



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

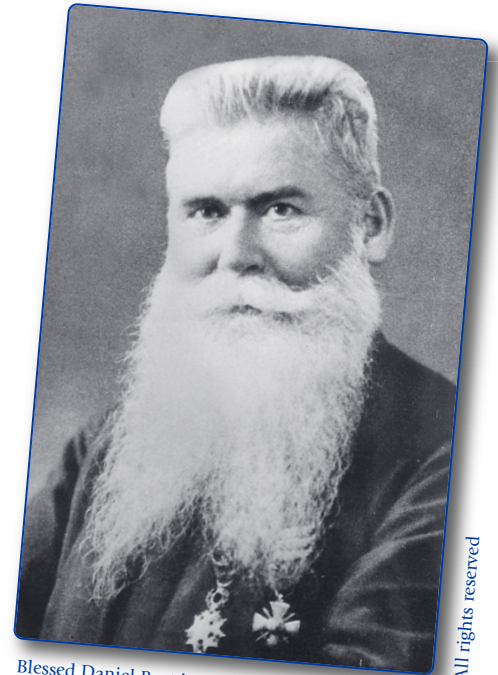
Letter of December 6, 2013,
Feast of Saint Nicholas

Dear Friends,

SEPTEMBER 1903. The young priest, Daniel Brottier, 27 years old, wrote to Monsignor Le Roy, the Superior General of the Holy Ghost Fathers: "From the age of twelve, I have thought about the life of a missionary, a life of one who wishes to sacrifice and immolate himself for the salvation of souls—at once or drop by drop, what does it matter? However if I were allowed to express a preference, it would be for the former. That is to say, Monsignor, that my head does not care much about remaining attached to my shoulders. I have some good reasons for this. I do not wish to be presumptuous, but if you have a particularly perilous post, where someone must be put at risk, I simply say: Here I am." These last words demonstrate the attitude of the young missionary religious. It is a response of love to the call of love that flowed from the Cross: *I thirst!*; a complete and joyful gift to love to the end.

The second child of a humble and deeply Catholic family, Daniel Brottier was born on September 7, 1876, in Ferté-Saint-Cyr, near Orleans, France. Gifted with intelligence, good judgment, and a loving heart, he quickly showed himself to be headstrong and boisterous, and dreamt only of cuts and bumps. When he was five, he declared to his mother that he would become pope. "You must first become a priest," she explained. "I will be a priest!" In school, Daniel was at the head of his class. At the age of eleven, on April 11, 1887, he made his First Communion. This first intimate exchange with JESUS marked him deeply, and in it he perceived the confirmation of his call to the priesthood. "Heaven," he would later write, "is a day of First Communion that never ends!" The following October, he entered the minor seminary in Blois. At the time, he dreamt of becoming a religious and a missionary, but he was wisely advised to finish his schooling first. He was loved for his cheerfulness and liveliness, but also for his piety towards the Blessed Virgin. On December 8, 1892, at the major seminary, he took the cassock. Despite violent headaches that plagued him his whole life, he courageously continued his studies. Ordained a priest on October 22, 1899, Father Brottier was sent to the high school in Pontlevoy. "You are a born educator," his bishop told him. And in fact, he had not lost any of his energy, humor, or enthusiasm. He had an extraordinary influence on young people. Nevertheless, his sense of a vocation to be a missionary remained.

On the advice of his spiritual director, Daniel applied in 1901 to enter the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, which was then evangelizing black Africa. He was eager to work in such a vast field for the Father: "I am longing to



Blessed Daniel Brottier

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offer my life, my blood, to spread the Good News... This wish to be a martyr is indeed ambitious, but without it, it seems to me that there can be no true missionary," he would later write. There was no shortage of obstacles to his vocation—opposition from his bishop who did not wish to see this beloved priest leave, as well as from his family. "If happiness here below were the goal towards which we should direct all our efforts, my plan would be crazy," he wrote to his brother. "But the sacrifices that we make now reap a harvest of glory and happiness in Heaven, and that is what we must consider before all else. That is not to say that we do not suffer from these sacrifices, but when the good Lord calls, we must go, whatever the cost. And God knows what it is costing me now, and that it will cost me still more. But this suffering would be nothing to me, if I were not making all those I love suffer, especially our good parents."

Holding back the flood

In September 1902, Daniel was received into the novitiate. In November 1903, he made his vows and received his assignment. He was a bit disappointed to learn that he was not going into the bush, but to a parish, Saint Louis of Senegal, as an assistant priest. He adjusted very quickly to the climate and the inhabitants, who appreciated this young missionary who loved to joke and make fun. At this time, the Combes Law required that Catholic schools be secularized, and that teaching religious be fired. To save the youth, Father Jalabert, his Pastor, called upon Father Brottier. With

remarkable zeal, he tackled the job of spiritual formation of youth: a Catholic circle, a confraternity of children of MARY, a youth club that Muslim youth also frequented. For adults he organized conferences on apologetics that met with success. "The good is difficult, but all the same we march on," he wrote. "Is it not our duty to try to hold back the flood of ungodliness that threatens to drown our young people?" However, in 1911, an accident resulted in a knee contusion and a head wound that would require many months of care. Moreover, his headaches had become so intolerable that his doctors demanded he return to France. Discouraged, he thought about becoming a Trappist monk, but a retreat at the Abbey of Lérins confirmed him in his vocation as a Holy Ghost Father. He would never again return to Africa, but he would continue to work for Africa until his death. He received from Bishop Jalabert, his former Pastor who had become bishop of Dakar, a pressing appeal to collect funds for the construction of the African Memorial, the cathedral of Dakar. He would work on it until its completion in 1936.

The lucky chaplain

On August 3, 1914, Germany declared war on France. Daniel Brottier was not subject to the draft, but he could not remain indifferent to his nation's sufferings. He joined the corps of volunteer chaplains the government had just authorized, and became a model chaplain. Always on the front lines during the four years of the war, he assisted the wounded and dying, French and German alike. Through correspondence, he also helped war widows, and mothers who had lost a son. During breaks he joined the officers and soldiers in their card games, though he had never played cards before; it was for him a way to win hearts and reach souls. For the feast of Easter 1915, he managed to get an entire company, officers and soldiers, to go to confession. On the eve of an offensive that had no chance of success, he went spontaneously at headquarters, and forced the officers to admit the impossibility of an immediate attack succeeding; in so doing he saved hundreds of lives. His attitude had a great effect on the soldiers' morale. "And yet," he admitted, "I'm scared just like everyone else!" The cold and lack of sleep was crippling; many fell. He was nicknamed the "lucky chaplain" because it was apparent that he was the recipient of special protection from Heaven. He was awarded six citations, as well as the Croix de Guerre (Military Cross), and the Legion of Honor. Although he should have been killed a hundred times, he was never wounded or gassed. Bishop Jalabert would explain that he had placed his photograph in a double-frame with that of Sister Therese of the Child JESUS, on which he had written, "Protect my Father Brottier, I need him". From then on, Father Brottier had a great devotion to his protectress, Sister Therese of the Child JESUS. "When she is beatified, I promise to build her a beautiful chapel," he declared, to show her his gratitude.

After the war, Father Brottier founded the National Union of Servicemen, and resumed his fundraising campaign for the construction of a cathedral in Dakar. The country's difficult economic circumstances forced him to deploy all his ingenuity. During these years, he felt useless and unproductive. His headaches had become more intense, and he underwent an interior purification, in which little Therese was his support and his model. God prepared the heart of a saint in order to show His infinite tenderness to His favored children, those marked by trials, those who are unloved.

Soon Father Brottier was asked to assume leadership of the Orphan Apprentices of Auteuil, in rue La Fontaine in Paris. Founded in 1866 by Father Roussel, in its early days this initiative brought together so-called "Children of First Communion." Every four months, one group of street children after another was prepared for their First Communion. Over time, a social dimension was added to this vital work, by training these orphans for a trade. In 1895, leadership of the initiative was transferred to the Congregation of Saint Vincent de Paul. This work continued during the war, but because of the war, donations dwindled to the point that closing the house was considered. In 1923, Cardinal Dubois, the archbishop of Paris, invited the Congregation of the Holy Spirit to take over Auteuil. Their Superior General, Archbishop Le Hunsec, appointed Father Brottier to lead this effort. On November 19, he took over the initiative, which numbered 175 apprentices. Two days later, he decided to fulfill his promise to honor the saint who had protected him during the war. The chapel would be built at Auteuil, replacing a too modest shed that had been converted into a chapel. Father Brottier didn't have a penny to his name, but he completely shared the blind trust of Therese, who had, in fact, prayed for this work of which she had been aware. For Monsieur Castel, the father of one of her novices, Sister Marie of the Trinity, had been a faithful collaborator of Father Roussel's.

Their little mother

The orphans were asked to pray a novena, and Father Brottier put his protectress up against the wall: "I've requested an audience with the Cardinal to discuss our future chapel. If you are in favor of our plan, send me a sign—that I receive 10,000 francs before this visit. If not, I will give it up." The novena ended and the hour of the audience arrived. Nothing. But, just as he was getting into the taxi to go to the archbishop, he was handed an envelope that contained the amount he had hoped for! The Cardinal authorized the construction of the chapel, although he objected: "Don't you think a young male saint would be more appropriate for these boys?"—"No, Your Eminence. These children who were deprived at such an early age of a mother's affection suffer such a great emptiness in their hearts that they will surely cling to this young female saint, to whom they owe everything. She will be their little mother."

A fund was established on December 8, 1923. Donations poured in. Every day Father Brottier received, often from an anonymous donor, a thousand-franc note. In 1925, the year Therese was canonized, construction was sufficiently underway that Archbishop Le Hunsec was able to celebrate a first Pontifical Mass in the chapel on Christmas Day. Finally, on October 5, 1930, the chapel was consecrated by Cardinal Verdier. This happy event did not keep Father Brottier from being worried about the orphans' fate. The premises needed to be expanded to rescue many children from the perils of the street, and from physical and moral poverty. "These children," he said, "are my little savages!" He wished to lead them to God and regretted, to the point of tears, not being able to take them all in: "You see, today I again had to turn away ten orphans; I no longer know where to put them." He made himself a beggar, and in four years, managed to double the capacity for taking them in. At the time of his death in 1936, there would be 1,425 apprentices. Unable to accommodate them all in Auteuil, he came up with the "Home in the Country", to entrust children to worthy families in the countryside. The aim was to give the young generation a taste for the soil. In March 1932, Archbishop Le Hunsec and Father Brottier were received in audience by Pope Pius XI, who blessed Father Brottier with affection: "The places of charity for our dear children must be expanded" he said, and he offered a substantial donation, which marked the beginning of the extension of the initiative in rural areas, with one or two new houses opened each year. In spite of the social difficulties of the time, Father Brottier did not hesitate to knock at the door of the hearts of the French, who responded generously.

The lightning rod

Father Brottier did not lose sight of the supremely important work of First Communion. "It is the lightning rod that protects the home," he said. "God cannot strike a home that saves the souls of so many poor children." During the days of preparation, the children were given room and board at no charge; in return, Father Brottier asked them to pray for the orphans. These orphans, boys from 13 to 18 years old, usually had received no education, instruction, or religion. As a result, there were many prejudices to overcome, and rebellious wills to subdue. Father Brottier's method was to win their trust with gentleness and firmness, with neither excessive rigor nor too much freedom. The announcement of final grades was the opportunity for him to give the apprentices compliments, observations, or even reproaches. If a harsh reprimand was on occasion necessary, it was followed by encouragements, and Father Brottier always showed his confidence for the future. The children loved and revered him. This priest, driven by an ardent zeal for the salvation of souls, instilled in them a concern for the purity of their souls, and the need to have no mortal sin remain on their conscience.

To grow his initiative, Father Brottier became a publisher. In addition to *The African Memorial* and *The Auteuil Messenger* newsletters, he founded *Illustrated France* and two publications for youth, *Missions* and *The Friend of Youth*. Aware of the danger of overemphasis on practical activity, he was the first to arrive in the chapel for morning prayer before celebrating the Mass. He spent the rest of his day in his office, both to write articles and letters (sometimes a hundred—but there were times when he received 600 letters a day), and to receive and listen with extraordinary patience to young people or souls in distress, leading them onto the right path. Louis Delage, a titan in the automotive industry, divided his life between work and all the pleasures that fortune and fame provide. He was far from living a Christian life. But in 1934, a financial catastrophe shook his firm, plunging him into profound discouragement. A friend suggested at the time that he meet Father Brottier. This half-hour meeting transformed him, making him a real Christian. "As I was leaving him," related Louis Delage, "Father Brottier took my hands and told me, 'Have trust, continue to fight. I do not know whether your firm will be saved, but tell yourself that whatever the will of the good Lord may be, it will be for your own good. And every time that you feel yourself weaken, that you feel your thoughts turning back to what you call your erring ways, stop and say a big Our Father with all your heart. Trust Him.' And so I, who was so far from the Church, abandoned all my worldly relations and displays without the least regret, and find myself happy as I never was before, even in the glorious moments of my life as an industrialist, when I'm making pilgrimages to Chartres, Lisieux, and Lourdes. I attribute to Father Brottier's protection this feeling of freedom and well-being that I experience, this feeling that makes me say that, if I lost a great fortune, I have found an ever greater one—faith!"

"God revealed it..."

In Father Brottier's heart, faith was absolute, without hesitation—simple and firm in the sense that he was ready to give his life for it. The sources of his faith were the infinite truthfulness of God and Christ, the indefectibility and infallibility of the Church. "Who are we," he explained, "to debate with God? Since God has revealed it, why not humbly submit to it?"

The Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us: "Believing is possible only by grace and the interior helps of the Holy Spirit. But it is no less true that believing is an authentically human act. Trusting in God and cleaving to the truths He has revealed are contrary neither to human freedom nor to human reason. Even in human relations it is not contrary to our dignity to believe what other persons tell us about themselves and their intentions or to trust their promises (for example, when a man and a woman marry) to share a communion of life with one another. If this is so, still less is it contrary to our dignity to 'yield by faith the full submission of ... intellect and will to God Who reveals'" (CCC, no. 154).

During the Year of Faith, which began in October 2012 and continued until the Feast of Christ the King on November 24, 2013, the Church invited us to reread and meditate on the Catechism of the Catholic Church, of which Pope Benedict XVI published a summary, the Compendium, in 2005, at the beginning of his pontificate. These are precious guides for deepening and living one's faith. Paul VI's Profession of Faith is also a valuable reference, providing a concise and precise commentary on the Credo. This text indirectly responds to errors still prevalent today.

Father Brottier never fell into the errors of modernism, the great heresy that ravaged the Church during his first years as a priest. He openly complained about "these so-called theologians who wish to be, in matters of faith, wiser than the Pope." He also showed unlimited confidence in divine Providence: "Providence must not be doubted. Pray and act... with that we can level mountains." The dogma of the communion of saints was also firmly anchored in his soul: "Believe me, it is the dead who lead the living. We believe we are leading ourselves and, in reality, we are led by this multitude of intercessors and friends we have in Heaven. I have always entrusted my initiatives to the souls in Purgatory, and I have never regretted it. You know that our dead are merely invisible, but remain very close to us and, when the moment arrives, when the curtain falls, we will be rejoined forever."

Let us not waste our time

In 1933, a serious heart flutter forced Father Brottier to give up leading the initiative for two months. His health subsequently deteriorated, but this did not keep him from declaring at the end of 1935: "My head is full of huge projects... it will be as God wills. Let's work, let's not waste our time, let's spare no effort—we will have all of eternity to rest." Did he have a presentiment of his impending death? "I can disappear from one day to the

next. One still need not worry too much about the future, because I've created around our orphans a network of friendships and devotion that I consider indestructible" (at that time, the initiative numbered 150,000 benefactors). On February 2, 1936, to console their Father for not being in Dakar for the consecration of the cathedral which had cost him so much effort, the orphans organized a little party. He was very touched and he spoke to them for what would be the last time: "I have found my happiness among you," he told them. "A number of people were surprised to see that I was not going to Dakar to receive some accolades. I am past the age at which one recognizes human honors. On the subject of Dakar, I can tell you, I have never for a moment dreamed of human glory. In all things the love of God, who arranges events for His greater glory, must be seen." The next day, he was stricken with congestion in both lungs. "Do not look for the cause of my illness," he confided. "If you saw all the miseries that knock at my door, if you measured my inability to relieve them, you would know what is striking me today." In Auteuil they prayed nonstop for his healing. On February 12, he received the last sacraments. He was taken to Saint Joseph's Hospital, where he rendered his soul to God the morning of February 28, 1936, at the age of sixty. On March 2, Cardinal Verdier presided at his funeral in the chapel in Auteuil, which proved too small for the occasion.

After his death the Orphan Apprentices of Auteuil continued to develop. In 1939, it numbered more than 2,000 orphans. Father Brottier performed miracles of healing and conversions. John Paul II beatified him in 1984: "Daniel Brottier," said the Pope, "worked as though everything depended on him, but knew as well that everything depends on God. He entrusted the children of Auteuil to Saint Therese of the Child JESUS, whom he called upon as a friend for assistance, confident of her efficacious support to all those for whom she had offered her own life."

Let us make our own this thought of little Therese's, following the example of Father Brottier: "We can never have too much confidence in our God who is so good and merciful. We obtain from Him as much as we hope for."

Dom Antoine Daice
o.s.b.

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ABBAYE SAINT-JOSEPH DE CLAIRVAL – 21150 FLAVIGNY-SUR-OZERAIN – FRANCE

Fax : + 33 3 80 96 25 29 – email : abbey@clairval.com – website : <http://www.clairval.com/>