



Abbaye Saint-Joseph de Clairval

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May 13, 2008  
Our Lady of Fatima

Dear Friend of Saint Joseph Abbey,

“**T**ODAY too, the dragon [of the Apocalypse, cf. Rev. 12] exists in new and different ways. It exists in the form of materialistic ideologies that tell us : it is absurd to think of God, it is absurd to observe God’s commandments... Life is only worth living for its own sake. Take everything we can get in this brief moment of life. Consumerism, selfishness and entertainment alone are worthwhile. ... Even now, this dragon appears invincible, but it is still true today that God is stronger than the dragon, that it is love which conquers rather than selfishness.” These words, spoken by Pope Benedict XVI last August 15<sup>th</sup>, are illustrated in the story of Henri Ghéon, in which we can admire the progress of grace in an upright soul.

Henri-Léon Vangeon, better known under the pseudonym Henri Ghéon, came from a home like so many others in 19<sup>th</sup> century France—a nonbelieving father, a Christian mother. Ghéon himself would say, “How many households manage to live in two opposite universes—one in accordance with the Prince of Heaven, the other with the prince of this world.” Born in 1875 in Bray-sur-Seine, a small town in the Brie region of France, the child was, as was customary, given a Christian upbringing. He recited his prayers kneeling between his mother and sister, and made his First Communion with profound fervor. Two years later, a dramatic turn of events : “My mother was getting dressed for Mass upstairs,” he wrote. “I was downstairs, reading. She called me and I did not answer. ‘Get ready, Henri, we are already late !...’ When I decided to go upstairs, she said, ‘See, you are going to miss Mass’ ... I heard myself answer her : ‘I’m not going to Mass... What do you want, Mother, I don’t believe anymore !’” Thus the fifteen-year-old adolescent had made his choice. Yet his father had done nothing to win him over to his antireligious ideas, and his mother secretly remained his favorite. “The poor woman took it all on herself—the sin of my renunciation, and concern for my salvation.” Undoubtedly, the reasons for the about-turn were numerous—rising passions in the adolescent boy, the bad example of the head of the family... Ghéon would later point in particular to his boredom during the classes taught by the good chaplain, who gave an overly abstract idea of religion, incapable of competing with the captivating attraction aroused by Henri’s teachers of literature and science. Religion lost out.

### *Moved by art*

When he grew up, he established himself as a doctor in his native town : “I had chosen this profession to assure my independence. I practiced it for eight years with loyalty but no passion,” which left him the leisure time to write. For himself and his friends, art came first

and, as he himself put it, “took up God’s scepter that had been abandoned.” Beauty in all its forms—literature, music, painting...—was the Lady the artist had to serve. Henri had become particularly close to André Gide, an atheistic writer of questionable morals. Yet without meaning to, Gide ended up undermining Ghéon’s paganism when he invited him to visit Florence with him. There, Henri discovered Giotto and Blessed Fra Angelico ; he saw in their art not only beauty, but a Faith that exuded from bared faces, modestly covered bodies, expressions, looks. He who was so sensitive—he sobbed with emotion in the cloister of the Monastery of Saint Mark—could not fail to be overwhelmed. “At Saint Mark’s, with Christ dying on the cross,” he wrote, “and the Virgin waiting for the Angel in a bare and silent corridor..., even our senses had a soul. Art had transported me before, but never so high.”

When he returned to Bray, Ghéon lived with his mother, whom he loved deeply, his sister, who had been widowed very young, and his two nieces. His father had died some years before. Thus he had a family without going to the trouble, as he said, of starting one. “I had replaced love with pleasures with no tomorrow, to spare myself being bothered with too strict obligations.” The art of Fra Angelico had touched him ; now came the suffering. “Two months after my return from Italy, my mother, who had loved me more than anything in the world, who had been my companion all my life, was killed before my eyes in an accident. ... I held a mangled body in my arms. In an example of filial piety, I wrapped her in her shroud with my own hands...” At the funeral Mass, “I gazed at the Eucharist elevated by the priest, with eyes that said, ‘You are not ! No ! You cannot be—You would not have taken from me what I loved...’”

In August 1914, war broke out. Henri Ghéon was declared unfit for service because of his fragile health. But he wanted to share the dangers of other men his age, so he signed up as a doctor in the Red Cross. André

Gide recommended to him : “ Since you are going to the Belgian front, try to find Dupouey.... ” Ten years earlier, the naval officer Dupouey had become friendly with Gide. Born into a Catholic family, Dupouey had rejected dogma, “ which was an unbearable weight on thought and morality ” ( Gide’s expression ). But in 1911, Dupouey married Mireille de la Ménardière. The example alone of this pure and upstanding young Christian woman did more than any book to lead him to God. The rhythm of the couple’s life was regulated by the reading of Christian authors, the sacraments, and good works. Dupouey had never stopped corresponding with Gide, hoping in that way to win him, too, for JESUS CHRIST.

### **Who is there to rely on?**

On January 25, 1915, Ghéon was able to get a letter to Dupouey, in the Nieuport region, where they found themselves both on the front lines. On the 27<sup>th</sup>, Dupouey replied with a friendly but slightly distant note. The next day, Dupouey was there, as an attack was being prepared. “ I was surprised by his short stature, ” Ghéon wrote, “ but he instantaneously inspired my respect. ” The two men shook hands. “ Let’s go outside, ” said Dupouey, “ we can talk better in the street. ” As they were walking, Dupouey said, “ Excuse me, I took you a long way, but I must get back to my soldiers who are there on reserve. ... Aren’t these artillery preparations nice? ” But the two men were already parting. On January 31, a second meeting—a rambling conversation about the previous day’s charge, which failed. The military doctor Ghéon had noted, “ Never did I think so much of death—not of my own. ” No disappointment for Dupouey—he scorned physical death and spoke only of art... “ This freedom struck me, ” Ghéon wrote. “ ...There was something mysterious here. Compared to him, I felt like a little boy. ” On February 24, Dupouey went to surprise Ghéon at his new post. Ghéon talked of his life, Dupouey of his. Nothing intimate—war stories. This would be their last meeting... Ghéon would write, “ Without suspecting it, Dupouey was responsible for a soul—mine. Nevertheless, there would be between us no decisive act, no fundamental conversation... ” The sight of death tormented him ; faced with so many comrades torn to shreds by shells : “ Lord ! ” he exclaimed ; “ these were men, what have You done to them ? What will You do ? — If I prayed, it would be for others... After an enthusiasm for war, I now realize all its horror. And in this hell, *who* is there to rely on? ” ( Letter to Gide, February 1 ).

At the Easter Mass, news circulated of a naval officer who had fallen before the enemy. Henri learned two weeks later : “ The Dupouey family is in tears. The captain is dead. It must have been Holy Saturday... ”

Ghéon made inquiries. On April 3, about 10 o’clock at night, Captain Dupouey was making his tour of the front line. As he was examining the trench, a stray bullet hit him right in the face, and he fell. A death without drama, in the simple accomplishment of his duty... “ The last months of his life, ” the chaplain said, “ I witnessed, I can say, his transfiguration. Every day he climbed higher. The closer death approached, the less he seemed to fear it. He arrived at the perfect state of indifference in which living and dying are the same. In a word : ‘ he was ready ’... He thought only of Easter, the Resurrection ! God could not resist the pleasure of giving it to him in its entirety. Read what his wife wrote to me recently. There was but one soul in the marriage... ” Ghéon devoured the letter : “ We both made the sacrifice. As to the little boy, he no longer has a father, he no longer has anything. I entrust him to the Father... ” Thoughts rose in his soul : “ Happy the hearts for which death is the opposite of nothingness and for whom love goes beyond the grave... Must we mourn a saint ? ” He meditated endlessly on this death, on this letter. It was the breach through which grace rushed through... Dead Dupouey could not be entirely dead. And if he still lives, it means God exists ! In Ghéon, however, the old man, the one of the false gods, was still fully alive. But Pierre Dupouey had left behind his wife on earth. The first to write, she thanked Ghéon for his friendship with her husband. Overwhelmed, he responded with total trust. He described the torment of his soul, and his wild gratitude to him who had reopened the door of Faith. Mireille wrote again : “ Pierre had given himself to God... he is praying for you. There where we must arrive at whatever cost, the Heart of God is loudly calling you, through the voice of your interior anguish... ”

### **A heart making progress**

In September 1915, on the eve of a great battle, Henri Ghéon, thinking about the many lives that were going to be sacrificed, surprised himself saying the Our Father for the first time in twenty-five years. The battle turned out disastrously ; but his interior peace surpassed all other peace. “ I bear a heart that is making progress, since it prays without shame... I say : ‘ Deliver us from evil. ’ Thus, I recognize sin. But I am not thinking about reforming my morals. ‘ Those who close their eyes for fear of seeing, and ears for fear of hearing, do not want to follow the word of Him Who speaks in the soul. They will be condemned by the all-powerful God. ’ So writes Angela of Foligno, whom I discovered in the ‘ meditations ’ Dupouey left behind... I am perhaps at a decisive turning point. On October 31, a bearded young chaplain invited the soldiers to receive Communion for All Souls’ Day. Receive Communion ? I do not at all want to take the plunge... If one were to ask whether I believe, I would reply, ‘ I believe, but I pick and choose. In the common Church, I have my

own chapel, where neither confession nor communion, nor any required sacraments are known...' In other words, I do as I please... The idea of approaching a priest, of kneeling before him, I discard in advance like a bogeyman. Look! I have a friend who is a saint in heaven (Dupouey), and he defends me before God!"

### **An interpreter chosen by God**

One morning in November 1915, the New Testament Ghéon had asked for arrived from Paris. "My messenger is a convinced Protestant, so he got a Protestant edition for me. ... The texts remain the same—who would dare to alter them? ... When those most astonished at my conversation admit that they would have understood my adopting, after reflection, the most liberal Protestantism, they exclaim indignantly: 'Are you no longer a free spirit?' No, my friends, I am no longer free, and I rejoice at this from the bottom of my soul. God has given me His own interpreter; I will read God with another's eyes, as the Church does, as Dupouey did." Ghéon saw clearly—in this matter, everything "is subject finally to the judgment of the Church, which carries out the divine commission and ministry of guarding and interpreting the word of God" (Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, 12). "I tackled the Gospels on the heaviest day of shelling of our trench... When it became calm, I began with Saint Matthew: 'She will give birth to a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins.' From their sins! ... I sadly confess that up to that point the figure of Our Lord was unknown to me. I had not measured the depth of His love, of His poverty, of His purity, nor above all of His sufferings. The God I loved was a God of glory and triumph, not a God of anguish and humility. To say that He suffered, and a hundredfold what I see my brothers suffering around me—this one crushed under bags of earth, that one shredded by shells and who will either die or remain mutilated... A God suffered all that!" A little later: "O sad fog of November, frozen mud, uncertain battles... Madame Dupouey suggested I read Bossuet's *Meditations on the Gospel*... I have answered every letter she has sent me. My faith is becoming eager... and yet, is not resolved to yield. Why change, Lord? Am I not already very close to You? Have I not already made worthy efforts? What more do You need?" On leave in Paris at the beginning of December, he told his overjoyed sister about the spiritual path he had traveled. He also told it to Gide, who replied: "Given where you are, you seem to me unforgivable for not having yet put your life in order."

After his return to the front, Ghéon was at church, the Sunday before Christmas. In his homily, the chaplain celebrated in advance the mystery of the Infant-God Who was coming; he urged all the soldiers to

glorify the Saviour and to present themselves at the Sacred Table. This time, "there was no debate, no temptation to rebel. Gide's words came back to me. ... It's done: I will receive Communion at Christmas. It was the matter of a moment. No more fear or timidity, no more pride or prejudice. I will receive Communion at Christmas. As Father intones the *Credo*, my head bowed, I prepare myself..." Two days later, he told the priest his whole story: "'If I understand you correctly,' the priest responded, 'you came to God as an artist.'—'Exactly.'—'My dear child, God is reason...', and he showed me the invincibility of the Catholic faith on the grounds of logic and the experience of the centuries. 'Let us not be led astray by feelings! Obviously, they are respectable, and useful at times, but... One must believe with one's mind.' What is he saying? And me, drawn entirely by love! No, no! I don't need his proofs... There's nothing to prove to me: I believe!" An icy cold shower... Ghéon hastened to leave. Deep down, he was furious... Then he thought, "God's wonderful wisdom! He wants clear-headed servants. He is suspicious of false exaltations." Faith is not a feeling; it is, as John Paul II said, "an obedient response to God. ... By faith, men and women give their assent to this divine testimony. This means that they acknowledge fully and integrally the truth of what is revealed because it is God Himself Who is the guarantor of that truth. ... This truth ... urges reason to be open to it and to embrace its profound meaning." This is to say that the obedience of the faith demands the commitment of the intellect and the will (cf. Encyclical *Fides et ratio*, 13).

### **Twenty years less**

"From then on," Ghéon continues, "I had but one concern—preparing my general confession. I must enter into the cesspool, rummage through it, empty it, scrape it to the bottom. Horrible! I find it all in me. There is perhaps not a single commandment of God or the Church that I did not break one way or another in my unruly life... I arrived trembling like a condemned prisoner, not at the thought of what I was about to do, but at what, still yesterday, I was doing. 'You are still disposed to do this?'—'Yes, Father.' First we agreed on the day of Communion—December 24<sup>th</sup>, discretely, rather than the 25<sup>th</sup>, in a little deserted church. "My dear child, do not believe that by receiving Our Lord in yourself you will be transported in a sort of ecstasy! Usually the graces of the Eucharist are not perceptible. It is not a feast, but the daily bread." Henri knelt. As he confessed his sins, he felt a thick and bitter layer, clump by clump, coming off his heart. "With all this poison among its fibers, how could it still beat, beat in joy as well as pain? Oh, the unnamed delights of a heart that is opened and renounces itself! I have confided everything to a man, and God hears me: 'Go in peace!'" When he stood up again, he was twenty years younger,

twenty years of sins. An unknown happiness transported him... The next day at dawn, a disappointment—the church they had chosen was full of chaplains and soldiers. Ghéon's joy became dryness. "I was not able, in all the murmuring, to focus my distracted mind." The priest had warned him, but he had not listened. "What torture to say to myself, 'God has come down into my heart,' and to feel only sadness there! I must pray, pray. God is there, but He is asleep...." So passed the day. But in the evening, as he read *Meditations on the Eucharist*, the little volume Mireille Dupouey had prepared for her husband, a wonderful peace descended over him and, "at midnight, God celebrated His feast in me and spoke to me." Pierre Dupouey had died the day before Easter that same year of 1915—Christmas was harvesting what Easter had sown.

### **The Church needs art**

After the war, Ghéon returned to Paris. To serve the truth and aid the eternal salvation of souls, he published a book recounting his conversion—*The Man Born from the War*. The converted aesthete then undertook to revive a popular Christian art along the lines of the 'mysteries' of the Middle Ages. He founded the "Companions of Our Lady," a sort of amateur theater confraternity with clearly apostolic goals. In effect, "if the artist can perceive a ray of the supreme beauty among the many manifestations of the beautiful, then art becomes a way to God," John Paul II told the artists gathered in Rome for the Jubilee, on February 18, 2000. The same Pope had written in his *Letter to Artists*: "In order to communicate the message entrusted to her by Christ, the Church needs art. ... Art has a unique capacity to take one or other facet of the message and translate it into colors, shapes and sounds ... Christ Himself made extensive use of images in His preaching, fully in

keeping with His willingness to become, in the Incarnation, the icon of the unseen God" (April 4, 1999). Before and after every performance, the Companions of Our Lady's program included Mass, Communion, and prayer; a number of actors would move on from the stage to religious life. Ghéon, by necessity actor, costumer, and stagehand, was first and foremost playwright and director. He proposed "images from the Gospel or the lives of the saints", and more than sixty plays would be produced and performed in Paris and throughout France: *The Poor Man under the Stairs* (Saint Alexis), *The Actor and Grace* (Saint Genesius), *The Mystery of Saint Louis* (performed in La Sainte Chapelle, in Paris), *Christmas on the Square...* Despite contrary predictions, his success reached Belgium, Holland, and Switzerland. The Académie Française (the French Academy) awarded him a prize. He also wrote poems (*Songs of Life and Faith*), novels (*Games of Heaven and Hell*), biographies—*The Curé d'Arns*, *Saint Thérèse of the Child JESUS*. Ghéon was a man full of spirit and of inexhaustible vigor, yet simple, warm, and welcoming to all.

In Paris, in June 1944, sick and alone, he died in a clinic after receiving the last sacraments from a Dominican Father. Being a Third Order Dominican with the religious names of his greatest friend, Pierre-Dominique, he was laid out in his white habit. The example of Henri Ghéon reassures Catholics that their faith is neither an opiate, nor old-fashioned, but the decisive and ultimate reality. As for unbelievers, the long search of this upright soul poses a question for them, that they perhaps are already asking themselves in the silence of their hearts: Could the Catholic Church be the way of salvation, that gives man the true life and happiness to which he aspires?

In his *Spiritual Notebook*, an entry from April 1917 reads: "Is not faith the recourse of the weak, the sick, and the elderly? No! Extreme weariness and extreme suffering do not bring man to believe, but rather to give up. God, the last recourse for disappointed hearts? Horrible blasphemy! God is strength, health, and joy. The act of faith assumes an effort; the unbelieving man at the end of tears does not care about life and eternity, he asks for peace—not the peace of which the Gospel speaks, but that of the absent soul, the annihilated body. Only faith gives man, with God's help, the sublime vigor of hope!" For all, we pray to the One who never doubted, the Virgin MARY, Mother of Hope.

*Dom Antoine Marie O.S.B.*

*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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