



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Newsletter of April 17, 2010,
Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha

Dears Friends,

AMONG the perils today that threaten youth and all of society, drugs are among the most dangerous, and all the more insidious since they are less visible... In the early stages of drug abuse, the user often holds an attitude of skepticism toward others and towards religion, marked by hedonism, which in the end leads to frustration, existential emptiness, a belief in the futility of life, and a drastic deterioration... The scourge of drugs, encouraged by large economic and sometimes also political interests, has spread throughout the entire world," declared Pope John Paul II (May 27, 1984 and June 24, 1991).

On May 14, 1991, the same Pontiff declared the heroic virtues of a young Redemptorist religious, Father Alfred Pampalon, who, since his blessed death in 1896, is often invoked by alcohol and drug addicts. The apparently insignificant life of this man shines like a light for our era, greedy for material efficiency and comfort. He built his life on supernatural realities, and what abundant favors—even temporal ones—have been obtained through his intercession !



Venerable Alfred Pampalon

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On November 24, 1867, Alfred was born in the Marian parish of Notre-Dame de Lévis in Quebec, the ninth child in a deeply Christian family. His father, Antoine Pampalon, was a contractor who built churches. His mother, Josephine Dorion, known for her humility and faith, took loving care of her children. Every evening, the family prayed the Rosary together. Two of Alfred's brothers and his sister Emma dedicated themselves to God. Particularly affectionate and helpful, Alfred quickly learned—thanks to his mother—about the Lord's goodness, and to pronounce the names of JESUS, MARY, and JOSEPH.

An even better mother

At the age of five, he lost his mother, not long after she had the joy of a twelfth birth. Shortly before she died, Madame Pampalon gathered her eight surviving children and, with an affectionate smile, said, "My dear children, your Mama is going to die... I love you very much, but I must go... You will no longer have a mother on this earth... I entrust you to an even better mother, the best there is, the Blessed Virgin... She is stretching out her arms to you... Love her very much! Pray to her very much! She will take care of you..." Beside the bed, Alfred cried softly. These words from the one he loved more than anyone else on earth were engraved into his memory, and would mark his entire life. His mother died on July 2, 1873, at the age of 45.

One year later, Monsieur Pampalon decided to remarry. He married a fine Irish widow, Margaret Phelan, who would regard all of Antoine's children as her own. Alfred was affectionate and sweet to his second mother. "He always had a smile on his lips," Margaret recalled. "He was cheerful, sweet, entertaining my little ones (Alfred's half-brothers), and was helpful to everyone."

In September 1876, at the age of nine, Alfred became a day student at the high school in Lévis, run by diocesan priests. He would study there for five years, without ever thinking of becoming a priest. Interested in business, he chose to take business courses rather than classical studies. In May 1877, he made his First Communion, and on October 7, the feast of Our Lady of the Rosary, he received the sacrament of Confirmation.

He exhibited a sense of the supernatural, which would continue to develop throughout his life. He confessed and received Communion once a week, which at that time was unusual. He loved to serve the Mass. Every day as he passed the parish church, he would stop to adore Our Lord and pray to the Blessed Virgin. "During the ten years I spent with him in the same classes in school," a classmate reported, "I don't remember the slightest misbehavior from him. He would sit at the front of the class to be closer to the teacher and less like-

ly to be distracted." Nevertheless, Alfred's virtue drew others to him. He exuded goodness—in sports, in a good and somewhat playful humor, he proved to be an excellent organizer. No one equaled him in some games—the younger students in particular were amazed at his skill in cricket, soccer, baseball... He ran very fast. Not only did they admire him, but they loved him, because he was always modest and kind when he won.

A smile that lit up

The year was 1881. A young adolescent, Alfred was not a brilliant student, and a speech impediment—which he would never manage to get rid of—made it difficult for his listeners to follow him. But in catechism, he excelled. Suddenly, his life was threatened by a serious illness. He prayed, recommending himself to MARY. "God made me understand," he would later write, "that He did not want me to belong to the world, but be entirely His. Immediately, at His call, I resolved that if I recovered, I would drop business and do classics, with the goal of becoming a priest." He moderated his love of sports. He remained joyful, even playful, but he wanted to live with and for the Lord. For the rest of his life, he would retain a sickly face, yet always brightened by his smile. His efforts bore fruit—he ended the 1883 school year fourth in a class of thirty.

In 1885, pneumonia brought him to death's door. He received the last sacraments. The sanctuary of Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré, where Quebec Catholics venerate Saint Anne as their patroness, was nearby. The alarmed family urgently appealed to the mother of the Virgin MARY to obtain Alfred's cure from the Child JESUS. "As my studies progressed," Alfred would later say, "my intention to become a priest became more and more firm. But what fixed it was my second illness. It was there that God was waiting for me. He inspired me to realize my plan through the bond of an unbreakable vow. I promised it to Him, if He granted my cure." Teachers and students in Lévis joined the family in pulling this grace from Heaven. Alfred recovered... As soon as he had the strength, he walked the 35 km to Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré, rosary in hand. At the sanctuary, kneeling before the miraculous statue, he gave thanks and promised to follow his brother's example and join the Redemptorists.

The Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer was founded in 1732 by Saint Alphonsus Maria de Liguori, a Neapolitan nobleman, in order to preach the Good News to the most abandoned souls. His religious—called Redemptorists—arrived in Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré only in 1878. Even before his decision, Alfred had read with profit the work the saint had dedicated to the Virgin in 1750, *The Glories of Mary*. Since no Redemptorist house of formation had yet opened in Canada, he would have to set out for Europe. Courageously, on July 22, 1886—at the age of eigh-

teen—he tore himself from his family's affections to enter the novitiate in Saint-Trond, in Belgium. Religious formation there was austere, but fed by the doctrine of the saints. Alfred applied himself to it with zeal and good humor. From the start, he spontaneously volunteered for the most undesirable jobs. Handicapped by ill health, he did his utmost, and edified others with his humble obedience... On September 8, 1887, he joyfully made the perpetual vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. He who at such a young age had abandoned himself into MARY's hands, exclaimed, "I promised my Good Mother to become a saint! And my confidence in her makes me hope for it!"

Sent to the major seminary of Saint-Jean-de-Beauplateau for two years of philosophy and four years of theology, he tackled his studies with courage. By his earnest prayer—above all to MARY, Seat of Wisdom—and hard work, he earned increasingly better grades. His sole ambition was to carry out his future apostolate as well as possible. Ordained a priest on October 4, 1892, he began his ministry in Mons, Belgium—preaching parish missions, hearing confessions, teaching catechism to children. He often visited the sick and encouraged them with his smile and kindness. From the dawn of his religious life, he saw in his order's rule a safeguard—by spiritual instinct, he knew that, without a disciplined life, perseverance is not assured. "Do you wish to be a saint, a very great saint? Then observe your Rule well, very well, and your superiors' instructions," he counseled.

A sure guide

From where did he draw his strength of soul? From prayer: "There is no virtue without prayer," he said, particularly prayer that ascends to the source, the most Holy Eucharist. He often stayed kneeling in the chapel, immobile, his eyes fixed on the tabernacle. Yet he never confused the means and the end: "He who loves God," he said, "demonstrates this love to Him with works and sufferings. In other words, he conforms himself to His holy Will." His actions showed his awareness of the presence of God. In community life, he had a friendly and gentle manner that did not keep him from freely expressing his opinions when the occasion arose, without fear of human respect.

In the Epistle to the Romans, we read, *The just man shall live by faith* (1:17). Alfred absorbed these words. "In the spiritual life," he said, "one must not be guided by feelings, but by faith. Feelings often deceive; faith is a clear and sure guide." Faith showed him that love of God went hand in hand with fleeing from all intentional sin: "There is but one evil, sin, and but one good, God. I will never commit the slightest fault to please anyone, no matter who." The Catechism expresses the same truth: "To the eyes of faith no evil is graver than sin and nothing has worse consequences for sinners

themselves, for the Church, and for the whole world" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church, CCC, 1488*).

Alfred frequently renewed his baptismal promises and his religious vows. His spirit of faith particularly shone when he celebrated the Eucharistic Sacrifice. As for hope, "when it reaches maturity, it takes the sweet name of confidence... I must maintain my peace of heart and not let in to the least uneasiness. The measure of our confidence determines the measure of our holiness." He thus was able to remain content with everything—his superiors, his confreres, in interior trials as in divine consolations, in difficulties with studies, in illness.

Father Alfred had placed at the top of the edifice a passionate love for JESUS CHRIST. Imbued with these words of Saint John: *In this is love, not that we loved God but that He loved us ... God sent His only Son into the world, so that we might live through Him* (I Jn. 4:9, 10), he wanted to render love for love. He meditated on the crib, the crucifix, the Eucharist. Every day, he made the Stations of the Cross and read Holy Scripture. He often repeated, especially during his final illness: "May my constancy not fail! Just a little while longer, and it will be eternity." In turning towards the eternal realities, the thought of death helps us make the love of God prevail over all other loves. This is why the saints thought often about death.

Glorifying mercy

Alfred was driven by a burning zeal for souls. "I want to become and always remain a holy priest, so that I might work as effectively as possible for the salvation of souls. The holier I become, the more I will save souls." Unable, because of his impediment, to preach much, he was diligent in the ministry of confession. In parish missions, he made his modest contribution, usually speaking to the children and preparing them to receive the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist. His instruction—clear, solid, and practical—was greatly relished. Given his difficulty in speech, he was allowed to preach only one major sermon: he chose to glorify the mercy of the Virgin MARY. His thirst to work effectively for the kingdom of God led him to value Christian mortification, a powerful means to free oneself from self-love. Even when he was out walking, he rarely ate outside of meals; he patiently endured chapped skin...

In May 1895, he was transferred from Mons, a mining area, so that his sick lungs might be relieved by the clean air of Saint-Jean-de-Beauplateau, in the forests of the Ardennes. He wrote, "My way of giving missions is to pray for souls." Unencumbered by the criticism of others, he thought that, "of all the vices, there is not one that has stopped more souls on the way to piety than pride. The spirit of vanity gives rise to the immoderate desire to impress and succeed in everything one does." He spoke little about himself, but gladly mentioned his

weak intellect. He carefully and happily performed the most menial tasks.

From the age of fourteen until his death, Alfred suffered from tuberculosis. He had hung in there as best he could. But on February 5, 1896, nine months after his forced retreat into the Ardennes, he had to resign himself to remaining in the infirmary—one lung was gone, the other badly damaged. The doctor gave him until March or April. The young priest spent his days in an armchair: "Some work, while others are worked. Here I am, worked by illness." He devoted his time to prayer and reading the lives of the saints—he was never idle. He coughed day and night. Soon consumption was joined by dysentery. Bedsores formed—Alfred had to lie on open wounds. Yet, he never showed the least impatience, but remained pleasant and cheerful. Everyone loved visiting him. In the Divine Sacrifice, which he still celebrated every day, he drew the strength to endure it all in union with His Savior nailed to the Cross. But on August 23, no longer able to stand up, he was forced to stop several times. Through the month of September, he hovered between life and death. On the 29th, at three o'clock in the morning, he received Holy Communion for the last time. He could scarcely be heard. On the 30th, at one o'clock in the morning, he suddenly sang the entire *Magnificat* in a loud and clear voice. At two o'clock, he asked for and received absolution from all the sins of his life. Shortly before eight o'clock, he raised his eyes to Heaven smiling, as though he saw someone, and breathed his last. He was not yet twenty-nine years old.

Testimonies pour in

Such a sad and unproductive life, it seemed! It is true that this sickly priest did not pay any attention to conversations on worldly matters, seeming not to understand them. Yet, soon after his death, prayers went up to Alfred Pampalon. His brother Pierre would write six years later: "I have been collecting temporal favors attributed to the intercession of this Servant of God. I've reached number two hundred and seventy-five; I am still finding new ones. I have at least twenty-six cases of apparently miraculous cures." The records of the sanctuary of Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré witness to this: "Victims of alcohol and drugs seem to draw the special attention and mercy of the Servant of God. Testimonies pour in from everywhere..." Youth invoke the Servant of God, for themselves and others. In our day, the blessings obtained continue to grow.

According to the Pontifical Council for Health Pastoral Care, "Drugs and addiction particularly affect the young, whatever their social milieu. The increased popularity and use of all types of drugs have never been as significant as now. Drugs are presented as yet another 'freedom', as a way to be accepted and happy" (*Church: Drugs and Drug Addiction, 2002, no. 1*). Illusory

promise! In reality, the result is the opposite—the addict falls into emotional instability, into a depressive state combined with a dependence on groups and dealers. Anxious and needy to the point of greed and sometimes to the point of anguish, he often feels threatened and no longer sees the meaning of life: “Better never to have been born”; he has trouble showing interest in people or things, because his mind is primarily drawn to what relates to the drug (*ibid.*, no. 517). Thus we can understand John Paul II’s fatherly warning: “Drug use is always illicit, for it involves an unjustified and irrational refusal to think, desire, and act as a free individual... A human being does not have the right to abdicate his personal dignity which is given to him by God!” (November 23, 1991; *ibid.*, no. 43). Therefore, “The use of drugs ..., except on strictly therapeutic grounds, is a grave offense” (CCC, 2291).

To avert this evil, some propose the legalization of “soft drugs,” supposedly harmless. But experience shows that the use of these products promotes isolation and dependence, and then leads to stronger substances. Many toxic products are used in medicine for their positive effects, but if they are abused or incorrectly combined, they can become a drug. The same can be said of tobacco and alcohol—drunkenness is just as dangerous as the intoxication brought on by cannabis.

Preventing evil

In most of their testimonies, drug addicts indicate that they use these substances to “feel good about them-

selves” and for pleasure. The pleasure then drives them to act in the moment, that is without judgment. The user enters into a spiral of dependency, to the point that the drugs become the fundamental desire in his life. The engagement of one’s conscience is required to free oneself from this slavery: in reality, desires and pleasures, good in themselves, flow from the individual’s thoughts, spiritual life, free will, and responsibility. Hence the need to found one’s life on an authentic morality and religious path. To accept the difficulties of life, in particular those presented by illness, loneliness, and death, it is essential to first recognize the meaning of life:

“A calm conviction regarding the immortality of the soul, the future resurrection of the body, and eternal responsibility for one’s actions is the surest method of preventing the terrible evil of drugs, of caring for and rehabilitating its victims, and of strengthening them in perseverance and in a firm commitment on the road to good” (John Paul II, September 7, 1984). Everyone must also learn to renounce things for one’s own good. That is the source of free and responsible individuals. Speaking to bishops, John Paul II declared, “The gift of life refers to sobriety, chastity, opposition to the spread of pornography, and awareness about the threat of drugs” (June 19, 1983). He saw in family life a powerful antidote to the temptation to escape into an unreal world. Thus he encouraged spouses to maintain stable conjugal and familial relations, based on mutual love open to life, knowing how to give and forgive.

Father Pampalon left this world one year to the day before Saint Therese of the Child JESUS. Both dreamed of leaving for far-off missions; both desired martyrdom and died young. Both were stricken with tuberculosis and suffered terribly; both discovered that their vocation was to love throughout a life in which nothing extraordinary happened. It might be said that Father Alfred received from God an important role somewhat like that of the Patroness of Missions—to show mercy to those in distress.

Venerable Servant of God, obtain for victims of drugs the gift of true hope, which *does not disappoint us* (Rom. 5 :5)!

Dom Antoine Marie
o.s.b.

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