Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Newsletter of October 25, 2009,
Mission Sunday

Dears Friends,

"The real problem at this moment of our history," wrote Pope Benedict XVI on March 10, 2009, "is that God is disappearing from the human horizon, and, with the dimming of the light which comes from God, humanity is losing its bearings, with increasingly evident destructive effects." It is often through the lives of the saints that the light that comes from God is made visible. On August 20, 2008, Pope Benedict XVI said, "The French writer Jean Guitton described the saints 'as the colors of the spectrum in relation to light', because with their own tones and accentuations each one of them reflects the light of God's holiness. How important and useful, therefore, is the commitment to cultivate knowledge of and devotion to the Saints, alongside daily meditation on the Word of God and filial love for Our Lady!"

Bl. Urban V, cathedral of Mende — J.-F. Salles

Guillaume de Grimoard, who would become Pope Urban V and be beatified in 1870, was born around 1310 in the Grizac family chateau in the Gévaudan region (today part of the Lozère department). His family was known for its Christian virtue. His father, a gentle and humble man and a brave knight, showed compassion toward the poor. His mother had a reputation for great charity. Both would rejoice at their son's vocation. At the age of twelve, Guillaume left to study in Montpellier; he later went to Toulouse to study civil law for four years. His teachers, dazzled by his intelligence and abilities, led him to hope for a chair in law. But suddenly, without a word to anyone, he embraced the monastic life in a Benedictine monastery of twelve monks in Chirac, where one of his uncles was Prior. The monastery was in his mother's home region of Lozère.

A warm and persuasive word

Guillaume was soon sent to Saint Victor Abbey in Marseille to complete his monastic formation. There he made his vows and demonstrated many good qualities: humility, obedience, and love of prayer and mortification. When he returned to his original monastery, he was ordained a priest, and before long, he left again, on the advice of his superiors, to teach as a university professor in Toulouse, Montpellier, Paris, and Avignon. He was twenty-five years old. On All Saints' Day 1342, he received the title of Doctor of Canon Law, in Montpellier. A professor who loved his work and was appreciated by his students, he enjoyed great success—thousands of listeners crowded the foot of his chair. Many came to seek his advice—the rich sought him out to arbitrate their disputes, and the poor asked his advice on their small family matters. After his classes, he never failed to go to the churches to make pious exhortations to the faithful. His warm and persuasive words, so loving and understandable, won the hearts of the poor. His qualities drew the attention of the Church hierarchy, and he was named vicar general of Clermont in 1349, then of Uzès in 1357. He also served as Prior of a monastery in the diocese of Auxerre, and in 1352, Pope Clement VI made him head of Saint Germain Abbey in Auxerre.

Since 1309, the papacy had relocated to Avignon to escape the revolutions that had been occurring one after another in Rome. Clement VI had made this situation official in 1348 when he purchased Avignon from Johanna I, Countess of Provence and Queen of Sicily. In 1352, the Pope entrusted Guillaume de Grimoard with a difficult mission to the archbishop of Milan, who was disposed to encroach on the Holy See's temporal power in Italy. Innocent VI, successor to Clement VI, entrusted him in turn with several diplomatic missions that were crowned with success. In 1361, the Pope named him Abbot of Saint Victor in Marseille. Guillaume undertook the renovation of the abbey, whose buildings were in an extreme state of disrepair. But soon, Innocent VI sent him on mission to Naples, where Queen Johanna, recently widowed and faced with a restless populace, was in need of advice and support. In September 1362, the Pope died. At the conclusion of a difficult conclave, Guillaume de Grimoard was elected to succeed him. It

was extraordinary that a simple monk, an abbot, not even a bishop, was elected pope. He was 52 years old.

The new Pontiff's coronation took place in Avignon on November 6, 1362. Guillaume chose the name "Urban" because, as he explained, "the other four Urbans were all holy men." His sole ambition was, in fact, to become a saint. From the day of his coronation, he led his pontificate on the path of austerity. Everything was ready, as was the custom, for him to go cross the city bedecked with ribbons, on a horse harnessed in gold, surrounded by a crowd of princes and bishops on horseback. But he refused this parade, stayed in his Benedictine habit, and did not leave the palace. He himself wrote to the Catholic rulers of Europe. The king of France, John II (John the Good) who had just arrived at Villeneuve-lez-Avignon, was allowed only to kneel before the Pope, without ceremony. Having come for the procession that would not take place, he wanted Urban to name four cardinals of his choice, but the Pope refused.

Shadows and lights of a century

The historical context of Urban V's pontificate was, for France and England, that of the Hundred Years' War; for Europe, the threat of Muslim invasion; and for Italy, endless clashes between cities. The 14th century also witnessed the terrible epidemic of the Black Plague of 1348 which, in one year, wreaked havoc and completely disrupted the social structure. The terrifying mortality (it is estimated that a third of Europe's population died) greatly marked this generation, and mentalities changed. City-dwellers took refuge in the country where, as if to avert death, they gave themselves over to every vice. Monasteries emptied out of fear of contagion. The clergy abandoned the cities, with the exception of the best of its members, who sacrificed themselves to give last sacraments to the dying. After the epidemic, the survivors returned home, the monks and nuns to their monasteries and convents, and the bishops to their episcopal sees—but all had developed a taste for independence and the worldly life. Nevertheless in this same century numerous monastic orders were spurred to reform through the shining light of such saints as Vincent Ferrier, Bridget of Sweden and Catherine her daughter, Catherine of Siena, etc.

In these circumstances, Urban V presented, from the outset, an example of a life of prayer and simplicity. A monk through and through, he continued to lead a monk's life. Although very generous toward others, for himself it was only plain food and a hard bed. He fasted several times a week, and every day humbly confessed before saying his Mass. He increased his alms and went to great lengths to provide for the needs of the poorest. His taste for beauty was expressed in divine worship, through the beauty of the liturgical objects and magnificence of the churches.

Through small touches, and not without a bit of humor, rather than through grand decrees, the Pope began the reformation of the Church with the cardinals. He abolished the right of sanctuary, which made cardinals' homes veritable dens of thieves, regulated the use of wine, and reminded the princes of the Church of their duties. As for bishops, he informed them of their duty to live in their diocese, because a "ship without a pilot onboard cannot avoid the rocks and ends in shipwreck." He rigidly suppressed simony (the purchasing or selling of spiritual goods), and forbade multiple benefices—the ecclesial benefice was a patrimony attached to a single office or position in the Church. Jealously guarding the papacy's independence from temporal powers, he refused all gifts from them. For his nominations, he listened neither to the petitions of kings, nor to pleas from his friends or family, but chose the ablest candidates. He reformed a number of monasteries, which sometimes caused turmoil. He intended to impose the Rule of Saint Benedict on the Carthusians, but, enlightened about the nature of this eremitical Order, he let them maintain their own usages, inherited from their founder Saint Bruno. At his request, the Order of Preachers (Dominicans) and the Friars Minor (Franciscans) visited monasteries and hospitals, and demanded account for their use of revenues.

A Reformist Pope

Urban V similarly restored order to the morals and religious practice of the faithful, reestablished justice, banned usury, and punished thieves. During his short stay of three years in Rome, more than twenty thousand people received the sacraments of the Church for the first time. He issued a decree banning luxury and indecent or ridiculous fashions in the Comtat Venaissin (the region surrounding Avignon). His reforms aimed also, more significantly, at preserving Christian doctrine, because the corruption of morals follows the disorder of ideas. The Pope fought against several heresies (teachings that attack dogmas revealed by God and taught by the Church). Some of these heresies negated the need for baptism, original sin, the eternity of the pains of hell, and divine grace. Urban V named cardinals, bishops, and competent professors to defend the Catholic faith wherever it was attacked.

Throughout his pontificate, Urban V promoted intellectual life, wishing thus to improve social conditions. He wanted to make education accessible to all. So, for the Polish who were unable to go to France or Italy, he founded a university in Krakow in 1364, sending the best professors there. He did the same in Pecz, Hungary; Vienna, Austria; and Geneva, Switzerland. He founded the universities in Orange and Angers, France and in numerous locations instituted colleges of civil and ecclesiastical law, theology, and humanities. He created "studiums," which functioned as small multidisciplinary colleges whose doors were open to all, rich or poor. There the poor received a free education—in addition,

Urban V financed their other expenses by a system of grants made from the pope's privy purse. He also made a point of banning students' luxurious ways by requiring them to wear simple clothes—so that the rich would not humiliate the poor, forcing them to stay away from school. When he was criticized for spending his assets on people who would not become clerics, he replied that "whatever their state in life and whatever they become, it will always be useful to them to have learned." He was, in fact, convinced that everyone, according to his state—father of a family, cleric, or artisan—would better assume his responsibilities if he had been educated to the extent of his abilities. He furthermore thought that knowledge aided the practice of virtue.

Besides studies and belles-lettres, Urban V also encouraged the other arts—thanks to him, numerous artists, miniaturists, illuminators, engravers, and tapestry makers came to enrich the Palace of the Popes in Avignon. Throughout the palace, he put artisans to work making reliquaries and other religious objects, stained glass windows, ornaments, etc. Thus, all facets of artistic and intellectual life flourished during his pontificate. Urban V was also eager to give the populations dependent on him the protection of strong walls against the armed bands that drenched his century in blood. To help the development of universities he had new buildings built. The cities of Montpellier, Mende, Avignon, Marseille, and Rome still bear the traces of his spirit of building.

One concern: unity

A man of peace, Urban worked for the reconciliation of the Eastern and Western Churches. He wrote, with authority and affection, to the Emperor of Constantinople, John V Palaiologos, and sent him legates. Impressed by both Urban V's reputation and his arguments, the emperor, whose States were suffering serious internal and external threats, particularly from the Turks, came to Rome at the beginning of 1369, accompanied by his wife, the Empress Helena Kantakouzene, and a flock of bishops, lords, and monks. The Pope, as we will see, had returned to Rome in 1367. The emperor spent six months in Rome, frequently discussing things of God with the Pope, who received him at all hours and without appointment. When he arrived unexpectedly at mealtimes, a place setting was immediately set for him—John V Palaiologos preferred these simple meals to the sumptuous feasts that he was served amid worldly pomp and ceremony. The cardinals too had long conversations with him, assuring themselves of his sincerity and responding to his objections. On October 8, 1369, the emperor solemnly professed his adherence to the Catholic faith, in the presence of several cardinals. In his profession of faith he affirmed all the articles of the Catholic Creed, notably that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, as well as the primacy of the Roman Church and the authority of the Pope over bishops and even patriarchs. The emperor and empress returned to Constantinople well pleased with the treatment they had received. Many Greeks, moved by the Pontiff's goodness, reunited themselves with the Church of Rome. This reconciliation was one of Urban V's greatest joys. Hoping it would spread throughout the Orient, he wrote, in an encyclical of March 8, 1370, the year of his death : "Oh! If God might grant us this grace that, under our pontificate, the Latin Church and the Eastern Church might reunite, after having been separated for so long, we would gladly close our eyes to the light and intone the canticle of the elderly Simeon *Nunc dimittis, Domine* (*Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace*)." At the time, many in the East followed the example of the Greeks. The Nestorians claimed that in Jesus Christ one must distinguish not only two natures, divine and human, but also two persons. Their patriarch, Marauze, traveled from Mosul to Rome to make his profession of the Catholic faith in the hands of the Pope.

Sadly, these events were short-lived. Even in our time, Christian unity remains a concern for the Pope and the Church. "Leading men and women to God, to the God who speaks in the Bible : this is the supreme and fundamental priority of the Church and of the Successor of Peter at the present time," states Pope Benedict XVI. "A logical consequence of this is that we must have at heart the unity of all believers. Their disunity, their disagreement among themselves, calls into question the credibility of their talk of God. Hence the effort to promote a common witness by Christians to their faith – ecumenism – is part of the supreme priority" (*Letter to Bishops*, March 10, 2009).

Urban V's apostolic zeal also manifested itself in the missions he sent throughout the world—to Bulgaria, Lithuania, Georgia, Bosnia, Dalmatia, Serbia, and as far as Mongolia and China, where the first diocese was created in Peking in 1370.

The foundations of a lasting peace

Concerned by the wars and violence of his century, Urban V applied himself to laying the foundations of a lasting peace and spreading civilization throughout Europe. His primary objective was to return to Rome and install himself there. Thanks to the political, military, and juridical work done by Cardinal Albornoz, this return became possible in 1367. Arriving in the City in October, the Pope sought to improve the lot of the disoriented citizens of Rome. He created great parks on Vatican Hill to provide jobs for unemployed workers. He had numerous monuments restored, and undertook excavations to find the skulls of the Apostles, Saint Peter and Saint Paul, which were discovered under the altar of the Lateran basilica.

To maintain the integrity of the Papal States, and ensure the freedom of both the Sovereign Pontiffs and

that of Italy, which were inseparable, the Pope conceived the plan of gathering all the Italian States around him into a sort of league, which he would head. The Holy Roman Emperor, Charles IV of Bohemia, and the King of Hungary were the first to agree to this plan. The Italian States followed, with the exception of Florence. All the princes of Christendom, from the King of Denmark to the King of Bulgaria, kept up voluminous correspondences with Urban V, or came to seek his advice.

On the other hand, if the Hundred Years' War experienced something of a respite after the Franco-English Treaty of Brétigny in 1360, the unemployed mercenaries flooding the roads ravaged everything. Urban V, joining diplomacy with firmness, excommunicated these bands, and urged them to leave on crusade, as much to get them away from Europe as to try to stop the Muslim push threatening the Eastern Empire. But, a few years after the Peace of Brétigny, violence flared up again between France and England, convincing the Pope to leave Rome for Avignon in order to arrange a meeting between the two kings and force them to come to terms. In his eyes, the vacuum left by the weakening of the Germanic Holy Roman Empire could only be filled by the mutual recognition of the nations that emerged from this empire (France and the German and Italian states), forming a peaceful and united Europe, rooted in the Christian faith.

An authentic humanism

Europe's formation was realized over centuries. "Europe was not a geographically defined unit," declared Pope John Paul II on December 14, 2000. "Only by accepting the Christian faith did it become a continent. Down the ages, this continent succeeded in spreading its values to almost every other part of the world for the good of humanity. At the same time, we must not forget that the ideologies which unleashed rivers of blood and tears during the 20th century came from a Europe that had wanted to forget its Christian roots. ... It cannot be forgotten that it was the denial of God and His commandments which led in the last century to the tyranny of idols. A race, a class, the state, the nation and the party were glorified instead of the true and living God. In the light of the misfortunes that overtook the 20th century we can understand that the rights of God and man stand or fall together." This is why this same Pope hoped for a borderless Europe that did not deny the Christian roots that gave birth to it, and that did not abandon the authentic humanism of Christ's Gospel.

Urban V's return to Avignon was probably also motivated by the desire to assure the calm and independence of the cardinals when they met in the conclave that would take place upon his death, which he felt was near. For Italy was once again the scene of dangerous unrest. As it happened, after several weeks of terrible suffering, Urban V died on December 19, 1370, just two months after his return to Avignon.

Blessed Urban V's strength came from his union with God. A chronicler who was a very close witness of this Pope wrote, "In God alone he poured out his heart, in God alone he set his thoughts and he consecrated himself totally to His service." In our day, Pope Benedict XVI likewise strives to lead men and women to God : "The first priority for the Successor of Peter," he wrote on March 10, 2009, "was laid down by the Lord in the Upper Room in the clearest of terms : *You... strengthen your brothers* (Lk. 22 :32). ... In our days, when in vast areas of the world the faith is in danger of dying out like a flame which no longer has fuel, the overriding priority is to make God present in this world and to show men and women the way to God. Not just any god, but the God who spoke on Sinai ; to that God Whose face we recognize in a love which presses 'to the end' (cf. Jn. 13 :1) – in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen."

Dom Antoine Marie
o.s.b.

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Cf. *Urbain V, un homme, une vie,* by Paul Amargier. Société des médiévistes provençaux, basilique Saint-Victor, Marseille, 1987.

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