



**Abbaye Saint-Joseph de Clairval**  
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Dear Friend of Saint Joseph Abbey,

**I**N a famous poem written before his conversion to the Catholic faith, John Henry Newman spoke to God in these words : “ Lead, Kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom, Lead Thou me on ! The night is dark, and I am far from home — Lead Thou me on ! Keep Thou my feet : I do not ask to see the distant scene — one step is enough for me. I was not ever thus, nor pray’d that Thou shouldst lead me on. I loved to choose and see my path ; but now, Lead Thou me on ! ” Souls of good will born outside the true Church must sometimes accept great sacrifices to follow the voice of their conscience and arrive at the full truth. Such was the case of Bishop Alfred Allen Curtis.

Born in Maryland on July 4, 1831, Alfred received Baptism soon after his birth from the hands of a Methodist minister, even though his parents were Episcopalian, an American Protestant denomination based on Anglicanism. As a young boy, he devoted himself assiduously to his studies and learned entire Shakespeare plays by heart. He also succeeded in mastering Latin and Greek. His passion for study did not keep him from fervent attendance at religious services. Although he had an ardent and somewhat impulsive nature, he was also very affectionate and was always the first to ask for forgiveness.

When Alfred was 17, his father died, leaving his wife responsibility for six children. The eldest brother left to make his fortune in the Far West ; Alfred put his talents to good use to support his mother and sisters. For four years, he worked as an assistant schoolteacher, but he then received the inspiration to devote himself to the service of souls. He then passed an exam before a jury of Episcopalian pastors, and was ordained a deacon, then a priest, in this denomination. Desiring to devote himself to the ministry without impediment, he renounced marriage.

In 1862, Alfred was named rector of Mount Calvary Episcopal Church in Baltimore, which he was to serve tirelessly for nine years. Filled with zeal for souls, he assiduously gave himself to prayer, fasting, and studying Sacred Scripture. To learn Hebrew, he went to a rabbi, and thus acquired a deeper knowledge of the Word of God. He also took a keen interest in the Fathers of the Church and steeped himself in their doctrine, which in his eyes expressed the faith of the Church. This Protestant pastor, who felt close to Catholicism, wore the cassock, recited the Roman Breviary, and prayed to the Virgin MARY. He went so far as to question the truth of his own faith. One day, two visitors came to his

church, asking if it was a Catholic church, and if he was a priest. He boldly replied “ yes, ” but conscience stricken, he went to find them and explained, “ I thought myself a priest, but I am not, and you will find the Catholic church three squares from here. ” He apparently doubted the validity of his priestly ordination, which in reality is lacking in Episcopalianism. However, Episcopalian priests, like their Anglican brethren, think they are true priests and able to consecrate the Eucharist. Pastor Curtis in fact cherished a very great devotion to this sacrament. Formed in the school of the Fathers of the Church, he took Christ’s words literally : “ This is my Body... This is my Blood... ” For him, JESUS, the Master and Guide Whom he felt called to preach and defend, is truly present in the consecrated species.

### ***Where is Christ’s Church?***

Following in the footsteps of many of his co-religionists, he considered himself a part of the great Christian Tradition composed of the Church of Rome, the Orthodox Church, and the Anglican Church. In our time, similar theories are current among many Christians. Some maintain that together the Churches and ecclesial communities, despite their differences in doctrine, form the single Church of Christ. To enlighten the faithful, the Holy See has specified : “ Catholics are bound to profess that through the gift of God’s mercy they belong to that Church which Christ founded and which is governed by the successors of Peter and the other Apostles, who are the depositories of the original Apostolic tradition, living and intact, which is the permanent heritage of doctrine and holiness of that same Church. The followers of Christ are therefore not permitted to imagine that Christ’s Church is nothing more than a collection ( divided, but still possessing a certain unity ) of Churches and ecclesial communities.

Nor are they free to hold that Christ's Church nowhere really exists today and that it is to be considered only as an end which all Churches and ecclesial communities must strive to reach" (Declaration *Mysterium Ecclesiae*, June 24, 1973).

In 1871, an event took place that marked a decisive turn in Pastor Curtis' life. His superior, the Episcopalian bishop of Maryland, published a pastoral letter on the Holy Eucharist, in which he stated that if Christ is present in this sacrament, it is not in order to be adored, but only to become food for our souls. He was therefore forbidding his flock from worshiping this sacrament as the Person of Christ. Curtis, shocked, reacted strongly and resigned from his pastoral duties. His November 8, 1871 letter to his bishop contains this beautiful profession of faith: "If it is not the truth that the very Human and Divine Christ is Himself first offered, for the living and the dead in the Holy Eucharist, and there put according to His whole Living Person into my very hands, to be then and there adored and endowed with all I am, and all I possess perpetually—there is no truth for me, at least no truth I greatly care to know... All my teaching grows out of, and depends upon the fact, that the Lord is actually one with and present in the Eucharist, under the form of Bread and Wine as He was of old present in the stable, one with and under the form of Babyhood..." A few days later, he further explained his thoughts: "I cannot at all see how Christ can be received as Christ without adoration. To say that He is present but is not to be adored is to me only a certain way of saying that He is not veritably present at all."

### **To adore the One we receive**

This conviction of Pastor Curtis was fully in line with the faith of the Catholic Church. However, in the period following the Second Vatican Council, there was a tendency to neglect Eucharistic adoration. To revive our faith in the Blessed Sacrament, John Paul II published the encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* in 2004, inaugurating a year consecrated in a special way to this sacrament. At the conclusion of this year, Pope Benedict XVI made the following reflection: "It is moving for me to see how everywhere in the Church the joy of Eucharistic adoration is reawakening and being fruitful. In the period of liturgical reform, Mass and adoration outside it were often seen as in opposition to one another: it was thought that the Eucharistic Bread had not been given to us to be contemplated, but to be eaten, as a widespread objection claimed at that time. The experience of the prayer of the Church has already shown how nonsensical this antithesis was. Augustine had formerly said: 'No one should eat this flesh without first adoring it; ... we should sin were we not to adore it'. Indeed, we do not merely receive something in the Eucharist. It is

the encounter and unification of persons; the Person, however, who comes to meet us and desires to unite himself to us is the Son of God. Such unification can only be brought about by means of adoration. Receiving the Eucharist means adoring the One whom we receive. Precisely in this way and only in this way do we become one with him" (*Address to the Roman Curia*, December 22, 2005).

Like so many others who, in order to be faithful to the voice of their conscience, have renounced a privileged and prestigious position, Pastor Curtis threw himself into the unknown. Giving up his parish and a comfortable salary, he had no idea what would become of him. "I felt as though I were about to leap into a great chasm, knowing not where I would land," he confided to a friend. God, in His mercy, allows this type of experience in order to purify the souls of His friends, to test their love, and to lead them to greater perfection. He never abandons those who are faithful to Him. Little by little, the light grew in Pastor Curtis' mind. He became nearly certain that the only path would be to enter the Roman Church. Out of consideration for the denomination in which he had been a pastor, he did not want to take this decisive step in his own country. In early March 1872, he left for England and went to Oxford, where he visited several leading Anglicans there to assure himself that he was not deluded. Their responses did not satisfy him. He then requested an audience with Father Newman, whose own conversion had taken place nearly thirty years before. The future Cardinal listened to him with kindness, spoke of his own path, and then gave him two books, saying, "Read these if you like, but pray and pray; nothing will help you more than humble prayer; and come to see me whenever you will, I am at your disposal."

### **The security of the Truth**

To a person for whom he had long been a spiritual director, Curtis wrote these lines which reveal the anguish in his soul in the face of the decision he had to make: "It is a miserable thing to remain in doubt as to the things of the greatest and most lasting moment. Nevertheless one must be content with uncertainty till he reaches full assurance by fair means." However, thanks to the help of prayer and grace, he eventually reached this certainty: "If the Roman Catholic Church is not truth, then there is no God," he wrote to a friend. In another letter, dated April 20, 1872, he relates, "I was received (into the Church) last Thursday... I first made a confession to one of the Fathers in his room, then I went into the chapel and was there (conditionally) baptized, kneeling before the altar, then versicles, collects and the *Miserere* were said; after which I made my profession in the creed of Pope Pius (IV)... On Friday I made my Communion... Yes, this secure feeling

that you have found the reality....It is a hard battle to put to death totally self-will, but when you have conquered, and you are really and finally submitted, and are quite sure that nothing can ever make you undo your submission, there comes so great a calm and so full a joy, such certainty, such blessed incredible faith, that you don't know your own self."

To the end of his days, Curtis would suffer from his family's inability to understand his conversion. Of his family, only a brother would join him in the true Church of Christ. Later, deeply moved by the death of his parents who had not entered the Church, he allowed himself to be consoled by a priest who assured him of his mother's total sincerity. Cardinal Newman, who had also experienced this sort of trial, wrote, "One cannot force others to think as one would like, even those who are the closest and dearest to us."

Curtis, after having been received into the Church, wondered about his future. His thirst to give himself totally to God made him want to enter the Carthusian order, but Newman, with a premonition of the good this man could accomplish, encouraged him to return to his country and put himself in the service of the archbishop of Baltimore. So Curtis went there and entered the seminary to complete his studies for the priesthood. Older than most of the seminarians, he was nevertheless admired by all for his gentleness, humility, zeal for communal discipline, and mortification. On December 19, 1874, he received priestly ordination.

### ***It is no longer I but Christ***

Named secretary to the archbishop, Father Curtis dedicated a great deal of time to ministering to souls, especially in the sacrament of Penance. A great spirit of faith as well as exceptional natural gifts drew many to his confessional. Always accessible, he made himself all things to all people and drew his inspiration from the ideal lived by Saint Paul: *It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me* (Gal. 2 :20). His homilies, true spiritual gems, attracted crowds. He was greatly valued as a spiritual director. Mapping out a rule of life for the father of a family, he scheduled a time each day to examine his children's books; this task seemed to him to be a sacred duty for parents and educators. Lastly, Father Curtis was a friend to the sick and the aged, whom he often visited, despite his many duties. His paternal heart likewise had a soft spot for children. "I know not," he once said, "what the world would do if it were not for the old people and the little children." This delicate attention to all demonstrated a great charity born from a deep union with Christ in the Eucharist. "Union with Christ is also union with all those to whom He gives Himself," writes Pope Benedict XVI. "I cannot possess Christ just for myself; I can belong to

Him only in union with all those who have become, or who will become, His own. Communion draws me out of myself towards Him, and thus also towards unity with all Christians. We become 'one body,' completely joined in a single existence. Love of God and love of neighbor are now truly united: God incarnate draws us all to Himself" (Encyclical *Deus caritas est*, December 25, 2005, no. 14).

In 1883, Father Curtis had the privilege of accompanying his archbishop to Rome, and in 1886, he was named bishop of Wilmington, Delaware, a suffragan diocese of Baltimore. His characteristic humility made him try to avoid this role: "I care not how many I have over me, provided I have no one under me." But his efforts to escape this burden failed, and he received episcopal consecration on November 14, 1886. As a bishop, he stayed close to his people and his priests. He did not fear fatigue and gave himself freely to the souls entrusted to his care. Filled with zeal for orphans and prisoners, he held poverty in high regard, and did not fear being considered poor. His responsibility seemed to him to be that of the servant in the Gospels to whom the Master, in leaving for a distant land, had entrusted the care of his possessions. He himself exhorted the faithful to remain vigilant at all times, for the Lord leaves us in the dark about the day of His return: "Our Lord mercifully conceals from us the time of His coming, for if people knew that they had several years to live, they might spend most of the time in earthly enjoyments and prepare for death only when it is near; thus they would lose the reward that might have been theirs had they always kept themselves in readiness for His coming at any hour."

### ***The supreme test of holiness***

On July 23, 1896, it was made public that Bishop Curtis had resigned from his position. Shortly before, he had told the Visitation nuns in Wilmington: "To me it is the supreme test of sanctity... to be simply nothing for God, and to be sweetly content to be nothing, and to be recognized as nothing, to be treated as nothing by others, to be set aside as useless... and to rejoice that others are something, and that you are nothing..." This desire for humility demonstrates a love for Christ comparable to that of Saint Benedict, who wrote in his *Rule*: "The sixth degree of humility is that a monk be content with the poorest and worst of everything, and that in every occupation assigned him he consider himself a bad and worthless workman, saying with the Prophet, *I was stupid and ignorant; I was like a beast toward Thee. Nevertheless I am continually with Thee*" (ch. 7). The news of this resignation was a trial for the clergy and faithful of Wilmington. A local newspaper commented on the event in these words: "This desire of the humble-minded Delaware ecclesiastic could only have its



parallel in a general who would ask to be reduced to the ranks, on the ground that there he could better serve his country.”

Deeply loved by his entire diocese, Bishop Curtis continued to provide Masses, homilies, and various services to the poor, even after his successor was consecrated. He also remained confessor for the Visitation nuns. The last ten years of his life were spent in Baltimore in the residence of Cardinal Gibbons, who named him Vicar General. Long hours of his days and nights were spent in front of the Blessed Sacrament. “It is pleasant to spend time with Him, to lie close to His breast like the Beloved Disciple and to feel the infinite love present in His heart,” wrote Pope John Paul II. “If in our time Christians must be distinguished above all by the ‘art of prayer,’ how can we not feel a renewed need to spend time in spiritual converse, in silent adoration, in heartfelt love before Christ present in the Most Holy Sacrament? How often, dear brother and sisters, have I experienced this, and drawn from it strength, consolation and support! This practice, repeatedly praised and recommended by the Magisterium, is supported by the example of many saints. Particularly outstanding in this regard was Saint Alphonsus Liguori, who wrote: ‘Of all devotions, that of adoring JESUS in the Blessed Sacrament is the greatest after the sacraments, the one dearest to God and the one most helpful to us’ ” (Encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 25).

In keeping with his desire to work up to the end in the Lord’s vineyard, Bishop Curtis assisted the Cardinal in giving Confirmation. During one such ceremony, he spoke to the confirmands in these words: “The Holy Ghost comes to be the truest and best of Friends, an unfailing one... All other friends, however true, would simply be such only in name, in comparison with the Divine Friend who comes to you today... Think of this, and cherish with jealous care a love and friendship

In imitation of this great convert and this truly apostolic man, let us receive from the Lord JESUS Himself the gift of His Person and His work of salvation in the Holy Eucharist, in which He shows us a love that knows no bounds. “The Eucharist is a priceless treasure: by not only celebrating it but also by praying before it outside of Mass we are enabled to make contact with the very wellspring of grace” (John Paul II, *ibid.*).

Dom Antoine Marie  
O.S.B.

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absolutely essential for the salvation of your soul. This Divine Friend will never depart from you, unless by sin you chase Him away. May God grant that such a misfortune may never happen to any of you, but that having had the happiness to become the temples of the Holy Spirit of God, you may ever cherish and preserve the help of the Divine Friend, by fidelity and perseverance in God’s grace.”

***These yet unknown saints***

In 1908, Bishop Curtis developed stomach cancer. No longer able to eat, he was soon at the point of death. On July 3, the first Friday of the month, he celebrated his last Mass with the fervor one can imagine of a man who had said several years earlier: “We ought to be able to say after each Mass, ‘This is the best Mass I have ever said. I have offered more to God, more for souls *this* day than I have ever done before; more love and more zeal for the conversion of souls. I have sacrificed to Him more of my own will.’ ” On Saturday, July 11, after much suffering, the servant of God fell asleep in the Lord, “like a child who finds the longed-for rest on the bosom of its mother,” according to the testimony of one witness.

We can hope that Alfred Allen Curtis is numbered among those yet unknown saints of whom he himself spoke so eloquently in a homily for the feast of All Saints’ Day: “Let us honor all Saints, but especially that numberless army of unknown Saints. The canonized Saints, who are few compared with the former, have been capable of practicing heroic virtue, virtue which is beyond our attainment. But we will consider the vast army of unknown Saints who have no history, who lived the same common life that we do, who did common things uncommonly well, who toiled, waited, suffered; who believed, hoped, loved and repented, these we can imitate.”