



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

October 18, 2023

Dear Friends,

In the bleak and lonely wilds of French Canada, during the reign of Louis XIV, a nun shared this childhood memory dating back to her eighth year: “One night, while I was sleeping, it seemed to me that I was in a schoolyard... Suddenly, the heavens opened and Our Lord emerged from them, and came to me! When JESUS came close, I held out my arms to embrace Him... Then JESUS gave me an affectionate embrace and said to me: ‘Will you be Mine?’—‘Yes!’, I answered...” This “yes” to God was the key to her entire existence, it was a “yes” that Saint Marie of the Incarnation never ceased to repeat on every occasion, both in joy and in adversity. She has been called “the mother of the Catholic Church in Canada”.

Marie was born on October 18, 1599 in Tours, to Florent Guyart, a master-baker, and his wife Jeanne Michelet. She was the fourth of a family of seven. The Guyarts provided their children with a deeply Christian upbringing and a solid education. Marie used to help her father at his ovens, well enough to learn the rudiments of the trade and how to run a business; she also attended the local school.

Marie was drawn to the divine realities when she was still very young, devising her own form of “meditation”: she would talk at length about her “little affairs” with the good Lord. From an early age, her rich personality revealed a remarkable balance, designed for both mystical experiences and practical accomplishments. When she was about fourteen, Marie expressed her attraction to the religious life. Judging by her cheerful and pleasant disposition, however, her parents thought she was destined for marriage: although very pious, the young girl read novels and put on a good face to the world. In 1617, Claude Martin, a master silk worker who ran a silk factory, asked her to marry him. Marie, who was about to turn eighteen, dared not resist her parents and allowed herself to be betrothed to the young man. But she promised God that if one day she became a widow, she would devote herself entirely to Him. In October, at the foot of the altar, she received from God’s hands the husband she had been destined to marry.

Her son and first biographer, Dom Claude Martin, later wrote of his mother: “Seeing her husband as holding God’s



Saint Marie of the Incarnation
(1599-1672)

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place, she paid him all the respect and service she could; she loved him not only because he had fine qualities of body and mind, but even more because God obliged her to do so.” Marie was faced with domestic problems caused by a jealous mother-in-law and financial troubles that led to the bankruptcy of her husband’s business: “God,” she wrote, “wanted to prepare my soul for His graces and to purify it in tribulation.” She had a strong desire for perfection. Despite being a model of devotion to her husband, she experienced the tension described by Saint Paul: *An unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord. But a married man is anxious about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, and he is divided* (1 Cor 7:32-33).

According to her biographer, Marie had a burning zeal to spread the fear and love of God in her home and in the workshop, and “to close off all the channels through which sin could penetrate”. Her charity and the thoughtfulness of her personal attentions endeared her to her employees. She would discretely insist that they go to confession often. And because she possessed talent, discretion and ease of expression, what she said was understood and received. In her every act, the Word of God remained present in her mind: “Having meditated on the Psalms, I was constantly reminded of passages from them, which I used whenever I encountered others... As I went about my business, I commended myself to God with this aspiration that was so familiar to me: *In You, O Lord, have I set my hope; may I never be put to shame*” (Ps 30:2).

In April 1619, at the age of nineteen, Marie gave birth to a son, named Claude after his father. Six months later, the latter died, no doubt because of the distress caused by the bankruptcy of his silk business. A widow at the age of twenty, it was up to Marie to wind up her husband's affairs. She must settle court cases, satisfy customers and debtors, and plan for the future. "All these crosses," she later said, "were naturally greater than a person of my age and sex, of my capabilities and limited experience, could have borne. But the excess of divine goodness put in my mind and in my heart a fortitude and a courage that allowed me to endure everything. My strength was founded on these holy words: *I am with those who are in tribulation* (cf. Ps 90:15)... In this way, I was able to accomplish everything I undertook."

An irresistible force

MARIE withdrew to her father's house, and her desire to enter a convent resurfaced with a vengeance. But the pitiful state of her business affairs and her infant son prevented her from leaving the world. Many suitors came forward; she was urged to remarry to restore her finances. After some hesitation, however, she decided to follow her inclination towards solitude and took a vow of chastity. She began to read spiritual books and to converse intimately with God. Suddenly, the Lord burst into her life. She herself recounts the mystical experience that led to what she calls her "conversion". One morning, as she was going to look after her affairs, an irresistible force swept over her and stopped her in the middle of the street. In an instant, the eyes of her mind were opened and all her faults and imperfections were shown to her with a "clarity more certain than any certainty". At the same moment, she saw herself immersed in the redeeming Blood of the Son of God. She confessed to the first priest she found in the chapel of the Feuillants and returned, so powerfully transformed that she no longer recognized herself.

Marie yearned for a life of seclusion, but in 1621 her sister Claude, who was married to Paul Buisson, a merchant, invited her to live with her. She accepted the offer in order to support herself and her son, but was determined to lead a life of self-sacrifice and service. At first, she positioned herself as a "servant of servants", taking on the most unrewarding and tiring tasks in the household. By turns cook, chambermaid and nurse, she took her meals with around thirty "rouliers" (laborers) to prevent them from blaspheming, and looked after them like a mother when they were unwell. However, that same year, mystical graces led her to a closer union with Christ. Already bound to God by the vow of chastity, she also took the vows of poverty and obedience.

However, her talents as an administrator became apparent; by 1625, Paul Buisson put her in charge of his river transport business. Marie was plunged into a "business hassle", having to speak to a large number of customers on the quays of the Loire. However, she was also experiencing

"an interior paradise" and receiving ineffable revelations about the mystery of the Holy Trinity. She was twenty-seven and her son Claude was eight. He was a frail, shy little boy, whom his mother was gently preparing for their final separation. Under the guidance of Dom Raymond de Saint-Bernard, a "Feuillant" monk (a Cistercian), Marie Martin patiently waited for God's ways to become clearer. She chose the Ursulines because a secret voice told her that God wanted her there. The Order of Saint Ursula was founded in November 1535 in Brescia, Lombardy, by Saint Angela Merici (1474-1540). The Ursulines first arrived in France in 1608; as cloistered nuns, they devoted themselves mainly to the education of girls, as well as caring for the sick and needy.

"Give me my mother back!"

MARIE Martin was to be admitted to the Ursulines in Tours on January 25, 1631. On January 11, her eleven-year-old son Claude ran away, aboard a boat sailing up the Loire. After three days of frantic searching, he was found wandering in the port of Blois. Marie entrusted him to the care of her sister, and entered the novitiate on the appointed day. She later confessed that hearing his cries and screams had made her feel as if her heart had been ripped out. Over the next few days, the poor child besieged the monastery, succeeding several times in breaking into the enclosure. One day, he arrived with a group of schoolchildren who shouted at the nuns. Amid all the noise, Marie heard her son's voice crying out: "Give me my mother back!"

How could this loving, Christian mother "abandon" her child? In human terms, such an act seems impossible to explain. However, Marie's decision had been endorsed, after careful consideration, by her spiritual director and by the Bishop of Tours, Bertrand d'Eschaux. The Lord JESUS is emphatic about the demanding nature of his call, as we read in Saint Luke: *If any one comes to me without hating his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple* (Lk 14:26). The verb "to hate" here translates a Hebraism that means "to put behind". The call to follow Christ "first" is a direct consequence of the primacy of God and the kingdom of heaven over all other affections, even those that are the most legitimate. The Church, in her wisdom, has set just limits to this radicality by preventing those with "responsibility for souls" from abandoning those entrusted to them to enter a religious order. But in this case, Marie did not leave Claude without support: she had provided for everything he would need for his education and his future. Claude would go on to brilliant studies with the Jesuits and, one day, freely decide to give himself entirely to God in the monastic life.

Marie Martin, now Sister Marie of the Incarnation (not to be confused with Madame Acarie, a Carmelite nun who bore the same religious name), made her religious vows in 1633. She soon became sub-mistress of novices and teacher of Christian doctrine, yet she was secretly convinced that

the Tours monastery was for her no more than a stopping place. Little by little, her apostolic vocation took shape. In a dream, God led her through a vast country “full of thick fog”. Later, the Lord expressly told her: “This is Canada that I showed you; I want you to go there and build a house for JESUS and MARY.” The *Relations des Jésuites* gave Sister Marie information about the missions in “New France”. Father Poncet introduced her to Marie-Madeleine de La Peltrie, a wealthy widow who wanted to devote herself to evangelizing native Amerindian girls. In human terms, the undertaking sounded like sheer madness: how to imagine a group of feeble women setting sail on an ocean infested with pitfalls and pirates? There were many objections to the scheme. Bishop d’Eschaux initially turned a deaf ear, but in the end, he recognized that God’s will was at work in this undertaking. After resolving a thousand difficulties, Marie of the Incarnation, accompanied by Madame de La Peltrie, who was financing the foundation, and two Ursulines, set sail for the New World on May 4, 1639 on the Saint-Joseph. During the crossing, the ship almost collided with an iceberg. The travelers reached Quebec City on the 1st of August.

An active mystic

THE French settlement of Canada had only really begun some thirty years earlier with the founding of Quebec by Champlain. Development was slow because of the lack of settlers—in 1640, there were fewer than 3,000—and general insecurity. The town was surrounded by fortifications, initially made of wood; non-hostile Indians, mainly the Hurons, were allowed to enter, in contrast to the English forts, and thus contacts and relations were established. Attacks by the Iroquois (another indigenous tribe in the region), at the instigation of the English, were relatively common, obliging the French to exercise great caution.

Mother Marie of the Incarnation soon felt fulfilled by the fervor she saw in the young Church in Canada. She was very happy to take part in the Mission, although she had to admit that daily life was extremely tough. As soon as she arrived, she proved her talents as a “businesswoman”. She settled into a makeshift house in the lower town, which she nicknamed her “Louvre”. To keep out the cold, bedding had to be arranged in trunks lined with serge. In 1642, the group moved into a beautiful stone monastery that was three storeys high, 30 meters long and 9 meters wide: truly a marvel by local standards. But on the night of December 31, 1650, a fire destroyed the residence, which had been the fruit of immense sacrifice. Undaunted, the foundress once again began to build. She succeeded, relying on divine help, her own energy and ingenuity, and collected alms. Marie of the Incarnation was truly an “active mystic”. She grew a garden, ran a farm and ordered wells to be dug. Governors, stewards and leading figures in the colony consulted her about temporal affairs. She put her talents as a leader at the service of souls. The Jesuits were her spiritual directors; she accompanied them in spirit even on their expeditions to the

Indians, during which eight of them, almost all of whom the Ursuline knew personally, died as martyrs between 1642 and 1649; they were canonized in 1930.

The Ursulines came to Canada mainly to educate girls. From the day after their arrival in Quebec City, they received all the young French girls to teach them piety and good morals. At first, the Ursulines took in eighteen to twenty paying boarders. Over the years, the number of boarders grew and the workload became heavy. “If it weren’t for the Ursulines,” Mother Marie wrote, “the young girls would be in constant danger for their salvation”: left to their own devices in the harsh world of the colonists, they were at risk of being perverted. Before she died, the foundress had the consolation of giving the religious habit to several Canadian-born girls who had come to continue her work.

But Marie of the Incarnation always reserved her best for the little Amerindian girls. She welcomed them with open arms, and did her utmost to understand them, catechize them and make them happy. To all the nuns, she recommended that they offer “greetings and little words of affection” to the native pupils. She often called them “my heart’s delight” and “the most beautiful jewels” in her crown. She admitted, however, that it was “almost impossible” to get them to adopt the French culture and way of life; you cannot go from the wild life of children in the woods to the polished customs of the Great Century of Louis XIV in just a few months.

“Courage, holy daughters!”

MOTHER Marie’s apostolate with the adult Amerindians was also very intense. She admired the simple faith of these neophytes, and being present at their Baptism in the Ursuline chapel was one of her greatest joys. When she was over forty, with the help of the Jesuits, she began to study the Indian languages, mastering them to the point of writing a French-Algonquin dictionary and an Iroquois dictionary and catechism. After the fire of 1650, the Hurons feared losing Marie of the Incarnation and her companions. Chief Taiearonk spoke to them in these moving words: “Courage, holy daughters, do not let yourselves be overcome by the love of your parents, and show today that the affection you have for the poor savages is a heavenly charity stronger than the bonds of nature!”

However, the hope of a harmonious merging of the peoples of Canada did not materialize. Generally speaking, the Indians had no taste for sedentary life or agriculture. They were vulnerable to the alcoholic beverages that unscrupulous settlers exchanged for furs; missionaries were obliged to keep them away from the centers of European settlement, which had become a source of scandal for them. The Iroquois ransacked the Ursuline mission’s farms and killed its servants and many of its dearest friends. In 1660, the monastery was placed under siege. Finally, in 1666, Governor Daniel de Courcelles made peace with the Iroquois.

In 1659, Mgr François de Montmorency-Laval, vicar apostolic and later the first bishop of Quebec (he was canonized in 2014), arrived in Quebec City. In 1660, the prelate visited the Ursulines and declared that he intended to make significant changes to the Constitutions of 1647, which had been carefully drafted by Mother Marie with the help of the Jesuit Father Jérôme Lalemant. With her twenty years' experience in Canada behind her, the foundress felt that the proposed changes would be detrimental to the spiritual and temporal good of the Congregation. She therefore wrote to the bishop, who had suggested that she take some time to reflect: "The matter is already well thought out and our minds are made up: we will not accept this, save at the extreme requirements of obedience." In the end, Bishop de Laval left the Constitutions of 1647 intact, with the exception of five articles dealing with minor points. Saints can differ on practical matters, without their mutual charity being affected.

"I go around the world in spirit"

IN May 1653, Marie of the Incarnation made an interior holocaust of herself to God for the spiritual good of all the inhabitants of Canada. On that occasion, she composed this prayer, which reveals the intensity of her missionary zeal: "It is through the Heart of my JESUS, my way, my truth and my life, that I approach You, O Eternal Father. Through this divine Heart I adore You for all those who do not adore You; I love You for all those who do not love You; I adore You for all the willfully blind who, out of contempt, do not know You. Through this divine Heart, I want to satisfy for all mortals. I go around the world in spirit to seek out all the souls redeemed by the most precious Blood of my divine Spouse, in order to satisfy You for all of them through this divine Heart; through It I embrace them to present them to You, and through It I ask You for their conversion... On this

adorable Heart do I present to You all the workers of the Gospel so that You may fill them with Your Holy Spirit... I present to You all these souls, make them one and the same with You."

Mother Marie had toiled much and long. Prolonged penances and ill-treated disease had exhausted her. She could no longer kneel, her eyesight was failing, and all food was repulsive to her. And yet she rejoiced at the thought that soon she would be able to see God face to face. Before she died, she looked back on the graces of her life: God had showered her with mystical favors, the work of the Ursulines was making excellent progress, and she was filled with joy with the reports from her son Claude: having joined the Benedictine congregation of Saint-Maur in 1641, he had been promoted to the office of prior in 1652 and then, in 1668, to that of assistant to the superior general. On the brink of death, Marie of the Incarnation sent her son, whom she had not seen for forty years, a tender message: "Tell him that I am taking him with me in my heart." Marie of the Incarnation died on April 30, 1672, at the age of seventy-two, having spent forty-three years in Canada. She was proclaimed a saint on April 3, 2014 by Pope Francis, through the process of equipollent canonization (based on a constant reputation for holiness, with the dispensation of a miracle). Her feast day is celebrated on April 30.

In an "Exclamation", the Ursuline named God in the way she experienced him: "No, my Love, You are not fire, You are not water, You are not what we say You are. You are what You are in Your glorious eternity. You are: that is Your essence and Your name. You are life, divine life, living life, uniting life. You are all bliss. You are superadorable, ineffable, incomprehensible unity. In a word, You are Love, and my Love."

The Christian woman in Saint Marie of the Incarnation achieved her full accomplishment with remarkable balance, in her various states of life: wife, mother, widow, company director, nun, mystic, missionary, always in fidelity to Christ and always in close union with God. On the strength of her experience, she wrote: "God never leaves those who call Him their friend and prefer Him to all things and to themselves." We can invoke her to obtain, through her intercession, the grace to do all things in God, with God and for God.

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

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