



# Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of March 17, 2012,  
Feast of Saint Patrick

**Dear Friends,**

**T**HE year was 1943. The German authorities were refusing to authorize the establishment of an official chaplaincy for French workers in Germany. So Father Rodhain, the chaplain general for prisoners of war, issued an appeal to priests to come secretly to Germany, pretending to be workers. Many thought one would have to be crazy to respond to such an appeal. Nevertheless, more than forty priests chose to go; among them, a priest from the Vendee, Father René Giraudet, who begged his Bishop, Bishop Cazaux: "Your Excellency, do not spare me." How did this young priest come to love JESUS to the point of the folly of the Cross?

Louis, a pharmacist's assistant, and Octavie Giraudet rejoiced at the birth of their first child, René, on December 4, 1907. He was baptized on the 8<sup>th</sup>, the feast of the Immaculate Conception, in the Cathedral of Luçon (in the Vendee). René would later see a sign from Heaven in this first encounter with the Virgin on the day of his baptism. A younger sister, Marie-Joseph, was born in 1912. During the summer of 1915, René spent several days at Sainte-Hermine, at his paternal grandmother's house. This fervent woman from the Vendee wished God to ignite a vocation to the priesthood in her family. Her prayer seemed to be heard—when they had just finished making the Stations of the Cross in the town church, René declared to her, "You know, Grandma, I want to be a priest."—"How happy that would make me. But I fear I won't see it—I will be dead by then."—"It doesn't matter! It will be even more beautiful for you, you will see me from up in Heaven." After his Confirmation in 1917 and his First Holy Communion the following year, René's vocation became even stronger. He even wanted to become a missionary.

## **"He's a good child"**

**I**n October 1920, he entered the minor seminary in Chavagnes-en-Paillers. This cheerful and athletic boy tried his best. However, he was equal parts simple and pious, mischievous and boisterous—a young colt who refused to be reined in, taking exuberant inattentiveness and laziness towards his studies to new heights. His parents, worried by the superior's and teachers' complaints, twice wanted to pull him out of the seminary. Only René's spiritual advisor defended him: "No! I tell you he is a good child. You must not remove him from here—it would be foolish to do so. All this will pass." And indeed, later on they did see progress. Motivated by



Fr. René Giraudet during a clandestine Mass in the woods (Berlin, 1943)

Private collection

a strong desire to enter the Congregation of the Blessed Virgin, he consecrated himself to Our Lady every December 8<sup>th</sup>, the anniversary of his baptism. He also made an effort to master his nature and earn admission to the congregation. He was only admitted, as a consolation, in June 1925, before his departure for Chavagnes. He then took as his motto, "Always reborn and always dying", an allusion to his first name (René = reborn) and his ideal of mortification.

In September 1925, René's family moved to Chantonnay, where they opened a hardware store. Mrs. Giraudet suggested to her son that he join them in this family business. "No, mother," he replied, "I want to be a missionary priest." At the major seminary in Luçon, in spite of his good resolutions, his former tendencies reemerged. The superiors questioned this young man's aptitude for the priesthood. In 1929, he was nevertheless accepted at the Foreign Missions Seminary in Paris, on Rue du Bac. After his ordination to the diaconate, in June 1931, his health worsened. To his great disappointment, the doctors declared him unfit for the missions, and he was sent to rest with his family. The following December 19<sup>th</sup>, he was ordained a priest in the chapel on Rue du Bac. Celebrating the Mass was for him an ineffable joy. The picture on his ordination card was a priest fastened to the Cross, opening his arms to the world; below one read, *I have been crucified with Christ* (Gal. 2:20). Did this already announce what he was to live? After ordination, Father Giraudet was advised to return

to his diocese, because his health would not allow him endure the climates of the Far East. In February 1932, he was named assistant priest at Saint-Hilaire-de-Loulay, a town of 1,680 inhabitants, near Montaigu. Religious practice was at a very high level in the parish; the young priest found a serious and reserved people who did not like to hear a joke on the lips of a priest. René strove to get to know and appreciate his parishioners. He admired their robust faith, and often would say that he had never met anyone more fully Christian than the natives of the Vendée in Bocage. With admirable zeal, he worked with the children and youth. He organized a “Valiant Hearts” group, and successfully launched a Young Catholic Farmers group.

“We cannot follow JESUS on our own,” said Pope Benedict XVI during World Youth Day in Madrid. “Anyone who would be tempted to do so ‘on his own,’ or to approach the life of faith with that kind of individualism so prevalent today, will risk never truly encountering JESUS, or will end up following a counterfeit JESUS. ... [D]ear friends, ... love the Church which brought you to birth in the faith, which helped you to grow in the knowledge of Christ and which led you to discover the beauty of His love. Growing in friendship with Christ necessarily means recognizing the importance of joyful participation in the life of your parishes, communities and movements, as well as the celebration of Sunday Mass, frequent reception of the sacrament of Reconciliation, and the cultivation of personal prayer and meditation on God’s word” (August 21, 2011).

### **The little box**

**A**bove all, the priest was concerned for souls, and he spent a great deal of time in the confessional. “A pastor’s first duty,” he wrote, “is to literally love this uncomfortable little box, and be never as happy as when he must stay there as long and often as possible.” He strove to make confession “friendly,” seeking to establish a trusting and warm dialogue, so that souls could be at ease to unburden themselves fully, feeling that the priest was a friend who understood them and wanted to help them. He advised his penitents to establish a rule of life, with a set hour for getting up and going to bed, a fixed time (even if short) for every pious exercise, and above all an examination of conscience every evening. Father Giraudet himself practiced this with great fidelity, and saw in it one of the most effective means of spiritual progress.

In February 1942, Father Giraudet was appointed pastor of Saint-Hilaire-du-Bois, a community of 600 inhabitants southeast of Chantonay. From the very first contact, the parishioners were won over by this priest who spoke straightforwardly but with a sincerity that went straight to the heart. When he preached, they listened with interest and none wanted to sleep. Every evening, during the recitation of the rosary, he added a spiritual reading from the life of a saint, to add to his

words the strength of example. On Saturdays, the parish bulletin went out to every household—four pages from the duplicating machine that were a masterpiece. In it were a word from the pastor, announcements from the parish and the town hall, news from the Prisoners’ Committee—in short, everything that could interest the villagers. As the days went by, the villagers discovered in their pastor a father who loved them as his own children, concerned with everything, both temporal and spiritual, that affected them. The restoration of the church was one of his great concerns, because it was the family home, and he wanted it to be pleasant and beautiful. Some of his parishioners were particularly afflicted by the war—prisoners and their wives, and the refugees from occupied territories. For the prisoners, he obtained and had sent packages with food for both the body and the soul. Their wives had formed a small association—he kept their courage up and taught them to place their hope in God. Little by little, they learned that Father René slept on a board and used very little heat. They caught him praying at length in the church in the morning. The way he celebrated the Holy Sacrifice excited their admiration, and attendance at Mass and the number of those receiving Communion grew. All the parishioners loved their pastor and stood solidly behind him. The seeds he planted were watered with dew from Heaven. On the first page of his breviary, he wrote, “The Cross hovers over a parish when the pastor, out of love for his flock, is nailed onto it.” He placed on his desk the drawing of an altar stone with the text: “The heart of a priest must be like an altar stone—marked with five crosses and containing the relics of martyrs.” Under his cassock he wore a missionary crucifix that he often took out to kiss.

### **“I was really wrong”**

**I**n 1942, Germany asked France for the assistance of workers. In the face of the failure of its propaganda, the Reich was requisitioning workers. Priests were not allowed among these young workers. Father Rodhain launched an appeal in dioceses for priests to lead them secretly. In March 1943, he met the volunteer priests and chose twenty, but Father René Giraudet was considered ill-suited. “He is a country priest whose experience is limited to rural areas,” Father Rodhain said. “What was more, he seemed timid, without a strong personality or drive.” Later, he would admit, “Was I ever wrong that day!” But Fr. Rodhain’s secretary intervened. She perceived in Giraudet a deep fire within, an unparalleled power of self-sacrifice, and an agile intelligence capable of confronting difficulties. After great hesitation, Father Rodhain added him to the bottom of the list.

In April, René was welcomed in Berlin by Father Bousquet, the first secret priest, who had arrived in January. “I have not come here,” he wrote, “to get involved in politics, either for or against anything. I have come to save souls, which I will work on as much as possible during my free time.” First hired by a printing

house where many Frenchmen were working, he lodged in a "Lager," a barracks where his comrades were for the most part indifferent, if not hostile, to religion. They did not know he was a priest, but this Catholic immediately impressed the Parisian street urchins, who sensed his virtue and respected him. It would be the same in the various "Lagers" in which he was to stay. Through his selflessness and his overflowing charity, he won the hearts of these youth who loved him like a brother. He very quickly found a little cramped space above an elevator shaft where he could be in peace and, above all, celebrate the holy Mass in secret. These young Frenchmen lived in great physical and moral distress. Above all, hunger tormented them. René wrote to his parishioners and friends in the Vendee, and numerous packages then arrived, which he distributed to all these young men, Christian or not. He went without food for those who lacked it, shared his clothing—everything he received, he gave. When he was alone in his little cramped space, he sometimes heard conversations through the wall, and thanked God for the remarks that his charity inspired. "Catholics, real ones, are neat. They want to help you out. Look, the Catholic here, he's really neat!" Father Giraudet took charge of those whom illness had brought to the hospital. There, the young men were very touched by this older friend who took care of them. When Father Giraudet saw a well-disposed soul, he told him in a whisper, "Listen, my friend, I am a priest. Keep the secret!" The response would be astonishment, but great joy also, and conversation would become closer. During the week, he sat on a public bench to hear confessions, and entered a telephone booth to give Eucharistic Communion. On Sundays he organized trips into the woods surrounding Berlin to preach little retreats and to celebrate the Mass for seminarians, scouts, and Young Christian Worker members. He devoted himself to all these activities, in spite of fatigue from the factory work and the racket of the night bombardments. He knew how to be all things to all people. The young men's piety aroused his admiration. "If you knew," he wrote to his parishioners, "how these youth, anxious about their eternal destiny, could give lessons to so many Christians in the Vendee who do not sufficiently appreciate the blessing of having received the faith from their earliest years... Make, as we do, the daily offering at the hour at which JESUS died for us, reminding yourselves of what is our motto: "To work abroad makes every day Good Friday.'"

### **Like a big brother**

**T**hrough his methodical and precise work, Father Giraudet played a large role in the organization of religious life in Berlin. Nevertheless, he held to the task that he had been entrusted with without overstepping his role. He knew how to make himself available to everyone. "He is a humble priest, full of gentleness, not using complicated expressions, but speaking to us like a big brother," emphasized one youth. From his ordination, René wanted to become "the true priest who sees

everything from a supernatural viewpoint, who has no other goal than the highest good in everything. It would be better," he said, "not to be a priest than to have any other view of one's priesthood." He was always ready for souls—nights could go by, the Gestapo could spy on him, his foremen could punish his absences, but no sacrifice, no fear stopped him from his priestly duties. His secret apostolate forced him to lessen his work in the factory. Given a poor review by his foremen, he found himself on the lowest rung among his fellow workers. He said, "I am perfectly happy to be ranked with my most humble brothers—this allows me to reach them more easily... Happy manual labor, so humiliating to one's nature, especially when one pushes carts down the halls like an unspecialized simpleton, which allows one to be so free in spirit and so close to God!"

### **His true mission**

**A**t the beginning of Lent 1944, he organized a campaign to obtain from Christ the conversion of a great number of Frenchmen. The young men made "Paschal promises" that rested on three components—sacrifices, spiritual life, and apostolate. At Easter, more than five hundred young men, who in France had abandoned their religious duties for years, in their state of exile refound the path of faith and religious observance. Thus each member had brought one or two friends to Christ. "Our actions are humble," wrote René on April 14, "and as necessary the Holy Spirit brings us back to reality though little humiliations from time to time. This is necessary for us to remain aware that it is the grace of God which does what we are witnessing." He was aware that his true mission was not so much to preach, as to suffer with JESUS for the redemption of souls. "Our apostolate here is accomplished as much through our moral suffering as through our exterior activity." In August 1943, he added, "When you no longer have any news from me, pray for me, so that my mission, which then will truly begin, might serve the glory of God."

"We see," explains Benedict XVI, "that in history it was the Cross that triumphed and not the wisdom that opposed it. The Crucified One is wisdom, for He truly shows who God is, that is, a force of love which went even as far as the Cross to save men. God uses ways and means that seem to us at first sight to be merely weakness. The Crucified One reveals on the one hand man's frailty and on the other, the true power of God, that is the free gift of love: this totally gratuitous love is true wisdom" (Audience of October 29, 2008).

On Sunday, May 14, 1944, Father Giraudet experienced a great joy. Speaking to a group of secret chaplains and Catholic Action leaders, he commented on one of the movement's prayers: "We offer to You, JESUS, our difficulties, our labors, our wounds in the horror of the bombardments, our lives themselves if you ask them, for our brothers' redemption." He pointed to the persecution that threatened, urging his listeners to offer them-

selves joyfully for the reign of Christ. Then, in a scene worthy of chivalry, everyone prostrated themselves, their faces to the ground, and prayed insistently to the Holy Spirit for strength. Finally, before the exposed Blessed Sacrament, they promised to serve Christ with all their souls, even should they have to pay with their lives.

The wave of arrests that unfurled from February to August 1944 struck Catholics involved in groups considered by the Nazis to be opposed to the regime, and they did not spare René. Arrested on June 12<sup>th</sup> because of his apostolic activity, in prison he rediscovered a number of his militants whose intense spiritual life had prepared them for long interrogations intended to make them confess political activity that in reality did not exist. After the failed attempt on Hitler's life on July 20<sup>th</sup>, he was sent—without trial or sentence—to the camp of Sachsenhausen, where he continued his apostolate. In the final months, he found himself the lone Frenchman, in a block filled with the SS members incarcerated for theft and murder who maintained the discipline in the camp.

### **“How happy I am!”**

**I**n January 1945, he was transferred to Bergen-Belsen, a “death camp”. Already suffering from tuberculosis, there he contracted typhus. This camp was liberated by the Allies on April 15<sup>th</sup>. Among the members of the Vatican mission sent to the site, René recognized a confrere from the Vendée, Father Hauret. Father Giraudet confessed to him : “I was hungry, I was cold, I was afraid.

“Faith starts with God, who opens His heart to us and invites us to share in His own divine life. Faith does not simply provide information about who Christ is ; rather, it entails a personal relationship with Christ, a surrender of our whole person, with all our understanding, will and feelings, to God's self-revelation. So JESUS' question : *But who do you say that I am?*, is ultimately a challenge to the disciples to make a personal decision in His regard. Faith in Christ and discipleship are strictly interconnected. ... Dear young people, today Christ is asking you the same question which He asked the Apostles : *Who do you say that I am?* Respond to Him with generosity and courage, as befits young hearts like your own. Say to Him : ‘JESUS, I know that You are the Son of God, Who has given Your life for me. I want to follow You faithfully and to be led by Your word. You know me and You love me. I place my trust in You and I put my whole life into Your hands. I want You to be the power that strengthens me and the joy which never leaves me’” (August 21, 2011).

*Dom Antoine Marie*  
o.s.b.

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