not be repaid in a timely fashion. “I am keeping well,” wrote the priest, “because, for nineteen years, Providence has always been there, but I fear for Father J., who’s at the end of his rope. You need to have nerves of steel to hold out in our situation!”

Father Markiewicz wished to establish Our Lady’s maternal presence in a more concrete form, and so commissioned a statue from a sculptor in Krakow. “To do what I am asking you to do,” he told him with a perspective full of faith, “your art and your technique will not be enough! I want all those who will work on this sculpture to be in a state of grace. For the Virgin will obtain miracles for us...”

In view of the rapid growth of his institute, Father Markiewicz proposed to train priests. In 1900, he sent four of his sons to the Gregorian University in Rome. In the fall of 1901, he requested that his bishop, Bishop Pelczar, a former classmate from seminary, admit several

candidates to the diocesan seminary. But he was refused, for these young people did not have high school diplomas. The prelate, who had just met with Blessed Don Rua, clarified his thoughts shortly thereafter—Father Markiewicz should return unconditionally to the Salesians who were in a good state in his estimation. When he refused, the bishop ordered him to defrock all his clerics, and advise them to enter another religious institute. By no means should this cast doubt on the prelate’s good intentions—but his views were very different from those of Father Markiewicz. God sometimes allows His friends to put each other to the test, even when they are genuine saints. Bishop Pelczar would be canonized by John Paul II on May 18, 2003.

Submission or dispersal

When he returned to his sons, Father Markiewicz told them, “In accordance with human judgment, I am bringing you some bad news. They demanded that we attach ourselves to the Salesians. When I categorically refused, I was ordered to make you leave the cassock and was told that, from now on, you no longer have the right to consider yourselves clerics... I was likewise charged to advise you to enter other congregations, such as the Jesuits, the Redemptorists, etc. You are free to do so and I will give you good references if need be.” It was a terrible blow to these youth, but, the next day, all the cassocks had disappeared. The priest sent his sons to pursue their studies at the Faculty of Theology in Krakow, where they were noticed for their moral qualities and their success. In spite of profound suffering, the priest remained calm. “His holiness manifested itself in a brilliant manner,” wrote one of his sons, “when we were stripped of our clerical dress. One would have said that with the trial, great graces had flooded his soul.”

Somewhat disarmed by Father Markiewicz’s obedience, Bishop Pelczar sent him financial help. At the end of 1902, the priest tried a new step to obtain his bishop’s approval of his Institute, which he placed under the protection of Saint Michael the Archangel. After a new inquiry, the bishop categorically refused the female branch of the Institute, formed by the young women who devoted themselves primarily to household tasks. The “Sisters” left the Institute. However, they soon returned, not as nuns, but as servants. Without their daily devotion, the *Temperance and Work* establishments could not survive. Indeed, in the darkest hours, the meals still had to be served, the housework still had to be done. The series of humble tasks did not stop.

To supervise the male branch of the Institute, the bishop named a vice-rector under Father Markiewicz, who remained rector. This vice-rector had customs that did not mesh with the life of the Institute. In addition, he claimed the authority to dismiss all those who did

not submit to the new rules he imposed on them. Father Markiewicz's sons staggered under the shock of the trial. He exhorted them to obedience and perseverance: "Without obedience, there is no holiness." In order to be able to go on to the priesthood, a number of them went into voluntary exile—after several years, more than twenty of them would be working in the United States in the service of Polish immigrants. Nevertheless, some disciples who had been with Father Markiewicz from the start temporarily renounced their clerical studies to remain with their Father as lay people, in order to attend to the Institute's operation.

Taking advantage of falls

Father Markiewicz regarded these humiliations as sources of hope. "The Church grows only by humiliations. You will do much more by humbling yourself than by preaching... The lower we go, the more we resemble the Lord JESUS." In the divine Master's school, everything that happens can feed the fire of our love of God, even faults: "God allows the greatest saints to have certain imperfections up to the end of their lives, in order to keep them humble," wrote the Father to one of his sons. "So take advantage of your very falls, saying with King David: *It is good for me that I was humiliated* (Ps. 118 :71)." And again, "Let us be first of all patient with ourselves!"

In 1905, massive upheavals stirred the Russian empire. The Church was intensely persecuted. Yet, Father Markiewicz's Institute remained in peace. A Socialist leader spoke of it in these words: "We would never hate an institution that proclaims, commands, and practices such a love for the poor, although we can-

not refrain from harboring resentment against those who call themselves Christians and do not live according to their faith." But the social unrest increased poverty: "The children are well-behaved," wrote the priest, "even though they do not see bread for entire weeks. We are feeding them potatoes, carrots, and cabbage. Many go barefoot, because we have no money with which to buy them shoes."

However, requests for foundations arrived from all over. In the absence of priests, most could not succeed. In October 1911, Father Markiewicz was able to declare that "more than 2,000 young people have been raised in our establishments and have left them with a trade in hand." But what was much more important to him was the moral quality of the students who were being "snatched up," such was their reputation for integrity and professional skill. He harbored no resentment whatsoever toward the Salesians: "I admire and I love the Salesians... I often send them the boys of rich parents who can pay a good allowance, and I only keep those who can pay nothing... Our works complement one another."

On December 11, 1911, the priest suffered a cerebral hemorrhage. A doctor was able to save him. However, his prostate caused him a great deal of suffering. His doctors decided to operate, but as the sick man's heart was very weak, they could not give him any anesthetic. The patience with which he endured his sufferings was heroic. In spite of the operation, he rendered his soul to God on January 29. Despite the bitter cold and snow, huge crowds flocked to pay their last respects. Bronislaw Markiewicz was beatified on June 19, 2005.

"When I'm gone, everything will turn out all right," the priest had asserted to his sons. "I will help you! Do not be afraid..." The help from above manifested itself in Bishop Sapieha, the new bishop of Krakow, where a foundation of Michaelites had been established in 1902. A great admirer of Father Markiewicz's institute, this prelate took all the steps necessary to obtain approbation for the Michaelites. Their canonical erection took place after the First World War, on September 29, 1921, the feast of Saint Michael the Archangel. There are currently more than 330 Michaelite religious in 28 houses. The Sisters, approved in 1928, now number about 270 in 37 establishments.

Let us ask Blessed Bronislaw Markiewicz to obtain for us the grace of perseverance in the service of God, no matter the number and intensity of humiliations and crosses that we have to bear.

Dom Antoine Marie
O.S.B.

P. S. This monthly letter is free of charge. We gratefully accept the addresses of other persons who may enjoy receiving it.

– Also available free of charge are: tract about the divinity of Jesus Christ; tract about the Truths of the Catholic Religion; scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, with explanatory notice; the promises of the Sacred Heart; the mysteries of the Rosary.

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