



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of January 6, 2021,
Feast of the Epiphany of our Lord

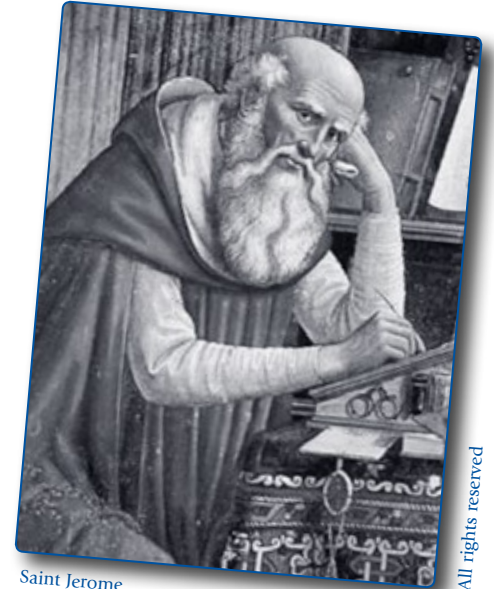
Dear Friends,

SAINT Jerome “centered his life on the Bible: he translated it into Latin, commented on it in his works, and above all, strove to live it in practice throughout his long earthly life, despite the well-known difficult, hot-tempered character with which nature had endowed him,” according to the words of Pope Benedict XVI (General Audience of November 7, 2007). This Father of the Church (thus does the Church designate the saints who by their teachings and their example nurtured her in her infancy) described himself in these terms: “I am at once a philosopher, a rhetorician, a grammarian, a dialectician, and an expert in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin.” Such were the weapons of the polemicist who, in his passion, went so far as to insult the Bishop of Hippo, St. Augustine—who was his junior by ten years—as if he were addressing a student: “Heed my advice, young man. Do not wander into the realm of Scripture and provoke an old man! You are disturbing my peace. You just flaunt your science.”

St. Jerome was born around 345 in Stridon, a fortified town on the borders of the provinces of Dalmatia and Pannonia (in present-day Hungary). His father Eusebius was a wealthy landowner. Jerome proudly stated, “I was born a Christian, of Christian parents, bearing the banner of the Cross on my forehead.” Yet he was given a pagan name, Hieronymus (meaning: one whose name is sacred), or Jerome in English. As was the custom at the time, he was not baptized but simply inscribed in the register of catechumens. Of his childhood, Jerome later said: “I remember frolicking through the slaves’ small bedrooms, spending my free day playing and then being torn from my grandmother’s arms to be delivered, captive, to the fury of an Olibrius.” This particular Olibrius was a schoolmaster with cruel educational methods, and young Jerome “cried under the whack of his stick.” He was a rowdy and mischievous student, with a keen intelligence and excellent memory. Jerome was extremely sensitive, which made him touchy and quick to take offense, but also very affectionate and open to others.

“A choir of the blessed”

His parents sent him to Rome to complete his studies. There, under the guidance of the finest teachers, he learned rhetoric (the art of speaking well) and dialectics (the art of discussion). He built up a library by hand-copying, “with great care and effort,” works by his favorite authors: Plautus, Virgil, and Cicero. However, he was also eager for entertainment: his ardent nature



Saint Jerome

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craved for expression, and though he did not indulge in pleasure with the fire of an Augustine, he did sometimes give in to his passions. He would later describe how he went astray “among the dances of Roman maidens.” Nevertheless, his religious spirit drove him to visit the catacombs with friends on Sundays. At last, he was touched by grace and decided to ask to be baptized in 366. Jerome moved on to Trier, where the Emperor Valentinian had established himself, because to please his family, he was seeking a position in the administration. Once there, however, his discovery of the monastic life led him to sober thought. Deeply moved, he decided to shun all things worldly, and turned his interest to Christian literature. Driven by his new-found dispositions, he returned to Aquileia in Italy, where he joined a group of devout Christians that had formed around Bishop Valerian: he described them as a “choir of the blessed.” In 374, he made the sudden decision to depart eastwards, with the purpose of entering into the monastic life.

After a long and harrowing journey, exhausted by fever, Jerome arrived at the house of a priest in Antioch of Syria: Evagrius, a friend he had met in Aquileia. There he stayed, finding joy in his quiet and studious life. However, it was not strictly speaking a monastic life. He fell ill in Lent in 375, and in the course of his illness received a dream in which he was reproached for his excessive attachment to secular writings: “Suddenly I was caught up in the spirit and dragged before the

judgment seat of the Judge... Asked who and what I was I replied: 'I am a Christian.' But He who presided said: 'You lie; you are a follower of Cicero and not of Christ. For where your treasure is, there will thy heart be also.'" Under the intense torments of his conscience, Jerome gave up secular books. He chose to seclude himself in the desert of Chalcis, south of Aleppo (Syria), practicing strict asceticism, while earnestly devoting himself to the study of Greek and Hebrew. Meditation, solitude, and closeness to the Word of God stoked his interest in reading the Bible. However, he was in poor health and suffered from the deprivations he imposed on himself: "My face was pale and my frame chilled with fasting; yet my mind was burning with desire, and the fires of lust kept bubbling up before me when my flesh was as good as dead."

Illuminating guidance

The Church of Antioch was torn apart by schism at the time. When Jerome was asked to take a stance, he appealed to the Pope but received no answer. The Arian monks, for their part, waited not. They pestered Jerome with their quarrels to the point that the desert became abhorrent to him. Disillusioned, he returned to Antioch in 377, where he was ordained a priest by Bishop Paulinus. In 379, Jerome moved to Constantinople to continue his biblical studies there, under the enlightened guidance of Gregory of Nazianzus, a theologian and exegete. A sincere friendship developed between the two men. It was at this time that he discovered Origen and began to develop an Exegesis (i.e. a study of the sacred text) based on the original texts in Hebrew and Greek. In 382, Bishop Paulinus and Epiphanius of Salamis invited him accompany them to Rome, where they wanted to inform Pope Damasus of troublesome events in the Orient. Jerome wholeheartedly accepted. The saintly Pope, who was aware of Jerome's reputation as an ascetic and of his scholarly excellence, asked him to serve as his secretary and consulted with him on the meaning of obscure passages of Scripture. He urged him to undertake a new Latin translation of the biblical texts.

"Jerome's literary studies and vast erudition enabled him to revise and translate many biblical texts: an invaluable undertaking for the Latin Church and for Western culture. On the basis of the original Greek and Hebrew texts, and thanks to the comparison with previous versions, he revised the four Gospels in Latin, then the Psalter and a large part of the Old Testament... Jerome was able... to produce a better translation: this constitutes the so-called 'Vulgate,' the 'official' text of the Latin Church which was recognized as such by the Council of Trent" and which remains so today after the recent revision of 1979 (Benedict XVI, November 7, 2007).

Marcella, a Roman widow in search of a spiritual director and a master who could explain the Scriptures to her, asked Jerome for help. She soon organized a study circle of wealthy widows in her palace. This circle included Marcellina, the sister of Ambrose of Milan; Paula and her daughters Blesilla, Eustochium, and Paulina, and many others. Some of them are now honored as saints. Jerome shared with his avid students the best of his research and the benefits of his spiritual direction. A letter to Eustochium would become famous: "Like the Ark of the Covenant, Christ's spouse should be overlaid with gold within and without. She should be the guardian of the Law of the Lord. Just as the Ark contained nothing but the Tables of the Covenant, so in you there should be no thought of anything that is outside. Let no one dare to forbid you, neither mother nor sister nor kinswoman nor brother: 'The Lord has need of you.' Should they seek to hinder you, let them fear the scourges that fell on Pharaoh, who, because he would not let God's people go that they might serve Him, suffered the plagues described in Scripture." It was a powerful defense of the monastic life and virginity, and was widely distributed, but it shocked the high society of Rome. To a number of clerics, this manifesto for an evangelical life felt like it was aimed at them, and they would not forgive its author for criticizing them so harshly, or for having publicly put his finger on their shortcomings. In their jealousy of his power of influence, they accused him of forgery and sacrilege for daring to introduce changes to the biblical texts that had been accepted until then. Their anger eventually burst into slanderous claims against Jerome and his saintly friends: what was this monk doing amongst all these ladies? Jerome cleverly replied, "If men asked about Scripture, I would not speak to women!"

An exhilarating journey

After Pope Damasus died on December 11th, 384, Jerome decided to fulfil his lifelong dream: in August of 385, he left for the Middle East with his brother Paulinian and several monks who were determined to settle with him in the Holy Land. Paula and her daughter Eustochium joined them in Antioch some time later. A caravan was formed with the mission of taking them to Judea in the very heart of winter. One of Jerome's letters describes Paula's enthusiasm for visiting holy places. The pilgrims continued their journey to Egypt and Alexandria, home to a great biblical school that followed the teachings of Origen and Athanasius the Great. The school was headed by Didymus the Blind; Jerome became one of his disciples. The pilgrims also took advantage of their trip to visit the monks of Egypt, the famous "Fathers of the Desert."

In 386, the small group returned to Bethlehem, where thanks to Paula's generosity, a monastery for the

monks, a convent for the nuns and a fortified tower were promptly built, as well as a hostel for pilgrims to the Holy Land, “since they remembered that these parts MARY and Joseph had not found a place to stay.” Jerome here found a place of quiet where he joyfully resumed his work: biblical translations and commentaries, history, polemics, hagiography, etc. Paula assumed the direction of the convent as did Jerome of the monastery, but it was he who provided the appropriate spiritual guidance to all, based on Sacred Scripture. The Bible, which he assimilated to Christ, held an essential place in their community life: “Love the Holy Scriptures,” he said, “and wisdom will love you; your tongue must know only Christ, and say only that which is sacred.”

Benedict XVI emphasized this Doctor of the Church’s love for the Word of God: “St. Jerome said, ‘Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.’ It is therefore important that every Christian lives in contact and in personal dialogue with the Word of God given to us in Sacred Scripture. This dialogue with Scripture must be truly personal because God speaks with each one of us through Sacred Scripture and it has a message for each one. We must not read Sacred Scripture as a word of the past but as the Word of God that is also addressed to us, and we must try to understand what it is that the Lord wants to tell us... The Word of God transcends time. Human opinions come and go. What is very modern today will be very antiquated tomorrow. On the other hand, the Word of God is the Word of eternal life, it bears within it eternity and is valid forever. By carrying the Word of God within us, we therefore carry within us eternity, eternal life” (November 7, 2007).

“Love it tenderly”

St. Jerome, continued Pope Benedict, “recommended to one of his spiritual daughters: ‘Love Sacred Scripture... love it tenderly, and it will protect you.’ And again: ‘Love the science of Scripture, and you will not love the vices of the flesh.’ For Jerome, a fundamental criterion of the method for interpreting the Scriptures was harmony with the Church’s Magisterium. We should never read Scripture alone because we meet too many closed doors and could easily slip into error... For him, an authentic interpretation of the Bible must always be in harmonious accord with the faith of the Catholic Church... Therefore, Jerome admonished: ‘Remain firmly attached to the traditional doctrine that you have been taught, so that you can preach according to right doctrine and refute those who contradict it.’ In particular, given that JESUS CHRIST founded his Church on Peter, every Christian... must be in communion ‘with St. Peter’s See. I know that on this rock the Church is built.’ Consequently, without equivocation,

he declared: ‘I am with whoever is united to the teaching of St. Peter’” (General Audience of November 14, 2007).

Before long, however, the Origenist quarrels (caused by the errors of Origen’s disciples who denied the definitive character of God’s judgment), followed by the fight against Pelagianism (which claimed that the initiative for salvation originates in man and denied original sin), prompted Jerome vigorously to defend the faith: there were times when his pen was like a razor-sharp stylus. At the same time, barbarian invasions that brought crowds of refugees to the Holy Land forced him to put aside his beloved studies in order to fulfil his charitable duties. Nevertheless, he persevered in the holy work to which he had dedicated himself. His cell became a kind of beacon for the entire Christian world: souls eager for perfection turned to him. This resulted in an extensive and varied correspondence with the best minds of his time. In response to a person asking for advice, Jerome explained the importance of community life: “I would rather that you live in a holy community, and that you not teach yourself, nor embark without a master on a path that is entirely new to you.” He recommended moderation in bodily fasts: “A modest diet, but one that is also reasonable, is good for both body and soul.” He often recalled that a courageous commitment to perfection requires constant vigilance, frequent mortifications—albeit with discretion—, diligent intellectual or manual work to avoid idleness, but above all obedience to God: “Nothing... pleases God as much as obedience..., which is the most excellent and sole virtue” (*Hom. de Obœdientia*: CCL 78, 552).

“Adorn this shrine!”

“The Gospel,” commented Pope Benedict XVI, “must translate into truly charitable behavior... For example, addressing the presbyter Paulinus (who then became Bishop of Nola and a Saint), Jerome counsels: ‘The true temple of Christ is the soul of the faithful: adorn it and beautify this shrine, place your offerings in it and receive Christ. What is the use of decorating the walls with precious stones if Christ dies of hunger in the person of the poor?’ Jerome concretizes the need ‘to clothe Christ in the poor, to visit him in the suffering, to nourish him in the hungry, to house him in the homeless.’ The love of Christ, nourished with study and meditation, makes us rise above every difficulty: ‘Let us also love JESUS CHRIST, always seeking union with him: then even what is difficult will seem easy to us’” (November 14, 2007).

The Pope Emeritus also emphasized “the importance that Jerome gave to the matter of Christian pedagogy. He proposed to form ‘one soul that must become the temple of the Lord,’ a ‘very precious gem’ in the eyes

of God. With profound intuition, he advises to preserve oneself from evil and the occasions of sin and to exclude equivocal or dissipating friendships. Above all, he exhorts parents to create a serene and joyful environment around their children, to stimulate them to study and work also through praise and emulation, encouraging them to overcome difficulties, foster good habits and avoid picking up bad habits... Parents are the principal educators of their children, the first teachers of life. With great clarity Jerome, addressing a young girl's mother, admonishes: 'May she find in you her teacher, and may she look to you with the inexperienced wonder of childhood. Neither in you, nor in her father should she ever see behavior that could lead to sin, as it could be copied. Remember that... you can educate her more by example than with words.'... Moreover, an aspect rather disregarded in ancient times but held vital by our author is the promotion of the woman, to whom he recognizes the right to a complete formation: human, scholastic, religious, professional. We see precisely today how the education of the personality in its totality, the education to responsibility before God and man, is the true condition of all progress, all peace, all reconciliation, and the exclusion of violence. Education before God and man: it is Sacred Scripture that offers us the guide for education and thus of true humanism" (*Ibid.*).

Better beg for bread than lose the faith

In the last years of his life, Jerome faced many ordeals. St. Paula, ever his faithful friend, died in 404. In 410, the Visigoth King Alaric I invaded Italy and sacked Rome. It was a tragedy in which Jerome recognized the collapse of a world, and he moaned, "the Roman Empire was decapitated, and, to speak more correctly, the whole world perished in one city." St. Marcella's convent was looted, and she herself was

tortured and died soon after. In 416, monks supporting Pelagius went on a punitive expedition to Judea against the Hieronymian monasteries. A deacon was killed, the buildings were set on fire. The fortified tower served as a refuge; Jerome barely escaped death. He wrote, not without pride: "As for our house, so far as fleshly wealth is concerned, it is completely destroyed by the onslaughts of the heretics; but by the mercy of Christ it is still filled with spiritual riches. To beg one's bread is better than to lose the faith." In 418, he was devastated by the unexpected death of Eustochium, who had succeeded her mother Paula at the head of the women's monastery. She had greatly assisted him in his work. This death, he wrote, "almost changed the conditions of our existence, because we are no longer able to do many of the things we would like to do: the spirit is strong, but it is defeated by the feebleness of old age." His last letter was to Augustine and his friend Alypius: "Every opportunity of writing to you, revered fathers, is most acceptable to me. I call God to witness that, if it were possible, I would take the wings of a dove and fly to be folded in your embrace. Loving you, indeed, as I have always done, from a deep sense of your worth, but now especially because your co-operation and your leadership have succeeded in strangling the heresy of Celestius (a disciple of the heretic Pelagius), which you have completely stifled by your zeal and by your care. May the mercy of our Lord JESUS CHRIST preserve you safe and mindful of me, my lords truly holy" (Letter 143). Crippled with infirmities and almost blind, the faithful servant peacefully fell asleep in the Lord on September 30, 420. He was buried near the Grotto of the Nativity in Bethlehem. His remains, which were brought back to Rome in the 8th century, are now in the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, near to the relics of JESUS' manger that Jerome himself had carefully reassembled.

According to the Second Vatican Council, "In the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them; and the force and power in the Word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons, the food of the soul, the pure and everlasting source of spiritual life" (*Dei Verbum Constitution*, No. 21). Let us follow the example of St. Jerome, and set aside time each day to meditate on the Word of God, either directly or with the help of commentaries from the Fathers and Doctors of the Church. As Jerome said, "How could one live without the knowledge of Scripture, through which one learns to know Christ himself, who is the life of believers?"

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

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Wire transfer: Abbaye St Joseph de Clairval - IBAN: FR60 3000 2025 3500 0011 7120 A65 - BIC: CRLYFRPP

Abbaye Saint-Joseph de Clairval (English ed) ISSN : 1956-3906 - Dépôt légal : date de parution - Directeur de publication : Dom Jean-Bernard Bories - Imprimerie : Traditions Monastiques - 21150 Flavigny-sur-Ozerain.

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