



# Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of June 29, 2021,  
Feast of Saint Peter and Saint Paul

**Dear Friends,**

**O**N March 6, 1998, Norbert Baudois, a Swiss farmer, decided to pull down the snow fences he had put up on the family farmstead. Four of his grandchildren accompanied him. Twenty-two-month-old Virginie and her eight-year-old sister were sitting on the tractor when the infant fell to the ground. There was no way the grandfather could stop in time: the little girl's entire body was crushed by the tractor's wheel, including her head. Appalled, he picked up her lifeless body... But a few moments later, Virginie began to cry in his arms. Norbert immediately thought of Marguerite Bays, and thanked her out loud. "She should have been crushed to death: this can't be anything but a miracle!", he cried, gazing at his granddaughter with tear-filled eyes. He and his wife, Yvonne, were in the habit of praying every evening to Blessed Marguerite, who had been raised to the altars three years earlier by John Paul II, begging her to protect their grandchildren—"ever since the day I saw a painting of Marguerite Bays surrounded by children," Norbert would explain later. Virginie was taken to hospital and carefully examined. Dumbfounded, the doctors told her parents that the accident had left not a trace: neither the internal organs nor the skeleton were affected; there were only a few bruises caused by the fall. This was especially incomprehensible since the marks of the tractor wheel were clearly visible on the little girl's clothes. It was this miracle that, once authenticated by the Church, led to the canonization of Marguerite Bays, on October 13, 2019, in the presence of Virginie, the girl whose life had been miraculously preserved.

Marguerite was born on September 8, 1815, in the hamlet of La Pierra, in the canton of Fribourg, in French-speaking Switzerland. She was the second of seven children born to Antoine and Joséphine Bays, a modest farming family. She was baptized the day after her birth in the parish church of Siviriez. From childhood, she helped her parents with the housework and the garden. In 1823, she received Holy Communion for the first time, and, in 1826, the sacrament of Confirmation. She learned to read and write at the village school. A lively and fun-loving child, she nevertheless felt attracted to prayer and solitude; her loved ones expected that she would enter a convent. She herself, however, did not hear such a call; while consecrating her virginity to God, she worked as a dressmaker in the house made of wood where people and cattle lived side by side.

Marguerite used to get up before three in the morning. In her room, the spinning wheel would soon be heard singing, as she skillfully spun hemp, before attending Mass at the church in Siviriez, one and a half kilometers away. Her work would then take her to families where she often met mothers facing all kinds of troubles. She helped them with kindness and patience,

and most of all with her prayers. She was frequently asked to come and watch over the sick and dying, whom she excelled at preparing to meet the Lord. Marguerite Bays had a special devotion to the Sacred Heart of JESUS, the perfect image of God's mercy towards sinners. In a century marked by anticlericalism, she prayed for the persecuted Church, especially for Pope Pius IX who, in 1870, would be stripped of all temporal sovereignty, and see his freedom threatened. A painting over Marguerite's bed depicted the Church militant, led by the successor of Peter and placed under the protection of MARY.

## **Serious family problems**

**T**hanks to the Third Order of St. Francis, which she had joined at the age of twenty, and to the good spiritual books provided by the Capuchin Fathers of Fribourg, Marguerite acquired the habit of daily meditation on the Gospels, enriched with commentaries. Having remained at her father's home together with three of her brothers, she performed the household chores that were hers to do. However, her sister-in-law Josette, a harsh and insensitive woman, frequently humiliated her, calling her a sloth. Marguerite never



Saint Marguerite Bays

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held this against her: when Josette became ill at an early age, Marguerite took care of her and, being the only person whose assistance the sick woman would accept, prepared her for death. Other sorrows beset the family: her sister Marie-Marguerite separated from her husband and returned to live at home; her brother, Joseph, a bachelor of extreme character and, at times, of loose morals, ended up serving a prison sentence, albeit a light one; the eldest, Claude, had a child born out of wedlock, little François. Marguerite urged her brother to recognize the boy officially, offering to educate him herself. Jean, her other brother, was more understanding than the others of his sister's spiritual aspirations and mystical life. Faced with their blameworthy conduct, Marguerite did not condemn her brothers and sister: she knew that "although we can judge that an act is in itself a grave offense, we must entrust judgment of persons to the justice and mercy of God" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, CCC, no. 1861). Remembering that JESUS *did not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance* (Lk 5:32), she won her loved ones to Christ by the witness of a holy life and her patient charity: all of them would end their lives as good Christians.

### Marguerite's Christmas

Marguerite Bays was very active in the Confraternities of the Rosary and the Blessed Sacrament. She also suggested to her parish priest that he should set up a movement to support the Catholic missions, and she introduced into the parish the work of the Holy Childhood, founded in Lyons by Blessed Pauline Jaricot, with the aim of providing material and spiritual assistance to poor children in faraway countries. She herself would always be very welcoming to children, not minding their boisterousness even in her own room, and they liked her. "Marguerite was not boring when she spoke to us, she enjoyed laughing and was always in a good mood," one of her protégés later testified. "She spoke little of herself," remarked other witnesses, "Her rule of life was: 'Work and pray'." At Christmas, Marguerite always prepared a Nativity scene for the children of the neighborhood to admire. She artfully arranged its figurines, provided by the abbey of La Fille-Dieu, in a natural setting made of moss and branches. All those who come to see "Marguerite's Christmas" were invited to say a decade of the rosary with her, followed by a *Memorare*, the Marian prayer of Saint Bernard. She encouraged her family and friends to make Nativity scenes in their own homes, which was not customary at the time. On Sunday afternoons, she took the children to the nearby shrine of Notre-Dame-du-Bois (Our Lady of the Woods). It was a secluded chapel where silence reigned, remindful of God's presence, and it often received her visits. Prayer and songs with the children were always followed by games in the woods. During the month of May, Marguerite would tastefully decorate a small oratory in her house with flowers: as a Franciscan Tertiary,

she knew that the beauty of Creation is a path that leads to God.

Marguerite Bays demonstrated a special concern for the poor and the sick. The needy eagerly sought her help, and they never came away empty-handed. She visited the poor, bringing them new clothes and food. Keeping in mind the figure of Christ, who *being rich, became poor, that through his poverty we may be rich* (cf. 2 Cor 8:9), she strove to follow JESUS in his humility and his poverty, choosing to live with only the bare necessities, and giving the poor the best of herself. She also helped them to come closer to the Lord, like she did for Louise Cosandey des Combes, a crippled woman with whom she had many a spiritual conversation.

### "Go ahead!"

Marguerite became spiritually close to a young priest from Fribourg, Canon Joseph Schorderet, whose vocation had taken form precisely during a visit to the Notre-Dame-du-Bois chapel. In 1873, he founded a religious congregation, the Sisters of Saint Paul, whose apostolate consisted of publishing Catholic newspapers and books. Bishop Marilley, of Fribourg, was not very favorable to this initiative at first, because he was suspicious of newspapers and preferred to stick to the traditional means of teaching: the reading of episcopal mandates from the pulpit by the parish priest at Sunday Mass. But this method did not allow to reach the people who no longer went to Mass regularly and who were avid readers of anti-clerical newspapers. The canon consulted Marguerite, who, having prayed, encouraged him to continue with his action: "Do not be afraid, go ahead, this work will do much good here and will be particularly blessed by God, because it corresponds to his will." Thus encouraged, the priest went to Rome where he obtained an audience with Pope Pius IX, who blessed his plan. Bishop Marilley, much annoyed, publicly humiliated Marguerite during a pastoral visit, leaving her to stand in front of him for a long time; finally, alluding to the excessive number of visitors who came to see her, he declared: "The water that flows deepest under the ground is best." This call to humility cast a shadow of doubt over the purity of Marguerite's intentions, and she, greatly distressed, remained silent. Later, the bishop recognized the holiness of this humble woman.

Marguerite often walked the six kilometers separating her house from the Cistercian abbey of La Fille-Dieu, in Romont. Her goddaughter, Alphonsine Menétrey, entered this monastery in 1865, apparently as a result of a pious inspiration from her godmother, who on the day of Alphonsine's baptism in 1845 vowed to pray every day that her goddaughter would be called to follow Christ more closely in the religious life. She never told the young girl about this in order for her to be totally free, but the day Alphonsine told her of her decision to

become a nun, Marguerite could not help but exclaim: "At last, my goddaughter! I've got you!" Under her religious name of Sister Ludgarde, the novice remained very close to her godmother, to whom she confided her sorrow at not knowing the eternal fate of her mother, who had died brutally five years earlier, without the succor of the sacraments. One day in November 1867, Marguerite presented herself at the porter's office of the monastery, asking permission to enter the enclosure in order to make the Stations of the Cross with Sister Ludgarde in the chapter hall, where there were paintings representing the different stations. She was told that permission from the bishop was required.

Marguerite then approached the prelate directly and obtained permission to carry out her plan. One evening, she was admitted to the chapter hall when the sisters were in bed, and for two hours she went through the fourteen Stations of the Cross with her goddaughter. At the end of this exercise, she joyfully assured Sister Ludgarde that her mother was now in Heaven. Marguerite had in fact learned by revelation that Alphonsine's mother would remain in purgatory until her daughter had made this Way of the Cross with her godmother in her intention. From then on, Marguerite was authorized by Bishop Marilley to make stays with the nuns; she did not take undue advantage of this, but did take part in their annual retreat. The nuns sometimes asked her for advice, which greatly disturbed her humility; illuminated from above, she reassured them about the future of their community, which seemed to be under threat, due to the measures of the cantonal government against religious congregations. In 1883, Mother Ludgarde, now elected abbess, had the joy of seeing her monastery placed under the jurisdiction of the abbot of the Trappist monastery of Celenberg, in Alsace, which ensured that it would remain rooted in the Cistercian Order... But by that time, Marguerite Bays was already in Heaven.

### **"Pick up your rosary!"**

When people told her of their difficulties, Marguerite was wont to reply: "Do as I do, pick up your rosary, things will get better afterwards." She herself indeed prayed the Rosary tirelessly, especially during her pilgrimages to Einsiedeln. The great Marian shrine of Notre-Dame-des-Ermites (Our Lady of the Hermits) is 200 km from Sivriz; every year, crowds of faithful from the canton of Fribourg, grouped by parish, used to go there on foot in three days, that is to say 60 to 70 km a day! Despite being very small, Marguerite made this pilgrimage eleven times, even when her feet were injured by the stigmata. During the halts, she would not give a thought to herself, the better to care for the bruised feet of the other pilgrims. In front of the Black Virgin venerated in this shrine, she would present to Our Lady all the intentions that had been entrusted to her, and spend the night in prayer.

Marguerite Bays' extraordinary Marian devotion can be explained in part by a very special favor she received on December 8, 1854. On that day, in Rome, Pope Pius IX defined the dogma of the Immaculate Conception: "The most Blessed Virgin MARY was, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God and by virtue of the merits of JESUS CHRIST, Savior of the human race, preserved immune from all stain of original sin" (cf. CCC 491). Marguerite could not take part in the thanksgiving ceremonies in church, for she lay dying in bed: for months she had been suffering from intestinal cancer, and the doctor had now declared that there was no hope of recovery. She asked MARY Immaculate to heal her or else immediately to open the way to Heaven for her. Suddenly, she felt that she was healed, and got up: her family, returning from Mass, was astounded to find her sitting on the outer edge of the stove with a radiant expression on her face.

### **A baffled doctor**

Marguerite's physical healing was the signal for an inner transformation, a more intimate union with JESUS CHRIST. Shortly afterwards (we do not know exactly when), this union expressed itself through the appearance of the stigmata: in her hands and feet the marks of the wounds of the Crucified JESUS were imprinted, more visible on Thursday evening and Friday. This embarrassed her and she carefully hid her hands with mittens; however, witnesses, taking advantage of a moment of distraction, saw a reddening in the form of a cross on the palms and backs of her hands. Walking became more difficult, but she continued to go to church, her second home, just as often as before. On Thursday afternoons, she would go to her room, feverish, her eyes bright, her face animated; there she prayed aloud, accusing herself of being a sinner, of not loving this God who is Love; she would offer herself in reparation for the sins committed in the world. Every Friday, around 3 p.m., she was plunged into an ecstatic sleep of about twenty minutes, which gradually lengthened over the years until it reached one hour at the end of her life. The sweat on her face revealed her intimate participation in the Passion of the Savior. In 1873, the bishop of Fribourg commissioned a committee composed of a lawyer, a doctor and two priests to conduct a thorough medical examination of Marguerite during one of her Friday afternoon ecstasies. The doctor, who had been chosen from among rationalists who were skeptical of the supernatural, in order to avoid any suspicion of partiality, could only note Marguerite's total insensitivity to the needle pricks he inflicted on her, as well as the visible presence of the stigmata, including in the area of the heart. When the patient came to, half an hour later, she cheerfully proclaimed: "I am very well!" She stood up, accepted a glass of wine and bore a toast with the people present. "What do you think?", one of them asked the doctor. Baffled, he replied, "It is an extraordinary thing, one is compelled to believe."



The love of silence did not make Marguerite taciturn. She willingly talked, but always managed to put in a word of spiritual weight, an encouragement to devotion, which led some to describe her as a "sermonizer." Her usual gentleness sometimes gave way to sharpness when she heard slanderous words. Above all, she abhorred bad things being said about priests. One day, when someone criticized the priest's latest sermon, she retorted in a tone of voice that would accept no argument: "What you are saying is not right. Priests are God's representatives for our souls. What they say, what they do in church, is only with the intention of doing us good, and it is not for us to criticize them or to find fault with their actions."

Malicious gossip is a widespread failing. In his *Spiritual Exercises*, St. Ignatius points out: "If you reveal the defect of another, you manifest your own... If, however, your intention is good, there are two ways in which it is permissible to speak of the sin or fault of another: When a sin is public, as in the case of a person openly leading a shameless life, or of a sentence passed in court, or of a commonly known error that infests the minds of those with whom we live. And secondly when a hidden sin is revealed to someone with the intention that he help the one who is in sin to rise from his state. But then there must be some grounds or probable reasons for believing that he will be able to help him" (no. 41).

Marguerite insisted on the necessity of praying much to advance in the spiritual life and to obtain the grace to love God above all else. When her prayers were not answered, she would say to herself: "The good God has not allowed it, He sees things differently than we do," or again: "I will obtain something else, if I do not receive what I ask for." Yet, one day she accused herself: "If I had prayed more, everything would have been better." In her anxiety about the lack of faith of her contemporaries, she composed a prayer to JESUS. This prayer, which she recited every day, reveals the center of her spirituality, inspired by Sacred Scripture:

We cannot imitate Saint Marguerite Bays in the extraordinary mystical phenomena with which God gratuitously favored her; but we can learn from her how to transform all our daily actions, however humble, into so many acts of love, offered to the Father in the Holy Spirit, in union with the perfect Sacrifice of Christ.

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

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Oh Holy Victim,  
draw me to Thy side  
and we shall walk together.  
That I should suffer with Thee is just.  
Heed not my repugnance.  
Let me accomplish in my flesh  
what is missing in Thy sufferings.  
I embrace the cross, with Thee I wish to die.  
I am willing to breath my last breath  
in the wound of Thy Sacred Heart.

Marguerite called JESUS a "victim" because Christ is *the propitiatory victim for our sin: not only for ours, but for those of the whole world* (1 Jn 2:2). By his Passion and death offered for the love of his Father and for sinners, and *whereas indeed he was the Son of God, he learned obedience by the things which he suffered, and being consummated, he became, to all that obey him, the cause of eternal salvation* (Heb 5:8-9). It was Marguerite's union with JESUS in his Passion that led her to his Sacred Heart. There she found rest, according to the Savior's promise: *Come to me, all you that labor, and are burdened, and I will refresh you* (Mt 11:28).

### **The power of simple prayer**

In 1879, Marguerite could no longer rise or take nourishment, but she did not fear death. She could say with St. Paul, that she *had a desire to be dissolved and to be with Christ* (Phil 1:23). On Friday, June 27, 1879, the octave of the feast of the Sacred Heart, after long weeks of suffering, she finally achieved the definitive encounter with the Savior she had been waiting for so long. In the homily for her canonization, Pope Francis remarked: "Saint Marguerite Bays was a seamstress; she speaks to us of the power of simple prayer, enduring patience and silent self-giving... Such is the holiness of daily life, which Saint John Henry Newman (canonized on the same day) described in these words: "The Christian has a deep, silent, hidden peace, which the world sees not... The Christian is cheerful, easy, kind, gentle, courteous, candid, unassuming; has no pretense... with so little that is unusual or striking in his bearing, that he may easily be taken at first sight for an ordinary man'."