



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of August 24, 2013,
Feast of Saint Bartholomew

Dear Friends,

ON November 27, 1830, on Rue du Bac in Paris, in the novitiate of the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, the community was praying in the chapel. A young novice, Sister Catherine Labouré, saw appear “an image of the Blessed Virgin, as she is ordinarily represented under the title of the Immaculate Conception, standing and extending Her arms... Rays of dazzling light beamed forth from her hands.” At the same moment Sister Catherine heard: “These rays are the symbol of the graces that MARY obtains for mankind.” Around the image, in golden letters she read the invocation, “O MARY, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to Thee.” Then this image was turned around, and on the back side, she saw the letter “M” surmounted by a small cross, and below, the Sacred Hearts of JESUS and MARY. After the Sister had registered all this, the voice told her: “Have a medal struck after this model. Those who wear one that has been blessed and pray this short prayer with piety will enjoy a very special protection of the Mother of God.” On June 30, 1831, 1,500 medals were struck, and initially were passed from hand to hand. Bit by bit, news of the extraordinary benefits that were granted spread, and people started calling the medal “miraculous.” In 1834, distribution of the medals began to explode; as of 1839, 10 million medals had been struck in France and abroad! In 1842, a sensational event in Rome confirmed that this medal was well-named. Let us allow the protagonist, Alphonse Ratisbonne, to introduce himself.



Father Alphonse Ratisbonne

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“My family was quite well-known for its wealth and beneficence. In these it held first place in Alsace.” Born on May 1, 1814, Alphonse was the youngest son in this affluent family of ten children. The head of the family, Auguste Ratisbonne, belonged to a generation of Jews who thought only of enjoying life on earth. Although he was President of the Jewish congregation, he seldom went to the synagogue, and then only for appearance’s sake. The children were nevertheless raised in the religion, at least with respect to Jewish traditions and customs. When he was four years old, Alphonse lost his mother, an accomplished and virtuous woman who provided her children the only examples of moral principles to which they were exposed.

In 1825, he began his studies at the royal college in Strasbourg. “At this time,” he wrote, “an event dealt a terrible blow to my family. My brother Theodore (twelve years his elder) declared himself a Christian, and soon afterwards, in spite of the most urgent entreaties, became a priest and conducted his ministry in the very same city, in sight of my family. This behavior revolted me, and I began to hate his cassock and his character. Raised among Christians as indifferent as I was, my brother’s conversion convinced me that Catholics were fanatic, and I detested them.” In July 1831, at the age of seventeen, Alphonse completed his high school studies.

Enjoying the world

His father had died the year before. A childless uncle became his second father. “This uncle, so well-known in the financial world, wished me to join the bank he headed. I studied law in Paris, then returned to him. He gave me complete freedom. I thought that one was in the world to enjoy it... I was a Jew in name, but did not believe even in God.” Nevertheless, as a witness recounted, “his heart remained pure.” He occupied himself with “serving the cause of his oppressed people, and working to get them full equality under the law, as well as greater inclusion in society.”

In 1841, Alphonse was about to turn twenty-seven. His family, in agreement with his own desires, decided on his marriage with one of his nieces. “I saw my family beside themselves with joy, for I must say that there are few families whose members love each other more than mine... One member alone was hateful to me—my brother Theodore. His serious words aroused my anger. I bore a bitter hatred for priests, churches, monasteries, and above all, the Jesuits. Happily, my brother left Strasbourg—he had been called to Our Lady of Victories, in Paris. His departure relieved me of a great weight.” Alphonse celebrated his engagement in Nice, but an emptiness remained in his soul. “In the negation of all

faith, I found myself in perfectly harmony with my friends, indifferent Catholics and Protestants, but the sight of my fiancée awakened something in me that brought me to believe in the immortality of the soul. Moreover, I instinctively began to pray to God. I thanked Him for my happiness, and yet, I was not happy." Since the young woman was only sixteen years old, it was considered best to postpone the wedding, so Alphonse set out on a voyage to the Orient.

A sudden antipathy

He reached Naples on December 9th. "I spent a month there to see everything and write it down. Oh, what blasphemies in my journal! ... I had no desire to go to Rome, despite the invitation of two friends... How did I end up in Rome? I cannot explain it." He left for the Eternal City, with the intention of returning on January 20th. Arriving on the 6th, he feverishly began to visit all the city's sights. On the 8th, a voice called him by name in the street—it was that of Gustave de Bussierre, a former classmate in Strasbourg, a Protestant Pietist. Invited to dine at the home of his friend's father, there Alphonse saw Gustave's older brother, Baron Theodore de Bussierre, who had become Catholic. "That was enough to inspire a deep antipathy in me. Yet, as Theodore was known for his travels in the Orient, which he had published, I told him I would pay him a visit." A few days later, he entered the Church of Ara Coeli, on the Capitoline Hill. Preparations were being made to baptize two Jews, and his guide innocently invited him to witness the ceremony. Alphonse furiously protested and left. The miserable conditions of the Ghetto, the nearby Jewish quarter, aroused his indignation.

The visit that he had said he would make to Theodore de Bussierre came to his mind "as a regrettable obligation." He nevertheless decided to go. A polite conversation ensued. "I spoke to him about his excursions in Rome," related Monsieur de Bussierre. "He shared various impressions with me... He spoke to me about the Ghetto, which had rekindled his hatred of Catholicism. I tried to reason with him, and he answered that he was born a Jew and would die a Jew... It was then that the most extraordinary idea came to me; an idea from Heaven, for the wise men of the world would have called it folly. 'Since you are such a strong and enlightened spirit, promise me that you'll wear what I'm about to give you.'—'What is that?'—'Just this medal.' And I showed him a miraculous medal... He quickly jumped back. 'But according to your way of thinking,' I said, 'it should make no difference to you, and it would give me great pleasure.'—'It means nothing,' he exclaimed, bursting out laughing. 'I wish at least to prove to you that one is wrong to accuse Jews of obstinacy.' And he continued with jokes that, for me, were blasphemies. Nevertheless, I put a ribbon around his neck, to which my little daughters had just attached the blessed medal. ... There remained something yet more difficult for me to accomplish—I wanted him to recite the *Memorare*, the prayer Saint Bernard composed that begins,

'Remember, O most gracious Virgin MARY.' But he would not. Yet an interior force pushed me, and I fought against his repeated refusals with a sort of relentlessness. I handed him the prayer, begging him to take it with him, but to be good enough to copy it, because I had only that one copy. Then, with a gesture of humor and irony, he said, 'So be it, I'll copy it. You can have my copy and I'll keep yours!'"

Alphonse went to the theater. On his return to his hotel, he began to copy the prayer, then, overcome with fatigue, fell asleep. During this time, Theodore de Bussierre, with some friends, kept vigil before JESUS in the Most Blessed Sacrament. The next day, January 17th, Alphonse came back to pay another visit to Theodore, who asked Alphonse about the *Memorare*: "Although he was irritated by my entreaties," Theodore said, "he read and reread the prayer, in order to discover what made it so precious in my eyes. Ill at ease, Alphonse shouted at his host: "Sorcerer! Magician! ... You have known me only twenty-four hours, and you are forcing me to listen to things that my brother would not dare say to me!" Exasperated, he rose to take his leave for good. "Don't leave," said Monsieur de Bussierre. 'Impossible—I have a reservation with the carriage office.'—'You will not leave, even if I must lock you in my room!' And I repeated to him that he could not leave Rome until he saw a ceremony that would take place at Saint Peter's in a few days. I induced him, completely stupefied, to cancel his reservation."

Two miracles are necessary

So Alphonse continued to visit the sights of Rome with Theodore. "Monsieur de Bussierre raised religious issues so naively, and insisted with such fervor, that I said to myself, 'If anything can drive a man from religion, it is this insistence on converting him.' As they passed the Scala Santa—the staircase JESUS climbed, according to tradition, during His Passion—the baron was overcome with enthusiasm. He stood in his carriage and exclaimed, 'Hail, holy stairs! Here is a man who will climb you on his knees one day!' I laughed at this, and told my apostle that he would get nothing from me, to which he replied that he was sure of my conversion. "In that case, two miracles will be necessary—one to convince me, and the other to get me to do it!"

Around noon on January 20th, Alphonse went to a café on the Piazza di Spagna to read the newspapers. At the café, he met two Alsatians—one Jewish, the other Protestant. "We spoke of Paris, art, politics, and trivial things. I invited these two friends to my wedding... If at this moment, a third speaker had told me: 'Alphonse, in fifteen minutes you will adore JESUS CHRIST as your God and Savior, and you will strike your breast at the feet of a priest, in a Jesuit house, where you will pass the Carnival preparing for your Baptism, ready to immolate yourself for the Catholic faith...' I would have thought this man completely mad!"

"As I was leaving the café, I saw Monsieur de Bussierre, who invited me to get into his carriage. The weather was magnificent, and I gladly accepted. He asked my permission to stop several minutes at Sant'Andrea delle Fratte, and suggested I wait for him in the carriage; I preferred to get out to see this church. They were preparing for a funeral. 'It is for one of my friends, the Count de Lafferronnays. His sudden death is the cause of the sadness in me that you noticed yesterday.' He left me—'I'll be just a couple of minutes.' Sant'Andrea delle Fratte was small, poor, deserted... No works of art attracted my attention. I walked around mechanically, looking around, without stopping on any particular thought. I only remember a black dog that jumped around my feet. Soon, I no longer saw anything... Or rather, my God, I saw only one thing !!!... How is it possible to speak of it? Oh! No, human words cannot attempt to express the inexpressible... I was there, prostrate, bathed in my tears, my heart outside of myself."

How good God is!

"As I went back into the church," Monsieur de Bussierre reported, "I found Monsieur Ratisbonne kneeling before the chapel of Saint Michael and Saint Raphael, in an attitude of deep recollection. I went to him and shook him several times, without his noticing my presence. Finally, raising towards me his face bathed with tears, he clasped his hands and said: 'Oh! How this man prayed for me!' He was speaking of the deceased, to whom I had three days earlier confided the intention that was close to my heart. He had replied, 'If he says the *Memorare*, you will have him, and many others with him.'—'Where do you want to go?' I asked Alphonse. 'Wherever you wish. After what I have seen, I will obey. ... How happy I am! What fullness of grace and happiness for me! How good God is! And how unfortunate are those who do not know!' He covered with kisses and burning tears the miraculous medal he was wearing. He then clasped me in his arms, saying with a radiant face: 'Take me to a confessor. When will I be able to receive Baptism, without which I can no longer live?' I took him to the Gesù, the Jesuit church, to Father de Villefort. As he approached him, he showed his medal and cried, 'I saw her!! I saw her!!!' He then recounted: 'I had been in the church for just a moment when, all of a sudden, I felt seized by an inexpressible agitation. The whole building seemed to be veiled from my sight—one single chapel had, so to say, concentrated all the light and, in the middle of this radiance appeared, standing on the altar, tall, brilliant, full of majesty and sweetness, the Virgin MARY, just as she is on my medal. An irresistible force drew me towards her. The Virgin gestured for me to kneel. She seemed to say to me: 'It is well!' She did not speak at all, but I understood everything.' Left alone with the priest, he declared that he wished to become a Christian. 'I expect I will have much to suffer, but I am ready for all the sufferings, and I deserve them, because I have greatly sinned.'"

One month later, on February 19th, a notary took down his deposition: "I tried several times to raise my eyes towards the Blessed Virgin, but her brilliance and my respect made me lower them, without preventing me from being certain of her presence. I fixed my eyes on her hands, and I saw in them the expression of forgiveness and mercy. In her presence, even though she said not a word, I understood the horror of the state in which I found myself, the deformity of sin, and the beauty of the Catholic Church—in a word, the blindfold fell from my eyes... Filled with a feeling of gratitude towards the Blessed Virgin MARY, I thought of my brother with inexpressible joy. I felt heartfelt compassion for my family, lost in the darkness of Judaism, and for heretics and sinners."

What does faith offer you?

An ardent desire for Baptism, inspired by the horror of original sin, filled the convert's soul. Some suggested he wait: "But," he would answer them, "the Jews who heard the Apostles were immediately baptized" (cf. Acts 2:41), and you want to postpone my baptism, when I have heard the Queen of the Apostles?" In fact, the Very Reverend Father Roothaan, Superior General of the Jesuits, would declare, "The meaning of the faith revealed itself to him so intensely and effectively that he grasped, penetrated, and retained all that had been presented to him." In a few days, he was deemed sufficiently instructed, so well that the Pope's cardinal vicar of Rome set the date of the Baptism for January 31st. Alphonse spent the three days preceding the Baptism at the Gesù. He enjoyed saying over and over again these words from the rite of Baptism: *As a hart longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for Thee, O God* (Ps. 42:1). When the day arrived, the cardinal, dressed in pontifical vestments, approached the front of the church, where the catechumen, wearing an alb, was kneeling. "What do you ask of God's Church?"—"The Faith."—"What does the faith offer you?"—"Eternal life."—"What name do you take?"—"Marie!"—"Do you believe in JESUS CHRIST?"—"I believe!" When he raised his head wet with water of baptism, an ineffable joy flooded the heart of Marie-Alphonse Ratisbonne. He had just crossed an abyss—he was Christian! The sacrament of Confirmation immediately sealed this outpouring of graces. Then the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass began. When the cardinal placed the sacred Host on his lips, the new Christian burst into tears. "At that moment, I had not a vision, but a very strong feeling of the real presence of Our Lord."

His family had tried to prevent the Baptism. "It is a terrible thing to renounce the faith of one's fathers!"—"Ah!" replied Alphonse, "I am not renouncing the faith of Abraham, of Moses; I am not renouncing the prophecies of Isaiah, Malachi, nor am I renouncing David or Solomon... but I renounce Judas." *I have come not to abolish the Law but to fulfill it* (Mt. 5:17). To the incredulous disciples on the way to Emmaus, JESUS *interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning Himself* (Lk. 24:27). In the 1880's, Augustin and Joseph Lemann, two Jewish

brothers who had become Catholics and priests, would publish the fruit of their detailed study of Holy Scripture: "In becoming Catholic, the Jew does not change his religion. He is the religious man *par excellence* who has achieved completeness, like the stalk that gains its flower... The New Law is nothing other than the fulfillment and perfection of that which had preceded it—everywhere, the same God as lawmaker, everywhere JESUS CHRIST, the center and purpose of the law." In entering the Catholic Church, the child of Israel recovers everything Israel lost: "Above all, he will find once again the Temple, the Altar, and the perpetual sacrifice. He will find again the singing of the Psalms and the reading of the prophets; he will find again the manna, or better yet, that which it prefigured—the living bread come down from Heaven in order to lead us there again." A new priesthood established by Christ has succeeded the Levitical priesthood that has entirely disappeared... "Our Jerusalem, the city of David, is but a shadow. But another Jerusalem has arisen. Love is the air breathed there. Truth is its sun. Roman unity is the bond. ... Salvation, i.e. to possess Heaven, is its concern and goal. A single all-powerful sacrifice is offered there to the divine Majesty *from the rising of the sun to its setting* (Mal. 1:11): the holy, pure, and immaculate Host!" The relation of continuity between ancient Israel and the Church is also affirmed by the Second Vatican Council:

"[T]he Church of Christ acknowledges that, according to God's saving design, the beginnings of her faith and her election are found already among the Patriarchs, Moses and the prophets. She professes that all who believe in Christ—Abraham's sons according to faith—are included in the same Patriarch's call, and likewise that the salvation of the Church is mysteriously foreshadowed by the chosen people's exodus from the land of bondage" (*Nostra Aetate*, no. 4).

Alphonse arrived in Paris at the beginning of March. The news of the miracle of January 20th had already spread even to Protestant countries, where it inspired a

reawakening of devotion to the Virgin MARY and numerous conversions. Seventy-five years later, on January 20, 1917, Our Lady would inspire the future martyr Saint Maximilian Kolbe to establish the Militia of the Immaculata, whose "knights" would have the conversion of the enemies of the Church as their goal, and the miraculous medal as their rallying sign. On April 12, 1842, Marie-Alphonse announced to the pastor of Our Lady of Victories: "My family has given me complete freedom. I consecrate this freedom to God." On June 14th, he entered the novitiate in Toulouse—he would spend ten years in the Society of JESUS.

To the lost sheep of Israel

Meanwhile, his brother, Father Theodore, had left for Rome. Received by Pope Gregory XVI, he told him the desire that haunted him: "Oh, how happy I would be if one day I was told: *Go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel* (Mt. 10:6)." This is the origin of the initiatives Father Theodore launched: the Catechumenate of the Children of Israel, the Sisters of Our Lady of Zion, and then, in 1847, the Congregation of Priests of Our Lady of Zion. Marie-Alphonse closely followed his brother's initiatives, helping as much as obedience permitted. He soon expressed his desire to leave the Society of JESUS to join him. In December 1852, Father Marie-Alphonse was released from his temporary vows by Very Reverend Father Roothan, and entered the Congregation of Our Lady of Zion.

For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen by race ... and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ (Rom. 9:3, 5)—this was the wish of the two brothers. Theodore died in Paris on January 7, 1884, and Marie-Alphonse in Jerusalem, the following May 6th. His last words, "God is my witness that I offer my life for the salvation of Israel," echo the words of Saint Paul: *My heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved* (*ibid.*, 10:1).

May his sensational conversion, effected by the miraculous medal, encourage us to see in recourse to MARY Immaculate a powerful bastion against the attacks of the devil, and the chief means of winning souls for God. O MARY, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to Thee!

Dom Antoine Marie
o.s.b.

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