



Abbaye Saint-Joseph de Clairval

F – 21150 Flavigny-sur-Ozerain

May 13, 2006
Our Lady of Fatima

Dear Friend of Saint Joseph Abbey,

“**T**HE cornerstone of the civilization of love is recognition of the value of the human person and, concretely, of all human beings. Christianity’s great contribution is recognized precisely in this area. ... The Christian vision of the human being as the image of God, in fact, implies that the rights of the person, by their very nature, demand the respect of society, which does not create but merely recognizes them. ... Christianity makes its contribution to building a more human society precisely by providing it with a soul and by proclaiming the demands of God’s law, on which all social organization and legislation should be based if they intend to guarantee human advancement, liberation from every kind of slavery and true progress” (John Paul II, audience of December 15, 1999). These truths are splendidly illustrated in the life of Blessed Anne-Marie Javouhey.

On November 10, 1779, a little girl, Anne-Marie, the fifth in a family of ten, was born in Jallenge, close to Dijon, France. Anne-Marie, nicknamed Nanette, was 7 years old when her family settled in Chamblanc, in the same canton. As a child, Nanette was vivacious, glowing, sparkling with life, with a lively imagination and a quick reply. At the age of ten, in spite of her father, who thought her too mischievous, she made her First Communion. “From that day on,” she would later admit, “I considered myself consecrated to God and His works.”

In 1791, during the French Revolution, Abbé Rapin, the parish priest, preferred going into exile to taking the schismatic oath demanded of the clergy. He was replaced by a priest who had taken the oath. Nanette sometimes attended Mass without her parents’ knowing. “I thought myself wiser than the rest,” she would later say. One evening, a priest who had not taken the oath knocked at the door. “I have been called to an invalid’s bedside and I do not know the way.” Fearless, Nanette offered to take him. On the way, the priest explained to her the need to remain faithful to the Roman Church. From then on, with her family, she organized clandestine Masses and hid priests being hunted by the revolutionaries. As soon as the upheaval subsided, Nanette traveled through the villages and, beating a drum, gathered the youth to catechize them. “I would not have wanted to upset my parents,” she would say, “or disobey them, but I couldn’t resist God, Who gave me such a strong desire to teach poor young girls and untaught adults to know Him.” One day, she received a very specific mission from God: “The Lord made known to me in an extraordinary but certain manner, that He was calling me to the state that I took up, to instruct the poor and raise orphans!” she would later affirm.

The children God gives you

Nanette, who thought more about praying and catechizing than about working on the farm, astonished and angered her father. The girl managed to win him over to her cause and, on November 11, 1798, during Mass, she officially consecrated herself to God in the presence of her family. In 1800, on the advice of Abbé Rapin, who had returned to the village, Nanette went to Besançon, where Jeanne-Antide Thouret had established a small community of women devoted to charity and the education of children. But soon, her soul was overcome by doubt. “Lord, what do You want of me?” she cried one evening. A clear interior voice replied that God had great plans for her. A few days later, as she was waking, she thought she saw many Black people around her, some entirely black, others less dark-skinned. Simultaneously, she seemed to hear these words: “These are the children God is giving you. I am Saint Teresa; I will be your Order’s protectress.” She then returned to her parents.

After devoting herself to teaching children, first in Seurre and then in Dole, she entered a Trappistine community in Switzerland. But at the bottom of her heart, a voice told her, “You are not called to the Trappistines, but to establish a Congregation to help the Blacks.” The few months she spent at the convent enabled her to receive a solid formation in religious life. After two new attempts at schools in the Jura Mountains, Anne-Marie returned to her father’s house, to establish her educational work there. In April 1805, after Napoleon’s coronation, Pope Pius VII traveled through Chalon-sur-Saône. Anne-Marie and her sisters were granted a private audience. The young woman explained her plans to the Holy Father. “Courage, my child,” replied the Vicar of JESUS CHRIST, “through you, God will accomplish many things for His glory.”

On her bishop's advice, Anne-Marie settled in Chalon-sur-Saône. An excellent teacher, she understood the need to develop children's practical skills. She taught her little girls reading, writing, and arithmetic, but also sewing, knitting, ironing, and spinning yarn. Anne-Marie planned to put the school's chapel under the patronage of Saint Bernard or Saint Teresa. But the parish priest, who was named Joseph, suggested instead that she invoke the protection of the spouse of the Virgin MARY. The name of Saint JOSEPH was taken, and it went from the chapel to the little community of educators she had formed. On May 12, 1807, Anne-Marie, her three sisters, and five other young women received the religious habit and made their vows at the hands of the bishop of Autun. This prelate suggested to the superior that she settle in the episcopal city. Mother Anne-Marie arranged for a portion of the former major seminary to be made available to her. At the end of 1810, during the war with Spain, convoys of sick and wounded arrived in Autun. The Sisters turned into nurses. One day in January 1812, Mother Anne-Marie came across an advertisement that offered the sale of a former Récollet monastery, in Cluny. She called on her father, who let himself be won over, and bought the property. The Sisters settled there and became the Congregation of St. JOSEPH of Cluny.

Mother gave a start!

With great difficulty, Mother Anne-Marie managed to open a school in Paris. The wife of the administrator of Bourbon Island (Réunion) came to visit her and asked her for some Sisters for her island, adding that it was populated "by Whites, Mulattos and Blacks." At these words, the Mother gave a start, remembering the prophecy at Besançon. Soon after, the Minister of the Interior asked her for some sisters for France's overseas colonies. With the perspective of a missionary, she agreed to it all. On January 10, 1817, four Sisters left for Bourbon Island. At the beginning of 1819, a contingent of seven nuns embarked for Senegal. But there, the hospital they were given to run was in appalling condition, the city had no church, evangelization had scarcely begun... The Sisters soon became discouraged.

Mother Anne-Marie went to Senegal herself in 1822. A few weeks after her arrival, she wrote, "The difficulties are incalculable. Nothing but pure love of God enables us to keep going without becoming discouraged. ... Today, now that I have recovered from all my surprises and I am seeing things more closely, it seems to me that we can do a great deal of good in Africa." Convinced that the Blacks were naturally inclined toward religion, she stated, "Only religion can give this people principles and knowledge which is solid and safe, because its laws and dogmas reform not only the gross exterior vices, but change the heart... Give the externals

to religion. Let the pomp and ceremony draw them in, let awe retain them, and soon you will have changed the face of the nation." On the other hand, she observed that Africa possessed an agricultural vocation. At the end of April 1823, she opened a farm-school in Dagana. This enabled her to establish ties with the population. Her reputation spread and soon she was called to Gambia and then to Sierra Leone, where she took charge of hospitals. But from France letters came begging her to come back. In February 1824, she returned to the mother country after having prepared the ground for the long and exacting work of civilizing and Christianizing Africa. Her first goal was to train an African clergy, essential for the missionary enterprise. So she established a house of formation for young Africans in Bailleul, in the Oise department (France).

The help of a good example

In 1827, the Minister of the Navy spoke to Mother Anne-Marie on behalf of Guyana, where the French colonists had already endured numerous setbacks. Mother accepted the offer, but stated her conditions, which were aimed at the Christian life of the colonists and the natives. In August 1828, she arrived in Guyana with just under a hundred people and set up in Mana. Four months later Mother wrote, "Everything is progressing steadily towards good order—the work is moving forward, the lands under cultivation are visibly growing, religion is becoming stronger in the hearts of those who had only a superficial idea of it, and all this by means of good example... We brought with us fifteen well-chosen workers for the most useful trades... With the good Sisters, I am hoeing and planting beans and cassava ; I am sowing rice, corn, etc., as I sing canticles, tell stories, and regret that our poor Sisters in France are not sharing our happiness." But the success Mother achieved through this hard work aroused the jealousy of some colonists in Cayenne.

In France, the revolution of July 1830 brought with it political transformations unfavorable to the Catholic faith, and the government decreased its financial support for Mother Anne-Marie's works. But Mother continued with her work, and her establishments stood firm. In 1833, she set up a leper hospital near Mana. On her return to France, Mother Javouhey visited her houses. She was aware of the shortcomings of her Congregation : " Our Congregation is quite young and already it is in need of a major reform," she wrote... " We need to acquire the interior spirit and the spirit of prayer. With this twofold spirit, there is no danger anywhere." Since 1829, the diocese of Autun had been led by Bishop d'Héricourt. This zealous prelate wished to get the lion's share of the Sisters' work. To this end, he wanted control over the Congregation, and he revised the statutes approved in 1827 by his predecessor and by King Charles X.

At the end of April 1835, Bishop d'Héricourt imposed on Mother Anne-Marie new statutes that made sweeping changes to the former ones, and according to which he became the Sisters' Superior General. When Mother refused, the prelate insisted, then ordered her to accept them. Given neither a chance to consult with the Sisters nor time for reflection, Mother Anne-Marie signed the new statutes. At the close of the interview, a haunting remorse descended upon her soul—she had signed too quickly, without the approval of the General Chapter, or of the other bishops affected by these changes. On the advice of people in authority, she realized that her signature had been extorted from her rather than freely given, and had no value. So she wrote to the bishop that she would hold to the statutes of 1827.

Preparing for emancipation

At the same time, members of the government were discussing the emancipation of the slaves. Such a measure demanded suitable preparation. A report by an interministerial commission reads: "In her management of this establishment in Mana, Madame Javouhey has shown a great spirit of order and perseverance in every trial. It is to the Sisters of Saint-Joseph of Cluny that the emancipation of the slaves should be entrusted." Not everyone, however, was of this opinion, and the Council of Guyana, dominated by colonists jealous of Mother's success, were violently opposed to this plan. Nevertheless, on September 18, 1835, a departmental order officially entrusted this mission to her. King Louis-Philippe himself received Mother several times and with her finalized the plan for the emancipation of the Blacks.

In our day, faced with modern forms of slavery (selling women and children, working conditions that reduce workers to the level of mere tools for profit, prostitution, drugs...), the Church reminds us of the dignity of the human being: "The seventh commandment forbids acts or enterprises that for any reason—selfish or ideological, commercial, or totalitarian—lead to the enslavement of human beings, to their being bought, sold and exchanged like merchandise... It is a sin against the dignity of persons and their fundamental rights to reduce them by violence to their productive value or to a source of profit" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, CCC, no. 2414).

When she arrived in Guyana in February 1836, Mother Anne-Marie was entrusted with about five hundred black slaves snatched from the slave traders. In her pedagogy, she wanted no recourse to force, but to educate by means of gentleness, patience, and persuasion. "I was placed," she would later write, "as a mother in the middle of a large family." This concept is all the more daring in that, among the Blacks she welcomed,

there were some who were dangerous. But her faith was based on the unique virtue of Christianity, which is capable of a great civilizing effect. Furthermore, Mother knew how to rely on her personal reputation—her presence alone was enough to calm disputes. In fact, situations where it was necessary for her to use harsh measures were rare. She provided Christian education and was especially concerned with marriages, because she intended to base her civilizing work on the family. Each took care of their own clean and well-equipped household. Together they formed a beautiful village that included a church. All this was not achieved without troubles, setbacks, and distressing difficulties. In spite of everything, after two years, a definite spirit of order and structure prevailed in Mana. On May 21, 1838, Mother Javouhey presided at the freeing of one hundred eighty-five slaves.

The happiest time!

However, the bishop of Autun's opposition followed her to Guyana. On April 16, 1842, the foundress wrote that the bishop of Autun "has forbidden the Apostolic Prefect to allow me to participate in the sacraments, unless I recognize him as Superior General of the Congregation. ... I wholeheartedly forgive him, for the love of God." The suffering brought about by this situation, which lasted two years, was intense. It was made worse by the circulation of defamatory libels against the Mother. When her Sisters approached the Holy Table while she herself was deprived of it, her tears flowed in abundance. One day, she went to Dutch Guyana, hoping to be able to receive Communion there. But the Apostolic Prefect for this territory had been informed that "this woman has either never had the faith, or has completely lost it," and she was likewise refused Communion. "This time of trials was for me the happiest of my life," she would later say. "Seeing myself excommunicated, as it were, since all priests were forbidden to absolve me, I went walking alone in the vast virgin forests of Mana, and there I said to God, 'You are all I have, Lord, and that is why I have come to throw myself in Your arms and beg You not to abandon Your child....' I felt so much spiritual consolation that I often had to cry, 'O my God, take pity on my weakness, do not so lavish Your favors upon me, for Your poor servant will not be strong enough to endure them.' Oh! How many times did I experience how good God is to those who trust only in Him, that one is never unhappy when one has God, no matter what the trials might be."

Aware of her personal role in the smooth running of Mana, Mother Anne-Marie concerned herself with the days when she would no longer be there. She planned to gather in one place the Black children of Guyana between the ages of five and fifteen, and raise them Christian. Once adults and free, they would spread

throughout the country and propagate a healthy mentality. But the government, from which she requested a grant for this project, refused. On May 18, 1843, Mother set sail for France. This departure was heart-breaking for everyone. On her arrival, bishops who knew her well granted her permission to receive the sacraments. She then visited her Daughters, who welcomed her everywhere with open arms. She exhorted them to the interior silence and peace in their souls that would allow them to discover God's plan for them, and she taught them to avoid all haste. Let us take care, she said, not to "go faster than Providence, which wishes to be followed and not led.... Experience has taught me that the work of God is done slowly."

However, the bishop of Autun persisted in his plan. In order to be recognized as superior of the Congregation, he tried to influence the novices of Cluny. He appointed a chaplain who set himself to turn the novices against their superiors who were "in revolt" against their bishop. On August 28, 1845, Mother Javouhey went to Cluny, spoke with great serenity to her Daughters, then concluded, "My children, you are told that it is a sin to follow me. I tell you that it is not a sin to follow the bishop of Autun. You are free, you will choose. You know the situation—there are many other bishops who have a different opinion of us than that of the bishop of Autun and who will be happy to welcome you. All those who wish to remain in the Congregation will follow me to Paris." Out of the eighty young women, only seven chose not to follow her. The bishop of Beauvais, a great admirer of Mother's, then energetically took the matter in hand. Little by little, Bishop d'Héricourt found himself isolated in his position against the Sisters. In the end, he realized that he had misjudged Mother. An immense abyss of misunderstanding had grown in his mind. On January 15, 1846, he and Mother finally reached an agreement.

Let us ask Blessed Anne-Marie Javouhey, beatified by Pope Pius XII on October 15, 1950, to obtain for us freedom from the worst of all slaveries, that of sin. Indeed, JESUS came "to free men from the gravest slavery, sin, which thwarts them in their vocation as God's sons and causes all forms of human bondage" (CCC, 549). May she share with us her spirit of devotion, charity, and simplicity, to attain the true liberty of children of God.

Dom Antoine Marie
o.s.b.

P. S. This monthly letter is free of charge. We gratefully accept the addresses of other persons who may enjoy receiving it. – Also available free of charge are: tract about the divinity of Jesus Christ; tract about the Truths of the Catholic Religion; scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, with explanatory notice; the promises of the Sacred Heart; the mysteries of the Rosary.

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"Let her pass!"

During this painful affair, Mother Anne-Marie had continued her apostolic activity with numerous foundations in France, Oceania, Madagascar, India, and the British West Indies. When the Revolution of 1848 broke out, she was near Paris. She returned with all haste to the city in turmoil. She had to cross the barricades. When the workers in revolt, whose financial difficulties she had often eased in the "National Workshops," saw her coming, they cried out, "It's Mother Javouhey! It's General Javouhey! Let her pass!" The new government hastily decreed the complete emancipation of the Blacks. The work of careful and methodical preparation for freedom became null and void, but Mother adapted to the situation by continuing the work of civilizing and evangelizing the newly freed slaves. In Mana, the news of the abolition of slavery was received with a peaceful joy that contrasted with the scenes of violence that took place elsewhere. The Black population there remained hard-working and settled, and very devoted to the religion that Mother had taught them.

At the beginning of 1851, Mother Anne-Marie's health weakened and, in May, during a visit to the house in Senlis, she was forced to take to her bed. On July 8, she learned of the bishop of Autun's death. Several days later, on the 15th, she declared, "We must consider the bishop one of our benefactors. God used him to send us a trial, when we generally heard around us nothing but praise. It was necessary, for, with the success our Congregation achieved, we would have been able to think we were something, if we hadn't had these difficulties and this opposition." Shortly after speaking these words, she rendered her soul to God. Her Congregation at that time numbered about 1,200 religious, devoted to seeking the will of God in all things, by means of teaching and hospital and missionary work.