



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Newsletter of January 1, 2010,
Solemnity of MARY Mother of God

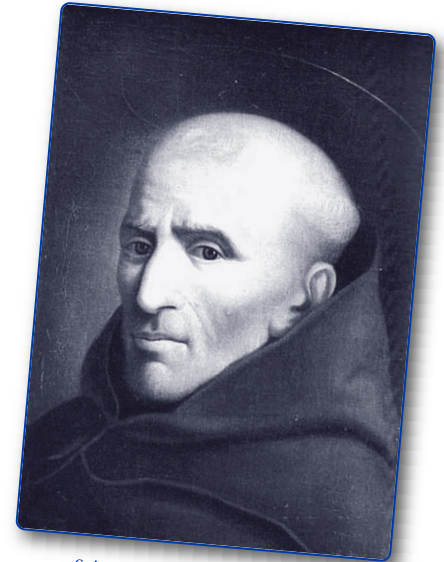
Dears Friends,

DURING his trip last year to Angola, Pope Benedict XVI brought up an objection often made to missionaries of the Gospel: "Why not leave them in peace? They have their truth, and we have ours. Let us all try to live in peace, leaving everyone as they are, so they can fulfill their own identities as fully as possible." To which the Pope answered, "If we are convinced and have come to experience that without Christ life lacks something, that something real – indeed, the most real thing of all – is missing, we must also be convinced that we do no injustice to anyone if we present Christ to them and thus grant them the opportunity of finding their truest and most authentic selves, the joy of finding life. Indeed, we must do this. It is our duty to offer everyone this possibility of attaining eternal life" (Homily in Saint Paul's Church in Luanda, March 21, 2009). Saint Leonard of Port Maurice stands out among the preachers who have taken seriously this duty of preaching salvation to all.

On December 20, 1676, in Porto Maurizio, on the Ligurian coast in northern Italy, a little boy was born who, at his baptism, was placed under the patronage of Saints Paul and Jerome. He would later say that he had the grace of having very good parents. His was an exemplary youth – he easily led his companions to pray and do good works. One of his favorite spiritual authors was Saint Francis de Sales, whose book *Introduction to the Devout Life* was always with him. He found moral and spiritual support in the meetings for youth organized by the Jesuits and Oratorians – he drew from them a growing fervor to practice virtue, with a desire to do penance. On holidays, he roamed the streets and squares of Rome and, braving scorn and insults, exhorted all who would listen to go to the sermons in the churches.

Words that go straight to the heart

Paul Jerome felt called to the religious state. His confessor encouraged him to intensify his life of prayer and penitence to obtain the grace to know God's will. One day, as he saw two monks shabbily dressed and of modest manner, Reformed Friars Minor of the Retreat of Saint Bonaventure, he suddenly felt in him the desire to embrace their way of life. Entering the monastery church just as the Brothers had begun to chant Compline, he heard these words: "Convert us, O God, Our Savior!" These words went straight to his heart, and he decided to ask to join. Admitted into the novitiate, he received the habit and the name of Brother Leonard on October 2, 1697. One year later, he made his vows. The young monk edified all those around him, particularly through



Saint Leonard of Port-Maurice

his fidelity to observance of the rule, even in its apparently most insignificant details. He loved to say, "If, while we are young, we set little store by small matters and pay them little heed, when we are older and have more freedom, we will allow ourselves liberties on the most important points."

Zealous for religious studies, he insisted that it was necessary to continue to learn in order to obtain the glory of God and the salvation of souls. After his ordination, he was appointed as a professor of philosophy. But he fell gravely ill. His superiors sent him to Porto Maurizio, his birthplace, but this change of air proved ineffective. The young priest then begged the Virgin MARY to obtain from Her divine Son robust health, which he would dedicate to gaining souls for Heaven. His prayer was heard – the illness he had been suffering from completely disappeared.

In 1708, not far from Porto Maurizio, Father Leonard preached his first "popular mission," the term for a series of homilies given in a parish by a visiting priest over several days or weeks. These missions, popular at the time, bore abundant fruit. Traditionally, the preacher took as his theme the necessity of conversion to the Lord so that one might lead a truly Christian life and ultimately obtain salvation of one's soul.

In our day, speaking of the salvation of one's soul is no longer popular. The cultural context and prevailing ideologies enclose men more and more in earthly realities; many live only for this world, without a thought for what comes after death. For others, there is indeed "an eternity" after death, but salvation poses no problem – they imagine that everyone, without distinction, will go to Heaven. In both cases, the result is unconcern for the salvation of the soul.

True happiness

However, "God put us in the world to know, to love, and to serve Him, and so to come to paradise. ... The beatitude we are promised confronts us with decisive moral choices. It invites us to purify our hearts of bad instincts and to seek the love of God above all else. It teaches us that true happiness is not found ... in any creature, but in God alone, the source of every good and of all love ... The Decalogue, the Sermon on the Mount, and the apostolic catechesis describe for us the paths that lead to the Kingdom of Heaven" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church, CCC*, nos. 1721, 1723-1724). The Lord JESUS came to reveal to mankind the infinite love of the Father, Who desires that all might be saved and share in His divine life in Heaven, but He equally insists on the fact that men will be judged according to their works and that those who die outside the divine friendship will not possess eternal life. "JESUS often speaks of *Gehenna*, of the *unquenchable fire* (cf. Mt. 5:22, 29; 13:42, 50; Mk. 9:43-48) reserved for those who to the end of their lives refuse to believe and be converted, where both soul and body can be lost (cf. Mt. 10:28). JESUS solemnly proclaims that He will send His angels, and they will gather ... all evil doers, and throw them into the furnace of fire (Mt. 13:41-42), and that He will pronounce the condemnation: *Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire!* (Mt. 25:41). The teaching of the Church affirms the existence of hell and its eternity. Immediately after death the souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into hell, where they suffer the punishments of hell, 'eternal fire.' The chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God, in whom alone man can possess the life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs" (*CCC*, 1034-1035).

Consideration of the final ends was at the heart of Father Leonard's teaching. "Consider," he wrote, "how important it is for you to achieve your final end. That is everything for you: for if you achieve it, you are saved, you are eternally happy, showered with all the benefits for your soul and body. If, on the contrary, you fail to achieve it, you are lost, body and soul, you lose God and heaven, you are eternally miserable, damned forever. So you see, among all things, the only truly useful, important, and necessary thing is to serve God and save your soul. If now you were to lose some of your possessions, you would still have the rest; if you lost a court case, you could appeal; if you made some kind of temporal error,

you could correct it. And even if you lost everything, what would it matter? For the day will come, like it or not, when you will have to leave everything behind anyway. But if you fail to achieve your final end, you will lose everything and will bring upon yourself irreparable harm for all eternity. *For what will it profit a man, the Lord says, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?* (Mt. 16:26). To save ourselves! That is our great, our only occupation. When it concerns only the affairs of this world, if you do not take care of it, another can for you. But as for the great affair of your eternal salvation, if you do not take care of it, who can do it for you? If you do not carefully look after it, who can look after it for you? If you do not help yourself in saving yourself, who will save you? This God Who created you without you does not want to save you without you. If you wish to be saved, you must concern yourself with it" (*Meditation on the end of man*).

The obstacle to get rid of

Before beginning a task, we must get rid of the obstacles that stand in the way of its completion. The obstacle to eternal salvation is mortal sin, which is a transgression committed on a grave matter, with complete awareness of God's law. "Mortal sin is a radical possibility of human freedom, as is love itself. It results in the loss of charity and the privation of sanctifying grace, that is, of the state of grace. If it is not redeemed by repentance and God's forgiveness, it causes exclusion from Christ's kingdom and the eternal death of hell, for our freedom has the power to make choices for ever, with no turning back" (*CCC*, 1861).

Here is how Father Leonard used to address his listeners on this topic: "Oh! How Saint Augustine had good reason to complain about the strange blindness that calls evil good, and good evil, according to the words of Isaiah (5:20): *Woe to those who call evil good and good evil!* He did not know whether to call it frenzy, fury, or madness – this disorder so common among men, that although sin is the most abominable evil in the world, no evil in the world is detested less than sin... In this lies the origin of so many falls, and the reason so many souls trip up, and hurl themselves into an abyss of iniquity – it is because they do not think, no, do not consider the evil they do when they commit a mortal sin" (*Sermon on the evil of mortal sin*).

Some think that mortal sin is committed only in exceptional cases of hatred or explicit contempt for God. But Pope John Paul II reminded us in the Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (August 6, 1993): "The grace of justification once received is lost not only by apostasy, by which faith itself is lost, but also by any other mortal sin ... Mortal sin is sin whose object is grave matter and which is also committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent ... For mortal sin exists also when a person knowingly and willingly, for whatever reason, chooses

something gravely disordered" which is the case "in every act of disobedience to God's commandments in a grave matter" (nos. 68 and 70). The *Catechism* explains, "Grave matter is specified by the Ten Commandments, corresponding to the answer of JESUS to the rich young man: *Do not kill, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and your mother* (Mk. 10:19)" (CCC, 1858). Sins against the sixth and ninth commandments must be named among the more common mortal sins: "Grave sins against chastity differ according to their object: adultery, masturbation, fornication, pornography, prostitution, rape, and homosexual acts. These sins are expressions of the vice of lust" (*Compendium of the CCC*, 492), which, without being the most grave, nevertheless render the mind blind to the eternal truths.

So one need not be surprised at the following words of Father Leonard: "Sinner, what are you thinking? Would you be harder than stone? Have you never reflected on the very special grace that God has granted you in giving you the time to do penance? How mad you are! What have you done to be so sure of yourself? Would it be too much to perform some small mortifications? Would it be too much to prepare a good general confession, to put an end to this life full of disorders that you are in?" (*Invitation to penance*).

The cure

But Father Leonard did not content himself with castigating evil. He also gave the cure for it – to let oneself be won over by the Lord, Who offers His mercy to all: "Consider that if God's justice is infinite with respect to obstinate sinners, His mercy is no less infinite for penitent sinners. God hates sin infinitely, but He loves His creatures infinitely. As soon as the soul repents of its sin, it recovers the love of God. If all sinners wished to return to God with contrite and humble hearts, all would be saved. This infinite kindness desires that all men reach Heaven... A mother would be less eager to rescue her child who fell into a fire than God would be to embrace the repentant sinner. The greater your sins, the greater still the triumph of the goodness, charity, and clemency of this God Who is infinitely rich in mercy" (*Meditation on God's mercy*).

"JESUS invites sinners ... to that conversion without which one cannot enter the kingdom, showing them in word and deed His Father's boundless mercy for them (cf. Lk. 15:11-32) and the immense joy in heaven over one sinner who repents (Lk. 15:7). The supreme proof of His love will be the sacrifice of His own life for the forgiveness of sins (Mt. 26:28)" (CCC, 545).

Having become a master in the art of guiding souls, Father Leonard often had experience of the value of certain devotions in helping souls to convert and retain the state of grace they had re-found. First, there was the practice of saying three *Ave Maria's* (*Hail Mary's*). This

practice originated with the German Benedictine, Saint Mechtilde, who one day asked our Lady to inspire her with a prayer that would please her. The Virgin appeared to her bearing on Her chest in golden letters the *Ave Maria*. "Never," she told her, "will anyone arrive at a greater salutation, and one could never honor me more sweetly than by respectfully saying these words." Another day, the same saint asked her heavenly Queen how to surely obtain the grace of final perseverance and of a good death. Once more, the holy Mother of God appeared to her and told her: "If you wish to obtain this great grace, say three *Aves* every day in honor of my privileges, and I will grant it to you." Saint Leonard propagated this devotion, advising the recitation of these three *Aves* in honor of MARY's privileges: "Every morning upon waking and every evening before going to bed, the soul devoted to MARY will ask for its holy Mother's blessing; and will not fail to recite three *Ave Maria's*, in honor of Her stainless purity, offering Her its senses and all its powers of soul, so that she might guard them as things that belong to Her and that are devoted to Her honor, and the soul will ask Her for the grace not to fall into sin that day (or that night)".

The trumpet of the last day

The saint also promoted this short invocation: "My JESUS, mercy!" He related a missionary's words: "When I return somewhere I have already given a mission, it often happens that penitents come to me and begin their confession with these words: 'My Father, I am a libertine who, a few years ago, came to unload at your feet a sack of iniquities. I do not know if you remember me, but, thanks to God, since the mission, I have no longer committed a sin of impurity or any mortal sin.' 'How did you do it?' the missionary asks. 'Ah, my Father, I have put into practice the great resolution you so strongly instilled in us, to commend ourselves often to God with this pious invocation: 'My JESUS, mercy!' I have done it every day, morning and night, and especially during temptations, I have frequently implored God's help by saying, 'My JESUS, mercy!' Need I say more, my Father? I have felt new strength reborn in my soul and thus I have never again succumbed'". Father Leonard continued, "My beloved brothers, who will give me a voice like thunder, or rather one of those trumpets that will resound on the day of the last judgment, so that, transported by a holy zeal, I can raise myself onto the peak of the highest mountains and from there cry out with all my strength: Lost nations! Wake up for once, and if you want to ensure your eternity, commend yourself to God, have frequent recourse to Him, through these words or ones like them: 'My JESUS, mercy!' And I give you my word, since JESUS CHRIST gave you His before I did in His holy Gospel: 'Ask, and it will be given you (Mt. 7:7), ask My help and you will have it, and with My help you will sin no more.' I give you my word, I repeat – if you commend yourselves often to God by saying 'My JESUS, mercy!' from the bottom of your heart, you will sin no more, and you will be saved."

The practice of the Stations of the Cross – which consist in following JESUS through the principal events of His Passion – already existed at the time, but were little used outside the Franciscan order. Thanks to Father Leonard, the practice spread throughout the Church. He spoke fondly of the Stations, and was not afraid to call them “the mother of all devotions, as they are the oldest, the holiest, the most pious, the most divine, the most excellent, and therefore are rightly worthy of precedence over all the others”. Single-handedly Father Leonard would erect 572 Stations of the Cross. His devotion to the Passion drew on a long tradition. Saint Bonaventure, for example, declared that, of all the pious exercises, no other contributed more effectively to one’s sanctification.

Heaven blessed the Father’s labors, and he conducted more and more missions. Nearly all of Italy and Corsica reaped the benefits of his preaching. In 1715, Father Leonard was named the superior of the Friary Saint-Francis-of-the-Mount in Florence, where he established the highest degree of order. But the solitude of an ordinary monastery was not enough for him – like Saint Francis before him, he sought a remote place where he could be, from time to time, alone with God. He founded a hermitage on a mountain, called Santa Maria dell’Incontro, to which religious who wished to could go to recollect themselves. The strictest poverty was observed there, and all applied themselves to manual labor. Soon, religious from various institutes and even

Father Leonard was reciting the *Te Deum* as he arrived at the Friary of Saint Bonaventure in November 1751. He was helped down from the carriage with difficulty – he was so weak that his pulse could no longer be felt. Scarcely having arrived at the infirmary, he confessed and received the last sacraments, after having said with surprising force the acts of faith, hope, and charity. He was offered a drink, which he accepted, and then said, “I have no words to thank God for the grace He has granted me in allowing me to die in the midst of my confreres.” Shortly after receiving Extreme Unction, he passed away peacefully. It was Friday, November 26, 1751. He was canonized by Blessed Pius IX, and Pope Pius XI declared him “the heavenly patron of priests devoted to the preaching of missions to the people.”

Saint Leonard, obtain for us the grace of a great zeal for the salvation of souls !

Dom Antoine Marie o.s.b.

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