



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of April 3, 2011,
Laetare Sunday

Dear Friends,

THE Zella-Mehlis camp in Thuringia, in the heart of Germany, housed many Frenchmen who had been conscripted for the Compulsory Work Service (*Service du Travail Obligatoire*, or *STO*). Early in the morning of April 19, 1944, Marcel Callo, a young Breton, left as usual for the factory. Around 11 o'clock, he returned to the barracks. Joel, a friend who worked at night, was surprised to see him return so early. "Are you sick, Marcel?"—"I've been arrested." A Gestapo agent immediately entered, searched through Marcel's possessions, closely examining his books and papers. Joel asked him why Marcel was being arrested. The officer replied coldly, "Monsieur is much too Catholic," and ordered Marcel to follow him. The young man took his rosary, shook Joel's hand, and asked him: "Write to my parents and my fiancée and tell them I've been arrested."

Born in Rennes, France, on December 6, 1921, Marcel was the second in a family of nine children. His father, Jean Callo, was a humble manual laborer. His family was poor in earthly possessions, but rich in faith. At home, Marcel, who was always glad to help, was cheerful and mischievous. His main fault was without question stubbornness, but he recognized his faults. At school, he was reprimanded for his uneven work—yet, all in all, his teachers found him hard working, and everyone was touched by his honesty and good spirit. When he was ten, Marcel joined the Eucharistic Crusade, an organization that taught a true love for JESUS in the Eucharist. He learned to offer his days to the Heart of JESUS for the salvation of souls. Every morning, he served Mass, and he went to confession every other week, taking seriously the motto of the "crusaders": "Pray, receive communion, sacrifice, and be an apostle."

A new page

In 1933, Marcel joined a scout troop, the Rennes 5th. The day he took his oath, June 18, 1934, a new page was opened in his life. The scouting ideals of loyalty, courage, service, and purity aligned with his deepest aspirations. He fervently lived the scout law, without forgetting that the scout's duty begins at home. In 1936, he was asked to lead a patrol. Marcel would thank scouting for having helped form him into the leader he would become in the Young Christian Workers (*Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne*, or *JOC*).

"Scouting," said the Venerable Pius XII, "gives the worship and service of God the pre-eminent place they ought to have in human life, and in this leads boys to recognize the true value of all objects, all rules, all virtues,



Blessed Marcel Callo

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and all created beauty; to see the true splendor of them all in the light of the divine sun. To seek, to find, to taste, to glorify God in His works ... that is what constitutes the heart of your lives as scouts" (September 10, 1946).

After obtaining his diploma in 1934, Marcel became an apprentice typographer at a printer's shop. He was proud to be able to help out his parents financially—at this time, welfare payments for children did not exist. His first days at the printery proved difficult. Marcel's Christian ideal collided with the unwholesome interests of the workers, who prided themselves on initiating the younger ones in their vices. While they were shaking with witless laughter at their bawdy jokes, he would refrain from laughing, but would later confide to his mother, who restored truth. On her advice, Marcel began the habit of turning his heart to the Blessed Virgin. He quickly became a competent worker, valued by his supervisor and the new apprentices, whom he ably protected from the perverse influence of the older workers.

Father Martinais, the pastor at Saint-Aubin church, deplored the absence of the Christian ideal in the parish's JOC group. He set out in search of the right boys to put things back on track. On his insistence, after an internal struggle Marcel reluctantly left scouting in 1936 to join the JOC. He was very coldly received—these young workers came to meetings to have fun, but they distrusted the Church and "little newcomers" like Marcel, whom they saw as lackeys of the clergy. Marcel

quickly understood that the ideal of the JOC was to help workers understand the dignity of their work, which they believed to be scorned, and to make them aware that they were all children of God. This required apostles who were proud to belong to Christ, who were pure, joyful, and triumphant. Some evenings, the discussions were acrimonious. Marcel, who had an uncompromising nature, knew his first head-on conflicts—nevertheless, his comportment commanded respect. Sometimes, when their words or wrongdoings shocked him, he did not hesitate to express his anger, without however losing respect for his opponents. Little by little, he learned to master his outbursts, and after saying all he had to in defense of the truth quickly found peace again.

President at the age of seventeen

Marcel was very faithful to the JOC study group, whose meetings he attended eagerly. He also studied the doctrine of the Church on his own. In 1938, the leadership of the Saint-Aubin JOC group resigned. Marcel had so won the esteem of all that, in spite of being only 17 years old, he was chosen as president of the group. He would turn the group into a remarkable team whose dynamism would exercise a beneficial influence on the parish. Animated with an apostolic fire, he wanted the group to grow, and took all means to attract unfortunate and unemployed youth. Marcel passionately spread among the young *Jocists* the method proposed by Father Cardijn, the JOC founder: “Learn to think like Christ, to have the mentality of Christ.” For Marcel, the main thing was to “live in God twenty-four hours a day.” In addition to daily Mass and communion, the *Jocist* meditated for fifteen minutes a day. He also set aside a time once a week for spiritual reading, as well as an hour of study for general formation.

Marcel carefully planned the group meetings, and organized games and bicycle outings. He did everything possible to create a fraternal atmosphere in the group. Leisure activities were of great importance to him, because he saw in them an excellent means of leading souls—and that was exactly what was closest to his heart. His good nature also helped greatly in creating friendships. He laughed and clowning around, but above all, he glowed with the interior life that emanated from his person. Young people came in ever-greater numbers—little by little they found their way back into the church. They were no longer “less than nothing, the damned of the earth,” as some of their revolutionary friends wanted to make them believe, but children of God, and their work, which they did in uniting themselves with Christ, was saving the world.

In his encyclical *Laborem exercens*, John Paul II taught, “All work, whether manual or intellectual, is inevitably linked with toil. The Book of Genesis expresses it in a truly penetrating manner: the original blessing of work contained in the very mystery of creation and connected with man’s elevation as the image of God is contrasted

with the curse that sin brought with it ... By enduring the toil of work in union with Christ crucified for us, man in a way collaborates with the Son of God for the redemption of humanity. He shows himself a true disciple of Christ by carrying the cross in his turn every day in the activity that he is called upon to perform. ... The Christian finds in human work a small part of the Cross of Christ and accepts it in the same spirit of redemption in which Christ accepted His Cross for us” (September 14, 1981).

The time of prayer and spiritual reflection held an important place in the movement, but it was always closely connected with the daily life of the *Jocist* workers. Marcel explained, “One cannot arrive at Mass with empty hands.” One of his friends recounted, “We thought that in order to be a good Christian, all you had to do was your morning and evening prayer and go to Sunday Mass—not much else. Since Marcel taught me, I no longer just ‘attend’ Mass, I try to participate, coming not with empty hands, but with something to offer from my life.” Marcel often brought his friends to visit the Blessed Sacrament, and his recollection left an impression on them. In 1939, he also organized a “Communion chain” to pray for peace and for the imprisoned.

The parishioners’ astonishment

The German occupation starting in the summer of 1940 did not discourage the young apostle’s zeal. During Lent in 1941, he did everything he could, with the help of his *Jocists*, to bring as many young people as possible to a three-day retreat held at the Church of Saint-Aubin. The parishioners were astonished to see all these boys arrive, many of whom no longer came to church. Marcel understood that his effectiveness as an activist came from a life of prayer, of true intimacy with JESUS: “God is everything, we are nothing. Without Christ’s help, on our own, our efforts would be in vain.” He waged a constant battle against sin: “We are often poor instruments in the hands of God because we have bad habits, bad inclinations. Sin dampens our spiritual life, lowers us, and keeps us from being activists, from dedicating ourselves. It is in the measure that we put on Christ that we will work for the good of the community. Every day I must be a little more conformed to Christ.”

But very soon, the JOC was forbidden by the Germans. Marcel carefully disguised important files and papers, and the group left its headquarters to become a “sports association.” The activities remained the same—the secretiveness galvanized the young people’s eagerness and zeal. It was truly the JOC of the catacombs—the activities were hidden, but the spirit was ardent, the solidarity boundless, and the prayer more fervent than ever, as in the times of the first Christians. It was at this time that Marcel met Marguerite, a young *Jocist*. Later on, they planned to join their lives, and entrusted their future family to Our Lady. The official engagement was

fixed for the summer of 1943. The future seemed radiant to Marcel ! But on March 8, 1943, everything changed... The city of Rennes was bombed by the Allies. Marcel, like many, left his work to help the victims. He discovered with dread that the building where his little sister Madeleine worked was in ruins. As soon as they were able to start clearing away the rubble, Marcel rushed in and soon found his sister's body. It was he who would have to break the terrible news to his parents. He was overwhelmed—how could he overcome such grief? And yet, "if God," he said to his parents, "has taken Madeleine from us, it is because He judged her ready for Heaven. Later, would she have had the same dispositions? Might she not have been lost? Providence knows better than us what must be done."

Drama of conscience

The trial had only begun for Marcel, who carried in his pocket a terrible secret—his summons for the STO. A law required young Frenchmen to enter the *Service du Travail Obligatoire* (Compulsory Work Service) in Germany, to replace German workers and farmers who had been called up for the army. It was a drama of conscience—should Marcel leave his family still suffering the shock of Madeleine's death, his chaste-ly loved fiancée Marguerite, and his dear JOC, or stay and go underground? But in this case, there would undoubtedly be reprisals against his family, especially against Jean, his older brother, who was to be ordained a priest in June. "It is not as a worker that I am not going there [to Germany]," he told his loved ones, "I leave as a missionary—there is so much to do to make Christ known."

On March 19, 1943, Marcel was sent to Zella-Mehlis in Thuringia, where the Frenchmen worked in a factory manufacturing firearms for sending signals from afar. He had to stand ten hours a day, in a stifling atmosphere, with companions who thought of nothing but leading a life of debauchery. Marcel's savings were stolen. His first weeks in Germany were a true Calvary. No religious services were allowed! It was out of the question to revive the JOC here, already forbidden in France. There was no Catholic church in this Protestant region. One fine day, however, the horizon brightened—he discovered a small room where a German priest celebrated Mass on Sundays. He had burned a finger on a machine, he had a toothache and stomachaches, but on Sundays he could go to Mass. Moreover, whenever he could, Marcel went to visit the Blessed Sacrament and pray to the Blessed Virgin. There, he drew strength and courage, and refound his zeal for souls. "Here," he wrote to his fiancée, "there are many moral wounds to be dressed... the two months after my arrival were extremely hard and painful. I no longer had a taste for anything, I was numb, I felt myself going little by little... Suddenly Christ snapped me out of it... He told me to take care of my comrades, and my enjoyment of life returned." To his brother, who had been ordained a priest on June 29,

he wrote about his sadness at being so far away from him on this special day: "This painful separation will enable me to understand life a bit better—it is in suffering that we become better."

Bit by bit, Marcel brought more of his fellow workers along on Sundays, and he hoped that sometime in the future, all of them would go to Mass. On Easter, he could rejoice—his entire barracks was there, except for one person. Once a month, the priest, at Marcel's request, celebrated a Mass for the French-speakers with French hymns. "Almost a hundred Frenchmen attended. And what enthusiasm! We all sang with one voice. But what made me the happiest was to see that we succeeded in bringing some comrades who had not been to Mass in years." To keep up their morale, he organized sports and artistic activities—singing, music, and theatre. His influence spread more and more. Even hardened hearts respected him and willingly went to him for advice. He was always ready to do a favor, to let others confide in him, to share his food packages with friends in need or who were sick. He lived on the memory of his fiancée, about whom he spoke often, which forestalled some of his fellow workers' bawdy talk. He only needed to arrive on the scene for the tone to change, for simply his presence inspired respect.

A secret network

The JOC had set up a secret organization in the different work camps. The leaders sought every opportunity to meet and help one another in their shared apostolate. A real spiritual resistance network formed in Thuringia. Informed of the *Jocists'* magnificent zeal, Cardinal Suhard, the archbishop of Paris, wrote to them to bless and thank them. For their part, the Gestapo, which was spying on them, saw in the JOC an anti-Nazi political party. In April 1944, the German police broke up the *Jocist* network. On the 19th, Marcel joined eleven of his friends, including two priests and two seminarians, in Gestapo prison cells. One after another, they were interrogated, threatened, and roughed up. The Gestapo wanted to know their plans, and the names of their comrades. The following Sunday, from the different cells, rose the voices of twelve prisoners singing the Mass of the Angels. They were afraid, hungry, and cold, but their hearts were deeply united. At the end of April, they were taken to the prison in Gotha to await their sentence. During the day, they went to work with the other prisoners on a nearby farm, where they ate their fill. On July 16, as they were returning from work, a *Jocist* discreetly delivered some consecrated hosts to one of them—an immense joy for the prisoners, who could receive Him for whom they were being persecuted, and for whom they had been waiting for 88 days!

Marcel wrote at least 180 letters or postcards from Germany. The last of these, dated July 6, 1944, reveals the depth of his soul. After expressing his sadness at no longer receiving news from his family, he wrote,

"Happily, there is a Friend Who does not leave me for a single moment, and who knows how to support me through the painful and crushing hours. With Him, one can endure anything. How I thank Christ for having laid out the path that I am following right now. What great days to offer Him! ... I offer all my sufferings for you all, my dear parents, my little fiancée, for Jean, so that his ministry may be fruitful, for all my friends. Yes, how sweet and comforting it is to suffer for those one loves... I am striving to become better in growing nearer and nearer to God... My thoughts turn also to France. We suffer to see her in the state she is in now. All of us who have suffered will rebuild her and will know how to give her her true face. God, family, homeland—three words that complement each other and that should never be separated. If everyone would build and rely on these three bases, all would go well."

A danger to the government

In August, following an influx of new prisoners, the *Jocists* were reunited in a single cell, where they had the joy of praying and singing together. The guards called this cell *die Kirche*, the church. On September 25, the verdict came from Berlin: they were sentenced to deportation to a concentration camp. Each had to sign his internment order, which read as follows: "By his Catholic activity towards his French comrades during his compulsory work service in Germany, he has made himself a danger to the Nazi government and the safety of the German people." Out of the twelve, only four would return from the death camps, their health ruined.

Marcel left Gotha on October 6 for the Mauthausen camp, in Austria, where 20,000 prisoners suffered. Torture, murder, and disease decimated 90% of them. They had to work under very difficult conditions. Marcel was assigned to assembling airplanes in an underground

factory. Someone stole his glasses. His eyes could no longer bear the glaring light reflected by the aluminum plates, and were so bloodshot that some days he was nearly blind. The slightest mistake was called "sabotage," and was punished with terrible blows from a club, which Marcel would have to endure four times. Thin, worn out, and mistreated, he suffered everything without hatred or even resentment. He never insulted his tormentors. He never stopped showing his charity, and found a way to spread words of comfort around him. "Have faith," he said, "Christ is with us... Don't give up—God is looking after us." People were happy around him. His heroic faith and patience were a real encouragement to his companions. He prayed with those who would join his prayer. But his physical exhaustion was so great that sometimes it was he who implored help: "Help me, I beg you, I can't go on." He contracted tuberculosis and dysentery. Edema of the legs and furunculosis made him suffer cruelly. Thus it was that he was transferred to the camp infirmary, which was empty of supplies. The rout of the German army (it was now March 1945) led to a shortage of food and medicine. The sick were abandoned and living on top of each other. On the evening of the 18th, Marcel collapsed. Colonel Tibodo, a French prisoner assigned to the infirmary, carried him on his pallet and was amazed at his patience. Marcel passed away peacefully under his eyes, like a lamp that had run out of oil: "He had only one look," he said, "a look that was seeing something else, and that expressed a profound conviction that he was leaving for Happiness. It was an act of Faith and Hope in a better life. Never have I seen on another dying man—and I have seen thousands—a look like his. He had the look of a saint. It was a revelation for me." At the age of 23, Marcel left for Heaven on March 19, 1945, the feast of Saint JOSEPH, patron saint of a good death, whom Madame Callo invoked unceasingly for her son.

During the beatification of Marcel Callo on October 4, 1987, Pope John Paul II declared that Marcel "showed the extraordinary influence of those who allow themselves to be inhabited by Christ and devote themselves to the complete liberation of their brothers."

Dom Antoine Marie
o.s.b.

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