



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of July 16, 2011,
Our Lady of Mount Carmel

Dear Friends,

THE priesthood is love of the Heart of JESUS,' the saintly Curé of Ars would often say. This touching expression makes us reflect, above all, with heartfelt gratitude on the immense gift which priests represent, not only for the Church, but also for humanity itself," Pope Benedict XVI observed. To help us come to this sense of gratitude, the Holy Father invites us to look at the good example of so many priests: "What is most helpful to the Church ... is not only a frank and complete acknowledgment of the weaknesses of her ministers, but also a joyful and renewed realization of the greatness of God's gift, embodied in the splendid example of generous pastors, religious afire with love for God and for souls, and insightful, patient spiritual guides" (June 16, 2009). Saint John Baptist de Rossi is one of these holy priests given by Christ to His Church.

John Baptist (Giovanni Battista) de Rossi, the ninth and last child of a humble family, was born on February 22, 1698 in Voltaggio, in the Liguria region of Italy. One of his uncles was a Capuchin in Rome, and one of his cousins, Lorenzo de Rossi, was a canon at Saint Mary in Cosmedin, one of the most beautiful churches in Rome. After spending three years as a page for a noble family in Genoa, John Baptist went to Rome, where his Capuchin uncle enrolled him in the Collegium Romanum, run by the Jesuit Fathers. A brilliant student, the young man also stood out for his active piety. His pleasantness, his way of saying things with kindness, and his joyfulness caused the others to follow his suggestions—he led them to pray and visit the sick poor. At the time of his father's untimely death in 1710, his family wanted him to return home to take charge of the family's affairs, but he chose to continue his studies in philosophy and theology at the Collegium Romanum, because he felt called to the priesthood.

Love that transforms

The ascetic life he led was intense, but he lacked prudent direction and, little by little, he became taciturn and withdrawn. Those who once gladly kept company with him now distanced themselves. One day, as he was attending Mass in the Jesuit church, he fainted. His excessive penances, particularly with respect to food, had seriously damaged his health, which would remain fragile for the rest of his life—he would suffer from stomachaches and epileptic seizures. He could no longer regularly attend his classes. He would later understand that it is love that transforms hearts and not excessive mortifications. "Learn from my example," he would advise



S. John Baptist de Rossi

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seminarians, "to not blindly trust your own judgment, but seek the advice of your confessor before embracing a practice." Aware of his intellectual abilities, he would see in this trial a delicate correction from God, averting him from the pride that he would have developed had he pursued higher studies. He would modestly say, "If I had not been stopped in my academic success, I too would have succumbed to the temptation of pride and ambition." John Baptist used the strength that remained to study with the Dominican Fathers, taking courses that centered on the doctrine of Saint Thomas Aquinas, for which he developed a taste and which he would recommend throughout his life to young seminarians.

He was ordained a priest on March 8, 1721, having received a dispensation from the age requirement. His primary desire was to walk on the path of sanctity himself before trying to lead others. Every morning on rising, he passed an hour in meditation, drawing primarily on the Gospels, and then commended his work and the needs of souls to God. In the evening, he spent another half-hour in mental prayer, principally on the lives of the saints. Zealous in praying the breviary, he encouraged his confreres not to leave it for spare moments, but whenever possible, to say the various Offices at their proper times. Later as a canon, he would show great fidelity to chanting the Divine Office in choir.

"A fundamental priority of priestly life is to be with the Lord and thus to have time for prayer. St. Charles Borromeo always used to say, 'You will not be able to

care for the souls of others if you let your own perish. In the end you will no longer do anything even for others. You must always have time for being with God'. I would therefore like to emphasize: whatever the demands that arise, it is a real priority to find every day, I would say, an hour to be in silence for the Lord and with the Lord, as the Church suggests we do with the breviary, with daily prayers, so as to continually enrich ourselves inwardly, to return ... to within the reach of the Holy Spirit's breath." (Benedict XVI, August 6, 2008). This advice on prayer is useful for all the faithful, as Benedict XVI reminded youth during his trip to the United Kingdom (September 18, 2010): "Every day we have to choose to love, and this requires help, the help that comes from Christ, from prayer and from the wisdom found in His word, and from the grace which He bestows on us in the sacraments of His Church. This is the message I want to share with you today. I ask you to look into your hearts each day to find the source of all true love. JESUS is always there, quietly waiting for us to be still with Him and to hear His voice. Deep within your heart, He is calling you to spend time with Him in prayer. But this kind of prayer, real prayer, requires discipline; it requires making time for moments of silence every day."

Close to shepherds and cowherds

Father John Baptist de Rossi's zeal for souls grew considerably with his ordination to the priesthood. Twice a week, he went to the Forum, where the shepherds and cowherds who brought the animals to market gathered. With kindness and patience, he instructed them in the mysteries of religion. Saint Galla's hospice was also fertile ground for the deployment of his zeal. Founded in 1650 for the poor, and to offer shelter to anyone in need, it was the home of a pious union of clerics who devoted themselves to taking in abandoned children and teaching them Christian doctrine. This work soon became John Baptist's favorite, and he devoted himself to it for forty-nine years. After having consulted his confessor, Father Galuzzi, a Jesuit, and prayed about it at length, he founded a similar hospice for poor women, who ran an even greater risk staying on the streets without shelter. Out of modesty, he left the official title of director of the house to Father Galluzi, while himself remaining in charge of spiritual and temporal matters.

In remembrance of the suffering that Our Lord endured in prison during the Passion, he visited prisoners. Asked about his attentiveness to them, he replied, "It is to free them from the interior hell they are in—once their conscience has been relieved, the hardships of prison become easier to accept, and they become able to endure them for the expiation of their sins." Through his efforts, a separate institution, managed by pious and charitable women, was created for female prisoners.

"The priest enters, like Christ, into human wretchedness, carries it with him, visits those who are suffering and looks after them and, not only outwardly but also inwardly, taking upon himself, recapitulating in himself the 'passion' of his time, of his parish, of the people entrusted to his care" (Benedict XVI, to the Parish Priests of the Diocese of Rome, February 18, 2010).

A very precious gift

"A good pastor," the Curé of Ars said, "a pastor after God's own heart, is the greatest treasure which the good Lord can grant to a parish and one of the most precious gifts of divine mercy." If the priesthood is one of the most precious gifts of divine mercy, it calls in return for support from the faithful, as Blessed John Paul II emphasized: "The help that diverse members of the Church can give to each other is particularly important. This mutual help also aids in revealing the mystery of the Church as Mother and Teacher. Priests and religious ought to assist the lay faithful in their formation. ... In turn, the lay faithful themselves can and should help priests and religious in the course of their spiritual and pastoral journey" (Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, December 30, 1988). For this help to be fruitful and wise, it is important that the faithful have a correct idea of the ministerial priesthood as exemplified by the holy priests that the Church sets forth as examples.

In 1737, Don Lorenzo died, and John Baptist inherited his place as canon, accepting it only on his confessor's order. He sold his cousin's sumptuous home, and distributed the funds to the poor. Then, so as to better participate in the choir Office and fulfill the other duties of his post, he moved close to the church into a sort of garret that belonged to the community. In the church, there was a miraculous image of the Blessed Virgin to which John Baptist had a great devotion; he always carried a reproduction of it on his person. Under his influence, the canons added to their Office the Litany of the Blessed Virgin. He also very much loved the prayer of the rosary, and he spread the practice of reciting three Hail Mary's, morning and evening, to obtain final perseverance. This devotion produced surprising results and genuine conversions.

In 1739, one of his friends suggested that he could do still more good if he obtained the authority to hear confessions, which he still did not have. He resisted for a while, putting forward all the arguments that his humility presented to him, but he ended up yielding to the entreaties of a bishop in whose house he was staying while recovering from an illness. Armed with this divine power, he became all the more active. In the mornings, he delayed his Mass until he had heard the last of the penitents who were waiting. He sometimes had nothing to eat or drink before the afternoon. In the evenings, he heard confessions again. Sometimes this ministry took him to the prisons or hospitals, in search of the most abandoned. He was so sought out by and busy with pen-

itants that Pope Clement XII dispensed him from his obligation in the choir when he had to hear confessions. Benedict XIV confirmed the dispensation, making it permanent. This dispensation was the cause of a distressing persecution—a canon with a very bitter temperament claimed that it had been fraudulently obtained, and was a serious scandal that disrupted the regularity of attendance at choir, the first duty of a canon. The saint fell ill as a result, but he always remained charitable towards his critic. Soon after, the persecutor fell ill in his turn. John Baptist visited him several times and was able to change his opinion of him. The sick man even took him as his spiritual director and had a peaceful death.

The most direct way

In confession, he displayed great gentleness, believing this to be an important condition for the penitent to not hesitate at sincerely acknowledging all his transgressions. He would maintain: “Previously I did not know the most direct way to go to Heaven—now I am convinced that it is to make a good confession.” In the same sense, Pope John Paul II would declare to young priests: “The sacrament of forgiveness is necessary for profound communion with God. ... We will never be holy enough not to need this sacramental purification ... From confession to confession, the believer experiences an ever deeper communion with the merciful Lord to the point of fully identifying with Him” (March 27, 2004). In desperate cases, other confessors turned to John Baptist de Rossi, because God had given him the talent of finding the words that opened souls to grace. A gravely ill groomsman refused to make a confession on the pretext that his bad habits were too deeply rooted. Called to his bedside, John Baptist had the happiness of converting him. Whenever possible the saint did his best to regularize disordered matrimonial situations. His exhortations in the confessional, strong and persuasive, obtained good results—the celebration of the sacrament of marriage, or the definitive separation of those living together outside of marriage. On the other hand, for the good of the penitents themselves, he firmly refused absolution to those who lacked contrition, who refused to remove themselves from the occasion of sin, or did not try to take the necessary steps to leave the sin.

“Priests ought never to be resigned to empty confessionals or the apparent indifference of the faithful to this sacrament. In France, at the time of the Curé of Ars, confession was no more easy or frequent than in our own day, since the upheaval caused by the revolution had long inhibited the practice of religion. Yet he sought in every way, by his preaching and his powers of persuasion, to help his parishioners to rediscover the meaning and beauty of the sacrament of Penance, presenting it as an inherent demand of the Eucharistic presence. He thus created a ‘virtuous’ circle. By spending long hours in church before the tabernacle, he inspired the faithful to imitate him by coming to visit JESUS with the knowledge that their parish priest would be there, ready to listen

and offer forgiveness” (Letter from Benedict XVI to Priests, June 16, 2009).

In 1748, because of his many health problems, Canon John Baptist de Rossi moved into the community of priests called Trinità de’ Pellegrini (Most Holy Trinity of the Pilgrims), but he continued his ministry at Saint Mary in Cosmedin, in particular on market days when the peasants, who had brought their goods to sell, took advantage of the opportunity to go to confession. John Baptist de Rossi also showed a great zeal to help priests with their spiritual life, and strived to maintain priestly friendships. He was careful not to offend against charity in speaking of other clerics or members of the hierarchy. His quick temper was often severely tested by others who were less delicate in these matters.

“Fidelity to one’s vocation requires courage and trust, but the Lord also wishes that you join forces: that you be concerned for one another and support one another fraternally. Moments of common prayer and study, and sharing in the demands of the priestly life and work, are a necessary part of your life. It is a fine thing when you welcome one another into your homes with the peace of Christ in your hearts! It is important to assist one another with prayer, helpful advice and discernment!” (Benedict XVI in Fatima, May 12, 2010).

Worth more than a good Lent

John Baptist de Rossi wished to organize a catechesis for adults during Lent, because he believed that “catechesis is worth more than a well-observed Lent”. Today, the teaching of the catechism remains a concern of the Church. In his preface to the catechism published for World Youth Day in Madrid (August 2011), the Holy Father invites young people to “study the catechism with passion and perseverance.” “Youth”, he states, “is not as superficial as it is accused of being; young people want to know what life truly consists of. ... This book is fascinating because it speaks to us of our very destiny and that is why it concerns each one of us very closely.” He adds, “This supplement to the catechism does not flatter you; it does not offer easy solutions; it calls for a new life on your part ... You must know what you believe; you must know your faith with the same precision with which a specialist in information technology knows the working system of a computer ... Yes, you must be much more profoundly rooted in the faith than the generation of your parents, to be able to resist forcefully and with determination the challenges and temptations of this time. You have need of divine help, if you do not want your faith to dry up as a dewdrop in the sun, if you do not want to succumb to the temptations of consumerism, if you do not want your love to be drowned in pornography, if you do not want to betray the weak and the victims of abuse and violence.”

John Baptist de Rossi was not a preacher of great renown, but his instruction touched souls. After preparing himself with prayer, he expounded the truths of the

faith clearly, adapting his teaching to his listeners. His examples in general were drawn from the lives of the saints. He was saddened when he heard superficial sermons, or conversely, theological treatises that were beyond the congregation's grasp. His favorite topic was divine mercy, an example that would be followed by the Curé of Ars, who, "in his time ... was able to transform the hearts and the lives of so many people because he enabled them to experience the Lord's merciful love. Our own time urgently needs a similar proclamation and witness to the truth of Love: *Deus caritas est* (1 Jn. 4:8)" (Letter of Benedict XVI to priests, June 16, 2009).

John Baptist strove to tactfully provide assistance to those struggling with poverty in all its guises, particularly families that had fallen on hard times, which he discreetly visited. He tried to win the affection of the Jews in Rome, for example by obtaining medical assistance for their sick. But his activity was not limited to the walls of the City. He made short missions to the countryside, giving villagers the opportunity to confess to a priest who was a stranger, knowing that in small rural parishes, one often hesitates to confess serious sins to one's own priest. John Baptist also felt attracted to faraway missions, in particular to India. But he was invited to consider the confessionals and the hospitals of Rome as his mission territory. At his superiors' request, he also served as an extraordinary confessor and preacher of retreats in religious communities.

Total security

He suffered from a fever that never left him for the last two years of his life. In August 1762, his health was so weakened that his friends convinced him to go to

the Lake Nemi region to regain his strength. There, the epilepsy of his youth returned with violent attacks. In mid-October, he returned to Rome and almost never again left his sick room. He regretted no longer being able to be active—"I am no longer good for anything!" And yet, when his friends came to visit him, he filled them with courage, so great was his spiritual joy. On September 8, 1763, he had himself taken to Saint Mary in Cosmedin to celebrate the feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin MARY. He declared to his confreres, "Pray for me. I will not return here again—this is the last feast I am celebrating with you." The morning of December 27, he was found on the ground, in the throes of a violent epileptic seizure. He did not regain consciousness until the next day. He was then brought Holy Viaticum. During his thanksgiving, he was deeply recollected in joy—some were convinced that he had been in an ecstasy. He then received the Anointing of the Sick. To everyone's surprise, his health improved, and he was able to celebrate Holy Mass several times more. But soon, he was no longer able to celebrate Mass or to say the Divine Office. His last consolation was saying the Rosary. He replied to his confessor, who exhorted him to accept death: "I regard death with serenity, without fear. I believe this feeling of total security is a special grace from God, and I hope that the Lord will grant it to me in the final hour, out of His love and because of the charity I bring to His poor." During one of his periods of unconsciousness, a friend removed the rosary from his grasp; when he came to, his first words were to complain about this act as though it were a theft. After some long hours of suffering, he died peacefully on May 23, 1764, at the age of 66.

With our Pope Benedict XVI, let us ask MARY, the Immaculate Mother, that "the Church be thus renewed by priests who are holy, priests transfigured by the grace of the One [Christ] who makes all things new" (in Fatima, May 12, 2010), and let us often repeat the invocation: "Lord, give us priests, Lord, give us holy priests!"

Dom Antoine Marie
o.s.b.

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