



Abbaye Saint-Joseph de Clairval

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June 7, 2009
Trinity Sunday

Dear Friend of Saint Joseph Abbey,

ON the occasion of the 350th anniversary of the founding of the Paris Foreign Missions Society, Pope Benedict XVI wrote to the Superior General, Father Etcharren, on May 11, 2008: “Many missionaries have gone to great lengths to witness to the love of God among the peoples of Asia, and at times, in a heroic manner.” This was most certainly true of François Pallu, one of the three founders of the Paris Foreign Missions Society, who dedicated his life to missions in the Far East, amidst constant difficulties.

Born in Tours, France, François was baptized on August 31, 1626 in the church of Saint Saturnin. His father, Étienne, “Esquire of Périers,” was a counselor and lawyer in the appellate court in Tours; he was also the mayor of that city. It was said of his mother, Marguerite, that she was “a strong woman who never ate her bread in idleness.” She brought eighteen children into the world. Several died in infancy; of those who survived, four became priests and three became nuns. At a very early age, François stood out by his desire to be good, being sweet-natured, modest and filled with a piety that made him choose the priesthood. He was admitted as a canon to the chapter of the Basilica of Saint Martin. Due to his young age, he received permission to pursue his studies in Tours, then in Paris. In the capital, he became friends with other fervent young people, both clergy and laity, and they formed an association under the Virgin MARY’S protection. He was ordained a priest in the summer of 1650.

His parents wanted him to remain a canon in Tours. François hesitated—should he remain peacefully in his stall in Saint Martin’s, like his two paternal uncles? Or should he become a religious, perhaps even a Jesuit, like two of his brothers? He sought the answer in frequent retreats and constant prayer. Little did the canons of Saint Martin’s know they would provide him with his answer. Aware of his exceptional prudence, they entrusted him with some pending business in the capital. In Paris, François met with his friends from the association, now led by Father Jean Bagot, a Jesuit. In January 1653, Father Bagot put them in contact with his fellow Jesuit, Father Alexandre de Rhodes, who had successfully organized the Church in Tonkin and Cochinchina (southern Vietnam). He was said to have baptized over one hundred thousand pagans. Faced with threats that the Europeans would be deported, he had just asked Pope Innocent X to send bishops who could train a local clergy. For his part, the bishop of Macao, a Portuguese possession, single-handedly was running the

largest diocese in the world—China, with its four hundred million souls!

“It is not for us to decide!”

Father de Rhodes was entrusted by the Pope to find three priests who would not recoil in the face of the overwhelming mission of organizing the churches of Asia. Impressed by Father Bagot’s spiritual sons, de Rhodes told him: “Father, I have just seen the men God has destined for our missions!” Questioned by their spiritual father, the young men let François speak for them: “It is not for us to decide,” he said. “Command, and be certain that you will be obeyed; we abandon ourselves entirely to your judgment.” A fervent retreat confirmed them in this purpose. The destiny of the Paris Foreign Missions Society was sealed. François assured his father, who had difficulty accepting his son’s plan, that he was called by God—he was unable to escape it “without neglecting my conscience and risking my salvation.” On the tomb of Saint Denis, the apostle of Paris, François made a vow to offer Our Lord “his life for the salvation of souls and the conversion of unbelievers.”

This generous offer provides an example worthy of particular attention. In fact, “the Church’s missionary proclamation is endangered today by relativistic theories”, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith observed in a letter published December 14, 2007; “the reason for evangelization has not been clear to many among the Catholic faithful. It is even stated that the claim to have received the gift of the fullness of God’s revelation masks an attitude of intolerance and a danger to peace” (no. 10). In a recent speech, Pope Benedict XVI explained, “Christians of the nascent Church did not regard their missionary proclamation as propaganda, designed to enlarge their particular group, but as an inner necessity, consequent upon the nature of their faith: the God in Whom they believed was the

God of all people, the one, true God, Who had revealed Himself in the history of Israel and ultimately in His Son, thereby supplying the answer which was of concern to everyone and for which all people, in their innermost hearts, are waiting. The universality of God, and of reason open towards Him, is what gave them the motivation—indeed, the obligation—to proclaim the message. They saw their faith as belonging, not to cultural custom that differs from one people to another, but to the domain of truth, which concerns all people equally” (Speech at the Collège des Bernardins, Paris, September 12, 2008).

The meaning of Catholicity

In 1658, the choice of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (at that time called “Propaganda”) to lead the evangelization of Asia fell on 32-year-old François Pallu, 34-year-old Pierre Lambert de la Motte, and 28-year-old Ignace Cotolendi. Alexander VII ratified this choice, and, on November 17, François was consecrated a bishop in Rome, then named Apostolic Vicar of Tonkin and administrator of the Chinese provinces and Laos. The nomination of these new bishops gave them the right, and imposed on them the duty, to go to the Far East—but it did not give them the means to do so. Returning to Paris, Bishop Pallu published a booklet explaining the Pope’s orders and the reasons for the Apostolic Vicars’ nomination. He looked for and found resources from the king and some wealthy families, and gathered any who wished to devote themselves to the missions in the new Society. The future missionaries took up residence in La Couarde, an estate near Paris, where in silence they prepared themselves spiritually and intellectually (the current seminary on Rue du Bac would be purchased in 1663). Bishop Pallu explained to them the directives of the Holy See, which called for the missionaries to adapt to the native customs, and to create an indigenous clergy that would have, as far as possible, its own bishops. Above all, the missionaries would strive to deeply inculcate the meaning of Catholicity, love for the Holy See, and unity with the Pope. The Apostolic Vicars received a particular order: “Above all make sure that no one during your journey knows the name or purpose of your mission. This is why you must change your names and your manner of comportment, and, above all else, conceal your office as bishop.” These instructions, delivered in 1659 by the Roman authorities to the founders of the Paris Foreign Missions Society, spoke volumes about the dangers of their task. Added to the difficulty of the journey and all that was unknown about the countries they had to travel through, was the hostility of the two colonial powers of the time, Spain and Portugal, whose rulers exercised control over the missions in the Americas and Asia. One of the goals of the Foreign

Missions was to free the evangelization of souls from political interests.

A bridge between Europe and Asia

The three new Apostolic Vicars traveled separately, each with several priests and lay people. Lambert embarked first, in November 1660. A year and a half later, he docked at Mergui, in Siam, modern-day Thailand. Cotolendi died of exhaustion at the age of thirty-three, in August 1662, in India. After having established the seminary for the Foreign Missions Society outside Paris, Bishop Pallu and his companions embarked from Marseilles on January 2, 1662. Beginning in Aleppo, Syria, they decided to dress as Arabs. In fact, to avoid certain Christians who were opposed to the success of the enterprise, they had to place themselves in the hands of Muslim guides. During this long voyage of more than two years, the group of missionaries was not spared trials. Bishop Pallu saw several of his companions die. “I hope,” he wrote, “that this affects you as it does us for, by the mercy of Our Lord, rather than the death of our brothers scaring us or making us lose heart (although we were deeply affected by it), we feel an even greater courage and more strength in pursuing the work that it has pleased the Divine Majesty to place in our hands.” The bishop, in his faith, had no doubt that his companions, so soon called to God, would intercede for and protect the new work. To a major benefactress of the missions, he wrote, “Now building the bridge has begun. I am only too happy if our corpses, as well as those of our dear sons, might serve as pilings to strengthen it and open a broad path for brave missionaries to reap an abundant harvest in these ever so fertile fields.”

At the beginning of September 1663, Bishop Pallu set off from Masulipatam, on the east coast of India, for Tenasserim, a port on the long Malaysian peninsula. Terrible storms prolonged the crossing, and the food began to run out. At last, on January 27, 1664, the bishop and his companions arrived in Ayutthaya (north of Bangkok), the capital of the kingdom of Siam, where the foreign priests could disembark in safety, because the Christian religion enjoyed complete freedom there. Siam became the external base for the mission to Vietnam, where severe persecution raged at the time. It was also there where Bishop Pallu, along with Bishop Lambert de la Motte, the Apostolic Vicar for Cochinchina, and his priests, held a synod to study the situation. Together, they developed the “Instructions for Proper Evangelization,” better known by the name “Monita.” Three themes dominate this text: the sanctification of the missionary by the salvation of Christians, the conversion of unbelievers, and the organization of Churches. They also decided to establish a seminary to train indigenous clergy. The young

Vietnamese would amaze the missionaries with their extraordinary intellectual aptitude—the results they achieved were beyond those obtained in Europe with children of the same age. They learned very quickly to read and write in Latin ; the older ones were able to provide commentary on the Gospel and the younger ones gave appropriate catechetical lessons.

At the prompting of Bishop Lambert de la Motte, Bishop Pallu considered founding a congregation of vowed religious, and he drew up the broad outlines of this institute, which he intended to have approved by Rome. But a rather delicate problem arose—that of relations between missionaries belonging to different religious orders and missionary bishops. What authority could the bishops named by Rome assert over religious ? Some religious supported their native country's politics and opposed the French missionaries sent by the Propaganda. In addition, it would be necessary to obtain jurisdiction over the kingdom of Siam, as well as a third Apostolic Vicar to replace Bishop Cotelendi, and to recruit new volunteers for the missions in Asia. So many questions that could not be resolved by letters alone.

A taste for adventure?

In January 1665, it became necessary for one of the two bishops to return to Europe. After two years of voyage and only one in the Far East, would Bishop Pallu have to return the same way ? It was not an easy decision. “The bonds of duty, as well of love and compassion for these abandoned souls,” he wrote, “weigh heavily on me ; and my heart could not think of separating from them without extreme violence.” As for the difficulties of the journey, he knew them too well to want to repeat them only out of a taste for adventure. However, he silenced his repugnance and made a heroic decision—the trip was necessary in order to establish a solid base for the missions that had been entrusted to them. After a journey lasting two years and three months, Bishop Pallu arrived safe and sound in Rome just as Pope Alexander VII was dying. He had to wait another two years to obtain the hoped-for response from Pope Clement IX. On July 4, 1669, Siam was established as an apostolic vicariate, and all the other requests were granted. The “*Monita*” was approved in its entirety—the Holy Office declared it “filled with the apostolic spirit”, and the Propaganda had it printed at its own expense. For three hundred years, the work, reprinted many times, would be the handbook for priests in the Foreign Missions. The plan for the religious congregation, on the other hand, was not approved by the Propaganda, which decided it was too strict and would discourage vocations. Bishop Pallu accepted these judgments, and wrote to Bishop Lambert : “I would rather die than stray an inch from the path that has been laid out for us, out of the respect

and obedience that I owe and wish to render to the Holy See all my life.”

In the spring of 1670, Bishop Pallu set out from Nantes with new recruits for his missions, on board one of the India Company ships that sailed along the western coast of Africa. They did not cross the equator until September 10. In October, the situation became tragic—more than seventy out of the hundred crewmen on the ship died from scurvy and were buried at sea. The missionaries had to help sail the ship. At the beginning of November, they reached the Cape of Good Hope, where they received a very warm reception from the Dutch. They stayed there two months. It then took forty-two days to reach Madagascar, because of a raging storm that broke the mast. In Madagascar, the deadly climate carried off one missionary ; two others, at the point of death, were saved. However, good news arrived from Siam ; Bishop Lambert de la Motte had ordained the first Vietnamese priests, and there had been many conversions. Bishop Pallu had to wait six months in Madagascar. This was his principle mortification—whenever he would become aware of an urgent need, an ocean of delays immediately would open before him, and he felt the need for patience, to wait for God's time. Without showing any irritation, he then adopted the rhythm of monastic life—he prayed, worked, sought to be of use to souls, until the moment the door opened. But behind the first door, there was always another, then a third. He never seemed hurried ; always self-controlled, he showed untiring patience. He ended up wearing down the adverse forces and elements—determined to continue his journey in the face of all opposition, without considering his time or his trouble, he would succeed in the end.

Quickly heard

The missionaries finally arrived at their house in Ayutthaya in May 1673, after more than three years of travel. But Siam was not Bishop Pallu's goal—he was headed for Tonkin, a land still hostile to missionaries. The bishop hoped to enter the country to join two priests. In 1674, he embarked on a French ship that, struck by a hurricane, narrowly escaped catastrophe. “Oh, how good and salutary it is to find oneself in such situations,” he wrote, “they let one know from experience how close God is to those He wishes to train, and the great advantages there are in needing to have recourse to Him alone. Thereafter there remains in the soul a certain strength, calm, and satisfaction that it did not know before. This is what made Saint Francis Xavier say, in all the dangers in which he found himself, that he wished nothing more, and asked God for nothing more, then to be delivered from them only to find himself in even greater dangers for love of Him.” Bishop Pallu was quickly heard. After the hurricane, the

ship was not good for much. It took on water faster than the pump could remove it. In this state, it would be impossible to reach the coast of Tonkin from which they had been driven. There was nothing to do but head for the Philippines. Yet taking refuge on Spanish soil was putting one's head in the lion's mouth.

Without being crushed by it

The Apostolic Vicar of Tonkin was detained in Manila for six months by the civil and religious authorities, who decided to refer the entire affair to the Sovereign Council for the East Indies, headquartered in Madrid, where Bishop Pallu could plead his case himself. To have made such a long voyage for this to happen! This meant five or six more years of travels for the bishop, and discussions that would get bogged down in a jungle of legal procedures. It was not just a setback for the mission—it was a disaster. In Tonkin, they were impatiently waiting for the bishop—the missionaries had gathered twenty-five candidates for the priesthood, the most advanced of whom were to be ordained upon his arrival. Others would have become discouraged and would have sunk into a dark rage, but the bishop's strength of soul enabled him to receive this new disappointment without being crushed. The voyage was eastward, passing through Mexico. As soon as the Apostolic Vicar arrived in Spain, the government of Louis XIV and Pope Innocent XI asked for and quickly obtained his freedom from the court in Madrid. Leaving Madrid in 1677, Bishop Pallu went to Rome to defend his missions against Portuguese patronage, and obtained decrees to organize the Churches of the Far East. These decrees, issued from 1677 to 1681, concerned in particular the recall of a number of Jesuits who were making difficulties for some of the Apostolic Vicar's missions, the extension of the Apostolic Vicar of Siam's jurisdiction to Japan, and the creation of Annamite and Chinese bishops. One of the most difficult to implement decrees concerned the oath of obedience that religious

from the different Orders working in the area were to make to the Apostolic Vicar.

In 1680, relieved of the Mission in Tonkin, Bishop Pallu was named administrator general for the missions in China, as well as Apostolic Vicar of Fo-Kien. After a stay in Paris, he reached Siam with new missionaries and financial aid. In June 1683, he embarked for China accompanied by a priest, but their junk was attacked and diverted onto the island of Formosa. Held prisoner for several months and finally freed, the bishop continued on his way and, in January 1684, reached China, the land of all his hopes. But, from his first months on the continent, he suffered attacks of the illness that was to carry him off. Feeling his end near, Bishop Pallu recommended the missions to Innocent XI, then to Louis XIV. To the Apostolic Vicars and the directors of the seminary in Paris he sent advice on running of the Society, recommending above all unity among them: "As long as charity prevails in the missions, all will go well. This will be the main aim of my prayers and desires when I am before Our Lord."

On October 29, 1684, Bishop Pallu died in Muiyang, Fo-Kien Province, from a catarrh that suffocated him. He was buried close to the village, at the foot of the "Holy Mountain," where his remains stayed until 1912. They were then transferred to the retreat house of the Paris Foreign Missions Society in Hong Kong. It is astonishing that a missionary bishop had spent his life traveling, without having himself been able to work in his own apostolic field. But the mission the Lord had reserved for him was to establish solid foundations on which others might create, according to the plans established through his efforts, a magnificent organization. Since its founding, the Paris Foreign Missions Society has sent 4,273 priests on mission. 177 of them have died a violent death, of which twenty-three have been canonized and two beatified.

Pope Benedict XVI, in his homily in Lourdes on September 14, 2008, expressed this hope: "After the example of the great evangelizers from your country, may the missionary spirit which animated so many men and women from France over the centuries, continue to be your pride and your commitment!"

Dom Antoine Parice
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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