



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Newsletter of June 24, 2010,
Nativity of Saint John the Baptist

Dears Friends,

BINTA was a teenage African Muslim girl living in Guinea. One day in 1994, she swallowed some caustic soda. Rushed to Barcelona, Spain, she was saved by an operation, and then sent to stay in a home run by the "Blue Sisters". But soon, doctors discovered that she had an enormous ulcer, peritonitis, and hemorrhaging of the stomach. In spite of another long operation, the prognosis was clear: "There is nothing more we can do." The death certificate was even prepared. The Blue Sisters began a novena to their foundress, Emilie de Villeneuve, and placed a picture and relic of Emilie in the girl's hand. Suddenly, Binta opened her eyes and, without any possible medical explanation, quickly recovered. After twenty-three days of unconsciousness, she got up by herself and returned to the Sisters' residence, completely healed. This miracle made possible the beatification on July 5, 2009 of Emilie de Villeneuve in Castres, in the south of France.



Blessed Jeanne-Émilie de Villeneuve

Congrégation des Sœurs Bleues de Castres

Emilie de Villeneuve was born in Toulouse, France, on March 9, 1811, into one of the oldest aristocratic families of the region. Two other girls, Léontine and Octavie, had preceded her. Every summer, the family went to their chateau in Hauterive, near Castres, and, after the birth of a son, Ludovic, in 1815, the family moved there. Madame de Villeneuve educated and raised her children herself in spite of her poor health, which had been ruined at an early age by the hardships of the Revolution. Her husband was completely occupied in the cultivation of their land, which he strode every inch of, directing the farm work. Discipline was strict at the chateau: no fires in the bedrooms, silence at table, and in the salon, the children were relegated to the far end of the room and forbidden to make noise. On the other hand, outdoors they were given complete freedom. The mother's authority, firm yet flexible, relied principally on trust, since she had taught the Christian principles of good and righteous conduct.

The difference in age between Emilie and her sisters created a certain degree of distance, leaving Emilie somewhat isolated. She lived her childhood years with a disconcerting insensitivity. One of her friends, Coralie, would later describe her as: "A heart that seemed to feel nothing, a cold person, lacking even the sweetness of the little reasonings that are so endearing among children." To this was joined a character trait quite exceptional at that age—a passion for exactitude, for things to be done at the precise time. Her mother soon put her in charge of teaching the basics of education to her younger brother.

Emilie, without brusqueness, was able to get the boisterous child to obey. She herself drew from this experience a growing taste for study.

Sensitive but closed

In 1825, Madame de Villeneuve died after a painful agony. Accustomed to not showing her emotions, however real, because, in her view, she had an exaggerated "sensitivity and tenderness", Emilie appeared as though unmoved. But this attitude revealed a hidden tragedy—she had received too little of her mother's tenderness, which had been focused more on the two older girls, and the younger girl had withdrawn into herself. On the occasion of her first communion in January 1826, she allowed no outward sign of her fervor. Shortly thereafter, Monsieur de Villeneuve was made mayor of Castres and turned over the care of his children to his own mother, who lived in Toulouse. This lady, very old and blind, gave the children almost total freedom. Her salon was a gathering place for the entire city. Léontine and Octavie were thrilled—they were attractive, and the world was attractive to them. As for Emilie, in spite of her magnificent blonde hair, she did not attract others: "Her tall, thin frame was devoid of grace," stated Coralie... "Her nearsightedness made her look clumsy, sometimes even rude, and caused her to blink, giving her face a strange appearance."

Octavie died in 1828, at the age of twenty. The entire family was in tears, except for Emilie, who was considered by those close to her to be a "lump". Nevertheless, this event had an astonishing effect on her: "Emilie began a new existence," wrote Coralie... "From this point on, an ineffable charity, and a tender and intense love would motivate all her actions. Prayer and frequent reception of the sacraments were her delights; and when kind and pious friends came to see her grandmother, she approached the circle and listened greedily, especially when they spoke of God and the things of Heaven." Her heart, which had been closed for so long, gave itself more entirely to God, and through Him, to souls.

At the end of November 1829, Léontine married. Emilie then became the mistress of the chateau in Hauterive, which had been rather neglected for some years. Her father retired in 1830 from his duties as mayor of Castres, but expanded his agricultural pursuits. Very good at running things, Emilie soon put all back in order, to her father's great satisfaction. Ludovic, for his part, was aggravated by his sister's seriousness. "At your age and in your position," he told her, "to adopt such a solitary life is absurd! Your friends are as ridiculous as you, none of you has common sense. Whoever deprives you of the sermons or services at church, deprives you of all your pleasures." Every morning, Emilie went to Mass. She divided among the poor the entire allowance her father gave her, and visited young women, instructing them and helping them in their illnesses. Father Leblanc, a Jesuit living in Toulouse, gave her spiritual direction.

An irresistible attraction

Having reached the age of twenty-three, Emilie confided to Coralie: "I will not marry... but what torments me is a vocation to which I feel an irresistible attraction, but Father Leblanc does not yet want to give his decision on it... I feel the desire to devote myself to the poor in the admirable community of the Daughters of Charity." When, finally, Father Leblanc did approve her plan, her joy was immense. But Monsieur de Villeneuve, along with his family, asked her to wait four years. Father Leblanc advised his spiritual director to accept this delay. So she continued with her activities and assisted her parish priest so well that her friends called her "the Assistant Priest". One day, a letter arrived from a Monsieur de Barre, a fervent Christian who prayed in churches for long periods at a time and spent the rest of his time alleviating the sufferings of the poor. He had received an inspiration during Mass—Emilie should establish a house in Castres run by nuns, to raise children whose parents were unable to care for them themselves. After several months of discernment and prayer, Father Leblanc concluded that the work was the will of God. Monsieur de Villeneuve, reassured by the thought that his daughter would not be too far away

from him, gave his consent, and the Archbishop of Albi likewise approved.

Her father's financial assistance allowed Emilie to buy a house in Castres. She named the Society she founded the "Congregation of the Immaculate Conception"; the Sisters' habit would be blue. Along with two companions, she went to the Visitation convent in Toulouse for a month of novitiate. On December 8, 1836, the three sisters took the habit and temporary religious vows, and moved into their house in Castres, in the presence of the archbishop. Emilie took the name "Sister Marie". The first Rules defined the purpose of the new Congregation—the education of abandoned children, service to the poor and prisoners, and teaching and providing vocational training to young women. On March 19, 1837, a sewing room was opened for thirty students, but soon the city's seamstresses complained of unfair competition. The populace, which had been very favorable toward the Sisters when they first settled into their house, turned bitterly against Sister Marie, with malicious remarks, and even slander. Even the clergy allowed themselves to be swayed, but Father Leblanc urged the Sisters to forge ahead.

"I am so weak..."

At the end of 1837, the wave of criticism had passed, and four postulants were admitted. At the beginning of the following year, the city of Castres placed the sisters in charge of the local prisons. On May 1, 1838, the community moved into the former minor seminary. Sister Marie treated every student with loving care, and they were drawn to the peace that she exuded. In her journal entries, she divulged some aspects of her own spiritual life: "O my God, my Creator and my Savior, I offer You myself, as completely and as perfectly as I am able to... I do not beg You to send me crosses and great trials, because I am so weak that I do not know if, after having asked for them, I would endure them as I should... Abandonment and trust are everything for me." Her motto was, "God alone!"

During the year 1840, serious difficulties emerged in the community—some bad examples led others to become slack in observation of the Rules. Rather than being harsh with anyone, Mother Marie de Villeneuve prayed. The still-imperfect organization did not allow the religious formation she gave to bear all its fruits. She decided to separate the novices from the professed religious, and began drafting the Constitutions that would ultimately be approved by the Archbishop of Albi at the end of 1841. The Superior General was to be elected for three years, but the Sisters obtained the archbishop's permission to appoint their foundress Superior for life. Mother Marie's behavior with them was full of delicacy and discreet vigilance. She very quickly spotted their doubts, their problems, and their sorrows, and immediately found the right word to restore them to peace. She

took the greatest care to observe the community rule in the least detail, and wanted to be able, from time to time, to sweep her cell or do the dishes.

In April 1841, Mother acquired a piece of land on which to have the Congregation's motherhouse built. But the flame of divine love that burned in her heart urged her to faraway missions. "The desire to make JESUS CHRIST loved and to serve Him in His members will not be limited to the borders of France. The Congregation still has the goal to devote itself to the beautiful work of foreign missions, particularly to the Blacks, and to the most scorned and abandoned in general. Wherever the voice of the poor or the orphan calls, there they will go without hesitation."

Without hope because without God

On May 11, 2008, Pope Benedict XVI recalled our fundamental need for Christ: "Christ is our future... Without Christ humanity is *without hope and without God in the world* (Eph. 2:12) – 'without hope because they were without God' [Encyclical *Spe Salvi*, no. 3]. In fact, 'anyone who does not know God, even though he may entertain all kinds of hopes, is ultimately without hope, without the great hope that sustains the whole of life (cf. Eph. 2:12)' (*ibid.*, no. 27). ... It is therefore an urgent duty for everyone to proclaim Christ and His saving message. St. Paul said, *Woe to me if I do not preach [the Gospel]!* (1 Cor. 9:16)" (Message for World Mission Day). One year later, the Pope added, "The goal of the Church's mission is to illumine all peoples with the light of the Gospel as they journey through history towards God, so that in Him they may reach their full potential and fulfillment. We should have a longing and a passion to illumine all peoples with the light of Christ that shines on the face of the Church ... The Church works not to extend her power or assert her dominion, but to lead all people to Christ, the salvation of the world. ... At stake is the eternal salvation of persons, the goal and the fulfillment of human history and the universe" (June 29, 2009).

In 1842, Mother Marie de Villeneuve was placed in contact with Father Libermann, the founder of the Missionaries of the Holy Heart of MARY. The Sisters in Castres and the Missionary Fathers established a plan to collaborate. At the beginning of June 1843, Mother went to Paris and tried, in vain, to obtain the government approval to open local primary schools. She met with Father Libermann, and would later write, "I like his conversation more than his letters... Our views are always in a truly amazing agreement. He is a man animated by the true spirit of God, of consummate prudence, and never before have I met anyone who has inspired me with so much confidence." When she returned to Castres, the foundress discovered that the expenses needed to build the convent exceeded their resources. To obtain the necessary funds, the Sisters proposed to do penance for forty

days. Mother agreed, still pointing her daughters first to interior conversion. On April 30, 1844, the community moved into the convent that had finally been completed.

In July 1846, Mother Marie founded a shelter to take in women whose extreme poverty had driven them to vice. "The Sisters dedicated by obedience to this important work must be motivated by a holy zeal and a true spirit of faith," she wrote in the Constitutions; "they primarily will see in these poor souls not the shameful state to which sin has reduced them, but rather the Divine Blood that is their ransom, and Our Lord, whose members they are and whom they are called to love and glorify throughout all eternity, perhaps more perfectly than the Sisters themselves... It is very important that the Sisters never show the penitents reproach for their wrongs, nor any impatience, nor distaste for their company, nor scorn for their persons. On the contrary, they must always treat them with an entirely holy gentleness and affection."

But Mother Marie still longed for distant missions. The first departure of four Religious for Africa was fixed for November 22, 1847; others for 1849 and 1850. Father Libermann lavished prudent advice on the sisters: "Without realizing it, we try to persuade the locals to take on the tone and manners of Europe... We must do the opposite—we must let the natives keep the customs and habits that are natural to them, refine them by inspiring them with the rudiments of the faith and Christian virtue and by correcting what is defective in them." Above all, the priest exhorted the Sisters to cultivate patience in every trial.

The source

The Heart of JESUS, in which Mother de Villeneuve placed all her confidence, is the only source from which the "care, tenderness, compassion, hospitality, availability and interest in people's problems [can] be drawn, as well as the other virtues necessary for the messengers of the Gospel to leave everything and dedicate themselves completely and unconditionally to spreading the perfume of Christ's charity around the world" (Benedict XVI, May 11, 2008).

In November 1847, Mother de Villeneuve went to Amiens to take up again an old project dear to Father Libermann—the creation of a novitiate for the missions, in the hamlet of Saint-Pierre, close to the city. A young woman and a former nun there wished to establish a third order. There was talk of combining the novitiate of the Immaculate Conception with the future third order. In reality, difficulties were encountered that forced Mother to abandon these plans in May 1851. Father Libermann died on February 2, 1852; his successor hoped she would take up this project again. Perplexed for some time, and deeply troubled by the difficulties that were cropping up everywhere, both in the missions

and in Castres, the foundress went through an especially trying period during which she lost her appetite and was unable to sleep. When she was, or thought she was, alone, she allowed herself to give in to tears, which betrayed her profound sensitivity but also her fatigue. Fortunately, this state did not last and soon Mother refound her peace, composure, and courage. She decided to limit herself to founding a boarding school in Paris and not resume the project in Saint-Pierre again, and returned to Castres at the end of June 1853.

Mother de Villeneuve's spiritual life was straightforward—she sought above all to do the will of God. "When we speak, act, or write for the good of a soul, on any important affair," she said to her daughters, "we should not so much plead for the good of this soul or the success of this affair, but rather for the will of God to be done, not wanting what we propose but rather His intentions, which are often different from ours." She placed great importance on prayer: we must become used "to conversing with JESUS in the midst of our occupations, praying from the heart as we come and go in the house." As for herself, she appreciated the moments when she was alone with God. But her spiritual life often passed through the dryness of pure faith, an experience she spoke of when she wrote to one of her daughters: "Do not worry about your interior state which, according to what you are telling me, is somewhat dark. God is everywhere, even in the darkness, and perhaps it is even better that way." She advised another: "You must always suspect a bit of illusion, and prefer to be led by a bare and unappetizing faith... Distrust these lofty desires for perfection—be content with desiring to do the will of God... I am afraid of the way of consolations for you and the others, and I prefer faith alone, the darkness, and finally the crosses."

In a September 21, 2009 homily to new bishops, Cardinal Hummes, Prefect of the Congregation for the Clergy, said, "The Church knows there is an urgent need for missionaries throughout the entire world, not only *ad gentes* [for the pagans], but also in the countries of the Christian world ... All our countries have become mission territory, in the strict sense. ... There is an urgent necessity to arise and go in search above all of those baptized who have distanced themselves from participation in the life of our communities, as well as to seek those who know little or nothing of JESUS CHRIST." On January 6, 2008, Pope Benedict XVI reminded us in the same sense that "each Christian [is] called to illuminate the path of the brethren by word and example of life ... Every authentic believer... with the little light that he carries within himself, can and must be a help to those alongside him, and even help the one for whom finding the way that leads to Christ is difficult."

May Blessed Emilie de Villeneuve obtain for us the grace to be true evangelists, passionately striving to spread the Kingdom of God everywhere.

Dom Antoine Marie
D.A.B.

Singular humility

Two months after returning to Castres, Mother de Villeneuve threw her daughters into turmoil by resigning as Superior General. The reasons she gave can be summed up as follows: her ardent thirst to practice obedience even in the smallest things; the advantage to the Congregation, which one day or another would be deprived of her leadership; the fear that her daughters obeyed her more out of confidence and fond affection than out of faith and pure love of God. Above all, Mother Marie did not consider herself at all necessary or even desirable, as Superior. Not without pain, the General Chapter of September 1853 assented to her decision. Nevertheless, wanting to be of aid to the new Superior, the foundress was appointed Assistant General and Novice Mistress, responsibilities that she would bear discreetly and effectively. This example of humility and detachment was most certainly an unparalleled source of fruitfulness for her Congregation.

Around the middle of 1854, cholera spread through the south of France and reached the city of Castres. An epidemic of "military fever" (a contagious febrile disease) broke out at the same time. Mother de Villeneuve set in motion a veritable crusade of prayers and created an atmosphere of confidence. Cholera did not make its way into the Sisters' convent, but the foundress fell victim to military fever and, on September 7, was forced to take to her bed. At the beginning of October, her condition worsened and the chaplain gave her Extreme Unction. Shortly thereafter, she passed away as the sisters said the prayers for the agonizing.

Today there are more than six hundred members of the Congregation of the Immaculate Conception of Castres, spread across 123 communities in Europe, Africa, South America, and Asia.

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