



Abbaye Saint-Joseph de Clairval

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29 September 2008  
Saint Michael the Archangel

Dear Friend of Saint Joseph Abbey,

“OUR souls must be at Our Lord’s feet like these humble and simple flowers are at the foot of the mountains. ... I ask God that we never do anything for show, but do our good in the shadows, always seeing ourselves as the littlest ones in the Church of God.” These words from Saint Therese Couderc, the foundress of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Cenacle, reveal her own life, a hidden life of stunning humility.

JESUS Himself taught us humility through His example and words. The first thirty years of His life were hidden from the eyes of man, in Nazareth. Later, He frequently called His apostles to humility, in particular on the eve of the Passion when, having washed the feet of His disciples, He said to them : *Do you know what I have done to you ? You call Me Master and Lord ; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Amen, amen, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master ; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them* (Jn. 13 :12-17).

Marie-Victoire Couderc was born on February 1, 1805 in the hamlet of Sablières, a village in the Ardèche (France), into a family of neither the nobility nor the peasantry. On Mas, their vast estate, they led a peaceful but hard-working life. The parents were committed to providing their ten children with a good Catholic education. Madame Couderc did not balk at getting up very early to go to Mass twice a week. When they were still quite young, the two eldest children, Jean and Marie-Victoire, began to feel the first touch of God’s call. The still recent stories of the persecution of priests and religious during the Terror strengthened their ardent desire to give themselves to God.

At the end of March 1825, a mission was given in Sablières, at which Marie-Victoire met Father Jean-Pierre-Étienne Terme, a missionary priest. She confided to him her desire to become a nun. A few months later, Father Terme received her into the novitiate at Aps, a house that he had founded for the formation of nuns dedicated to teaching in rural areas. Marie-Victoire took the name Sister Therese. At this time, Father Terme was organizing a pilgrimage to St. Francis Regis’ tomb in La Louvesc. One day, the thought came to him to establish a house to receive women who were on pilgrimage, to

avoid many scandals. At the time, the local innkeepers lodged pilgrims of both sexes in the same rooms. He had a building constructed and placed there three religious from the novitiate in Aps : Sister Agnes, Sister Therese, and Sister Regis. In spite of her youth ( she was twenty-three ), Sister Therese was named Superior. The nuns of La Louvesc would have a double role : in the winter, they would attend to teaching in the countryside, while in the summer, they would devote themselves to welcoming female pilgrims. But soon, the too great number of pilgrims threw the house into chaos. Then the young Superior had an inspiration—to only provide lodging to those who agreed to make a novena or triduum in honor of Saint Regis.

### ***A profound impression***

In 1828, Father Terme made an Ignatian retreat that marked him deeply. On his return to La Louvesc, he preached a retreat for the Sisters and announced that from then on, Saint Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises* would be given to the female pilgrims received in their house. Soon, the number of retreatants became considerable. Mother Therese would later write, “We were full of admiration to see the fervor with which the Exercises were done.” In the face of this success, Father Terme wondered if he should continue the work in the schools. Gradually, he became convinced that only the work of the retreats should continue.

After Father Terme’s death in December 1834, the work of the retreats was entrusted to the Jesuit Fathers. Soon, Father Terme’s daughters separated into two congregations—the teachers would call themselves the “Sisters of Saint Regis,” and those who took care of the retreats the “Sisters of the Cenacle.” At the canonization of Therese Couderc, Pope Paul VI would say, “The Cenacle is a religious institute dedicated to Our Lady, the Mother of Christ who, in the heart of the first Christian community, waited for, invoked, and received

in a new fullness the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost... It is a school of life and of Christian doctrine, a refuge of silence and meditation, a clinic where one's moral and spiritual strength is renewed... The Cenacle is an institution that specializes in a social service—the Spiritual Exercises... We know how significant such an institution is in our modern world... The need to compensate ordinary life, wasted in the fascination of wickedness (Wis. 4 :12) and in the allurements of frivolousness or worldly interests, with religious and personal intensity, suits perfectly the men and women of today who wish to remain Christians and not lose sight of the true and ultimate end of our existence" (May 10, 1970).

To assure our progress toward the ultimate end, Saint Ignatius reveals to us the tactics of our enemy, Lucifer, who, by inspiring a desire for riches and a love for the vain honor of the world, tries to lead us to an unbounded pride and, from there, to all the other vices. Our Lord, on the contrary, draws us to a total spiritual poverty and to the desire for scorn and contempt in order to plant in us humility, which then disposes us to the other virtues (cf. *Spiritual Exercises*, no. 142, 146). Mother Therese soon had the opportunity to put this spiritual doctrine into practice.

### **Merciful purposes**

On October 23, 1838, an incorrect financial report, written by a scheming Sister, led the Bishop of Viviers, Bishop Bonnel, to doubt the abilities of Mother Therese. He relieved her of her duties and put in her place a novice in whom he had great hopes, conferring on her the title of "Foundress Superior" !... The humiliation was profound for Mother Therese. But the conviction grew in her that God's will for her life would be realized through the effacement of her own person, and she accepted her removal from office to live in obscurity. For her, humility was not an end in itself, but a privileged means of uniting oneself deeply with God and being a docile instrument of His most holy will. This attitude proceeds from a certainty of faith. "We must confess and believe," Mother Therese would write, "that everything God does is done well, and moreover that He always has merciful purposes in all He ordains or allows... Everything that comes from the good Master is good like He is." However difficult it may be for our nature to recognize this goodness of God in certain trials, it is always possible to see shining from them a good even more precious, the Cross. "Let us embrace the Cross such as it is given to us," Mother Therese asked. "You know that it sanctifies all that it touches since it was itself sanctified by Him Who is the source of all sanctity. Let us love it, if possible, because the more we love it, the more it will profit us."

The new Superior, who had not the slightest idea of religious life, remained in charge for only a few months, because soon, in the face of the disarray that she brought to the house, the bishop understood that she had to be replaced. Under the influence of Mother Therese, the community elected Mother Contenet, who thought it fitting to relegate the true foundress, still only thirty-five years old, to the lowest rank. She often humiliated her, even in front of the novices who, outdoing this example, ridiculed this woman who was no longer anything in the house that she had founded. The Sisters who witnessed these humiliations were astonished at Mother Therese's docility. Sister Regis would say, "For a long time she was responsible for the cellar and the garden, weeding and watering like a little servant." She was kept at a distance from everything, continually kept busy at jobs that left her separated from recreations.

### **A more intense suffering**

"In some cases," Pope Paul VI would explain, "a foundress' mission takes on the aspect of a painful drama, especially when difficulties arise from those who exercise authority in the Church or from members of her community—in other words, when those who hurt her are venerated and good people, fathers or spiritual daughters. These are sufferings that, *a priori*, would be thought unthinkable or impossible: they interfere in relationships that belong to the domain of ecclesial charity, which the Lord left us as most necessary and most beautiful. This is precisely why all wounds inflicted in such relationships produce the most intense suffering. Love increases sensitivity and transmits it from the skin to the heart... One could say that this was the story of Therese Couderc" (*Ibid.*).

In the midst of these trials, Mother was careful not to become angry. Sometimes she spoke the simple words: "That's fine," then, lowering her eyes, she took up her work again or went away with her habitual calm. A piece of advice given to a sister reveals to us the fundamental disposition of her soul: "To console Our Lord, often tell Him: 'Give me the grace to love being scorned, and so resemble you a little...'" In the school of Saint Ignatius, Mother Therese conceived the desire for a perfect humility that, in order to imitate Our Lord, "choose[s] poverty with Christ poor rather than riches, insults with Christ loaded with them rather than honors" and desires "to be accounted as worthless and a fool for Christ, rather than to be esteemed wise and prudent in this world. So Christ was treated before me" (*Spiritual Exercises*, no. 167).

Yet Mother's interior battles transpired in these words: "We must always be ready to accept in advance everything that the Lord allows or ordains. Only in this spirit can one find rest or peace... I am ashamed of my

weakness and above all, of my lack of virtue, I who receive the cross grudgingly when it draws near. But no, I want it, whatever it may be, and I will always wholeheartedly say : “ *Fiat! Fiat!* ... The Cross always bears its fruit when we carry it with submission and love.” Without knowing it, she was following the teaching given by Saint Benedict 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 am brought to nothing and I am without understanding; I have become as a beast of burden before You, and I am always with You* (Ps 72 [73] : 22-23)” (ch. 7).

### **The fruit of humility**

In 1842, Mother Therese was sent to a new foundation in Lyons. For almost eighteen months, alone with one sister, she fulfilled the lowest duties in an unsanitary house. But Providence used her to purchase another property located close to the sanctuary of Fourvière, and much more suitable for holding retreats. Then she returned to obscurity for several years, most of which were spent in Lyons. However, after the death of Mother Contenet in 1852, a serious crisis erupted in the house established in Paris. Mother Therese was sent there and, by dint of patience and prayers, she managed to redress the situation. In November 1856, she was named Superior in Tournon to prepare the sale of the house there owned by the Congregation. Her time as superior, which lasted several months, can be summed up in one word : kindness. Kindness, the expression of charity, seems to flow from the practice of humility. Saint Benedict, the great spiritual master, asserts in his *Rule* (ch. 7) that by degrees of humility, we will reach perfect charity. Saint Paul advised the Philippians : *Be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others* (Ph. 2 : 2-4).

After her stay in Tournon, Mother Therese returned to La Louvesc, then to Lyons. On October 20, 1859, a Jesuit Father gave a retreat to the Sisters that touched her deeply : “ He said,” she reported, “ that the divine Master was asking for souls dedicated to pleasing Him, to accomplishing all of His desires, that is, victims offered in sacrifice for His glory and the salvation of souls... I prayed, I offered myself to Our Lord as completely as I was able. I told Him that I did not dare offer myself as a victim, because victims must be pure to please Him, and I had offended Him so much. Then He let me understand that He wanted me nevertheless, that I pleased Him as a victim and I heard clearly these words : ‘You will be a holocaust.’ There was in me no

rebellion, I assented completely, but I was shaking and speechless.” Our Lord explained to her that in a holocaust, the victim is completely consumed. Thus, He desired that everything in her be for Him. It is not necessarily a matter of being consumed by physical or moral suffering, but of being consumed by the will of being entirely His. Wanting thus to do the will of God does not mean being a slave to an exterior and distant Master, but listening to the Lord present in the innermost depths of our soul.

### **Offering ourselves up**

Toward the end of August 1860, Mother Therese was sent to the house in Montpellier. The morning of June 26, 1864, the Lord gave her an intense illumination : “ I saw in a panorama the whole Catholic universe and a multitude of altars where the adorable Victim was being simultaneously sacrificed. The Blood of the spotless Lamb flowed in abundance on each one of these altars. I was greatly astonished that the whole world had not been sanctified by these sacrifices... Here is what I believe I heard : the sacrifice is without any doubt in itself sufficient, but souls are lacking correspondence and generosity. This generosity must lead us to offer ourselves up to God. But what does it mean to offer oneself up?... Offering oneself up means dying to everything and to oneself, no longer being concerned with the self except to keep it turned toward God. To offer oneself up means to no longer seek oneself in anything either the spiritual or the physical—that is to say, to no longer seek one’s own satisfaction, but the divine will alone.” The grace received that day completed in her soul the grace of her offering of herself as a sacrificial victim.

In the years that followed, the Good Lord granted Mother Therese many graces of prayer and lights on her own nothingness and on the divine Holiness, such as this one : “ All of a sudden, I saw written, as in letters of gold, the word ‘Goodness’ ... I saw it written on all creatures animate and inanimate, rational or not... I then understood that all the good in creatures, and all the services and aid we receive from each of them, are a benefit that we owe to the Goodness Who communicated to them something of His infinite Goodness, so that we might encounter it in everything and everywhere.”

This insight illustrates one of the meditations suggested by Saint Ignatius : “ I will consider all blessings and gifts as descending from above. Thus, my limited power comes from the supreme and infinite power above, and so, too, justice, goodness, mercy, etc., descend from above as the rays of light descend from the sun, and as the waters flow from their fountains, etc.” (*Spiritual Exercises*, no. 237). The goal of the *Exercises* is, in effect, to make us live close to God in all things, in a



faith that shows us Him at work even in the painful events of our lives.

***“I would follow You without this!”***

In 1867, the Cenacle in Montpellier was closed, and the Mother Foundress returned to Lyons. For several years, God led her on the path of participating in JESUS' agony in Gethsemane. She secretly wrote, “For years, I did not understand how one could know God and not love Him. I saw His infinite goodness everywhere and I was flooded with consolations. Serving Him was effortless... But one day, I told God: ‘I would follow You without that!’ He took me at my word, and took it all away from me... I soon saw that I had been heard, and I learned what desolation is.” Her failing health already was conforming her to Christ in His Passion—all her limbs, especially her legs, gave her pain. She lost her hearing, to the point that she was no longer able to follow a conversation in recreation. But most of all, her soul entered into agony—she saw and felt in herself the struggle that arose in JESUS' Heart in Gethsemane. She felt His horror of sin, the incomparable pain He felt at the blindness and ingratitude of sinners. Mother Therese's constant prayer was “My God, have pity on me!”

During her last years, Mother Therese spent her time in a straw armchair doing various tasks as she prayed

silently. Despite her continuing interior agony, her soul seemed calm. “My prayer is very simple,” she said one day. “I place myself in the presence of Our Lord and I tell Him everything I have in my heart. I praise Him for His divine attributes, I wish that all creatures might adore and love Him... I request the perseverance and sanctification of the just, and the conversion of sinners. In a word, I spread my soul before the Divine Majesty. If I have joys, I share them with Him; if sufferings, I confide them to Him. I prostrate myself in His presence.”

At the start of 1885, Mother Therese fainted and was unconscious for several hours. The next day, she told her Superior General about an astonishing perception she had of Purgatory: “Since yesterday, I have been surrounded by multitudes who pray continuously in penetrating tones... In one voice they beg, they moan, they adore and praise the Divine Majesty, in ineffable harmony, faith, hope, love — men's voices, women's voices, children's voices... How they pray, how they sing! Oh! If we could pray like that!”

After a difficult agony, Mother Therese peacefully rendered her soul to God on September 26, 1885, at the age of eighty. The pilgrim to La Louvesc can see her body there, still intact, apparently simply asleep, her face radiating calm and serenity.

*He who humbles himself will be exalted* (Lk. 14 : 11). These divine words, quoted several times in the Gospels, were first realized in Our Lord JESUS CHRIST, of Whom Saint Paul tells us: *Being born in the likeness of men and being found in human form, He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name which is above every other name* (Phil. 2 : 7-9). Similarly, Saint Therese Couderc “was in practice stripped of her responsibility as Superior, her title as foundress was disputed, she was given positions and duties inferior to her abilities and merits. It is above all in this humility, in this gift of self (‘offering up,’ she would say), that she appears great,” declared Paul VI in canonizing her. The fecundity of this humble life has also been manifested in abundant spiritual fruits, especially in the religious Congregation that she founded. Today, the Sisters of the Cenacle number 500 nuns working for the glory of God in eleven countries.

Let us ask Saint Therese Couderc to teach us how to practice the humility that leads to perfect Charity toward God and neighbor.

*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.*

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