



Abbaye Saint-Joseph de Clairval

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The Holy Apostles Peter and Paul

Dear Friend of Saint Joseph Abbey,

ON her deathbed, Saint Therese of Lisieux heard a novice sigh with sadness at seeing her suffer so much. “ But no ! Life is not sad,” she responded. “ If you were to say, ‘This exile is sad,’ I would understand you. But it is a mistake to give the name ‘life’ to that which must end. It is only to the things of Heaven, that never end, that one can rightly give the name ‘life’, and so life is not sad, but happy, very happy ! ” The name of this novice was Sister Marie of the Trinity.

Marie-Louise Castel was born on August 12, 1874 in Saint-Pierre-sur-Dives in Normandy and baptized the next day. Her parents, brothers, and sisters enveloped her with love. She was the thirteenth child born into the family, though eight had already died at an early age. The family would see four religious vocations flourish. Her father, a teacher at a state school, refused to accept the laws of 1882 that secularized the schools, and he maintained the pious practice of morning prayer with his students. This courageous stance was not appreciated by the administration, and forced to resign, Monsieur Castel moved to Paris. The family loved to pray to the Blessed Virgin MARY in front of an image of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. Marie-Louise’s parents also had a great devotion to the Holy Face of Our Lord. At a very early age, Marie-Louise heard the call to consecrated life. At the age of 12, she discovered a prayer, “ To ask for enlightenment on one’s vocation,” which she said nine days in a row. At the end of the novena, while praying before the Holy Face, she received an inspiration that she translated into these words: “ How happy the Carmelites must be ! I will be a Carmelite ! ”

“The good Lord is calling me and I am coming!”

The yearning for Carmel grew in her soul, without diminishing her very spontaneous nature. Unbeknownst to her parents, she ran around the shops, the entertainments, the fairs. Knocking down bottles with a ball, she would, “ out of piety,” have fun choosing the cutouts of priests or nuns as targets ! Not wanting to wait for her entry to Carmel to consecrate herself to God, she took a vow of virginity before she turned 16. A few days after this vow, she learned through her confessor that the Prioress of the Carmel of the Reparation and the Holy Face (Avenue de Messine, in Paris) had accepted her for an eight-day retreat. When the Prioress asked her to write what attracted her to Carmel, Marie-Louise wrote these few lines : “ You ask me, Reverend Mother, my

reasons for wanting to enter Carmel. To tell you the truth, I only know one thing : the Good Lord is calling me and I am coming. He suffered to death out of love for me ; I also want to suffer out of love for Him.” The Prioress replied, “ The beginning of your letter convinced me of your vocation.” A few months later, on April 30, 1891, the girl entered Carmel and received the name Sister Agnes of JESUS. Unfortunately, her health deteriorated and on July 8, 1893 she had to return “ into the world. ”

The following July 22nd, Marie-Louise went to seek comfort at the Carmel of Lisieux. She was received in the parlor by the new Prioress, Mother Agnes of JESUS, the sister of Saint Therese of the Child JESUS. On her return to Paris, Marie-Louise learned that she could not return to the Carmel on Avenue de Messine until she turned 21. The Prioress, seeing her pain, suggested she seek entry into the Lisieux Carmel : “ Your native air will be better for you than that in Paris.” Marie-Louise thus entered the Lisieux Carmel on June 16, 1894, but not before a last visit to the fair ! All her life she would retain the mark of her slightly rascally youth in Paris. Her round face remained so childlike that Sister Therese called her “ her little doll,” a nickname that well expressed the affection Therese had for her. Therese, at the time a young nun of twenty, was in fact responsible for introducing her to life in Carmel. Marie-Louise received the name Sister Marie-Agnes of the Holy Face. Being Therese’s youngest novice, she benefited from her ample advice and quickly became her fervent disciple. Nevertheless, she was a handful for Therese, who was strict with her and did not let her get away with anything. The young Sister’s failure in another Carmel and her little Parisian ways did not endear her to the older Sisters. Far from keeping her eyes lowered, as the rule of Carmel requires, she liked to nose about everywhere. Therese pointed out to her that her expression looked too much like that of a wild rabbit. Nevertheless, the

presence of this “impish Parisian urchin” enlivened the atmosphere.

Since her progress was deemed sufficient, the postulant was able to take the habit of Carmel once again, on December 18, 1894. Sister Marie-Agnes was still far from perfection. There was no shortage of criticisms! One day, discouraged, she confided to Therese: “I don’t have a vocation!” Therese simply laughed at this, and Sister Marie-Agnes also laughed heartily. To help her overcome her habit of crying over nothing, Sister Therese used an original method: “Putting a mussel shell on her table,” the young Sister would later recount, “she held my hands to keep me from wiping my eyes. She then began to catch my tears in this shell—my tears soon turned into joyous laughter.” And Therese added, “From now on, I allow you to cry as much as you want, as long as it’s in this shell!” Therese thus taught her the art of being happy and smiling in all circumstances: “The face is the reflection of the soul,” she told her. “It must always be calm, like that of an always happy little child, even when you are alone, because you are constantly in the sight of God and His angels. ... JESUS loves joyful hearts. He loves a soul that is always smiling.”

The only goal: to make Him happy

Sister Marie-Agnes’ profession was supposed to take place toward the end of 1895. However, Mother Marie de Gonzague, the novice mistress, judged that she was not ready, and the ceremony was postponed until April 30, 1896. So Therese suggested to the novice that she make “the Act of Offering to the Merciful Love” right away, which she did fervently on December 1, 1895. “I was,” she would later say, “so flooded with graces that all day I physically felt the presence of the Eucharistic JESUS in my heart.” This “Act of Offering,” written by Therese, is intended to make reparation to God for His creatures’ rejection of His Love, and to inspire one to work with the sole goal of making Him happy. Here is the central passage: “In order to live in an act of perfect Love, I offer myself as a holocaust offering to Your Merciful Love, begging you to ceaselessly consume me, while You let the floods of infinite tenderness within You flow into my soul, so that I might become a martyr to Your Love, O my God! May this martyrdom, after having prepared me to appear before You, finally cause my death, and may my soul fly instantly into the eternal embrace of Your Merciful Love... With each beat of my heart I want, O my Beloved, to renew this offering an infinite number of times, until, the shadows having disappeared, I can repeat to You my love in an eternal face-to-face!” To console JESUS and at the same time to save souls, was the great motivation that enflamed Therese’s heart, and she taught it to her disciples. The day of her own profession of religious vows, September 8, 1890,

she had written a very personal prayer, in which she expressed her deepest thoughts: “JESUS, grant that I may save many souls, that today not a single soul may be damned, and that all the souls in purgatory may be saved...” Already on July 14, 1889, she had written to her sister Celine, still in the world: “Celine, in the few moments that remain to us, let’s not waste our time... Let’s save souls... Souls are being lost like snowflakes, and JESUS is crying...”

“You are loved by God”

Two months before Sister Marie-Agnes’ profession, her superiors decided to give her the name Sister Marie of the Trinity and of the Holy Face instead, to avoid any possible confusion with Mother Agnes, the Prioress at the time. On April 30, 1896, she finally made her vows. “This day,” she wrote, “was more of Heaven than of earth... Sister Therese of the Child JESUS seemed as happy as I.” Sister Therese would tell her, “Oh! Spend your life in gratitude, for you are especially loved by God.”

Over the course of 1897, the condition of Sister Therese, stricken with tuberculosis, worsened. To avoid possible contagion, the Prioress decided that Sister Marie of the Trinity would no longer come near the patient. Therese wrote several short messages to her novice to help her accept this decision: “I understand very well your suffering at no longer being able to talk to me, but be sure that I am also suffering from my powerlessness, and that never have I felt so strongly that you hold an immense place in my heart!” On September 30, Sister Marie of the Trinity would witness, along with the community, the last moments of Saint Therese, and her beautiful and long ecstatic look at the moment she “entered into Life.” After Sister Therese’s canonization in 1925, Sister Marie of the Trinity would write, “I do believe it’s the first time that a Saint has been canonized who did nothing extraordinary—no ecstasies, no revelations, no mortifications that frighten little souls like ours. Her entire life is summed up in this: she loved God in all the ordinary little acts of community life, performing them with great faithfulness. She always maintained a great serenity of soul, in suffering as in joy, because she took all things as coming from the hand of the good God.”

The life of the convent continued, with the Divine Offices in choir, the two hours of prayer each day, and domestic chores. Nevertheless, Therese had left a deep impression on the little community, and in particular on Sister Marie of the Trinity, who found in the memory of the Saint an inspiration for her spiritual life. In addition, she always had the feeling that Sister Therese of the Child JESUS was accompanying her on her pilgrimage on earth. This presence encouraged her in the

face of the volumes of mail that flooded Carmel after Therese's autobiography, *The Story of a Soul*, was published. Sister Marie of the Trinity was in fact kept very busy with this mail which, from twenty-five letters a day in 1909, reached a thousand a day when Therese was canonized in 1925.

On March 10, 1926, she wrote to Mother Agnes: "I want to love God like our little Therese loved Him, to be like her the joy of His Heart!" Very skillful, Marie of the Trinity worked in the book bindery and baking hosts. To change tasks was her relaxation. She wrote a great deal: a concordance of the four Gospels, extracts from the Old Testament, various episodes from the lives of the Saints. Her infectious cheerfulness did not fade. She loved to emphasize the generosity and goodness of Mother Agnes, her Prioress: "I find you so merciful," she wrote her, "that it seems to me God cannot be any more so!" For mental prayer, it was usually enough for her to remember the words and examples of her to whom she had had the grace to be close: "My memories of Therese," she wrote, "are enough for my prayer, and I know that God asks no more of me than that I walk in the 'Little Way' in which she guided my first steps. My whole job is to avoid straying from it, for... one must pay constant attention to stay on it. But when one is on it, what peace!"

"From the moment we recognize them"

In her "Little Way," intended for souls who have the desire to serve the Lord and to do the Divine Will, Therese gave this basic teaching: do not bemoan your own weaknesses, but rather, throw yourself into the arms of JESUS and allow him to purify you in His infinite mercy. Sister Marie of the Trinity retained this lesson. On November 2, 1914, she explained to Mother Agnes: "I feel only my poverty and my powerlessness, I see only darkness, but in spite of all that, I remain in ineffable peace. JESUS is asleep, MARY too. I do not try to wake Them but, like Therese, wait in peace for heaven's shores." And to another sister: "Oh! If you lived with me, how you would be encouraged to see that we are all the same with our little faults. I say 'little' because, as soon as we recognize them and want to correct them, they are not so serious and do not hurt JESUS, but rather serve as a ladder to reach Him through suffering and humiliation. A Saint is someone who always picks himself up again. I no longer remember who said this, but always picking oneself up again implies that one is always falling down!"

In February 1923, Sister Marie of the Trinity caught pneumonia. Shortly thereafter, a spot appeared on her head—it was a painful lupus that gradually spread over her entire face and made her look like a leper. Rather than being sad over this, she was happy to reproduce on

her face the Holy Face of JESUS in His Passion, which she had contemplated in meditating on the prophet Isaiah: *As many were astonished at Him—His appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and His form beyond that of the sons of men ... He had no form or comeliness that we should look at Him, and no beauty that we should desire Him. He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces He was despised, and we esteemed Him not. Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with His stripes we are healed* (Is. 52:14-53:5).

"My body is you!"

At an early age, Marie of the Trinity had developed the practice of contemplating the disfigured Face of Our Lord. One day, as she was contemplating the Holy Face, she thought, "This holy Image shows the head of Christ, but where is His body?" And the Lord seemed to answer her, "My body is you!" "Yes," she wrote on April 3, 1910, "we are the body of this adorable Head, so how can we be surprised, then, to face suffering, scorn, and humiliation?" Thus was she ready to carry this cross with love for Him Whom she loved above all else. She grew to understand more and more that her wounds, united with those of the Savior, were a source of grace for souls. She wrote to Mother Agnes on this point on April 24, 1934: "These words of the prophet: 'The Lord does not wound except to heal,' help me a great deal, when I think about my lupus. Yes, all our physical or moral wounds, united to those of JESUS, serve to heal souls, and what a grace to share in His Redemption in this way." All the same, redressing the wound was long and painful, taking two hours every morning. "My 'wolf,' ('loup' in French) she said, "devours my head day and night. What a continual act of abandon and love I must do!" One day, she reproached herself for not resembling Therese enough in her love of suffering. She prayed to her to obtain this love. The next day, August 6, 1940, during the Mass of the Transfiguration, the day that Carmel traditionally celebrated the Holy Face, she understood that this desire took her outside the "Little Way" and that it was better to accept to always be "poor and without strength." "Can one ask a little child to love suffering? He cries, he is unhappy when he suffers... God is pleased to hear us say with JESUS: 'Father, let this cup pass from Me,' for He knows that we are abandoning ourselves to His will nevertheless!" To suffer rightly, it is enough to suffer humbly, as JESUS did at Gethsemane. And this is what gives peace to our souls. This peace finds its source in the certainty that the Lord gives His strength from day to day. One day the sick woman had a very vivid

experience of this : “ Saturday, after the doctor’s visit, God made me vividly aware that it was He sustaining me while I was enduring the burning needles. I thought with sweetness that His divine hand was leading the doctor’s, and that He matched the intensity of the pain to the strength that He gave me to endure it...”

Becoming more and more stooped, Sister Marie of the Trinity soon was no longer able to walk without her cane. In spite of these premature symptoms of old age, her words remained cheerful, even when they were very profound, as in this letter of June 6, 1939 : “ My God, if I would be a little less pleasing to You without my lupus, I much prefer to keep it and be completely pleasing to You.” On July 21, 1941, she wrote to Father Marie-Bernard of La Grande Trappe Abbey, “ God is doing me the favor of not letting me know the future. I abandon myself to Him like a child to the best of fathers, who does everything for the best. My great consolation is looking at the sorrowful Face of JESUS and noting that in some ways I resemble it. Sister Therese of the Child JESUS loved to remind me often of these words from Isaiah : *He had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men.* At the time, I was surprised at her insistence on always going back to the same topic. Now, I truly believe God had inspired her to tell me these things that would do me so much good later on.” A Carmelite monk who met her in 1940 drew this vivid picture of her : “ She was at that time over 65 years old, but wore her years valiantly in spite of the lupus that afflicted over half her face. She gave me an impression of holiness and simplicity that I have not forgotten. She spoke of Saint Therese with an affectionate and respectful veneration that still moves me. ”

Whatever it cost her, she took part in the activities of the community, taking her turn reading in the refectory

Let us ask Sister Marie of the Trinity to obtain for us her docility toward the Divine Will in the little things of each day, in order to console the Heart of JESUS and win Him a great many souls.

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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and going to the choir office, leaning on her ever-present stick. When she was unable to attend Matins, she would make up for it the next day by being the first to arrive. Henceforth, her health declined inexorably. She received the last sacraments on January 15, 1944, saying, “ Sweet and humble JESUS.” That night her last words were heard : “ In Heaven, I will follow little Therese everywhere.” After a short agony, she died on January 16, the feast of Our Lady of Victories, at 11 o’clock in the morning.

Privileged collaborators

Sister Marie of the Trinity is for one and all a guide on the way of spiritual childhood. She helps us grasp the value of suffering humbly united to the Lord’s, in accordance with the teaching that Pope John Paul II gave several weeks before his death, at a time when he himself bore the burden of suffering and old age : “ Dear sick friends, if you unite your sufferings to the sufferings of Christ dying on the cross to save us, you will be His privileged collaborators in the salvation of souls. This is your mission in the Church, which is always deeply aware of the role and value of illness enlightened by faith. Thus, your suffering is never wasted ! Indeed, it is valuable for it is a mysterious but real sharing in the saving mission of the Son of God. ... The Pope, therefore, sets great store by the value of your prayers and sufferings : offer them up for the Church and for the world ” (Message to the Sick, February 11, 2005). Two days later, John Paul II added, “ We do not enter eternal life without bearing our cross in union with Christ. We do not attain happiness and peace without courageously facing inner combat. This combat is won with the weapons of penance, prayer, fasting and works of mercy ” (Angelus Message, First Sunday of Lent, February 13, 2005).