



Abbaye Saint-Joseph de Clairval

F – 21150 Flavigny-sur-Ozerain

May 27, 2007  
Pentecost Sunday

Dear Friend of Saint Joseph Abbey,

**W**HO shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him Who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life ... nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in CHRIST JESUS Our Lord (Rom. 8 : 35-39). Saint Paul's words apply in a special way to the life of Latvian Bishop Sloskans, who, after a year as bishop, suffered for the faith. Jailed in seventeen Soviet prisons, he was deported to Siberia and exiled for over thirty years, far from his homeland. His life witnesses to the presence of JESUS CHRIST in His Church, and in each one of His disciples : our Savior gives strength and light, even in humanly unbearable conditions.

Boleslas Sloskans was born on August 31, 1893, in Tilgale, Latvia which was at the time part of the Czars' Russian empire. Boleslas' parents, who were Catholic, had the joy of bringing six children into the world. His religious education was received in the heart of the family. At the end of grammar school, Boleslas told his father that he planned to become a priest. His father showed his approval with the bang of his fist on the table, making his only condition that his son promise to become a good priest. At the end of his studies in Saint Petersburg, Russia, Boleslas was ordained a priest on January 21, 1917. The following autumn the Bolshevik Revolution broke out, and the Communists seized power. Little by little, religious instruction was prohibited, churches were closed, bishops and priests were imprisoned... In November 1918, Latvia regained its independence from Russia, but since the borders remained closed, Boleslas was forced to stay in Petrograd. He was given St. Catherine's parish, where his pastoral zeal and wisdom worked wonders.

### ***"A simple but holy man"***

In the aftermath of the revolution of October 1917, the Holy See was worried about the situation of the Catholic Church in the Soviet Union. To give the Latin Church the best chance for survival, new bishops needed to be consecrated. Father Michel d'Herbigny, a Jesuit, delegated by the Vatican to negotiate with the new masters of the Kremlin, received from Pius XI the mission to carry out these episcopal consecrations. In 1926, he obtained a visa to visit the French communities in Russia. En route to Moscow, Father d'Herbigny was received by the Apostolic Nuncio in Berlin, Bishop Pacelli, the future Pope Pius XII, who secretly

consecrated him a bishop. In Moscow, Bishop d'Herbigny consecrated to the episcopate a French priest, Father Neveu, who recommended to Bishop d'Herbigny Boleslas Sloskans, a "simple but holy man," who, in the hope of continuing his pastoral mission in Petrograd, had taken Russian citizenship. Boleslas, who knew fully the dangers that accompanied the role of bishop under the Communist regime, accepted this burden with courage. On May 10, he was consecrated in the greatest secrecy and given responsibility for the dioceses of Mohilev and Minsk, in Byelorussia, as an apostolic vicar. He was thirty-three years old. The following September, he made his episcopal consecration officially known, which did not prevent him from following a course of conduct that was not obliging toward the public authorities.

In Mohilev, he became aware that he was being spied on by agents of the GPU, the national security police. Therefore he carefully weighed each word spoken in public. At the beginning of September 1927, he undertook a fifteen-day tour to visit the regions under his jurisdiction. During his absence, the GPU searched his home. When he returned the night of September 16, he was visited by policemen who searched once again. They found survey maps and military documents hidden behind paintings, all planted there by GPU agents during an earlier search. He was immediately arrested. A sham investigation was organized. Nighttime was usually chosen for the exhausting interrogations. After suffering several months of inhuman treatment in various prisons, Bishop Sloskans was exiled and sentenced to three years of forced labor in the concentration camps of Solovki, a freezing and damp archipelago in the White Sea covered with forests. It was later admitted to him

that the charge of espionage was only a pretext to distance him from his diocese—if he had truly been found to be a spy, the penalty would have been much more severe.

### **“What makes me so happy”**

In spite of the torments he had already endured, Bishop Sloskans wrote his parents: “You must have learned of my arrest from the newspapers. After six months, I am finally able to write to you. I have always loved to preach the words of Our Lord: *Not even a hair from your head falls without God’s having willed it* (cf. Mt. 10:30). I now know from experience that everything that happens by the will or the permission of God is a work of salvation. I received more graces in these last five months of my captivity than during all the last fifteen years of my life put together. The imprisonment is the greatest and most beautiful event of my interior life, even though I regret no longer being able to say Mass. Dear parents, pray for me, but do it without anguish and without sadness. Let your hearts be opened to the greatest love possible. I am so happy, because I have now learned to love all men, without exception, even those who do not seem to deserve this love. They are the most unfortunate. I beg you, do not allow any feeling of vengeance or bitterness to enter your hearts. If we allowed ourselves such a thing, we would no longer be Christians, but fanatics. I am sentenced to three years. I ask you again: Pray! May the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit descend upon you and remain with you always.”

Bishop Sloskans’ profound faith in the workings of Divine Providence was based on truths of the faith recalled in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “The witness of Scripture is unanimous that the solicitude of Divine Providence is concrete and immediate; God cares for all, from the least things to the great events of the world and its history. ... ‘For Almighty God..., because He is supremely good, would never allow any evil whatsoever to exist in His works if He were not so all-powerful and good as to cause good to emerge from evil itself’ (Saint Augustine). ... *We know that in everything God works for good for those who love Him* (Rom. 8:28). The constant witness of the saints confirms this truth: St. Catherine of Siena said to ‘those who are scandalized and rebel against what happens to them’: ‘Everything comes from love, all is ordained for the salvation of man, God does nothing without this goal in mind.’ St. Thomas More, shortly before his martyrdom, consoled his daughter: ‘Nothing can come but that that God wills. And I make me very sure that whatsoever that be, seem it never so bad in sight, it shall indeed be the best’ ” (nos. 303, 311-313).

The conditions under which prisoners were held in the Solovki Archipelago were very difficult: hard labor, insufficient food, and all sorts of inhuman deprivations and treatment. A great many of the prisoners there perished. Bishop Sloskans and the other priests imprisoned on the archipelago organized to celebrate Mass. They were given a room to use that they called “Chapel Saint Germanus”. They used a glass for a chalice and the lid of a tin can for a paten. Their only liturgical vestment was a stole they had made themselves. They knew by heart most of the texts of the Mass. The hosts and the wine came to them thanks to the kindness of a jailer, but when there was no wine, Bishop Sloskans made some from raisins soaked in water. On September 7, 1928, in the greatest secrecy, Bishop Sloskans ordained one of the prisoners, Donat Nowicki, a priest.

### **The golden thread that binds together the ages**

At the end of October 1928, the Chapel Saint Germanus was closed by the camp authorities. The priests then decided to celebrate Mass at night, in secret, in an attic above their cell. In the morning, in the convoy going to work, Bishop Sloskans distributed, in the utmost secrecy, the consecrated Hosts to the Catholics who wanted them, and hid the remaining Hosts under the roots of a tree, wrapped in a piece of purple cloth so that those who had not received Communion in the morning could do so during the day. This episode illustrates the following statement from the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “The Eucharist is the golden thread that, beginning with the Last Supper, binds together all the ages of the Church’s history up to ourselves today. The words of consecration, ‘This is My Body’ and ‘This is My Blood’ have been said at all times and places, even in the gulags, in the concentration camps, and in the thousands of prisons that are still here today. And it is upon this Eucharistic ground that the Church bases her life, her communion, and her mission” (Introduction to the second part: Explanation of the painting, *JESUS Gives Communion to the Apostles*).

But in January 1929, the priests were dispersed among other groups of prisoners, or in solitary confinement. Bishop Sloskans was transferred to Anser Island. In mid-October 1930, after having served his three-year sentence, he was set free. He chose to return to Mohilev. There he observed that many of his faithful had disappeared without a trace, especially those who had sent packages to imprisoned priests. Many of the children, under the influence of the atheist teaching, were ready to denounce their parents to the police when they reflected beliefs contrary to the Communist propaganda. One week after his return, Bishop Sloskans was arrested again—in his absence and without a trial, he had been sentenced to an additional period of exile.

In December 1930, during the long and exhausting journey to Siberia, he felt an unshakable conviction—he was not alone. He recalled the words of the psalm: *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want; ... Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me* (Ps. 23 [22]). At Yenesei, the train stopped. At the moment it started up again, someone threw him a badly tied up package. He found in it a little book titled *The Story of a Soul*, the autobiography of Saint Therese of the Child JESUS. The following June, he had to leave for further north, to a place called Sharo-Turukhansk. A small colony of thirteen families lived there, settled on the frozen plains. The settlement was made up of one-room wooden huts in which an entire family lived. Bishop Sloskans was taken in by one of the families who gave him a corner of its hut. He could move about freely, but the village was surrounded by vast snowfields and the closest city was 1,400 km away. In one of the rare forests in the area, he noted a rock emerging out of the ground. There, alone among the trees, before God's vast creation, he was able to celebrate Mass, the mystery of faith, the victory of life over death, of resurrection after suffering.

### ***A ray that pierces the clouds***

Bishop Sloskans drew from the Eucharist the supernatural strength that was indispensable for him to live his life in exile. "The Eucharist is truly a glimpse of heaven appearing on earth," stated Pope John Paul II. "It is a glorious ray of the heavenly Jerusalem which pierces the clouds of our history and lights up our journey" (Encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, April 17, 2003, no. 19). "The Church has received the Eucharist from Christ her Lord not as one gift—however precious—among so many others, but as the gift *par excellence*, for it is the gift of Himself, of His person in His sacred humanity, as well as the gift of His saving work. ... When the Church celebrates the Eucharist, the memorial of her Lord's death and resurrection, this central event of salvation becomes really present and 'the work of our redemption is carried out'. This sacrifice is so decisive for the salvation of the human race that JESUS CHRIST offered it and returned to the Father only after He had left us a means of sharing in it as if we had been present there" (*Ibid.* no. 11). In Holy Communion, the exiled bishop received a foretaste of Heaven: "Those who feed on Christ in the Eucharist need not wait until the hereafter to receive eternal life: they already possess it on earth" (*Ibid.* no. 18).

To meet his needs, Bishop Sloskans made nets and spent a great deal of time fishing. As he waited for better days, this shepherd of the Church of God abandoned himself completely to Providence, in a life of prayer and

sacrifice. In November 1932, he was taken to Krasnoiarisk, a city that he reached only after a 35-day journey by sleigh. He arrived on Christmas Eve and was locked up in a frigid jail where he remained alone for two days without food. He would later write, "It was the hardest Christmas of my life!" He soon left his dungeon to be taken to Moscow, where he was put in a relatively comfortable cell and received a visit from the ambassador of the Republic of Latvia, who announced that he would be freed the next day. His release was in exchange for a Soviet spy detained by Latvia.

### ***The good shepherd***

Bishop Sloskans' greatest desire was not to return to his homeland, but to be reunited with his faithful in Mohilev and Minsk. "The good shepherd does not abandon his flock!" he exclaimed. Only an order from the Pope could convince him to leave the U.S.S.R. But a highly placed person managed to convince him that this was indeed the Pope's wish and, in a spirit of obedience, he agreed and arrived in Riga, the capital of Latvia, on January 22, 1933. Shortly thereafter, he left for Rome where he was received as a "confessor of the faith." The Pope invited him to celebrate at his side the opening of the Holy Door of Saint Peter's Basilica for the jubilee of the 1933 Holy Year, commemorating nineteen centuries since the death of Christ. The Holy Father then suggested that he stay in Rome for a year to recover his health. One day, speaking with the Pope about the circumstances of his release from prison, he learned that, contrary to what he had been told, the Pope had never asked him to leave the U.S.S.R., abandoning his Russian faithful. This revelation was very distressing to him, and he kept the bitter secret in his heart until his death, speaking of it only to a few close friends.

When he returned to Riga, Bishop Sloskans taught moral theology at the faculty of theology and traveled throughout the country giving lectures and preaching retreats. On June 17, 1940, Latvia was invaded by the Soviet army and annexed by Stalin. The persecution of believers began. Bishop Sloskans managed to escape the secret police who were after him. But in June 1941, Germany, in turn, seized Latvia. Free access to places of worship was reestablished. In 1944, the Germans were driven from Latvia by the Russians. Fearing to see their bishop arrested and exiled to Siberia yet again, some faithful arranged his escape to Germany.

In the spring of 1947, Bishop Sloskans went to Belgium, where he was put in charge of the Latvian seminarians who had taken refuge there. In 1948, these young men began studies at the University of Louvain, where the Latvian bishop joined them. In 1951, the Father Abbot of Mont-César invited Bishop Sloskans to

live at his abbey. From then on, he would share the life of the monks there. He was not a recluse, however—Pope Pius XII gave him various missions. In addition, he exercised his episcopal ministry frequently with confirmations and ordinations. Yearly he went on pilgrimage to Lourdes with the Belgian Farmers' League. He also began to make a stay every year with the Sisters of the Poor Child JESUS in Simpelveld, in Limburg. But above all, he led an intense life of prayer, offering his exile for his faithful and praying for his former torturers, against whom he bore no ill will. Sometimes he stayed for hours on his knees or seated, in meditation before the Most Blessed Sacrament.

### ***A genuine dialogue of love***

The example of Bishop Sloskans is an encouragement to prayer. In his apostolic letter *Novo millennio ineunte*, Pope John Paul II wrote, "This training in holiness calls for a Christian life distinguished above all in the art of prayer. ... But we well know that prayer cannot be taken for granted. We have to learn to pray : as it were learning this art ever anew from the lips of the Divine Master Himself, like the first disciples : *Lord, teach us to pray!* (Lk. 11 :1). ... The great mystical tradition of the Church of both East and West has much to say in this regard. It shows how prayer can progress, as a genuine dialogue of love, to the point of rendering the person wholly possessed by the divine Beloved, vibrating at the Spirit's touch, resting filially within the Father's heart. This is the lived experience of Christ's promise : *He who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him* (Jn. 14 :21). ... Our

Christian communities must become genuine 'schools' of prayer, where the meeting with Christ is expressed not just in imploring help but also in thanksgiving, praise, adoration, contemplation, listening and ardent devotion, until the heart truly 'falls in love'. ... It would be wrong to think that ordinary Christians can be content with a shallow prayer that is unable to fill their whole life. Especially in the face of the many trials to which today's world subjects faith, they would be not only mediocre Christians but 'Christians at risk'. ... [Education in prayer] would require that popular piety be given its proper place, and that people be educated especially in liturgical prayer" (no. 32-34).

Bishop Sloskans spent the last eighteen months of his life in a rest home run by the Sisters of the Convent of Bethlehem, in Duffel. He distinguished himself by his cheerful unaffectedness and his continual prayer—he always had his rosary in his hand. On April 18, 1981, Holy Saturday, he lost consciousness. Immediately, those around him were praying for him out loud. As they were singing the *Salve Regina*, all of a sudden his face was transformed and his features lit up. Lifting his eyes to heaven he rendered his soul to God at the very moment they sang "*post hoc exilium... O clemens Virgo MARIA!*" ("after this exile... O clement Virgin MARY"). On October 10, 1993, Bishop Sloskans' remains were returned to Latvia, which had become a free country again. They were buried in the crypt of the national sanctuary of the Virgin of Aglona, 270 km from Riga, where they await the resurrection. The cause of his beatification has been introduced in Rome.

The life of Bishop Sloskans, exiled for more than a half century, might appear in the eyes of men to have been a series of failures. But God judges otherwise : *Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven. Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on My account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in Heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you* (Mt. 5 :10-12). May we, following the example of Bishop Sloskans, accept the crosses of our life and offer them in union with Christ's Sacrifice, for the salvation of souls !

*Dom Antoine Marie*  
 o.n.p.

*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.*

#### ***Contributions may be sent to this address in France:***

- **From U. S. A., U. K. or Canada:** by ordinary cheques payable to "Abbaye Saint Joseph," (no need to have special international cheques) in U. S. \$, Pounds Sterling or Can. \$.
- **From Irish Republic:** by ordinary cheques in Euros.
- **From other countries:** by postal order, or bank drafts in Euros.

*Credit card (Visa, CB, Mastercard, American Express): through our website: <http://www.clairval.com/>*

Fax: 00 33 3 80 96 25 29 – E-mail: [abbey@clairval.com](mailto:abbey@clairval.com) – <http://www.clairval.com/>