



Abbaye Saint-Joseph de Clairval

F – 21150 Flavigny-sur-Ozerain

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Month of the Sacred Heart of JESUS

Dear Friend of Saint Joseph Abbey,

TOULOUSE, France, February 10, 1907. An estimated fifty thousand people are crowded along the route of a funeral procession. The body to be interred is not one of the great ones of the world, but of a humble Capuchin friar, Father Marie-Antoine de Lavour. Locally he is popularly called “The Saint of Toulouse.” Even *La Dépêche*, the anticlerical local newspaper, praises “this son of Saint Francis, very popular in some circles, who did not know how to keep a cent on him and gave everything to the poor. Self-love and human respect were unknown to him. He ran straight for his goal. And in his bold strides no one found any grounds to mock him...”

Born on December 23, 1825 in Lavour, in the Tarn, Léon Clergue was baptized the same day. His father, Frédéric, a deeply pious law clerk, brought this first-born son to the altar of the Virgin MARY. “Blessed Virgin, I consecrate him to you, he is yours.” His mother, Rose, had a manly energy. She later would earn the nickname “La Vendéenne” when, during the riots of 1830, she grabbed a revolutionary flag from some youth. These two temperaments merged and harmonized in Léon, forging a character both energetic and pleasant. The child would have a brother and a sister—Célestin and Marie. Little Léon had but one ideal—to become a priest, to celebrate the Mass, to preach. His tender piety already inspired great desires in him: “When I grow up, I want to be a saint.” Already at age six, while playing lively and high-spirited games with his friends, he was seized by an impetuous ardor and, enflamed with oratorical zeal, would play the preacher. Standing on a chair, he preached and led songs of praise to the Lord. So he was called “the little pope.” Nevertheless, he did not like being opposed. “Hard-headed,” said his concerned mother.

At the beginning of the 1836-1837 school year, his parents sent him to the minor seminary of l’Esquile in Toulouse. There he distinguished himself not only as a well-behaved and hard-working student, but also as a confirmed apostle already beginning his conquests. A few years later, during his theology studies, he roamed throughout Toulouse evangelizing homeless teenagers on the street, who were trying to eke out a living doing menial work. These young knife-grinders, cobblers, and street peddlers, having fallen through the cracks of the pastoral vigilance of the Church, were brought together by the young seminarian into various confraternities and associations.

On September 21, 1850, Léon was ordained to the priesthood by Archbishop Mioland of Toulouse. Appointed the assistant priest at Saint-Gaudens, his ardent zeal made him stand out—he could be seen roaming the countryside in search of farmers who, deprived of religious assistance, had reverted to paganism. He established the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, in which magistrates and the sub-prefect were enrolled. He gathered the girls under the banner of MARY, to protect them from the perils of the world. He was devoted to the poor, for whom he kept places at his table, and to whom he gave even his mattress and firewood. In January 1854, Father Clergue vigorously fought against the cholera that claimed many victims in the area.

Leaving all to find all

A fervent pilgrim to the sanctuary of Notre-Dame du Bout-du-Puy, Léon heard the Lord say to him one day, “You will be a Capuchin!” After two years of discernment, he made his decision in spite of opposition from his family and friends. One of them, who no doubt conceived of preaching only in a formal sense, asked him, astonished, “What are you going to do in an order of preachers, when you are unable to preach?”—“I will say to God, ‘Here is Your gun. If You want the shot to be fired, load it.’” God loaded it so well that the future Capuchin would become the great missionary of the Midi region. On June 1, 1855, Léon joined the Capuchin Novitiate in Marseilles. On the 13th, the feast of Saint Anthony of Padua, he was clothed in the habit and became Father Marie-Antoine de Lavour. “I am happy,” he stated. “One must leave all to find all.” Nonetheless, his Superiors wondered if he would be able to preach. After having written out and memorized a formal sermon on their order, he found himself unable to recite it and, after a humiliating silence, resorted to an improvisation that made a profound impression and

brought about conversions. For his whole life, Father Marie-Antoine would content himself with writing the outline of his homilies, on which he would meditate at length before God ; then he would turn himself over to inspiration. On June 13, 1856, he took his vows. His Superiors soon gave him the ministry of preaching. His commanding height, his long beard, his lively gaze, his sweet smile, and his entirely spontaneous eloquence soon captivated the working-class districts of Marseilles.

In 1857, Father Marie-Antoine founded the monastery of Saint Louis of Toulouse, which would be his base during the fifty years of his apostolate as a preacher. He became “the Apostle of the Midi” (the south of France), a “Midi” that encompassed a third of France. Whether invited to preach a mission for Lent or for a Month of MARY, one thing remained constant : “Every mission,” he said, “is a war. So I have always felt the need to place them under the banner of the Mother of warriors (MARY)”. His preaching bore extraordinary fruit, drawing crowds to churches ; many returned to the sacraments, particularly the most hardened sinners, for the conversion of whom he had a special grace from God. His one concern was to bring souls to God. Since he had been a novice his prayer was, “My God, give me a soul ! Another ! Another !” Did he have to load wood ? “My God, another soul !” Pick vegetables ? “My God, for each one, give me a soul !”

A great lever

When Father Marie-Antoine arrived in a parish, he had the bells rung, leaflets passed out, posters hung. First he spoke to the Pastor and the most faithful of his flock : “It is not enough, at this time, to have a great faith—lively, informed, enlightened. It must be militant and triumphant. Evil must be defeated with faith. There is no other weapon.” Children were the best ambassadors in families, and Thursday was reserved for them. He recommended prayer above all to them. He had them kneel and, before the sign of the cross, spoke to them some appropriate words, illustrated with stories, to get them to understand the importance of prayer and the qualities it must have. Prayer is the great lever, especially the prayer of children. “When everything seems lost or impossible,” he wrote, “find a small child, very small, scarcely able to lisp. Have him join his little hands and recite a ‘Hail MARY.’ Say it yourself with him, piously.” Well before the decrees of Saint Pius X, Father de Lavaur understood the desires of the Church with regard to the early reception of Communion by children. To prepare these young hearts, he explained contrition to them, brought them before JESUS in the Tabernacle, and made with them a fervent act of contrition.

Father Marie-Antoine put Christian women in the school of JESUS crucified. He knew equally well how to

speak to men—few missed the sermons he gave for them after work. His instruction often became a dialogue on the difficulties of daily life. Full of anecdotes and amusing stories, the priest’s remarks disposed his hearers to listen to the austere and useful truths that led them to the confessional. There, the confessor did not burden himself with formalities. He got down to work, penetrated to the bottom of consciences, and got to the roots of a complicated confession in a few moments. The penitent, happy to have been understood, left in peace. Sometimes Father Marie-Antoine liked to strike decisive blows, like at the Mission in Meymac. This one started several days before the feast of Saint Léger, the patron of this city. But the feast, originally religious, had become, by a strange abuse, the pretext for dissipation at dances and worldly parties. The missionary announced that a procession to the cemetery would be held on the feast day. There, he gathered the ladies, dressed in black, with banners draped in black. Instead of parties, dances, and gay music, the stunned city saw only a long funeral cortège, accompanied with funeral chants : “At death, at death, sinner, everything will end !” This scene, in the style of the time, was designed to recall the fundamental truths : at the hour of death, the pleasures and honors of this life will give way to God’s judgment, which will determine the eternal fate of the soul. As the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, published by Pope Benedict XVI in 2005, says : “What is the particular judgment?... It is the judgment of immediate retribution which each one after death will receive from God in his immortal soul in accord with his faith and his works. This retribution consists in entrance into the happiness of heaven, immediately or after an appropriate purification, or entry into the eternal damnation of hell” (no. 208).

Turned around by a kiss

Father Marie-Antoine had the art of overcoming obstacles that stood in the way of the smooth progress of his Missions. In late January 1875, he was in Gondrin, in the Gers. From the back of his small workshop, a cobbler was mocking those he saw running to the sermon : “Yes, yes, go listen to this barefoot tramp. He will tell you some good ones !” The priest went to see him and, in his friendliest manner, ordered a pair of sandals. Two days later, he returned to get them, found them perfect, and warmly kissed the cobbler. But the cobbler had a tumor on his face that made him an object of horror for the entire village. Feeling the missionary’s lips on his virulent wound, and meeting his loving and peaceful gaze, transformed him. From that day on, he proclaimed everywhere that this barefoot tramp was a saint.

The so-called wisdom of the world did not fool Father Marie-Antoine. With a vigor that some found

excessive, he waged war on a vice already very widespread in the 19th century—onanism (cf. Gen. 38 :8-10), or the separation of union and procreation in the conjugal act of spouses. Pope Paul VI would explain in the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* : “ If each of these essential qualities, the unitive and the procreative, is preserved, the use of marriage fully retains its sense of true mutual love and its ordination to the supreme responsibility of parenthood to which man is called ” (no. 12). As a result, “ any action which either before, at the moment of, or after sexual intercourse, is specifically intended to prevent procreation ” is intrinsically evil (*Ibid.*, 14 ; cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 2369-2370). The issue is delicate, and many are afraid to address it. The authority and the missionary role of Father Marie-Antoine allowed him to remind listeners of this truth and awaken their consciences. “ Alas ! Vice and sterility have taken over at the family hearth ! ... This vice inevitably leads society to death, because it attacks the source of life and violates the fundamental law of creation... In rebelling against the holy will of the Creator, spouses, unfaithful to the chaste and holy duties of their sublime vocation, wound His Heart. ”

“She has visibly assisted me”

Father Marie-Antoine attributed all his success to the Virgin MARY. Therefore he spoke with unequalled tenderness and delicacy about Our Lady. “ The heart of a mother is a masterpiece of God, and the Heart of MARY is the most beautiful of all mothers’ hearts. In her, God and man met to give each other the kiss of holy and eternal love. ” He preached about MARY, consecrated parishes to her, founded confraternities and associations under her patronage, and organized pilgrimages to chapels dedicated to her. “ In all of my missions, ” he said, “ the good Virgin has visibly assisted me. ” So, whenever there was a nearby place of pilgrimage, he would lead the parish he had just evangelized there in thanksgiving. There, the faithful repeated the incessant cry of his heart : “ *Omnia per MARIAM*, All through MARY ! ” Soon he would lead crowds to Lourdes.

Father Marie-Antoine met Bernadette Soubirous for the first time in July 1858, at the end of the Lourdes apparitions. He would write : “ In growing up, this angelic child had retained all her sublime and holy simplicity... She made for me the same gestures as MARY. Until one has seen and heard these things, one has not yet known MARY. ” Pius IX had defined the dogma of the Immaculate Conception on December 8, 1854 ; the Virgin had come to confirm it on March 25, 1858. On January 18, 1862, a declaration by Bishop Laurence of Tarbes approved the apparitions and announced the construction of a sanctuary. During one of the apparitions, MARY had in fact asked, “ Let people come here in pilgrimage... Let a chapel be built. ” These words did

not leave unmoved the Capuchin, the great mover of souls, the devotee of MARY. He would have no end to satisfying his Good Mother who asked for pilgrims. With the parish priest of Lourdes, Father Peyramale, he embarked on many projects. It was he who led the first large organized pilgrimages to the Grotto. In large part, he is the founder of the popular liturgy of Lourdes—the torch procession begun in 1863, the procession of the Blessed Sacrament and night prayers begun in 1886, the procession of the sick. It was at his initiative that the Stations of the Cross and the Calvaries by the sanctuaries were put up in 1886, as well as, the following year, the grotto of Les Espèlagues, dedicated to Our Lady of the Seven Sorrows and to Saint Mary Magdalene.

Lourdes became the main home of the Capuchin’s zeal and the center of his operations for more than thirty years. There he found himself in his element, and became Lourdes’ most popular preacher, confessor, and converter. He seemed to be the Virgin’s confidant and the worker of her mercies ; seeing him pray with such fervor, one would think that he saw MARY, as Bernadette once did. “ You are helping the Blessed Virgin work her miracles, ” he would sometimes be told, not without a hint of malice. He would be content to smile, his lively faith finding it entirely natural that prayer was heard, and that the Heart of MARY could not resist her children’s love. One day, a pilgrimage from Poitou was about to leave ; among the many sick they had brought, not one felt even the beginning of an improvement. Some priests shared their sadness with the Capuchin. “ Come, come, ” he said, “ let’s pray together ! ” And from that moment, the miracles multiplied.

Before taking up the pen

It was at Lourdes that Father Marie-Antoine met Émile Zola, the celebrated author praised by all. The Father urged him to convert. “ All Christian philosophy, Monsieur Zola, is summed up in this : the flesh wars against the spirit, the spirit wars against the flesh. If the flesh wins, it is death. If the spirit wins, it is life—the life that JESUS CHRIST gave to the world... You must, ” continued the Father, “ find here your road to Damascus. ” Following this meeting, Father Marie-Antoine wrote a letter to the author, who was preparing a book : “ The event at Lourdes is the great divine event of our century, and the heart alone understands divine things. But to understand them, it must be pure. Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God ! Before taking up the pen, purify your heart. Purify it with a good confession, and then put it in touch with God with a holy and fervent Communion. After that, take up the pen and begin your book. ” But instead of listening to him, Zola would write a novel against pilgrimage to Lourdes. Father Marie-Antoine then wrote to one of Zola’s colleagues, the very anticlerical Émile Combes, at the time in dan-

ger of death : “The *tempora nubila* (the dark times) have come for you. This is the hour when true friends come. Here I am. You have just been knocked down, like Saint Paul on the road to Damascus. Hear JESUS tell you as He told him : *I am JESUS Whom you are persecuting*. As many children as you have torn from His doctrine and His love, as many victims you have made, so many times you have crucified Him yourself! Say as Saint Paul : *Lord, what would You have me do?* Say it, be converted, return to JESUS! You know what you must do : renounce Satan, that is renounce his infernal lies ; come strike your breast, weep for your sins, asking pardon of God and of man ; finally, throw yourself at the feet of the priest of the Lord, with great repentance, to receive forgiveness.”

A social question, a question of love

No form of ministry was foreign to Father Marie-Antoine. His love for the poor made him even more popular than his preaching. On behalf of the most indigent, he propagated the initiative of the “Bread of Saint Anthony of Padua”. For him, the social question, social injustices were more a matter of love, to which the Gospel brings the only real solution, than a matter of laws and rights : “Saint Francis is there to resolve the social question, which is only a question of love : let us love, proving to people that we love them, and victory is assured.” Another of his other charisms was the awakening of vocations. A great number of priests, religious, and missionaries could say : “We owe our vocation to Father Marie-Antoine, to an invitation from him, to one of his sermons we heard.”

The demon pursued with a special hatred this man who robbed so many souls from him and fought him on

all fronts. “If I have no teeth left,” Father Marie-Antoine said at the end of his life, “it’s because I left them all in the devil’s skin.” To the persecutors who attacked the Church and the religious orders from 1880 onwards, he said, “You want to kill God, fools that you are! Kill God! No one, from the beginning of time, would have dared imagine it without trembling. Do you not know that nature abhors a vacuum? Other idols will replace Him—power, money, sex—that are far more demanding. And then, so much for your freedom!”

In the spring of 1903, the monasteries were closed and handed over to liquidators, with the exception of the monastery of the Capuchins of Toulouse, which was nonetheless stripped of all its furniture. The only item that remained was a monumental Virgin that dominated the choir of the empty chapel. Father Marie-Antoine’s popularity with the people, and the strength of their resistance, saved him from expulsion, while his brothers in religion found refuge in Burgos, Spain.

At the beginning of February 1907, as he was going to visit a priest friend, he was stricken with a chill. The illness took hold quite quickly. Aware of the seriousness of his condition, he received the last sacraments and prepared himself for death. He spent his last night praying aloud. To his nurses who tried to get him to rest, he said : “I have never gotten tired of praying!” The next day, February 8, he continued, and these were his last words : “Know that I am going straight to Heaven! Never listen to the devil. Me, I have never listened to the devil, so I am going to Heaven!” His body rests in the chapel of the monastery he founded in Toulouse, now the Carmelite monastery. An association (APMA, 25 rue de la Concorde, 31000 Toulouse, France), created in 2005, is working for the cause of his beatification.

Father Marie-Antoine’s example encourages us to follow a recommendation made by Pope Benedict XVI, on July 23, 2006 : “We must reach out with our love, as far as we can, to all the suffering, knowing that the Judge of the Last Judgment identifies with those who are suffering. ... This is important : that we can bring His victory to the world at this moment, taking an active part in His charity. ... We need the Face of Christ in order to know the true Face of God and thus bring reconciliation and light to this world.”

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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Fax: 00 33 3 80 96 25 29

– E-mail: abbey@clairval.com

– <http://www.clairval.com/>