

ciples of Christian faith and morals, the final destiny of man, and the vanity of the world.

In 1839, he went to Rome, where he entered the novitiate of the Society of JESUS. The attempt lasted only a few months, but gave him a new impetus to work for the salvation of souls. "God gave me a great grace," he would write in his autobiography, "in leading me to Rome so that I would live, even if only for a short while, with such fervent religious. If only I had profited more from it! But if the benefit for me was slight, it was great for others. For it was there that I learned how to properly give the *Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, and to preach, teach the catechism, and hear confessions to the great benefit of souls. Be blessed in everything, O my God, make me love You and make You loved and served by all! May all creatures experience how good and merciful You are!" Later on, he would say that the *Exercises* "are one of the most powerful means I have used for the reformation of the clergy."

When he returned to Spain in 1840, Don Anthony was named parish priest of Viladrau. There, he gave the full measure of his love of neighbor. "Once settled in the parish of Viladrau," he would write, "I cared for the spiritual needs of the faithful as well as I could. On Sundays and feast days, I explained the Gospel during the High Mass, and in the evenings taught catechism to the boys and girls. Every day, I visited the sick. Unfortunately, there was no doctor in the town. So I was doctor to both soul and body, using my general knowledge and the knowledge I had gathered from medical works... The Lord backed up my zeal so well that none of the sick I attended to died."

Look for the true causes

"When I arrived in Viladrau," he described elsewhere, "there were many who were said to be possessed (by the devil), and their families urged me to exorcise them, for I had the power to do so. I observed that scarcely one out of a thousand of them was truly possessed—the malaise of the others had physical or moral causes." For their relief, Don Claret gave appropriate advice; having observed that often the so-called possessed gave way to anger and alcohol abuse, he advised them to suffer patiently, never become angry, and stay sober. Also, he recommended that they recite seven "Our Fathers" and seven "Hail Marys" three times a day, in honor of the Seven Sorrows of the Blessed Virgin Mary, that they make a good Confession of all the sins of their life, and then receive Holy Communion. Most of the time, those who followed this advice soon came to thank him and declare that they were completely cured.

One of Anthony Claret's favorite occupations was teaching catechism. "Since the catechism is the foundation for the moral and religious instruction of children, I have always thought that it was the most important

means of the apostolate. As children's minds are more malleable than those of adults, they can learn it easily and retain it, imprinted, so to say, in their minds... What drove me most strongly to teach children has been the example of JESUS CHRIST and the saints. *Let the children come to me*, Our Lord said, *do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God* (Mk. 10:14). It is certain that in the eyes of God, a child whose innocence has been preserved by a good education is a treasure more precious than all the riches in the world." He added, "Catechesis for adults is, to my knowledge, the best means of doing them good. Through the catechism, they are pulled out of their ignorance, which is greater than one might imagine. Preachers sometimes believe that those who come to hear their sermons are already instructed in religion and their obligations—they are terribly wrong. ... The basis of my catechesis has always been God's Commandments, to which I added more or less explanation... I never attacked the main vices of my audience at the outset. To do so, I waited until I had my audience well in hand. Then, sensing them well-prepared, I broached the most serious topics. My listeners, seeing me demolish their little idols, did not rebel, and many repented of their sins."

An effective means of action

Besides catechetical instruction, Don Claret made a point of doing good to all he met: "Friendly conversation is another way to act on souls, and how efficacious it is! As a student, I read that among the first members of the Society of JESUS was a lay Brother who was responsible for doing the shopping. He went out every day to fulfill his duties, and in his conversations with laypeople, he was so edifying and pleasant that he converted more souls than any missionary. This example made such a strong impression on me that I have always striven to imitate it."

He also undertook to give popular missions, during which he did not hesitate to preach on "the four last things"—death, judgment, heaven, and hell. Already in his childhood he had been marked by these fundamental truths. "The first thoughts that I remember as having occupied my childish mind," he wrote, "were about eternity. I was five years old, in bed, and unable to sleep, and I thought about these words—forever, forever, eternity! I imagined a huge distance, to which I added another, then another, then still another, never arriving at its end. Then my little heart trembled, and I thought: so those who fall into hell will never finish suffering? No, never. Will they suffer forever? Forever. I was overwhelmed with a great pity for those who fall into the flames, and my heart broke with sorrow, for I am very compassionate by nature. Since then, this thought remained deeply engraved in me, and I can say that it is always present. It is what has driven me to work for the conversion of sinners. I often say to myself: the Faith teaches that there is a Heaven for the good and a hell for the wicked; the Faith teaches that the sufferings of hell

are eternal; the Faith teaches that a single mortal sin is enough to condemn a soul, because of the infinite malice of mortal sin, which is an offense against an infinite God. Given these absolutely certain principles, when I see the ease with which sins are committed, when I see the multitude of men and women who are continually in mortal sin, and who are thus walking towards death and hell, how could I rest? I must run, I must shout. I tell myself—if I saw someone falling into a well, into a fire, I would certainly start to run and shout to save them. Why then would I not do the same to keep men from falling into the fires of hell?"

Like a good son

In his exhortations, Don Anthony recalled the need to obey God's Commandments in order to arrive at the eternal happiness of Heaven: "It is certain that God is your Father. In fact, He created you, and He placed in you His image and likeness, and He wants you to inherit the patrimony of Heaven—it was for this end that He created you. But, He also wants you to behave like a good son—and if you do not, that is to say, if you violate His Commandments, and die without repenting, you will not be able to reach the end for which you were created... God is your Father and He loves you tremendously. Because of this love that He has for you He sent His Son to be your Teacher and Doctor, who, to cure your mortal illness, gave as a cure the blood from His veins, administering the dose of this divine medicine in the blessed Sacraments." And to help men and women practice the Commandments, which could seem a burden too heavy to bear, he wrote further: "Dear Christian, you must know that it is my love for you that motivates me to write what I am going to tell you... May God be my witness that I am telling the truth, and that I only want your happiness. Do you want happiness in this world and in the next? There is a secret—do not sin, and you will obtain it. Do you want not to sin? For that there is an infallible remedy—remember death, think of your certain death, and you will not sin... Pay attention to the advice that my desire for your good is telling me. Put your affairs in order now, and put yourself in the state in which you would like to find yourself at the hour of death. Make a sincere confession full of sorrow for your sins; flee evil; store up good works, since these are the only things you will be able to take with you from this world."

Anthony Claret published more than 150 books and brochures, and had a great number of holy cards printed. More than one conversion was initiated by this modest means. He also established a number of confraternities. But the great work of his life was the founding of the Congregation of Missionary Sons of the Immaculate Heart of MARY, established July 16, 1849. This is a group of priests who dedicate themselves to preaching and catechesis, while leading a fervent religious life. Anthony Claret himself described what a member of this congregation must be: "A Son of the Immaculate Heart of

MARY is a man who is consumed with love and who sets on fire everything in his path. He is a man who unceasingly spends himself to light the fire of divine love in the world... He only thinks of one thing—to work, suffer, and seek at all times the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls, in imitation of Our Lord JESUS CHRIST."

This imitation of the Lord is achieved by practicing the virtue of humility. Don Claret wrote, "I have tried to imitate JESUS, who told us: *Learn from Me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls* (Mt. 11:29). I contemplated Him constantly—in the crèche, in His workshop, on Calvary. I meditated on His words, His sermons, His actions, His way of eating, of dressing, of going from one town to another. I encouraged myself at all times to follow this example, and thought, 'How would JESUS act in the circumstance I am in?' Then I tried to imitate it, and was full of joy at the thought of the happiness I was bringing Him by imitating Him."

A dreaded responsibility

So much work and so many virtues made Anthony Claret noticed. In August 1849, he was appointed archbishop of Santiago, Cuba, in the Spanish Antilles. In his humility, he energetically refused, but had to yield to the insistence of the Apostolic Nuncio. He was consecrated as a bishop on October 6, 1850, at the age of 42, at which time he added the name "Mary" to his first name. The new archbishop arrived in a diocese that was vast in size, but materially and spiritually poor. His first concern was to create a seminary to form many and holy priests. He also had to see to the reform of the existing clergy. So he enjoined all his priests to spend one month a year in the seminary to perfect their studies.

Cuba's political context was difficult. The local slave owners reproached the new archbishop for his leniency and called him a revolutionary, while the separatists reproached him for being a Spaniard. Despite all this, the saint remained at peace: "I will remain on the cross until the Lord unfastens me!" To those who hoped to see him counterattack his enemies, he replied, "Leave them be. I know what is best for me. Persecutions keep me humble and resigned. I suffer, of course, from how they are offending Our Lord, but they are helping me to achieve my purpose, and they are offering me the opportunity to suffer for the love of God."

At the time, great moral disorder prevailed in Cuba—many people cohabitated without being married. Archbishop Claret went throughout the diocese, preaching missions and regularizing matrimonial situations.

The saint's pastoral concern for Christian marriage is completely understandable. The intimate bodily union between a man and a woman is an act with profound meaning. It is a sign of the total gift, exclusive and permanent, of one to another. This is why it is only licit when the two have truly given themselves to each other

in marriage. "[W]hat can 'union' mean when the partners make no commitment to one another, each exhibiting a lack of trust in the other, in himself, or in the future?", asks the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which goes on to state that concubinage and "free union" are situations that "offend against the dignity of marriage; they destroy the very idea of the family; they weaken the sense of fidelity. They are contrary to the moral law. The sexual act must take place exclusively within marriage. Outside of marriage it always constitutes a grave sin and excludes one from sacramental communion" (CCC, 2390).

Remaining at his post

In August 1852, Archbishop Claret predicted an earthquake that indeed shook Santiago—not one building escaped it, but thanks to the saint's prayers, there were no deaths. On February 1, 1856, he barely escaped an attack on him by a man armed with a straight razor, who made a deep gash on his face from forehead to chin. After having recovered from this attempt on his life, the archbishop made a trip to Rome; there, Pope Pius IX asked him to remain at his post. In a spirit of faith and obedience, he returned to Santiago. But one year later, he was called back to Spain by Queen Isabella II to serve as her confessor. He nevertheless remained in charge of the diocese of Santiago until 1860. When he arrived in Spain, the queen explained to him the reasons for her choice—she wished at all costs to do the will of God, and to ensure the salvation of her soul. Before accepting this ministry, Archbishop Claret set as conditions that he would not live at the royal palace, and that he would be free to devote himself to preaching and to visiting hospitals. During the twelve years that the saint performed

the duties of chaplain, the royal couple led a very Christian life—frequenting the Sacraments, daily Rosary, spiritual reading—and maintained perfect harmony. Sumptuous dinners, balls, and theater became more rare. Provocative clothing disappeared—on several occasions, Archbishop Claret had threatened the queen that he would leave if this scandal did not come to an end.

Isabella II was particularly docile in the hands of her director. Archbishop Claret gave this testimony: "I did not speak the truth to anyone as frankly as to the queen. With others, I find a way to make the truths less bitter, but with her I am able to give them whole and unvarnished, just as they come to my mind." The queen's travels gave Archbishop Claret the opportunity to preach sermons, missions, and retreats across Spain.

In November 1868, Isabella II was driven from the throne by a revolution—she had to take exile in France, where her confessor followed her. In doing so, Archbishop Claret left Spain for good. In spite of his health, which was becoming increasingly delicate, Archbishop Claret actively looked after the Spanish community in Paris. On March 30, 1869, he went to Rome to participate in the First Vatican Council. On his return to France in July 1870, the Spanish ambassador called for his arrest. Archbishop Claret, warned in time by the bishop of Perpignan, took refuge in the Cistercian Abbey of Frontfoide, in Languedoc. It was in this setting of monastic peace that he rendered his soul to God, on October 24, 1870. He was canonized by Pope Pius XII on May 7, 1950. Today, the Sons of the Immaculate Heart of MARY, or Claretian Missionaries, number about 3,000 throughout the world.

May Saint Anthony Mary Claret obtain for us the gift of a renewed zeal for the glory of God and the salvation of our neighbor, with the strength of soul needed to preach with our lives and our words the truth of Christ, who alone leads us to eternal happiness!

Dom Antoine Marie
o.s.b.

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