



# Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of March 13, 2019,  
Month of Saint Joseph

**Dear Friends,**

**B**UT as for you, O man of God, ... pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. (cf. 1 Tim. 6:11-12). In Saint Paul's counsel to his disciple Timothy, we can see the beginnings of the spiritual itinerary of Blessed Lorenzo Salvi, a man of God through both his intense prayer and his tireless devotion to his priestly ministry. He was fully aware of the mission entrusted by Christ to each apostle, and throughout his life he endeavored to follow the example of the Son of God, who wished to save the world through the humiliation of the Cross" (Homily of Pope Saint John Paul II during Salvi's beatification on October 1, 1989).

Lorenzo Salvi was born in Rome in 1782, and was baptized the next day. His father, Antonio Salvi, ran the estate of one of the most prominent families in Rome. Lorenzo's mother died a month after his birth. Antonio Salvi soon married Anna Maria Costa. They had other children, and Lorenzo would not learn about his real mother until he reached adulthood. He was educated by private tutors from Palazzo Carpegna, and often went to the nearby Church of Sant'Eustachio, where he loved to serve the Mass. One of the clergymen who often visited the palazzo was Dom Mauro Cappellari, a Camaldolese monk who would become Pope in 1831, under the name Gregory XVI. Lorenzo studied at the *Collegio Romano*, which was run by secular priests at the time. One of his classmates was Gaspar del Bufalo, the founder of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood, who was canonized by Pope Pius XII in 1954. Lorenzo also attended the Oratory of San Francesco Saverio del Caravita, founded by the Jesuits, where he became deeply devoted to MARY. He also regularly visited the city's main sanctuaries with friends.

At eighteen, Lorenzo asked his father's permission to join the Passionists, which he had come to know through the impassioned preaching of Saint Vincenzo Maria Strambi, who was well known in Rome at the time. This congregation was very active—many of its priests had known the founder, Saint Paul of the Cross, who had died in 1775, and a number of them would later be raised to the honors of the altar. Despite his profound Christian faith, Antonio Salvi told his son: "For one year, I do not want to hear any talk of a religious vocation, nor even a priestly vocation." Indeed, the city of Rome was just emerging from several years of occupation by French troops, and the exiled Pope Pius VI had



Blessed Lorenzo Salvi

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died in Valence, France, on August 29, 1799. Becoming a seminarian or priest under these circumstances was not without danger. One year to the day after this first refusal, Lorenzo repeated his request. After a moment of reflection, his father told him: "If this is your desire, do what the Lord is asking of you, and whatever happens to you, remember that this house will always be your father's to you. May the Lord bless you!"

## Every minute

Lorenzo joined the Monte Argentario Passionist house in southern Tuscany to complete his novitiate. When he began, he placed himself under the protection of the Apostle of the Indies, and received the religious name of Brother Lorenzo Maria of Saint Francis Xavier, already marking the resolutely Marian and missionary nature of his apostolate. But he soon experienced great doubts about his religious vocation. His novice master helped him overcome this trial, and on November 20, 1802, he took the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. He also took a fourth vow, unique to the Passionists, to promote devotion to the Passion of JESUS. On this occasion, Lorenzo composed the following prayer, which he would recite with fervor on each anniversary of his first profession:

"O Lord, please allow me to serve You faithfully in this holy congregation, every day of my life. You are truly worthy of being served in all ways, worthy of all

honors and of eternal praise. You are truly My Lord and my Patron, and I am but Your poor servant, bound to serve You with all my strength. This is my wish, this is my desire... O Holy of holies, ocean of grace, Most Holy and Immaculate Virgin, Mother of God, grant me the strength to accomplish perfectly on this day that which I have promised Your Son. Direct and protect me in every hour and every minute."

Saint Paul of the Cross, the founder of the Passionists, was born in 1694. In 1721, he withdrew with his brother to a hermitage, where they fervently devoted themselves to prayer. In 1727, they went to Rome to care for the sick, and they preached successful parish missions focused on the mystery of the Passion of Christ. In doing so, they initiated the Passionist way of life, combining preaching with deep contemplation. Through the strength he drew from an ongoing heart-to-heart with JESUS, the founder sought to set the hearts of men on fire with the love that dwelled within him. In 1775, in the rules he set out for his congregation, he wrote: "Since one of the chief aims of our congregation is not only to devote ourselves to prayer so that we might become one with God through charity, but also to lead our neighbor to this same union by introducing him to prayer through the most effective and accessible method possible, our priests will teach souls to meditate on the mysteries, suffering, and death of Our Lord JESUS CHRIST."

### *Saved by the Cross*

On September 14, 2008, Pope Benedict XVI reminded us that JESUS saves us through the mystery of His Passion: "The Son of God became vulnerable, assuming the condition of a slave, obedient even to death, death on a cross. By his Cross we are saved. The instrument of torture which, on Good Friday, manifested God's judgment on the world, has become a source of life, pardon, mercy, a sign of reconciliation and peace. 'In order to be healed from sin, gaze upon Christ crucified!' said Saint Augustine. By raising our eyes towards the Crucified one, we adore him who came to take upon himself the sin of the world and to give us eternal life. And the Church invites us proudly to lift up this glorious Cross so that the world can see the full extent of the love of the Crucified one for mankind... On this wood JESUS reveals to us his sovereign majesty, he reveals to us that he is exalted in glory. Yes, come, let us adore him!"

After his studies in philosophy and theology, Lorenzo Salvi was sent to the Passionist motherhouse of Saints John and Paul in Rome to prepare for his ordination to the priesthood, which he received on December 29, 1805. In July 1809, Pope Pius VII, who had not been willing to accept Napoleon's divorce, was kidnapped by French General Radet's troops. The following year, a decree banning religious orders and requiring that priests take a schismatic oath of loyalty to the emperor,

forced Father Salvi to conduct his pastoral ministry in secret in Rome. In 1811, learning that a community of Passionists had secretly reformed in a former Augustine monastery in Pieve Torina, a small town in central Italy, he went there immediately, and felt great joy in resuming community life with his religious brothers. Becoming all things to all people, at the request of the local residents Father Lorenzo even taught in the town's primary school, with great success among the children. In 1812, an apparition of the Child JESUS cured him of a serious illness, and gave him profound and intimate knowledge of the mysteries of the Savior's childhood. His life and apostolate were profoundly changed by this event; he would even make a vow to spread devotion to the Child JESUS.

### *God Who became small for us*

"During these Christmas days," said Pope Francis during the audience of December 30, 2015, "the Child JESUS is placed before us... Devotion to the Child JESUS is very widespread... I think especially of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, who... took the name 'Thérèse of the Child JESUS and the Holy Face'. She... knew how to live and bear witness to the 'spiritual childhood,' which one assimilates by meditating, in the school of the Virgin MARY, on the humility of God who for our sake became a child... this must have its own special meaning for our faith... [W]e know little about the Child JESUS, but we can learn much from him if we look at the lives of children... We discover, first of all, that children want our attention. Why do they have to be at the center? ... Because they need to feel protected. We also need to place JESUS at the center of our lives and know—even though it may seem paradoxical—that we are responsible for protecting him. He wants to stay in our arms. He desires to be cared for, and to be able to fix his gaze on ours... Let us hold tight the Child JESUS in our arms, placing ourselves in his service... to show him our love and our joy... He came among us to show us the face of the Father who is rich in love and mercy."

In 1814, the Napoleonic Empire collapsed. The Supreme Pontiff returned to Rome, the decrees against clerics were revoked, and religious communities were restored. Lorenzo rejoined the Saints John and Paul motherhouse. But out of the 243 members of the Congregation prior to the revolutionary upheaval, just 151 returned to their previous life. From then on, Father Salvi, while remaining devoted to deep and intense prayer, was very active preaching retreats and missions, writing letters, directing souls, and publishing devotional opuscles. Rather than improvising, he prepared his homilies carefully, as his numerous books of notes and homilies attest to.

Lorenzo Salvi's main literary work is entitled "The Soul in Love with the Child JESUS". In it, he writes, "Here

then is where we seek to lead all Christian people, here is the gentle invitation that is extended to all faithful Catholics—to fall in love with the Child JESUS. Thus, having continually before their eyes the examples of virtue that, from the cradle he teaches us, they might, follow his example, bringing souls who have gone astray back onto the right path, and serving as models to those who are already on it. Both can be sure that if they walk in the footsteps of this celestial Child, they will not stray from the path that leads to eternal life. They will acquire this precious hallmark of spiritual childhood which JESUS the Redeemer wants all those who aspire to Heaven be endowed with: ‘Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven’ (Mt. 18:3). This invitation to put one’s heart into assiduously honoring the childhood of JESUS CHRIST should not seem strange to anyone. Indeed, if the zeal of so many devout priests and monks to promote the perpetual memory of the Passion and Death of JESUS among Christians is praiseworthy, how can it not be equally commendable to rouse the faithful to assiduously remember his birth in the manger in Bethlehem? It is there that the Word Incarnate opened the first public school of all the virtues. It is there that all that surrounds the holy Child lying on the straw cries out to our ears, as Saint Bernard wrote: ‘His tongue does not yet speak, but all that surrounds him cries out. The stable cries out; the manger cries out; his tears and his swaddling clothes cry out. His little members do not cease to cry out, though his childhood remains silent.’”

### **An overactive priest**

**B**ut Lorenzo faced a number of trials. In his community, others did not always understand why he was so active, and so often absent from the motherhouse. They were also surprised to see a priest devoted to contemplating the Passion base his preaching on devotion to the Child JESUS. “He does not conform to the common practices of the congregation!” some asserted. However, his accomplishments prove that his efforts did not come from frenetic activism, but were a work of God inspired by the Holy Spirit. In many villages and towns in Latium and Tuscany, the memory of his homilies and miracles is still alive. In the town of Vignanello, his words brought an end to many scandals, important restitutions, and resolution of long-standing family conflicts through acts of Christian forgiveness. In addition, seventeen young men there sought admission to the Passionists. In Marina, south of Rome, where age-old hatreds among several families had led to fights and even murders, Lorenzo’s preaching brought about the public reconciliation of 200 people, which had a calming effect on the entire population. After a weeklong mission in a small town of 2,000 inhabitants, all but three people approached the sacraments with devotion. In 1829 and 1830, Father Salvi carried out his apostolate primarily in Rome. There he preached a mission to 209 prisoners at

Castel Sant’Angelo, a prison at the time. Another retreat was dedicated to chaplains, doctors, and nurses at San Giovanni Addolorata Hospital, near Laterano. His zeal extended to agreeing to prepare the children of Rome for their first Communion himself.

Lorenzo Salvi’s admirable zeal foreshadowed the recommendations Pope Benedict XVI made on May 10, 2010: “Dear priests, ‘shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion but willingly... being examples to the flock’ (1 Pet. 5:2-4). Therefore, do not be afraid to lead to Christ each one of the brethren whom he has entrusted to you, certain that every word and every action will bear fruit if they come from obedience to God’s will: know how to live while appreciating the merits and in recognition of the limits of the culture in which we find ourselves, with the firm assurance that the proclamation of the Gospel is the greatest service to render. In fact, there is no greater good in this earthly life than to lead people to God, to reawaken faith, to lift people out of their inertia and desperation, to give hope that God is near and directs our personal histories and that of the world: this, in the ultimate analysis, is the deep and final meaning of the task of governing that the Lord has given us. It means forming Christ in believers, through that process of sanctification that is a conversion of criteria, value system, and patterns of behavior, allowing Christ to live in every one of the faithful. Saint Paul sums up his pastoral work with these words: ‘My little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!’ (Gal. 4:19)”.

At the Saints John and Paul house where he lived, Lorenzo became friends with Blessed Dominic Barberi, a fellow Passionist, who had a large apostolate in northern Europe. He would have liked to accompany Barberi on his missions, but obedience to his superiors kept him in Italy. Meanwhile, they both became close friends with members of the English community in Rome, including Patrick Wiseman, a future cardinal in the Roman Church.

### **It’s nothing!**

**L**orenzo’s spirituality was characterized by both strength and gentleness. His words had a profound impact on his listeners because they were based on a personal experience of God and of spiritual life. Small and very quick, with refined artistic talent and taste, Laurent was quickly noted for his great humility, simplicity, gentleness, and obedience to superiors and the Rule, which he strove to observe even during his travels. The evening of Christmas 1840, when he was rector of the Saints John and Paul motherhouse in Rome, Lorenzo decided to make a little crèche, with the help of two brothers. The work was underway when the surprising order from the superior general came to suspend all decorating.

The brothers were tempted to complain, but Lorenzo told them, with his usual gentleness: "Let us do so; holy obedience, holy obedience!" His intense spiritual life also brought mystical phenomena. Surprised in a state of levitation in the monastery of Saint Angelo church in Viterbo, he responded: "It's nothing. Do not speak of it!" At times he was also given the gift of reading consciences and knowing about future or distant events. Several witnesses said they had seen the Child JESUS in his room. He was increasingly called "the saint." One day, in Viterbo, he turned to a lady and said: "Listen to these people! I am a scoundrel, and they are saying 'Look at the saint!'"

Lorenzo performed a number of miracles by showing an image of the Child JESUS. The Passionist archives of missions between 1828 and 1870 contain the account of five miraculous cures obtained by his intercession to the Child JESUS. These cures include that of a nun who had lost the use of a leg after a severe stroke: our Passionist cured her leg by touching it with an image of the Child JESUS. A woman in Viterbo suffered from a serious heart condition that rendered her an invalid. Knowing that Lorenzo would be visiting a nearby house, she had herself carried there. A sizable crowd was waiting for him at the house. When he reached her, he stopped. He named the illness she was suffering from and added, "May the Child JESUS free you from this terrible sickness!" Then he blessed her. The woman was immediately and permanently cured. Another time, a mother presented him with her deformed child, who was deaf, dumb and blind. The missionary caressed him for a long time, then told the mother to lay him on the ground, assuring her that nothing bad would happen. The child then exclaimed, "Mama, mama, I can see!" In 1855, he obtained the end

of a cholera epidemic in Viterbo by performing a solemn triduum in honor of the Child JESUS. His spiritual healings were even more numerous, as revealed in his vast correspondence.

### *Pulling the cart*

From 1842 to 1845, Lorenzo worked incessantly—twenty retreats and seven popular missions. In 1847, his external apostolate was so intense that he spent only twenty-eight days in the community. In the final years of his life, Lorenzo was afflicted by a nervous condition that caused him great suffering. He was reminded of the precariousness of life, and purified his intentions. He admitted, "In spite of my fatigue, I keep pulling the cart; all merit belongs to the Child JESUS, who strongly sustains me." In February 1854, a cardiovascular accident immobilized him for several hours. Nevertheless, in May, he was able to participate in his congregation's general chapter, where he was once again appointed provincial councilor. In April 1855, he narrowly avoided a serious accident, which left him with an injured arm. Two months later, on June 10<sup>th</sup>, he was called to Capranica, several kilometers south of Viterbo, to bless the sick and administer the sacraments to several people in need. As he was leaving his motherhouse, he told his brother porter: "I am leaving, but I will not return; I am going to die in Capranica." At noon he celebrated Mass, wrote several letters, visited the sick, and then withdrew to his room. As evening approached, the mistress of the house, alerted by strange noises, entered his room and found him standing, in critical condition. The doctor diagnosed a stroke; Lorenzo received the last sacraments. That evening, with almost no agony, his soul returned to God.

"Lorenzo Salvi fought the good fight of faith, in keeping with the spirit of his religious congregation, with intense commitment to preaching popular missions and retreats, and the ministry of confession. To all those he approached, he tried to convey the love of the poor and humble Christ, by spreading devotion to the Child JESUS and to Our Lord's Passion, moments in which the Savior's humility and gentleness are revealed to the fullest. A firm believer in the infinite mercy of the Heart of Christ, he never tired of encouraging souls to trust, following the example of the little child who is filled with trust in his father's strong and loving arms" (Saint John Paul II, Homily of Beatification). May the Child JESUS also be the joy and love in our own hearts!

*Dom Antoine Marie*  
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