



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of September 12, 2014,
Feast of the Holy Name of MARY

Dear Friends,

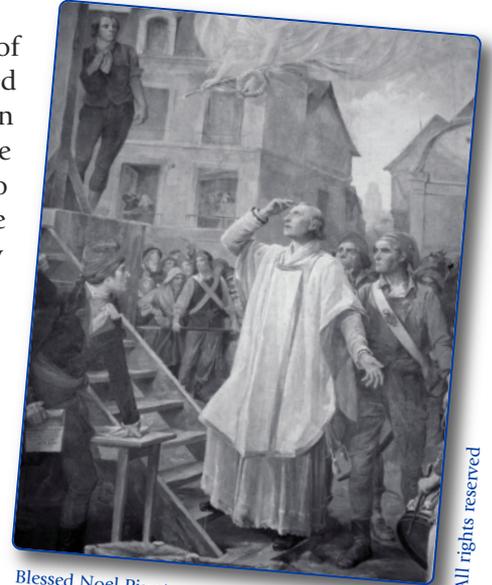
ON Sunday, January 23, 1791, Father Noel Pinot, the parish priest of Louroux-Beconnais in the diocese of Angers, France, celebrated Mass in his packed church. The assistant priest, Father Mathurin Garanger, was present in the choir and the mayor and town officials were seated in the first rows. At the end of Mass, the mayor and officials were to hear the two priests take the oath of loyalty to the civil constitution of the clergy. The priest went to the sacristy to take off his vestments. When they went to look for him, he stated that he could not in good conscience take the oath. When the mayor then forbade him from performing any clerical duties, he asserted that, since his powers came from God and His Church, he remained the legitimate priest of the parish, and would never submit to unjust laws.

This priest would go as far as martyrdom to remain faithful to God and to his conscience. In 1926, he would be proclaimed blessed by Pope Pius XI.

Noel Pinot was born in Angers on December 19, 1747, into a family that already had fifteen children. Tears were mingled with the joy—that same day, the youngest of his brothers, a twenty-month-old baby, died in his cradle. The following day, the newborn was baptized. During his early years, Noel had before him the example of courage and austerity of life of his father, a master weaver. In 1756, this hardworking Christian would be torn from the affection of his loved ones, worn out by his hard work. While his father instilled in him a liking for work well done, it was his mother who taught the young boy to pray. In 1753, the eldest of the family, Rene, was ordained a priest. This older brother took a special interest in the youngest of the family. Noel confided to him his desire to study to also become a priest. In 1765, at the age of eighteen, he entered the seminary. On December 22, 1770, he was ordained a priest. The next day he celebrated his first Mass, assisted by his brother. What joy and what emotion for their mother to contemplate, at the same altar, the youngest and the eldest of her sixteen children!

The Incurables

Over the next ten years, Father Pinot served as an assistant priest in various parishes. Everywhere he went, he showed an attentive charity to the poor and the sick, so much so that in 1781, his bishop appointed him chaplain of the *Incurables* in Angers. This institution took in the poor who often were brought there only to wait for death. The young chaplain experienced true consolation in celebrating Mass and preaching for the sick. Relieved of all material anxieties by charitable Christians, he devoted himself body and soul to his new



Blessed Noel Pinot

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ministry. His great concern was the sanctification and salvation of his sick. The rule for the *Incurables* specified that the chaplain “with prudence bring the poor, during their first year in the house, to make a general confession, above all those who never made one, and employ his zeal and charity to encourage them in the practice.” Father Pinot’s tenderness towards these poor men and women was for them an unaccustomed consolation. In spite of his youth, they cherished him like a father.

The bishop of Angers appointed Noel Pinot to the vacant position of parish priest for Louroux-Beconnais; Noel took possession of the parish on September 14, 1788, on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. This parish, the most spread out of all those in the diocese of Angers, was made up of small hamlets quite far from one another, connected by poor roads. Its population rose to over three thousand souls. Even though he was assisted by a vicar, the pastor had a considerable amount of work to do, but his devotion readied him for everything. Day and night, he was at the service of his parishioners, to provide them with the help of his ministry or to help them materially, for in his love for the poor, he deprived himself of everything for their sake. The memory of his good deeds and his zeal would remain so vivid in Louroux that, long after his death, the elderly would bear witness: “What a good pastor he was!”

Two years thus passed, but, after the Revolution broke out, the storm raged to the heights of the Church in France: the National Assembly wanted to dictate the

affairs of the Church. The ecclesiastical committee that it erected placed ecclesial life in the service of the new State. After church property was nationalized on November 2, 1789 and religious vows were abolished on February 15, 1790, came the vote on the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, ill-advisedly sanctioned by Louis XVI, on August 24, 1790. With this law, the civil authority claimed to impose on the Church in France a modification of the boundaries of dioceses and the jurisdiction of bishops, without regard for the authority of the Pope. Thus were 52 of the 135 bishoprics abolished; bishops and pastors would henceforth be determined by popular election—each department would choose its bishop, and each district would elect the pastors. Everyone could vote. This provision, which wished to return to the practice of the early Church, was absurd—it gave the right to vote to Protestants, Jews, and atheists, but not to the poor. The bishop would give notice of his election to the Pope “as to the head of the universal Church, as a sign of the unity of faith and of the communion that he must undertake with him”. In the exercise of his duties, he could only make decisions after the favorable vote of a “permanent council” made up of various clergymen from his diocese. The gravest vice of the Civil Constitution was the lack of submission to the Holy See, because on the one hand, only the Vicar of Christ is entitled to re-draw the map of dioceses and, on the other hand, no one can be granted an episcopal see without having first been appointed by the Pope.

A National Church

In the following weeks, the protests of the bishops, who could not in conscience accept this Civil Constitution, were heard; however, they suspended their definitive response until the Pope had given his verdict. In this spirit, on October 30, 1790, an *Exposition of the Principles of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy* was published, an analysis with which nearly all the bishops in France concurred. The passive resistance recommended in this text exasperated the delegates of the Assembly: a law of November 27th declared that bishops, priests, vicars, superiors of seminaries and all other clergy, as public civil servants, were required to take an oath of loyalty to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. On December 26th, Louis XVI, his hand forced, signed this law, which instituted a schismatic national Church. Any priests who refused to take the oath would be declared removed, and if they continued to carry out their ministry, they would be prosecuted as “disturbers of the public peace”. Even though the Pope had not yet given his verdict, the priest of Louroux was resolved—he would not take the oath. He visited his confreres in the area—when he had the unpleasant surprise of encountering indecisiveness, he tried to convince them: “Be certain,” he told them, “the Pope will condemn this oath. He knows only too well, I think, that in reality, this Constitution only serves to separate us from the Catholic Church, in creating in France a so-called national

Church.” But his own vicar would not let himself to be persuaded.

On Sunday, January 23, 1791, after having met with a refusal from the parish priest, the Mayor of Louroux invited the assistant priest to take the oath required by law. Shaking from head to toe, Father Garanger complied, amidst icy silence from some and disapproving murmurs from others. Noel Pinot, convinced that the awaited instructions from Rome would open his assistant priest’s eyes, allowed him to continue his duties in the parish as before. Soon, in two successive briefs of March 10 and April 13, 1791, Pius VI condemned the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, declaring it heretical on several counts and an infringement of the rights of the Holy See. Father Garanger would in fact retract his oath the following May 22nd. Without waiting, Noel Pinot went up into the pulpit on Sunday, February 27th at the end of the Mass. He had deliberately chosen this day, on which a gathering of neighboring parishes would be held in Louroux. Without an insulting word for anyone, he began to explain in a speech he had long prayed about before the tabernacle, why, as a Catholic priest linked through his bishop to the successor of Peter, the sole head of the entire Church of JESUS CHRIST, he had refused on January 23rd to swear the constitutional oath, which was an infringement on the rights of God and of the Church. The National Assembly did not have the right to demand an act of the clergy that, by its very nature, detached them from the center of the Church.

“Incendiary priest”

The mayor, seated in the front pew, interrupted the priest in an angry voice: “Come down from that pulpit! You claim it’s a pulpit of truth, but you spew forth only lies!” The faithful rose up in protest, astounded by such insolence. A loud voice dominated the others: “Stay in the pulpit, Father! You speak well, and we support you!” That evening, the residents of neighboring parishes reported to others what had happened. Noel Pinot’s courageous example made him a rebel who influenced others—his passionate declaration would echo throughout the Anjou, the Vendee, and even Brittany. The town officials met and sent a report to the Revolutionary Tribunal in Angers, demanding the arrest of this “incendiary priest” and “disturber of the public peace”. The following Friday, a detachment of the National Guard arrived in the town to arrest the priest, by night out of fear of the population. He was taken away, tied onto his own horse. Around noon, the procession entered Angers, where the inhabitants showed him compassion and respect. The judges sentenced him to remain at least eight leagues (thirty kilometers) from his parish for two years. This sentence was too light in the eyes of the public commissioner, who appealed it unsuccessfully. Noel Pinot withdrew to the *Incurables* hospice, where he was welcomed with joy. But the revolutionaries soon took offense at his presence. Father Pinot then withdrew, in July 1791, into the Mauges region, close to

Beaupreau, and lived there as an outlaw, devoting himself with zeal for souls. He did his best to make up for the absence of the priests who had been forced into exile. In 1793, the events of the War of the Vendee gave him the opportunity to return to his parish.

The motives for the Vendee uprising were religious rather than political. An old Vendeen would later recount, "In spite of our indignation, we had not acted when they took away our priests and our churches. But when we saw them make fun of the sufferings of the good Lord, we rose up to defend Him." In March 1793, the Vendeen army conquered Saumur and Angers; with control of the two banks of the Loire they held, for the moment, the revolutionary army in check. Noel Pinot's return to Louroux was a triumph. Several priests who had taken the oath (called "juror" priests) had tried to take the post, but had been unable to remain. The faith of his flock had not wavered. What joy for the pastor's heart, after so many trials! But this was but a break in the storm. The disaster of the Vendeen army at Nantes, in June 1793, reopened the persecution. The National Convention dispatched into the west "representatives of the people" with unlimited powers. They became the Terror in the provinces, often much more terrible even than the Terror in Paris. Such was the case in Maine-et-Loire with Francastel, a disciple of Carrier, the "Butcher of Nantes." The hunt for non-juror priests began once more. Noel Pinot had to go back to wearing disguises, and living the life of an outlaw. He could have fled abroad like many clergy, but preferred to remain among those whom God had entrusted to him, thinking he could still be of service to them. The vast majority of his parishioners were devoted to him; however, as he knew, the area also had its demagogues, and a betrayal was always possible. Judging that the hour had come for the good shepherd to give his life for his sheep, he stayed.

The Church of the Catacombs

The vast territory of his parish, cut up by woods and heaths, enabled Father Pinot to hide in remote farms. The watchful affection and complete discretion of the faithful provided good protection for his hideouts. Nevertheless, he frequently had to change his hiding places, because the National Guard suspected his presence and conducted searches frequently. During the day, he stayed closed up in attics or barns, sleeping there as best he could, praying, reading, or writing. When night fell, he went out to administer the sacraments to the sick in the neighboring parishes whose pastors were nearly all prisoners, in exile, or already put to death. He baptized newborns, instructed the children, and received the faithful, hearing their confessions and comforting them. At midnight, the necessities for celebrating Mass were prepared, and the faithful—who in doing so put themselves at risk of death, along with their pastor—could participate in the Holy Sacrifice and receive Communion. A religious life continued, worthy of that of the catacombs.

Father Noel preserved Christian life through catechesis, prayer, and the sacraments; he emphasized family prayer. This advice still holds true today: "The Christian family is the first place of education in prayer. Daily family prayer is particularly recommended because it is the first witness to the life of prayer in the Church. Catechesis, prayer groups, and 'spiritual direction' constitute a school of and a help to prayer." (*Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 565). The *Catechism* itself specifies, "The memorization of basic prayers offers an essential support to the life of prayer, but it is important to help learners savor their meaning" (CCC, no. 2688).

The year 1794 began in blood and tears. Robespierre was at the height of his dictatorship. All public Christian worship was suppressed, even that of the schismatic Church, the so-called "Constitutional Church". Deconsecrated churches were converted into weapons repositories or revolutionary clubs. The Committee of Public Safety increased its efforts to destroy the Church. It mercilessly imposed the decree of October 21, 1793, which punished by death any non-juror priest who did not leave the country within ten days. A one hundred pound reward was offered to any citizen who informed against a priest. Noel Pinot no longer had a stone on which to rest his head, and his outlaw sack held his entire fortune: a few articles of clothing and what was needed to celebrate Mass. The sufferings and physical and mental trials of the existence he led since the summer of 1793 had succeeded in severing the ties that could attach him to earth; only his love of Christ, his zeal to serve souls, and his charity for his parishioners gave him the courage to continue the fight.

Niquet, the traitor

The net was closing in on the outlaw. He had been advised to withdraw to a quieter place far away, but he refused. Each day, he prepared himself for death. If he was spared, he had the consolation of telling himself that he had not been betrayed by his devoted country parishioners. Moreover, they admired him—they would sacrifice everything, even their lives, to save their priest. In order to discover where he was hiding, the National Guard roughed them up and ransacked and devastated their homes, but in vain. But the "the powers of darkness" had their hour. On February 8th, Father Pinot was in the village of Milandrierie, a few kilometers out of town, at the home of a pious widow, Madame Peltier-Tallandier. When night fell, he went out for some fresh air in the garden, when a worker named Niquet, whom the priest had once rescued with generous alms, recognized him despite the dark. The hope of the one hundred pound reward made him forget all the benefits he had received. Niquet ran to denounce Noel Pinot to the authorities. Immediately the National Guard set out. Around eleven o'clock, the house was surrounded. In the widow's home, nothing was suspected, and all was ready for Mass when blows resounded on the door. There was

just time to hide the priest in a large chest and make the liturgical objects disappear before Madame Peltier opened the door. Since the valiant widow refused to speak, they searched the house without finding anything. As he was passing close to the chest one of the guards, who had been pressed into service, lifted the lid in a distracted manner, then paled as he let it close. He had just discovered the outlaw and hesitated to denounce him. But Niquet had noticed everything: "You found the priest," he yelled, furious, "and you want to hide him?" He lifted the lid and the priest came out, his face serious and calm. He looked the traitor in the eyes. A single protest left his lips as he addressed the ingrate, like an echo from Gethsemani: "What! It's you?" (cf. Lk. 22:48). Insulted and beaten, Noel Pinot allowed himself to be bound without giving any resistance. His vestments were seized with him. He was taken to Louroux, then Angers, where he appeared before the Revolutionary Committee. Accused of being an "extreme counter-revolutionary", the priest was thrown into a dungeon and sentenced to bread and water.

After ten days of imprisonment, the rebel was brought before the revolutionary court, which held its trials in a deconsecrated church. This February 21st, the committee was presided over by Citizen Roussel. By a horrifying coincidence, this revolutionary officer was an apostate priest, who had initially taken the oath, then left the priesthood! But in Anjou, no one knew his past. After he had given the sentence, Roussel looked at the vestments displayed before the court, and mockingly suggested to the prisoner: "Wouldn't you be well pleased to go to the guillotine in your vestments?"—"Yes," agreed the confessor of the faith without

hesitation, "it would be for me a great consolation."—"Well, then," the other replied, "you will wear them and be executed in this get-up."

A Friday at three in the afternoon

The execution took place that very day. The procession, led by drums, set out, the judges accompanying the victim, dressed in his vestments. The scaffold was erected on the new square, called the Rallying Square, in the place where once stood the collegiate church of Saint Peter, destroyed by the revolutionary town authorities. Father Gruget, an eyewitness and priest who had remained faithful to the Pope, testified, "The martyr prayed in a state of profound recollection. His countenance was calm and his brow radiated the joy of the elect. On his lips, so to say, one could follow the canticles of thanksgiving bursting forth from his heart." This Friday, at three in the afternoon (the hour of the Lord's death on the cross), Noel Pinot found himself at the foot of the scaffold. The sinister platform was transfigured in his eyes—he saw himself at the foot of the altar of real sacrifice, the altar once again bloody where, in the image of the God of Calvary, a true victim would be immolated. So naturally the first words of the Mass came to his lips: *Introibo ad altare Dei (I will go to the altar of God)*. His chasuble was removed; his stole crossed over his chest, he presented himself to the executioner. From afar Father Gruget gave him absolution. A drum roll... The blade fell... The sacrifice was consummated—the soul of the good shepherd had reached the altar of God! And so died, February 21, 1794, at the age of 48, Father Noel Pinot, the pastor of Louroux-Beconnais.

After having declared on June 3, 1926 that Noel Pinot died a martyr of hatred of the faith, Pope Pius XI beatified him the following October 31st, on the solemnity of Christ the King. The Blessed's example calls to mind this remark of Saint Gregory the Great: "When we celebrate the mystery of our Lord's passion, we ought to imitate what we then do: for then shall it truly be a sacrifice for us unto God, if we offer ourselves also to him in sacrifice" (quoted by Paul VI, November 18, 1966). May JESUS CHRIST, the Supreme Priest, through the intercession of Blessed Noel Pinot, grant us the grace to be faithful to Him even in the most difficult circumstances!

Dom Antoine Marie
o.s.b.

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