



# Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of December 28, 2016,  
Feast of the Holy Innocents

**Dear Friends,**

**O**NE day Pope Francis confided to a Jesuit Father his admiration for Peter Favre, whom he had himself canonized. The Holy Father noted the ability this saint had to “dialogue with all, even those furthest away from or opposed to the Jesuits, his simple piety, a certain naiveté perhaps, his immediate availability, his attentive interior discernment, the fact that he was a man of great and strong decisions but also capable of being so gentle and loving.”

Peter Favre was only a few hours old on April 13, 1506, when he was taken to the baptismal font in Villaret, Savoy. He was born into a family of poor shepherds who nonetheless were “virtuous Catholics and very pious.” He himself would write: “My parents took such care to raise me in the fear of the Lord that, even as a small child, I was aware of my actions. And, what is a sign of extra attentive care from God, at around the age of seven, I experienced special feelings of devotion, a reflection of the fact that the Lord Himself, the Spouse of my soul, wished to take possession of me... At around twelve years old, as I felt an ardent desire for purity, I promised God that I would preserve my chastity forever.”

## **Not one wandered off**

**P**eter had such a desire to learn that he sometimes abandoned his sheep, entrusting them to his guardian angel, and raced down the slopes to hear the lessons given by a monk at a nearby monastery. Then he would greet JESUS in the tabernacle, and run back to his animals. Not one wandered off during his absences... Nevertheless, the child’s father was not sure whether to allow his son to study. Dom Mamert Favre, Prior of the Carthusian monastery in Reposoir and Peter’s uncle, told him: “To be opposed to little Peter’s studies would be opposing God,” and paid Peter’s tuition himself. Sent to school in Thones, the boy learned basic writing and arithmetic. His sharp mind and excellent memory allowed him to soon enter the secondary school in Roche-sur-Foron. But Peter discerned a call to the priesthood and, when he finished his secondary studies at the age of nineteen, he went to ask the advice of the Carthusian monks in Reposoir, who encouraged him to continue his formation in Paris, at the Sorbonne.

When he arrived in the capital in 1525, Peter’s roommate was a Spaniard, Master Francisco de Xavier.



Saint Peter Favre

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Another Spaniard soon joined them, Inigo (later called Ignatius) de Loyola. Peter soon became a tutor to this thirty-four year old former soldier, who was having difficulty with his studies. Peter would later write, “My relationship with him was initially superficial, then close ... He eventually became my master in spiritual matters, giving me rules and methods to advance in knowledge of the divine will; we came to share a single desire, a single will.” Strengthened by this spiritual guide, the Savoyard student succeeded in overcoming certain temptations and a tendency toward scrupulosity, finding his balance in faithfulness to the will of God. Simon Rodriguez, one of the first members of the little group that formed around Ignatius, said of Peter: “In this Father blossomed, in his relations with everyone, a truly rare sweetness, pleasant and gracious, that I sincerely swear I have yet to see in another person. I do not know how he gave himself in this way to the friendship of others, how he imperceptibly influenced their thoughts. But constant in his manners and charming in the graciousness of his words, he powerfully led everyone with whom he had contact to the love of God.”

In 1530, Peter earned his bachelor of arts, and four years later, he was ordained a priest, after having made the Spiritual Exercises under Ignatius’ direction. On August 15, 1534, it was he who received the religious vows privately made by his companions in the chapel in Montmartre; the first stone was thus laid for what would soon be called the Society of JESUS. The only priest of the group, Peter was the chaplain, and when Ignatius

was absent, he took his place as the head of the fledgling community. In 1536, he received his master's degree. During these years, Peter spent a great deal of time in the study and practice of the Spiritual Exercises, in which he deeply immersed himself; Ignatius later acknowledged him as the one who gave them the best. He helped develop the Latin text of the Spiritual Exercises, the first version that has come down to us. This little book, which Pius XI would describe as "a most wise and universal code ... for the direction of souls ... to help souls reform themselves and reach the summits of the spiritual life," certainly owed a great deal to the Savoyard.

In our day, Pope Francis still recommends the Exercises: "[May] the practice of the Spiritual Exercises be spread, supported and valued, for the men and women of today need to encounter God ... To propose the Spiritual Exercises to someone means to invite them to an experience of God, of his love, of his beauty. Those who live them in an authentic manner submit themselves to the attraction of God and reemerge transfigured. When they resume their ordinary lives, their ministry, their daily relations, they carry with them the fragrance of Christ." (March 3, 2014).

### *The root*

In January 1537, the eleven "friends in the Lord" decided to go on pilgrimage to the Holy Land. But the journey proved impossible due to the dangers posed by the Ottomans. So they redirected their steps to Rome, to put themselves entirely at the Pope's disposal. There, Peter Favre taught theology and Sacred Scripture at the Sapienza University of Rome. The Society of JESUS was canonically recognized by Pope Paul III on September 27, 1540. A superior had to be elected. After three unanimous ballots, Ignatius finally accepted. If he had persevered in his refusal, everyone would have elected Peter. Yet the young Savoyard was cultivating his attraction to self-effacement. He knew that more importance is always given to the branches and fruit of a tree, which are visible, than to the roots, which are hidden, although it is from the roots that the tree draws all its vitality. "The best things in this life," he remarked, "must also be buried in sorrow and hidden."

On April 22, 1541, the eleven companions officially made their religious vows. Father Favre then began, out of obedience, a life as an itinerant missionary. In less than ten years, he would travel, mostly on foot, over 15,000 kilometers through France, Italy, Spain, and Germany, working for the spiritual renewal of Christians and the reform of the Church. "I had in my mind," he would write, "all the miseries of men, their weaknesses, their sins, their heartlessness, their despairs and their tears, the disasters, famines, epidemics and anguish, etc., and at the same time the remedy: Christ the redeemer, Christ the life-giving, illuminating, helping, merciful and compassionate Lord and God. I prayed to Him with all the strength of those names to deign to come to the

assistance of all men. I then wished and asked... that it be granted to me to be the servant and minister of Christ the consoler, to be the minister of Christ who assists, who delivers, heals, frees, enriches, and strengthens, so that I might myself, through Him, come to the aid of many."

### *Procuring the good of all*

His intense activity did not diminish his profound spiritual life. He strove to unite his entire life with God: "One must not just seek the lights of the Spirit for purely spiritual matters such as contemplation, and mental and affective prayer, with the aim of doing them well or even very well. One must also, with all one's strength, aim to find the same grace in exterior works, in vocal prayers and even in private conversations or public sermons." And he noted that to this end difficulties are very useful, for "much better than things that can be done without difficulties or struggles, are the difficult things that teach you what man is made of and why you need the Spirit of God." His union with God spontaneously spread to a familiar relationship with the saints and angels. He called upon Saint Apollonia (third-century virgin and martyr) to obtain healing for a toothache, or upon the guardian angel of a person or a place, to facilitate his ministry as preacher of the Gospel. "It seems very necessary," he wrote, "in order to place someone into a good frame of mind (independently of what which one might do for him), to have a great devotion to the guardian angels, for they have a thousand ways of opening our hearts and pushing away the attacks and temptations of the enemy." During this time of wars of religion, he prayed above all else for "the good of the entire kingdom of France, which has received so many blessings, which has had so many sins forgiven, which today has so many material and spiritual needs." But he also worked for the good of every kingdom, and also prayed for the conversion of the enemies of the Church, notably the sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, and the Protestant reformers.

Paul III sent Peter to Parma as a theologian of the apostolic legate (the prefect of the pope in this city in the Papal States). He stayed there eighteen months. Out of fidelity to his vow of poverty, he refused the accommodations offered by the legate, and humbly asked for room and board at the hospice, like the poor. He preached, counseled souls, and gave the Spiritual Exercises with great fruit, leading to the reform of a number of convents and monasteries. He taught the catechism to children, and formed priests and catechists in this important ministry. He soon succeeded, not without encountering some resistance, in getting the residents of Parma to receive the sacraments more often. In the aftermath of the wars, begging was widespread in Parma, and Father Favre spared no trouble caring for the poorest. Nevertheless, in his humility, he would later write: "I had the clear feeling of having often been negligent, distracted and uncaring with regard to those I saw in

those times, covered with sores and to whose assistance I sometimes came, but feebly and unfeelingly... I could have gone begging door to door for them and relieved them somewhat more." In 1543, he would establish in Mainz a refuge for pilgrims and a shelter for the poor who were sick.

### *Win their goodwill*

**A**t the Pope's request, Peter Favre then went to Germany (1540-1541) to the Councils of Worms and Regensburg, asked for by Emperor Charles V with the goal of achieving union between Catholics and the "reformers." The attempt at agreement ended in failure, but Favre's stay in Germany opened his eyes to the religious ignorance of the Christian people and the immorality of the clergy, major causes for the spread of Protestantism. He stayed there nine months, giving the Exercises even to bishops and princes of the imperial court, preaching, confessing, touching all classes of society. With regard to Protestants, he advised charity and patience: "Win the goodwill of the heretics so that they love us..." He obtained some conversions to the Catholic faith, but by no means a massive return to the Church. Disturbed and tempted to despair of the success of his apostolate in Germany, he soon discerned in these discouraging feelings a tactic of the evil spirit, who always presents difficulties, while the good angel points out possibilities and encourages us. In the book of Spiritual Exercises, Saint Ignatius teaches on this: "In persons who are rising from good to better in the service of God, the method of the evil spirit is to place before their eyes obstacles, so as to stop their progress on the way of virtue; while on the contrary it is the way of the good spirit to give courage and strength, easing the path and removing obstacles, so they may advance more and more in good" (cf. no. 315).

However one day, in a state of desolation, Peter feared he was allowing his heart to "grow dark and become narrow in charity." He then interiorly received this response: "Seek a true relationship with God and His saints, and you will easily find how to get along with your neighbor, whether he is friendly or hostile towards you... If there is something you can say or do now to reconcile with your neighbor, it is in doing it first that you will reconcile yourself with God." He also noted that it is important to uproot all resentment from one's heart, "so that one has charitable feelings of benevolence, forbearance, patience and resignation, so that one does not become irritated, and does not cease to trust in people and does not lose hope..." (cf. 1 Cor. 13). And more concretely, he understood that "one must above all keep watch and not allow oneself to be penetrated by the frigid winds that come from paying attention to the faults of others. That is what often makes one lose hope in their salvation, or that destroys the respect, trust, love and charity that one had for them. Through warmth of spirit, one must overcome not only the perception but, to the extent possible, the very reality of their faults, so

as to overcome evil with good and to continue, in spite of their deficiencies, to remain united with them and to care about them."

Peter continued to be highly regarded by Ignatius and the Pope. Both wanted, in effect, to have him at their disposal and by turns snatched him away from the other. So he received the order to go to Spain. Along the way, he stopped in Savoy, to visit his family. Seventy years later, Saint Francis de Sales, himself from Savoy, would recall the reputation for holiness that he had left in the region, reporting even some accounts of ecstasies and levitations (elevation of the body during an ecstasy) that were observed through indiscretion. After his mission to the Spanish court, Peter passed through Barcelona, then again through France, where he did not stop.

### *A transformed student*

**I**n April 1542, he was once again in Germany, where he stayed two years. In Mainz, his reputation for great virtue and knowledge drew to him a student from Cologne, Peter Canisius, who wished to consult him about his vocation. Later, Canisius would testify: "I never saw nor heard a theologian more learned and profound, a man of such dazzling virtue and who was so distinguished." The young man made the Spiritual Exercises with him and found himself "as though transformed into another man." The following year, Peter Canisius, future saint and doctor of the Church, decided to enter the Society of JESUS. Thus Peter Favre laid the foundation for the Society in Germany. One day in Mainz, Father Favre was seized with sadness at the thought of the negligence with which he had attended to the burial of a priest. He then received this interior response: "Better to forge ahead with the will to do good, than to weary and exhaust the will under the weight of the past."

In October 1542, he was asked to place his theological skill in the service of the ecumenical council that was to begin in Trent. His humility was terrified at the prospect of this, but "the Lord," he later wrote, "entirely delivered me from it by the virtue of a holy and blind obedience that considered neither my personal inadequacy, nor the grandeur and the importance of what was being demanded of me."

At the request of Pope Paul III and Ignatius, Peter Favre went to the court of King John III of Portugal in the summer of 1544. Impressed by the holiness of this religious, the king wished to keep him in his country. However the Father was satisfied with a short stay in the Society's novitiate. Attracted by his kindness, the novices immediately became attached to him. His tireless zeal inspired more than thirty distinguished members from the University of Coimbra to enter the Society, several of whom would become missionaries to Japan or to distant Portuguese possessions. Shortly thereafter, Peter left Portugal for Spain, where, in spite of the depletion of his strength, he founded two communities of Jesuits in



Valladolid and Alcalá, in 1545. In Valladolid, on Good Friday 1545, "having heard the confessions of all of the small children in the family of one of my spiritual sons," he related, "I felt prideful thoughts slip into me. A spirit whispered: 'So did you come here to be busied with these little children? Wouldn't it be more worthwhile for you to have remained where you could hear the confessions of important people?' He immediately reacted, and decided to dedicate the rest of his life, if it pleased God, to this hidden work. "I discovered better than ever the value of all one does with a right intention for the littlest ones, for those scorned and looked down upon by the world."

In Madrid, he was confined to bed in the hospital in Campo del Rey. There he received a letter from Pope Paul III, calling him to the council of Trent to supplement two other Jesuits, Fathers Lainez and Salmeron, who were appointed as theologians for the Fathers. Despite his illness, he went. However, the opening of the council was delayed due to a heat wave, and Father Favre took advantage of this respite to lay the foundation stone for a secondary school in Gandía, at the request of Francis Borgia, formerly Viceroy of Catalonia and now the duke of this city. That very day, this already widowed prince made a secret resolution to enter the Society of JESUS, of which he would become the third Superior General; the Church honors him as a saint. When he arrived in Valencia, Father Favre was drowned in visits and did not have a chance to rest. "May the Lord be blessed in all things!" he wrote at that time. In

Barcelona, while waiting for a boat to Rome, he wore himself out preaching, helping monasteries, and preparing orphans for their first Communion. Observing his exhaustion, several people wanted him to stay: "If you leave, you'll go to your death!" "It is not necessary to live," he replied, "but it is necessary to obey."

### **To be full of kindness**

**H**e embarked on July 17, 1546, and arrived in Rome, where Ignatius received him with joy. But on July 31, at the end of his strength, he received Extreme Unction and Viaticum (communion before dying). During his short life, he continuously prepared himself for God's judgment: "The practice of mercy," he wrote, "is a sure means of obtaining God's mercy for ourselves; it is easy for us to have a generous benefactor in God, if we ourselves give generously of what we are and what we have. ... If we want God to be truly indulgent and not hold Himself to the rigor of His justice, we must be full of kindness and clemency towards all, and not too strict or severe." The next day, August 1, Peter Favre died, at the age of forty, in the arms of Saint Ignatius, his father, his superior, and his friend. Ignatius would say of his first companion: "He loved Lady Charity very simply. It was to please her that he attached such a great value to those important qualities that facilitate both apostolic influence and self-control: education, courtesy, expertise, kindness, culture, in short, all that helps make conversation between men at the same time more humane and more Christian, for the greater glory of God."

Saint Peter Favre recounted some of the benefits he received from God in his *Memorial*, a book written for his own use, in which everywhere he shows the desire "that all the good that he could accomplish, think or organize, be done by the good spirit, and not by the evil." For it was not enough for Peter to speak the truth, but above all it was important to him to discern in what spirit he proclaimed it, so that he spoke it always "with the spirit of truth that is the Holy Spirit." May we, following his example, learn to discern and fulfill the will of God at every moment of our lives!

*Dom Antoine Navie 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](mailto:abbey@clairval.com) – website : <http://www.clairval.com/>