



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of 17 January 2016,
Feast of Saint Anthony, Abbot

Dear Friends,

MOTHERS often pass on the deepest sense of religious practice," Pope Francis said on January 7, 2015. "[I]n a human being's life, the value of faith is inscribed in the first prayers, the first acts of devotion that a child learns. It is a message that believing mothers are able to pass on without much explanation: these come later, but the seed of faith is those early precious moments." Saint Joaquina de Vedruna was one of those mothers who pass on the faith. Her life knew the joys of motherhood, the sorrow of widowhood, and then the total consecration of religious life.

Joaquina de Vedruna was born in Barcelona, Spain, on April 16, 1783, and was baptized that same day. Her parents, Llorenc de Vedruna, a notary in the city's royal chancery, and Teresa Vidal would have eight children, including two sons. One of them, Ramon, would become a member of the Academy of Belles Lettres. At the time, Catalonia, for good or ill, was under the central authority of the Bourbons, and the "French Enlightenment" (the skeptical and rationalist spirit introduced by philosophers such as Voltaire), was beginning to influence thought. The Vedruna family, for its part, would remain profoundly Catholic.

A naive request

The child often appeared very recollected, and when her mother asked her the secret of this recollection, she replied: "Anyone can use my method. When I pull up a weed in the garden, I ask the Good Lord to pull up a fault from my heart. When I use needles to make lace, I see the thorns that, because of my sins, pierced the head of JESUS..." At the age of twelve, she felt a call from God to religious life. The Vedrunas regularly attended Mass at the Carmelite convent. The girl naively asked the Prioress to be admitted to Carmel. The Prioress answered gently that her age did not yet allow such a step.

A young lawyer named Theodore de Mas, originally from Vic, a town 70 kilometers away, worked alongside Mr. Vedruna at the chancery in Barcelona. At the time such a distance made it impossible to return home every day. So Llorenc de Vedruna opened his home to the young man. It wasn't long before Theodore felt an attraction to the charming Joaquina, barely sixteen years old.



Saint Joaquina de Vedruna

The father rejoiced at the thought of having such a son-in-law, and he soon spoke of it to his daughter. Although still drawn to religious life, Joaquina saw in her father's desire God's will for her. The wedding was set for Easter Sunday, March 24, 1799. Theodore brought his wife to the family home, but the young Barcelonian did not have the good fortune of pleasing her parents-in-law, which led to great misunderstandings and tension that would diminish only with the birth of their first daughter, Anna. Other births then followed: a total of nine children, two boys and seven girls, of whom three (a boy and two girls) would die in childhood. Four daughters would embrace religious life.

"The joy of children causes the parents' hearts to beat and reopens the future," declared Pope Francis, on February 11, 2015. "Children are the joy of the family and of society. They are not a question of reproductive biology, nor one of the many ways to fulfill oneself, much less a possession of their parents ... Children are a gift, they are a gift ... Each one is unique and irreplaceable; and at the same time unmistakably linked to his/her roots ... a society with a paucity of generations, which does not love being surrounded by children, which considers them above all a worry, a weight, a risk, is a depressed society ... If a family with many children is looked upon as a weight, something is wrong! The having of children must be responsible, as the Encyclical

Humanae Vitae of Blessed Pope Paul VI also teaches, but having many children cannot automatically be an irresponsible choice. Not to have children is a selfish choice. Life is rejuvenated and acquires energy by multiplying; it is enriched, not impoverished! Children learn to assume responsibility for their family. They mature in sharing its hardship. They grow in the appreciation of its gifts. The happy experience of brotherhood inspires respect and care for parents, to whom our recognition is due."

The nineteenth century in Spain was particularly troubled. The country was continually disrupted by wars, attempted revolutions, and fierce struggles for power. Taking advantage of conflicts within the ruling family, Napoleon seized the peninsula. In 1808, Barcelona was occupied by the French army, and the Vedruna family fled to the countryside. Theodore enlisted as an officer in the Spanish army, against Napoleon. When peace returned, the family moved to Barcelona where Theodore opened a management office. His health suffered as a result of the war, but he worked bravely to provide for his family. On January 26, 1816, he wrote to his wife, who was at the family farm: "Dear Joaquina, thank you for your kind letter... I am happy that you and the little one are well... I wish that you return as soon as possible, for the boys are driving me crazy. One wants to go to the theater, the other to the little shepherds, and it is I who must take them ... The clients do not pay their bills and I am ashamed to ask for what I am owed... May we live many more years to enjoy one another. Your husband, Theodore, who loves you awake, asleep, dreaming, and in repose."

"I choose you!"

Two months later, tuberculosis struck Theodore and within a week, on March 6, 1816, put him in his grave. Joaquina was overcome with grief, but in contemplating JESUS crucified, she drew an unshakable confidence in God the Father. The very night of her husband's death, she received these words from JESUS: "Now I choose you for My wife." She moved to the family farm of Mas Escorial in Vic, a property she inherited from her husband, and immediately began to devote herself to the tasks of managing a farm—working with the farmers, caring for the livestock, farming the land, paying the taxes, defending against lawsuits... In the midst of all this activity, she spent long periods in prayer, which strengthened her in knowing what to do and in her gentle attentiveness to her children, and which soothed her heart, wounded by the death of her husband. She extended her loving care to her servants, looking after their corporal and spiritual needs, and joining them in sweeping the house and washing the dishes. So passed ten years of her widowhood (1816-1826).

"Mothers," said Pope Francis, on January 7, 2015, "are the strongest antidote to the spread of self-centered

individualism. 'Individual' means 'what cannot be divided'. Mothers, instead, 'divide' themselves, from the moment they bear a child to give him to the world and help him grow... How a mother suffers! It is they who testify to the beauty of life. Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero said that mothers experience a 'martyrdom of motherhood' ... Yes, being a mother doesn't only mean bringing a child to the world, but it is also a life choice. The life choice of a mother is the choice to give life. And this is great, this is beautiful. A society without mothers would be a dehumanized society, for mothers are always, even in the worst moments, witnesses of tenderness, dedication and moral strength... Without mothers, not only would there be no new faithful, but the faith would lose a good part of its simple and profound warmth. And the Church is mother, with all of this, she is our mother! We are not orphans, we have a mother! ... We are not orphans, we are children of the Church, we are children of Our Lady, and we are children of our mothers."

The Lord wants something else

As a young thirty-three-year-old widow, Joaquina made an impression on the fashionable society of Vic, but her sole attraction was to follow the Lord's call, which had become a fire that set her heart ablaze, all the more so as several of her children were already on their own. She increased her work with the poor, so numerous at the time. Sometimes, accompanied by her daughters, she went to the hospital to care for the sick or to help them to have a good death. One day in 1819, the horse she was riding refused to obey her and stopped before the Capuchin church. A religious approached and told her, "I have been waiting for you." It was Brother Stephen, who had recently been assigned to preach in Vic and the surrounding area. This Capuchin, who led a very austere life, became her spiritual director. When he traveled through the villages of rural Catalonia, this missionary religious noted the poverty, state of neglect, and suffering of the locals, and hence the urgent need for a permanent organization to help them. When these two apostles met, the plan to found a new type of apostolic religious congregation to respond to these needs was born. Setting aside her hopes for a cloistered life, Joaquina embarked on founding a new women's order of nurses and schoolteachers dedicated to serving the poor. She explained, "My intent was to enter the convent, but it seemed that the Lord wanted something entirely different of me—the formation of Sisters who embrace all the needs of the people, in caring for the sick or teaching girls."

In instituting the jubilee year of Mercy, Pope Francis exhorted Christians to perform works of mercy: "It is my burning desire that, during this Jubilee, the Christian people may reflect on the corporal and spiritual works of mercy... JESUS introduces us to these works of mercy

in His preaching so that we can know whether or not we are living as His disciples. Let us rediscover these corporal works of mercy: to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, heal the sick, visit the imprisoned, and bury the dead. And let us not forget the spiritual works of mercy: to counsel the doubtful, instruct the ignorant, admonish sinners, comfort the afflicted, forgive offenses, bear patiently those who do us ill, and pray for the living and the dead... May the words of the Apostle accompany us: *he who does acts of mercy, let him do them with cheerfulness* (cf. Rom. 12:8)" (*Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy*, April 11, 2015).

In preparing for her mission as foundress, Joaquina practiced long hours of mental prayer, however without depriving her children of her tenderness as a mother, and devoted herself to both works of charity and harsh penances. She showed a pronounced appetite for liturgical prayers, whose richness and savor she penetrated. Her spirituality likewise rested on the profound experience of God the Father's love, a love that JESUS' humanity made visible and that the Spirit inspires to enable one to follow in the footsteps of Christ. Joaquina's soul was transformed, and the Lord rewarded her with extraordinary spiritual gifts: ecstasies, raptures, levitations... These phenomena punctuated the rest of her life, and, in spite of the care she took to hide them, were witnessed by many.

Misunderstandings and criticisms

In April 1825, a new bishop, Bishop Corcuera, arrived in Vic to replace his predecessor, who had been assassinated. The prelate took an interest in Joaquina's project, as unusual and novel as it was. On January 6, 1826, during a Mass, at the age of forty-two, Joaquina took the three vows of religion at the hands of the bishop. The youngest of her daughters was only eleven years old, a fact that would bring misunderstandings and criticisms against her. In reality, even as a religious, the foundress remained very close to her children. Soon a group of young women moved by the same ideal joined her. These young women of humble origins perceived God's call to religious life, but they could not provide a dowry. As a result, according to the provisions of canon law at the time, they had no possibility of entering religious life. In her official petition to the bishop, to establish the community, the foundress wrote: "Joaquina de Mas y de Vedruna aspires to work for the glory of God and the good of her neighbor, in union with a few other poor souls, on fire with the love of God. These souls, desirous of becoming nuns, but not having been admitted to convents, could not otherwise quench their love for JESUS. This is why I beg Your Excellency..."

Joaquina did not build any convent; the manor she had inherited from her husband would be the cradle of

the new congregation. On February 26, 1826, during a Mass at the Capuchin house in the town, the institute was officially founded and nine young women committed themselves to it. At the bishop's request, it was placed under the patronage of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. In 1850, it would be definitively approved under the name of "Congregation of Carmelite Sisters of Charity". At the manor, which had become their novitiate, these apostolic Carmelites opened a school for girls; they also offered to watch over the sick at night. Joaquina was a true mother to her companions who, for the most part, were younger than her own children. Brother Stephen, who had written them a Rule very much marked by Franciscan spirituality, died in 1828, and Joaquina had to take over the growing congregation without the support of this precious spiritual guide. Very appreciative of the friendship of priests she knew, she suffered when they seemed to forget her. In a letter to the prioress of a convent, she wrote, "Please tell Father Francesc that I do not know if he is living or dead. As for me, I cannot forget him, but as for him, I think that he has forgotten me, for I have not received a single word from him. At least remember me to him."

"Reassure her!"

At this time, the country's population was largely illiterate, and it was primarily males who received education. Joaquina approached town halls to obtain legal protection and permission to open facilities for the education of girls. Her followers were the first women religious in Spain dedicated to teaching. The Mother did not want corporal punishment in her schools, and she transformed the saying "Learning enters with blood" into "Learning does not enter with blood but with affection". She recommended to her religious: "Do not allow a student to leave the school annoyed and irritated. If it is necessary to be angry with one during class, reassure her before she leaves and make her feel that you love her very much." In order for her religious to be able to devote themselves to the most demanding tasks, they needed to be in robust health and the foundress declared to them: "I wish to see you all happy, eating heartily and resting well at night. Yes, be joyful, JESUS is pleased to live in the heart of a religious who accepts everything with a holy joy." In a letter to a mistress of novices, Joaquina wrote, "Since among the novices there are some who are fearful, these fears must cease. May they strive to always do what God wishes them to do!"

Thanks to new laws that protected charitable activities, Joaquina and her daughters were able to offer their services in municipal hospitals. As both a daughter and wife of men of the law, she knew how to take advantage of the laws in force to assist the poor, her charges. The impact of her congregation on local authorities and on communities grew to the point that vocations poured in, and the services of the Carmelites of Charity were

requested from towns far and wide. However, when the congregation had been in existence only seven years, the first Carlist War (1833-1839) brought about the closing of almost all the houses, as well as Joaquina's imprisonment. Indeed, she was called an enemy of the victorious State, because one of her sons had enlisted in the Carlist militias (legitimist royalists, supporters of Don Carlos, opposed to the liberal monarchy in Madrid). After a harsh persecution and a brief prison stay, she finally was forced into self-imposed exile in France, where the city of Perpignan welcomed her for three years (1840-1843). From there, she could still maintain an exchange of letters with her communities that had been spared by the government. Life in the capital of Roussillon was not easy. Living in a too small apartment and surviving by doing a few odd jobs, the fifteen Sisters and the Superior saw the death of three of them. The foundress wrote to her deputy for the Spanish communities: "In spite of all that I am currently living, that I have already lived through, and all that I am seeing, God always sustains me by giving me courage so that I do not completely succumb. This is why, my daughter, I can affirm that on the way of the cross, it is JESUS Who carries it. Amen! Forward!" The varied, unforeseen and unsettling circumstances of her life had taught Joaquina that it is abandoning oneself totally into God's hands that makes it possible to endure all things. Her apostolic dynamism remained steeped in contemplative life. In her numerous occupations, she remained closely united with God. Her motto could have been: "Action through contemplation."

An inestimable comfort

When she returned to Vic in 1843, Joaquina experienced the bishop's hostility towards her because of her son's Carlist sympathies, for which she was in any case not responsible. She accepted this

injustice in silence. Fortunately, meeting Saint Anthony Mary Claret was an inestimable comfort. This apostle took charge of defending the Sisters, like a father or brother. He supported the foundress with all his power, particularly in the formation of novices, and proposed to her a revision of the original rule, which would prove extremely beneficial. A new novitiate was opened (it had been closed in 1840). After Father Claret's death, the Claretian Missionaries, his spiritual sons, would continue to provide fraternal assistance to the nuns. In spite of the numerous problems posed by the civil war, the congregation grew, first in Catalonia, then throughout Spain, and as far as South America. Between 1843 and 1853, Mother Joaquina established nineteen communities to run public schools and municipal hospitals.

Exhausted by such dedication, the foundress' strength weakened. In 1849, she had already suffered a stroke. Seated in a wheelchair, she witnessed the continuing flourishing of her congregation in the hands of her successor. The morning of August 28, 1854, in Barcelona where she had moved at the end of 1852, she suffered a stroke. The cholera epidemic carried her off on this same day, around three o'clock in the afternoon, at the age of seventy-one. This disease would claim four hundred victims in the House of Charity that she herself had founded. Joaquina de Vedruna, a widow, left behind six living children, eleven grandchildren and an institute that numbered 150 sisters spread out among thirty communities. Beatified by Pius XII on May 19, 1940, she was canonized on April 12, 1959 by Saint John XXIII. Under the mantle of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, the tertiary Carmelites of Charity-Vedruna continue today their unceasing devotion to serving others. They currently number more than 2,500 religious, carrying out their mission in twenty-three countries on four continents.

Saint Joaquina reminds us that we can sanctify ourselves whatever our state in life and be faithful to the Lord "Who calls". She shows that the life of sacrifice, illumined by humility and prayer, is a short path to Heaven. Let us put her teaching to good use in our own lives.

Dom Antoine Marie
o.s.b.

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