



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of September 23, 2011,
saint Pio of Pietrelcina

Dear Friends,

IF we truly want to know the Face of God, all we have to do is to contemplate the Face of Jesus! In His Face we truly see who God is and what He looks like!" (Benedict XVI, September 6, 2006). The image of the Holy Face of Our Lord has been revered by many Christians throughout the history of the Church. Among them was a pious layman of the 19th century, Monsieur Dupont, called in his lifetime "the Holy Man of Tours." In 1851, he introduced a devotion to the Holy Face that transformed his house into a pilgrimage shrine where graces have abounded.

"Marquis Considerate"

Leon Papin-Dupont was born in Martinique on January 24, 1797. He scarcely knew his father, an officer of Breton origin who died in 1803, leaving his young wife to take care of a large estate and raise their two children. From his earliest years, Leon's frankness and candor of soul set him apart from his peers. From 1811 to 1815, with his brother Theobald, he went to high school in Pontlevoy, France, in the Touraine. An uncle took care of the boys at his chateau in Chissay, near Blois, as though they were his own sons. In 1818, Leon was in Paris to study law. The time in the capital was not without danger for this very distinguished young Creole, whose friends nicknamed him "Marquis Considerate"—he enjoyed a great fortune, and spent freely, though he continued to practice his religion. Leon passionately loved to have fun, dancing and horseback riding, but he was extremely generous. Providence led him to discover the Little Savoyards, run by young laymen of his station, who belonged to the Congregation of the Blessed Virgin. This project, founded in Paris in 1666 to catechize young chimney sweeps, overwhelmed him. There were men who deeply practiced this religion that he barely scratched the surface of, men who sacrificed their liberty for the salvation of poor boys! In comparison, his life seemed empty and miserable. He wrote to a friend: "All of a sudden, the light has dawned for me. This ray of light made me see the importance of Christian life, the critical matter of Salvation. Grace had to intervene!" Grace intervened strong and triumphant—Leon abandoned his worldly habits and gave himself entirely to a life of piety and good works.

Won over by the Little Savoyards, he decided to join them. Some instruction completed his religious formation. He was allowed to make his consecration into the Marian Congregation on November 12, 1820, and made it his duty to abide by all its rules. And so it was that one



Leon Papin-Dupont

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Sunday while he was traveling, he entered a church and asked a priest to hear his confession, so that he might receive Communion. In those days, a priest was not used to seeing a young man flout public opinion and ask for Holy Communion on an ordinary Sunday! He hesitated, thinking it might be a joke. Then the student explained to him that he was in a confraternity and had made it a rule to approach the sacraments every week. His generosity was shown in his heroic sacrifices. Once he was at the home of a stationer who was poor and had a family to support; the man's creditors were there to declare him bankrupt. After asking about the amount owed, Leon pointed to the street, and said, "Take my horse and carriage; sell them and pay." Thus the merchant was on his feet again. The following year, diplomas in hand, he returned to Martinique and became the Commissioner-Advisor to the royal court in Saint-Pierre, the island's seat of government.

Leon was unsure about his future direction—priesthood or secular life? His brother's death in 1826 and his mother's wishes made him decide to start a family. On May 9, 1827, he married Caroline d'Audiffredy, a young Creole he knew from the chateau in Chissay, when she was a student at the Ursulines' school in Tours. In 1832, Leon became the father of a little girl, Henriette. But his wife died eight months later, brought down by tuberculosis. It was a very heavy blow and a great sorrow for the young husband. Afterwards, Leon and his mother decided to leave for France, with the intention of settling in

Tours, where Henriette could receive a good education from the Ursulines. It was there, in 1835, that Monsieur Dupont—as he called himself for the sake of simplicity—formed two key friendships, with the rector of the cathedral, and the Superior of the Ursulines. With them, he once again examined his vocation. After reflecting and praying, the two advisors urged him to remain single, thinking that this way he would have more influence on society. His behavior created a sensation in the town. Without concern for human respect, he fearlessly showed everyone what he was and what he wanted to be—a sincere and fervent Christian going to Mass every day, not hesitating to serve at the Mass when no other server was present, and regularly going to confession and receiving Communion. He traced what he called his “conversion” back to a grace received in the chapel in Chissay on July 22, 1837, the feast of Saint Mary Magdalene. It was an experience of God that interiorly transformed his life. He became the man of the Absolute, the penitent. Having glimpsed the infinite Majesty of God, he developed a great horror of sin. From then on, he was determined to live only for God. He still had the politeness and urbanity of a man of good upbringing, but he had broken with all worldliness.

A life's happiness

Leon kept the love of God alive in his heart by regularly reading and meditating on Holy Scripture. On a large desk in the middle of his room, there were two thick Bibles, one in Latin and the other in French. Without “this book which has been my happiness for a great many years and which daily gives me light on the things of Heaven, what would I have become, weighed down by my passions and my ignorance?” he wrote at the end of his life. Soon, Biblical expressions spontaneously sprung forth from his lips and his pen.

“Those who know God’s word also know fully the significance of each creature,” declared Pope Benedict XVI. “... The Word of God makes us change our concept of realism: the realist is the one who recognizes in the Word of God the foundation of all things. This realism is particularly needed in our own time, when many things in which we trust for building our lives, things in which we are tempted to put our hopes, prove ephemeral. Possessions, pleasure and power show themselves sooner or later to be incapable of fulfilling the deepest yearnings of the human heart. ... Truly, since *for ever, O Lord, Your word is firmly fixed in the heavens* and the faithfulness of the Lord *endures to all generations* (Ps. 119:89-90), whoever builds on this word builds the house of his life on rock (cf. Mt. 7:24)” (Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*, September 30, 2010).

During his meditations on Holy Scripture, Monsieur Dupont discovered the way of spiritual childhood. Several times he formulated the principles of this spirituality, forty years before Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, who would practice it so well. He wrote, “In every circum-

stance, our primary concern is to progress in the holy love of God and to use all our forces to acquire the simplicity of Christian childhood. Look at the child—he does nothing... he does not even know that he does nothing, and yet he lives a continuous action in the arms of his mother. Similarly, let us be completely lost in the arms of God.” Leon appreciated all the external signs of devotion—scapulars, ribbons, medals—but he had a special devotion to the medal of Saint Benedict, which he widely distributed for the conversion of sinners, and deliverance from all sorts of troubles. His zeal and faith were also shown in his frequent pilgrimages, an ancient devotion then largely abandoned. “The pilgrim,” as he liked to call himself, could be seen going to pray at the sites or ruins of former shrines that the French Revolution had desecrated or destroyed, particularly at the ruins of the Basilica of Saint Martin in Tours, and at shrines dedicated to the Virgin MARY. When he heard the news of the apparitions of La Salette (September 19, 1846), he was one of the first to climb the holy mountain. He brought back miraculous water from La Salette, and kept an indelible memory of his conversations with the little shepherds.

Following his trip to Saint James of Compostela on November 6, 2010, Pope Benedict XVI wondered “what it is that impels so many people to leave their daily occupations to set out on the penitential journey ..., a way at times long and arduous. It is the desire to reach Christ’s light which they yearn for in the depths of their heart ... At moments of confusion, of seeking, of difficulty, as well as the aspiration to strengthen their faith and live in a manner more consistent with it, pilgrims ... embark on a profound process of conversion to Christ who took upon Himself the weakness, the sin of humanity, the wretchedness of the world, taking them to where evil has no more power, where the light of goodness illuminates all things. It is a people of silent walkers ... who rediscover the ancient medieval and Christian tradition of the pilgrimage” (General Audience, November 10, 2010).

“You will not leave me”

In 1847, Leon experienced the greatest trial of his life. Henriette, his beautiful and tall fifteen-year-old daughter, the living image of her mother, demonstrated exceptional gifts—a lively intelligence, great imagination and sensitivity, and a great faith. However, she had been a little too spoiled by her father and grandmother, and she showed a will that was less firm than it ought to be. Her father’s vigilant eye was worried about the definite attraction she had for the world and its pleasures. “My God,” he said, “if You foresee that she will stray from the straight and narrow path, I allow You to take her away from me, rather than see her give herself over to the vanities of the age.” God, it seems, heard this heroic prayer—Henriette was suddenly stricken with typhoid fever. When all hope was lost, Monsieur Dupont himself prepared his daughter to die well, talking to her of Heaven with pious enthusiasm. After she had received

the last sacraments, he asked her, "Now, my daughter, that you have received so many graces, are you happy?"—"Yes, Papa!"—"Will you regret anything on earth?"—"Yes, Papa!"—"What, then?"—"Leaving you!"—"No, you will not leave me—we will not be separated at all. God is everywhere; you will be with Him in Heaven, and you will see Him. I will pray here, and through Him I will be with you." When the child breathed her last, the father said to the doctor: "Doctor, my daughter goes to see God!" and recited the *Magnificat*.

Living in the midst of so much moral and material poverty, Leon felt compelled to act, because he was moved by every distress. He discreetly supported young people who had banded together in a Conference of Saint Vincent de Paul. He subsidized a foundation of Little Sisters of the Poor that he had brought to Tours, and took a great liking to this house where he spent his Sunday evenings with the elderly, helping the sisters with the humblest tasks. In Touraine there was a community of English people with whom he had many contacts, and from which he brought a number of Anglicans to full communion with the Catholic Church. In addition, he worked on behalf of the missions in North America (Indiana) and Polynesia. But three works were particularly close to his heart—nocturnal adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, the revival of pilgrimages to Saint Martin, and the act of reparation to the Holy Face of JESUS.

At the feet of Our Lord

Nocturnal adoration of the Blessed Sacrament began with an initiative in Paris during the riots of 1848: a few girls and women gathered for prayer vigils before the image of the Holy Face, then before the Blessed Sacrament in the Carmelite chapel on Rue d'Enfer. The intention was to offer reparation for the sins of mankind to an offended God and to obtain for it the graces of conversion. Inspired by this example, a men's group was formed, begun by a Jewish convert, Hermann Cohen. The men's nocturnal adoration was inaugurated December 8, 1848 at Notre-Dame-des-Victoires (Our Lady of Victories); two months later, on February 2, 1849, Monsieur Dupont obtained from Archbishop Morlot permission to begin nocturnal adoration in Tours. The first volunteers were inspired by his faith, and took care of the smallest practical details so that the adorations might go smoothly. His zeal spread far, to many towns. However, he concealed his own role as much as possible, hiding behind friends and acquaintances. "The best way to pray," he said, "is to unite in a single thought at night at the feet of Our Lord, adoring Him, making reparation to Him, and bringing our needs to Him. Oh, what a blessing for this generation if such thought were carried out throughout all of France!"

The Basilica of Saint Martin having been destroyed during the French Revolution, a neighborhood had built

up on the site of the former monastery. The cholera epidemic of 1849 nevertheless reawakened devotion to Saint Martin, with the procession of the saint's relics through the streets of the city. The following year, Monsieur Dupont founded in Tours a charity in honor of the great fourth-century evangelizer of Gaul. It collected clothing and mended it before distributing it to the poor, hence its name, "Saint Martin's Closet". This organization undertook the project of reconstructing the Basilica. The tomb of Saint Martin was discovered on December 14, 1860, amidst great joy and intense fervor. A temporary chapel was provided until the new basilica could be built, which Monsieur Dupont would not live to see.

The Holy Face

In the Carmel in Tours, a young nun, Sister Marie de Saint-Pierre (1816-1848), in 1843 began to receive messages from Heaven inviting her to make reparation for offenses against Our Lord. She was to encourage devotion to the Holy Name of God, to the Childhood of JESUS, and to His Holy Face disfigured and insulted during the Passion. After Sister Marie de Saint-Pierre's death, Monsieur Dupont continued her mission by spreading her request and desire for reparation. But it was only during Holy Week in 1851 that this apostolate really began. On Palm Sunday, the Mother Prioress of the Carmel had an engraving of the Holy Face given to him, a copy of the "Veronica" (the true image) that was venerated at that time at Saint Peter's in Rome. He displayed it in his parlor and lit a small vigil lamp. He hoped that this lighted lamp would elicit questions and give him the opportunity to speak about God, sins, and the duty of reparation that devolves on fervent souls. On Holy Saturday, Monsieur Dupont received a visit from a young woman who was suffering from very intense pain in her eyes. He joined her in prayer before the Holy Face, and suggested that she place a little oil from the lamp on her eyes. "My eyes don't hurt anymore!" she exclaimed. Soon a great number of miracles were experienced by pilgrims who had come to the home of the "Holy Man of Tours" to pray in a spirit of reparation and love. On some days, three hundred people came into his parlor and ended their pilgrimage by going to confession and receiving Communion. The fame of the parlor on Rue Saint-Étienne spread, first in France and then around the world. It became the most-frequented pilgrimage site in France after Ars. Monsieur Dupont did his best to keep up with the correspondence that swelled beyond measure, curtailing all his other occupations except for nocturnal adoration. He was asked for drops of oil from the lamp that burned day and night before the Holy Face. In 1854, he had already given or sent more than sixty thousand vials. That same year, he distributed twenty-five thousand images of the Holy Face. He wrote down the graces received, the conversions and the miracles produced, to preserve the memory of the divine generosity.

For Monsieur Dupont, worshipping the Holy Face was not a devotion like others, but devotion to the very person of the Incarnate Word in His humanity, humiliated in the Passion, following in His tracks and thus bringing his tenderness. In the same line of thought, Pope John Paul II would say before the Holy Shroud of Turin: "The Shroud is also an image of God's love as well as of human sin. It invites us to rediscover the ultimate reason for JESUS' redeeming death. ... Echoing the Word of God and centuries of Christian consciousness, the Shroud whispers: believe in God's love, the greatest treasure given to humanity, and flee from sin, the greatest misfortune in history" (May 24, 1998).

In imitation of the suffering Christ, the "Holy Man of Tours" advanced on the path of humility and spiritual poverty. With the war of 1870, the number of pilgrims decreased. But soon, Monsieur Dupont could no longer receive them himself because paralysis gradually took over his entire body. Then, no longer free to write or read, condemned to isolation and at times agonizing pain, he prayed continually, day and night, without complaining. He repeated his beautiful invocation: "May I die changed by the ardent thirst to see the Face I so desire, of Our Lord JESUS CHRIST." His last words were to beg for God in the Eucharist, after which he entered into an agony that lasted a week. Finally, on the morning of Saturday, March 18, 1876, he passed away peacefully at the age of 79. At his funeral, the entire city joined the procession to the cemetery. The following June 29th, the archbishop of Tours, Archbishop Collet, converted the house on Rue Saint-Étienne (now Rue Bernard Palissy) into a chapel. A tabernacle was placed in the parlor. The crowds returned with devotion to the Holy Face. To receive the pilgrims, a society of auxiliary priests was assigned to the chapel. Archbishop Collet established the Confraternity for Reparation for Blasphemies and the Profanation of Sunday, which had the mission

to spread worship of the Holy Face in the spirit of Sister Marie de Saint-Pierre. This effort spread quickly.

"There you will see how He loves us"

At Lisieux, for example, the Carmelites worked to establish a Confraternity in their town. On April 26, 1885, Monsieur Martin, the father of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, enrolled in it, along with his daughters. The image of the Holy Face profoundly marked the spiritual life of Thérèse Martin. The foundress of the Carmel in Lisieux, Mother Geneviève, had instilled in her novices a profound devotion to the Holy Face. One of their first readings was the life of Sister Marie de Saint-Pierre. When she entered Carmel, the Holy Face became Thérèse's favorite image. It reminded her that JESUS, in order to save us, did not hesitate to allow Himself to be insulted and disfigured. "Look JESUS in the face," she wrote to Céline on April 4, 1889. "There you will see how He loves us." By looking at this image, Thérèse in turn desired to be forgotten and accounted as nothing. A month after Sister Thérèse of the Child JESUS and the Holy Face took the habit, her father was committed to Bon Sauveur hospital in Caen, where he would stay for more than three years. Monsieur Martin suffered from cerebral arteriosclerosis, which affected his mental abilities. His illness gave renewed impetus to Sister Thérèse's devotion to the Holy Face. In the light of Chapter 53 of Isaiah, she wrote, "Just as the lovable Face of JESUS was veiled during His Passion, so must the face of His faithful servant [Monsieur Martin] be veiled in the days of his sorrows, in order to be able to shine in the Heavenly homeland alongside His Lord, the Eternal Word" (Manuscript A, 20 v°). On August 6, 1896, Sister Thérèse consecrated herself to the Holy Face with two of her novices. When on July 8, 1897, she was moved to the infirmary because of her illness, she had the image of the Holy Face spread by Monsieur Dupont hung on the curtain of her bed, saying, "How this Holy Face has aided me in my life!"

Sister Thérèse was still a young professed when, in 1891, Leon Papin Dupont's cause for beatification was opened. On March 21, 1983, Pope John Paul II promulgated the decree attesting to the heroic virtue of the "Holy Man of Tours."

May Venerable Leon Dupont teach us to live under the eyes of the Father of mercies, Who has revealed His Face to us in the Holy Face of His Son JESUS CHRIST.

Dom Antoine Marie
o.s.b.

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