



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of June 29, 2012,
Feast of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul

Dear Friends,

"My dear friend, your holiness is closely linked to your professional competence," wrote a priest to a young medical student. "Just as it is impossible to be a good priest and at the same time a bad chaplain, so, even if for a different reason, one cannot be at the same time a good Christian and a mediocre doctor." This student, Pedro Tarres, who would become a doctor and then a priest, was beatified by Blessed John Paul II on September 5, 2004.

Pedro Tarres was born in May 1905 in the town of Manresa, in the heart of Catalonia, Spain. This ancient city is also the spiritual home of Saint Ignatius of Loyola. The newborn was baptized on June 4th, in the church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. His father was a locksmith and mechanic in a textile factory. Later, after a period of unemployment, he would be employed as a driver and mechanic by a rich widow in the town. In 1908, Pedro's first sister, Francesca, was born, followed in 1910 by a second, Maria-Salvacion. Seeing that Francesca was receiving all the affection, Pedro was overcome by terrible jealousy. One day when the little girl had been lifted onto a high chair, Pedro pushed her forcefully to make her fall. Without her father's swift intervention, the little girl's fall would have had serious consequences. But the jealousy did not last, and Pedro became a deeply loving brother. He kept a host of affectionate nicknames for his sisters, telling them: "We will not be like siblings who, when they are grown, no longer love each other. We will love one another always and will try to be saints." He himself liked to be called "Guy," in honor of Guy de Fontgalland, a Parisian child who died in the odor of sanctity, whose biography he had read. One day, the youngest daughter fell gravely ill. All seemed lost, and the burial gown was ready. At a lady's suggestion, Pedro rushed to Saint Ignatius' fountain, and drew some water said to be miraculous. The water was given to the dying child who, to everyone's great astonishment, was completely cured.

A thunderbolt

Pedro began school with the Piarists, but around the age of 10, he was hired as a delivery boy for the town pharmacy. It was not long before the pharmacist noticed the child's intelligence, and secured a scholarship for him to attend high school. One day, allowing himself to be led along by friends, Pedro yielded to the temptation to steal some apricots. He was in the tree



Blessed Pedro Tarres

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when the farmer suddenly appeared and yelled at him: "I know you—you're the locksmith's son. I'm going to tell your father." This threat was like a thunderbolt for the child, because he had never made trouble for his parents. The next day, the family was invited to a wedding, after which Pedro had a terrible stomachache. When his father came to see him, the child understood that he already knew about the apricots, but Mr. Tarres simply allowed his son to bear the consequences of his error.

A gifted student, our schoolboy made it a point of honor not to disappoint those who had made it possible for him to study. His secret was diligence and methodicalness. He was also intensely pious. He said the Rosary with his sisters and gently scolded them when they were distracted. When he was fourteen, he received the scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. The Virgin MARY became his confidante: "When I leave the house, I tell her where I'm going, and when I come home, I tell her how things went." He was very attached to the Jesuits in the town, in whose church he served as a choirboy. The desire came to him to become a priest. "This one will end up a Jesuit," those around him guaranteed. His father, who did not want to lose him, was afraid and asked him to change spiritual directors. But at the age of 16, Pedro began medical studies in Barcelona, because he had been told that the practice of medicine was much like the priesthood. He looked for a new spiritual director. "The human soul," he thought, "is like the body. It needs someone to take care of it, someone who knows

how to lovingly dress its wounds, which are nothing but unbridled passions, selfishness, and pride." He found this spiritual father in the person of Father Serra, an Oratorian and future martyr. Father Serra wrote to him: "I am happy at the thought of the virtues that with God's grace you are destined to practice, in pursuing a career whose social influence is so important. You must be very methodical..." Pedro began the practice of receiving Communion every day, from which he received a love of chastity, which was his strength and his joy.

At the beginning of July 1925, Pedro went to the bedside of his father, who was suffering from typhus. He whispered short prayers into his ear and added, "You are asking JESUS for forgiveness with all your heart, aren't you father? You are forgiving all those who have offended you, aren't you?" His father died peacefully. Five months later, Pedro learned that his mother had been knocked down by a cyclist. He hurried back to Manresa and found her immobilized by a fracture of the thighbone. He stayed with her and cared for her with admirable devotion. "Poor child," she would later say, "how I made him suffer during those terrible nights!"

An extraordinary impulse

Pedro was a dedicated member of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, and led the Catholic Action in Barcelona. On Christmas 1927, he consecrated his virginity to the Lord forever: "Christmas night," he said, "I felt a very strong movement, an extraordinary supernatural impulse. God was asking of me a perpetual vow of chastity." When he told his spiritual director about it, his director confirmed that it was the will of God.

In his encyclical *Sacra virginitas* (March 25, 1954), Pope Pius XII wrote: "The Fathers of the Church considered this obligation of perfect chastity as a kind of spiritual marriage, in which the soul is wedded to Christ ... 'My virginity is dedicated in MARY and to Christ' (Saint Jerome) ... the most delicate fruit of virginity consists in this, that virgins make tangible, as it were, the perfect virginity of their mother, the Church and the sanctity of her intimate union with Christ" (nos. 17, 66, 30).

On June 26, 1928, after six years of brilliant success, Pedro Tarres earned his doctorate in medicine with highest honors. Immediately thereafter, he climbed the holy mountain of Montserrat to thank the Virgin, then opened a medical office in Barcelona. His mother and little sister Maria-Salvacion joined him there. His eldest sister, Francesca, had become a religious with the Sisters of the Conception; Maria-Salvacion would join her there in 1930. Pedro built up a good practice. In spite of all the service he gave for free to the city's poor, he made a good living and bought himself a beautiful car, in which he took his mother for drives to entertain her. "I see them mainly as friends," said our doctor about his patients. One day he confided to his colleagues: "For me, the doctor before the patient is like the priest before

the altar. The bed is the altar, the patient is the suffering victim, and the doctor is the priest. Haven't you ever thought this, when you are with a patient?" His presence won over the most difficult patients. He would later assert, "I assure you that during all the time I practiced medicine, I did everything possible to enable patients to receive the sacraments. Death is the moment when God's mercy descends upon on a soul, and the doctor can help to channel it. I have witnessed truly comforting cases." His kindness and consideration toward his patients were boundless. A poor elderly man suffered above all from being unable to leave his home. Doctor Tarres took him in his car to change his mind, as though he were his own father.

"Through faith, we can recognize the face of the risen Lord in those who ask for our love," Pope Benedict XVI reminds us. "As you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me (Mt. 25:40). These words are a warning that must not be forgotten and a perennial invitation to return the love by which He takes care of us" (Apostolic Letter *Porta fidei*, October 11, 2011, no. 14).

Apostles in jackets and trousers

One day, Pedro went to a poor part of town where he had to fill in for a friend, when he was surrounded by a group of men and women who robbed him of everything he had. Not disconcerted in the least, he asked, "Tell me where to find the free clinic, because I am the doctor filling in for Doctor X." Dumbfounded, his assailants apologized wholeheartedly and gave him back what they had stolen. Then he asked if they knew the house where a sick person was. They led him to a cellar where a woman with tuberculosis lived, surrounded by three children with rickets. This pitiable scene would later bring Pedro to found the Our Lady of Mercy sanatorium for poor tuberculosis patients. It was also the memory of this scene that made him become a fervent advisor to the Federation of Young Christians of Catalonia, a movement created to promote the social doctrine of the Church among young workers abandoned and led to believe in Communist and anarchist utopias. Doctor Tarres also taught courses at the university as an adjunct professor, and wrote powerful articles for the weekly *Flame*, organ of the Federation, of which he had become the real leader. "We need apostles," he declared, "apostles in jackets and trousers to evangelize workshops, factories, offices ... to sow with love the seed of our faith, the reason for our lives, the truth of our doctrine."

In the Letter *Porta fidei*, Pope Benedict XVI similarly declares: "What the world is in particular need of today is the credible witness of people enlightened in mind and heart by the word of the Lord, and capable of opening the hearts and minds of many to the desire for God and for true life, life without end" (no. 15).

Pedro himself drove in his car throughout the city with other young adults to speak about Jesus and His Gospel. His eloquence was such that sometimes after hearing him speak, young people would rip up their membership cards to anarchist organizations. But other times, he and his companions had to flee at top speed in the black Opel, whose windows were not always spared. "We are strong because we are free," he said, "and we are free because we are chaste. The purity of youth is the salt that prevents the corruption of people... It is the guarantee of the most solid family peace."

JESUS tells us: *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God* (Mt. 5:8). The "pure in heart" are those who have aligned their intelligence and will with the requirements of God's holiness, through charity, chastity, and faith. There is a connection between purity of heart, of body, and of faith. Purity of heart will enable us to see God; even now it enables us to see all things according to God. Purification of heart requires prayer, the practice of chastity, and purity of intention and of sight (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2518, 2531, 2532).

Like candlewax

This path of purification begun by Baptism is maintained by sanctifying grace. "In Baptism," explained Pope Benedict XVI to young people in Germany on September 24, 2011, "the Lord, as it were, sets our life alight with what the Catechism calls sanctifying grace. Those who watch over this light, who live by grace, are holy. ... He does not demand glittering achievements, but He wants His light to shine in you. He does not call you because you are good and perfect, but because He is good and He wants to make you His friends. Yes, you are the light of the world because JESUS is your light. ... A candle can only give light if it lets itself be consumed by the flame. ... Allow Christ to burn in you, even at the cost of sacrifice and renunciation. ... Have the courage to apply your talents and gifts for God's kingdom and to give yourselves—like candlewax—so that the Lord can light up the darkness through you."

In Barcelona, Doctor Tarres enjoyed tremendous prestige. People suggested that he run for public office, but he refused, believing that that was not his place. Civil war broke out in Spain, and the situation in Barcelona became untenable, the city having fallen into anarchy. Pedro Tarres continued his apostolate from the shelter of his prestige as a doctor. At the beginning of August 1936, two armed men appeared at his office. "Take off your white coat and come with us!" At the police station, Pedro was advised to voluntarily be imprisoned to save his life. He refused, but, soon released, he left his house and went into hiding at the home of some friends, where he suffered from not being able to receive Communion. "My God, if I were able to receive Communion!" he wrote in his journal. "If You would grant me the grace of bringing me a priest!" Eleven months passed in this seven meter square her-

mitage. Finally on August 24, 1937, learning that the capital of Catalonia had returned to relative calm, Pedro returned home. These months of intense prayer had revived in him the desire to become a priest. But on May 28, 1938, he was drafted into the Republican Army (Spain was in civil war at that time) as a doctor lieutenant. On June 13, 1938, he wrote in his journal: "I want no soldier to be able to say that I treated him carelessly." In fact, he sometimes spent the whole night with a wounded man. Once a soldier he had treated confessed to him: "Doctor, I was ordered to kill you, but I realize that your religious ideas are of great value."

A clear response

However, the Republican Army's debacle was near. On January 27, 1939, after the troops scattered in a disorderly retreat, Pedro Tarres returned to his medical office. He entered the seminary when it reopened, and took the cassock on September 29th. He then went through a sort of spiritual night, but his confessor reassured him. In spite of the fact that he was 34 years old, he yielded to discipline. But shortly thereafter, anemia reduced him to total intellectual incapacity. Fortunately, his health returned and he was able to resume his studies. During a recreation, a seminarian asked Pedro: "When you are a priest, will you also practice medicine?" The clear reply: "No!" He explained that both these vocations demanded a total gift of self, and consequently, he had given up medicine.

During the summer of 1941, his mother passed away. On May 30, 1942, Pedro was ordained a priest, and the next day, he celebrated his first Mass at the basilica of Our Lady of Mercy. Three days later, he was named assistant priest in a small parish, Sant Esteve de Sesrovires. "It's one of the smallest parishes in the diocese," he wrote to his sister Francesca, "but even if there were only one soul, I would feel happy, so great is the value of a soul!" The first penitent the new priest found in the confessional was his pastor, a good priest whose advanced age emphasized little natural faults: touchiness, an inferiority complex, a harsh character... Little by little, the new assistant priest transformed the parish. While giving catechesis to the children, he introduced them to theater. He organized study groups, and even a soccer team, yet for all that not neglecting the confessional. His great capacity for work was sustained by a true mystical life.

One day, he was called to give the last sacraments to a woman who was dying in childbirth. Father Tarres gave Extreme Unction. Quickly, his professional glance diagnosed the medical problem. It was possible to operate, but there was no time to lose—it was a matter of minutes... An irresistible force impelled him to act, and both mother and baby were saved. Later on, he would save one or two more dying people by means of discreet advice. However, these medical actions would remain rare.

His bishop soon sent him to the University of Salamanca to study theology. He suffered there from cold and hunger, to the point that he would say with humor: "If I happen to wander, there is one place where you don't need to look for me—it's Salamanca." On November 13, 1944, he earned his bachelor's degree in theology, and the bishop called him to Barcelona to put him in charge of chaplaincies and various initiatives. His days were overloaded, but he remained joyfully available to everyone. To temporarily replace another priest, he was named advisor to Women's Catholic Action. "Women," he said, "have such a power of love, such a capacity to give of themselves, that, put in the service of the Church, they can become a very powerful force."

On May 10, 2009 in Amman, Jordan, Pope Benedict XVI observed, along the same lines: "The Church, and society as a whole, has come to realize how urgently we need what the late Pope John Paul II called the 'prophetic charism' of women ... as bearers of love, teachers of mercy and artisans of peace, bringing warmth and humanity to a world that all too often judges the value of a person by the cold criteria of usefulness and profit."

"I saw only lights..."

The sanatorium dedicated to Our Lady of Mercy, where Father Tarres was the cornerstone, opened in 1947. That same year, Father Tarres had to take a bit of rest in the Pyrenees, at the sanctuary of Our Lady of Nuria. When he returned to Barcelona, he was made chaplain of a shelter for sick women who had come out of prostitution. He spent his last Holy Week preaching a retreat to these women. He shared their meals and had a

great number of cakes bought for them, which he brought to them with childlike joy. He also visited the prison in Barcelona, where his love and kindness converted three anarchists who were sentenced to death. A fourth was so shaken by his words that the eve of his execution, he wrote a poem in his honor, with these words: "My eyes penetrated his chest ... I saw only lights..."

"It is in prayer," declared Father Tarres, "that my soul is strengthened. "With prayer, I have enough strength to walk." Nevertheless, in April 1950, exhausted by a lymphosarcoma (cancer), he was received in "his" Our Lady of Mercy sanatorium. "I have preached much on suffering," he said. "Now I must live it well." Sometimes he sighed, "What value souls must have, that one must suffer so much for them!" He was fond of saying the breviary: "I know that I am dispensed from saying it," he admitted, "but the Office is so beautiful... I will say it as long as I am able..." He still celebrated the Mass, but on May 30th, he had to stop at the beginning of the Offertory to continue his offering another way, on the altar of his bed. Countless faithful came one after the other to his bedside, and received there a grace of comfort that emanated from his person. After having seen and heard him, one of his former professors of medicine exclaimed, "In this Catholicism, yes, I believe!" On August 7th, a telegram from the Vatican arrived: "The Holy Father sends his affectionate blessings to Father Tarres." Father Tarres exclaimed, "If His ministers are happy with me, it means God is also happy with me!" On August 31st, around 11 o'clock in the morning, he entered into a mild agony and, shortly before 6 o'clock in the evening, he entered into eternal life.

May we, in turn, live firmly anchored in the hope of these new heavens and this new earth, where justice will reign...

*Dom Antoine Marie
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