



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of January 21, 2020,
Feast of St. Agnes, virgin and martyr

Dear Friends,

ON the night of July 25, 1624, a beautiful woman appeared to Yvon Nicolazic, a decent, sensible, and hardworking farmer who lived in the hamlet of Keranna, near Auray, in southern Brittany (now in the Morbihan). Yvon was around 30, a pious man who recited a rosary daily. The beautiful lady said, "Fear not... I am Anne, the Mother of MARY. Tell your parish priest that on the piece of land called Le Bocenno, there once was a chapel dedicated to me... I wish it to be rebuilt as soon as possible, and for you to take care of it, because God wills that I be honored there." The following March 7, Nicolazic discovered a statue of Saint Anne in the spot she had mentioned, confirming the apparition's authenticity.

During the apparition, Saint Anne gave no call to repentance or conversion. Yet 12 years later, in 1636, she revealed her power of intercession in obtaining the conversion of a local man known for his debauchery, a notorious miscreant who mocked her miracles and the credulity of the crowds of pilgrims who flocked to her wonders. This gentleman, Pierre Le Gouvello de Kériolet, was born in Auray on July 14, 1602. The last and only boy in a family of four children, he spent his childhood at the Château de Kerlois, in the town of Pluvigner. Young Pierre exhibited a vicious streak: he was rebellious and rowdy, only interested in games, violence, and sensual pleasure. Neither love nor fear gripped him. His parents sent him to a Jesuit secondary school in Rennes, but since the school did not board its students, the adolescent was exposed to the dangers of almost complete freedom. He lived a disordered life, resorting to theft to satisfy his desires, and recruiting a band of delinquents to help him steal from other students. Through weakness, his unhappy parents paid his debts while continually writing him to recall him to his duties. But he remained deaf to their sound advice.

22 years old and back in Kerlois, Pierre no longer knew how to cover his reckless spending. So he stole a large sum from his parents; caught, he ran away from home, heading for Constantinople to become a Muslim. Yet Providence stopped him: he was attacked by bandits in a German forest. His Breton faith reawakened in the face of such danger, and he promised to undertake a pilgrimage to Notre-Dame-de-Liesse, near Laon, France. But, miraculously having barely escaped death, he ignored his promise and continued on his journey, though without getting farther than Hungary.



Pierre de Kériolet

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He returned to Paris and devoted himself to debauchery and witchcraft.

An immense fortune

When Pierre returned to Brittany, he was more violent than ever. His passion was duels; he provoked others simply for the pleasure of fighting. His belligerent nature soon took him down a different path; he enlisted as a soldier and fought in the war between Italy and Germany. But he chafed at military discipline, and shed his uniform barely a year after enrolling. Around that time his father passed away, leaving him a large inheritance. Pierre, facing difficulties with the other heirs, became a Huguenot (Protestant) in order to blackmail his relatives into giving him a larger share of the inheritance in exchange for returning to the Catholic Church. Impious as he was, he enjoyed this sacrilegious game and acquired an immense fortune. Later on, he sought to become a magistrate in the Parliament of Brittany. He was able to purchase the office, but was required to take an exam before assuming the position. He attempted in vain to avoid the test, but was nonetheless able to pass thanks to his intelligence. He who deserved to be judged was then put in a position to judge others, to the scandal of honest people. In fact, he even sowed discord among the plaintiffs to the point that grievances were settled by the sword.

Hoping that his serious position would settle him down, his family tried to marry him off, but he preferred

his scandalous life. Nevertheless, he was generous to the poor and never refused them alms. However, he admitted that "I often gave alms to the poor, and though I felt compassion for their misery, I never felt any love for God or the Holy Virgin, and would hear nothing of it... When a poor person would say, 'May God will reward you' or 'I will say my rosary for you,' I would reply that I wanted to hear none of that, that I didn't want their Ave Marias." Paradoxically, Pierre remained secretly devoted to saying a daily "Hail MARY", doubtless mechanically, probably because of a promise made to his mother. The Mother of Mercy was not going to forget such a homage, however slight.

A mysterious spell

One night in 1635, Pierre was deeply disturbed by a vision of hell: he saw the place that was reserved for him if he continued to scorn divine justice. He quickly confessed, showing all the signs of sincere contrition, and avoided places of debauchery, going only to church. For two months, he was a postulant at the Carthusian monastery in Auray. But soon after entering novitiate, he was once again overcome by impure passions, left the monastery, and became worse than before. At that time, the events of Loudun, in Poitou, were the talk of France and Europe. Since 1632, the Ursuline nuns there, victims of a curse, were possessed. All of them were delivered, one by one, through a series of exorcisms that ended in 1638. Father Surin (1600-1665), a Jesuit who himself had been tormented by the devil for a long time, stated, "A whole book would have to be written to recount all the benefits that God drew from this possession, for His glory and the salvation of souls."

In early 1636, Pierre and two of his libertine friends traveled to Loudun. Their plan was to kidnap a beautiful young Huguenot girl they had heard about. The evening of their arrival, though Pierre no longer believed in God or the devil, he entered Sainte-Croix church out of curiosity, where a priest was exorcizing a possessed person. For four days, Pierre watched the exorcisms, impressed. The fifth day he himself became involved when a demon, speaking through one of the possessed sisters, said to him: "What? This God you have scorned for so many years! Oh, wicked one! We thought we had you and could take you to hell after you made the vow to Notre-Dame-de-Liesse and did not keep it. You are ungrateful and unworthy of the blessings of the Virgin!" The demon then revealed many other things he had done, adding "Blasphemer and atheist! Is it possible for such a man to receive mercy?" Shaken to the core by these revelations, Pierre asked, "Can you tell me why I left the Carthusian monastery?" The demon replied through the possessed woman, "God could not bear so impure a man in such a holy house!"

Unexpectedly touched by grace, Pierre was defeated. He publicly confessed his sins, and received the sacrament of confession. The next day, January 6, he was unrecognizable: whereas he had previously been derisive and haughty, he was now humbly prostrate, like the publican in the Gospels. The demon that the priest had exorcized recognized Pierre and raged: "He is in such a state that if he continues, he will be as high in heaven as he would have been low in hell with us!" "Who then, after God, is working so powerfully to save him?" asked the Father. "It is the Virgin MARY, a great friend of that man. She put her own arm in up the elbow to remove him from his filth." Then, speaking to Pierre: "Your bushel was full, but you still maintained some devotion to her."

A very important chapter

The Church affirms the existence of the devil, his action in creation, and teaches us how to fight him. Saint Paul VI said, "It is a departure from the picture provided by biblical Church teaching to refuse to acknowledge the devil's existence; to regard him as a self-sustaining principle who, unlike other creatures, does not owe his origin to God; or to explain the devil as a pseudo-reality, a conceptual, fanciful personification of the unknown causes of our misfortunes... This matter of the devil and of the influence he can exert on individuals as well as on communities, entire societies or events, is a very important chapter of Catholic doctrine which should be studied again, although it is given little attention today... Nowadays they prefer to appear strong and unprejudiced to pose as positivists, while at the same time lending faith to many unfounded magical or popular superstitions or, worse still, exposing their souls—their baptized souls, visited so often by the Eucharistic Presence and inhabited by the Holy Spirit!—to licentious sensual experiences and to harmful drugs, as well as to the ideological seductions of fashionable errors. These are cracks through which the Evil One can easily penetrate and change the human mind. This is not to say that every sin is directly due to diabolical action. But it is true that those who do not keep watch over themselves with a certain moral rigor are exposed to the influence of the 'mystery of iniquity' cited by Saint Paul (2 Thes. 2:3-12) which raises serious questions about our salvation" (Audience on November 15, 1972).

Believing in the existence of the devil is not enough; we must understand his tricks to fight him well, as Christ did. Saint Ignatius of Loyola, heir to the Desert Fathers and the spiritual masters, gave very instructive rules for discernment: the behavior of the Evil One "is that of a seducer who seeks to remain hidden, fearing nothing but to be discovered... When the enemy of human nature wants to deceive a just soul with his

tricks and his deceits, he wants her to listen to his words and keep them secret. But if one reveals them to a confessor, or to another spiritual person who understands the Evil One's deceits and ruses, he is very displeased. For he knows that all his evil plans will fail the moment they are exposed and brought into the light. He cannot succeed in his evil undertaking, once his deceits have been revealed... He is like a captain who wants to capture a town where he hopes to gain great booty. He will set up camp and examine the fortifications and defenses of the town in order to attack it at its weakest point. So too with the enemy of our human nature. He examines from every side all of our virtues, theological, cardinal and moral, and when he has found our weakest and most vulnerable spot, it is there that he attacks us and tries to gain a complete victory." (Spiritual Exercises, nos. 326-327).

More austere than a monk

Pierre de Kériolet was 34 when he began a new life. He left on foot on pilgrimage to Notre-Dame-de-Liesse to repair his sacrilegious omission in 1624 and to thank the Mother of Mercy for her protection. On the way, he gave away all the money he had on him and exchanged his beautiful clothes for the rags of the first beggar he encountered. This pilgrimage increased his zeal. It was the first of a long series of peregrinations that demonstrated Pierre's faith and repentance. The second took him to Sainte-Baume, in Provence, and there he asked Saint Madeleine for the gift of tears of contrition, as well as some of her love for JESUS CHRIST.

On his return to Brittany, Pierre became as famous for his penitence as he had been for his debauchery. Secluded in his Château de Kerlois, he lived more austere than a monk, dividing his time between prayer, study, and meditation, subsisting primarily on bread and water. He dressed as a pauper, and most nights slept fully dressed in a chair, with only the table or a few books for a pillow. Religious and beggars were his only guests; the things of God his only conversation. The wealth that had previously fueled his passions now fueled his limitless charity. Saint Anne was a primary beneficiary as now, eleven years after the apparitions, the pilgrimage of Auray was in full bloom. Pierre also supported the city's hospitals, and even provided the funds to build a hospital in Keranna. Lastly, he made a vow of poverty to his confessor, giving full use of all his goods to the poor and sick, retaining only their management. He sold his seat in Parliament; he would have gladly given it away, but preferred to get as much as he could from it to give to the poor.

Touched by his fervent life and self-denial, friends encouraged him to become a priest. Nothing was farther from his mind. His first impulse was to shrink back

terrified from a ministry of which angels themselves are not worthy: was not his past life an insurmountable obstacle? Nevertheless his spiritual father told him to prepare himself to receive Holy Orders. Pierre submitted, trembling. After six months he received the tonsure and Minor Orders. On March 7, 1637, he was ordained deacon; on March 28, in the packed Cathedral of Vannes, Bishop Rosmadec ordained him priest. At the moment his hands were to be anointed, Pierre was tempted to pull them back, he so considered them unworthy of the sacrament, after having been soiled by so many infamies and even murders. The bishop encouraged him, reminding him that they had been washed in the Blood of the Man-God. The impossible had become reality: the bandit of Kerlois had become a priest of JESUS CHRIST! Never had the Divine Mercy shone so brilliantly to the faithful.

Perhaps this is Our Lord

Pierre's chateau became a true hospital for the poor. Seeing Christ in each of them, he lodged up to 150 a day, not counting the vagabonds that came to him. Since the manor could no longer hold them all, he set up a huge dormitory in a neighboring building, called the Orangery. Not content to feed and shelter all these poor under his roof, he also clothed them. "Each pauper that I receive, I see as JESUS CHRIST," he said. "If some are very sick, it is they that I embrace most willingly, thinking to myself: 'Perhaps this is Our Lord.' I recall what happened to Saint Martin, Saint Francis, and other saints." His heart overflowed with mercy and compassion for the worst off; he saw them as his brothers and children, and lived with them as a family. Kind and helpful towards everyone, he never rebuffed anyone, except to correct those who disturbed the order in the house. A huge chapel near Kerlois, dedicated to Our Lady of Mercy and acquired by his parents shortly after his birth, daily welcomed a great number of the poor, for whom Father de Kériolet would offer the Holy Sacrifice with great fervor. There, immobile on his knees, his arms often extended in a cross, he passed long hours in prayer. Each Friday, he meditated on the Passion of the Savior.

Pierre also resumed his pilgrimages, laborious walks that were a form of penance for him. However, he did not abandon the poor in his care but entrusted them to friends in the priesthood. Seeing this poor priest walk by, wearing a worn cassock, face haggard, eyes lowered, rosary in hand, carrying neither bag nor walking stick, many remarked, astonished, "So this is the devil Kériolet!" And they admired his conversion. Afflicted with gout and with feet torn, he walked at least 25 miles (40 km) per day, begging his bread. Nights he slept outdoors, often in open air, for there was no room in inns for this sick-looking beggar. He walked like this

for months at a time, with no interest in the beautiful monuments he passed, fleeing the company of other travelers. His devotion led him back to Notre-Dame-de-Liesse and to Loudun, but also to Mont-Saint-Michel, to Montserrat and Santiago de Compostela in Spain, and to Rome. Back in Kerlois, Father de Kériolet found time to visit the chapels in the region. It is to the church of Saint Anne he went most faithfully; twice a week, Wednesdays and Saturdays, he celebrated Mass there and distributed alms.

The years passed, and de Kériolet now inspired as much veneration as he had once inspired fear. Many of the pious sought spiritual direction from him, but he refused, preferring to remain a chaplain to the poor. Also, he now had an additional duty: he had received the powers of exorcism, but had made little use of them until 1645, when on the advice of his spiritual father he gave himself wholeheartedly to this ministry. He received the possessed, heard their confessions, exorcized them, and gave them Holy Communion. With great humility and admirable patience, the former slave to the devil subjected his former master to servitude, and sometimes forcefully chased him out. "Possession of the body," he said, "though very unpleasant, is not the worst thing; rather, the possession of souls by sin is the only truly horrible thing and the only thing we truly need to fear. The former is often only a trial and an opportunity to gain merit." However, the devil was angry to see this great sinner converted, who not only taunted the devil with his penitence and good works, but also chained his power and tore souls away from him. By every means possible the devil tried to turn Pierre away from his ministry of exorcism.

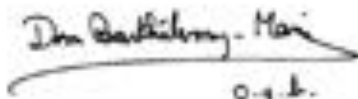
As the Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us, "JESUS performed exorcisms and from him the Church has received the power and office of exorcizing. In a simple form, exorcism is performed at the celebration

of Baptism. The solemn exorcism, called 'a major exorcism,' can be performed only by a priest and with the permission of the bishop. The priest must proceed with prudence, strictly observing the rules established by the Church. Exorcism is directed at the expulsion of demons or to the liberation from demonic possession through the spiritual authority which JESUS entrusted to his Church... It is important to ascertain that one is dealing with the presence of the Evil One, and not an illness" (no. 1373). However, exorcism does not dispense us from the practice of a morally and spiritually ordered life.

In Saint Anne's chapel

In 1658, the Father de Kériolet fell gravely ill. To this physical trial were added torments of conscience; despite the penance and virtue of his life, he only remembered his sins and trembled at the thought of appearing before his judge. He had himself carried to the Carmelite convent of Saint Anne, where he hoped to die. After two months, he had an un hoped for improvement, and despite great fatigue, was able to return to his apostolic life. He was greatly attracted to the sanctuary of Saint Anne, where the Carmelites set aside a cell for him. On the night of September 21, 1660, though gravely ill, he managed to find the strength to reach the convent. He received the Extreme Unction there on October 5. His suffering was such that he would cry out, "What agony, my God! My God! A little relief!" As soon as his confessor reminded him of the Savior's agony and divine resignation, Pierre immediately turned his complaints into submission and thanksgiving: "I am honored to share in the agony and the abandonment that JESUS CHRIST suffered for me." He died on October 8, at the age of 58. People from all over rushed to his funeral. He was buried in the chapel at Saint Anne's, his tomb marked with the words, "Here lies Pierre de Kériolet, conquest of MARY. He was her faithful and zealous servant."

Like Pierre de Kériolet, let us root ourselves in true devotion to the Blessed Virgin: we will experience how our Mother "confirms the soul in good... and makes it courageous in opposing the world and its fashions and maxims, the flesh in its weariness and passions; and the devil in his temptations" (Saint Louis-Marie Grignon de Monfort).



Dom Barthélemy-Marie
O.S.B.

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