



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of July 22, 2022,
Feast of Saint Mary Magdalene

Dear Friends,

AFTER her marriage to JOSEPH, 'MARY was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit', Pope St. John Paul II recalled in his Apostolic Exhortation on St. JOSEPH ... "In these circumstances, 'her husband JOSEPH, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to send her away quietly' (Mt 1:19). He did not know how to deal with MARY's 'astonishing' motherhood. (...) But as he considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'JOSEPH, son of David, do not fear to take MARY your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name JESUS' (Mt 1:20-21)" (*Redemptoris Custos*, August 15, 1989, nos. 2-3). So moved was Emilie de Vialar upon contemplating the scene of the apparition of the angel Gabriel to St. JOSEPH in a painting on display in a museum in Toulouse, that in 1832, she would give the name "St. JOSEPH of the Apparition" to a new religious congregation.

All alone in my room...

Anne-Marguerite-Adélaïde-Emilie de Vialar was born on September 12, 1797 in Gaillac, in the diocese of Albi (south-western France), to Baron Jacques-Augustin de Vialar and his wife Antoinette Portal. The Baron de Vialar had read Voltaire and embraced the ideas of the Enlightenment, but he was not anti-religious. When the French Revolution broke out, he was a member of the Gaillac town council. He married in 1794, under the Reign of Terror, and it was a clandestine priest who blessed the couple. As a child, Emilie was attracted to God, but also to the world and the lures of coquetry. She sometimes lied to her parents to avoid being scolded. In 1810, Madame de Vialar travelled to Paris with her daughter in order to find a religious school for her. Recent childbirth had left the young mother weak, and she died there from malaria aged thirty-four. Emilie remained in the capital where she studied for two years with the nuns of Notre-Dame, and received her First Holy Communion. On her return to Gaillac in 1813, by now a pretty young girl, she entered into a whirl of fashionable gatherings, and neglected the sacraments. But in 1815, having turned eighteen, she received a singular grace: "One day, all alone in my room, I was as though ravished by God." She resisted the grace, but her conversion took place the following year, while she was attending a parish mission where she was "seized one evening by a great fear of God's judgment". She went to confession and received Holy Communion; she put an end to her worldly life, and to superficial and backbiting chatter.



Saint Émilie de Vialar

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Emilie's eyes were opened by her conversion, and she became aware of the poverty that surrounded her. There were about eight hundred needy souls in the town of Gaillac, most of them beggars. This "social leprosy" stirred her to compassion and involvement. She began to visit the sick, bringing them warm broth, clothes and medicine, and she ended up taking them into her home, much to the displeasure of her father. The young girl also worked for the conversion of sinners and the return of Protestants to Catholicism; to this end, she devoted herself to many bodily mortifications, but she was incapable of remaining in a state of inner recollection. The Lord spoke to her inwardly: "Keep my presence. I will call you back to it when you wander away." One day, while in adoration before the tabernacle in the church of St. Peter, she saw the image of the crucified JESUS imprint itself on it. Emilie felt a call to consecrate her life entirely to God and, despite her father's wishes, showed no intention of marrying. However, she remained in her home so as not to leave him, for without her, he would abandon the Christian life. In 1822, at the age of twenty-five, she took a private vow of virginity. She perceived two inner attractions that indicated a call from God: the assistance of the sick in their homes, and the missions to pagan lands.

Having received a large inheritance from her grandfather, Emilie, joined by three companions, bought a house in Gaillac in order to house the congregation they wanted to found. She left her home, but she did not abandon her father, whom she visited daily; yet he only

responded with coldness. Christmas Day of 1832 saw the birth of the Institute of St. JOSEPH of the Apparition, whose purpose was to care for the poor and the sick. Vocations poured in: six months later, there were already twenty-six Sisters. Their costume was unassuming: a black woolen dress and an apron with a bib, and a white cap similar to the local women's headdress. They had neither enclosure nor grilles, which led to gossip. Having been approached by the civil authorities, the new nuns agreed to open free schools for girls. In January 1834, the foundress submitted a draft Rule to the archbishop of Albi, François de Gualy; he approved it the following year. The name "St. JOSEPH of the Apparition" referred above all to the apparition of the Archangel Gabriel to St. JOSEPH, but possibly also to an apparition of St. JOSEPH with which the Foundress is said to have been favored at a time of discouragement.

Winning sympathy

The Sisters were soon to receive a powerful appeal. In 1830, the French navy had gained a foothold in Algeria, until then a hotbed of piracy that infested the entire western Mediterranean Basin. Augustin de Vialar, Emilie's brother, was a former officer who had established himself as a colonist in Algeria, in the poorly pacified region of Boufarik, near Algiers. His guiding principle was this: "We must not control the natives by the force of arms, but bind them to ourselves by the benefits of civilization." At his own expense, he had an ambulance set up for the exclusive benefit of sick Bedouins, and asked his sister to come and help him; at the same time, the municipal council of Algiers sent Emilie an official request regarding the hospice of Algiers. Archbishop de Gualy encouraged her to go. The Foundress embarked with three sisters and arrived on August 3, 1835, in the midst of a raging cholera epidemic. The nuns' unlimited generosity immediately won them the sympathy of the Muslim population, the more so that they received no subsidies and that the congregation relied entirely on Mother Emilie's own assets. She founded a boarding school for young girls from wealthy families, in order to fund a free school which met with immediate success.

In 1838, Mother Emilie, who had been elected Superior General in Gaillac, opened a large number of houses in Algeria. That same year, the French government obtained from Rome the appointment of Father Antoine-Adolphe Dupuch as the first bishop of Algiers and of all Algeria. From the moment of his arrival, the prelate, though filled with true zeal, revealed his unruly and domineering temperament. In 1840, his hostility was aroused by a foundation that Emilie had set up in Constantine, because he wanted to put the Sisters under his exclusive authority. He was determined to make all appointments himself and to take charge of the spiritual direction of the Sisters. He disliked Mother Emilie's Roman spirit, but even more, her refusal to acknowledge him as the sole superior of her congregation, which was

developing in many places. From 1839 on, the bishop of Algiers had already subjected it to various vexations and disciplinary measures, such as forbidding the celebration of Mass in the sisters' chapels and refusing them the sacraments. Mother Emilie de Vialar and her nuns did their utmost to continue their apostolate, however, with the support of the population, be it Christian, Muslim or Jewish, whose sick they cared for and whose daughters they educated.

In 1840, Bishop de Gualy sent Emilie de Vialar to Rome to ask the Pope for the canonical approval of the institute. Despite a favourable reception from Gregory XVI, the Foundress, who spent eighteen months in the Eternal City, only obtained a "laudatory decree" because of the maneuvering of the bishop of Algiers. In 1842, a petition signed by one hundred and thirty-three Muslim dignitaries in favor of the Sisters, and the support of the Holy See, was not sufficient to prevent the civil government, influenced by Bishop Dupuch, from expelling the Sisters of St. JOSEPH from Algeria. One evening, in the middle of serving meals to the sick, the eighteen Sisters of the hospice in Algiers were ordered to hand over their convent immediately to nuns from another congregation. "Why are you crying?" Mother Emilie asked her Sisters. "It is only a trial... Our Lord has suffered much more than we have!" Four years later, by a twist of fate permitted by Providence, the bishop, saddled with debts he had contracted to finance his good works, was hounded by his creditors: he was given shelter in Algiers by Augustin de Vialar. Mother Emilie approved of this merciful gesture on the part of her brother. But a request made by Emilie de Vialar to the French government for compensation for the enormous construction and maintenance costs incurred at her own expense in Algeria was met with administrative inertia. The Foundress endured her temporal ruin by trustingly abandoning herself to Divine Providence.

A polite refusal

However, in Gaillac, Mother Emilie was viewed with suspicion by the new archbishop of Albi, Archbishop de Jerphanion, who had been warned against her by impatient creditors. She went to Paris to obtain civil recognition for her congregation. Despite praise for the work done in Algeria, the Minister of Justice politely refused: the government considered that France already had enough religious congregations. However, after foundations in Tunisia in 1840, others were established in 1844 in Rome and Cyprus, and a third in Malta the following year. There, vocations abounded and schools were opened. A foundation in Greece followed. The incessant travels that she had to undertake damaged the health of the Foundress and forced her to rest.

In 1846, the Baron de Vialar, assisted by his daughter, had a very edifying death, after having devoutly received

the last sacraments. In Gaillac, however, the clergy had become hostile to Mother Emilie. She was refused Holy Communion, which she had to receive in a neighboring diocese. The Jesuits in Toulouse provided her with spiritual help, which was all the more appreciated as her institute had many novices. The management of the congregation's temporal affairs was at the time in the hands of a shady businessman, Monsieur Molis, who managed to put Emilie's vigilance to rest. His embezzlements soon left her ruined, and she also realized that the superior of Gaillac, Sister Pauline, was annoyed at not receiving the funds she considered necessary and was rebelling against her. Emilie's civil court complaint against the swindler was rejected, and she was forced to pay off all the debts that had been incurred. She drew on the inheritance she had received from her father, and offered the ordeal of this material loss to God. The lawsuit would only come to an end in 1851, with a final judgement based on a false document that had been forged by Molis, thus rendering the ruin of Emilie de Vialar and her family complete. "I have received a great lesson", she wrote to her spiritual father, "that of understanding that temporal advantages must not be desired excessively, and that we must rest with tranquility on the Lord for our interests, whatever they may be... Peace is always in my mind even when the heart is oppressed. How good God is to those who desire to love Him! This Good Friday I was overwhelmed with the outpouring of His love."

The dawn of a very beautiful day

During a trip to Rome, Emilie received an excellent welcome from the new Pope, Pius IX, who promised that her congregation would rapidly be approved. However, the hostility of the clergy of Gaillac and the indifference of the archbishop of Albi forced her to consider moving the novitiate of her congregation to another diocese. In 1847, Emilie and her nuns settled in Toulouse. Stricken by the loss of several nuns who fell ill and died, by financial worries and by the pettiness of some of the sisters, the Mother Superior started to feel how worn out she was, and her health deteriorated. Yet, strong in her faith, she was still able to discern signs of hope in these events: "What comforts me in all my sorrows is that God only allows whatever upsets me for a greater good, and that He must have special plans for our interests... In the midst of these crosses, and undoubtedly thanks to them, our house is seeing the dawn of a very beautiful day." Mother Emilie found consolation in new foundations made in the Holy Land. She called the superior of the convent in Jerusalem back to France and entrusted her with the teaching of Arabic to young vocations destined for the Middle East. In that same year, she visited Lebanon and founded a school to work alongside the Jesuit mission in Zahlé. Then, at the request of an Italian congregation of priests, she sent six young English-speaking nuns to Burma. Mother Emilie knew that, despite the many difficulties they would

face, her Sisters were willing to take the good news of the Incarnation of the Son of God to distant pagan lands. They believed in the protection of St. JOSEPH who "knows how to make possible the most impossible things" (St. Francis de Sales). This distant foundation was financed by the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, founded in Lyons by Blessed Pauline Jaricot. The Sisters were conveyed by cart through the dangerous crossing of the Isthmus of Suez (this was before the construction of the canal), but their guides were not very competent. At each difficult moment, they would encounter a good old man who helped them and reassured them by saying: "It is I, my children, do not be afraid, I am here!" The man disappeared after having led them to their boat in Suez. The Sisters unhesitatingly identified him as St. JOSEPH, their heavenly protector.

"The patronage of St. JOSEPH", wrote Pope St. John Paul II, "must be invoked as ever necessary for the Church, not only as a defense against all dangers, but also, and indeed primarily, as an impetus for her renewed commitment to evangelization in the world and to re-evangelization in those lands and nations where religion and the Christian life were formerly flourishing and are now put to a hard test. In order to bring the first proclamation of Christ, or to bring it anew wherever it has been neglected or forgotten, the Church has need of special *power from on high* (cf. Lk 24:49), a gift of the Spirit of the Lord, a gift which is not unrelated to the intercession and example of his saints. Besides trusting in JOSEPH sure protection, the Church also trusts in his noble example, which transcends all individual states of life and serves as a model for the entire Christian community, whatever the condition and duties of each of its members may be" (*ibid.*, nos. 29-30).

Advice and support from a saint

In 1852, a foundation took place in Trebizond, Turkey. The Sisters of St. JOSEPH were now present throughout the Ottoman Empire, from North Africa to the Black Sea. The mother house of the congregation could not remain in Toulouse, however, and the bishop of Marseilles, St. Eugene de Mazenod, founder of the Oblates of MARY Immaculate, welcomed it, giving the Foundress advice and support; he approved the congregation in 1853. Roman approval would come only after Emilie's death in 1865. The Constitutions of the Congregation state: "The Sisters of St. JOSEPH of the Apparition devote themselves to the education of young girls of the well-to-do in return for a small fee, which will be used to enable them to care for the poor sick of their parish free of charge and to devote themselves to all the works of charity for which the diocesan bishop should wish to employ them."

Twenty years after its foundation, Mother Emilie de Vialar, having had her fill of material and spiritual

trials, saw her work grow in an unhoped-for way: in 1856, it comprised forty-two houses, including one in Australia. However, in order to appease her creditors, the Foundress was obliged to sell her family home, followed by the house in Gaillac which had been the first monastery of the Sisters of St. JOSEPH. At the end of years of very painful interior torments, the Foundress now observed: "Divine Providence has suspended its trials. My age has compelled it to lighten the crosses that, in His love for me, the Lord deigned to bestow upon me." In the midst of the manifold affairs of this world, Emilie found peace of soul in the gift of self: "To please the Lord, to give Him glory, is this not the most excellent good?" However, the Foundress had the sorrow of witnessing the premature death of many Sisters who fell victim to tropical diseases. She nevertheless did all she could to support the local superiors, instructing them, for example, on how to care for people suffering from malaria, yet without taking away what they needed to do on their own: they were given a great deal of leeway to adapt the customs of their houses to the particular circumstances of each country.

"We had bread!"

In 1854, a new bishop of Algiers, Bishop Pavy, travelled to Marseilles to meet the Foundress and ask her for Sisters for his diocese. Mother Emilie consented, eager to carry out this Christian "revenge": after having been expelled, it would be a return to Algeria without a mention of the past... In October 1855, Mother Emilie received the decree of legal approval of her institute, which was vital under the terms of the Concordat between France and the Church: it gave the congregation the right legally to possess its own property. However, the Foundress was not sorry that money troubles should

have anchored the Sisters of St. JOSEPH in the poverty of the Holy Family of Bethlehem: "If I had not become poor, I would not have been able to establish the congregation... Everything must be marked with the seal of the Cross. People do not understand the happiness of being poor for the love of JESUS... God always helps us" (Letter of 1855). She set an example for her Sisters, even to the point of depriving herself of her own clothes. Although she expected much from her daughters' spirit of sacrifice, Mother Emilie was not lacking in humanity. She wrote to a Sister in delicate health: "I urge you, if you find that sea-bathing is good for you, to bathe now and as often as possible, because it will strengthen your health." But her joy lay in prolonged prayer, and when asked, "What are you doing?" she replied, "What I am doing, my good woman! I contemplate the Love of the Lord!" A few days before her death, Mother Superior received a poor man in Marseilles who cried out for food. She gave him the little bread that remained that day. To the Sister cook who protested, she replied: "Hush! Hush, my dear, calm down, this man is hungry and he must eat. St. JOSEPH will come to our aid." The Sister later testified: "I don't know by what means, but what is certain is that we had bread for supper."

On August 24, 1856, the Foundress died suddenly, at the age of fifty-eight, of a strangulated hernia: the result of an accident that occurred during her youth while she was carrying a large bag of flour for the poor. She was canonized on June 24, 1951, by Pope Pius XII; her feast day is celebrated on August 24. In 2017, her congregation numbered 829 Sisters in 144 houses and 24 countries. The Sisters face situations that are often difficult and perilous, living by the words of the angel Gabriel to St. JOSEPH: "Be not afraid!"

St. Emilie's motto was: "To reveal God's immense love for humanity and to collaborate in the mission for which JESUS came to earth." This mission, the Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church explains, is to "reconcile us sinners with God, to have us learn of God's infinite love, to be our model of holiness and to make us 'partakers of the divine nature'" (no. 85). In order to carry out this beautiful program, may St. JOSEPH "become for all of us an exceptional teacher in the service of Christ's saving mission, a mission which is the responsibility of each and every member of the Church: husbands and wives, parents, those who live by the work of their hands or by any other kind of work, those called to the contemplative life and those called to the apostolate" (*Redemptoris Custos*, no. 32).

+ Sr Jean Bernard, Abbot,
and all the monks of the Abbey

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