



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of February 10, 2012,
Saint Scholastica

Dear Friends,

A thirty-two-year-old Dominican, a priest for just 18 months, set foot in a prison for the first time on September 15, 1864. His name was Jean-Joseph Lataste. The prison was in a former ducal castle in Cadillac-sur-Garonne, France, the small wine-producing village he was from. Nearly four hundred women were imprisoned there, divided into three categories, according to the length of their sentences. Sent by the prior of the monastery in Bordeaux, Father Lataste had come to preach a four-day retreat to these women—it would be an experience that would set the course of his life.

Alcide Vital Lataste was born in Cadillac on September 5, 1832, and baptized the next day. Six brothers and sisters had preceded him. His father, Vital, owned several vineyards, and also had a fabric business that provided him with a good income. He was considered a bit eccentric, and gladly called himself a free-thinker. He did not practice the faith, but did not object to the piety of his wife, whom he left completely free to raise their children Christian. Throughout his life, Alcide worried about his father's salvation.

At an early age, the child fell gravely ill, and was entrusted to a wet nurse with whom he stayed three years. When his parents came for him, there was a new loss when his favorite sister, his godmother, entered religious life with the Daughters of Wisdom.

A period of discouragement

In September 1841, at the end of his primary school years, his parents enrolled him in the minor seminary in Bordeaux. His attraction to the priesthood was counterbalanced by his very strong sense of unworthiness: "I did not dare admit my desire, for the role of the priest seemed so great, and I was so aware of my unworthiness." After a few years, he was sent to the secondary school in Pons, "to test his vocation." The adolescent then entered a troubled period. At the end of Alcide's third year, the superior wrote to his parents "that he did not believe that the boy was called to the priesthood." Discouraged, the boy allowed himself to be led, on his return, by his less serious friends. "Bit by bit, I forgot the Lord, and my love for the Blessed Virgin diminished... I was more ready to believe that I did not have a vocation, because I wanted less to have it." He then found himself grappling with the demon of impurity, a common trial



Venerable Jean-Joseph Lataste, op

All rights reserved

at that age. But Alcide found in the apostolic strength of his religious sister firm, if not always pleasant, support. He clung to prayer. When he was twenty, his correspondence no longer bore any trace of these struggles. In 1850, he earned his degree in letters. After a "sabbatical year" at his family home, he entered the civil service. First as a trainee, and then as a civil servant, he worked at the tax office from 1851 to 1857. In Bordeaux, he became friends with a young colleague, Leon Leyer, a fervent Catholic who profoundly influenced him.

Leon Leyer introduced Alcide to the Saint Vincent de Paul Society at the Saint André parish. From the beginning, the newcomer took visiting the poor to heart. He was not satisfied with bringing the needy bread or a warm piece of clothing, but prolonged his visit—the familiarity that was established enabled him to share a Christian word. In addition, he dedicated a great deal of time to teaching catechism, and evening courses for soldiers. After Father Hermann Cohen, the famous pianist who had become a Carmelite, passed through Bordeaux, Alcide extended his zeal to nocturnal adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. After a few months, he was transferred from Bordeaux to Privas, then to Pau and Nérac. The constant in his life was his tireless devotion to the Saint Vincent de Paul meetings. These were, to his mind, fertile ground for developing true friendships, a sort of family life that encompassed people from every social background. In Nérac, he started an "economic furnace,"

a sort of soup kitchen that, in the course of a year, would distribute more than 46,000 hot meals to the poor.

Alcide arrived in Privas in March 1853, preceded by a flattering reputation among the members of the local Saint Vincent de Paul Society. Right away, a young girl of sixteen from a noble, but not wealthy, family pledged her admiration and love to him. Alcide interpreted the reciprocal feeling that arose in him as the sign of God's will. But he had not reached the age of majority. Vital Lataste, opposed to his son's plans of marriage, had the civil service transfer Alcide to a town closer to Bordeaux—this would be Pau. Alcide would never again see Cécile de Saint-Germain. He wrote to his brother, Emile: "When duty calls, I consider it to be the voice of God, and obey... This is why I am resolved to do without complaint whatever my father wants."

A double ordeal

Two years passed in Pau. In October 1855, Alcide received terrible news—his sister the nun, in whom he had complete trust, had been called back to God. She had offered her sufferings and her life for her brother's vocation. This shock brought about a complete reversal in him. "Two weeks after my sister's death, I resolved to take my vows." It was at this time that he learned that Cécile had succumbed to typhoid fever. He was deeply moved by these deaths. "My heart has been stripped bare like a devastated sanctuary." Just then three Dominicans arrived in Pau to give a retreat. A sermon on the victory of life over death confirmed him in his decision to give his life to God, but he hesitated between religious life, and a celibate life in the world in service to the poor. His sense of his own unworthiness always held him back.

A chance meeting on a train with Father Edmond, who re-established the Norbertines in France, spurred Alcide on. He went to see Father Lacordaire, who had just brought back the Dominicans; Father Lacordaire encouraged him to read his *Life of Saint Dominic*. In March 1857, during a retreat at the Carmelite house in Agen, he understood how to, in religious life, direct his capacity to love towards God. To the objection, "And your freedom? Do you want to give it up forever?" he replied in his own mind, "What are you seeking and what do you want? Salvation! The certainty of loving and of being loved one day with an endless love." On November 4, 1857, Alcide entered the Dominican novitiate in Flavigny-sur-Ozerain, a medieval city that owes its origins to a Benedictine monastery founded in 720, and that would continue until the Revolution in 1790.

The novitiate, established in this village by Father Lacordaire, had more than thirty members. Alcide was filled with joy by its atmosphere of fervent prayer and mutual love, and he showed himself to be kind, cheerful, and generous. On November 13, he received the habit of the Order and the name Brother Jean-Joseph, and he renewed his act of consecration to MARY. The

novice-master was struck by his firmness of soul, as well as his devotion before the Blessed Sacrament. Alcide applied himself to the essential—becoming a saint. Just one observance frightened him—the corporal mortifications in the rule. "If You want me to suffer," he told God, "send me sufferings... but don't count on me to make myself suffer!" Soon, the novice's finger was pinched as he was moving furniture, and it developed an infection. The condition worsened, and amputation was considered. At the time, this would make it impossible to celebrate Mass. Alcide accepted this eventuality; meanwhile, the infection cleared up. A little later, he came down with a bone infection in his hip, which caused severe pain, and presented the prospect of remaining lame and frail. The superiors called the young novice's profession into question. Brother Jean-Joseph was not flustered—forced to lead a somewhat solitary life, he devoted himself to prayer, though he continued to love and seek community life. He was fully cured in 1863. Sent to the monastery in Toulouse to benefit from the warm weather of the South of France, Brother Jean-Joseph was permitted to make his profession on May 10, 1859, six months after the usual date.

"Never despair!"

In the days following his profession, Brother Lataste experienced a peace he had never felt before, in the certitude of loving and being loved by the One who is Love. The day after his profession, he left for the house of study in Chalais, outside Grenoble, where seventeen brothers were studying. In July, all traveled to the former monastery of Saint Maximin, in the Var, which Father Lacordaire had just recovered for the Order. Their formation centered their interior life on the knowledge and love of Jesus. The encounter with Saint Mary Magdalene, whose relics were preserved in the monastery, was decisive for Brother Lataste. "What place do you think Mary Magdalene has in Heaven?" he wondered. "I for one wouldn't be surprised to one day look upon the repentant sinner immediately after the Immaculate Virgin." On May 10, 1862, he made his solemn profession; on February 8, 1863, he was ordained a priest in Marseilles. His first public sermon, on the following Good Friday, showed his concern for souls. "All your crimes, however great, will never be as great as His infinite love and Mercy! My brothers, please, whatever you have done, whatever you might do, never despair of God's mercy. Do not expose yourself to the risk of despair by stubbornly resisting His grace, which is seeking you at this very moment."

Father Lataste was transferred to the monastery in Bordeaux. On his way through Lourdes, he had an interview with Bernadette Soubirous, and he left convinced that the apparitions were real. Responsible, on his arrival in Bordeaux, for several ministries, he was sent after about a year to preach in the women's prison in Cadillac. In the nineteenth century, the therapeutic effects of detention were stressed as a way to avoid

recidivism. The civil service called upon religious orders to supervise and raise the morals of the prisoners. On May 1, 1835, twelve Daughters of Wisdom had arrived in Cadillac to care for the sick and monitor the interior of the prison, under the director's authority. The most absolute silence was imposed on all the inmates, above all to prevent them from teaching one another to do wrong. What sorts of crimes were these women most often guilty of? Documents indicated infanticide and theft.

A brother's tone

As he walked through the prison door, Father Lataste wondered what good he could do for these women who were often called "lost women." However, he took the opposite tone: "My dear sisters," he would begin. As a brother, he had come to help them reflect on the root of their sins in order to lead them to conversion. This filled three sermons, one of which was on hell. The third day, he drew a contrast between Judas and the good thief, who had not doubted Divine Mercy, and then gave a meditation on Mary Magdalene. Already, the beaten down faces began to lift up and glow. The last day included a sermon on the Eucharist and another on Heaven. During his long sessions in the confessional, Father Lataste saw the working of Mercy in souls. He was amazed to discover the depth of Christian life and the truth of the forgiveness these women were capable of. The Blessed Sacrament, exposed in the chapel the last evening, received the adoration and love of all. This experience inspired Father Lataste with the idea of establishing a foundation to rehabilitate prisoners. With the help of grace, the trial that initially they were compelled to endure could become an offering freely given.

In September 1865, Father Lataste returned to Cadillac for a second retreat, which the prisoners themselves had asked for. He gave only one sermon a day, in order to have more time for confessions and spiritual direction. His blueprint was simple—death, judgment, Heaven, the Eucharist. It was austere but realistic, given that the prisoners saw a casket pass among them an average of every nine days. They had to see this reality through the eyes of faith. Father Lataste preached a hope that went beyond earthly hopes—the beauty of the heavenly inheritance that awaits will help the Christian convert and accept sufferings and humiliations. The last night, these women adored the Blessed Sacrament exposed, some until midnight, others from midnight till dawn, in perfect silence. Struck by this sight as he came out of the confessional, Father Lataste wrote his last sermon based on the burning words of Saint Catherine de Siena: "I have seen the secrets of God; I have seen wonders!" The contrast between the quality of the moral life he observed in prison and the contempt these women would encounter when they left was intolerable to him. He wondered, "What will become of them?"

At the end of this month, Father Lataste was appointed master of the Dominican students in Flavigny. He would spend a year there, from October 1865 to October 1866. Wishing to introduce to the general public the work he felt called to establish, he drew up a brochure titled "Rehabilitated Women." In it, he showed that true rehabilitation flows from the forgiveness offered by God.

Human justice is limited to punishing the guilty. "Divine justice," says Benedict XVI, "seeks goodness and creates it through forgiveness that transforms the sinner, converts and saves him. ... If evildoers accept God's pardon and confess their sin, letting themselves be saved, they will no longer continue to do wicked deeds, they too will become righteous and will no longer deserve punishment" (May 18, 2011).

An unrecognized drama

Father Lataste's brochure appeared in May 1866. Its main point was to find a way to welcome into religious life women coming out of prison, who were ready to leave the world to devote themselves to the God Who had saved them. Father Lataste proposed to found a congregation of contemplative women religious who would be willing to receive the former inmates, after a probationary period. The author understood well that this congregation would be able to receive only a small number of these women. But, in sending his brochure to both government officials and journalists, he wanted to alert his fellow citizens to the drama that women prisoners faced when they were released, and to the responsibility that society had to them. Father Lataste called the foundation "The House of Bethany," which would later be changed to the "Congregation of the Dominican Sisters of Bethany." Bethany was the village in Judea where JESUS' three friends lived—Lazarus, Martha, and Mary, the sinner who became a contemplative soul (Father Lataste, following the Latin tradition exemplified by Saint Augustine and Saint Gregory the Great, identified Mary Magdalene with Mary of Bethany). JESUS loved to come and stay with them.

Although supportive of Father Lataste's plan, the Dominican superiors specified that the Order would not take on responsibility for the foundation. Father Lataste found the foundation stone for his order in Mother Henri-Dominique Berthier. This religious from the Presentation in Tours felt drawn to an apostolate to women inmates. In May 1866, she received permission to make a retreat under the direction of Father Lataste, and agreed to assume responsibility for the foundation. It was the beginning of the nun's total confidence in Father Lataste, ten years her junior, and of a two-and-a-half year collaboration in deep communion. On August 14, Mother Henri-Dominique and Sister Marguerite-Marie, a younger nun also from Tours, took possession of a house in Frasnés-le-Château, near Besançon.

However, for French society in the nineteenth century, the nature of the new foundation was surprising, even scandalous. Hostile reactions came particularly from the Dominican Third Order Regular communities, onto which Father Lataste intended to graft Bethany. These religious, usually dedicated to the education of girls, were afraid of public opinion confusing them with repentant sinners. The provincial chapter of the Order informed Father Lataste that the very principle of his foundation raised objections. The founder was not discouraged. This opposition seemed to him to be the sign of divine blessing, given through the cross. In the end, the difficulties faded away, and the foundation continued its course.

The Bethany foundation was not an escape for Father Lataste—he remained a Brother preacher. To remain faithful to community life, he did not want to move to Frasnès. In the sermons that his superiors asked him to give, he did not cultivate the art of oratory, but touched hearts with his conviction, combining reserve, humor, and generosity.

Soon heard

Father Lataste's various illnesses had exhausted his health. Aware of his frailty, he directed a surprising letter to the Pope in which he said he was offering his life so that Saint JOSEPH might be declared Patron of the universal Church and His name inserted into the Canon of the Mass. In return, he asked this great saint to watch over the foundation for Rehabilitated Women. As he began to read the letter, Pius IX exclaimed, "Oh! Oh! The good holy religious! He will soon be heard!" After he finished reading it, he added, "This is quite difficult!" referring to the matter of an insertion into the Canon of

the Mass. This would not be done until about one hundred years later, under Blessed John XXIII.

At the end of July 1868, in Frasnès, Father Lataste fell prey to an overwhelming fatigue that reduced him to almost total rest. At Christmas, he managed to celebrate the Midnight Mass, but warned Mother Henri-Dominique that it would be his last. During the day, he had the consolation of giving the habit to a female convert from Cadillac. In his discussions with them, Father Lataste invited his daughters to trust in God. He unveiled an aspect of his deep interior life when he said: "There is in me a perpetual adoration of God through a simple act of my soul, always the same and always new, without beginning, middle, or end—it is like a reflection, a glimmer of eternity." He thanked the Dominican Order for the years he had the grace of wearing its habit and receiving so many benefits, and forgave his brothers who had not approved of, and had even fought, his foundation. As death approached, he recommended his daughters to God, following the example of Christ's priestly prayer (cf. Jn. 17). Showing that he was offering his life for Bethany, he entrusted to Saint JOSEPH the fragility of his foundation. On March 10, he peacefully rendered his soul to God.

The Dominicans of Bethany, contemplative women religious who welcome among them women from various paths, have four houses today—two in France, one in Switzerland, and another near Turin. They visit nearby prisons. The heart of their community life is contemplation of the Divine Mercy, centered on the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, in keeping with Father Lataste's wishes. His beatification is near, given that all the necessary elements for such a solemn act have been assembled.

At the invitation of Father Lataste, let us draw from the Eucharistic Heart of JESUS the divine Love we need to forget ourselves for the sake of those who "lie stripped, on the side of the road" (cf. Lk. 10:30).

Dom Antoine Marie
o.s.b.

- To receive the Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey newsletter (free of charge), contact the abbey.
- We gratefully accept the addresses of other potential readers.
- Donations : we are able to accept cheques in \$US, \$ Can., £ Sterling, Euro, Swiss Francs. Credit card donations can be made through our website www.clairval.com

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.