



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of November 11, 2010,
Saint Martin

Dear Friends,

I FIND plenty of people to do physical work, but to teach catechism, to put the faith and love of Our Lord in souls, I find very few, almost none." These words express the burning desire of Blessed Antoine Chevrier to "give the Church and the world poor priests and good catechists who would go everywhere to make JESUS CHRIST known" (John Paul II, beatification homily, October 4, 1986).

Antoine Chevrier was born in Lyon on Easter Sunday, April 16, 1826, and baptized two days later. The only child in a hard-working household of silk workers, he grew up in a world in turmoil—the silk-weavers' revolt of 1831 and the revolution of 1848. He inherited from his father the virtues of humility and gentleness; from his mother, a capable woman with a passionate and energetic disposition, a faith that could move mountains. Madame Chevrier's fear was that her husband and son would not stay on the straight and narrow path and would lose their souls. If in an unthinking moment the child committed a peccadillo, his mother sent him to bed early. "Go to bed, mister!"—"Oh, Mama, no, I don't want to be a mister, I am your little Antoine." The mother once let him cry until eleven o'clock at night, before giving him the kiss she had refused him as a penance. Antoine Chevrier would later write: "Do you know what makes men? Suffering, hardships, mortifications. The man who has not suffered knows nothing—he is a limp noodle." As enthusiastic about sports as about schoolwork, he was often picked by his classmates as their leader on the playground, and even in the streets. One day, the students from the public school lay in wait to attack them as they were leaving school. Antoine was so imposing, with his tall height and soothing words, that the rascals gave up all thoughts of fighting.

A luminous orb

At a very early age, his soul received a miraculous grace. It was at a time when, at Mass, the faithful were asked to lower their eyes during the consecration out of respect for the consecrated host. One morning, Antoine, out of a holy and naïve curiosity, raised his head and at the moment of the elevation saw, not with surprise but with admiration, a luminous orb above the chalice. It was only later that he would understand that this visible sign was extraordinary, and would thank God for having wished to strengthen his budding faith. Father Chevrier would one day recount this miracle to



Blessed Antoine Chevrier

someone who was at the point of death, but who survived and divulged it. After his First Communion in 1837, Antoine asked for the privilege of serving at the first Mass of the day every day, at five o'clock in the morning. Summer and winter, he was faithful and was often found waiting in the cold for the doors to be opened. In 1840, Antoine was fourteen years old. A priest at the parish asked him if he would like to become a priest. He had never thought about it, but answered "yes," and then felt a great joy. He entered the Saint Francis school, then the Argentière minor seminary, close to Lyon. In October 1846, he received the cassock at Saint Irenaeus major seminary, and the following year, the tonsure. On this occasion, he had the idea to offer himself for the foreign missions. His mother was absolutely opposed to this: "You are an ingrate, mister, a bad son. Do you think I raised you for you to be eaten by savages? ... Savages you can find in Lyon! If you go in spite of me, I will disown you as my child." These words, of an all too human wisdom, would not have been enough to keep him in France, if he had not received similar advice from his confessor.

Ordained a priest by Cardinal de Bonald on May 25, 1850, Antoine was appointed assistant pastor at Saint-André de la Guillotière parish, in a large working-class district of Lyon. Most of the inhabitants were uprooted country folk. Men, women, and children from the age of eight or nine, worked in factories or workshops over eight hours a day, Sundays included. Their clay houses

were packed one against the other in narrow alleys that opened onto dreary landscapes. Cabarets and seedy ballrooms were their only distractions. In 1850, Saint-André numbered six thousand souls, and evangelization there was so difficult that the previous priest had worked there for four years without success. The young apostle was delighted because he had “much good to do around him.” He rose very early—meditation, the breviary, Mass, sacred studies, visiting the sick. If he thought that a sick person’s door might be closed to him because of his cassock, Father Chevrier stood to the side so that he could not be seen. As soon as the door opened, he put his foot in the doorway and pleaded so fervently that he ended up almost always allowed to enter to the dying person’s bedside. In this way, he made miraculous catches. In the street, the young priest converted women of ill repute, for which he was insulted, threatened, beaten black and blue, and even chased by people throwing stones.

The secret of an apostolate so productive in the face of such opposition is poverty. Father Chevrier stripped himself of everything, and relied on God to provide for his needs. His mother had supplied him with linens—he quickly gave them to the poor. She gave him linens a second time—he again gave them away. “But,” she exclaimed in exasperation, “it is not for strangers that I go to so much trouble and expense!”—“But these strangers are my children.”—“So, I’m the grandmother of all these hoodlums! No thank you!” He laughed heartily and continued. But, as his mother covered him with reproaches, he finally replied, “What of it? Our Lord JESUS CHRIST gave His own blood!” In the middle of the night on May 31, 1856, the banks of the Rhone overflowed, causing flooding that became a veritable catastrophe for some areas like la Guillotière. For several days, Antoine Chevrier showed himself courageous and indefatigable in rescuing victims, his life endangered by the violent current and dangerous whirlpools. He saved many people and brought supplies to cut off houses. Perhaps there is some connection between this trial and the spiritual event that completely changed his life a few months later, for God had plans for him.

Everything turned upside down

On Christmas Eve 1856, as he was meditating on the Incarnation in front of the crèche of the Infant JESUS, Father Chevrier perceived a supernatural call that he expressed thus: “The Son of God came down to earth to save men and convert sinners. And yet, what do we see? How many sinners there are in the world! Men continue to damn themselves! So I decided to follow Our Lord JESUS CHRIST more closely to make myself more able to work effectively for the salvation of souls.” From that moment on, everything was turned upside down. He must “leave everything and live as poorly as possible.” Neither impulsive nor hotheaded, he took time for reflection and prayer. He understood that his mission was to catechize the poor and children. In January 1857,

he consulted the holy Curé d’Ars. The saint listened to him and approved his plans, from then on considering the priest his child. His own pastor, on the other hand, did not understand him and opposed his initiatives. Father Chevrier then thought of leaving the parish. In June 1857, his meeting with Camille Rimbaud hastened things—this remarkable layman had left his job and had the City of the Child JESUS built for the poor. The work needed a chaplain. Cardinal de Bonald appointed Father Chevrier to this position, to the great regret of the parish priest and parishioners of Saint-André. His primary task was to celebrate daily Mass and teach catechism to twenty-odd children who were preparing for First Communion. At the time, this institution for the working-class sheltered a little over two hundred disaster victims, most victimized by the recent floods. Camille Rimbaud, or Brother Camille, as he was called, ran everything. He had an ascetic temperament, and imposed on his coworkers extreme poverty and great mortification. This way of life appealed to Father Chevrier’s soul despite his delicate health. In 1859, he became a member of the Third Order of Saint Francis—this saint’s example was what he most desired to imitate. Witnesses recounted that Antoine Chevrier beamed with joy.

The two charitable efforts that Camille Rimbaud led at the same time—the catechism for poor children and the construction of subsidized housing—could not continue long in the same locale. A site was rented in la Guillotière for the catechism for boys; the catechism for girls would take place at Fourvière. As a result, Father Chevrier exercised his ministry in three places, which called for an effort beyond his strength. He begged Divine Providence to help him find a solution. On December 10, 1860, he rented the Prado, a huge dance hall that had been disreputable up until then. Without a penny in his pocket, but with the help of benefactors and encouraged by his archbishop, soon he was able to purchase it. By a mutual agreement, Camille Rimbaud, who had become a priest, was the superior of the City of the Child JESUS, while Father Chevrier ran the catechisms for boys and girls at the Providence of the Prado.

Proud of her son

The Prado, formerly the “house of the devil,” became the house of the Lord. The large ballroom was made into a chapel. Madame Chevrier could be proud of her son. Assisted by a few young men and women, who were called “brothers” and “sisters,” the priest took in children and youth from working-class families for six months at a time, to “make of them men and Christians”. The first, Pierre Pacalet, was noticed as he was hungrily devouring melon rinds found on a garbage pile. The priest took pity on him. This mentally handicapped child became the foundation stone of his work. Pierre made his First Communion at the Prado, of which he loved to call himself “the pillar”. Youth from the ages of fourteen to twenty poured in. Many had worked in

the factories since they were eight or nine years old. Some were orphans, others had been in jail. At the Prado, they received a thorough religious education. Two hours a day, they learned reading and writing—the rest was centered on religious instruction. Everything depended on Divine Providence. They ate whatever there was, and if there was nothing, at the last minute someone brought just what was needed. When there was no money left, Father Chevrier went begging at church doors. At first, it was very hard for him, and he was even harassed by the police. In spite of its poverty, life at the Prado was not sad. Father Chevrier's gaiety burst forth during recreations, which were very lively, especially when one or another of the young boarders had previously been a circus performer, a sword-swallower or an acrobat.

The catechism was Father Chevrier's primary concern, in his work among children, but also among the adults who frequented the Prado. "Catechizing men," he wrote, "is the great mission of the priest today." He hoped to train others to catechize, but it was a difficult mission. "Oh! For a soul who would teach the catechism well, who truly had the spirit of poverty, humility, and charity—I would give the entire Prado for this soul!" Father Chevrier summed up catechesis in three words: "First, to enlighten the intelligence, then to touch the heart, and lastly to stimulate the will. ... We must teach not with grand speeches that do not penetrate the heart of the ignorant, but with very simple instructions that are within the people's grasp. In our day, we must catechize everywhere, teach the first truths, tell men that there is a God, and teach them to love and serve Him."

A providential instrument

"One hundred fifty years later," writes Cardinal Barbarin, the Archbishop of Lyon, "circumstances have completely changed, to be certain, but the urgency and the stakes remain the same" (Pastoral letter, 2006). However, since 2005, a providential instrument available to all is the authority on the topic, the *Compendium* (abridged version) of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. "The *Compendium*," Benedict XVI specifies, "contains, in concise form, all the essential and fundamental elements of the Church's faith, thus constituting, as my Predecessor had wished, a kind of *vademecum* which allows believers and non-believers alike to behold the entire panorama of the Catholic faith" (*Motu Proprio* of June 28, 2005). More recently, the Holy Father has revisited this subject: "The organic presentation of faith is an indispensable requirement. In fact, the individual truths of faith illuminate each other and, in their total and unitive vision appears the harmony of God's plan of salvation and the centrality of the Mystery of Christ. ... The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, as well as the *Compendium* of this same *Catechism*, offer us exactly this full picture of Christian Revelation, to be accepted with faith and gratitude. However I would like to encourage the individual faithful and the Christian communities to

make the most of these instruments to know and to deepen the content of our faith. It will thus appear to us as a marvelous symphony that speaks to us of God and of His love and asks of us firm adherence and an active response" (General audience of December 30, 2009).

The year 1870 began in mourning with the death of Cardinal de Bonald, and ended with war abroad, and was followed by the social unrest of the Commune in both Lyon and Paris in 1871. The priest's poverty and his reputation for doing good protected him. His efforts to prepare children for their First Communion were not interrupted. Father Chevrier was not at all afraid to lead the children to Fourvière, crossing the whole city in his cassock, in the midst of national guard members doing drills. On the Feast of Corpus Christi in 1871, he carried the Blessed Sacrament in the streets, where there was scarcely a moment's letup in the fighting. No one dared disrupt the ceremony. At the same moment in Paris, the "Communards" had the archbishop and a group of priests shot. Father Chevrier has been called perhaps the boldest priest of his era.

As though his work at the Prado were not enough, Father Chevrier accepted, out of love for the poor, the charge of establishing a new parish in the neglected Moulin-à-Vent neighborhood, three kilometers from the Prado, where there was no practice of religion. A first Mission achieved great success. "Virtue and charity are what really inspire the trust and love of the people," stated Father Chevrier. ... "Place a poor priest in a wooden church, exposed to the four winds, and he will attract and convert more people ... than another priest in a church made out of gold." And again: "What freedom and power this holy and beautiful poverty of JESUS CHRIST give the priest! What an example he is for the world, this world that works only for money, that thinks only about money, that lives only for money!"

"It is a message that is as good now as then," writes Cardinal Barbarin. "Hearing this message implies a great opening of the heart and a strong reaction against the temptation present everywhere toward comfort and material goods. How to remain free with respect to money, which is a necessary and daily reality, but which quickly tricks us, carrying us away with its implacable logic?"

Teaching, building understanding

Even if the pastoral work at Moulin-à-Vent was most often done by one of his associates, Father Chevrier was its head priest, from 1867 to 1871. The "Pradosienne" method was first and foremost the active evangelization of the parishioners—talks, the Rosary, the Stations of the Cross with public meditation. Teaching, creating understanding—these were the main ideas behind Father Chevrier's work. "If so many are bored at Mass, it is because they do not understand the mysteries that are taking place there." He himself cele-

brated the Mass with great care and got the greatest possible attention from those attending.

"The best catechesis on the Eucharist is the Eucharist itself, celebrated well. By its nature, the liturgy can be pedagogically effective in helping the faithful to enter more deeply into the mystery being celebrated" (Benedict XVI, Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, no. 64, February 22, 2007).

In 1866, Father Chevrier completed a project at the Prado that had always been close to his heart—raising up poor priests to evangelize the poor. He opened a small school for children who had shown a potential for this type of vocation. In 1873, his first four students entered the major seminary in Lyon. For them, he picked up his pen to write *The True Disciple of Our Lord JESUS CHRIST*, in which he expresses the passion of his life—to follow JESUS by being poor with Him at the crèche, being crucified with Him, being eaten as Him in the Eucharist, so as to follow Him in His glory. "The priest is a man stripped, a man crucified, a man who is eaten," as the sentences the priest painted on the walls of the modest Saint-Fons house, close to Lyon, stated. He himself loved to retire to this place at times for a few days of meditation. "I am going to put some oil in the lamp, I sense that it is low," he would say to his confreres. He was referring to the oil of the love of God.

The stripping bare

Father Chevrier gave of himself unceasingly, well beyond his strength, and he was aware of it: "I have worked myself to death." In the spring of 1874, he fell gravely ill—nevertheless, he managed to resume his activities and to make a four-month visit to Rome to form his future priests there, but he would never really regain his health. When it appeared that the work had come to maturity, he experienced the trial of being stripped bare—a former companion left him for the Trappists, and his new priests, ordained in May 1877, were reluctant to continue at the Prado. "God had given me assistants," he said, "good coadjutors, and He has taken them back. May His holy Name be blessed!" In fact, these three fellow workers would remain at the

Prado. But Father Chevrier suddenly became incapable of any work—he was forced to give his resignation on January 6, 1878, while a younger person succeeded him. The doctors prescribed a complete rest for him at Limonest, in the Lyon countryside. In September 1879, understanding that the end of his stay on earth was approaching, he asked to return to the Prado. He died there on October 2, 1879, at the age of 53. Close to ten thousand people came to his funeral. His remains were buried in the chapel, in front of the altar, where the orchestra once led the dance.

The first four priests of the Prado found themselves alone in a difficult situation. Their status was precarious and would be for some time—the constitutions of the Priests of the Prado would not be approved by the Archbishop of Lyon until 1924, forty-five years later, and the Sisters would be established as an apostolic society of diocesan right in 1925. The growth of the Prado dates from this time, first in the diocese of Lyon, then in France starting in 1945. The foundation is currently found in more than thirty countries in Europe, Asia, Africa, and South America. Today the priests number a little over one thousand. The Pradosienne family also includes Brothers, as well as the Women's Institute, consisting of laywomen who live in the world, committed to the celibate state out of love for Christ.

Father Chevrier was beatified in Lyon on October 4, 1986, on the feast of Saint Francis of Assisi. "He is," Pope John Paul II said, "an incomparable guide for priests. But all lay Christians will also find in him a great light, because he shows each baptized person how to proclaim the good news to the poor and how to make JESUS CHRIST present through his own existence. The religious context is no longer that of the time of Father Chevrier. It is marked by doubt, unbelief, atheism, and a claim to the widest possible freedom. Religious ignorance is spreading in a disturbing manner. The poor are all those who lack God... who suffer from unemployment, who lack work. It is no longer only the world of the worker that is affected, but many other milieux—the sick, the handicapped, prisoners. The words of JESUS call out to us: 'I was sick, I was in prison, and you came to me.'"

Blessed Antoine Chevrier, teach us to live according to the spirit of the Beatitudes, and open our eyes to the poverities of our world, so that we might better give what we have—the joy of loving God and neighbor!

Dom Antoine Marie
o.s.b.

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Abbaye Saint-Joseph de Clairval (English ed) ISSN : 1956-3906 - Dépôt légal : date de parution - Directeur de publication : Dom Antoine Beauchef - Imprimerie : Traditions Monastiques - 21150 Flavigny-sur-Ozerain.

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