



# Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of June 13, 2013,  
Feast of Saint Anthony of Padua

*Dear Friends,*

**T**HE year was 1836. Father Desgenettes, the parish priest at Our Lady of Victories in Paris, was discouraged. For four years, his zeal had been unable to overcome the indifference of a middle class bogged down by material interests. He thought seriously about resigning. This temptation hounded him until Saturday, December 3<sup>rd</sup>, when, as he was celebrating the Mass at the altar of the Blessed Virgin, he several times received this interior word: "Consecrate your parish to the Most Holy and Immaculate Heart of MARY." Father Desgenettes placed his parish in the hands of the Virgin MARY, and everything was transformed: his church became a "refuge of sinners", to the point of its renown spreading to the ends of the earth. Who was this priest whose ministry was so influential?

## *Intense nature*

**O**n August 10, 1778, in Alençon, France, the magistrate Charles-Guillaume Dufriche-Desgenettes, his wife, and their two daughters rejoiced over the birth of Charles-Éléonore. From Charles' earliest years, Madame Desgenettes strived to pass down the faith to her son and teach him piety. Gifted with a quick mind and a remarkable memory, little Charles had to overcome his intense, even combative, nature. He built little oratories in honor of the Blessed Virgin, to which he went often to beg forgiveness for having upset his mother. Sensitive, generous, and candid, he had a resolute temperament that sometimes made him stubborn. To subdue this turbulent disposition, his First Holy Communion was postponed six weeks, even though he was first in his catechism class. He would not forget this lesson. At the age of twelve, he already thought about the priesthood. His family moved to Sées, then to Dreux. Placed in the secondary school in Chartres, Charles' Catholic convictions drew attention—he refused to go to confession to a juror priest (a priest who had taken the schismatic oath required by the government established by the French Revolution). The execution of Louis XVI on January 21, 1793, led Monsieur Desgenettes to resign his post. He was arrested, imprisoned, and stripped of all his property, leaving his family destitute. To help his family's financial situation, Charles roamed the countryside. Farmers competed in generosity offering him food. He established contact with some priests faithful to Rome, who had been forced to go into hiding to avoid prison, or even the scaffold. Madame Desgenettes exhausted herself in useless attempts to get the authorities to release her husband. On August 4, 1794, Charles couldn't stand

it any longer. He went to the revolutionary club in Dreux and received permission to speak. This sixteen-year-old adolescent's plea obtained not only his father's release, but that of a hundred other prisoners.

The trial had matured the young man and strengthened him in his priestly vocation. Yet his family, frightened by the sufferings endured by priests, opposed his plan. Charles was stricken with typhoid. Seeing himself in danger of death, he vowed that he would consecrate himself to God in the clerical state if he was cured. He then sank into a healing sleep and, the next morning, was in perfect health. Becoming a bold apostle, he provided for the needs of priests in hiding, and with one of them began studying theology. In 1803, thanks to the recent Concordat, he could finally enter the major seminary in Sées. Nevertheless, one worry tormented him—the salvation of his father, who had abandoned all religious practice. He urged his mother and sister to double their prayers for a month to obtain his conversion. Soon after, they had the joy of seeing their prayers answered.

On June 9, 1805, on the Feast of the Holy Trinity, Charles was ordained a priest, and named assistant priest at the parish of Saint-Germain in Argentan. It was a delicate position, due to opposition between the partisans of the former Constitutional bishop (appointed by the Revolutionary government) and the Catholics who had remained faithful to Rome. The young priest, in charge of teaching catechism to children, gave the instruction in the church to increase its solemnity and



Father Desgenettes

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attract parishioners. Very soon, he succeeded in restoring unity among the faithful.

In 1815, Charles thought about joining the Society of JESUS, which Pope Pius VII had just reestablished. He confided in Father de Clorivière, who was working to restore the Jesuits in France. The two priests agreed to each celebrate Mass on September 8<sup>th</sup> for the intention of obtaining the Holy Spirit's enlightenment through MARY's intercession. After their prayer of thanksgiving, they met. The Jesuit's verdict was final: "You absolutely must give up this plan forever. God wants you to be a parish pastor; you will do more good that way."—"Me, a pastor? Never! I've already refused the position twice," replied the priest, who had always seen himself as a preacher, a confessor, an educator, but not, in any case, a pastor. "This year will not end before you receive your appointment," the Jesuit answered. "You will be sent into a parish where you will have much to suffer, but where you will do much good. After a few years, you will be sent to another city."

### *Persevering charity*

**A**nd in fact, in 1816, Father Desgenettes was appointed the pastor of Saint-Pierre-de-Montsort parish, in Alençon. The Montsort quarter was notorious for the revolutionary spirit and immorality of its inhabitants. In four years, he transformed his parish, thanks to his persevering charity which overcame many obstacles. However, some recalcitrants managed to get the government to remove him. He then wondered about his pastoral vocation, and considered dedicating himself to other works. But his virtues as a pastor were extolled to Doctor Récamier in Paris, who repeated them to Father Desjardin, the pastor of the parish of the Foreign Missions. Father Desjardin was enthusiastic—he wanted Desgenettes to be his assistant priest. Soon, the bishop of Sées agreed to loan him to the Parisian clergy, with the hope of getting him back one day.

Charles Desgenettes arrived in Paris in March 1819. In October, he succeeded Father Desjardin and found that he was, despite himself, the pastor of a Parisian parish that included hundreds of poor people. The Sunday evening catechism was specifically for them—all who attended were assured of leaving with vouchers for bread and wood. Father Desgenettes was not content to appeal only to the rich. He broke his own piggy bank to establish a new educational initiative, the Providence Saint-Charles, which Charles X generously supported. In 1829, Father Desgenettes welcomed a new assistant priest, the future Dom Guéranger, whom he would assist in his project to restore the abbey of Solesmes and the Benedictine order in France. In July 1830, revolution broke out. Father Desgenettes, whose works had been linked to the deposed king, became a target for the revolutionaries. He resigned and fled to Fribourg, Switzerland. But in the spring of 1832, learning that a cholera outbreak had stricken Paris, he decided to

return. Archbishop de Quelen appointed him pastor of Our Lady of Victories. This church, founded on December 8, 1629 in commemoration of Louis XIII's victories, particularly over the Protestants in La Rochelle, had been entrusted to the Discalced Augustinians. A very popular humble monk, Brother Fiacre, was the originator of Marian devotion at this sanctuary; in November 1637 he had received the mission from God to announce the imminent birth of the Dauphin (heir apparent to the throne), the future Louis XIV, and to hasten the official consecration of France to the Blessed Virgin. Through his efforts, he had MARY invoked at this church under the beautiful titles of "Mother of Mercy" and "Refuge of Sinners."

### *The pastor's great surprise*

**B**ut since that time, the Revolution had done its work and Father Desgenettes counted but forty people at the Sunday High Mass, in a parish of forty thousand souls! For four years, he traversed a "desert". "It is in vain," he said, "for the priest to mount the pulpit to break the bread of the Word: there is no one to hear him. His flock consists of a handful of Christians, who are afraid to be seen as such. The others, absorbed in calculations of interest and profit, or drowned in sensuality and passions, know neither the church, nor the shepherd." Following an interior locution he received during Mass on Saturday, December 3, 1836, he drew up the statutes for a prayer society for the conversion of sinners, and invited the faithful to come to the office of Vespers on Sunday, December 11<sup>th</sup> to beg for the conversion of sinners through the intercession of the Heart of MARY. Throughout the day that Sunday, the poor pastor worried, hoping that at least a few parishioners would come. That evening, to his great surprise, five hundred people showed up, including many men! Who had brought them? Many would admit that they did not know why they were there. The assembly, quiet during Vespers, participated enthusiastically in the Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. They spontaneously chanted the invocation from the Litany of the Blessed Virgin MARY three times: "Refuge of sinners, pray for us." Moved to tears, the priest immediately asked Our Lady for a sign of approval of the confraternity: a dramatic conversion in the parish, of Monsieur Etienne-Louis-Hector de Joly, a fervent Voltairian who was the last holder of the Seals of Louis XVI. The pastor had already tried in vain to see this blind and sick old man, but on Monday the 12<sup>th</sup>, he was finally ushered in to him. After a few minutes of conversation, this soul opened to grace—the conversion was instantaneous!

On December 16<sup>th</sup>, the confraternity was canonically established, and on January 12<sup>th</sup>, the first members were enrolled. Before the end of the year there were already 214 associates. From then on, Father Desgenettes understood his mission—to lead poor sinners to the feet of MARY, and so fight Satan's work in souls and in society. As for the associates, they were required to attend Mass the first Saturday of the month and to gather on Sunday

evenings for the confraternity's religious exercises. They "shall remember," the statutes say, "that it is above all by the purity of their hearts that they shall obtain the protection of the Most Holy and Immaculate Heart of MARY. They shall strive to merit it by good confessions and frequent Communion." For, as Father Desgenettes clarified, "it is with JESUS CHRIST, through JESUS CHRIST, using with Him the power and mediation of the Most Holy Heart of His august Mother, that we ask for the conversion of sinners."

"Entrusting the world to the Immaculate Heart of MARY," said Blessed John Paul II, "means returning to the foot of Her Son's Cross. Moreover, it means entrusting this world to the Savior's pierced Heart, taking it back to the very source of its Redemption. The Redemption always exceeds the sins of man and the sin of the world. The power of Redemption is infinitely superior to all the evil in humanity and in the world. The Heart of our Mother, more than any other anywhere in the universe, is well aware of that. This is why her Heart calls. It calls not only for conversion, it calls us to be helped by her, our Mother, to return to the source of Redemption" (Fatima, May 13, 1982).

### Countless conversions

From the start, the most visible graces rewarded the members' fervor. The work was still shielded from the slander and ridicule that would be poured upon it later. In a letter dated June 1837, Father Desgenettes wrote, "Countless sensational conversions have taken place, and most are of men between the ages of twenty and thirty. My parish was the center of indifference and impiety. Well ! It has given me astonishing consolations. In my whole life I never heard as many confessions as I have since last December. Among the neophytes I count several systematic atheists, former Carbonari, Saint-Simonianists (revolutionary factions)... All live as Christians today, many leading an angelic life." On April 24, 1838, Pope Gregory XVI raised the confraternity to an Archconfraternity. From then on, it could include faithful and Catholic communities from around the world. When Father Desgenettes died in 1860, more than 800,000 individuals had registered in the Archconfraternity, and some 14,000 Christian communities (parishes, congregations, schools) were enrolled. In 1845, the Curé d'Ars asked for his parish to be registered. In truth, Father Vianney had preceded his confrère in consecrating his parish to the Immaculate Heart of MARY; he had done so on May 1, 1836, seven months before Father Desgenettes. Nonetheless he humbly asked the Archconfraternity to accept his parish in Ars.

The pastor of Our Lady of Victories was aware that his church was linked to the chapel in rue du Bac, where the Virgin MARY had appeared to Catherine Labouré, a nun of the Sisters of Charity. MARY had asked her to have a medal struck that would come to be called "miraculous". Father Desgenettes discovered in it the source of

the graces that were poured out on his parish. That is why he had the Archconfraternity become one of the first centers for the distribution of the miraculous medal. Father Desgenettes also saw in this recourse to the Immaculate Heart of MARY the continuation of the revelations at Paray-le-Monial, in which Our Lord said: "You have rendered all my graces useless. Therefore, I give you a new pledge of My love and leniency. Go to My Mother, entrust to her most compassionate Heart all your evils, your sins, and your remorse. Beg her, by virtue of the tenderness, the merits, and the power of her Heart; she will intercede for you." On January 1, 1839, the first edition of the Archconfraternity's handbook was published, in which the founder recounted the most well-known graces. The handbook would be followed by the *Annals*, which would be distributed by numerous missionaries on the five continents. The eloquence of these writings would rival those of Fathers Lacordaire, Guéranger, d'Alzon, Libermann, and Ratisbonne, all of whom would come and preach at Our Lady of Victories. Among the graces obtained was the 1842 conversion to Catholicism of Alphonse Ratisbonne, Jewish by birth, which had an enormous impact. His elder brother Theodore, who had become a priest in 1830 and joined the Archconfraternity in 1839, helped Father Desgenettes in his ministry. The pastor insisted on obtaining a detailed account of Alphonse's conversion which he published in the *Annals* in April 1842. From then on, crowds made for Our Lady of Victories.

### "Monsieur Unapproachable"

Every morning, after a period of prayer, Father Desgenettes went to the church to hear confessions from 6 to 9, then celebrated Mass, followed by a long prayer of thanksgiving. During the day, he kindly received all sorts of people, whom he often led to the confessional. However, "Monsieur Unapproachable", as he had been nicknamed in Alençon, became impatient when he was interrupted, even by those prompted by a holy curiosity. "My time belongs to sinners, and there are many of them," he affirmed. One day, Mother Barat (Saint Sophie Barat, the foundress of the Society of the Sacred Heart) drew a curt reply when, accompanied by her novices, she told him: "We are quite pleased that you are praying for the conversion of poor sinners, for we are all sinners!"—"Mother," he answered, "I have other things to do besides attend to sinners of your kind!" But he himself was well aware of his faults. Twice a year, on the feast day of his patron saint and the anniversary of his ordination, he publicly asked the faithful to forgive him for his failures in their regard. "I did not break my character when I was younger, and now I am the victim of my impatience. All these flaws that I bemoan to God and to you will keep me long years in the flames of Purgatory, if God does not take pity on my poor soul, and if MARY, my good Mother, does not intercede for me."

However, the slander directed at him gave him the opportunity to make his Purgatory here on earth. The Archconfraternity did not draw only friends to him, as Father Libermann attested: "He is a saint and a man of great wisdom. Whatever bad priests there are in Paris are all unleashed against him. He lets them speak without ever taking the slightest step to justify himself. ... As to the Archconfraternity, jealousy makes them say that this holy man established it just to enrich himself. If every cleric enriched himself like him, it would be a great blessing for the poor. ... He showed me letters that came from all over, that proclaimed miracles accomplished by the prayers of the Archconfraternity. ... Many of these miracles were of the first order: hopeless illnesses suddenly cured, unexpected conversions..." The 37,000 votive offerings in the sanctuary testify still today to the varied graces that have transformed countless hearts.

It was on November 4, 1858, the feast day of his patron saint, that he celebrated Mass in the church of Our Lady of Victories for the last time. From then on, because he was 80 years old, and had great difficulty moving around, he celebrated Mass in an oratory adjoining his room. For another year and a half, he experienced the progressive deterioration of old age. During his last days, he had great difficulty expressing himself, but was anxious to bless the faithful on Good Shepherd Sunday, April 22, 1860. His last words as a preacher were marked by the straightforwardness and boldness he had shown all his life: "Pray and persevere, and you will triumph. Devotion to the Holy and Immaculate Heart of MARY is the principle and center of all devotion." He rendered his soul to God on April 25<sup>th</sup>. An immense crowd came to pay their respects before he was buried in his church, at the foot of her who had so often answered his prayers. Upon hearing of the death of this holy priest, Pope Pius IX was filled with sadness. The Pope had previously confided: "The Archconfraternity of the Immaculate Heart of MARY is the work of God. It is a

plan that Heaven has brought forth on earth. It will be a great resource for the Church."

Less than sixty years later, Our Lady appeared to three young children in Fatima, Portugal, to herself recommend devotion to Her Immaculate Heart; to exhort sinners to conversion and repentance for their sins, so as to avoid further afflicting Our Lord, already so greatly offended; and to encourage praying the Rosary. Blessed John Paul II declared, "In the light of maternal love, we understand the entire message of the Lady of Fatima. The greatest obstacle to man's journey toward God is sin, perseverance in sin, and, finally, denial of God. ... [T]he eternal salvation of man is found only in God. If man's rejection of God becomes definitive, it leads logically to God's rejection of man, to damnation ... Can the Mother who desires everyone's salvation with all the force of the love that she nourishes in the Holy Spirit, remain silent about that which threatens the very foundation of their salvation? No, she cannot!" (Fatima, May 13, 1982).

### Try to console me

On June 13, 1917, Our Lady declared to Lucia, the eldest of the three children who saw her at Fatima: "JESUS wishes to spread devotion to my Immaculate Heart throughout the world. I promise salvation to those who embrace this devotion. Their souls will be loved by God with a special love, like flowers placed by me before His throne." And on December 10, 1925, she clarified, "See, my daughter, my Heart surrounded by thorns, with which ungrateful men pierce me at every moment, by their blasphemies and ingratitude. You, at least, try to console me and announce in my name that I promise to assist at the moment of death, with all the graces necessary for salvation, all those who, on the first Saturday of five consecutive months go to Confession, receive holy Communion, recite the Rosary, and keep me company for fifteen minutes while meditating on the mysteries of the rosary, with the intention of making reparation to my Immaculate Heart."

In this year of Faith, let us ask the Blessed Virgin, she who is 'blessed because she believed' (cf. Lk 1:45), to make the theological virtue of Faith grow in our hearts, that all our actions might be guided by its light.

Dom Antoine Marie  
O.S.B.

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