



# Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of March 21, 2014,  
*Passing of Saint Benedict*

**Dear Friends,**

**D**URING his 2006 apostolic voyage to Poland, Pope Benedict XVI spoke these words to the crowd: "I ask you now, cultivate this rich heritage of faith transmitted to you by earlier generations, the heritage of the thought and the service of that great Pole who was Pope John Paul II. Stand firm in your faith, hand it down to your children, bear witness to the grace which you have experienced so abundantly through the Holy Spirit in the course of your history." The spiritual fruitfulness of the Polish soil was well illustrated by the Ledochowski family, which had two daughters elevated to the altars, and a son, Wlodimir, who served as Superior General of the Jesuits from 1915 to 1942. Mary Theresa Ledochowska, beatified by Pope Paul VI on October 19, 1975, was the foundress of the Missionary Sisters of Saint Peter Claver, who support the missions through various publications. Her sister Julia was beatified in 1986 and canonized in 2003 by Pope John Paul II. Julia founded the Gray Ursulines, dedicated to the education of the very poorest.



Saint Urzula (Julia)

Blessed Mary Theresa  
Ledochowska

Count Antoni Halka-Ledochowski descended from a family of ancient Polish nobility that had always shone in its devotion to its sovereign and fidelity to God. He had three sons from a first marriage; widowed, he married a Swiss woman, Josephine Salis-Zizers, in 1862. Mama Sephine, as she was called, showed herself to be a true mother to the count's sons, who were soon joined by Mary Theresa, on April 29, 1863, then eight other children, including Julia in 1865, and Wlodimir in 1866. The family lived on a grand estate in Loosdorf, near Melk in Lower Austria. The children's artistic, musical, pictorial, and literary talents developed under the caring gaze of their parents. Mama Sephine ran her little world with gentleness and firmness. She never compromised her fidelity to duty or self-control, even at the cost of sacrifice. The Christian faith was transmitted to the children by frequent participation in the Sacraments, prayer, and reading the Gospel and the lives of the saints. Life was happy, enlivened by numerous outings and punctuated with stays in the sumptuous residences of friends in grand families.

## **To merit yet more**

**M**ary Theresa, who loved to shine, envied the talents of the other children and strove to outdo them. She readily left behind the games of her younger siblings to immerse herself in reading, though her mother often asked her to sacrifice her preferences to take care of them. Her faults were the flip side of a gen-

erous nature. At the age of nine, she revealed her character in a poem which recounted a dream in which her angel led her to Heaven and she saw that those who had suffered and waited more on earth received a more beautiful crown. She concluded, "I thank God and rejoice at the time He has given me to merit yet more." For little Julia, this dream was just imagination; nevertheless, "to suffer and to work" would become her older sister's motto.

In 1873, following a reversal of fortune, the Loosdorf castle was sold. The family moved into an apartment in Sankt Pölten. The girls attended a school run by English ladies, supplemented by private lessons. Music, theater, visits, sports, excursions, and games were all a part of life. Julia played the zither; she also loved dancing and sports. In the Ledochowski home, the pleasures of life excited gratefulness to God, rather than compromising a deeply supernatural spirit.

"Work and celebration are closely connected with the lives of families", wrote Pope Benedict XVI on August 23, 2010. "[T]hey condition decisions, influence relations between spouses and between parents and children and affect the relationship of the family with society and with the Church. Sacred Scripture (cf. Gen. 1-2) tells us that the family, work and holidays are gifts and blessings to help us to live a fully human life. Daily experience shows that the authentic development of the person includes both the individual, family and com-

munity dimensions and functional activities and relations, as well as openness to hope and to unlimited Good."

Mary Theresa yearned for the eternal Good. At the age of eleven, she wrote in her journal: "The persecutors of the Church will perish, while the Church will resurrect gloriously, and whatever we do not receive in this mortal life, we will find in Heaven if we courageously persevere unto death." At thirteen, she met her uncle, Cardinal Mieczyslaw Ledochowski, who had been imprisoned under Bismarck for the Catholic faith during the *Kulturkampf*. During his captivity in Ostrowo, he had received a poem from his niece, whom he encouraged in her literary pursuits. The prelate's handsome and noble features, weakened by his hardship, left a lasting impression on the girl. At fifteen, she wrote a monthly review, *The Butterfly*, that circulated in cultured circles. It earned her a certain success, but also criticism from those who thought a young countess should not show off in public. At sixteen, she accompanied her father on a trip to Poland. It was an even greater joy for, along with her brothers and sisters, she had made the great effort to learn the language of her father's homeland. Everything delighted her in Poland. She recorded her impressions in a short book, *My Poland*. But soon she contracted typhus and had to remain in bed for six weeks.

### A lovely home

In 1882, wishing to return permanently to the land of his ancestors, the count acquired a farming estate in Lipnica Murowana, close to Krakow. The new property consisted of a mansion with outbuildings, a garden, fields, and forests. Mary Theresa helped her father run the estate. From then on, for the young woman practical tasks—buying and selling livestock, directing work, managing employees—took the place of fine arts. She quickly learned to lead a team skillfully. Julia did her share of the work, and Wlodimir, a student at the Teresianum in Vienna, would devote himself to it once he completed his studies. Sefine made the farm a lovely home. Frequent outings to the aristocratic world of Krakow broke up the monotony of farm work. All doors were open to the Ledochowski's, and the two young countesses were very popular. Their worldly successes, however, left them unsatisfied.

The two sisters' faith, the source of their freedom vis-à-vis the success they experienced in the world, had been cultivated and developed in their home environment. In his first encyclical, Pope Francis writes, "The first setting in which faith enlightens the human city is the family. I think first and foremost of the stable union of man and woman in marriage. ... In the family, faith accompanies every age of life, beginning with childhood: children learn to trust in the love of their parents. This is why it is so important that within their families parents encourage shared expressions of faith which can help children

gradually to mature in their own faith" (*Lumen Fidei*, June 29, 2013, nos. 52-53).

At the age of twenty-two, Mary Theresa contracted smallpox; she had to be quarantined to avoid contagion. In spite of her mother's devotion, it became apparent that a nursing sister was required. Braving the danger, Julia remained very near, and the two sisters' relationship deepened. Long stirred by the desire to become a nun, Julia readily discussed her plans with the nursing sister. "I also want to do something great for the God!" exclaimed Mary Theresa. However, Sefine was alarmed at the sight of her daughter's face, pockmarked by smallpox. She had all the mirrors taken down. But one day, she noticed one next to the patient's bed. Mary Theresa read her mother's apprehension. "It doesn't matter—I've long known that I am disfigured for life." Overcome by emotion before the heroic humility of her daughter, Mrs. Ledochowska withdrew to weep. Mary Theresa recovered from her illness, but her father, who had also been stricken, died a short time later.

### Lady of the court

The young woman then became a lady-in-waiting in the service of the archduchess of Tuscany, in Salzburg. Paradoxically, her interior life increased in depth even amid the splendor and many distractions of a prince's court. She wrote to her uncle the cardinal: "I know well that the career I am undertaking is as demanding and difficult as it is outwardly splendid. But I draw courage from the conviction that God will not refuse me His aid, as long as I maintain the firm will and serious desire to remain His faithful servant. But for me not to stray from the right path, your prayers are more necessary than ever, dear uncle." Life at the court, luxurious and filled with diversions, was trying in the etiquette, the diligence, and punctuality that it demanded. Still, Mary Theresa accompanied the archduchess to daily Mass and went to confession every week. During a stay at the court by Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, she was overcome by an ardent zeal for souls. She was drawn by the lure of the distant missions, but her delicate health kept her from becoming an overseas missionary. Learning that one of the Franciscans was a former lady of the court who had left everything to care for lepers in Madagascar, she became enthusiastic and entered the Third Order of Saint Francis.

One day a Protestant friend asked her to read a lecture by Cardinal Lavigerie about slavery in Africa and the campaign to abolish it, in which he asked the women of Europe who had the gift for it to write on behalf of this cause. Mary Theresa, aware of her literary talents, saw in this a call from God to serve these abandoned souls. She immediately set to work and published her articles in the opinion column of a newspaper. Letters and donations poured in in such large numbers that she thought about leaving the court to devote herself solely to this mission. She showed Cardinal Lavigerie a play she had

written under the pseudonym Africanus: *Zaida, the Black Woman*. The cardinal asked about the author's identity. "Her situation prohibits her from revealing it," she replied. Directing a penetrating gaze on her, the Primate of Africa said to her in a serious tone: "Well then, kneel down, so that I may bless Africanus!"

In 1891, Mary Theresa obtained permission to leave the court and devote herself entirely to the missions. During a rest cure, she was the victim of an attack by a mysterious person, who released her as she invoked Saint Louis. For the rest of her life she would suffer migraines, which she called her "dear illness", as the aftereffects of this attack. In spite of the incident, and through criticisms and obstacles, she printed her own review, *The Echo of Africa*, and published stories from the missions. She also raised, collected, and sent off donations from the faithful for evangelization. Around this time, forced by circumstance, Mary Theresa gained her first experience in public speaking. She spoke before bishops, and gave hundreds of lectures throughout Europe to make her work known and solicit collaboration.

### A precious gift

In 1894, with the help of the Jesuits in Vienna, Mary Theresa sketched out the plan for an association called the Sodality of Saint Peter Claver. On April 29<sup>th</sup>, her birthday, she was received in audience by Pope Leo XIII, who blessed the undertaking. Soon, volunteers joined the Sodality as external members. On June 13<sup>th</sup>, she met with Julia, who had become Sister Ursula in the Ursuline convent in Krakow. Together they attended the first Mass of their brother Wlodimir, who had become a Jesuit. In 1897, she obtained initial approval of the constitutions of an Order dedicated to prayer and an apostolate for the missions through publishing. This religious Order corresponded to Mary Theresa's personal attraction to missionary work, and enabled her to provide the stability and devotion her initiatives demanded. Her first companions set up on the property of Maria Sorg, in a valley that was two hours on foot from Salzburg. Mary Theresa chose Our Lady of Good Counsel as their heavenly Patroness. "We live in a time of anxiety and feverish activity, where one throws oneself all too easily into the arms of human prudence... In our poverty, we ardently desire that this precious gift of the Holy Spirit, the gift of Counsel, might direct all our actions. Yet such a gift is a grace that we will be granted only through prayer. And who else might we better invoke as mediatrix than MARY, the Mother of Good Counsel?"

However, religious life cannot be improvised, and the foundress appealed to three Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, who provided the first companions with a year of formation. Soon twelve postulants came and contributed their help with the farm work and the publishing house, which distributed overseas catechisms, dictionaries, prayer books, and all the works in the native

language that missionaries would need. The order established itself in numerous countries in Mother Mary Theresa's lifetime: Germany, Austria, Poland, Italy, Switzerland, France, and the United States. These foundations benefited from the relationships that the Mother had formed during her youth in the aristocratic world. In 1900, Cardinal Sarto, at that time the patriarch of Venice and soon to become Pope under the name of Pius X, invited the Sodality into his diocese. In 1905, the motherhouse was permanently established in Rome, close to the basilica of Saint Mary Major. That same year, the work was established in England, Portugal, and Spain, where Queen Maria Christina remembered Mary Theresa, who had been her childhood playmate.

In spite of World War I, Mother continued to send funds to Africa, and to ship a great number of printed materials there—1,500,000 in 1915, 2,700,000 in 1916, and twice that in 1917. She drew her inexhaustible energy from private prayer before the tabernacle. There, everything seemed to disappear for her, and only the Creator and His creature remained. Her incessant labors cost superhuman effort: "It is absolutely clear that the Good Lord is supporting me supernaturally, for my state of health is pitiful, and I should not be capable of anything," she confided on May 17, 1922. Nevertheless, a short time later she was forced to take to her bed; her brother Wlodimir visited her every day. The morning of July 6<sup>th</sup>, the Mother's face lit up in a heavenly smile that seemed to say that she regretted none of the madness that had led her to leave a splendid and secure life to work unceasingly on behalf of the missions. Shortly thereafter, she rendered her soul to God. On the threshold of the Second World War, the printing houses of the "Mother of Africa" had printed 3,000,000 books in 160 native languages. Today the Missionary Sisters of Saint Peter Claver are present on every continent, constituting 43 communities in 23 countries.

### Julia

Like her sister Mary Theresa, Julia benefitted from a caring upbringing that enabled her to remain true to her faith amid the allures of the world. Being aware of such a benefit, she felt led to consecrate her entire life to God in the education of youth. She had discerned the beauty and difficulty of this work, of which the Second Vatican Council emphasized the essential role:

"All men of every race, condition and age, since they enjoy the dignity of a human being, have an inalienable right to an education that is in keeping with their ultimate goal ... For a true education aims at the formation of the human person in the pursuit of his ultimate end and of the good of the societies of which, as man, he is a member, and in whose obligations, as an adult, he will share. ... Beautiful indeed and of great importance is the vocation of all those who aid parents in fulfilling their duties and who, as representatives of the human community, undertake the task of education in schools. This vocation demands special qualities of mind and heart,

very careful preparation, and continuing readiness to renew and to adapt" (*Declaration on Christian Education*, October 28, 1965).

Before he died, Count Ledochowski had granted his daughter Julia permission to enter the convent. In 1886, at the age of 21, Julia arrived at the Ursuline convent in Krakow, where she received the name of Sister Maria Ursula of JESUS. After her formation, she devoted herself to the education of girls, and then became superior in 1904. The following year, she opened the first residence for Polish young women attending Jagiellonian University. Mother Ursula was also involved in the formation of Polish girls who had come from Russia. A Catholic priest in Saint Petersburg invited her to rebuild Saint Catharine House, which was in decline. In 1907, Mother was officially sent to Russia by Pope Saint Pius X, who told her: "Take pink habits if you wish, but go to Russia!" So she settled in Saint Petersburg with a few sisters. Since Nicolas II's government did not tolerate the presence of Catholic religious, they dressed as lay women. The community nevertheless grew, and received its canonical autonomy from the Ursulines in Krakow.

### The Gray Ursulines

In 1914, because of the war, Mother Ursula and her companions were expelled from Russian territory. They took refuge in Stockholm, where the mother founded *The Ray of Sun*, a review published in Swedish, one of nine languages she spoke fluently. From there, her influence spread throughout Scandinavia—Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Finland—founding youth clubs, orphanages, retreat centers, and, secretly, a novitiate for the vocations that were flocking to them. On her return to Krakow in 1920, the Mother requested that Rome recognize her community as an autonomous congregation. Out of prudence, Benedict XV asked her instead to return to her convent. Mother Ursula wholeheartedly complied. But then the Pope, learning that she was guided by

her brother, who had become the Superior General of the Jesuits, allowed her to proceed with her initiative. On June 23, 1923, she obtained approval of the constitutions of the new "Congregation of the Ursulines of the Heart of JESUS in Agony", or "Gray Ursulines". The spirituality of the congregation is centered on contemplation of the redemptive love of Christ. The sisters participate in its mission of salvation through education, teaching, and service to the suffering, the abandoned, the marginalized, and those seeking the meaning of life. Mother Ursula summed it up in these words: "Saving souls, leading them to JESUS, making known to them the infinite goodness of His Heart, is the ideal to which we must devote ourselves."

Shortly thereafter, Pope Pius XI called Mother Ursula to Rome, where she would establish the general house. She opened residences and schools for girls, wrote and acted on behalf of youth, the poor, and women. Pope John Paul II, who had always had a great devotion to this Krakow native, defined her spirituality in these words: "In the love of the Eucharist she drew the inspiration and strength for the great work of her apostolate. ... She wrote [to her sisters], 'The Most Blessed Sacrament is the sun of our life ... Love JESUS in the tabernacle! Leave your hearts there, even if physically you are at work.' ... In the light of this love, she knew how, in every circumstance, to perceive a sign of the times, in order to serve God and her brothers and sisters. She knew that for those who believe, every event, even the smallest, becomes an opportunity to accomplish God's design. The ordinary she made extraordinary; the daily she made eternal; the banal she made holy" (Homily of May 18, 2003). Mother Ursula died in Rome in 1939, with her brother Wlodimir by her side. In 1989, her incorrupt body would be transferred to the motherhouse in Pniewy. The Gray Ursulines currently number 786 sisters spread through over fourteen countries on four continents.

Still today, the Church invites us to spread the faith and to care for the poorest. May the Ledochowska sisters, who knew how to put into practice the Lord's command, *You received without pay, give without pay* (Mt. 10:8), obtain for us the grace to keep ourselves available to serve the Lord!

*Dom Antoine Marie o.s.b.*

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