



# Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of March 2015,  
Month of Saint JOSEPH

**Dear Friends,**

**O**N July 5, 1852, Father Ernest André, a young parish priest in Mesnil-Saint-Loup, a poor village in the diocese of Troyes, France, was received in a private audience by Blessed Pius IX. Kneeling at his feet, he asked, "Most Holy Father, would you grant the name of 'Our Lady of Holy Hope' to the Most Blessed Virgin honored in our church?" At these words, the Pope raised his head, then, after a moment of reflection, seemed full of joy, and said with a marked note of satisfaction, "Our Lady of Holy Hope—yes!"

Under the impetus of the pastor, in just a few short years Our Lady of Holy Hope would not only transform the parish of Mesnil-Saint-Loup, but also spread her graces far beyond the village.

Ernest André, who would later be known as Father Emmanuel, was born on October 17, 1826, in Bagneux-la-Fosse, in the Aube. At the age of nine, the child contracted typhoid fever, which brought him to death's door. After forty days of near-unconsciousness, he was cured as though by a miracle. Shortly thereafter, he expressed the desire to become a priest. In 1839, Ernest entered the minor seminary. The sacrament of Confirmation, which he received at the end of the first year, marked him profoundly. Later, in his teachings, he would often emphasize the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian. His years of formation at the major seminary took place at a time when a missionary spirit permeated French Catholicism. Some of Father André's classmates left the seminary to enter the Marist Brothers or the Picpus Fathers to evangelize distant lands. He too felt this fervor. Nevertheless, in the end he dedicated himself to the more traditional mission of parish priest in his diocese. After the dark years of the Revolution, did not Christianity need to be rebuilt in France itself?

## **"He won't stay with us"**

**O**rdained a priest on December 22, 1849, Father André, then twenty-three years old, was appointed pastor of Mesnil-Saint-Loup, a parish of three hundred fifty souls, twenty kilometers west of Troyes. On December 24<sup>th</sup>, the new pastor arrived in Mesnil. Catching sight of a villager, he asked him the way to the church. As he accompanied him there, the man naively made his and the entire region's confession: "You see, sir, we are not very devout here. Oh, we don't miss Sunday Mass, but afterwards, we are fond of going for a drink." Hearing him chant the Midnight Mass,



Our Lady of Holy Hope

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the parishioners said to each other: "This one sings too well—he won't stay with us." But in fact, he would remain at Mesnil-Saint-Loup fifty-three years. In this village where the people were poor, religious practice was a regular part of life, at least if one considered the number of people attending Sunday Mass and Vespers. But it was only women who fulfilled the obligation of receiving Communion at Easter. In the intensity of his faith and the passion of his pastoral zeal, Father André could not be content with the minimum. He wanted more, and above all better—fervent Christians eager to drink from the spring of the sacraments, who were nourished on the Word of God and gave a real place to prayer in their daily lives. The young pastor immediately set to work—visiting parishioners, especially the sick, catechism, and preparation for first Holy Communion. His good humor, spirit, and easy laugh were already warming hearts. His entire being showed an exuberance for life that wished only to expend itself for the salvation of souls. But Father André quickly understood that the harvest does not come the day after sowing. He noted that, among the communicants prepared by his predecessor the year before, few had persevered in the sacramental life. Would he have better success in 1850? He deployed all his zeal: "Committing one's life," he said, "is a serious matter. You belong to JESUS Christ." Nevertheless, several boys left. The young priest's repeated exhortations,

and joining in their games, won some of them back. But it all remained precarious.

In June 1852, Father André embarked on a pilgrimage to Rome. Along the way, as he said his Rosary, he was seized interiorly by a thought that filled him with joy and excitement—Mary is the Mother of Holy Hope, according to the Biblical expression (cf. Sir. 24:18). At that moment, he received the certainty that once he reached Rome, he must ask the Pope's permission to give the name of "Our Lady of Holy Hope" to the statue of the Virgin in his church, and to institute a feast in her honor. The Pope's consent, he rightly thought, would be the sign that this inspiration came from Heaven. Against all expectations, he immediately received permission from Pius IX to celebrate a liturgical feast in honor of Our Lady of Holy Hope on the fourth Sunday of October. In 1854, this feast would be accompanied by a plenary indulgence. The fact that it was Pius IX who instituted the devotion of Our Lady of Holy Hope was not mere chance—it was extremely significant. The Holy Father personally gave Our Lady of Holy Hope to the parish of Mesnil-Saint-Loup. He himself had had a great devotion to the Virgin Mary since his earliest childhood. On the very day of his birth and baptism, on May 13, 1792, Giovanni Maria Mastai Ferretti had been consecrated by his parents to a Madonna called Our Lady of Hope. Pius IX would also be the Pope of the Immaculate Conception, proclaiming that dogma in 1854.

### "Crying the little prayer"

On his return to his parish, Father André initially kept secret the favors he had just obtained from the Holy Father, waiting to announce them on the Solemnity of the Assumption. During a memorable sermon in which he let his joy and filial confidence in MARY burst forth, Father André addressed a series of invocations to the Virgin MARY, one of which touched his parishioners more than the others: *Our Lady of Holy Hope, convert us!* It was a simple expression that grabbed the faithful's piety. They would say it, praying and crying, to the point that the expression "crying the little prayer" was coined. Father André did not ask his parishioners to convert, but asked MARY to obtain their conversion from her Son. The Christian life is a continual conversion, a gift we receive through prayer.

The first conversion was that of Ernest André himself, who was transformed into an inspired and effective worker: "Before the Holy Hope," he would later say, "I was directionless, I knew nothing. With it, I became focused, I saw, I understood." In the school of MARY, Father André would become a pastor and incomparable former of Christians. From that day on, the Blessed Virgin's immense power to convert, *omnipotentia supplex* (the all-powerful supplicant, an expression used by the Fathers of the Church) manifested itself in a sensational way. On Sunday, October 22, 1852, the first feast of Our Lady of Holy Hope was celebrated very simply, but

with great joy. The parishioners did not typically receive Communion on an ordinary Sunday, but Father André insisted. The women went without much difficulty, but would the young men he had brought together have the courage to publicly approach the sacraments? Most of them came to confession at a rather late hour—human respect still held them back. But the next day, they received Communion at the High Mass in front of everyone. It was the first victory of Our Lady of Holy Hope. A new wind, the Holy Spirit, was blowing through Mesnil-Saint-Loup. The grace of baptism buried in their hearts reappeared in all its freshness and strength.

### Reestablishing true notions

Father André commented, "For Christian behavior to be reestablished, true notions of Christianity must first be reestablished in people's minds. All of Christianity consists of knowing and recognizing in practice what we lost in Adam and what we have received in JESUS CHRIST; the doctrine on original sin and its consequences on one hand, and on grace and its necessity on the other." And later on, he would specify what conversion consists of: "The work of Our Lady of Holy Hope in Mesnil-Saint-Loup was simply to reestablish Christianity among the baptized. Here as elsewhere, almost everything had been invaded by a cold and base naturalism that does not allow man to elevate his thoughts above his feelings. Here as elsewhere, human reason—and what reason!—prevailed over divine reason, that is to say, over faith. The grace of Our Lord JESUS CHRIST was a sublime unknown. ... All the Christian virtues were unknown, replaced by an easy and universal virtue the world calls honesty. From the moment Our Lady of Holy Hope arrived, every soul understood that great change was absolutely necessary. The external practices of religion would be found inadequate; the interior motives for action would have to undergo fundamental modifications; the love of God would have to stop being just an expression. The Spirit of the Lord was going to breathe into dried bones and raise up a new people (cf. Ez. 37)."

In his catecheses on the gifts of the Holy Spirit, Pope Francis, quoting St. Thomas Aquinas, explains the role of the Holy Spirit and the importance of the gift of fear, which is connected with the virtue of hope: "Filial fear does not mean that we are afraid that we will fail to obtain what we seek from divine help, but rather that we are afraid that we will separate ourselves from this help. This is why filial fear and hope are united, and each perfects the other (*Summa Theologiae*, IIa-IIae, 19, 9, ad 1<sup>um</sup>)."

"When the Holy Spirit," the Pope continues, "comes to dwell in our hearts, He infuses us with consolation and peace, and He leads us to the awareness of how small we are, with that attitude—strongly recommended by JESUS in the Gospel—of one who places his every care and expectation in God and feels enfolded and sustained

by His warmth and protection, exactly as a small child with his father! This is what the Holy Spirit does in our hearts: He makes us feel like small children in the arms of our father. In this sense, then, we understand how fear of the Lord in us takes on the form of docility, gratitude and praise, by filling our hearts with hope. Indeed, we frequently fail to grasp the plan of God, and we realize that we are not capable of assuring ourselves of happiness and eternal life. It is precisely in experiencing our own limitations and our poverty, however, that the Holy Spirit comforts us and lets us perceive that the only important thing is to allow ourselves to be led by JESUS into the Father's arms. This is why we need this gift of the Holy Spirit so much. Fear of the Lord allows us to be aware that everything comes from grace and that our true strength lies solely in following the Lord JESUS and in allowing the Father to bestow upon us His goodness and His mercy. To open the heart, so that the goodness and mercy of God may come to us: this is what the Holy Spirit does through the gift of fear of the Lord. He opens hearts. The heart opens so that forgiveness, mercy, goodness and the caress of the Father may come to us, for as children we are infinitely loved" (General Audience, June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2014).

### **The confraternity of Perpetual Prayer**

**F**rom 1852 to 1860, not a single Easter feast or feast of Our Lady of Holy Hope passed without real conversions taking place, which led souls to God by radically separating them from worldly life. Participation in the sacraments increased, and more men joined the women in saying the Rosary. In 1853, despite of the opposition of some parishioners, an altar to Our Lady of Holy Hope was erected in the church. The same year, a confraternity to say the little prayer was established. So that the little prayer might be extended over the course of the day as a perpetual prayer, the members, in sets of twelve, committed to saying, each at a set hour, a *Hail MARY* with the invocation *Our Lady of Holy Hope, convert us!* before and after it.

Father André cared more about the fidelity and fervor of the members than their number. Nevertheless, the confraternity grew rapidly. At the end of 1854, there were just 272 members, but a year later there were more than 4,000. In 1856, Father Desgenettes, the pastor of Our Lady of Victories in Paris, spoke of the initiative of Our Lady of Holy Hope saying: "All these storms are stirred up against the effort only because it is well planted on the rock of Saint Peter. It is a young tree that will become great and strong, because its roots have penetrated the rock to draw Catholic vigor from its source." In fact, the Perpetual Prayer quickly spread beyond the parish. Members came from all of France and even from abroad. Encouraged by several briefs from the Holy See, the Perpetual Prayer would be established as an arch-confraternity on August 27, 1869. Less than ten years later, the association would number 100,000 members.

On March 25, 1877, the monthly *Bulletin* of Our Lady of Holy Hope would begin to be published.

The transformation of the parish in Mesnil was the work of Our Lady, but the pastor cooperated with it with great zeal. He said, "I need Christians as Baptism made them. They exist in seed; I will cultivate them and obtain them. I need them such, because that is how God wants them, and I am collaborating with His grace. I will not tolerate the mixing in of the spirit of the world that deforms, diminishes, and even sometimes under religious pretenses kills, the Christian. 100 % Christians, Christians of the Gospel, Christians who, far from cloaking themselves in deliberate ignorance, seek the light in order to be wholly one with the light—that is my aim."

To accomplish this, Father André began Sunday afternoon classes; his constant concern was to instruct his faithful, to enlighten their faith. He taught on the books of Holy Scripture, the liturgy, the sacraments. He even went so far as to teach them the rudiments of Latin, so they could understand the chants of the Mass and the Psalms—for on Sundays and feast days, many came to the church to chant a part of the Divine Office (Lauds, Vespers and Compline). The instruction was intermingled with games on the town square, and Sundays concluded with evening prayer, with the express aim of putting an end to dances and the influence of cabarets. Within a few years, cabarets and dances had disappeared from Mesnil. Conversion was also reflected in modesty of dress. The pastor waged war against vanity and immodest attire. "Modesty," he said, "is one of the signs of the presence of the Holy Spirit in a soul. In general, men do not know how to be chaste if women are not modest." In 1878, he would gather together the most committed women in the "Society of JESUS Crowned with Thorns".

### **MARY's "vengeance"**

**N**evertheless, it would be wrong to think that this movement did not meet with opposition. Some in the village did not want Our Lady of Holy Hope. Young libertines created a "second parish" in a stable that had been transformed into a dance hall, where they parodied religious ceremonies. Our Lady had her revenge in her own way: one Sunday in the month of MARY in 1854, while these young people were going out on a pleasure excursion, the leader stopped cold and decided to go home. His companions' mockery had no effect on him. He would later say, "It was as though the medal of the Blessed Virgin had fallen on my head." He began to say the Rosary, then, in October, he went to confession. In the end, he became a monk at the Abbey of La Pierre-qui-Vire.

Despite these signs, Father André apparently did not win the unanimous support of his parishioners. Nevertheless, from throughout the diocese and even beyond, people flocked in, drawn by the renown of

Our Lady of Holy Hope, by the atmosphere of prayer that surrounded her, by the beauty of the celebration of her feast. Gradually the feast on the fourth Sunday of October became the object of pilgrimages, and registrations to join the Perpetual Prayer flooded in. In his newsletter of November 1878, Father André wrote, "People go on pilgrimage to where there is a spring, a miraculous spring. Several weeks ago, a poor man came. He had come from far away, on two crutches. He asked for our charity and shared a few thoughts. 'Oh, so people come on pilgrimage here?'—'Yes, in October.'—'Oh, so do you have a spring?' Do you have a spring! Here is the true explanation for the pilgrimage to Our Lady of Holy Hope. How many souls who are thirsting for God's grace, for consolations from Heaven, come here believing to find a spring. And of all those who have come here, not one has ever said: I was deceived. Yes, there is a spring in Our Lady of Holy Hope, in her whom the Church calls *Mater, fons amoris*: MARY is Mother, Mother and Spring of Love." At the feet of Our Lady, pilgrims lay votive offerings. "Thank you to Our Lady of Holy Hope, who converted me."—"She freed me from vanity"... Such is indeed the grace of this devotion: in it, MARY reveals herself as the all-powerful converter, the Queen of hearts.

### Monastic life

The crowds of pilgrims and the poor condition of the parish church led to the decision to build a new one. The project would take ten years. The Blessed Virgin did not stop there—she also fulfilled Father André's dearest desires. He had always been attracted to monastic life. In 1864, he succeeded in founding a small

For us, who live today in "a world without hope" (Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, no. 42), the Mother of Holy Hope still wishes to grant the grace of conversion. She is only waiting for our "little prayer" to make us witnesses and apostles of the Hope [that] does not disappoint! (cf. Rm. 5:5).

monastery in the village, and took the name Father Emmanuel. In 1886, the monastery attached itself to the Italian Benedictine congregation of Mount Olivet, and in 1899 Father Emmanuel was released from his parish duties. In 1901 he witnessed with profound sorrow the dissolution of his religious community, which, like so many others, was the victim of severe secularist measures. When he died on March 31, 1903, the monastery was juridically liquidated. A community reformed there in 1920. In 1948, the monks would leave to give new life to the abbey of Bec-Hellouin, in Normandy. A group of monks returned to Mesnil in 1976. If the life of Father Emmanuel ended in being stripped of everything, devotion to Our Lady of Holy Hope, the pilgrimage, and the parish nevertheless remained very much alive.

In 1923, Rome granted the diocese of Troyes permission to celebrate the feast of Our Lady of Holy Hope throughout the diocese every October 23<sup>rd</sup>. The archconfraternity counted more than 150,000 members, and the bishop affirmed that the Perpetual Prayer continued to do much good. One can, still today, enroll in the archconfraternity of Perpetual Prayer by applying to the parish house (Place du Père-Emmanuel, 10190 Mesnil-Saint-Loup, France).

On July 6, 1952, in Mesnil-Saint-Loup, several bishops commemorated the centenary of the archconfraternity, a day of thanksgiving for a hundred years over which Our Lady of Holy Hope converted countless souls. For the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary, on July 7, 2002, a Mass was celebrated to give thanks for these blessings and to ask that these fruits continue.

Dom Antoine Marie o.s.b.

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