



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of November 21, 2014,
Feast of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin MARY

Dear Friends,

ON October 7, 2012, Pope Benedict XVI declared Saint John of Avila a Doctor of the Church. "A profound expert on the sacred Scriptures," the Holy Father said, "he was gifted with an ardent missionary spirit. He knew how to penetrate in a uniquely profound way the mysteries of the redemption worked by Christ for humanity. A man of God, he united constant prayer to apostolic action. He dedicated himself to preaching and to the more frequent practice of the sacraments, concentrating his commitment on improving the formation of candidates for the priesthood, of religious and of lay people, with a view to a fruitful reform of the Church." Relatively unknown elsewhere but much celebrated in Spain, John of Avila left a profound mark on the Church of his native land in the sixteenth century.



Saint John of Avila

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Born in 1500 in a town in the south of New Castile, the son of Alfonso de Ávila, a rich merchant, and Catalina Xixón o Gijón, John of Avila had no familial relation to the great Saint Teresa (1515-1582). His earliest years were peaceful. In 1514, he went to Salamanca to study law at the most famous university on the peninsula, but in 1517, he left the city without a diploma and returned to his family. "As he was making his way to a bullfight and duels," wrote a historian of his day, "the Lord revealed to him so vividly the world's indifference to death and its forgetfulness of the way of salvation, that he flew into a rage with himself, such was he as occupied as others were with that which is futile, and forgetful of the account he would have to make to God... When he returned to his senses, he devoted much time to considering the vanity of the things of this world... and came to abandon his studies of law in order to attend to the concerns of God." Saint Gregory gives an account of a similar decision Saint Benedict made while still a youth: Benedict's parents "sent him to Rome to devote himself to the study of letters. But he perceived that this was the occasion for many to fall into the abyss of vice. Therefore, scarcely had he set foot in the world than he withdrew from it, out of fear that, because he had had some contact with the aforesaid learning, he might in return be hurled down in his entirety into that abyss. Therefore, scorning the study of letters, he set forth in search of a form of holy life" (*Dialogues*, II, 1). While not intended to negate the benefits of study, these examples remind us that we must prefer nothing to the service of God and the salvation of our souls. For the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us that true happiness "is not found in riches or well-being, in human

fame or power, or in any human achievement—however beneficial it may be—such as science, technology, and art, or indeed in any creature, but in God alone, the source of every good and of all love" (CCC, no. 1723).

When he returned to his parents' home, John of Avila found a little room at his disposal, where he began to do penance. He went regularly to confession and spent long hours in the presence of the Most Blessed Sacrament. One day in 1520, a Franciscan friend advised him to go to study in Alcala. The University of Alcala, which had just recently been founded, exposed students to virtually all the spiritual movements of the time, notably illuminism, a vast movement that endeavored to remedy the decline of Christianity (the decay of religious orders, the deterioration of virtue and learning among the clergy), by arousing a thirst for an interior Christianity "in spirit and in truth". Illuminism was not without a trace of a certain exaggerated subjectivism, tinged with disdain for the hierarchy, ceremonies and sacraments of the Church. John suffered its influence. In 1523, he obtained his degree in philosophy and began his theological studies, which he would continue until 1526. But it was not until 1537 that he would earn the title of "maestro" in Grenada, which doctors in theology are called in Spain.

Rather a dozen poor than a banquet

Ordained a priest in 1525, John soon gained attention for the passion of his youthful eloquence and his enthusiastic charity. On the day of his first Mass, he

refused the banquet organized in his honor in his native village, in order to share his meal with a dozen poor. A friend of the lowly, he dreamed of leaving for these West Indies of which there had been much talk for more than a quarter of a century. But in spite of his great desire to enter missionary life, he did not leave, as a Sevillian priest had pointed out to him a vast field for apostolate in Andalusia, which was still inhabited by so many Moriscos, new converts from Islam who were more or less sincere. Through the intervention of the archbishop of Seville, the young priest decided to remain in Spain. He launched his apostolate in Seville, preaching in hospitals, teaching children the catechism in schools, and teaching Christian doctrine in the plazas. His career as an itinerant preacher also began at this time. In the homes into which he was taken in on his travels, he taught groups of adults how to do contemplative prayer.

Contemplative prayer, in the words of Saint Teresa of Avila, is nothing more than “an intimate sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with Him Who we know loves us.” The *Catechism* adds, “Contemplative prayer is *hearing* the Word of God. ... the obedience of faith, the unconditional acceptance of a servant, and the loving commitment of a child” (CCC, no. 2716).

But there were women among John’s listeners, and that was enough to spread malicious rumors that forced him to abandon this apostolate. However, he maintained his expansive interior freedom. One day when he wanted to preach in a church, a preacher of papal indulgences kept him from doing so. John simply withdrew—but the people followed him and left the other preacher all by himself. Later on, this preacher encountered him on the plaza and insulted him, then slapped him in the face. John threw himself at his feet to beg his forgiveness!

Listen, my daughter!

In 1527, Dona Sancha Carrillo, an elegant young woman of noble birth, was preparing to leave for the court, to be a lady-in-waiting to the empress. Her brother, Don Pedro, a priest and disciple of John’s, persuaded her to first go to confession to Father Avila. She returned from the confession completely changed—she abandoned the court and devoted herself to the Lord. She chose to live as a recluse in two rooms adjoining her father’s palace. She persevered in this exceptional state of life until her death. John wrote for her the *Audi filia* (*Listen, Daughter* Ps. 45 [44]:11), his only mystical book. Later on, in Grenada, he would obtain the conversion of the future Saint John of God, the founder of modern hospitals. The conversion of Francis Borgia, a prince who was very close to Charles V and the empress Isabella, would take place after the death and funeral of this young princess admired for her beauty and intelligence. The sermon John of Avila preached in Grenada would imprint in Francis’ soul the thought of the vanity of the possessions of this world. *For when he dies he will carry nothing away; his glory will not go down after him*, says

the Psalm (49 [48]: 17). As for King Hezekiah, he groaned in these words: *Like a weaver I have rolled up my life; he cuts me off from the loom* (Is. 38:12). These reflections led Francis de Borgia to request to be admitted into the Society of JESUS, of which he would become the third Superior General. He was canonized in 1671.

During the fall of 1531, informers denounced John of Avila to the Tribunal of the Inquisition for heresy—he was accused of illuminism and even of Lutheranism. In 1532, he was put into prison in Seville. Due to numerous attempts to penetrate the peninsula with Protestant heresy, the Spanish Inquisition was very suspicious. John of Avila, who considered the Gospel as the primary source of interior life, seemed almost like Luther, for whom the Holy Scripture was the Christian’s sole guide. On the other hand, some of John’s expressions on the contemplative life could be understood in an illuminist meaning (the autonomy of the “spiritual” Christian in relation to the teaching Church). Nevertheless, he knew to be wary of illuminism. He wrote to a young man: “I am informing you of a mistake, which is to believe that true love of God resides in the emotion one feels. God does not make His love reside in that which He would make you feel, but by knowing Him well, such that, out of love for Him, you suffer freely, you receive everything from His hand without rejecting anything, you set great store in being humble, chaste, patient, in suffering, in not speaking and in being scorned for Christ..., rather than emotions and sensitive devotions.”

An immense honor

As the trial unfolded, it appeared that the saint had been a victim of a veritable plot: rich people who had been offended, and jealous confreres who had attempted to make him atone for his concern for the poor or his success as a preacher. During critical stages in the trial, John remained confident in God, and even refused to exercise his right to contradict the witnesses for the prosecution. From his prison in Seville, he confided to his friends: “My beloved brothers, may it please God to open your eyes to recognize how many favors He has granted us, where the world sees disadvantages; how, in seeking God’s honor we are honored in being dishonored; what immense honor is reserved for us as a result of our present prostration. How tender are the arms of God, full of love and gentle, to receive those who have been wounded in fighting for Him!” On July 5, 1533, the tribunal publicly exonerated him, but asked him to be more prudent in announcing the Word of God, and to gather those who had previously listened to his homilies to explain to them with more clarity what they had not correctly understood. This was the purpose of a solemn sermon delivered in Seville in the presence of the Inquisitors, and welcomed with enthusiasm by the audience.

Already some followers had come to be under his tutelage. They went to roam this Andalusia from which

Christ was all too often absent, and which was open ground for soldiers on leave who were quick to draw their swords, highwaymen, unscrupulous officials, the prostitutes and those who supported them, etc. Wealth was arrogantly flaunted by those in high places, and even by the clergy... Alongside them stagnated the masses of farm workers, poor as their soil, often forsaken by pastors, ignorant of religion and often falling victim to witchcraft. Nothing bound the disciples to John, neither a vow, nor a promise of stability or of obedience—no hierarchy or organization, unlike the Society of JESUS, which was nonetheless so similar in its impulse. These new evangelizers stood in contrast with the majority of priests at that time, who lacked vocation and formation, and were greedy for ecclesiastical revenues.

Watering the seeds

From Cordova, John organized a huge mission starting in 1546. He sent his disciples—more than eighty—into the countryside. He wanted them to go two by two, with the permission of the bishops and under their authority; they would ask for hospitality for the night in hospices or sacristies, and would accept neither fees for Masses nor gifts; they would radiate the good odor of Christ; they would spend evenings and feasts hearing the peasants' confessions. If there were disputes, they would do their best to reestablish peace. The faith received at Baptism is comparable to a seed that needs to be watered—knowledge of Christ and hearing His Word, regular recourse to prayer and the sacraments, are the water that faith needs to grow and be fruitful. Offering this invigorating water to the children of God is the aim of missions.

During these years, John's group of priests considered organizing into a "congregation of holy and valiant priests". John himself dreamed of this, for he saw his efforts, begun in Grenada in 1538, become more solidified over the years. However, this was not the Lord's will. John felt weary and ill. Moreover, he had been introduced to Ignatius of Loyola's Society, which matched his aspirations: "It is your Ignatius whom the Lord has chosen to be the instrument for what I had planned without being able to bring it to fruition", he declared in 1553 to Father Villanueva, who had come to visit him on behalf of Saint Ignatius. He unhesitatingly approved the entrance of some of his followers into the Society of JESUS. However, John's influence remained considerable. From several regions of Spain and Portugal, people appealed to him for advice, and begged him to send some of his followers.

But it was not enough to broadcast—it was important to provide young people with deep and solid training, and to interest others in becoming instructors. He gave his all to these efforts, and succeeded in establishing lasting initiatives. In Grenada, he reorganized the university founded in 1532, as well as the school for Morisco children. He assisted the archbishop in founding a "semi-

nary" before such institutions existed in Spain, and a home for priests who had already been ordained but who had little instruction in philosophy and theology. Then came the schools in Jerez, Cordova, and other locations. But John's masterwork was Baeza, the birthplace of the most famous school he founded, a model of organization and method. Gradually, this school took on the appearance of a university where everyone from children to adults could find intellectual and spiritual food. This school taught reading and writing, "doctrine"—what we would call "catechism"—, and all the way up to the most advanced disciplines: holy Scripture and theology. Girls and young women were admitted.

A determined spirit

Driven by his zeal to promote the sanctification of the clergy, John did his utmost to support the efforts of pastors: "Deep are our wounds," he wrote to the Pope on the occasion of the Council of Trent, "they have grown old and have become worrying. One can no longer treat them with a placebo—now is not the time for weakness and negligence. A determined spirit is necessary to climb up on the Cross, stripped of all affections, as did the Lord." He proposed a manner of conduct, drawn from the lessons of history and particularly from the Word of God. His advice was practical: humility, coherence, penance, in a word, conversion. His work with schools indirectly inspired the council. Pope Paul III, who convened this council in 1545, knew John's work well since, on March 14, 1538, he had canonically erected the school John had founded in Baeza. The seed that would give birth to Tridentine seminaries was already there. But Avila played a more direct role in the second and third periods of the council, as an advisor to a Spanish prelate, Don Pedro Guerrero, his former fellow student in Alcala, who had become archbishop of Grenada. He provided him with two theses of major importance, which would be incorporated in part into conciliar decisions at Trent. One was titled "Reform of the Ecclesiastical State," the other "Advice to Bishops". John was particularly attentive to catechesis. In 1554 he published a short catechism in verse, which was immediately translated into Italian by the Jesuits. He had his verses sung during processions and during the Stations, where in questions and answers adults went over the Christian doctrine alongside children. His methods would be imitated throughout Spain and even beyond.

John of Avila's legacy consists particularly in his way of preaching: lively, evangelical, simple, intense, and practical. He modeled himself on Saint Paul, "given by God to the pagans as a preacher." Luis de Granada, who had heard him preach, noted, "The Master was so stirred up and so transported by this love and the desire to save souls, that he took no interest in anything else, except for that which could assist in their salvation. From this love arose the passion and spirit with which he preached." The crowds that came to hear him were so

great in number that most people remained standing. The holy priest invited sinners to be reconciled with God and took his place in the confessional as soon as he had finished preaching. Some of his sermons have survived to this day, simple, written in the manner of a dialogue in which John asks a question and gives the answer. He proclaimed, "We have a God and Lord Whose Being is to love in an infinite manner... To give witness to the supreme height of love He has for us, He wished to give us His Beloved Son, so that, possessing such a perfect proof, namely God Himself, we might have faith in this truth: God loves us!"

The *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* begins with this fundamental assertion: "God, infinitely perfect and blessed in Himself, in a plan of sheer goodness freely created man to make him share in His own blessed life. In the fullness of time, God the Father sent His Son as the Redeemer and Savior of mankind, fallen into sin, thus calling all into His Church and, through the work of the Holy Spirit, making them adopted children and heirs of His eternal happiness."

After having presented God's benevolent design, John of Avila emphasized the demands of the Gospel. He forcefully denounced sin, exposing its vileness and harm. For sin "is an offense against God: *Against You, You alone, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in Your sight* (Ps. 51 [50]: 6). Sin sets itself against God's love for us and turns our hearts away from it" (CCC, no. 1850). John also pointed out the eternal consequences if we do not convert—hell, eternity without God, without love—, so as to lead the sinner to renounce his behavior.

His zeal exhorts us to remember the meaning of sin. "To the eyes of faith no evil is graver than sin", the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us (no. 1488). But, as Saint John Paul II wrote, "Many of the faithful have an idea of sin that is not based on the Gospel but on common convention, on what is socially 'acceptable' " (*Letter to Priests*, Holy Thursday 2001). Our society overcome by lust has lost respect for chastity. However, in spite of the opinion of the majority, cohabitation and

To a renowned theologian who had asked for his advice in order to preach to good purpose, Saint John of Avila replied, "Love our Lord very much." This is similar to Saint Benedict's essential recommendation to his spiritual sons: "prefer nothing to the love of Christ" (*Rule*, chapter 4, 21). May we put this into practice more each day!

adultery remain serious sins. The same goes for contraception. In fact, as Saint John Paul II explained, "the innate language that expresses the total reciprocal self-giving of husband and wife is overlaid, through contraception, by an objectively contradictory language, namely, that of not giving oneself totally to the other. This leads not only to a positive refusal to be open to life but also to a falsification of the inner truth of conjugal love, which is called upon to give itself in personal totality" (Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, November 22, 1981, no. 32).

"You searched for me!"

While denouncing sin, John of Avila encouraged the sinner to have trust in God, in showing him JESUS CHRIST, our Redeemer, our Priest, our All: "O JESUS, on the Cross You searched for me, You found me, You cared for me, You freed and loved me, delivering Your life and blood into the hands of cruel executioners for my sake. It is thus on the Cross that I wish to search for You, and on which I find You. Thus, you care for me and you free me from myself, I who thwart Your love, in which resides my salvation...—With your sins before your eyes, raise your heads to gaze on the Crucified before you, not the Christ Who has died, but the Christ Who gazes upon you and Who waits for you with open arms. Consider what He has done for you on the Cross, and what you have done for Him, what you do for Him each day" (*Letters 58 and 232*).

From 1555 to 1559, John of Avila, increasingly ill and nearly blind, continued to advise priests and souls passionate in seeking perfection. He withdrew to Montilla, into a modest home, where he died a holy death on May 10, 1569. His "society," greatly reduced in number, would carry on his activities until close to the end of the century, then disappeared. But the seed sown would bring forth a shoot, and the Spanish clergy would greatly benefit from the reformer's zeal and methods. Given by Pius XII as a patron to the Spanish clergy in 1944, he was canonized by Paul VI on May 31, 1970.

Dom Antoine Marie o.s.b.

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