



Abbaye Saint-Joseph de Clairval

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May 1, 2009

Saint Joseph the Worker

Dear Friend of Saint Joseph Abbey,

“**T**HE Church is the work of Christ, the work through which He continues and is reflected, and through which He is ever-present in the world. She is the spouse to whom He has offered Himself completely. ... If God loved the Church to the point of sacrificing His very life for her, this makes clear that she is also worthy of our love” (John Paul II, March 3, 1983). On April 24, 1988, Pope John Paul II beatified Francisco Palau, a religious who loved the Church with a passion.

Francisco Palau was born on December 29, 1811, the seventh of nine children, to a family of Catalan peasants in Lerida, Spain. Spain was in a very difficult political situation. In the words of one historian, nineteenth-century Spain saw “one hundred thirty governments, nine constitutions, three kings dethroned, five civil wars, dozens of provisional governments, and virtually countless revolutions.” In spite of the country’s difficult occupation by Napoleonic France, the solidly Christian Palau family lived their rustic life as best they could. Francisco hoped to become a priest. He was admitted to the seminary in Lerida in 1828. Four years later, he decided to enter the Carmelite order. He was received into the novitiate on October 23, 1832, and soon took the habit under the name Francisco de JESUS MARIA JOSÉ. In spite of rigorous observance of the rule, things in the monastery were not as good as they could have been. Some monks had absorbed the revolutionary ideas that were fashionable at the time. Furthermore, revolutionary forces threatened to dissolve religious orders. Nevertheless, Francisco did not hesitate to make his religious profession on November 15, 1833.

On July 25, 1835, a riot, cleverly instigated against religious, devastated the monastery where Francisco lived. Francisco managed to escape through a window and took refuge in the home of a widow who locked him in a wardrobe. The rioters searched the house. One of them tried to open the wardrobe, but gave up when the key broke in the lock. In March 1836, the government abolished all religious orders and seized their property, the beginning of an unceasing wave of violence throughout Spain. In the following years, some radicals temporarily in power forbade all communication with the Holy See. Prisons filled with bishops and priests, and the sale of church property accelerated. In July 1843, however, the moderate party regained power and sought to renew relations with Rome.

Francisco considered giving up becoming a priest and being a brother instead. The son of a farmer, he had retained his talent and taste for manual work. Yet his superiors had him continue his preparations for the priesthood. He received priestly ordination on April 2, 1836, and first exercised his ministry in Aitona’s San Antolín parish. A long series of trials for his priestly heart soon began. In June 1837, his faculties to hear confessions and preach were revoked; in March 1838, permission to hear confessions was restored, but not to preach. Apparently, his very forceful words and lack of diplomacy upset people. Later he would improve this character trait, without ever entirely overcoming it.

### ***God allows things to happen***

In August 1838, the civil governor of Lerida placed him under house arrest in Aitona, because he had been accused of using the confessional to spread propaganda against the throne. He consequently withdrew to a cave. The life of penance and contemplation he led there touched many people’s hearts, but did not please all. One night, three individuals entered the cave, determined to kill him. A few words from the priest converted their hearts, and they left after receiving the sacrament of confession. Soon, tired of forced inactivity, Father Palau left with his brother and a seminarian for Tortosa, where he devoted himself to preaching parish missions in Catalonia. Then, realizing that the political situation was about to worsen once again, he decided to exile himself in France, crossing the border on July 21, 1840. In order to remain independent of both the French government and his fellow Spanish exiles, he decided to live as a hermit. He meditated on the situation of the Church in Spain—priests and religious killed; churches, monasteries, convents, libraries, and manuscripts burned; works of art mutilated; the most despicable calumnies to discredit the Church in the eyes of the people... “How could God allow this?”, he wondered. “The faith teaches us that JESUS CHRIST

lacks neither power nor goodwill... Why does He not calm the storm, when He has the power to control it...? It is a mystery that holds me in deep meditation..." He concluded, "Only prayer can save the Spanish Church from collapse."

However, the factional fighting that was tearing Spain apart spread into France and, to escape it, Father Palau undertook a long journey through the mountainous regions of Aude and Tarn. At the beginning of 1843, with his brother and a few young Spaniards he moved into a cave in the middle of dense woods in the diocese of Montauban, on land owned by a family with whom he had become friendly. He immediately gained the confidence of the vicar general, who granted him faculties to hear confessions. He roamed the countryside, crucifix in hand, and many came to him, some for material needs, others for spiritual needs, but all in search of comfort.

A former Poor Clare nun and a young woman took Father Palau as their spiritual director. He formed a small contemplative community for them. Soon two other young women joined them. In the spring of 1846, Father Palau crossed the Pyrenees again and went to Aitona. However, a year later, he left for France once more, where he found himself facing new opposition as a result of the attitude of some of his Spanish companions who had stayed behind in France during his journey to Spain. So he retreated to an even more remote location, where he resumed the life of a hermit. Slandered before the bishop of Montauban, Father Palau defended himself for the honor of the priesthood. Nevertheless, he accepted the restrictions the bishop put him under, in particular not to celebrate Mass. Unable to resolve the conflict amicably, he returned to Spain in April 1851.

### ***The School of Virtue***

Father Palau first went to Lerida, but he was not wanted there. He then headed for Barcelona, where the bishop welcomed him with fatherly affection. He lavished his care on the young women he directed, whom he named the "Third Order Sisters of Carmel," until March 1852, when the two small communities formed in Lerida and Aitona were dissolved by order of the civil governor. With his brother Juan and several companions, the priest moved into a cave where they led a life of penance. But the bishop of Barcelona called on him for a new mission of evangelization and entrusted him with the spiritual direction of his seminarians. Father Palau organized a sort of continuous mission, a series of talks that each Sunday gave adults systematic instruction in the Catholic faith. Later on, this catechism would be called the "School of Virtue." Its goal was to reconcile people with the Church, science with faith, and politics

with religion, to bring the spirit of Christianity into social institutions. Aware of the growing gulf between the powerful and the weak, the rich and the poor, Father Palau sought to achieve a true integration of the working-class world into society.

Led by a group of priests and laymen, the School of Virtue used an original method that combined lectures with the active participation of the listeners, allowing for dialogue and questions and answers as much as possible, without omitting time for group prayer. The first part of the curriculum was based on St. Thomas Aquinas' treatise on the virtues, in the form of a catechism. The second part dealt with the social doctrine of the Church, establishing the rights of the individual and the family, and the right to association. Father Palau urged men to perform their temporal duties according to the Gospels, and declared, in the face of accusations of obscurantism leveled against the Church, that the Church considered intellectual and material progress to be a Christian duty. The Second Vatican Council would later remind the faithful that "the laity, by their very vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God. ... It is their special task to order and to throw light upon these affairs in such a way that they may come into being and then continually increase according to Christ to the praise of the Creator and the Redeemer" (*Lumen gentium*, 31).

### ***The peace of Christ***

In the large city of Barcelona, where the School of Virtue began, the riches and success of some were built at the cost of the misery and suffering of others. Father Palau explained that peace, and both temporal and spiritual happiness, require that social rights be recognized, accepted, respected, and protected. As Pope Benedict XVI recalled on May 13, 2007, "The Christian life is not expressed solely in personal virtues, but also in social and political virtues." If hearts do not adhere to Christ's command to love one another, Father Palau rightly thought, there will never be true or lasting peace, justice, brotherhood, or liberty on earth. His success was impressive—he managed to gather two thousand people in the church on Sunday afternoons, where love and justice were spoken of to the worker and the employer, where the truth was preached to the student and the teacher, where the doctor and the lawyer confirmed the harmony between science and revelation. Many troubled minds rediscovered peace.

Students at the School of Virtue belonged in large part to the working class, and some government officials claimed that the school advocated dangerous socialist ideas. In 1854, labor strikes broke out in Barcelona. The military authority ordered the suppression of the School

of Virtue, which was accused of playing a significant role in these strikes. The workers as well as the leaders of the Textile Workers' Society defended the School. In spite of this, on April 6 the governor ordered Father Palau's immediate exile to the Island of Ibiza (Balearics). He would write: "Since we had refrained from meddling in politics, if politics had left religion alone, the School of Virtue would have peacefully followed its path." Pope Benedict XVI would later say, "The Church is the advocate of justice and of the poor, precisely because she does not identify with politicians nor with partisan interests. Only by remaining independent can she teach the great criteria and inalienable values, guide consciences and offer a life choice that goes beyond the political sphere. To form consciences, to be the advocate of justice and truth, to educate in individual and political virtues: that is the fundamental vocation of the Church in this area" (May 13, 2007).

### **"I was contemplating"**

In Ibiza, Father Palau suffered profoundly from his forced inactivity. With two of his faithful companions, he transformed the uncultivated land that had been given to him into a vegetable garden and orchard. Sensitive to artistic beauty in all of its forms, Father Palau was often inspired. "In all seasons," he wrote, "I opened the windows, and from my telescope, I contemplated all the beauties of winter, spring, summer, and fall." He lavished his spiritual care on the island's population. During this exile, his spiritual life deepened. He understood more profoundly the link between love of God and love of neighbor: "If love seeks God alone, believing that God, without relation to neighbor, is enough, it remains there, going no further. If love does not go out to pour itself out on one's neighbor, spiritual selfishness will consume and ruin it."

Decrees of amnesty were promulgated in 1856 and 1857. Father Palau hoped to be able to take advantage of them, but the government was unwilling to apply them to him. He was forced to wait for the general amnesty of May 1, 1860. The following August 30, a Catholic newspaper announced to Barcelonans that "the government has favorably received the just objections made by the wise and virtuous priest (Father Palau), who, for so long, has endured the consequences of an unfair persecution. The high courts of the nation have in justice declared his innocence."

At the end of 1860, Francisco Palau was graced with a mystical vision in which he saw the Church in the form of a young woman. Pure Virgin and fruitful Mother, the Church is a pilgrim here on earth, appearing sinful in her fallible members. The weeds of sin are mixed with the good wheat of the Gospel until the end of time (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, CCC,

827). Aware of this truth, on Good Friday, March 25, 2005, Cardinal Ratzinger offered this prayer: "Lord, Your Church often seems like a boat about to sink, a boat taking in water on every side. In Your field we see more weeds than wheat. The soiled garments and face of Your Church throw us into confusion. Yet it is we ourselves who have soiled them! It is we who betray You time and time again, after all our lofty words and grand gestures. Have mercy on Your Church; within her too, Adam continues to fall. When we fall, we drag You down to earth, and Satan laughs, for he hopes that You will not be able to rise from that fall; he hopes that being dragged down in the fall of Your Church, You will remain prostrate and overpowered. But You will rise again. You stood up, You arose and You can also raise us up. Save and sanctify Your Church. Save and sanctify us all" (Stations of the Cross, ninth station).

### **Passionate about the Church**

However, in spite of the weaknesses of her members, the Church is holy in herself: "The Church is holy insofar as the Most Holy God is her author. Christ has given Himself for her to sanctify her and make her a source of sanctification. The Holy Spirit gives her life with charity. In the Church one finds the fullness of the means of salvation. Holiness is the vocation of each of her members and the purpose of all her activities. The Church counts among her members the Virgin MARY and numerous Saints who are her models and intercessors. The holiness of the Church is the fountain of sanctification for her children who here on earth recognize themselves as sinners ever in need of conversion and purification" (*Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 165). Father Palau was passionate in defense of the Church. He was driven by his love, his desire to serve this Church made of living stones, his brothers. He would later say that all his time spent in prayer, all his apostolic or contemplative activities, had but one goal: to unite him with the Church in faith, hope, and love. The Church was for him Christ "contemplated and loved not as a single individual, but as the head of a body, an entirety", a mystery to be lived more than a truth to be believed, the sole instrument of Salvation. Union with the Church is the most intimate means of communing with Christ, fulfilled in a special way in the Eucharist.

"I must go from one end of Spain to the other and work with all my strength for the salvation of souls, anywhere a path is opened for me," Father Palau wrote. From that point on, his apostolate began to branch out and again grew feverish and intense; all the while he remained faithful to his private prayer and penances. Clearly seeing the situation in Barcelona, he noted that industry was bringing in thousands of people whose material and spiritual needs were tremendous.

Everywhere he established groups of active Christians who, with their parish priests, could provide Sunday talks for youth, gatherings that would protect them from idleness and dangerous amusements. He fought against ignorance, superstition, and loss of piety. Yet he did not forget the Congregation he had established, his Third-Order Carmelite Brothers and Sisters. The men's branch had been founded in Majorca in 1860. Soon after, in February 1861, the Sisters were established in Minorca. Without neglecting its contemplative element, the Congregation took charge of schools, and then also began caring for the sick both in patients' homes and in hospitals. Although the Congregation's establishment in Minorca did not last long, its work spread to Aragon and Catalonia.

In 1865, the missions in Ibiza and Barcelona completely absorbed Father Palau. In December 1866, he went to Rome to obtain official recognition of the Congregation of Third Order Carmelites. On January 8, 1867, he was granted the right to receive the religious vows of his spiritual sons and daughters, with prior permission from the local bishop. This same year, he wrote the statutes for the Third Order Brothers. These Brothers, at the time twenty-six in number, were spread across six houses. This men's foundation, very dear to Father Palau, would last until Spain's 1936 Civil War, at which time all but one of its members would be massacred during the initial outbreak. As for the Sisters from the initial foundation, they would eventually form themselves into two Congregations for women that would spread to four continents: the Teresian Missionary Carmelites, and the Carmelite Missionary Sisters.

In 1868, Father Palau launched a weekly periodical, "El Ermitaño." In it, he demonstrated a true talent for polemics, especially in his defense of the Church, for it was then that forceful remarks flowed naturally from his

pen. His sense of humor permitted him to smile at his own adventures and gave new courage to those who wrote to him, disturbed at the turn of events. Following the revolution of September 1868, a new wave of persecutions unfolded in Spain. Father Palau was imprisoned at the end of October 1870, with several of his Brothers and Sisters. After two months of detention he was freed, but it would be another year before the judge would recognize his innocence.

### ***"Teresa, it's time!"***

At the end of his life, Father Palau traveled a great deal, anguished at the thought of leaving his work unfinished, for numerous foundations were in the planning stages, but he lacked financial and human resources. In addition, some of his companions had left him and sowed trouble with their criticisms. He established a central house in Tarragona, from which he could direct all the work. On February 14, 1872, he published a booklet containing the Rules and Constitutions of the Third Order of Discalced Carmelites. Around this time, Father Palau accompanied three of his Sisters to Calasanz, Aragon, where a deadly epidemic had broken out. Their devotion to the sick touched at times on heroism. Father Palau returned to Tarragona, exhausted by this charitable work. He recommended the Church one last time to those around him: "Pray for the triumph of the Church, uniting your prayers with those of Saint Joseph, for we make him our mediator... I have never strayed from the Church in the least detail. In my opinions, I have always subjected my judgment, having no other interest than the glory of God." With the entire community gathered in his room, he said, "Kneel, so that I may bless you!" Raising his right hand, he blessed his children and added, addressing Saint Teresa of Avila: "Teresa, it's time!" and, his arm raised, he breathed his last.

Father Palau always had a filial affection for the Virgin MARY. In 1864, she revealed herself to him as the Church's most perfect figure, which is how he presented her to the faithful. "But while in the most Blessed Virgin the Church has already reached that perfection whereby she exists without spot or wrinkle, the faithful still strive to conquer sin and increase in holiness. And so they turn their eyes to MARY" (CCC, 829). Let us ask Our Lady to grant us an unfailing love for the Church.

*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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