



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

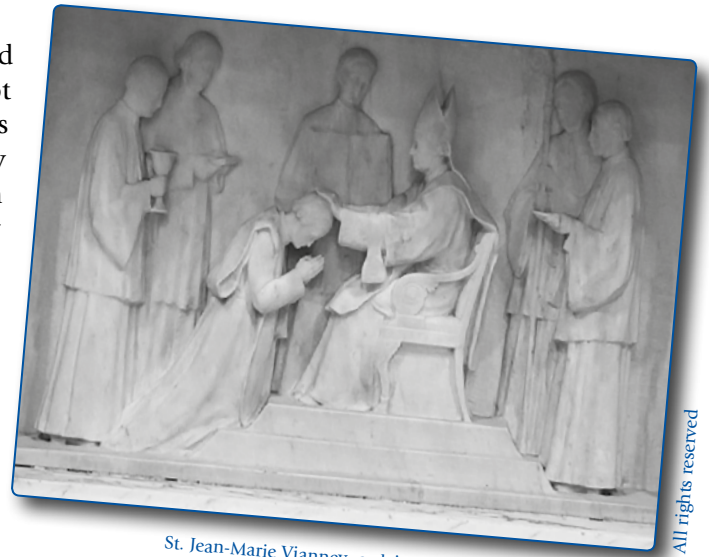
Letter of April 17, 2019,
Wednesday in Holy Week

Dear Friends,

FATHER Charles Balley would most likely have remained enshrouded in oblivion, if Providence had not placed on his path a young peasant from the Lyons area, who, thanks to his intelligent and supernatural piety would become the holy Curé of Ars. A brilliant Génovéfain canon, Fr. Balley could have become a renowned professor of moral theology at the major seminary in Lyons, where he was offered a chair on several occasions. Instead of this enviable position, he humbly preferred that of a simple parish priest, to which he dedicated himself in a complete gift of self. His hidden labor bore fruit beyond all expectations.

Antoine Balley and Jeanne Laurent came from Lyons' middle class. Their large household was already rich with nine boys and six girls when Charles was born on September 30, 1751. The child was baptized the following day at the Church of Saints Peter and Saturnin. Already fully committed to the faith, the family was unaffected by the irreligious currents that were already permeating the middle class in France. Sunday Mass, confession, and first Communion were carefully prepared for, and the rich, fertile Christian ground in which the children grew up allowed solid vocations to blossom. Two girls would enter the Annunciade convent, a boy would become a Carthusian monk, and two others would become Génovéfain canons. Antoine Balley was a model of hard work, and managed his affairs well. Charles inherited from his father a taste for order, a gift for judging events and people, and a spirit of decisiveness when confronted with unexpected situations.

The young man was not yet sixteen when he attended the solemn profession of his Génovéfain brother. Two months later he himself entered the novitiate of this congregation of priests living under the rule of Saint Augustine. At that time undergoing reform, this institute numbered more than a thousand religious. Most lived in conventual houses, while the others were scattered in parish rectories in various dioceses; parish ministry was the primary purpose of the congregation. The spirit of the institute promoted zeal for preaching the divine word, care for the sick, with a preference for the poor and afflicted, careful administration of the sacraments, instruction of the ignorant, catechism to children, and the splendor of the liturgy. In 1768, about a year after his father's death, Charles made his profession, then pursued studies in various houses of the order. He was



St. Jean-Marie Vianney, ordained a priest
thanks to the persevering solicitude of Father Balley

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then appointed prefect of discipline at the seminary in the abbey in Ham, in Picardy. There he was ordained to the priesthood at the age of twenty-four, his joy mixed with tears, as his mother had died the month before.

Choue

After his ordination to the priesthood, Father Balley worked for two more years with the young canons in Ham. He noticed a resistance to authority among them that disappointed him—these young men aspiring to the priesthood seemed to be in pursuit of a career more than the service of God. He applied his tact and all his energy to coax them to piety, the study of theology, and order. Nevertheless, he feared his words were falling on deaf ears. On September 1, 1779, his superiors sent him to the priory of Saint Irenaeus of Lyons to assume the duties of novice master, and later those of parish vicar. In 1784, he joyfully accepted the pastoral charge of the village of Choue, in Le Perche, where the rough country folk were more interested in superstition than the rebuilding of their church, which was on the verge of collapse. However, the priest could rely on the cooperation of a vicar who had been there seven years. In the spring of 1785, he gathered together the leading citizens for a parish meeting and persuaded them to undertake the renovation of the church. He made an inventory of the sacristy and secured an allotment to refurbish the worn-out vestments. In three years, the dignity of the worship was noticeably enhanced. Father Balley also waged a bitter war against religious ignorance,

explaining the truths of the faith everywhere. Not one to overlook the basic education of his flock, he appointed a worthy individual to teach primary school. His charity made itself felt in a very special manner in the harsh winter of 1788-1789, when he made arrangements with the local lord of the manor to provide the poorest with something to live on.

But soon, the turmoil of the French Revolution swept through the kingdom. In 1790, the little village of Choue witnessed a succession of three mayors. In February, the National Assembly banned monastic vows and suppressed religious orders; on July 12, this same assembly promulgated the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, which sought to establish a national Church, subject to political authority and cut off from the Pope. It soon forced bishops and priests to swear an oath of loyalty "to the Nation, the Law, and the King". Those who refused to take the oath would be considered to have resigned. A little more than a third of the priests of the district of Mondoubleau, where the parish of Choue was located, refused to take the oath. Father Balley expressed himself in these words: "I the undersigned, priest of the parish of Saint Clement in Choue, declare that my conscience does not permit me to take the oath on the Constitution without exceptions. But, in order to comply with the National Assembly's decree of November 27, to the extent that my religion permits me to do so, I vow to watch with care over the faithful of the parish that God has entrusted to me through the ministry of my Bishop, to be faithful to the Nation, the Law and the King, and to the Constitution enacted by the National Assembly and sanctioned by the King, in all that pertains to the civil and temporal, strictly excluding all that pertains to the spiritual, on which the Church alone has the right to command, and in all that which would not be contrary to my conscience."

Legitimate pastors

The bishop of Blois, Bishop de Thémines, had refused to take the oath. Exiled in Savoy, he was replaced by Father Grégoire, who was elected bishop of the new department of Loir-et-Cher. The pastor of Choue refused to recognize the intruder, and before being removed in turn, took pains to explain to his parishioners how the Civil Constitution of the Clergy was schismatic. "By the very words of the Gospel, and by the doctrine that has been taught continuously in the Church since its institution by our Lord JESUS CHRIST, there can be no legitimate parish priests in the Church other than those who hold their mission from JESUS CHRIST Himself, a mission passed on to them through the ministry of the legitimate bishop, meaning he who has received (from the Pope) a true canonical mission. It follows that he who has received this canonical mission remains the true parish priest, and the faithful of his parish are obliged in conscience to regard him as their true pastor and to have no spiritual relations with one the electors have appointed in his place." Father Balley

warned them again that, for the same reason, the priest who would take his place would not have the necessary jurisdiction to absolve sins, and that those who received the sacraments administered by him would be participating in schism.

The parish was soon divided between Christians loyal to Father Balley, and supporters of the priest the government had appointed in his place. The local tribunal summoned Father Balley to appear for seditious remarks. The priest introduced himself in no uncertain terms as the pastor of Choue: "I know of no other canonical institution for parish priests," he declared to the judge, "than that of their legitimate bishop; my position not having been vacated by my death, my resignation or my canonical deposition, I still consider myself to be the legitimate pastor of Choue." The case, which had the potential to be catastrophic for the courageous priest, was however dismissed on a technicality by the tribunal. But the priest was driven out of his parish at the instigation of a group of revolutionary villagers. He remained in the area for another year until August 26, 1792, the date on which all refractory priests (priests who had refused to take the oath) were sentenced to exile. He then went into hiding, and all his possessions were confiscated and sold.

"Carlos"

With Robespierre's fall on July 27, 1794, some peace returned to the religious politic. Father Balley found himself in Lyons, a city very much tried by the Revolution, carrying out a clandestine apostolate under the full authority of the legitimate bishop, Bishop Marbeuf, who at the time was in exile in Lubeck. Étienne, Father Balley's Carthusian brother, had been guillotined on January 14, 1794, the very day of his arrest by the Commission Temporaire, on the grounds of "not having taken any oath, [and being] an excessive fanatic, not wanting to submit his letters of priesthood, saying that he held them from God." His two sisters who were nuns remained faithful to their consecration while living in the world; the younger would die from extreme poverty at the end of 1795. But the brother who was a Génovéfain canon had taken all the required oaths, allowing him to keep his parish in Étalante, in Burgundy. This was a painful thorn in Charles' heart. During this time, Charles worked zealously, under the pseudonym "Carlos". The refractory priests (i.e. those who had refused to take the oath) were assisted by heroic women who dedicated themselves selflessly. By day, Carlos gave lessons as a tutor; by night, he carried out his secret ministry, at first in relative tranquility, then starting in 1798, at the risk of his life.

The promulgation in 1802 of the Concordat signed between the First Consul Bonaparte and Pope Pius VII ushered in a period of peace for the Church in France. The "Concordataire" bishops prepared the list of priests available to them to minister to the people. Father Balley was on the list of the Bishop of Blois, who hoped he

would return to Choue, and to the staff roster in Lyons. The comments of all were laudatory: "Talents, zeal, piety." Once he was appointed archbishop of Lyons, Cardinal Fesch, Napoleon's uncle, appointed Father Balley to minister to the parish of Écully, north of Lyons. It was a parish of 1,250 inhabitants, spread across some twenty hamlets and two more populated areas. They made their living from farming and practiced the faith, though attendance at Sunday Mass fluctuated during the harvest season. The new pastor noted that in three quarters of the households, there was holy water, the New Testament and the Imitation of Christ were read regularly, and families prayed together. Everything related to worship—buildings, relics, altars, and vestments—had remained in decent condition in spite of the Revolution. But Charles Balley set his sights on the splendor of the liturgy; he replaced or restored all the objects, the sacred vessels, the books, the canopy... In 1807, he would obtain a marble altar for his church. He attended to the details of public processions, which had been reestablished by the Concordat. So, after a fifteen-year absence, the Rogations, Corpus Christi and the August 15 procession commemorating Louis XIII's vow were solemnly observed. The confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament was revived, and offered Eucharistic adoration every Sunday and feast day. Lent was a particularly special time for the parish—the pastor intensified his austere penitence, and gathered his flock every evening for prayer, a meditation, and, on some days, a lecture. From All Saints' Day until Pentecost, when first Communions took place, he gave a forty-five minute catechism after Sunday vespers, in addition to the morning lesson five days a week during Advent, and the first Sunday from Lent to Pentecost.

Two students

The priest gladly made calls on his parishioners and paid visits to those furthest away from the Church. His amiable kindness helped him set irregular matrimonial situations aright, including those involving former revolutionaries, and convinced parents to have their children baptized. He likewise promoted the schools in the parish as much as he could, despite the less than exemplary instruction they provided. Cardinal Fesch had also insisted that his vicars general encourage among the priests a zeal for vocations. In March 1807, during a Confirmation ceremony, Charles Balley had the joy of presenting to his archbishop his two students—Mathias Loras, an intelligent fourteen-year-old, and a young twenty-year-old peasant with little aptitude for study, named Jean-Marie Vianney.

Originally from Dardilly, a village near Écully, Jean-Marie Vianney had long hoped to become a priest. He had found a patron in his parish priest, Father Fournier, who had taught him to read and write when he was seventeen. But this priest had died an untimely death in 1806. During his funeral, Father Balley had made an impression with his tall figure and ascetic face, prompting Jean-Marie's mother and aunt to speak to him on his

behalf. They met with a refusal—but the priest had nevertheless agreed to meet with the young man. Observing his solid piety and determination, Father Balley changed his mind, and during the winter of 1806-1807, Jean-Marie began studies at the rectory in exchange for domestic services. From his youth spent working in the fields, Jean-Marie Vianney had gotten a sound constitution and common sense, as well as stubborn patience and an obstinate will. That said, studying French and Latin grammar was for him an overwhelming task, though he persevered in the effort with a humble tenacity. Father Balley supported him and, in spite of his slow progress, lavished his encouragement and efforts on him. He also knew how to be firm. When discouragement pushed the student to ask for a leave at his father's house, who was looking for any excuse to keep his son at the farm, the priest challenged him: "Where do you want to go? To search for unhappiness? Does JESUS not assure us that *He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me?* (Mt. 10:37)". Indeed, seeing Jean-Marie's spiritual progress, his prayer, his mortification, his gentleness and love for God and the poor, the priest was firmly resolved to sacrifice to the end to bring him to the priesthood.

He will be a priest!

However, on October 18, 1809, Jean-Marie was called up to serve in the imperial armed forces. The blow was all the more bitter in that Napoleon was persecuting the Church in the person of the Holy Father. Was it necessary to obey the orders of an excommunicated sovereign? After being released from the hospital for an illness, Jean-Marie failed to rejoin his regiment, and let himself to be led by a deserter all the way to the village of Les Noës, near the Loire and the Allier. When Madame Vianney asked the pastor in Écully about her son, she received this confident answer: "Mother, do not be distressed over your son. He is neither dead nor sick. He will never be a soldier, but a priest!" Jean-Marie returned to the rectory in March 1811, after having arranged for his brother François to take his place in the army. But his father, who had just lost his wife the month before, was very annoyed with him for the problems his desertion had caused.

Jean-Marie soon had the consolation of being presented by his pastor to receive the tonsure, which he received at the age of twenty-five, his first step towards the Lord's altar. He nevertheless continued to struggle in his studies—the certificates that Father Balley sometimes had him write up in the parish records bear witness to the most unconventional spelling. But in his spiritual life, the student followed in his teacher's footsteps. He would later be fond of pointing out: "To love God, one needed only hear Father Balley repeat: 'My God, I love You'".

On All Saints' Day in 1812, Monsieur Balley had his student admitted at the seminary in Verrière, in hopes that he might acquire the basics of philosophy

there. The year was very trying for Jean-Marie—the staff were overworked, discipline was lacking, the Latin classes were incomprehensible to him, and the French lessons proved to be scarcely more productive in spite of relentless work. He was then offered an opportunity introduced by Bishop Fesch, of allowing older seminarians to go directly into theology. But after six weeks in the major seminary in Lyons, Jean-Marie Vianney's first examination, in the presence of the archbishop, was a disaster, and he was sent back to Écully completely discouraged. Father Balley, however, knew his protégé. He encouraged him, and forcefully sent him back to work: "If you give up now, farewell to Mass, farewell souls!" He himself dedicated his free time to teaching theology to his student in French. Thus Jean-Marie received the living tradition of his revered teacher through a personal relationship.

In 1814, making use of all his connections, Monsieur Balley arranged for his student to be examined once again. The vicar general asked about the aspirant's piety—does he say the rosary, is he humble? The pastor responding in the affirmative, he sent an examiner to the rectory to question the seminarian in French. Now able to understand the questions because they were in French rather than Latin, Jean-Marie answered very satisfactorily. He received minor orders, and then the subdiaconate on July 2, 1814. The year-end exam took place several days later. Jean-Marie received a very low grade. He was nevertheless granted permission to resume his studies with Father Balley, who had all the confidence of the diocesan authorities. Given the political instability, ordinations to the diaconate were accelerated, and Father Vianney was admitted to the diaconate along with sixteen confreres on June 23, 1815. Father Balley then redoubled his efforts on the candidate's behalf—he stressed his need for a vicar, which the diocese was unable to provide, and asked that Father Vianney be ordained to the priesthood as soon as possible. He himself would see to the studies Vianney had yet to complete. On Sunday, August 13, Jean-Marie was ordained a priest in Grenoble, on behalf of Cardinal Fesch, who was still in exile. When on Sunday, August 20, Father Balley assisted his young vicar at the six o'clock morning Mass,

he felt a calm and overwhelming joy at having achieved such a good result.

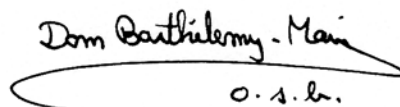
The pastor now needed to pass on to his disciple his experience as a confessor, so as to prepare him to carry out this ministry himself. In the meantime, he had him teach catechism to children lagging behind and prepare sermons, but had him preach only infrequently to spare his shyness and his acute awareness of his shortcomings. He taught him how to run a parish well, and had him clean up the parish records. Those from 1817, which the ailing Father Balley was unable to correct, were riddled with spelling errors and all sorts of omissions. But the secret of the rectory in Écully lay in seeking holiness through morning prayer before the tabernacle, spiritual conversations, joint recitation of the breviary, meditation, pilgrimages to Fourvière, and self-denial for the benefit of the beloved poor, without forgetting the munificence of the table when they received a guest.

Hide these!

In 1817, suffering from a leg ulcer, the pastor had to rely ever more on his assistant priest; on All Saints' Day he felt he was dying, had Jean-Marie come to his side, and handed him his instruments of penance: "Take and hide these, my poor Vianney! If they were found after my death, I would be thought to have sufficiently expiated my sins, and I would be abandoned in purgatory." He died on December 16, 1817, at the age of sixty-six. Mathias Loras, at the time the young superior of the seminary in Meximieux, celebrated the funeral.

Soon appointed pastor in Ars, Jean-Marie Vianney would recreate there what he had seen practiced by his beloved teacher. He would put all his zeal into the parish, perhaps with some failings of moderation at times, but motivated by an ever-increasing fervor. "I would have ended up being a little saint if I had always had the pleasure of living with Monsieur Balley," he would later maintain. Through the movement of the Holy Spirit, he would become the Holy Curé of Ars, the perfect example of priests in ministry, and universal patron of parish priests—Father Charles Balley's masterpiece.

The zeal of this exemplary priest corresponds with the wish expressed by Pope Benedict XVI: "Keep alive in your hearts, and in others around you, the desire to raise up—in cooperation with the grace of the Holy Spirit—new priestly vocations among the faithful... Nothing will ever replace a Mass for the salvation of the world!" (Fatima 2010)



Dom Barthélémy-Main
O.S.B.

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ABBAYE SAINT-JOSEPH DE CLAIRVAL – 21150 FLAVIGNY-SUR-OZERAIN – FRANCE
email : abbey@clairval.com – website: <http://www.clairval.com/>