



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of October 28, 2020,
Feast of Saints Simon and Jude

Dear Friends,

“**G**OD is always on the side of the lowly, the poor, the suffering, and the marginalized,” said Saint John Paul II. “By making Himself human and being born in the poverty of a stable, the Son of God proclaimed in Himself the blessedness of the afflicted and shared—in all things save sin—the destiny of man, created in His image. After Calvary, the Cross, embraced with love, becomes the way of life. It teaches each one of us that if we know how to travel with abandoned trust the exhausting, uphill road of human suffering, the joy of the Living Christ which surpasses every desire and every expectation will blossom for us and for our brothers and sisters” (January 5, 2004). In the past five centuries, the Brothers Hospitallers of Saint John of God have given the Church many models to follow. The example of Saint Benedict Menni, canonized by Saint John Paul II, reminds us that service to the sick and the needy is a sure path to holiness.

Luisa Figini, the wife of Luigi Menni, gave birth to her fifth child (she would have ten more) on March 11, 1841, in Milan, near Porta Nuovo. On the same day, the newborn child received the name of Angelo in the holy sacrament of baptism in the church of Santa Maria della Fonta, across the street from the family home. The Menni family’s timber trade allowed them to live in modest comfort. Their profound faith went hand in hand with charity towards the poor. The family recited the rosary together every day. After elementary school, Angelo attended the nearby high school. Then at sixteen, diploma in hand, he went to work at a bank. But he would soon be asked to lend himself to shady operations, upon which he decided to follow his conscience and left his job.

Devotion to all

On June 4, 1859, the Franco-Piedmontese army defeated the Austrians at Magenta. Large numbers of wounded soldiers were brought by train to Milan, where young Menni offered to come to their aid at the station as a stretcher-bearer. It was there that he noticed the Brothers of Saint John of God and admired their devotion to all—allies and enemies alike. This experience inspired him to choose the religious life, to devote himself like them to caring for the sick. He was admitted to the Brothers’ novitiate on May 13, 1860. He received the habit and the name of Brother Benedict. He pronounced his temporary vows the following year and his perpetual vows on May 17, 1864.



Saint Benedict Menni

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Saint John of God (1495-1550) was not yet eight when he embarked upon an errant life. He was, in turn, a vagabond, a shepherd, a soldier, and an itinerant salesman. On January 20, 1539, he heard the sermon of Saint John of Avila, the apostle of Andalusia, on the glory of Saint Sebastian, the martyr being celebrated that day. “Following the example of this perfect imitator of Christ,” the preacher said, “we must all accept any kind of suffering rather than committing sin, which is far more dangerous than the plague that is threatening the region.” Profoundly shaken by what he had just heard, John ran through the streets of the city screaming “Mercy! Mercy!,” while tearing off his clothes; he even rolled in the mud. Children chased him, shouting: “He’s mad! He’s mad!” He was locked up in the Royal Hospital of Granada and experienced the fate of the mentally ill at the time: fasting, floggings, and jets of ice water... that were administered to drive away his malady. This caused him to understand that his vocation was to spend the rest of his life helping the kind of people among whom he lived at the Royal Hospital: vagrants, prostitutes, the paralyzed, and above all the mentally ill. He was the creator of modern hospitals.

In Pope John Paul II’s words: “Even when disabled persons are mentally impaired or when their sensory or intellectual capacity is damaged, they are fully human beings and possess the sacred and inalienable rights that belong to every human creature. Indeed, human beings, independently of the conditions in which they live or of what they are able to express, have a unique

dignity and a special value from the very beginning of their life until the moment of natural death. The disabled person, with all the limitations and suffering that scar him or her, forces us to question ourselves, with respect and wisdom, on the mystery of man... They challenge us to recognize, accept, and promote in each one of these brothers and sisters of ours the incomparable value of the human being created by God to be a son in the Son" (*ibid.*).

An adventurer?

Benedict Menni hoped to become a surgeon in the Order. But the spiritual good of the Brothers required that some of its members become priests. Believing that he had the necessary qualifications to enter the priesthood, his superiors sent him to study in Rome. He was ordained on October 14, 1866. He was not yet twenty-six when his Superior General, Father Alfieri, appointed him to carry out a difficult task: the restoration of the Order in Spain. As a result of the anti-clerical laws enacted in 1850, the Brothers of Saint John of God had been expelled from Spain. On January 14, 1867, the young priest was presented to Pope Pius IX, who told him: "Go to Spain, my son, with the blessing of Heaven, to restore the Order in its very cradle." Father Benedict Menni arrived in Barcelona on April 26. At first the local bishop, Pantaleon Navarro, took him for an adventurer and gave him a rather frosty welcome. But having been reassured by a letter from the Pope, he soon allowed him to open a small nursing home in the city with a dozen beds for disabled children.

The First Republic was declared in Spain in early 1873. Religious persecution increased, and was made even worse by the civil war during the process of restoration of the throne. In March of that same year, revolutionaries burst into the Brothers' small hospital. Father Menni was able to convince them that it housed only sick, unwanted children. However, he ordered the Brothers to put on civilian clothes, and himself went to friends' homes safely to hide the sacred vessels there. On his way, he was taken prisoner by militiamen and only released on condition that he leave the country. He went into exile in Marseilles, France, but twice secretly returned to Barcelona. He was arrested the second time but managed to secure his release thanks to his cool-headedness. He left for Tangier (Morocco) to determine how a hospital could be established there. But soon the ban on the Brothers of Saint John of God was lifted; they were allowed to return to Spain in order to care for the wounded from the Spanish Civil War. They worked in Pamplona until 1876, "without distinguishing between sides, and for the sole love of Our Lord JESUS Christ." The Spanish government approved the statutes of the "Association of nursing Brothers of Charity." Thanks to generous benefactors, Father Menni bought land to build a psychiatric hospital in Ciempozuelos, not far from Madrid. The first building,

designed for one hundred beds, soon proved to be insufficient. Construction continued so that five hundred patients could be cared for.

"Recognition of the rights (of the disabled) must be followed by a sincere commitment on the part of all to create practical living conditions, structures which provide support and legal protection that can respond to the needs and dynamics of the growth of disabled persons and of those who are involved in their situation, beginning with their families. Over and above any other consideration or individual or group interest, no effort must be spared in promoting the integral good of these people. Nor can they be denied the support and protection they need, even if this entails a greater financial and social burden. The mentally handicapped need perhaps more attention, affection, understanding and love than any other sick person: they cannot be left alone, unarmed and defenseless, as it were, in the difficult task of facing life" (Saint John Paul II, *ibid.*).

Be fair and gentle

Father Menni's efforts to restore the Order in Spain required commitment to strict discipline. This led some of his brothers to complain to the Superior General, accusing Father Menni of scheming to obtain money and being hard on his subordinates. Father Alfieri wrote to him: "Try to be fair and gentle. You should completely let go of your ingrained habit of sticking to your ideas and plans no matter what; do not rush things." In 1878, the Bishop of Granada allowed Father Benedict to recover the house where Saint John of God took his last breath on March 8, 1550. In this "cradle of the Order," he set up an orphanage for poor children and a hospice for elderly priests. Over the years, Father Menni created more than forty hospitals in Spain, various European countries, and as far away as Mexico. According to the Order's constitutions, these hospitals were exclusively for men. Unable to obtain help from women's congregations to care for female patients, Father Menni turned to the Blessed Virgin. Providence led him to two young women from Granada who wanted to devote themselves to God: María José Recio and Antonia Giménez.

Father Benedict began by putting them to the test, asking their confessor to discourage them. Seeing that they persevered in their resolve, he set them up in a shabby room in the home of an elderly woman in Ciempozuelo. Their life was very harsh, working in the hospital laundry and sewing. Two other women soon joined them. From Barcelona, Father wrote them a long letter encouraging them to prayer, work, perseverance, the love of God and silence. They soon moved to a larger house. The Father adorned their chapel with a beautiful image of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart. In 1882, after the bishop approved the constitutions that Father Menni had given them, they took the religious

habit. The Sisters, whose numbers were increasing, were now caring for mentally ill women. On October 30, 1883, Sister María José, the superior, died a victim to her own dedication, after being attacked and trampled on by a mental patient. In 1892, the Holy See approved the community under the name "Sisters Hospitallers of the Sacred Heart of JESUS." Turning to an image of the Blessed Virgin, the Father said to them: "Behold your Superior!" The Sacred Heart of JESUS and the love of the Blessed Virgin would serve as their consolation and joy in their difficult apostolate. "Serving the sick," wrote Father Benedict, "does not exclude spiritual assistance, but presupposes it." Caring for both body and soul was also one of Saint John of God's missions and a key part of his work. The Sisters, like their Brothers, guided the souls of the sick towards the unique purpose of our life: eternal salvation.

"In revealing the fundamental frailty of the human condition, the disabled person becomes an expression of the tragedy of pain. In this world of ours that approves hedonism and is charmed by ephemeral and deceptive beauty, the difficulties of the disabled are often perceived as a shame or a provocation and their problems as burdens to be removed or resolved as quickly as possible. Disabled people are, instead, living icons of the crucified Son. They reveal the mysterious beauty of the One who emptied himself for our sake and made himself obedient unto death. They show us, over and above all appearances, that the ultimate foundation of human existence is JESUS CHRIST...They can teach everyone about the love that saves us; they can become heralds of a new world, no longer dominated by force, violence and aggression, but by love, solidarity and acceptance, a new world transfigured by the light of Christ, the Son of God who became incarnate, who was crucified and rose for us" (Saint John Paul II, *ibid.*).

Paradoxical honours

However, Father Menni's work was not always met with approval. In October 1891, he wrote to one of his nuns: "I thank God for giving me the honour of being much persecuted, called a thief, a rascal, a hypocrite and a liar; and for helping me suffer for his love with intense inner joy and perfect compliance with his will." In 1893, a priest and three nuns accused him before the Holy Office of the most infamous sins. The priest, his fellow brother, was chaplain of the hospital in Palencia. The local bishop made enquiries of the three sisters, who revealed that the accusing priest, their confessor, had threatened them with excommunication if they did not sign a document they had not read, and forced them to keep the matter absolutely secret. After three years of investigation, the Holy Office determined that Father Menni was completely innocent.

In June 1897, the mother of a mentally ill woman, her concubine and the editors of two newspapers

accused Father Benedict of vile acts towards the patient. Moreover, they demanded a large sum from him to settle the case. When Father Benedict did not respond to their blackmail, his accusers brought him before the court of Getafe (Madrid), which exonerated him. The slanderers continued their defamatory campaign against him in anticlerical newspapers. In a letter he wrote at the time to the sisters in Madrid, the saintly priest revealed his inner dispositions: "Day after day, I am losing the taste for worldly things. My only desire is for my heart to be totally united with JESUS. May God grant me to be able to suffer for the salvation of countless souls... My only desire is to help souls save themselves. If only I could be tormented, humiliated, and despised until the Day of Judgment, as long as it is for the love of JESUS!" In his *Spiritual Exercises*, Saint Ignatius expressed a similar ideal: the third and highest degree of humility leads the disciple to imitate JESUS CHRIST, Our Lord, in His poverty and to suffer contempt because of Him (cf. the Eighth Beatitude, Mt 5:11) and even to desire "to be rated as worthless and a fool for Christ, Who first was held as such, rather than wise and prudent in this world" (No. 167). However, for the good of the Church, the Archbishop of Madrid urged Father Menni to bring his accusers to justice in order to uphold the reputation of the Brothers Hospitallers. In 1900, both the slanderers and the two newspaper editors were severely condemned.

Painful accusations

At the same time, the Father was attacked from within his own congregation. In December 1898, twenty or so priests from the Spanish province reported him to the Roman Congregation of Bishops and Regulars. They demanded his dismissal, accusing him of excessive authoritarianism, poor administration of the Order's assets, and subjection to the religious order of nuns that he had founded. The informers once again included the chaplain of Palencia, who would leave the Order shortly thereafter. This denunciation was not followed up. Indeed, it was at this time that Father Menni was re-elected Provincial superior of Spain for the fifth time. When asked about his accusers, he explained, "Licitly or not, they want to obtain jobs that they consider more suited to their talents or tastes."

In 1903, however, after holding office for thirty-six consecutive years, the Father was not re-elected. With more freedom to dispose of his time, he prayed more and devoted himself to the Sisters Hospitallers. In 1909, Pope Saint Pius X appointed him Apostolic Visitor for the whole Order. Then on April 21, 1911, he was named Superior General for a period of six years. In June of the following year, Father Menni summoned the provincial superiors and several members of the General Chapter to Rome to address various problems, including in particular the reform of the Constitutions. But discussions proved difficult. Opposition arose

against a Prior General who was guilty of having been chosen directly by the Supreme Pontiff. Using his infirmities as a pretext, some of the Brothers persuaded the Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation of the Religious that Father Menni was unfit to govern. Because of this, Father Menni presented his resignation on June 10, 1912, due to his advanced age and poor health. The cardinal would afterwards bitterly regret having listened to the complainants, since under their arguments were hidden a number of modernist ideas that Father Menni did not support. However, he officially retained the faculty to visit all the houses of women religious that he had founded. The day after his resignation, Pope Pius X told him during a private audience, "The time has come for you to pray and give advice." "Your Holiness, I have been obliged to appear before all the tribunals of this world. Thankfully, the outcome was always successful; in the same way I hope to be absolved before the seat of God's judgment, and to encounter his mercy," he responded. "You will encounter it!" the saintly Pontiff told him several times.

Conforming to Christ

The *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches, "After death, which is the separation of the body and the soul, the body becomes corrupt while the soul, which is immortal, goes to meet the judgment of God and awaits its reunion with the body when it will rise transformed at the time of the return of the Lord." It then specifies that this particular judgment is "the judgment of immediate retribution which each one after death will receive from God in his immortal soul in accord with his faith and his works. This retribution consists in entrance into the happiness of heaven, immediately or after an appropriate purification, or entry into the eternal damnation of hell" (Nos. 205, 208). Pope Benedict XVI stated, "It is today, in the present, that our future destiny is being played out. It is our actual conduct in this life that decides our eternal fate.

Pope John Paul II said of Father Menni: "Like all those who followed Christ, he was not spared misunderstandings and suffering, even on the part of those closest to him... In profound communion with the Church and with Christ, he was able to withstand the attacks and to carry forward his fruitful work... Without a deep devotion to the Sacred Heart of JESUS and a special veneration for the Mother of God, without the fire of the Holy Spirit, he would never have been able to achieve the marvellous work he accomplished." Let us, too, be guided in all circumstances by the Holy Spirit!

+ *Jean-Bernard, Abbot,*
and all the monks of the Abbey

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