



Abbaye Saint-Joseph de Clairval

F – 21150 Flavigny-sur-Ozerain

December 25, 2007  
Nativity of Our Lord JESUS CHRIST

Dear Friend of Saint Joseph Abbey,

“ **I**N order to avoid all serious errors in life, we must avoid acting precipitously.” This rule was regularly followed and recommended by Blessed Father Tansi, who added, “We can keep this principle by placing ourselves in the presence of God, and organizing and performing our task with Him. If we do so, neither success nor failure will disturb us.”

Iwene Tansi was born in 1903 in a small village in Nigeria. His parents were pagans, but deeply religious. He was still quite young when his father died. When Iwene was born, his father had made him an amulet, a good-luck charm that the child was very fond of. But one day, as he was coming home from Saint Joseph’s Christian School in Aguleri, a trembling nine-year-old Iwene destroyed his amulet. Father Rubino, who was preparing the child for baptism, had told him to destroy this object of superstition before receiving the sacrament. Soon after, Iwene was baptized with the name Michael. During his adolescence, Michael became aware that he saw out of only one eye, a disability that he would have all his life. Nevertheless, he worked hard and did well in his studies. In his final year, when he was only sixteen, he was asked if he wanted to stay on at the school as a teacher. He would have been able to get a better position elsewhere, but he did not care about money, and he accepted the offer. In 1922, Michael lost his mother under tragic circumstances that overwhelmed him. In their village child mortality had suddenly increased, and the sorcerer was asked to determine by magic who was responsible for this evil spell. He identified Michael’s mother, whom he accused of magically saving her life at the expense of the local children. She had to submit to the penalty—drinking poison. Michael’s suffering was immense, but it motivated him to work on the conversion of his three brothers to Christianity. They were in fact converted; as for his sister, she would be baptized just before her death.

### *An openness that frees*

At the age of twenty-one, Michael, who had continued his studies while teaching, became principal of the school in Aguleri. He discerned God’s call to the priesthood, however, and soon entered the minor seminary in Igbariam to discern his vocation. His family was opposed to this decision, thinking it unnatural not to

marry. But the young man did not let himself be deterred. After studying six years in the minor seminary, he was sent to the missions for a year, in Eke. His humility and kindness made him loved by all. At the end of this year, Michael founded, with two others, the major seminary in Eke, and became its bursar. As the day of his ordination to the subdiaconate drew near, Michael seemed worried and uneasy. It seemed to him he was not progressing quickly enough in his studies. He went to reveal his doubts to his Superior. His Superior assured him that he was completely free to discontinue his path to the priesthood, and that, in this case, he could do much to proclaim Christ as a layperson, but if he decided to continue, the bishop would ordain him on the appointed day. These words calmed the young man, giving him joy and confidence in his vocation. So he continued his formation at the seminary and, when it was completed, was ordained to the priesthood on December 19, 1937.

The young priest was first sent to Nnewi, where he helped Father John Anyogu. Both often traveled to Christians in distant villages where they found hundreds of faithful for whom they administered the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist. “Father Tansi knew that there is something of the Prodigal Son in every human being,” said Pope John Paul II, during the Father’s beatification in Nigeria. “He knew that all men and women are tempted to separate themselves from God in order to lead their own independent and selfish existence. He knew that they are then disappointed by the emptiness of the illusion which had fascinated them, and that they eventually find in the depths of their heart the road leading back to the Father’s house. He encouraged people to confess their sins and receive God’s forgiveness in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. He implored them to forgive one another as God forgives us, and to hand on the gift of reconciliation, making it a reality at every level of Nigerian life. Father Tansi tried

to imitate the father in the parable : he was always available for those searching for reconciliation. He spread the joy of restored communion with God. He inspired people to welcome the peace of Christ, and encouraged them to nourish the life of grace with the word of God and with Holy Communion” (March 22, 1998).

Two years later, in 1940, Father Michael was assigned to the parish in Dunukofia. He used all of his practical intelligence in the service of his priestly zeal. His mind was teeming with numerous projects. He was concerned that, in accordance with local custom, few young women remained virgin until marriage. To remedy this situation, he had rooming houses built where they could receive a genuinely Christian religious education as well as practical training to become good wives and mothers. These efforts were not without opposition from the many young men who believed they had a right to pre-nuptial relations. Nevertheless, Father Tansi remained firm, well aware that “the sexual act must take place exclusively within marriage. Outside of marriage it always constitutes a grave sin and excludes one from sacramental communion” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church, CCC, 2390*).

### ***The beauty of a chaste life***

Our situation today is similar to that of Father Tansi’s day : “Some today claim a ‘right to a trial marriage’ where there is an intention of getting married later,” notes the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. “However firm the purpose of those who engage in premature sexual relations may be, the fact is that such liaisons can scarcely ensure mutual sincerity and fidelity in a relationship between a man and a woman, nor, especially, can they protect it from inconstancy of desires or whim. Carnal union is morally legitimate only when a definitive community of life between a man and woman has been established. Human love does not tolerate ‘trial marriages.’ It demands a total and definitive gift of persons to one another” (*CCC 2391*). Every baptized person is called to lead a chaste life, in accord with his particular state of life. He must struggle against the concupiscence of the flesh and disordered desires. With God’s grace, he can prevail by means of chastity, which includes a training in self-mastery ; by purity of intention, which seeks to find and fulfill God’s will in all things ; by purity of vision, external and internal ; and by prayer : “I was foolish enough not to know ... that no one can be continent unless You grant it,” wrote Saint Augustine, addressing God (cf. *CCC 2339, 2394, 2520*). Pope Benedict XVI states, “The world needs transparent lives, clear souls, pure minds that refuse to be perceived as mere objects of pleasure. It is necessary to oppose those elements of the media that ridicule the sanctity of marriage and virginity before marriage. In our day, Our Lady has been given to us as the best

defense against the evils that afflict modern life ; Marian devotion is the sure guarantee of Her maternal protection and safeguard in the hour of temptation” (Homily, May 11, 2007).

Father Michael attracted many volunteers to help him in his construction projects and various works, but he himself put his entire being into these efforts. Attentive to his parishioners’ needs, he showed interest in each and every one, and was involved in all their problems, big or small. He desired above all to bring his faithful closer to God. He spent much time in prayer, and often performed acts of self-mortification. A young seminarian who was faced with great trials and tempted to abandon his vocation, went to the church where he found Father Tansi lost in prayer, late at night. He was deeply moved, and drew from this example the strength to persevere in his path to the priesthood. He would later become a bishop.

### ***Discovering another way***

One day, a nun lent Father Michael the book by Blessed Dom Marmion, *Christ, the Monk’s Ideal*. There he discovered monastic life as another means of offering oneself and serving God. As attracted as he was by such a life, instead he undertook the foundation of a new parish, which he called Akpu-Ajalli. There he built a formation center for preparation for marriage, and applied himself to bringing families back to God. His great love of God was the source of his strength.

In 1949, Father Tansi was named pastor in Aguleri. In less than a year, he resolved the financial problems he had found upon his arrival. With his vicar, Father Clement, he evangelized his parishioners, leading the same sort of life as he had in his previous missions. His charity led him one day to bury with his own hands a parishioner who had died of cholera, whom no one wanted to touch for fear of contagion. Strong in his pastoral mission, he was not afraid to denounce wrong, and to stand firm against the entire parish council if it was not taking the right path. Some parishioners complained to the bishop about him, criticizing him for being too busy with the things of God and not following their desires.

At this time, Bishop Heerey, the bishop of Father Tansi’s diocese of Onitsha, decided to introduce monastic life to Nigeria, sending the candidates to Europe for their formation. He contacted several abbeys and received a favorable response from the Cistercian abbey of Mount Saint Bernard, in England. In early 1950, he visited Aguleri and discovered that Father Michael and Father Clement wanted to become monks. In spite of the shortage of priests for his diocese, the bishop gave priority to establishing contemplative life, and sent

Father Michael first to Mount Saint Bernard. Entering the abbey on July 3, 1950, Father Michael was received by a community of seventy-one monks, of whom thirty were priests. He received the name Father Cyprian. Seven times a day, the monks gathered in the church to chant the praises of God. At the abbey of Mount Saint Bernard, the first office was Vigils at 2 :15 in the morning. The rest of the day was punctuated with the various Offices, centering on the community's High Mass. Two other important aspects of monastic life are spiritual reading and manual labor, ranging from hard work on the farm to the cleaning and maintenance of the monastery. Hospitality, in the form of welcoming outsiders in the guest quarters, also has its place in monastic life, according to the Rule of Saint Benedict. Reading and study in a Trappist abbey take place in a common room called the Scriptorium. At night, each of the monks sleeps in a cubicle in a large dormitory. The monks of Mount Saint Bernard never eat meat or fish. The days are passed in silence.

### ***Another climate***

From an active life filled with responsibilities, Father Cyprian went to a hidden life where he found himself a beginner all over again. Despite his priesthood, he asked to be treated like an ordinary novice, and was always satisfied with the lowest place, ready to do any work he was asked to do, always maintaining his sense of humor. During the first five years, he did not have the faculties to hear confessions. He was later granted them, but only to hear the confessions of Africans who requested it. Used to the tropical sun, he suffered from England's climate, which he found "very cold." Little by little, he assimilated the fundamental principles of contemplative life, which he would explain persuasively to a group of African students from his country, who had come to visit the abbey.

Father Clement came to join Father Cyprian at Mount Saint Bernard, where he received the name Father Mark. Both wished to return one day to their country to introduce contemplative life there. Their bishop and the Father Abbot envisioned the possibility of establishing a foundation in Nigeria, but this project came to nothing. The two priests then decided, with their bishop's explicit consent, to stay at Mount Saint Bernard. They made their first profession there on December 8, 1953, after which they entered their three-year scholasticate, during which they deepened their knowledge of theology.

Community life was not always easy for Father Cyprian. He had an inferiority complex which he never managed to rid himself of completely. For eight years, he worked in the bookbinding workshop. His main responsibility was to keep the choir books in good

condition, through a repetitive and boring work that consisted of taping strips of adhesive tape on torn pages. Most of the time, he performed this task in a very small, cold room above the stairwell. He did not make a fuss, but admitted that this work held no appeal for him. A monk who was responsible for overseeing his work sometimes complained about him, and undid his work when he deemed it faulty. Father Cyprian was deeply hurt by this monk's rude and offhand manner, but he gladly offered up all his troubles to God.

"Sweat and toil, which work necessarily involves in the present condition of the human race, present the Christian and everyone who is called to follow Christ with the possibility of sharing lovingly in the work that Christ came to do. This work of salvation came about through suffering and death on a Cross. By enduring the toil of work in union with Christ crucified for us, man in a way collaborates with the Son of God for the redemption of humanity. He shows himself a true disciple of Christ by carrying the cross in his turn every day in the activity that he is called upon to perform" (John Paul II, *Laborem exercens*, no. 26, September 14, 1981).

### ***A life of faith***

On December 8, 1956, Father Cyprian and Father Mark made their perpetual profession. They left the scholasticate, and each received a place in the large Scriptorium. There they could read, write, and study. Father Cyprian's desk was in a terrible draft every time the door opened, but he did not ask to be moved. He applied himself fully to living the Cistercian vocation, which is to follow Christ in His hidden life in Nazareth and to participate, through prayer and penance, in the work of the Redemption of man. A priest who was very close to him later said that Father Cyprian never knew consolation in prayer. Already in 1953, Father Cyprian wrote to an African nun : "Spiritual life is a life of faith and not of feeling. It can well be that during most of this life you receive neither consolation nor external signs that you are pleasing to God, or that God is satisfied with you."

Our faith is based on the authority of God Who has revealed it, and Who can neither deceive nor be deceived. This faith is certain, more certain than all human knowledge, because it is founded on the very Word of God, Who cannot lie. Here below *we walk by faith, not by sight* ( 2 Cor. 5 :7), and *now we see in a mirror dimly* ( 1 Cor. 13 :12 ). Made luminous by Him in Whom it believes, faith is often lived in darkness. It can be put to the test. The world we live in often seems very far from the one assured us by faith. Our experiences of evil and suffering, of injustice and death seem to contradict the Good News ; they can shake and tempt our faith. It is then that we must turn to the witnesses of

faith : to Abraham, who *in hope ... believed against hope* (Rm. 4 :18) ; to the Virgin MARY, Who went into the “ night of faith ” in sharing Her Son’s suffering and the night of His tomb ( cf. CCC 156-157, 164-165 ).

Father Cyprian kept his heart turned toward the land of his birth, from which he received many letters. He welcomed African visitors, especially those from Nigeria, with a face shining with joy. In July 1961, the monks once again raised the question of a possible foundation. The community held many discussions about how and where to carry out this plan. Father Cyprian and Father Mark’s former bishop came to speak to the community about the possibility of establishing this foundation in east Nigeria. Father Cyprian preferred to remain silent during these discussions, even though the project was close to his heart. He put himself entirely in God’s hands, devoting himself to fervent prayer. Finally, the bishop’s intervention won nearly unanimous support and preparations for the foundation began.

In January 1962, a tumor was discovered on Father Cyprian’s neck, and was operated on without delay. It was a benign form of tuberculosis. This did not stop him from working in the garden. He was very interested in gardening and delighted in the fruits of his labor. Far from avoiding the exhausting chores of weeding or clearing the ground, he devoted himself to them with enthusiasm. On December 19, 1962, the community organized a party for the silver jubilee of Father Cyprian’s priestly ordination. On this occasion, he

received a great number of letters from all over the world, as well as a blessing from the Pope.

### ***Africa or Heaven?***

During this time, steps for the foundation in Nigeria continued. But in the end, in spring 1963, a decision was made to change the location and to establish it in Cameroon, at the request of a bishop from this country. Father Cyprian was chosen to be part of the new community, with the title of Novice Master. In spite of his regret at not going to Nigeria, he prepared for his departure with determination. He was, however, not part of the first group of monks who went to Cameroon in October 1963. In January 1964, Father Cyprian fell ill and was bed-ridden. He was offered a bed in the infirmary, but he preferred to stay on his straw mattress until the day when a thrombosis in his leg and an abnormal growth in his stomach were discovered. The doctor decided to hospitalize him. Before he left for the hospital, he had a heart attack that caused him violent pain, but did not make him lose consciousness. He prayed continually : “ My God ! My God ! May Thy will be done ! Into Thy hands, O my God ! ” He received the Anointing of the Sick and the Holy Eucharist. He was lying on a stretcher in the ambulance on the way to the hospital when the priest leading Father Cyprian’s group to Cameroon told him, “ Your ticket for Africa is booked. You must come back to us soon ! ” — “ We’ll go, that’s for sure ! ” replied Father Cyprian. But a few hours after he arrived at the hospital, a burst aortic aneurysm led to his death.

During Father Tansi’s beatification on March 22, 1998, Pope John Paul II said of him : “ He was first of all a man of God : his long hours before the Blessed Sacrament filled his heart with generous and courageous love. Those who knew him testify to his great love of God. Everyone who met him was touched by his personal goodness. He was then a man of the people : he always put others before himself, and was especially attentive to the pastoral needs of families. He took great care to prepare couples well for Holy Matrimony and preached the importance of chastity. He tried in every way to promote the dignity of women. In a special way, the education of young people was precious to him. ”

Let us ask Blessed Father Michael Tansi to guide us in the ways of the interior life and the apostolate.

*Dom Antoine Paice*  
o.t.l.

*P. S. This monthly letter is free of charge. We gratefully accept the addresses of other persons who may enjoy receiving it. – Also available free of charge are: tract about the divinity of Jesus Christ; tract about the Truths of the Catholic Religion; scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, with explanatory notice; the promises of the Sacred Heart; the mysteries of the Rosary.*

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