



Abbaye Saint-Joseph de Clairval

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Saint Teresa of Avila

Dear Friend of Saint Joseph Abbey,

ONE day in the fall of 1885, Pope Leo XIII received in audience the ambassador Merry del Val, who had come to Rome to bring his son Raphael to the Scottish College. The Pope, meeting the young man for the first time, questioned him about his studies and then asked : “ Why are you entering the Scottish College ? ” After having heard the reply, he responded, in a commanding tone, “ No. Not the Scottish College, but the Academy of Ecclesiastical Nobles. ” The Vicar of Christ’s intervention would decisively direct this young man’s future.

Raphael Merry del Val was born October 10, 1865 in London, where his father, a Spanish diplomat of Irish descent, was secretary of the Spanish embassy. Early on Raphael demonstrated an intelligence and strength of character beyond his years, and showed a natural inclination to piety. He brilliantly completed his studies at the preparatory school Bayliss House, in Slough. The boy was passionate about sports—tennis, cricket, riding, fencing—and also loved chess. Yet, his heart burned with another, much stronger passion—to become a priest, to work for the salvation of souls and the conversion of England. To test him, his father asked him one day : “ How will you manage, Raphael, if you become a priest, since you love sports, games, and riding so much ? ” The young man replied without hesitation : “ For God, I can and I must sacrifice everything ! ” At eighteen, with youth smiling on him with its promises and enchantments, the ambassador’s son entered Ushaw College to begin the studies that would lead him to the priesthood.

After studying philosophy and receiving minor orders, Merry del Val left to pursue his training in Rome, to comply with the wishes of Cardinal Vaughan, the Archbishop of Westminster. A young cleric in the midst of priests who were preparing themselves for diplomatic assignments in the Church, Raphael imposed a rule of life on himself, dividing his day between work and prayer, renouncing the little liberties granted to the students. During vacation time with his family, he found himself among the highest aristocracy. Yet he distanced himself as much as possible from such social activity and led a secluded life, edifying all those around him with his piety.

Given the level of Merry del Val’s education, his perfect knowledge of the major European languages, and the tradition of diplomatic service in his family, before long he caught the attention of Leo XIII, who entrusted

him with several important missions. Even though he was not yet a priest, he received the title “ Monsignor. ” Nevertheless, not letting himself be distracted by the early honors, he aspired to the altar, hoping that he could eventually devote himself to the care of souls. He was ordained a priest on December 30, 1888. Faithful to his motto, *Da mihi animas, cætera tolle – Give me souls, take everything else*, he used his free hours ministering to the children of the densely populated Transtevere neighborhood, and among the English-speaking aristocracy living in Rome.

A thwarted plan

On December 31, 1891, Leo XIII called him to the Vatican in the capacity of “ Secret Chamberlain, ” a post that made him one of those closest to the Pope. The young priest then realized that he would be unable to realize his goal of devoting himself to the care of souls. He confided his difficulty to the Supreme Pontiff, revealing his most intimate aspirations and begging him to allow him to follow his vocation as a simple priest. The Pope answered him : “ Tell me, Monsignor, are you willing to obey the Pope and to serve the Church ? ”—“ Yes, if Your Holiness orders it, ” he replied, moved. “ Good, ” concluded the Holy Father. Msgr. Merry del Val submitted and, without looking back, moved forward on the path that Providence had chosen for him. He would later comment, “ When God calls us to do something for Him, it is proof of His confidence in us ; we must respond faithfully and not betray JESUS’ trust... We must accept on the spot, with complete obedience, the plans of Providence, seeing in it the Will of God. He knows better than we do what is good for us, and, He will provide, in an even greater grace, that which we seemed to be lacking. ” He also counseled : “ It is of no importance whether something pleases one or not. All that matters is to know that it is the Will of God, and to choose it... Let yourself to be

led, from day to day, by the Lord with full trust in His Mercy and His Love for you...”

Leo XIII valued Msgr. Merry del Val's presence by his side as he sought to determine the religious situation in English-speaking countries, particularly England. The young prelate played an important role in writing the Encyclical the Pope published in 1895 urging the Christians of England to unity in the faith. He also served as secretary of the commission formed to examine Anglican ordinations. This examination resulted in the apostolic letter *Apostolica cura* of September 13, 1896, in which Leo XIII declared these ordinations invalid. In October 1899, Msgr. Merry del Val was named President of the Academy of Ecclesiastical Nobles, then, in April 1900, at the age of thirty-four, he was made a bishop.

“Be brave, the Lord will help you!”

Leo XIII died on July 20, 1903. The cardinals gathered in Rome elected Msgr. Merry del Val Secretary of the Conclave. Contrary to all expectations, the cardinals were leaning towards choosing the Patriarch of Venice, Cardinal Giuseppe Sarto. Sarto feeling incapable of taking on the responsibility of Supreme Pontiff, turned it down. Several cardinals interceded with him to beg him to accept ; finally the Cardinal Dean gave Merry del Val the responsibility of asking the chosen one if he was going to persist in his refusal and if so, whether he was authorized to officially announce the refusal to the Conclave. Msgr. Merry del Val recounted, “It was about noon when I entered the silent and dark (Pauline) chapel... I saw a cardinal kneeling on the marble floor near the altar, deep in prayer, his head in his hands and his elbows leaning on a small bench. It was Cardinal Sarto. I knelt alongside him and quietly relayed the message with which I had been entrusted. As soon as I finished, His Eminence raised his eyes and slowly turned towards me, tears streaming from his eyes... ‘Yes, yes, Monsignor,’ he continued softly, ‘tell the Cardinal Dean that he may do me this charity...’ The only words I had the strength to utter and that sprung to my lips were : ‘Eminence, be brave, the Lord will help you !’ ” When the votes were counted the next day, Cardinal Sarto, having received the required number, accepted the pontificate “as a cross, to obey the will of God.” The new Pope took the name Pius X. Perhaps Msgr. Merry del Val thought of these dramatic circumstances when he later wrote, “Moments of discouragement are a part of the cross you must bear. You must not be surprised at these difficult moments. If you fall often under the cross, arise again with courage. Accept this part of the Cross.”

The evening of the election, Msgr. Merry del Val presented himself to the new Pope with letters for him

to sign addressed to heads of state, officially announcing his election. Then, having fulfilled his duty, he prepared to take his leave. “What, Monsignor !” exclaimed Pius X. “You wish to abandon me ? No, no, stay, stay with me. Do me this charity.” Seeing the prelate's reluctance, the Pope added, “I ask you to continue in your office until I have made a decision. Do me this charity. It is the will of God ; we will work and suffer together for the love and honor of the Church.” Two months later, Pius X named him Secretary of State and a Cardinal.

Humble and a saint

The nomination of a thirty-eight year old, who moreover was not Italian, for Secretary of State, was not without surprise. Opposition, criticism, even calumnies appeared. Pius X explained, “I have chosen him because he speaks several languages. Born in England, raised in Belgium, Spanish by origin, having lived in Italy, the son of a diplomat and a diplomat himself, he understands the problems of all countries. He is humble and a saint. Every morning he comes and informs me on matters worldwide. I have never found anything to criticize in him. And, he does not compromise on principles.” Cardinal Merry del Val, without hiding the sufferings that awaited him, tackled the difficult task the Holy Father had entrusted him with. From then on he would not be his own. His name and his work would be linked to that of Pope Saint Pius X, in an intimate unity of thoughts and hopes. The following lines reveal the state of mind in which he took on his responsibility : “I have promised (God) with His grace not to begin any action without remembering that He is witness of it—that He performs it together with me and gives me the means to do it ; never to conclude any without the same thought, offering it to Him as belonging to Him ; and in the course of the action, whenever the same thought shall occur, to stop for a moment and renew the desire of pleasing Him.”

For eleven years, Pius X devoted himself without respite to important reforms of sacred music, the breviary and the Roman calendar, to the codification of canon law, and to catechetical formation. To this were added political difficulties : in Italy, the Pontifical States were unjustly taken in 1870 and the Pope was, as it were, a prisoner in the Vatican ; in France, the government was preparing to expel religious orders, confiscate Church property, and break diplomatic relations with the Vatican ; in Spain and Portugal, leftist governments were battling the Church and the Pope. Freemasonry did not miss any opportunity to malign the Church. The situation of the Church was such that it enabled a freethinker of the age to write, “Nothing will be able to reverse the tide ; Catholicism has been definitively defeated, faith is dead, and free thinking spreads victoriously like a spill of oil over all of Europe.”

Staying in the Church to change the faith

An even more serious concern for the new pontificate : the storm raged within the Church itself. A way of thinking had appeared toward the end of the 19th century : a group of intellectuals, under the pretence of adapting to the modern mentality (hence the name “modernists”), aspired to renew the Church by radically changing its moral and dogmatic teaching. Having decided to remain within the Church in order to more effectively transform it, they had the cunning to keep the Catholic vocabulary, but to give it a new meaning in keeping with their own ideas. Pius X, after several charitable appeals to these straying sheep, and seeing their stubbornness, published on July 3, 1907 the decree *Lamentabili*, which listed the modernist errors. Two months later, the Encyclical *Pascendi* officially set forth the reasons why modernism is contrary to sound philosophy and the Catholic faith.

Modernism maintains that human reason is confined to the realm of appearances and is incapable of rising to the level of God by means of creatures. The Church teaches the contrary, in full agreement with the experience of all time : “Starting from creation, that is from the world and from the human person, through reason alone one can know God with certainty as the origin and end of the universe, as the highest good and as infinite truth and beauty” (*Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 3). The principles of modernism lead to denial of the existence of objective truth and, as a result, denial of the certitude and even the possibility of Divine Revelation. Religion is reduced to symbols. God Himself is no longer the transcendent Creator (meaning pre-existing and surpassing the universe), but only an immanent force, “the universal soul of the world,” which leads directly to pantheism (the identification of the world with God). JESUS CHRIST is but an extraordinary man transformed by faith ; hence the modernist distinction between the “Christ of history,” who is no more than a man who died on a cross in Palestine, and the “Christ of faith,” whom the disciples imagined was “resurrected” and whom they “deified” in their hearts. This combination of errors led Saint Pius X to define modernism as “the synthesis of all of the heresies which threaten to destroy the foundations of the Catholic faith and annihilate Christianity.” The measures taken by the saintly Pope and his colleagues resulted in the decline of this evil, which had entered “almost into the very veins and heart of the Church.”

The dictatorship of relativism

At the centenary of the encyclical *Pascendi*, we must nevertheless note that the modernist hydra has raised its head again. Already in 1965, the crisis of the faith was

such that Cardinal Charles Journet wrote in a letter to a monk : “What you describe about a great confusion of thought is not unknown to me, for I suffer it in the depths of my heart ... May it please God to cure me of this suffering ! One cannot, without betraying Divine Revelation, call into question the dogmas of the Credo, replacing JESUS-God with the “God of JESUS,” or reinterpret the definitions of the Council of Trent on Catholic doctrine to strip them of their realistic meaning. The entire meaning of biblical Revelation is realistic. ... The crisis today is certainly graver than that of modernism. One day, believers will wake up and realize they were intoxicated with the Spirit of the World.” In 2005, Cardinal Ratzinger declared, on the eve of his election to the Papacy : “How many winds of doctrine have we known in recent decades, how many ideological currents, how many ways of thinking. The small boat of the thought of many Christians has often been tossed about by these waves—flung from one extreme to another : from Marxism to liberalism, even to libertinism ; from collectivism to radical individualism ; from atheism to a vague religious mysticism ; from agnosticism to syncretism and so forth. Every day new sects spring up, and what St. Paul says about human deception and the trickery that strives to entice people into error (cf. Eph 4 :14) comes true. Today, having a clear faith based on the Creed of the Church is often labeled as fundamentalism. Whereas relativism, that is, letting oneself be tossed here and there, carried about by every wind of doctrine, seems the only attitude that can cope with modern times. We are building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one’s own ego and desires” (Homily of the Mass “Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice”, April 18, 2005). Such evils must lead us to look at the remedies proposed by Saint Pius X to exorcise modernism : the study of sound philosophy, the return to Tradition, particularly to the doctrine of Saint Thomas Aquinas, and obedience to the Magisterium of the Church.

In this battle against the forces of Hell, Cardinal Merry del Val remained at Saint Pius X’s side, sharing the burden and courageously enduring the sometimes vicious attacks. He wrote, “Let us never act with an eye to pleasing the world. Let us have the courage to endure the criticism and disapproval of the world. Let us have no human respect ; as long as God is pleased, nothing else matters. ... We must have the courage to assert the Truth, never retreating from our duty. We must have the courage to face ridicule, because often our duty is mocked by the world. Let us do this out of love for Our Lord and to resemble Him more closely.” In another letter : “Endure in peace and resignation the pains and anxieties of each day. Remember that one cannot be a disciple of JESUS without sharing in His Passion.”

On August 20, 1914, Pius X fell asleep in the Lord, his heart broken by the outbreak of the First World War. Cardinal Merry del Val described their last meeting: "I entered the room. He immediately turned toward me, following me with his piercing gaze... He took my hand and gripped it with so much force that I was stunned. He stared at me so intensely that his eyes entered into mine. ... He kept me close to him, now letting go of my hand, now taking it back. At last, weary, he let his head fall on the pillows, his eyelids closed..."

Our Lord's greatest teaching

After the death of Saint Pius X, Cardinal Merry del Val served as archpriest of Saint Peter's Basilica and worked with the Roman Congregations. His wisdom and experience led those around him to say, "He's a born teacher." He exercised his deep fraternal charity especially through his work for the conversion of Anglicans, and gave spiritual direction to many souls. He stressed the boundless, filial trust we must have in God, and advised peacefully accepting whatever place God had put us in to do His will. In comparison to his earlier role as Secretary of State, his new position put him in relative obscurity, a situation that did not displease him. He found it an opportunity to devote more time to prayer and study, putting his ideal into practice: "Find God in the ordinary duties of everyday life. Silence and contemplation. Prayer and activity. Sacrifice and love." Cardinal Merry del Val was indeed a man of prayer. Daily after his Mass, he recited what he called the "Litany of Humility" which he had composed, but which remained unknown until his death. The litany reveals a

soul that loved Our Lord intensely and that unceasingly contemplated the humiliations of His Passion. Eager for humility, having never sought honors, the Servant of God wanted to disappear in the eyes of the world. He wrote, "Consider that humility is the basis of the Holy Family. In the humility of your family relations, you can find peace. Our Lord spent thirty years of His Life teaching the humility of the domestic virtues, to make their importance understood, and to merit the grace of their being imitated. The first, the greatest of Our Lord's teachings is humility: humility of mind, of will, of heart. We must endeavor to imitate the humility of JESUS' Heart, His Union with His Father, His renunciation, His docility to the Father's will. Like Him, abandon yourself to God's will, in little as well as great things, in the trials of each day, in the vexations and difficulties of life. Accept sorrows from the hands of Our Lord out of love for Him and see, in the consolations He grants you, the proofs of His merciful tenderness."

At the age of sixty-four, Cardinal Merry del Val still had all his strength. But on the evening of February 24, 1930, he felt slightly ill. The next day, he had an attack of appendicitis, the seriousness of which no one suspected. The afternoon of February 26, he fell asleep and died. He had written, "To die is to close one's eyes and fall asleep, only to awaken above, in Heaven ... At the moment of death, we must be peaceful, thinking that we are passing from this life to another, as through a door that opens to lead us to God." His will stated, "I lovingly accept death, when and how God wishes it, in expiation for my sins and in adoration of His decrees."

The holy Cardinal left us not only the radiant example of a life offered entirely in the service of the Church, but also precious pieces of wisdom, including: "Our Homeland is not of this world. After a few years here below, we must abandon this earth to follow Our Lord, if we have remained faithful to Him. What error, what folly to attach oneself to the things here below in a manner contrary to the will of God, to the point of offending Him, thus transforming into an obstacle that which He placed before us in order to attain eternal Life!"

Dom Antoine Marie
o.s.b.

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