



# Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of September 29, 2013,  
Feast of Saint Michael the Archangel

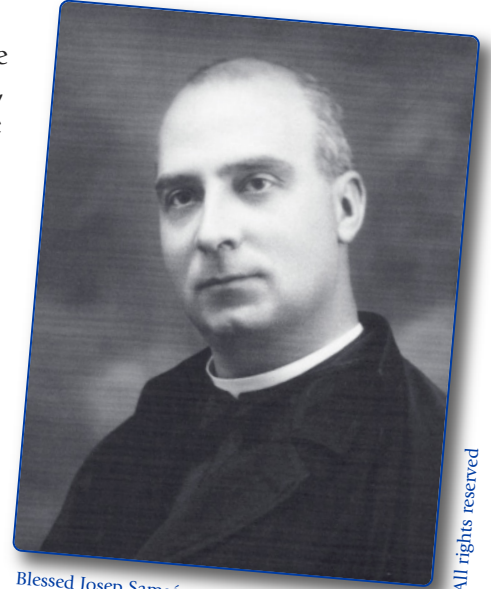
**Dear Friends,**

Shortly before his execution, convicted by a revolutionary court at the end of the summer of 1936, Blessed Josep Samsó, a Catalan priest, said, "All we Christians need to do is recall the Master's teaching: Love your enemies, repay evil with good... Maybe that will be the resolution to the social problem." On January 24, 2010, the day after this martyr was beatified, Pope Benedict XVI presented him as a model for priests, especially parish priests, for the ministry of catechesis.

Josep Samsó was born on January 17, 1887, in the Catalan town of Castellbisbal, in the province of Barcelona, and was baptized on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of that month. The following October 20<sup>th</sup>, as was the practice at the time, he received the sacrament of Confirmation. He was the son of Jaume Samsó, a pharmacist, and Josefa Elías. In 1888, a little girl was born, bringing more joy to the family. However, on November 12, 1894, the father departed this world for eternity. Left without resources, the widow approached her childless sister, who lived in a neighboring town. She and her husband helped the little orphans. Josep attended a Marist school, while his sister went to the Teresian Sisters' school. From the age of reason, the boy showed his desire to become a priest. Serving the Mass was truly his passion. A very gifted student, he excelled in mathematics in particular. In 1900, the family moved to Barcelona, and Josep entered the minor seminary as a day student. To pay for his studies, Mrs. Samsó and her daughter worked very hard as seamstresses. One day, the boy was felled by sharp chest pain. The doctor prescribed a medicine, but warned that if it did not work, the child would not have long to live. The terrified mother went to prostrate herself before the image of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, venerated in a church dedicated to her in Barcelona. She promised to subscribe to the shrine periodical if the child recovered. One month later, Josep had regained perfect health.

## What to do on Sundays?

When he entered the major seminary, Josep gave private lessons to earn a little money and help out his mother. A brilliant student, he was sometimes asked to stand in for a professor. On June 25, 1909, he earned his degree in theology, which entitled him to be called "Doctor." From then on, he would be called "Doctor Samsó." It was at this time that the bishop of Barcelona called on him to serve as his secretary. Later that year, he was ordained a deacon. The following year, on March 12<sup>th</sup>, he was ordained a priest with a dispensa-



Blessed Josep Samsó

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tion, since he was not yet twenty-four years old. On March 19<sup>th</sup>, the feast of St. Joseph, he celebrated his first Mass in the humble parish of the Workers' Center, on Calabria Street in Barcelona. Convinced that Father Samsó had a true vocation as a parish priest, his spiritual director interceded with the bishop to ask him not to keep him on as his secretary. Soon, Father Samsó was named the assistant priest in Sant Julià d'Argentera, a small town in the area. His pastor, Father Francesc Botey was a good priest who was bending under the weight of old age. Josep Samsó took over catechism for the parish, which had been somewhat neglected. He possessed a true talent for teaching, to the point that even adults became interested. At times he posed questions in a somewhat provocative manner: "What must we do on Sundays?"—"Go to Mass."—"Very good, but we can still work, can't we?"—"No, Father."—"Why?"—"Because God forbids it," the children proudly answered.

The precept of Sunday rest refers to God's Third Commandment: *Observe the sabbath day, to keep it holy* (Deut. 5:12). *The seventh day is a sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the Lord* (Ex. 31:15). The Church explains this precept to us in the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*: "On the Sabbath day one remembers God's rest on the seventh day of creation, and also the liberation of Israel from the slavery in Egypt and the Covenant which God sealed with His people." To the question "For what reason has the Sabbath been changed to Sunday for Christians?" the *Compendium* answers, "Sunday is the day of the Resurrection of

Christ. As the *first day of the week* (Mk. 16:2) it recalls the first creation; as the *eighth day*, which follows the sabbath, it symbolizes the new creation ushered in by the Resurrection of Christ. Thus, it has become for Christians the first day of all days and of all feasts. It is the *day of the Lord* in which He with His Passover fulfilled the spiritual truth of the Jewish Sabbath and proclaimed man's eternal rest in God."

"Christians keep Sunday and other days of obligation holy by participating in the Eucharist of the Lord and by refraining from those activities which impede the worship of God and disturb the joy proper to the day of the Lord or the necessary relaxation of mind and body. Activities are allowed on the Sabbath which are bound up with family needs or with important social service, provided that they do not lead to habits prejudicial to the holiness of Sunday, to family life and to health." Thus the civil recognition of Sunday as a holiday is important "so that all might be given the real possibility of enjoying sufficient rest and leisure to take care of their religious, familial, cultural and social lives. It is important also to have an opportune time for meditation, for reflection, for silence, for study, and a time to dedicate to good works, particularly for the sick and for the elderly" (Cf. *Compendium*, nos. 450-454; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2189).

### How many do you need?

In Father Samsó's parish there lived a man who was very opposed to religion. To avoid conflicts, his wife went to Mass in secret. Learning from his friends that the new priest was very nice and that he taught children wonderfully, this man allowed his wife to take their children to catechism. The wife agreed, under condition that he allow her to freely go to Mass, to which the husband gave his consent. When she informed the priest about this, he suggested she say three Hail MARY's for her husband's conversion. Shortly thereafter, the parish priest and his assistant organized a retreat based on Saint Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*. But for it to take place, enough retreatants had to be found, but at the time, there were only six. Told about the planned retreat, the husband said to his wife, who could not believe her ears: "If he came to invite me, I would sign up." A short time later the assistant priest ran into him, and the husband asked him how many retreatants were signed up. The priest, slightly embarrassed, hesitated, and then admitted that there were only a few. "How many do you need?" "About thirty," the priest replied. "Don't worry, Father, I'll find you the rest." When the retreat started, there were thirty-two participants.

At this time, a Spanish Jesuit novice, Francisco de Paula Vallet, gripped by the power of Saint Ignatius' *Exercises*, launched a campaign to preach the retreats in Catalonia. His goal was to make the *Exercises* available to lay people in all sectors of social life. To do so, he came up with a five-day retreat, after which many retreats are still modeled today. Ordained a priest in 1923, he would

put his personal charism as a preacher in the service of this work of evangelization. From 1923 to 1926, he would give the Ignatian retreat to more than 8,500 men. Soon, by the grace of God, many spiritual fruits appeared—conversions, reconciliations, vocations, social undertakings, and the renewal of parishes...

The *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius "are a particularly precious means and method with which to seek God, within us, around us and in all things", declared Pope Benedict XVI on February 21, 2008 (Address to the Fathers of the General Congregation of the Society of JESUS). Saint Robert Bellarmine, a sixteenth-century Jesuit, wrote, based on the teaching given in the Exercises: "If you are wise, you understand that you have been created for the glory of God and your eternal salvation. This is your goal, the center of your life, the treasure of your heart. If you reach this goal, you will find happiness. If you fail to reach it, you will find misery. So consider as a true good whatever leads to your objective, and as an evil whatever leads you away from it. Prosperity and adversity, wealth and poverty, health and sickness, honors and humiliations, life and death, the wise man should neither seek out nor avoid for their own sake. They are good and desirable only if they contribute the glory of God and your eternal happiness; they are evil and to be fled from if they are an obstacle to it" (*On the Ascent of the Mind to God*). Pope Benedict XVI commented, "These are obviously not words that have gone out of fashion but words on which we should meditate at length today, to direct our journey on this earth" (Audience of February 23, 2011).

### Through prayer

A new bishop appointed to Barcelona organized a competition, following the practice of the time, to select the priest for a small country parish, Sant Joan de Mediona. Father Samsó won with flying colors. But during his interview with the bishop, the bishop reproached him for being an independent spirit who refused to remain in the service of his predecessor. Fortunately, before long the prelate realized the malicious remarks he had heard and on which his accusations were based were unfounded, and on January 11, 1917, Father Samsó took over of the parish. The parishioners had remained attached to the priest who had been the temporary administrator of the parish, and their welcome was frigid. Not long thereafter, an eleven-year-old child died, and the family made clear their wish that he be buried in a white coffin. The young priest pointed out that, according to the liturgical norms, white coffins were reserved for children who die before the age of reason. To the great discontent of all, he followed the liturgical rules, as was his wont. When the ceremony was over, some hotheads threatened to throw rocks at him... Nevertheless, through prayers and tears, the priest managed to win his parishioners' trust. In difficult moments he would repeat, "God before all." One parishioner would later testify, "When he first arrived,

no one liked him, because we didn't know him. When he left us, we all cried, because then we knew him!"

In August 1919, the pastor of the coastal town of Mataró died, leaving behind a huge parish divided into two factions with very opposed political affiliations, each supported by a dozen or so priests. The archbishop of Barcelona wished to send Father Samsó there as administrator—this thirty-two-year-old priest seemed to him to be the providential man to bring peace to the parish. Father Samsó asked for some time to think it over. His spiritual director advised him to accept the post: "My child, it is not you who has sought this out. God is proposing it to you through your superior. Accept this charge with humility and have confidence, knowing that where you cannot succeed, God will succeed."

### A characteristic smile

Rather tall and fine-looking, Doctor Samsó always wore his hair cut very short. His manner was grave, with a somewhat military bearing and a touch of severity that he tried to soften with his characteristic smile, inherited from his mother. With his family he was able to show great affection. His strong temperament made him demanding of himself and sometimes too demanding of others. "If Father Samsó had not died a martyr, no one would ever have dreamed he would be beatified," some later said. Nevertheless, he also knew how to make himself loved and forgiven. The works of St. Francis de Sales, which he read and meditated on, helped him to make appreciable progress in correcting his natural inflexibility. "In this parish of Saint MARY'S in Mataró," one of his priests acknowledged, "we assistant priests learned a great deal, in spite of the prevailing discipline that sometimes made us suffer, for Father Samsó was a wise man and a saint." The author of these lines was one of the most undisciplined of the group, and the young administrator had to exercise great patience with him. For example, one day when Father Samsó insisted on keeping a punctual schedule, this priest answered, "Look, Doctor Samsó, you know that I am from a village where everyone knows me. In all the parishes I've been through, the first month they put up with me, the second month they hate me, and the third month, they throw me out. So, know that punctuality doesn't suit my temperament!"

Father Samsó wished to be the priest of all people. His first concern in Mataró was to open participation in liturgical celebrations more broadly to less well-off families. For example, under his leadership, workers were also invited to carry the canopy during the procession of the Most Blessed Sacrament. In a similar vein, he provoked quite an outcry when he asked the faithful to simplify the expensive outfits made for children for their first Communion. On the other hand, for the benefit of all he insisted on a very careful catechetical preparation, which is essential for the right disposition of heart. "My children," he said, "never make yourselves guilty of

receiving the Body of Christ unworthily. Purify your consciences, even of venial sins and disordered actions. If you do this, your Communion will bear very great fruit." He also turned them toward the Virgin MARY: "Look at the Immaculate Mother, see her mantle and think of Heaven! Desire Heaven! Equip yourselves with the wings of purity; the purer these wings, the closer you'll be to Heaven." To facilitate access to the sacrament of Penance, he had confessionals added to the basilica.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us: "The Lord addresses an invitation to us, urging us to receive Him in the sacrament of the Eucharist: *Truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you* (Jn. 6:53)... To respond to this invitation, we must prepare ourselves for so great and so holy a moment... Anyone conscious of a grave sin must receive the sacrament of Reconciliation before coming to communion... To prepare for worthy reception of this sacrament, the faithful should observe the fast required in their Church (cf. *Code of Canon Law*, can. 919: 'A person who is to receive the Most Holy Eucharist is to abstain for at least one hour before holy communion from any food and drink, except for only water and medicine'). Bodily demeanor (gestures, clothing) ought to convey the respect, solemnity, and joy of this moment when Christ becomes our guest" (CCC nos. 1384, 1385, 1387).

### All are called

The bishop of Segovia would testify that in Mataró Father Samsó had established the best-organized catechism classes in all of Spain. For this priest, catechism class was the breeding ground for the parish and the seminary. His goal was that the catechism students would later become catechists in turn: "We must not think that our lack of personal inclination excuses us from becoming catechists, for all of us—parents, religious, priests, lay people—are called to the work of evangelizing souls." Aware of the trouble caused by co-education, especially among adolescents, Father Samsó was not at all in favor of it, particularly during the recreation periods organized by the Young Workers' Club. On this point, he opposed another priest who was of a contrary opinion.

However, an antireligious hatred was developing in the country, stirred up by powerful revolutionary factions. On October 6, 1934, armed men burst into the basilica in Mataró. They threatened to kill Father Samsó, who was there with a confrere and two laypeople. Pointing their guns at them, they ordered them to set fire to the church at once. Imperturbable, Father Samsó and his friends showed that they would rather die than comply. The assailants dared not shoot—they set fire to the church themselves and fled. The neighbors were alerted and came running, putting out the fire as best they could. In a presentiment, Father Samsó declared,



"No matter what happens, let us place ourselves entirely in God's hands. For my part, every day in prayer I prepare myself for martyrdom. ... We must acknowledge that many sins are committed, and these stains must be washed out with innocent blood that generously unites itself to the sacrifice of the Spotless Lamb."

During the night of July 18-19, 1936, shots rang out at the rectory door. They were fired by police officers who had come to search the rectory, because they thought the priests were hiding weapons. Catholics, in fact, were suspected of wanting to overthrow the Republic. Seated on a bench, Father Samsó spoke friendly with the policemen. "You can search all you want. I have always thought to defend the Church by all possible means, except that of weapons. To defend His Church, JESUS, My divine Master, killed no one, but rather gave His life."—"Ah, if only all priests were like you!" one of the policemen replied. Father Samsó answered, "It's that you do not truly know priests, and that all too often you get a completely wrong idea of them."

### **"I'm the one!"**

Soon, the Republic's government was taken over by extreme elements. Worker militias inflamed by Marxist and anarchist ideologies seized city halls and the streets. For them, the enemy to crush was the Church. Aware of the danger, Father Samsó sought refuge in the home of friends. On July 30, 1936, disguised as a businessman, he left his protectors so as not to put them in jeopardy. So, with a fake mustache, dyed hair, dark glasses, a cigarette between his lips and a briefcase under his arm, he hurried to the train station. On arriving, he asked a woman what time the train was leaving. But this woman recognized the voice of this priest she had heard so many times before, and she alerted the militia, who were roaming in the vicinity. Questioned by them, Father Samsó answered candidly: "I'm the one you're looking for!" They took him to the town hall to be tried

by the antifascist committee. He was locked in a room with ten others—which soon became thirty-five—and remained there for thirty-three days. At once he organized his days: meditation, breviary, and rosary with his fellow prisoners. He heard their confessions and supported them with his encouragement: "Do not be afraid—I'm the one who's been chosen for the sacrifice. Blessed be God!" One of his companions in captivity would later say, "Every morning, when we had to clean the cell, we had to tear the broom out of his hands. His stay in prison was a veritable mission for us." On August 15, 1936, he received Holy Communion for the first time in prison, brought by a family with whom he was friends. This grace would be repeated twice a week until September 1<sup>st</sup>. On August 29<sup>th</sup>, another priest joined the prisoners. He was the priest with whom Father Samsó had disagreed about the Young Workers' Club's co-ed gatherings. He welcomed his confrere with open arms, sealing their profound reconciliation. The two priests confessed to each other. "Father Samsó died a saint, as he had lived," declared this priest, who himself would escape death.

On September 1, 1936, they came to get him for his execution. On the way, he conversed in a friendly manner with his executioners. One of them told him, "We are carrying out orders—otherwise, we wouldn't dream of wanting to kill you."—"Do what you were ordered to do," Father Samsó replied simply. When they arrived at the execution site, he forgave his executioners in tones of such warmth that they were seized with distress. He drew closer to embrace them. Of the three men, only one refused to allow himself to be touched, and he alone fired his weapon on the priest. He would later say, "If I had touched him, I wouldn't have been able to shoot." Learning of his execution, one of the revolutionary leaders, who had known him well, exclaimed, "Thieves! Murderers! You have stolen him from me! He was under my protection! This is not how our cause will be won..."

Father Samsó was beatified on January 23, 2010 in the Basilica of Saint MARY in Mataró, where he had been the archpriest. Let us ask him to share with us his zeal for transmitting the faith through catechesis. May he help us to be witnesses of Christ in today's world!

*Dom Antoine Marie*  
o.s.b.

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Abbaye Saint-Joseph de Clairval (English ed) ISSN : 1956-3906 - Dépôt légal : date de parution - Directeur de publication : Dom Antoine Beauchef - Imprimerie : Traditions Monastiques - 21150 Flavigny-sur-Ozerain.

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