



Abbaye Saint-Joseph de Clairval

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Saint Benedict

Dear Friend of Saint Joseph Abbey,

AUTUMN 1793. The French Revolution had entered its most violent phase, the Reign of Terror. Priests who had remained in communion with the Holy See were being hunted down and tried. The evening of October 12, in Coutances, Normandy, 37-year-old Father Pierre Toulorge was radiant as he returned from his trial to the cell he shared with other prisoners, priests and lay people. “So, what’s the news?” “Good news—my case was decided in my favor!” Everyone thought he had been acquitted. However, soon he revealed the truth—a death sentence, without appeal. The joy in the cell was replaced by sadness. A nun who had been arrested at the same time as him, Sister Saint-Paul, burst into tears. The martyr then told her sternly: “Madame, the tears you are shedding are unworthy of you and me. What would worldly people say if they knew that having renounced the world, we found it difficult to leave it? If we are loathe to die, we will give the children of this century a bad example, and perhaps your discouragement will close the door of Salvation for many souls who might find themselves in the same situation. Let us teach them by our constancy what they must do. Let us show that faith is victorious over torture, and open a path to Heaven amidst the final efforts of hell.” Who was this fearless witness to Christ and His Church?

Born and baptized on May 4, 1757 in Muneville-le-Bingard, France, on the Cotentin peninsula, Pierre-Adrien was the third child of Julien Toulorge and Julienne Hamel who owned a small farm. The diocese of Coutances in which he grew up had remained, in the era of Voltaire, a region of religious fervor. Nearly everyone participated in the sacraments at Easter, and vocations flourished. Pierre-Adrien was pious, and when his first aspirations to the priesthood began to take shape, he was taken under the wing of one of the assistant priests who taught him Latin. The young man was soon sent to school for first his general studies and then philosophy. Around 1776, he was admitted to the major seminary in Coutances, run by the Eudists; the seminary’s Superior, Father François Lefranc, would be martyred in Paris in September 1792. Ordained a priest in 1782, Pierre-Adrien Toulorge was made assistant curate in Doville, a parish of six hundred inhabitants. The parish priest there was a Norbertine canon, methodical and zealous. The financial situation allowed the two priests to live modestly but decently. The parish had many people made poor by the American Revolutionary War, which had ruined the sea trade and maritime occupations. The parish priest and his curate were intent on helping these individuals.

A Happy Condition

The text of one of the young curate’s sermons on the happiness of the just and the misery of the wicked has survived to this day. It includes the following passage, which is truly prophetic: “How happy, my Brothers, is

the condition of the children of God! He tests them, but out of love. He afflicts them, but He renders their afflictions pleasant; they suffer, and soon His love is moved, and hastens to comfort them. It pours into their hearts a thousand blessings of sweetness that transport them. Yes, my Brothers, in the tender outpourings of the Consoling Spirit, one is penetrated by a divine pleasure, an ineffable, indescribable joy. The nature of misfortunes changes, one loves them, one suffers at having nothing to suffer, and all a faithful soul desires is to perpetuate or consummate its sacrifice.”

Pierre Toulorge often went to the nearby Norbertine Abbey in Blanchelande. Founded by Saint Norbert in Picardy around 1120, the Norbertines (or Premonstratensian Order) focus on the communal celebration of the Divine Office and pastoral ministry. The Norbertines, called Canons Regular, wear white habits. Pierre-Adrien asked the Prior to receive him into the community. His aim was twofold: to devote himself to priestly ministry in the countryside, and to practice community life, in order to draw spiritual support from it. He was admitted, then left to complete his novitiate at the abbey in Beauport, Brittany. In June 1788, Canon Toulorge returned to Blanchelande and made his religious profession. He exercised his ministry in the surrounding parishes, particularly by preaching.

However, in January 1789, the States-General (the kingdom’s general assembly) were convened in Versailles by King Louis XVI. Events soon took a revolutionary turn. The Constituent Assembly that had, in a

daring coup, seized power, had Voltairian tendencies—it despised Religious and coveted their property. On February 13, 1790, it abolished monastic orders and nationalized their assets; the Canons Regular were put in the same category as monks. In April, the municipality of Saint-Sauveur-le-Vicomte sent a team of representatives to Blanchelande to take a detailed inventory—it lasted two months—of the abbey’s assets, in order to put them up for sale. Each of the five canons was then asked if he wished to “take advantage of the provisions of law in order to leave the monastic life.” The Prior and the Sub-Prior responded “yes”; the three other Brothers asked to continue to live in community and follow their Rule. They were told they would be allowed to withdraw to the department’s “concentration monastery”, where religious from all orders would be rounded up. Faced with this less than reassuring prospect, the three canons quietly left to continue serving parishes. For a year and a half, Pierre Toulorge was lodged at a neighboring farm.

Error of judgment

In July 1790, the National Assembly promulgated the “Civil Constitution of the Clergy,” a schismatic act that placed the Church in France under civil authority. From then on, bishops and pastors were to be elected by the people, and the Holy See was stripped of all authority. In November, a new law required priests in public service — bishops, parish priests, curates — to swear an oath of fidelity to the Civil Constitution, under pain of being stripped of their office and, if they persisted, criminal prosecution. In March 1791, Pope Pius VI condemned the Civil Constitution and forbade clergy from taking the schismatic oath. In the meantime, many priests had taken the oath out of ambition, greed, weakness, or ignorance. Some later retracted their oaths when they learned of the papal condemnation.

On August 26, 1792, as the “revolutionary machine” moved inexorably forward, a law was passed calling for the deportation of all public service clergy who had not taken the oath. From then on, their hatred of priests and religion visibly drove the persecutors. The “refractory” priests who remained in France, or who returned after leaving, would soon be subject to death. The faithful clergy *en masse* went into exile. At this point, Father Toulorge made an error of judgment—he thought he was affected by the banishment law, when it only applied to public service priests. He obtained traveling papers and, on September 12, embarked for the nearby Anglo-Norman island of Jersey. There he joined over five hundred priests from the diocese of Coutances, and for five weeks, lived the precarious existence of a penniless exile. However, a confrere in exile pointed out to him his error on the scope of the banishment law. Then Pierre-Adrien, thinking of his country so short of

faithful priests, decided to return as soon as possible, in the hope that his absence had not been noticed. He landed secretly on a beach in Cotentin and soon went underground—from November 1792 to September 1793, he lived in hiding, going from village to village in disguise, to celebrate Mass in private homes and to administer the sacraments. Twenty other refractory priests carried out the same ministry in the area. Father Toulorge celebrated Holy Mass with makeshift vestments; he had copied by hand the main prayers from the Missal. He pursued his activity despite being hunted by the local commissioners and revolutionary clubs. Anyone who spotted a refractory priest was encouraged to report him to the authorities, and was promised a reward.

A poor beggar

The evening of September 2, 1793, close to the village of Saint-Nicolas-de-Pierrepoint, a passerby saw a “muddy, wet, tired” vagabond appear suddenly from a thicket. Charitably, the woman invited him into her home and lit a fire. His trust having been won, the poor beggar made himself known—it was Father Toulorge. The hostess, in turn, revealed her identity—Sister Saint-Paul, a former Benedictine nun who had been driven from her priory by the Revolution. The priest accepted her hospitality for the night. The next morning, the nun led him, disguised as a woman, to the home of a friend, Marotte Fosse, thinking he would be safer there. But some workers, seeing this unfamiliar woman walk by, noticed his men’s stockings and shoes. Tempted by the promised reward, they followed the two suspicious characters from a distance to Marotte’s door, and then went to inform the Revolutionary Committee. As Pierre-Adrien was resting in the attic, three national guards knocked so violently on the front door they made it shake. “Open in the name of the Law!” Father Toulorge froze. A guard went to look for Marotte, who had left for work, and made her open the door. The house was searched from top to bottom. The priest had hidden himself under bundles of flax—the national guards stabbed with their bayonets at the pile of bundles. Nothing! They were going to leave, muttering to themselves, when one of them went back to the attic and discovered Pierre-Adrien, as he was coming out of his hiding spot. The priest was immediately arrested and the evidence — vestments, chalice, etc. — seized.

Two days later, the accused were taken to the director of Carentan district to be put on trial. To avoid the death sentence decreed for “returned exiles”, Pierre-Adrien hid the fact that he had left France. Commissioner Le Canut, hoping to get him to contradict himself, asked him point-blank: “Have you ever, at this time or at any other time, gone to Jersey or to any other foreign land?” “No.” “But a refractory priest we

interrogated a little while ago told us he had seen you in Jersey.” (This was a fabrication by Le Canut.) “I have never left French soil and, if others have told you I have, they are either mistaken or crazy.” He was then shown the vestments and the liturgical objects seized from the Fosse home, and he admitted they were his. The judges, uncertain, decided to send the accused to the departmental court in Coutances.

“Let your ‘yes’ be ‘yes’ and ‘no’, ‘no’ ”

Father Toulorge had, to save his life, denied having gone to Jersey. It is true that a defendant is not required to give witness against himself when objective proof of his guilt has not been established. Yet, back in prison, the religious was immediately plagued with remorse. He thought he had failed the truth. JESUS’ words echoed in his heart: *Let your ‘yes’ be ‘yes’ and your ‘no’, ‘no’* (Mt. 5 :37). He felt driven to tell the whole truth, whatever the consequences might be. At dawn on September 8, the feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin MARY, Pierre-Adrien spontaneously confessed that he had spent time in Jersey. The deposition went with him to Coutances, where he was imprisoned the same day. The priest from Normandy arrived in the principal town in the Manche department at the worst possible moment—representative Lecarpentier was staying there, sent by the Convention (the Republic’s parliament) to “take every possible measure to wipe out any vestiges of royalty and superstition.” Lecarpentier would go down in history as the “Executioner of La Manche.” In a few days, one hundred forty people were arrested.

On September 22, 1793, Pierre-Adrien appeared before the administrative Commission of Coutances, charged with determining if he should be declared a “returned exile.” Interrogated at length in spite of his physical exhaustion, he admitted his brief emigration to Jersey. The judges, who feared Lecarpentier but would have liked to save the priest’s life, declared that “the defendant must be considered an exile,” based on the traveling papers in his name, but they did not mention his confession, to allow him a chance to exonerate himself. They then sent him before the criminal court, whose duty it was to sentence him. Although Loisel, the presiding judge in this case, was a Jacobin, he was not a fanatic “terrorist”—no one liked seeing blood run in Lower Normandy. Before the hearing, he tried to save the defendant by suggesting to him that he retract his confession of having emigrated to Jersey and that he vaguely allude to having stayed somewhere in France. The court would be satisfied with it, and Toulorge would avoid the guillotine. Some judges were even ready to answer questions from the president on the priest’s behalf, so that he would not have to burden his conscience—he would only have to remain silent. But

he preferred to die than not tell the full truth, even to a French revolutionary court.

The *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, published by Pope Benedict XVI, replies to the question, “What is one’s duty toward the truth?”: “Every person is called to sincerity and truthfulness in acting and speaking. Everyone has the duty to seek the truth, to adhere to it and to order one’s whole life in accordance with its demands. In JESUS CHRIST the whole of God’s truth has been made manifest. He is ‘*the truth*’. Those who follow Him live in the Spirit of truth and guard against duplicity, dissimulation, and hypocrisy” (no. 521). Commitment to the truth led Father Toulorge to his heroic decision.

The records of the Tribunal for October 12, 1793 read: “Toulorge, questioned as to whether he was in a position to prove that he had not left the territory of the French Republic, said that he could not, and even admitted to having left French territory and withdrawn to the English island of Jersey.” The end of this sentence (“and even admitted...”) was added to the margin of the proceedings that had been prepared ahead of time—this detail shows that the court had anticipated giving the benefit of the doubt to the defendant. But his unequivocal confession “forced” the judges to apply the reign of terror’s law.

Farewell, Messieurs, until Eternity!

A moving silence followed the reading of the verdict. Then Pierre-Adrien uttered these words: “Deo gratias! (Thanks be to God) ... May God’s will, not mine, be done! Adieu, Messieurs, until Eternity, if you make yourselves worthy of it!” His face shone with joy. Housewives who passed him as he was being taken back to prison thought he had been acquitted. When evening came, the prisoner dined with a healthy appetite, then went to confession and managed to write three letters. To a friend: “I have very good news to tell you. They have just read me my death sentence. Tomorrow, at two o’clock, I will leave this earth laden with abominations to go to Heaven. My consolation right now is that God is giving me tremendous joy and serenity—and what strengthens me is the hope that soon I will possess my God...” To his brother: “Rejoice, tomorrow you will have a protector in Heaven, if God, as I hope, sustains me, as He has up till now. Rejoice that God has found me worthy of suffering not only prison, but even death for Our Lord JESUS CHRIST. It is not to perishable goods that we must be attached. So turn your eyes toward Heaven, live as a good Christian, and raise your children in the Holy Catholic, Apostolic, and Roman Faith, outside of which there is no salvation.” Finally, he announced his imminent martyrdom to an unidentified

person, adding, “I did not deserve such an obvious sign of God’s goodness.”

The condemned man then slept the sleep of the just. The next day, Sunday, October 13, he appeared joyful and calm. He asked for his hair to be cut and his beard shaved. He talked about Heaven with his companions. He said the breviary with them and stopped at the hymn for compline (the evening prayer), after having recited this verse: “When, Lord, will dawn Your day that knows no end?” He then exclaimed, full of joy: “Soon I will sing this thanksgiving canticle in Heaven.” When the executioner came for him, Pierre Toulorge blessed those present. The guillotine was set up in the center of Coutances—it was the first time since the Revolution began that it was being used in the little city. Arriving at the foot of the scaffold, Pierre-Adrien said, “My God, I place my soul in Your hands. I ask that You reestablish and preserve Your Holy Church. I beg You to forgive my enemies.” After the execution, the executioner grabbed the head by the hair and showed it to the people. According to an eyewitness account, Pierre-Adrien was buried by pious individuals in the cemetery of Saint-Pierre, according to the custom observed for priests: the face uncovered and facing west. He had kept a look of great serenity on his face. Sister Saint-Paul and those accused of having hidden Father Toulorge were acquitted—the martyr, from the heights of Heaven, had extended his protection over them.

When in 1922 a number of diocesan processes for the beatification of martyrs of the French Revolution in Normandy were undertaken, Father Pierre-Adrien Toulorge’s cause was considered the most worthy of

those of the fifty-seven priests killed in this province. The diocesan process was concluded in 1996, and the cause is currently underway in Rome.

A daily witness

In his August 6, 1993 encyclical *Veritatis splendor*, Pope John Paul II wrote, “Martyrdom is an outstanding sign of the holiness of the Church. Fidelity to God’s holy law, witnessed to by death, is a solemn proclamation and missionary commitment *usque ad sanguinem* (to the point of shedding blood), so that the splendor of moral truth may be undimmed in the behavior and thinking of individuals and society. This witness makes an extraordinarily valuable contribution to warding off, in civil society and within the ecclesial communities themselves, a headlong plunge into the most dangerous crisis which can afflict man: the confusion between good and evil, which makes it impossible to build up and to preserve the moral order of individuals and communities. ... Although martyrdom represents the high point of the witness to moral truth, and one to which relatively few people are called, there is nonetheless a consistent witness which all Christians must daily be ready to make, even at the cost of suffering and grave sacrifice. Indeed, faced with the many difficulties which fidelity to the moral order can demand, even in the most ordinary circumstances, the Christian is called, with the grace of God invoked in prayer, to a sometimes heroic commitment. In this he or she is sustained by the virtue of fortitude, whereby — as Gregory the Great teaches — one can actually ‘love the difficulties of this world for the sake of eternal rewards’ ” (no. 93).

To Father Toulorge the people of Cotentin have given the title “martyr for truth.” May this priest, through his intercession, gain for us the grace of giving witness with our entire lives to Christ, who is Truth itself.

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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