



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of April 21, 2012,
Feast of Saint Anselm

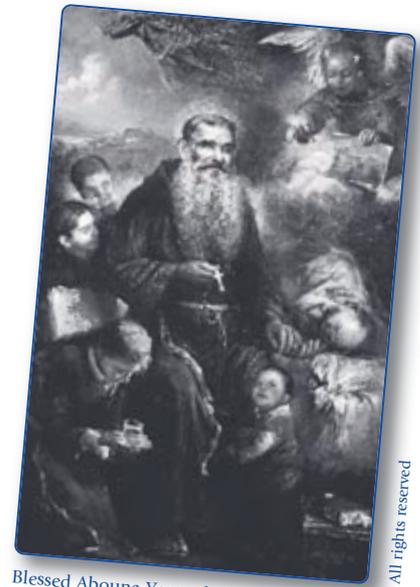
Dear Friends,

THE poor are cheques we can use anytime we want to make a withdrawal from the bank of divine Providence. If you truly understood Him Whom the poor represent on earth, you would serve them on your knees. Be certain that the bank of Providence will never run out of money." So spoke Father Jacques to the Franciscans of the Cross of Lebanon, which he had founded to serve the sick and the poor. This Capuchin priest had developed an extraordinary level of energy in order to wipe out the signs of poverty, disease and ignorance that circumstances had imposed on Lebanon.

Khalil Haddad, who would later become Father Jacques (Abouna Yaacoub), was born on February 1, 1875, in Ghazir, Lebanon. His mother gave birth to fourteen children, six of whom died at an early age. His parents were dressmakers. His mother taught him: "You will do everything and endure everything out of love for God... In difficult moments, pray the rosary." His father was a pious man but strict in raising his children. Khalil would receive from him common sense, as well as a sense of humor and determination. Khalil had an uneventful childhood. However, he had an accident the eve of an August 15th—along with friends, he climbed onto the terrace of the church where, according to a local custom, ash soaked in oil was spread to light a fire in the night. Suddenly, his clothes caught fire. He ran away, but his flight fanned the flames and put his life in danger. Fortunately, they managed to extinguish the fire, and the young man was not even burned. He considered his preservation a favor from Heaven.

"No, no, not me!"

Khalil went to school in Ghazir. Intelligent, hard-working, and conscientious, he had no difficulty with his studies. One day, at table, Mrs. El-Haddad opened her heart to her children: "Oh! What a joy it would be for me if one of you became a priest!" and her gaze stopped on Khalil. "Why are you looking at me?" he exclaimed. "Look at the others! No, no, not me!" In July 1891, at the end of his literature course, Khalil received the "Prize of Wisdom," awarded by the students' vote with the teachers' approval. In 1892, Khalil was invited by a distant uncle who ran a hotel in Alexandria, Egypt. On his arrival, he was hired by the Christian Brothers at Saint Mark's School as an Arabic teacher, a language he knew perfectly. After taking care of his expenses, he sent the rest of his salary to his father,



Blessed Abouna Yaacoub (Father Jacques)

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who was very pleased. To protect his faith and his purity, Khalil devoted himself to prayer and spending time in church. One day, on a friend's insistence, he agreed to go to a show that included photographic projections. Soon sickened by the provocative images, he covered his eyes with his hand. Never again would he let this happen.

Modesty, of which Khalil gave an example, is the refusal to unveil what should remain hidden. It protects the intimacy of the person. It is ordered to chastity, whose delicacy it affirms. It keeps glances and gestures in conformity with the dignity of the human person. Modesty is decency. It inspires the choice of clothing. It keeps silence where there is a risk of unhealthy curiosity (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 2521-2523). If, in our day, modesty is sometimes ridiculed, it remains indispensable and must be taught to all, because it awakens respect for the human person and protects the freedom and privacy of everyone. There is a real connection between the loss of modesty and the breakdown of society—murders, pedophilia, abortion...

On February 28, 1893, during the funeral of a 42-year-old Franciscan priest, Khalil grasped the emptiness of life, as well as the beauty of the total detachment that this Religious was an example of. "Yes, I will become a priest," he thought. "I will belong to God and nothing is going to stop me." Nevertheless, his friends made fun of him for his frequent visits to church and told him coarse

stories about members of the clergy, in particular about an unfortunate priest who did not live in accordance with the priesthood. Deeply moved by this priest's condition, Khalil spent nights in prayer for him. He told his companions: "Well, I am going to become a priest, and I will show you what a good priest looks like!"—"We'll soon see, holy man," his friends retorted.

To celebrate at least once...

When Mr. El-Haddad learned of his son's resolution, he opposed it vigorously. But Khalil remained firm in his plan and his father eventually relented; on August 25, 1893, he accompanied him to the nearby Capuchin monastery. Khalil was overjoyed. When he took his habit, he received the name of Brother Jacques. The monastery included many young Religious who had been driven out of France by the persecution. After his first profession on April 14, 1895, Brother Jacques began his studies in philosophy and theology. The students had to take care of a good amount of the household work themselves—sewing, sweeping, gardening, and laundry. During holidays, they devoted themselves to major renovations to the masonry. Brother Jacques also went on many missions where his knowledge of Arabic language and local customs were of great use. From 1896 on, he did apostolic work, particularly Marian devotions during the month of May. He made his perpetual profession on April 24, 1898, and aspired to priestly ordination: "My God," he prayed, "allow me to celebrate, even if only once, the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, then You can take me to Yourself. That would be my greatest joy and my greatest consolation." On November 1, 1901, he was ordained a priest. His superior sent him to celebrate his first Mass in Ghazir. During the journey, the horse-drawn cart he was riding in overturned in a deep ravine. Father Jacques was trapped, bleeding, in the vehicle. He believed his final hour had arrived, and begged the Blessed Virgin to help him. Finally, they managed to extricate him. The next day, he was able to celebrate the Mass in his village.

Abouna Yaacoub was soon appointed bursar for the Capuchin monasteries in Lebanon. This responsibility required long journeys on foot over mountain paths. One day he would say, "If they gave a prize for the number of kilometers walked, I would win it!" In the summer, he was dripping with sweat. In the winter, he was soaked to the bone by the rain and snow. His endless journeys exposed him to many dangers, but they did not keep him from doing favors for the Brothers or Sisters he met. His Superiors were eager to take him as a traveling companion on their trips, to serve as an interpreter or guide. In July 1910, Father Jacques embarked for France. To thank him for his hard work, his Superiors offered him a pilgrimage to Lourdes, Rome, and Assisi. After spending three days in Lourdes, he tore himself away from the blessed grotto and left France, never to see it again. He went to Assisi, then Rome, where the Pope Saint Pius X received him in audience.

From 1905 on, Abouna Yaacoub was responsible for administering the schools created by the Capuchins in the mountains. He rejected the idea of large teaching institutions and preferred small free schools throughout Lebanon, offering education to all, especially to the children of the poor. Over five years, he would bring the number of schools from 15 to 230. This apostolate demanded untiring patience to find the sites, the teachers, the furniture, the school supplies, and the funds; and to listen to families' complaints and appease quarrels. His great desire was to strengthen the faith of young children. "Until recently," he wrote, "a simple and robust faith characterized our Lebanese people, shining with all its brilliance. Over the last several years, it seemed to grow dim. The thirst for gold has been the primary cause. America has appeared as a mine, and the emigrants have gone there, and are going there still by the thousands, to try their fortune... When they return, they have lost some or all of their faith and above all their religious practices... The remedy is to reawaken the faith in souls of children and to preserve it, by still teaching the catechism, particularly in Arabic, preaching retreats, and preparing children for First Holy Communion."

An indispensable requirement

Yet today, studying the catechism remains a priority for all Christians. During a general audience on December 30, 2009, Pope Benedict XVI pointed out, "[T]he organic presentation of faith is an indispensable requirement. ... 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." He also asked the young people participating in World Youth Day in Madrid: "Study the catechism! ... Sacrifice your time for it! ... You must know what you believe; you must know your faith with the same precision with which a specialist in information technology knows the working system of a computer ... yes, you must be much more profoundly rooted in the faith [than] the generation of your parents, to be able to resist forcefully and with determination the challenges and temptations of this time."

When he visited schools, Father Jacques was often invited to give a sermon or a spiritual retreat. On these occasions he expressed himself simply but with conviction. Twenty-four volumes, and many loose sheets, of sermons written in his own hand have been preserved. To his listeners he spoke from his overflowing heart, augmenting his preaching with striking anecdotes and examples drawn from the lives of the saints. "The preacher," he said, "is God's clarion. ... I am a voice crying out in the desert, in the heart of the sinner which is like a desert. What a ruin is the place where God is not!"

Father Jacques also devoted himself to administering the sacrament of penance.

Abouna Yaacoub zealously spread the Third Order Franciscans. He explained that Saint Francis exhorted his listeners to hate sin and to lead a life of penance; several of them wanted to follow under his banner and he mapped out a new way for them, adapted to lay life—that is how the Third Order came about. “The spirit of the world today is in the process of shaking the elect,” the Father declared. “Only the Christian spirit can triumph over it ... This spirit is contained in the conditions of admission for the candidate (to the Third Order), the primary ones of which are: good conduct, loving peace, dedication to the Catholic faith, and submission to the Church.” He founded his first Third Order fraternity in Beirut in 1906. About twenty years later, there were more than 10,000 Third Order members. Father Jacques kept a close eye on the fraternities, entrusting them to priests who themselves were Third Order Franciscans, keeping for himself the organization of regional or national gatherings. On January 1, 1913, he launched a magazine, *The Friend of the Family*, which published articles on spirituality, pedagogy, and poetry. He also published various works, including a short life of Saint Francis, religious plays, and prayer booklets of the Stations of the Cross.

Knowing how to hang on

During the First World War, the French Capuchins had to leave Lebanon, and Abouna Yaacoub was appointed Superior of the Lebanese Capuchins. Under the Turkish occupation, he took enormous risks for his life, especially since famine and typhus were rampant. He clung to the Cross with an unshakable faith: “We consider this time terrifying, when every disaster has descended upon us. The present frightens us, and the future makes us tremble. Will we fall into discouragement and despair? No! The aware Christian clings to calm and patience, for he knows that God holds in His hands the book of history. Adversity opens the eyes that well-being has closed.”

For a long time, Abouna Yaacoub had been making arrangements for the construction of a general meeting center for his fraternities. After the war, another objective was added to this plan—to erect a monument where people could come to pray for the thousands of Lebanese who had died with no one to place a cross on their grave. And from that site, people would call for the Virgin’s blessing on all emigrated Lebanese. In 1919, he purchased a plot of land in Jall ed Dib, on a hill where he built a small convent dedicated to Our Lady of the Sea. In 1923, he unveiled a new building as well as a statue of the Virgin carrying Jesus, with a ship at her feet. Two years later, a huge cross, ten meters tall, was placed on top of the building. Father Jacques was overjoyed. In 1929, at Deir el Qamar, a small town that long ago had been the capital of Lebanon, he undertook the erection

of a monumental, twenty-meter Cross that would be finished in 1932. Every year, the feast of the Cross was like a national holiday, where Third Order Franciscans and simple faithful flooded in by the thousands. Soon a Stations of the Cross would be installed, followed by nighttime lighting.

In July 1925, Abouna Yaacoub expanded the sanctuary at Our Lady of the Sea. One day in 1926, he was called to hear the confession of a sick priest. He was a former monk who had left his monastery and now repented, but was left to himself in remorse and discouragement. Abouna Yaacoub welcomed this poor priest to Our Lady of the Sea, and thus began an initiative to assist elderly priests and priests who suffered from long-term physical or mental disabilities. “Take care not to turn away a priest who knocks at our convent door,” he would advise his Nuns. “If a room is not available, give him mine... The priest is Christ on earth. He must be respected and honored.” Later on, other priests as well as sick and handicapped persons from every social and religious background would be received there. In 1948, the sanctuary of the Cross (Our Lady of the Sea) would house 400 patients.

As many as the “Hail MARY’s”

Confronted with the increase in work that came with taking in priests and the sick, Abouna Yaacoub thought about founding a new religious Congregation, affiliated with the Third Order Franciscans. During the summer of 1929, assisted by Franciscan Sisters, a small group of young Third Order women who aspired to religious life came to take care of the priests, taking courses and learning to do all sorts of tasks. Their life was difficult—they had to knead the bread, fetch water from the spring, gather bundles of firewood from the woods, and carry the laundry to be washed all the way to Jall ed Dib. But all was done in an atmosphere of gaiety and enthusiasm, for these ardent souls were consumed by an interior fire. Father Jacques gave them spiritual formation and insisted on harmony, charity, and self-sacrifice, a humble life in silence. The community grew quickly. One evening in 1936, during a preaching tour in Palestine, Abouna Yaacoub was in the church in Nazareth. “Oh, MARY,” he prayed, “grant that at the hour of my death, the number of my nuns equals the number of Hail MARY’s I am able to say before the church closes.” He began to finger his beads. He had just finished the one hundred fiftieth bead when the sacristan came to close the doors of the church. Eighteen years later at Abouna Yaacoub’s death, the Congregation would number one hundred fifty religious.

In 1937, the Lebanese government granted Father Jacques a subsidy for each person the Sisters took in. From then on, the infirm, the elderly, the blind, the mentally handicapped would arrive, sent by the government or by municipalities... Abouna Yaacoub had to open other nursing homes and care centers, expand

buildings, and find ever more funding. To a friend who asked him about his bookkeeping, he replied, "Don't talk to me about bookkeeping. That is outside my scope. God is my accountant. I keep nothing with me. Whatever comes I immediately spend on the poor." But his trust in God did not make him lose sight of the virtue of prudence, and he took care not to incur debts in constructing the fourteen centers (schools, homes, hospitals...) that he founded. His many works put him in contact with a great number of people, including national leaders. But in the complexity of relations that he had to maintain with civil and religious authorities, he always remained very fair towards everyone, and never ended up in court.

The only way to salvation

His crowning achievement was the sanctuary that an interior call urged him to erect to Christ the King, to Whom he wished to consecrate Christian Lebanon. Pope Pius XII had declared in the encyclical *Summi Pontificatus*:

"At the head of the road which leads to the spiritual and moral bankruptcy of the present day stand the nefarious efforts of not a few to dethrone Christ; the abandonment of the law of truth which He proclaimed and of the law of love which is the life breath of His Kingdom. In the recognition of the royal prerogatives of Christ and in the return of individuals and of society to the law of His truth and of His love lies the only way to salvation" (nos. 21-22) (October 20, 1939).

Abouna Yaacoub chose for the site the hill called "The Ruins of the Kings", where ancient conquerors had carved in the rock the record of their victorious armies. Begun in 1950, the sanctuary includes a basilica and buildings to accommodate elderly or sick priests and Nuns. A twelve-meter-high statue of the Sacred Heart crowns the edifice. The center was inaugurated on the last Sunday of October 1952, on the feast of Christ the

King. In the course of construction, workers had discovered an underground cave. Full of joy, Father Jacques exclaimed, "That's for the Queen!", and he built there an oratory in honor of the Immaculate Conception of MARY.

The works that Abouna Yaacoub carried out did not make him forget his vocation as a Capuchin friar. His entire life was punctuated by prayer. He had a very special devotion to the Eucharist and to the Cross of Christ. In his last days, he never stopped repeating, "The Cross is my life! I hail Thee, my Cross! You have always been on my chest, on my table, in my room, on my paths in my travels." One of his last words was this oft-repeated call: "O Saviour's Cross, oh, beloved of my heart!"

Abouna Yaacoub had always enjoyed robust health. However, in May 1954, he dictated these lines: "My mind is still clear, but in other respects I am overwhelmed with infirmities—insomnia, cataracts, prostate, eczema. All these miseries make me a walking hospital, for I still walk and do my work as best I can." A doctor discovered by chance that he was suffering from leukemia: "Oh, how this delighted and comforted me," the Father exclaimed... "For me, death is a joy and a consolation because I am going to meet my heavenly Father." He told the Sisters' Superior, who was worried about his leaving them: "Do not be afraid. If a man goes from one room to another, does it mean he has abandoned his loved ones and will no longer help them? ... I will go to Heaven, and I will not cease to support you." He declared to the Sisters: "As long as you live in harmony, and charity reigns among you, no one will be able to do anything against you. I want everyone to sacrifice her life for her sister." Today, the Lebanese Franciscan Sisters of the Cross continue their mission—there are 230 Sisters spread across six countries (General House: Our Lady of the Well, Bkennaya, Jall ed Dib. BP 60-206 - Metn, Lebanon).

On June 26th, Yaacoub received Extreme Unction and the Eucharist in Viaticum, then rendered his soul to God at three o'clock in the afternoon, after having murmured, "JESUS, MARY, JOSEPH." He was beatified on June 22, 2008.

With Pope Benedict XVI, let us ask that "the intercession of Blessed Abouna Yaacoub, united with that of the saints of Lebanon, finally obtain for that beloved and martyred country that has suffered so much, progress towards a lasting peace."

Dom Antoine Marie
o.s.b.

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