



Abbaye Saint-Joseph de Clairval

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Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin MARY

Dear Friend of Saint Joseph Abbey,

ONE day in 1886, a chaplain from the officers' club in Arras, France, asked Father Georges Bellanger's help in administering the sacrament of Penance. The young priest agreed, went to the club, and there soon discovered his vocation in the service of soldiers. He would later tell the priest who had invited him : " It is to you that I owe my vocation, because I was the least likely man to be a military chaplain. " In 1998, Pope John Paul II would officially recognize the heroic virtue of Venerable Georges Bellanger.

Born on May 24, 1861, on the feast of Our Lady Help of Christians, in Bourbourg, in northern France, Georges was baptized two days later. As soon as possible, his mother took him to the ancient church of Our Lady of Miracles in Saint-Omer to consecrate him to the Virgin. His father died February 24, 1865 as the result of an accident, leaving six children behind. His widow was in a state of shock for several hours afterwards. Finding herself alone with little Georges next to the deathbed, she told him, " My child, you are an orphan. Well ! Don't forget that from now on Saint Joseph will be the father of our household ! " Confident in this powerful patronage, Madame Bellanger took charge of the family farm. Rising first in early morning, she began with a long period of prayer, then gave the farm hands their tasks, and if possible, went to the church for Mass. Every day, the family said the Angelus, the Rosary, and evening prayer together.

A difficult child

To help her raise the children, Madame Bellanger brought Georges' godmother, a governess, into her home. By her account, her godson gave her " much more trouble than all the others. " Georges showed, in effect, a strong tendency toward stubbornness, anger, and lying. At the slightest opposition, his face would turn pale then red, and he would throw himself on the ground and yell. During a walk, the little boy, captivated by the flowers, fell into the water. His governess pulled him out. When he arrived home, still soaked from head to toe, Georges insisted he had not gone near the water, and no one could get him to admit otherwise ! Understanding that punishment would have insufficient effect on her son's unyielding and temperamental nature, Madame Bellanger turned to God and applied herself to forming Georges in the fundamentals of the faith, appealing to his good and sensitive heart. When about seven or eight years old, the child told a big lie. His mother took him on her lap and asked him to

never lie again. " Look, " she added, " I'd rather see you dead ! " These words left an indelible impression on the boy's heart.

One of Georges' favorite things to do was to play at celebrating Mass. He celebrated his " mass " at a set time, and everyone in the house had to attend it with a serious manner. Madame Bellanger made use of this attraction of her son to make him think when he lost his temper. " For shame ! " she said, " the naughty boy who gets angry and then, afterwards, says the mass ! ... The good JESUS won't even want to look at his flowers ! " Her maternal care bore fruit and Georges' tantrums became rarer and less violent, and were followed by true repentance. From then on, he was very fond of stories from the Gospel, especially about the role of the Virgin MARY. He took pleasure in reciting the *Hail MARY*.

In the spring of 1870, the Bellanger family moved to Moule. In September 1871, Georges entered Saint Bertin Minor Seminary in Saint-Omer. Separation from his family was a difficult sacrifice for him, but he quickly adjusted to the boarding school's rules, and his greatest joy was praying in the chapel. In class, he was serious and hard-working, but lacked imagination and even worse, memory. On June 1, 1873, he made his first Communion and, the following July 18, received the sacrament of Confirmation. During the school vacation that followed, one of his cousins noted the change in his personality ; he had become rational, gentle, humble, and considerate. At school, his conduct earned him admission into the congregation of the Blessed Virgin, and the following year, he received the coveted position of sacristan. In 1876, he was a fifteen-year-old adolescent full of life. Nevertheless, he experienced some interior pains. His examinations of conscience, which one would think easy for him after the regulated days of the boarding school, were a torture, and he made anxious confessions. Happily, with his confessor's help, he emerged from this distressing state.

But other sufferings awaited him. When he returned from a walk, he was dragging one leg. Soon it became terribly painful. The doctor diagnosed coxalgia (tuberculosis of the hip). In time, the characteristic abscess of this disease appeared. The punctures to drain it were particularly painful. Georges feared most of all that he would lose his position, but as soon as he would take his Rosary in his hands, he would feel better. On May 30, 1876, two doctors told Madame Bellanger that the end was near. In an ardent burst of faith, she cried, "Blessed Virgin, cure our little Georges, only if he is to become a holy priest!" The next day, Georges felt completely cured. Nevertheless, he would walk with a limp for the rest of his life.

Too austere

In October 1876, Georges returned to Saint Bertin Seminary. His face was marked with a certain sadness, but the suffering had matured him. In the fall of 1879, he entered the major seminary in Arras. His director commented to him on his overly austere expression. "How, then," he said to him, "do you understand the advice of Saint Paul, a serious man if ever there was one, 'Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, Rejoice. Let your moderation be known unto all men'" (cf. Ph. 4 :4-5). Georges got the point, and wrote in his diary: "Don't think that to be driven by true zeal, one must always speak of the things of God. Often one must gaily take part in everyday conversations, at other times keep quiet and wait for the right moment to say some edifying words."

In spite of his efforts to be more convivial, Georges remained marked by a certain sadness. He was often attacked by terrible migraines but, rather than becoming discouraged, he drew strength from Eucharistic adoration and from his relationship with MARY. As the day of his ordination to the subdiaconate drew near, he was again assailed by temptations. His director used all his influence to restore his peace of mind. On July 15, 1883, Georges Bellanger received the subdiaconate and at Christmas, he was ordained deacon. Too young in 1884 to be ordained a priest, Georges was named professor at the minor seminary in Arras. On July 12, 1885, he received priestly ordination with great fervor, and then resumed his duties as a professor. Invited to help at the officers' club, Father Bellanger quickly gained friendships and confidences. Many young soldiers came from far away and felt alone and abandoned; dangerous pleasures were a permanent temptation for them. With the priest, they felt part of a family and evenings spent at the club comforted them. The young priest's apostolate could be summed up in two things: a heart to love soldiers, especially the most forsaken, and Marian devotion. He gave first place to the supernatural, convinced that the greatest need of soldiers was for God.

Nevertheless, he did not neglect wholesome amusements, even making the effort to play the piano. From the beginning of his ministry, he led recitation of the Rosary, and gave the place of honor to MARY. Later, he would put an image of Our Lady of Good Counsel in the entryway of the officers' club, with a kneeler and a sign inviting visitors to greet the "mistress of the house" with a *Hail MARY*. He himself joined the Third Order of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. He consecrated himself to MARY using the formula recommended by Saint Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort.

However, the men he dealt with were not always easy. At times, he experienced bitter moments with them, but persevered against winds and waves. "First of all, we tried to lead the soldiers to the Most Blessed Virgin," he would later write. "We put a Rosary in their hands, they recited it, and MARY hastened to lead them to her divine Son in His Eucharist... In our work, we have brave soldiers almost every night who come to say the Rosary on their knees. I found several saying the Rosary with their arms outstretched... But what almost all do is converse with her, so to say, during long hours of watch day and night." The priest installed a chapel in the officers club and excited in his soldiers a love for Eucharistic adoration and holy Mass: "Let us attend Mass very faithfully," he told them. "It is by far the greatest act of the week." And he reported with sadness this comment from a young officer: "What upsets me, what I cannot understand, is to see how easily some Christian soldiers skip Sunday Mass."

"Sine dominico non possumus"

That was not the attitude of the first Christians. In the year 304, the Emperor Diocletian forbade them, under penalty of death, from gathering on Sunday to celebrate the Eucharist. In Abitene, a small town in what is now Tunisia, forty-nine Christians were caught celebrating the Eucharist one Sunday. When the proconsul asked them why they had violated the emperor's order, one of them, Emeritus, replied, "Sine dominico non possumus," that is, we cannot live without joining together on Sunday to celebrate the Eucharist. Because of their faithfulness to Sunday Mass, they were condemned to death. "The experience of the martyrs of Abitene is also one on which we twenty-first century Christians should reflect," Pope Benedict XVI said on May 29, 2005. "... We need this Bread [the Eucharist] to face the fatigue and weariness of our journey. Sunday, the Lord's Day, is a favorable opportunity to draw strength from Him, the Lord of life. The Sunday precept is not, therefore, an externally imposed duty, a burden on our shoulders. On the contrary, taking part in the Celebration, being nourished by the Eucharistic Bread and experiencing the communion of their brothers and sisters in Christ is a need for Christians, it is a

joy ; Christians can thus replenish the energy they need to continue on the journey we must make every week. ”

Man’s relationship with God needs an explicit time for prayer. Sunday, which commemorates the Lord’s Resurrection, is the day of prayer *par excellence*. On that day the sacrifice of the Mass is celebrated, which makes present the paschal mystery. This mystery is the full revelation of the mystery of creation, the summit of salvation history, and the anticipation of eternal life.

Christ unites His sacrifice with the sacrifice of the Church. In the Eucharist, Christ’s sacrifice becomes also the sacrifice of the members of His Body—the lives of the faithful, their praise, their suffering, their prayer, their work, are united to those of Christ and to His total offering. They thus acquire new value.

In order for the presence of the Risen Christ among His own to be announced and experienced in a fitting manner, it is not enough for His disciples to pray individually. In effect, those who have received the grace of baptism have not been saved only as individuals, but as members of the mystical Body. Therefore, it is important for them to gather together to fully express the true identity of the Church.

Sanctification, joy, relaxation

Remembering God’s rest after creation : *He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done* (Gen. 2 :2), Christians make Sunday a day of rest. They abstain from work and from anything that is incompatible with the sanctity of the Lord’s Day, with appropriate joy and necessary relaxation. Sunday also gives the faithful the opportunity to consecrate time to works of mercy, charity, and apostolate.

In the Letter *Dies Domini* (The Lord’s Day) of May 31, 1998, Pope John Paul II underscored the spiritual and pastoral richness of Sunday : “ Sunday in a way becomes a synthesis of the Christian life and a condition for living it well. It is clear therefore why the observance of the Lord’s Day is so close to the Church’s heart, and why in the Church’s discipline it remains a real obligation. Yet more than as a precept, the observance should be seen as a need rising from the depths of Christian life. It is crucially important that all the faithful should be convinced that they cannot live their faith or share fully in the life of the Christian community unless they take part regularly in the Sunday Eucharistic assembly. ”

Father Bellanger’s pastoral zeal was also exercised in administering the sacrament of Penance. One day, a young military chaplain asked him, “ How do soldiers decide to go to confession ? ” — “ Like this : you have read the story in the Gospel of Our Lord’s meeting with

the Samaritan woman. JESUS takes an interest in her, talks to her about her life, about what she has done—and that is precisely what touches her and opens her heart... So, with your soldiers, do just like the Master. Talk to them about their families, their minor concerns, then before long about their soul, which is probably sick. You will soon have found the door to their heart. ” Father Bellanger wrote, “ Let the priest remember that without the Blessed Virgin MARY he can do nothing... So let him put the Most Blessed Virgin in the center of his activity, through the miraculous medal or a scapular given to the penitent before confession, through the Hail MARY he recites with his penitent at the start of confession. ” When he could, he visited the sick soldiers in the hospital in Arras. He did many favors for them, but most of all took care of their souls, helping them, when the time came, to have a good death.

On March 8, 1891, Father Bellanger presided at the consecration of a new chapel, bigger than the preceding one, built on private land. His joy was immense. But at the time, the French government was attacking Catholic activities and, on April 23, the local military authority received the order from Paris to close this chapel. It was a terrible blow for the priest, who had been expecting so many graces there. Nevertheless, he did not lose his peace, and brought his soldiers to sanctuaries in Arras. A friend let him use his living room, where nights of prayer were organized. In addition, the priest fitted out a small chapel adjacent to his office. Soldiers liked to go there to spend hours in adoration.

A trying novitiate

Father Bellanger was drawn to religious life. He wanted to see established a group of priests who, under the patronage of the Blessed Virgin, would unite contemplation with action, focusing on serving youth, soldiers, the poor, and the abandoned. He searched for a group that was close to his ideal and discovered the Religious of Saint Vincent de Paul, founded in 1845 by the Servant of God Jean-Léon Le Prévost (died 1874). These Religious serve organizations of young workers and children, and perform various charitable activities with the goal of rechristianizing society, and providing a Christian response to grave social problems. At the beginning of February 1894, Father Bellanger paid a visit to the Superior General. Two years later, after the Poor Clares in Arras had said countless *Hail MARY’s* for his intention, he finally obtained permission from his bishop to enter the Religious of Saint Vincent de Paul, on the condition that he continue his apostolate in Arras. On May 4, he entered the novitiate in Paris. With his unyielding and independent nature, accustomed to organizing everything in his life himself, he now had to submit himself to the constant direction of

the Novice Master. Despite his good will, the effort and battle sometimes showed in his face.

On July 2, 1898, Father Bellanger made his first religious vows in peace and joy. He continued his apostolate in Arras, and launched an urgent appeal to all monasteries and convents in France, urging prayer for soldiers from children, seminarians from all over, and priests (from whom he also asked Masses). In 1899, he wrote, "Again this year, our soldiers will have thousands of Masses and hundreds of thousands of Rosaries in all the seminaries and religious houses in France said for them... How good Our Lady of Good Counsel is to have given me the means to have all of France praying without my having to leave my chair!" In the face of his apostolic fervor, and despite his infirmities, his Superiors gave him permission to preach sermons, retreats, and novenas in the diocese of Arras.

His great devotion to Our Lady of Good Counsel was reflected by the work of art that he had made honoring this image of the Virgin in the military chapel. The Madonna there was considered Queen, Guardian, and Mother. The chaplain's joy was immense when Rome authorized the Brothers of Saint Vincent de Paul to say the office and celebrate the Mass of Our Lady of Good Counsel on her feast day, April 26. He consecrated himself entirely to the Most Blessed Virgin so that, through her, the offering of his entire being and all his actions might be agreeable to JESUS. He had recourse to MARY at every moment, making his days, through the regular recitation of the holy Rosary, into almost continual praise of and prayer to her. And it was on her that he relied to ensure JESUS' triumph in souls. His joy was to preach MARY to win souls for JESUS.

Much of 1899 he passed in painful illness. Father Bellanger was forced to interrupt his apostolic activity in order to rest, and his doctor asked that he be dismissed from his military work. On March 25, 1900, he was

May Our Lady of Good Counsel obtain for us the grace of following the examples of Venerable Georges Bellanger in his zeal for the glory of God and the salvation of souls !

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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named Novice Master, in Paris. This appointment grieved him, because he would have preferred to resume work with his soldiers ; nevertheless, he agreed to take it on. His first act was to entrust his work to the hands of the Most Blessed Virgin. His method consisted above all in giving a good example. He unveiled to his novices the basis of his life : the glory of God. God " has created us first of all to know and serve Him," he explained. " Our salvation must be but the consequence of the reign and glory of God. Our happiness is written only on the back side of the book of life—the glory of God fills the front. "

A long look of love

In 1901, the law on religious congregations was passed by France's anticlerical government. The Brothers of Saint Vincent de Paul decided to go into exile rather than request the authorization to exist that this new law demanded, and which would probably be refused to them. At the beginning of October, Father Bellanger and his novices found refuge in Tournai, Belgium. Father passed through profound spiritual trials—a terrible dryness invaded his soul. Moreover, his health declined again, and he was struck with consumption (tuberculosis of the lungs). On April 12, 1902, the doctor strongly advised him to return to his family to rest. He understood that this departure was final. His soul was in great suffering. " I let myself go without joy, with sadness," he wrote to a friend. " My poor soul deserves nothing else. " The last week of July, the disease worsened. Motionless on his bed, he held in one hand his crucifix, and in the other, a small painting of Our Lady of Good Counsel, on which he fixed from time to time a long look of distress, surrender, and love. On August 16, as the evening Angelus rang, he rendered his soul to God. " I offer my life, " he had told a sister, " for the good of my dear Congregation... for the novitiate... I ask only one thing of my novices—that they do not forget their Rosary!... Have engraved on my little wooden cross only these words : 'Ave MARIA.' "