



# Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of September 1, 2010,  
Saint Giles

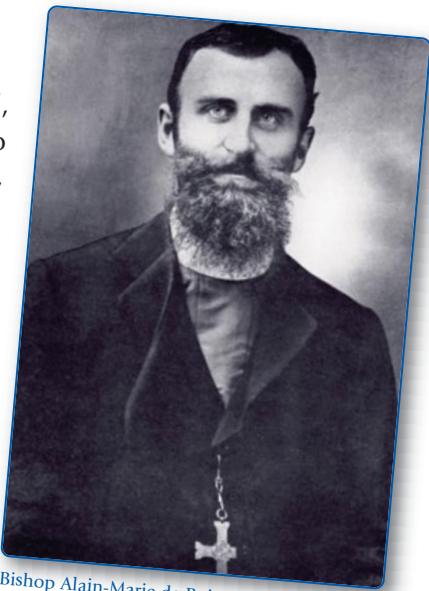
Dear Friends,

**I**f you wish to praise me, you must be sure to say, 'He spoiled his "boy", he smoked cigarettes, he loved a little drink now and again, he used to say, "Leave me alone !"'" These words by Bishop Alain de Boismenu, "the bishop of the Papuans", reveal the humility of a big heart whose true holiness naturally revealed itself under the rough exterior of an old missionary.

Alain-Marie Guynot de Boismenu was born on December 27, 1870 in Saint Malo, France, the last of eleven children. Since his mother died giving birth to him, he would be raised by his oldest sister, Augustine. Little Alain proved to have a short temper and a passionate nature. He easily submitted to the authority of his father, whom he venerated, but he sometimes balked at his oldest sister's strictness. One day when she was reprimanding him and added, "So you don't love me?", he looked her straight in the eye and answered, "Yes, I love you, but I want to choose to obey." When his father heard this story that evening, he told his son: "Alain, I would like you to choose to obey your sister Augustine." The boy promised to do so, and kept his word. Fifty years later, a bishop for nearly thirty years, he would confess with a smile to one of his nieces: "I obey only two people on earth—my sister Augustine and our Holy Father the Pope." According to a classmate, "Alain was sometimes difficult to deal with, but he put so much thought into what he said, and did everything with such good humor that people would have followed him anywhere, because he was such a leader and organizer." In high school, one of the priests told him about a new Congregation that sent missionaries to the far ends of the earth to preach the Gospel. The ideal intrigued him, and the desire to leave for New Guinea took hold of him. With this end in mind, he entered the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart in Issoudun. He took religious vows in 1888 and was ordained a priest on February 10, 1895.

## "Above all, become holy!"

**A**t that time, the mission in New Guinea was being ravaged by famine, fevers, and deaths, and was in great danger. The apostolic vicar, Bishop Navarre, came to France to drum up interest and ask for support. Father Alain wanted to go, but his Superiors were hesitant—he looked frail, and men more robust than him had been unable to withstand the climate and living conditions in the mission. What is more, the Congregation needed



Bishop Alain-Marie de Boismenu

teachers in its house of formation. So for four years, he performed his duties as an instructor. During this time, a missionary bishop, Bishop Verjus, to whom Father Alain had confided his desire, wrote to him: "You continue to have a passion for our dear missions? Good to hear it! May the missions possess you more and more and become your life's only goal! ... But I implore you: above all, become holy. You need one hundred times more virtue, spirit of sacrifice, and spirit of faith here than in Europe... Consider it an excellent day when you are most frustrated, practice patience as you endure your brothers' shortcomings—that is essential."

And one day in 1897, Father Alain received the news from his Superior General that he had been chosen for New Guinea, the eastern part of the large island called Papua. This mission had been established thirty years earlier. At the time of Father de Boismenu's arrival on January 25, 1898, there were already 1,950 Catholics in the mission area, under the care of 16 priests and 17 coadjutor brothers, spread out across 20 missionary stations. There were also fifteen or so nuns, daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart. He spent his first two weeks there visiting the entire mission. On February 11, Father Alain was named pro-vicar general.

The southeast portion of the island, which the French Missionaries of the Sacred Heart oversaw, was a British possession, and was under the authority of an English governor who claimed that Catholics were forbidden in

areas reserved for Protestants. Father Alain vigorously defended the right to evangelize. However, to avoid conflicts, he took the initiative to cast a wide net, going into unexplored regions in the mountains to set up the first missions there. This decision would be confirmed several years later by Pope Saint Pius X himself, who would say to Father Alain, who had become a bishop: "Fighting does not suit us. We have vast lands that have not been spoken for—we must go to those areas rather than clash with the Protestants. We cannot join with them, but they are, to some degree, our 'adjutores' [assistants] ... They provide the truth in part."

Indeed, as the Second Vatican Council would later teach, "the separated Churches and Communities as such, though we believe them to be deficient in some respects, have been by no means deprived of significance and importance in the mystery of salvation" (*Unitatis redintegratio*, no. 3).

At the end of the following year, he was nominated to the episcopate, as a coadjutor for Bishop Navarre. He was consecrated a bishop on March 18, 1900, in the basilica of Montmartre in Paris. He was not yet thirty years old. Bishop Alain—he would most often be called by this affectionate term—demonstrated an extraordinary energy. He did not manage to avoid tropical fevers, but his health withstood them. Every year, he covered the area of his mission several times, visited remote posts that were a several days' walk from each other, established stations, and opened new districts. According to the testimony of one of his missionaries, "he traveled with astonishing speed. On foot, by horse, in a humble barque, he was always there to say the difficult words he had to say, to give a boost, or to make the decisions that had to be made."

When he returned to Papua after his *ad limina* visit to Rome in 1911, Bishop de Boismenu, who had become the apostolic vicar, vigorously took up again the work of civilization and evangelization—orphanages, parish schools for the lower grades as well as for the professions, and above all, schools for catechists, in order to prepare an elite that would in turn train Christians and awaken vocations. The bishop was convinced that the mission's future was in the formation of a native clergy—it needed to have "not only Christians, but a Christianity," he stated.

### God's answers

Bishop Alain depended on the Lord present in the Blessed Sacrament: "I am erecting a bishop's oratory, close to my residence on Yule Island. I need the Blessed Sacrament close by, so that I can go find Our Lord at any time, render an account of my mission to Him, explain my worries and difficulties to Him, and speak to Him heart to heart in solitude. There are times when no man can advise me; there are things I cannot confide to anyone. And it is so good, so peaceful to be able to collect my thoughts in private there, and wait for

the good ideas, the good solutions that are God's answers."

During the First World War, the mission endured a precarious period—though the missionaries received a dispensation from serving in the armed forces, they could no longer count on reinforcements being sent. In addition, financial support was sorely lacking. Yet, following a schedule of visits to stations and remote posts, all areas of the mission were ministered to. To support his priests in this difficult situation, Bishop Alain published a pastoral letter in which he wrote, "If you want to make your effort as fruitful as possible and ensure its success, give it an ample portion of the supernatural element. It is the essential ingredient, the main factor in the result. Nothing can substitute for it, not devotion to duty, or expertise, or relentless work. Without it, your efforts are nothing more than unprofitable activity, a waste of time and energy. With it, on the contrary, the smallest effort is fertilized, the least strength is increased tenfold, and Heaven guarantees your ultimate success."

In 1918, several young Papuan women resolved to become nuns. Bishop de Boismenu formed them into a community and gave them the name "Handmaids of Our Lord", but before long they were regularly called "Ancelles" (from the Latin "ancilla"—handmaid). Mother Marie-Thérèse Noblet, who had come from France, took charge of the young foundation, and formed for the service of the apostolate the native religious whom in 1925 Bishop de Boismenu began sending into various mission stations. Mother Marie-Thérèse Noblet shared her bishop's ideals, and had the same passion—love of God and the salvation of souls.

### The invisible thread of history

In these lands, which at that time were under the power of the prince of darkness, the battle to eradicate superstitious practices was intense. In a pastoral letter of September 29, 1922, Bishop de Boismenu wrote to his priests: "There are indeed two kingdoms that divide the world and fight for souls, two armies constantly and violently clashing—the army of JESUS CHRIST, the Church, anxious to save souls, and the army of Satan, raging to lose them. It is a war without truce or mercy. Many people are not aware of it, many people see it as nothing more than a fiction. But it is real all the same. It is the invisible thread of the history of the world, until the end of time." After reminding his priests that Lucifer is full of hatred for God and souls, the bishop continued, exposing the devil's tactic: "To deprive men of the supernatural and reduce them to the natural plane, where his superior nature regains his advantages and his empire... How Satan has succeeded among the civilized nations! How he has kept them from the supernatural! He has led them in droves to the natural, where he keeps them securely imprisoned..."

Pope Benedict XVI has also pointed out this temptation to limit our horizon to the things of this world : "For most people, the things of God are not given priority, they do not impose themselves on us directly. And so the great majority of us tend to postpone them. First we do what seems urgent here and now. In the list of priorities, God is often more or less at the end. We can always deal with that later, we tend to think." In contrast to this mistake, the Holy Father proposes the example of the shepherds in the Christmas Gospel : "It tells us that after listening to the Angel's message, the shepherds said one to another : *Let us go over to Bethlehem ... they went at once* (Lk. 2:15f.). 'They made haste' is literally what the Greek text says. What had been announced to them was so important that they had to go immediately. In fact, what had been said to them was utterly out of the ordinary. It changed the world. The Savior is born. The long-awaited Son of David has come into the world in His own city. What could be more important ? ... The Gospel tells us : God is the highest priority. If anything in our life deserves haste without delay, then, it is God's work alone. ... God is important, by far the most important thing in our lives. The shepherds teach us this priority. From them we should learn not to be crushed by all the pressing matters in our daily lives. From them we should learn the inner freedom to put other tasks in second place—however important they may be—so as to make our way towards God, to allow Him into our lives and into our time. Time given to God and, in His name, to our neighbor is never time lost. It is the time when we are most truly alive, when we live our humanity to the full" (December 24, 2009).

To thwart the devil's influence, Bishop Alain recommended praying to the Holy Angels : "By nature equal to the demons, the Holy Angels have the advantage of grace. They expose the adversary's ruses and schemes. None of the dangers that confront us escapes their notice. They remove them, sometimes instantaneously. They always warn us about them, and if we wish, powerfully help us to confront them, calming our passions, enlightening our intelligence, strengthening our will, and uniting themselves with us to obtain an increase in grace and strength. Happy to serve God by serving us, their service is a service of love. For our dear Angels love us with a friendship that goes beyond our dreams. Knowing precisely the price paid for our souls, they desire their salvation more passionately than Satan desires their loss... Ah! If our faith were more simple, and we had a more lively sense of the presence of our Angels, of their love, of the value of their services ! If we were more attentive to their inspirations, more ready to call on them and more confident of their help, what a strength for ourselves and for our ministry !"

### The sole aim of the Church

On February 28, 1926, Pope Pius XI published the encyclical *Rerum Ecclesiae*, which left a profound mark on the missionary history of the Church. Bishop

Alain introduced it with these words : "Pius XI declares the supreme rule of the apostolate—the salvation of the greatest possible number of souls—and firmly indicates what must be done to accomplish this... You can truly hear the Divine Master speaking through him—His voice, the inspiration of His spirit which, over the course of the ages, leads the Church on her mission... to spread Christ's reign everywhere, to bring salvation to all men—this is the sole aim of the Church militant."

The Second Vatican Council also emphasizes the Church's call to mission : "Divinely sent to the nations of the world to be unto them 'a universal sacrament of salvation', the Church, driven by the inner necessity of her own catholicity, and obeying the mandate of her Founder, strives ever to proclaim the Gospel to all men" (Decree *Ad gentes*, no. 1). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains, "The ultimate purpose of mission is none other than to make men share in the communion between the Father and the Son in Their Spirit of love. It is from God's love for all men that the Church in every age receives both the obligation and the vigor of her missionary dynamism, *for the love of Christ urges us on* (2 Cor. 5:14). Indeed, God *wishes all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth* (1 Tim. 2:4); that is, God wills the salvation of everyone through the knowledge of the truth. Salvation is found in the truth. Those who obey the prompting of the Spirit of truth are already on the way of salvation. But the Church, to whom this truth has been entrusted, must go out to meet their desire, so as to bring them the truth. Because she believes in God's universal plan of salvation, the Church must be missionary" (CCC 850-851).

### The first native priest

Pius XI's directives were put into practice so well in Papua that in several months the missionaries had reached twenty-three new tribes, and eighteen new outposts had been opened. In 1929, Bishop de Boismenu wrote to his missionaries : "Your work has not been a flash in the pan. More than two thousand catechumens are in training, five times more than in 1925. You have taken the orders from Rome seriously, and swiftly led the campaign on behalf of the Gospel... The pace is good, and is pleasing to God. He loves that we are serving Him boldly." In 1930, Bishop Alain went to Rome again for his *ad limina* visit. During this trip, he spent a little time with his family, and one of his nieces asked to follow him to Papua. One year later, Solange Bazin de Jessey would be in Papua to succeed Mother Marie-Thérèse Noblet, who had died at the beginning of the year. In 1935, the Papuan mission celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. A memorable event opened this jubilee year—the opening of the first Carmel in the islands of Oceania. For several years, Bishop Alain had been going through the necessary steps for this project to be realized. In 1937, he experienced another joy—that of welcoming the first native priest, Father Louis Vangheke from the Mekeo tribe, who had been ordained in

Madagascar, where he had been sent for his studies. In a pastoral letter, the bishop let his joy ring out: "This humble child from our native soil has been consecrated a priest of God, an authorized minister of the redemption of His Son, and a close friend of our Divine Master and Lord, JESUS CHRIST... Seeing one of their own in the flesh at the altar, in the confessional, they will grasp from life the harmonious fusion of colors and races in the unity of the Church, indifferent to castes and foreign to no one..."

In May 1941, the news spread—Bishop Alain was dying! At that time, a missionary recorded these words from his bishop: "If I leave, may God's will be done. Join me in asking that His will be done... I ask forgiveness from everyone, from all those I have hurt, those to whom I have been too harsh, not nice enough, those whom I failed in not being supportive or fair enough... Yes, forgive me, everyone. As for me, I have nothing to forgive, absolutely nothing. We are all from the same family, are we not? We may have hurt one another, but we have forgiven one another..." Against all expectations, the bishop recovered and was able to resume his pastoral visits several months later.

The spread of hostilities in the Pacific during the Second World War severely tested the mission once again. In February 1942, Japanese forces landed on the northern shore of New Guinea. In this disquieting context, Bishop Alain gave his directives—he took measures to prevent food shortages; on the pastoral level, he specified the conditions that must be met for general absolution to be given, and stressed that spiritual assistance must be given to any combatant, regardless of his nationality.

### Time to love deeply

In 1945, the Holy See gave him a successor in the person of Father André Sorin. To everyone's great delight,

Bishop de Boismenu stayed in Papua. For seven years, he would live at the foot of the mountains. From his hermitage, he continued to provide some services for the good of souls, but above all he devoted himself to prayer: "As for me," he wrote to a missionary, "I am living a solitary life in my hermitage, to which has now been added a little oratory where, thanks be to God, I can still celebrate the Holy Mass every day, a grace that I hope to have up until the end—the supreme consolation of 'old hands' who can still in this way 'exercere opus redēptionis' (perform the work of redemption)." As his death approached, he wrote to one of his nephews: "I am a cripple, and nothing works anymore but my heart, which now has the time to love deeply. It is good to be able to say that one is able to love more and more, and that one day we will receive the gift of being able to love fully..."

Hearing the news that their Father was close to death, the missionaries rushed to his bedside. The dying man greeted them with his customary kindness, and confided to them: "I do not like the way that certain books talk about detachment. We have a heart, and it is for loving. Our Lord loved. What He does not want is for us to love to the point that we cling to things. We must be able to let go the first time we are asked and be ready to separate ourselves from anything... but that hurts..." Feeling his strength leaving him, he gave a long look at the missionaries surrounding him, and told them in a loud voice: "Stand firm." On November 5, 1953, at three o'clock in the afternoon, his heart stopped beating, at the very moment that the verse *Lord, into Your hands I commend my spirit* was being read. His body rests in Kubuna, in the Val Fleuri cemetery, near the graves of Mother Marie-Thérèse Noblet and Mother Solange Bazin de Jessey. His cause for beatification has been opened.

Bishop Alain de Boismenu's episcopal motto, "Ut cognoscant Te" (That they might know You), was taken from Jesus' discourse after the Last Supper: *And this is eternal life, that they know Thee the only true God, and JESUS CHRIST Whom Thou hast sent* (Jn. 17:3). This bishop's happiness and passion were to lead men to know God, Who alone can save them and make them happy. May the example of his zeal help us to spread God's kingdom on earth and lead souls to the beatitude of Heaven!

Dom Antoine Marie  
O.S.B.

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