



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Newsletter of November 27, 2009,
Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal

Dears Friends,

TOULON, France. January 8, 1932: a steamship is about to raise anchor. On the deck, a brokenhearted Monsieur and Madame Bazin de Jessey hug their 26-year-old daughter Solange one last time — they will never see her again. Answering JESUS' call, Solange is leaving everything to join a Congregation of native Sisters in Papua New Guinea.

Yves and Elizabeth Bazin de Jessey lived at "Montmarin", a beautiful estate near Saint-Malo. After two years of marriage, they had still not had a child. One morning, Yves, knapsack on back and walking stick in hand, set out on a pilgrimage to Saint-Anne d'Auray. A few months later, the long-awaited baby made its presence known—a boy who would be followed by six girls. Solange, the fourth daughter, was born on Holy Thursday, April 12, 1906. The family spent part of the year in Paris, but the First World War soon turned their lives upside down. As the father of seven children, Yves was exempt from the draft. Nevertheless, he enlisted of his own free will, following his sense of duty. Thanks to God, he would return uninjured. During the war, Elizabeth bore the heavy burden of raising their children alone. She applied Saint Paul's counsel: *Strive to overcome evil with good* in her own way, preferring to reward rather than punish. Some years later, Solange would jot down these revealing words: upbringing "is what the child breathes in from the atmosphere in which he is placed, the unconscious, unguarded language used by his parents and those around him, not their formal advice or regular lessons—the words that the grown-ups say in front of them without being aware of it. It is by these inadvertent expressions that the parents' true thoughts are made known to the child. That's where upbringing comes from."

"My only support"

In school, Solange was often at the head of the class. She was so passionate about it that she was somewhat saddened when she received a less good grade. A human desire, but one with spiritual demands as well: her yearly retreat was the occasion for a review of the preceding months, and for resolutions for the future. "I want to come out of these days with my soul purified, fervent to do good, loving self-denial, loving God as my only support" (March 25, 1919). Without ever hurrying—one might have thought her nonchalant, because she was imaginative, distracted, sometimes inaccurate—she



Solange Bazin de Jessey

found the time to devote herself to music: piano, singing, then soon passionate about the violin. At home, her older siblings respected her, her younger ones admired her. She was even asked to mediate minor family disputes. Did an argument arise between her parents and her older sisters about the extent of their freedom? Solange listened in silence, saddened if voices became raised. A few hours later, her older sister would find in her room a note with a correction so discreet and appropriate that she would consider it entirely natural to bow to her younger sister's judgment. During the summer, Solange enjoyed the enchanted surroundings of Montmarin, where she loved to unwind after long months of study—tennis, swimming, long bicycle rides, so many activities encouraged by her parents who were fighting against the newly introduced practice of "baking" in the sun. Friends were warmly welcomed at Montmarin. In 1911, they received a visit from a cousin of Yves de Jessey's, Bishop Alain de Boismenu, a religious of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart of Issoudun. He had been sent to New Guinea, then elevated to the episcopacy in 1900. Through his intense apostolic activity, "the bishop with a lion's heart" had succeeded in shaking the stronghold of paganism that was Papua New Guinea. At Montmarin, struck by the personality of the young Solange, a very curious and impassioned child, the uncle nicknamed her his "Little Fountain," so clear and deep were her eyes. In 1920, they again awaited the arrival of the missionary. "This year," wrote Solange, "has been marked for me by the arrival at Montmarin of the saint we have for an uncle. From now

on, climbing ever higher must be my constant concern." When she discovered that the world was not the protected place that she had experienced up to then, she wrote, "Now that I have tasted the pleasures of the world a bit, I understand how intoxicating, attractive, and dangerous they are. Despite myself, I love and enjoy them."

A higher aspiration

After high school, in order to improve her English, she spent a year with one of her sisters at the boarding school run by the Benedictine nuns of Saint Cecilia's Abbey in Solesmes, at the time in exile in Ryde, on the Isle of Wight. The two sisters were so happy in this spot where the beauty is put in the service of God, and where the Benedictine joy is already a foretaste of Heaven, that their parents wondered if they would ever get their daughters back. Yes, they returned—nevertheless, it was there that Solange thought of her vocation for the first time. On her return, she did not avoid worldly activities, but it was clear that the world did not satisfy her. At the time, she was preparing for a competition at the *École Normale de Musique*, in Paris. However, this student who was so musical and so eager to liberate herself from the fetters of technique to draw from her violin a purer and purer tone, let her professor understand that music was not her goal, there was in her a higher aspiration. She would later write, "God allowed music to be one of the channels that led me to Him. He made me love harmony in all things. And I found its highest realization in charity."

In Sydney, on July 19, 2008, Benedict XVI exhorted the youth with these words: "Let your faith mature through your studies, work, sport, music and art. Let it be sustained by prayer and nurtured by the sacraments, and thus be a source of inspiration and help to those around you. In the end, life is not about accumulation. It is much more than success. To be truly alive is to be transformed from within, open to the energy of God's love. In accepting the power of the Holy Spirit you too can transform your families, communities and nations."

In 1926, Pius XI, in his encyclical *Rerum Ecclesiae*, gave a powerful impetus to apostolic missions throughout the world. To dedicate herself to the missions, to lead foreign peoples to Christ, were the goals that attracted Solange. Perhaps her uncle could help her discover God's plan for her. And in fact, her family was expecting Bishop de Boismenu that fall of 1930. His welcome was even warmer than usual, since they knew he was grieving the death of the "Mother of the Papuans," Mother Marie-Therese Noblet (1899-1930), Superior of the Congregation founded by the missionary bishop, the "Servants of Our Lord," called "Annelles." Solange asked her uncle if she might be able to continue the work of Mother Marie-Therese. "We'll see," he simply replied. But at that moment, he knew that God had heard his prayer and granted his wishes. He encouraged his niece to be patient, pray, and reflect. On February 11, 1931, Solange attended a conference given by the bishop in

Paris, and it was for her a shaft of light. "The grace of vocation," she wrote to the Mother Abbess in Ryde, "with its great interior illumination, made its presence felt in me so strongly that I was bowled over, physically and morally." She felt the task was beyond her own strength, but "as Our Lord has granted me this great grace," she continued, "of giving me complete certainty of my vocation, despite everything I am armed with great confidence." Informed of this vocation, Yves and Elizabeth, in spite of the hard and completely unexpected blow, right away saw this call solely from the perspective of faith and prudence. They consulted the Archbishop of Paris, Cardinal Verdier, who saw in it the hand of God. To the objection, "Why go so far away when there is so much to do here in France?" Solange answered, "I am not becoming a religious to serve France, I am becoming a religious to serve God, wherever He wants me." She had considered Carmel, with the idea of working for the Papuan mission through prayer, "but God," she said, "has placed in me such a great love for His charity that I would suffer greatly if I did not use all my strength, all my apostolic abilities to make Him loved by loving His most deprived children just as He has loved us. And the grace of God truly has changed me, because I was not like that before."

Solange's example is an encouragement for youth still today, that they might respond to the call made by Pope Benedict XVI at World Youth Day in Sydney, July 20, 2008: "The Church especially needs the gifts of young people, all young people. ... Do not be afraid to say 'yes' to Jesus, to find your joy in doing His will, giving yourself completely to the pursuit of holiness, and using all your talents in the service of others!"

Modified rules

Solange spent several months at the motherhouse of the Franciscan Missionaries of MARY, where she prepared for religious life and earned a nursing degree with high honors under the auspices of the Red Cross. Then, after a six-week voyage, she met up again with Bishop de Boismenu in Sydney, Australia. From there, they reached Port Moresby, the capital of Papua New Guinea, on March 3, 1932. They had the surprise of finding on the pier four Papuan Sisters who had made a long trip through the jungle to greet their new Mother. Solange was immediately adopted by the Little Sisters. For the apostles to Papua, the first desires born among the natives to devote themselves to God had been a hopeful sign for the Mission. Bishop de Boismenu had been obliged to create a Congregation with modified rules that were indeed far removed from these young women's previous lives, yet compatible with their disposition. The convent had been set up about 100 kilometers north of Port Moresby in Kubuna Valley, an area previously in the midst of virgin forest but cleared by the missionaries, and that had become a way station on the mountain road. The Annelles took as their model the Virgin MARY, the first and perfect servant of JESUS. Their

habit was a gray servant's dress and a light veil, and bare feet, ever ready to run. "Always keep your manner and your face charming," the bishop advised them, "serving with kindness Him Whom in all things you intend to serve, the divine Master of gentleness and tender affection." Through the impetus given by Mother Marie-Therese Noblet, the work had developed beyond all expectations over the course of ten years—numerous vocations, assistants in the Mission's service, the opening of a day-care in Kubuna, true religious life after the example of their saintly Mother. But on January 15, 1930, their Mother had died suddenly, offering her life for her daughters.

A vast, wild island

Solange discovered the beauty of Papua, this vast, wild island with its mountainsides covered by virgin forests, but nevertheless an inhospitable place, the so-called land of fever, where men had to coexist with wild animals. She loved the Papuans' faces and their welcoming ways, the strange way they wore their hair, decorated with feathers, their riotous laughter at the sight of whites. She liked everything except for the mosquitoes! She also appreciated the simplicity of the Papuans' social relations—human interactions seemed more direct than those in Europe.

On March 22, 1932, Solange took the habit and, on April 4, she made her temporary vows. Bishop de Boismenu reminded everyone of the Ancelles' two keywords, *Ecce* and *Scio*. *Ecce ancilla Domini, Behold the handmaid of the Lord*: this verse was the source of their name, Ancelles. "It was with this response to the Angel that the Virgin MARY, on behalf of the entire human race, consented to the Incarnation," the prelate explained. "This was the starting point for the entire redemptive and missionary work that, through the Word Incarnate, led the world to God. Our little *Ecce* signifies this fundamental adherence to the divine will which is the essence of all holiness." And likewise the *Scio* of trust: *Scio cui credidi, I know Whom I have believed* (2 Tim. 1:12). For these troops of the advance guard, sent on difficult expeditions and thankless, dangerous assignments, "there is," he added, "an unbelievable strength in our *Ecce* and our *Scio*." That very day, with her spiritual director's permission, Solange made private perpetual vows in the secret of her heart. A young Frenchwoman who was to share the Ancelles' life for a while, would later say of her: "Her love for Our Lord was so personal, and her trust in Him so absolute that she could not set limits on what she would do for Him. 'With God,' she thought, 'what is there to lose?'"

From "white", Solange went to being, in a way, "brown", so as to assume leadership over 23 dark-skinned Sisters, some of whom had been born in the huts of cannibal parents, and had come from the shadows of the coarsest paganism. With, in addition, the responsibility for 25 children at the day-care, she found little chance to

rest. First thing in the morning, the worries of the day would invade her mind to some degree: "There are always crosses. They lead the souls that JESUS calls to detachment... Good suffering, well offered, will leave in the evening a good memory." Her primary concern was the formation of her daughters. Clearly seeing the strengths and weaknesses of each, Mother Solange was more willing to remember their good qualities than their faults. With very simply words, she tried to share her love for Our Lord: "Do all things with Him, make the effort of the moment. He expects no more than that, and that is where He is waiting for us. Leave to God the plan of each day, with an *Ecce* to everything, an *Ecce* that is ever readier, ever more loving." Bishop de Boismenu wrote, "God is using the Mother's charm to attract vocations and fill His convent." Next to English and French classes, singing was most popular. The musical awakening of the children and Ancelles was primordial, and enabled Mother Solange to enter into communication with them. With the Mother's violin accompaniment, the songs took on a completely different energy. The Ancelles sang Gregorian melodies that Solange called "prayers of beauty."

"It is once again clear," said Benedict XVI, "that music and song, skillfully interwoven with faith, can acquire a lofty pedagogical value in the religious context. As an art music can be a particularly important way of proclaiming Christ because it succeeds in making His mystery perceptible with an eloquence all its own" (February 12, 2009).

The transformations possible

The Sisters in Kubuna welcomed people in need, the sick or wounded, and also took in newborns brought by mothers who were destitute or who had been run out of their villages. Mother Solange's nursing degree enabled her to teach the Ancelles how to care for the sick. Living as Christians among the members of their race, these nuns brought to the Papuans a living example of the transformations possible to every human creature, with God's help. In the 1930s, many centers of evangelization and study were established. Mother Solange trained catechists who taught the basics of reading and writing in the village schools. 1935 marked the mission's tipping point, with 23,000 out of 46,000 Papuans being Catholic. From three centers at the start in 1900, there were eighty-two.

In January 1939, Solange lost her mother, Elizabeth. "How hard it is to lose your mother," she wrote, "especially when you are far away and it is a mother like the one the Good Lord gave us." The same year, financial resources dried up, and material supplies were completely cut off because of the Second World War. About the worries raised by the war, Mother Solange wrote, "Yes, life is difficult here, but we do not have these fears, and it is more comforting to see savages humanized by the light of grace, than to see those who had been civilized return to a state worse than barbarianism, despite

all the comfort and ease of modern life. Progress without God—what presumptuousness! —and how God causes to fall low again the proud who think they can make the world better without Him!”

At World Youth Day in Sydney, July 20, 2008, Benedict XVI observed, “In so many of our societies, side by side with material prosperity, a spiritual desert is spreading: an interior emptiness, an unnamed fear, a quiet sense of despair. How many of our contemporaries have built broken and empty cisterns (cf. Jer. 2:13) in a desperate search for meaning — the ultimate meaning that only love can give? This is the great and liberating gift which the Gospel brings: it reveals our dignity as men and women created in the image and likeness of God. It reveals humanity’s sublime calling, which is to find fulfillment in love. It discloses the truth about man and the truth about life.”

“Behold the handmaid of the Lord”

In October 1940, a brush fire in Kubuna reduced more than half of the center to ashes, and annihilated twenty years of work. Worn out, Mother Solange had frequent bouts of malaria. She limped after receiving a wound in her foot. With the war in the Pacific spreading all the way to Papua, the Ancelles, facing the threat of the Japanese, were invited to take refuge in Australia. But they decided to stay at their post to provide urgent medical aid to the Papuans. Solange brought care and comfort to all. She stayed day and night at the bedside of one of her daughters who was suffering from a terrible case

of the flu. In spite of her efforts, the nun died. Solange herself caught the illness. She was only 35 years old, but with her strength sapped by ten exhausting years and far from any medical help, her health could not resist. Alerted, Bishop de Boismenu ran to the side of his niece, who renewed her religious vows and offered her life: “for my little ones, for my Father Bishop, the Mission, my family, my homeland, for the reign of God, for peace.” She then made this passionate cry: “I am the child of MARY”, and her last words: “*Scio cui credidi, I know in Whom I have put my faith.*” A few hours later, on February 26, 1942, Mother Solange passed away. Leaning over her, the bishop murmured, “*Ecce Ancilla Domini.*” He wrote to his cousin: “If you only knew how I think with grief of how, as a father, your heart must be suffering. I need only feel my heart to understand your pain. May God support and console you! He will, for nothing moves Him more than the sacrifice that your dear Elizabeth and you have made of your dear girl, and the complete and heroic gift that she made of her life and you... Her radical and definitive sacrifice from her arrival here was made each day in the great manner of the saints, without reservation, without thought of self, up to the end.” He attributed to the offering of her life the amazing protection with which they were surrounded. When neighboring Missions, invaded by the Japanese, were destroyed and their staff decimated, he expected the same. But when the enemy troops, continuing their advance, surrounded them on all sides, the invasion suddenly stopped some distance from the Mission. No one ever knew why.

“What would become of the world if there were no Religious?” After quoting these words from Saint Teresa of Avila in the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (March 25, 1996, no. 105), Pope John Paul II added, “Beyond all superficial assessments of its usefulness, the consecrated life is important precisely in its being unbounded generosity and love, and this all the more so in a world which risks being suffocated in the whirlpool of the ephemeral. ... The Church and society itself need people capable of devoting themselves totally to God and to others for the love of God. ... Without this concrete sign there would be a danger that the charity which animates the entire Church would grow cold, that the salvific paradox of the Gospel would be blunted, and that the ‘salt’ of faith would lose its savor in a world undergoing secularization.”

So that the Church’s charity might not grow cold, we can ask, through the intercession of Mother Solange, for the grace to give ourselves freely to God and neighbor, and to say, day after day, the *Ecce* of the offering of ourselves, and the *Scio* of trust.

Dom Antoine Marie
o.s.b.

Solange Bazin de Jessey, by Jeanne Villeroy de Galhau. Available from the association “Les Amis de la Papouasie”, at E. Villeroy de Galhau, 4, rue Bayard, 75008 Paris.

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Abbaye Saint-Joseph de Clairval (English ed) ISSN : 1956-3906 - Dépôt légal : date de parution - Directeur de publication : Dom Antoine Beauchef - Imprimerie : Traditions Monastiques - 21150 Flavigny-sur-Ozerain.

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