



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of December 18, 2019,
Feast of Saint Malachy, Prophet

Dear Friends,

ONE day, JESUS picked a child out of the crowd and pronounced these words: *Amen, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of Heaven.* This eloquent lesson negates the error and ambition of those who think the kingdom of Heaven is like an earthly empire and dream of occupying the best places there: *Who is the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven?* And to better establish that preeminence in the kingdom of Heaven is the privilege of spiritual childhood, the Lord continues in these terms: *Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven (Matt. 18:1-4).*

Another day, some mothers presented their children to Him so that He might touch them, and as the disciples pushed them away, JESUS became upset, saying: *Let the children come to me; do not prevent them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.* And here again He concludes: *Amen, I say to you, whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it (Mark 10:15).*

Childishness?

Spiritual childhood is thus a necessary condition to obtain eternal life. What does that mean? Is it necessary to idealize childhood to the point of forgetting its defects and weaknesses? Is it necessary to become childish and lose the wisdom of adulthood? No, certainly not. On the contrary, we must put to work all of the faculties and aptitudes that God has given to us. It does not mean thinking, speaking, feeling and acting like a child. Saint Paul warns us about this: *So that we may no longer be infants, tossed by waves and swept along by every wind of teaching... Rather, living the truth in charity, we should grow in every way into Him who is the head, Christ (Eph. 4:14-15).* And again: *Brothers, stop being childish in your thinking. In respect to evil be like infants, but in your thinking be mature (1 Cor. 14:20).* No matter how much the freshness of childhood moves us, we must not forget that its unfinished state calls for maturity. The emotional nature of the child is both tyrannical and selfish. The child seeks to control the beloved more than to give himself to the beloved, and thus does not offer a good example.

Our Lord desires something else when He asks us to become children again. The way of childhood, as Saint Theresa of the Child JESUS said, consists essentially "in



Blessed Eugénie Joubert

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a disposition of the heart, which makes us humble and small in the arms of God, conscious of our weakness, and confident even unto boldness in His fatherly goodness" (*Novissima Verba*). In the light of affirmations of the faith, it makes us conscious of reality: it is God alone who permits us to be, to love, to act, above all on the supernatural level. Our spiritual life cannot be an initiative on our part with respect to God: it can only be a placing of ourselves in the hands of Him who is infinitely good, who loves us freely, with a primary and creative love: *For those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God (Rom. 8:14).*

This attitude recognizes a link of total dependence with respect to God, excludes the feeling of pride in oneself, the presumption of reaching a supernatural goal by human means, and the foolish wish of sufficing unto oneself at the time of peril and temptation. It makes us practice "humility, the kind and sincere humility of the heart, total fidelity to our duty of state, whatever it may be, in whatever sphere and at whatever level of the human hierarchy that God has placed us and called on us to work, a disposition to all sacrifices, confident abandonment in the hand and Heart of God, and above all true charity, the real love of God, true tenderness for JESUS CHRIST, answering to the tenderness that He Himself showed toward us, this charity that is benevolent, patient, always active and putting up with anything, prepared for self-sacrifice, even to give up one's life... Spiritual childhood is accessible and

necessary for everyone. As Saint Augustine observes, not everyone can preach and do great works. But who isn't capable of praying, of humbling oneself and of loving?" (Pius XI, February 11, 1923).

Saint John Paul II has given us a new model of the practice of the way of childhood, by beatifying, on November 24, 1994, a contemporary of Saint Theresa of Lisieux: Blessed Eugénie Joubert. She lived her short life in "a great loving trust, the love of simplicity of the small child" (retreat note).

A simple, accessible, attractive model

Eugénie was born at Yssingeaux on the harsh plateaus of the Upper Loire, on February 11, 1876, anniversary day of the first apparition of the Blessed Virgin at Lourdes. Childhood, vocation, religious life, apostolate, suffering and death, everything in the life of Eugénie will be marked by the maternal presence of MARY.

When she was quite young she was placed with her elder sister in the boarding school of the Ursulines at Ministrel. The two little girls were happy there. They were loved there. The most beautiful memory that Eugénie kept from this time is that of her First Communion and the months of great spiritual fervor that preceded it. The young girl, greatly attracted to the Virgin Mary, experienced the omnipotence and the limitless care of her heavenly Mother. Did she wish to obtain some grace? Nine days in a row she recited the Rosary, adding to that five sacrifices that were among the most costly to her. MARY always heard her. "When she spoke of the Blessed Virgin," a student would later say, "it seemed to me that I saw something heavenly in her look."

Her fervor didn't prevent her from being happy. On the contrary! One of her mistresses would say of the young girl that she was "very expansive, with a bold and good heart... She had influence over her friends who were swayed by her good spirits." Eugénie wrote to her sister: "The Good Lord does not forbid laughing and amusing oneself, provided that we love Him with all our heart and that we keep our soul quite pure, that is to say, without sin... The secret of remaining the child of the Good Lord is to remain the child of the Most Blessed Virgin. It is necessary to truly love the Most Blessed Virgin and ask her every day to let you die rather than commit a single mortal sin."

On October 6, 1895, she entered as a postulant among the Religious of the Holy Family of the Sacred Heart, at Puy-en-Velay: "Since my childhood," she wrote at that time, "my heart, even though poor, rude and earthly, searched vainly to quench its thirst. It

wished to love, but only a beautiful Husband, perfect, immortal, whose love is pure and unshakable... MARY, you have given me, poor and small though I am, the most beautiful of the children of men, your Divine Son, JESUS!" At the time for good-byes, Mrs. Joubert told her, while embracing her warmly: "I give you to the Good Lord. Don't look back, but become a saint!" That will be the plan of the postulant. She really intends "to be everything to JESUS" and not to be a halfhearted religious.

Eugénie is not yet twenty years old. Her looks remain lively and her laugh joyous. But her very young face, almost childlike, her look imprinted with virginal purity, reflects at the same time a very deep seriousness. Her composure generates admiration and excites the imitation of her companions in the novitiate. "If I live by the spirit of faith," she writes, "if I really love Our Lord, it will be easy for me to make for myself solitude at the bottom of my heart and above all to love this solitude, to remain there alone with JESUS alone."

On August 13, 1896, feast of Saint John Berchmans, she received the religious habit from the hands of Father Rabussier, founder of the Institute. She would later express the feelings that moved her at that time: "May my heart from now on be like a ball of wax, simple like the small child, and let itself be clothed in obedience, to every wish of the good divine pleasure, opposing it with no resistance except that of wishing always to give more."

In order to never be alone

During her novitiate, Sister Eugénie twice followed the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius. Following them, she learned to live in familiarity with JESUS, MARY and Joseph. For the *Exercises* are a school of intimacy with God and His Saints. In the course of the meditations and contemplations that he proposes, Saint Ignatius invites his disciple to place himself at the heart of the Gospel scenes in order to see the people there, to listen to what they say, to consider what they do, "as if one were there." The mystery of Christmas, for example (No. 114): "I will see (...) Our Lady, Joseph, the servant girl and the Child JESUS when He is born. I will stand in their presence; I will contemplate them; I will serve them in their needs with all the attention and respect of which I am capable, as if I found myself present there." Saint Ignatius encourages us to practice this familiarity even in the most mundane activities of our daily lives, as when we eat a meal: "While we are eating, let us consider, as if we saw it with our own eyes, Our Lord JESUS CHRIST Himself having a meal with His Apostles. Let us see how He eats, how He drinks, how He looks, how He speaks; and let us endeavor to imitate Him (No. 214)."

Eugénie was seduced by the simplicity of this practice which corresponded so well with her desire to live in intimacy with the Holy Family. "To love this composition of place," she wrote: "to be even in the morning in the Heart of the Most Blessed Virgin." Indeed: "I am never alone, but always with JESUS, MARY, Joseph." One day, she would compose this beautiful prayer to Our Lord: "O JESUS, tell me what Your poverty was like for You? Tell me what You most ardently sought after at Nazareth?... Give me the grace to embrace with all my soul the poverty that it will please Your love to send to me." We too can speak often with JESUS in the privacy of our hearts, asking Him how He practiced humility, goodness, forgiveness, mortification and all the other virtues, then praying to Him to give us the grace to imitate Him.

Simple as a child

On September 8, 1897, Sister Eugénie pronounced her religious vows; in the course of the ceremony, Father Rabussier gave a homily on spiritual childhood. The newly professed sister saw in it encouragement to continue along this path. She gave her attention to two points that seemed to her essential in order to arrive at the "simplicity of the small child": humility and obedience.

For Sister Eugénie, humility is the means to draw "the attention of JESUS." One day she is severely reprimanded for a poorly done piece of sewing, but the work in question is not hers... Sister Eugénie remains quiet, even though her nature goes against it; she could correct the situation, explain the mistake... but she prefers to unite herself to the silence of JESUS who was also falsely accused. She sees in the humiliation an opportunity to "grow in lowliness," and it is for her a true success: "Worldly people," she writes, "look to have success in their desires to please and to be seen. But really! Our Lord permits me also to have success in the spiritual life. Each humiliation, no matter how small it is, is a true success for me in the love of JESUS, provided that I embrace it with all my heart."

To be humble also means not to discourage oneself before one's weaknesses, failings or defects, but to offer all to the Divine Mercy, especially in the Sacrament of Penance which is the ordinary means of receiving the forgiveness of God. "O blessed misery, the more I love it, the more Our Lord too loves it and lowers Himself to it in order to have mercy on it!" cries Sister Eugénie concerning her weaknesses.

Humility goes in hand with obedience. Saint Paul says of JESUS that *He humbled Himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross (Phil. 2:8)*. Sister Eugénie saw in obedience "the fruit of humility and its purest

form," and she wrote: "I wish to obey in order to humble myself and to humble myself in order to love more." To obey God, His commandments, His Church, those who hold His place, that is to truly love God. *If you love Me*, JESUS said to His disciples, *you will keep My commandments. Whoever has My commandments and observes them is the one who loves Me. And whoever loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and reveal Myself to him. (John 14:15 and 21)*. "Obedience is not so much a virtue as the mother of virtues," Saint Augustine was able to write (PL 62:613). Saint Gregory the Great has these beautiful words: "It is obedience alone that produces and supports the other virtues in our hearts" (*Morals*, 35:28). And, as Saint Benedict teaches us: "The obedience that one renders to superiors, it is to God that one renders it" (*Rule*, ch. 5).

Nevertheless, the exercise of any virtue must be governed by prudence. The latter permits us to discern in particular the limits of obedience. Thus, when a command, an order or a human law is in manifest opposition to the law of God, the duty of obedience does not exist: "Authority is a postulate of the moral order and derives from God. Consequently, laws and decrees enacted in contravention of the moral order, and hence of the divine will, can have no binding force on conscience" (John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, April 11, 1963). "[...] Now the first and most immediate application of this teaching concerns a human law which disregards the fundamental right and source of all other rights which is the right to life, a right belonging to every individual. Consequently, laws which legitimize the direct killing of innocent human beings through abortion or euthanasia are in complete opposition to the inviolable right to life proper to every individual; they thus deny the equality of everyone before the law" (John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitæ*, 72). In the face of such human orders, let us recall the words of Saint Peter: *We ought to obey God, rather than men (Acts 5:29)*.

Except for orders which we cannot carry out without sin, obedience is due to legitimate authorities. Sister Eugénie, in order to more closely follow JESUS and to work for the salvation of souls, undertook to obey with great perfection, in order to carry out at every moment the will of God the Father, in imitation of Our Lord who said: *The Son cannot do anything on His own, but only what He sees His Father doing; for what He does, His Son will do also (John 5:19)*. *I do nothing on My own, but I say only what the Father taught Me (John 8:28)*.

In the service of little ones

The young nun had barely pronounced her vows when she was sent to Aubervilliers in the Parisian suburbs, to a house consecrated to the evangelization of workers. She seized the hearts of the children, and

thus was able to calm the mischievous ones, of whom she had quite a few among her listeners! Her secret? Patience, kindness, goodness. She got results beyond hope.

Being an apostle, Sister Eugénie raised up apostles. A little boy, conquered by her catechism course, dreamed of winning over his friends. Getting together the ones he found in the street, he brought them up to his room, before a crucifix: "Who put JESUS on the cross?" he asked. And when the answer was slow in coming, he added with emotion: "It is we who, by our sins, made Him have to die. We must ask Him forgiveness." Then everyone fell to their knees, and recited from the bottom of their hearts acts of contrition, thanksgiving and love.

Sister Eugénie communicated her love for MARY to the children. For Our Lady she burned with a love that one day made her cry out: "To love MARY, to love her always more and more! I love her because I love her, because she is my Mother. She has given me everything; she gives me everything; again it is she who wishes to give me everything. I love her because she is totally beautiful, totally pure; I love her and wish that every beat of my heart says to her: My Immaculate Mother, you know well that I love you!"

When will He come? When?

During the summer of 1902, Sister Eugénie felt the first effects of the tuberculosis which would overcome her. Thus for her began a painful Calvary which

would last two years, and which would end in sanctifying her by uniting her more closely to JESUS crucified. She found great comfort in meditating the Passion. One day the nurse asked her, "Are you suffering a lot?" The sick nun answered, "It is dreadful, but I really love Him... the Sacred Heart...when will He come?... When?..." In prayer, JESUS made her understand that in order to remain faithful in the midst of sufferings, she must "embrace the practice of spiritual childhood, be a small child with Him in pain, prayer, combat, obedience." Self-abandonment and confidence guide her to the end! After a particularly significant hemorrhage, she collapsed exhausted, feeling life slipping away from her and, without ever losing the smile on her face, she cast her gaze on an image of the Child JESUS.

It was with great peace that, on June 27, 1904, Sister Eugénie welcomed the announcement of her departure for Heaven. She received the Last Rites and Holy Communion. On July 2, the breathing crises became more and more difficult; a Sister had the idea of lighting a small lamp at the foot of the statue of the Immaculate Heart of MARY in the chapel, and the Good Mother brought a bit of relief to the dying woman. The hour of deliverance was near. She was presented with a portrait of the Child JESUS. On seeing it, Sister Eugénie exclaimed: "JESUS!... JESUS!... JESUS!..." and her soul flew to Heaven. The body of this evangelical child seemed to be about twelve years old. A beautiful smile lit up her face.

"I will pray for everyone in Heaven!" she had promised her fellow sisters. Let us ask her to guide us to Paradise, "the Kingdom of the Little Ones," on the road of spiritual childhood. She is waiting for us there with the multitude of Saints. We pray to her as well as to Saint Joseph for you and yours, living and departed.

Dom Barthélemy - Main
O.S.B.

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