



# Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of May 29, 2014,  
Solemnity of the Ascension of Our Lord

**Dear Friends,**

**I**N 1544, the Christian world was in crisis, one of the most serious crises in its history, one not only of religion and doctrine, but of civilization as well. ... Cesar de Bus was born into this troubled period, when men were opening themselves up more and more to culture, the arts, and the reign of pleasure. Even he would allow himself to be led astray during his adolescence and early adulthood, sliding into the comforts offered by his state in life and his fortune: the easy, carefree life of a gifted spirit who shone in society, a sometime poet more attuned to enjoying every pleasure than to the demands of the Gospel. His conversion was nothing less than radical." It was with these words that, on April 27, 1975, Paul VI introduced the new blessed he was elevating to the altar.

Cesar was born on February 3, 1544 in Cavaillon, in Comtat Venaissin (today in Provence), the son of Jean-Baptiste de Bus, the town consul, and Anne de la Marche, the seventh in a family of thirteen children. At his Baptism he was entrusted to the patronage of Saint Caesar of Arles, a great defender of the faith. Originating from the Roman gentry, the family's ancestors included Saint Frances of Rome, née Buxis, who had lived in Rome in the previous century. Cesar received his earliest schooling at home from a private tutor. The child showed early signs of a vocation to the priesthood. He distinguished himself by his piety, gentle disposition, and great modesty. He continued his studies at a school in Avignon, then in Cavaillon. In spite of his youth, he was admitted into the city's Confraternity of Black Penitents, whose goal was to imitate JESUS CHRIST, in particular in the sufferings and mortifications of His Passion, by penitential processions and exercises in personal mortification. Cesar saw in these a means to protect himself against the devil's snares. His zeal would lead to his election as rector of the confraternity.

At the beginning of the reign of Charles IX, Provence was racked by unrest caused by Protestant machinations. In 1562, at eighteen, Cesar enlisted to defend the Church and the faith. He considered a general confession of his sins to be his most pressing preparation, because the perils of battle are even more dangerous for the soul than for the body. He saw the campaign as a crusade, attending Mass every day, praying fervently day and night, and distinguishing himself in combat. The mockery he endured from some soldiers over his virtuous life did not disturb him. Pained by the disorders he saw in the Catholic camp, he nevertheless did not make himself a censor—he spoke only by his example. He made friends with a gentleman of Cavaillon of the same



Blessed Cesar de Bus

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age. The two men supported each other in their duties as soldiers. The war came to an end with the Edict of Pacification, signed in Amboise on March 19, 1563. Demobilized, Cesar returned to his literary and artistic studies.

## **The lure of the world**

**F**or several years, his brother Alexander, a young officer, had lived at the Court, and won the esteem of the king, who showered him with favors. Alexander became the commander of Charles IX's guard. In 1565, he invited Cesar, whom he especially loved, to join him, promising to introduce him to the Court, and to obtain for him a place of honor, friends, and fortune. Flattered by such wonderful promises, Cesar, although he had maintained his pious ways, allowed himself to be dazzled and gave in.

*We have this treasure in earthen vessels (2 Cor. 4:7).* On the occasion of World Youth Day in Brazil, Pope Francis gave an enlightening commentary on these words of Saint Paul to the faithful of Corinth: "The Church has greatly suffered and suffers still each time a person called to receive the treasure in an earthen vessel heaps up treasures, and devotes himself to changing the nature of the clay. He believes he is better, and no longer 'earthen'." But men and women "are made of clay up to the end, and no one can save them from this. JESUS saves them in His own way, but not in the human way, the way of prestige, appearances, important positions", the

Pope continues, likewise denouncing “the careerism which has done and is doing so much damage within the Church” (homily during the morning Mass on July 25, 2013, in Sumare).

So Cesar went to the Court, not to serve God but the spirit of the world. The desire to impress others, and the ambition and sensuality that motivated him, would lead him in stages to shipwreck. He fell far, and would have fallen even further had God, Who wished to save him, not mingled bitterness with these intoxicating pleasures—the young man was always being promised appointments, but never received any. Disappointed in his ambition and tormented by a troubled conscience, in 1570 he settled in the city of Avignon, to continue leading there an entirely worldly life.

The fall of this pious young man may be at first surprising. It becomes more understandable when one reflects on the devil’s tactics, so well described by Saint Ignatius in his *Spiritual Exercises*. Demons tempt “men first with the desire for riches ... in order to lead them more easily to love for the vain honor of the world, and from there to boundless pride. So the first step in the temptation is riches; the second, honor; the third, pride; and from these three steps he leads men to all the other vices” (no. 142, “Meditation on Two Standards”). How do we avoid these traps, if not by humility and detachment? JESUS declares, [W]hoever among you does not renounce—in his heart—all that he has, cannot be My disciple (Lk. 14:33).

### “Where are you going?”

In 1573, the death of his father and his brother Charles, a Canon of the collegiate church of Salon-de-Provence, led Cesar to reflect, and he returned to Cavaillon. There two saintly and humble persons would help him in his path of conversion. To inspire him to meditate and pray, an illiterate widow, Antoinette Reveillade, asked Cesar to read her the lives of the saints. This woman, who lived in union with God and helped others to discern His will, struggled in vain to turn Cesar away from worldly parties. When he would leave to go to them, she would reprimand him: “Where are you going? To look for ways to lose your soul, as though enough did not appear on their own?” One evening in 1574, she was insistent: “God is not mocked. He is calling you and you do not listen to Him. He is ceaselessly pursuing you, and you are ceaselessly fleeing.” And she begged him to commend himself to God as he left the house. Cesar agreed to, and left. After a few steps, he exclaimed, “What a wretch I am! I commended myself to God at the very moment that I set off to offend Him!” Then he fell to the ground unconscious, as though felled by grace. When he came to, he went to find Antoinette, who advised him to go see Louis Guyot, the tailor and sacristan at the Cathedral, a man of remarkable influence. Under his direction, Cesar embarked on a path of conversion and penance. Many

interior battles presented themselves. Seized with fear at the prospect of walking the narrow path of renunciation, he nevertheless understood that it was the path of Salvation, and remembered that the Lord’s *yoke is easy, and [His] burden is light* (Mt. 11:30). “Lovable penance,” he said, “you will be the raft that saves me from my shipwreck.”

### A decisive turning point

Cesar de Bus withdrew to Aix-en-Provence. An old friend, Father Ferreol, sent him to Father Pierre Pequet, a Jesuit in Avignon, whose spiritual experience, prudence, discernment, and firmness would be of great help to Cesar. Confronted with a grave occasion of sin, the young man passed by a convent of Poor Clares singing Matins. Stopping to listen, he was filled with shame and confusion to the point of losing consciousness. This event marked a decisive turning point. After a few days of preparation, he made to Father Pequet a confession of all the sins of his life. When he returned to Cavaillon, Cesar put his affairs in order. One day Louis Guyot, the sacristan, asked Cesar, while he was still wearing the plume and sword of a gentleman, to hold a lighted candle in his hand and accompany a priest who was bringing the Blessed Sacrament to a sick person, a humble role usually entrusted to an altar boy. In spite of the ridicule he foresaw—and which he did not escape—Cesar agreed, with the aim of making amends for his sins. This good deed liberated him from the spirit of the world. His prayer life became more intense, he meditated frequently on the four last things (death, judgment, Heaven and Hell), and did penance to the point of becoming ill. He even thought at one point of becoming a Carthusian. He dedicated himself to works of mercy: giving alms, visiting the afflicted and the sick, in particular a leper in whom he saw the image of Christ, disfigured by our sins.

In 1576, over three weeks Cesar made the *Spiritual Exercises*, under Father Peguet’s direction, in order to choose a state of life. After this retreat, he devoted himself to study with a view to the priesthood. From then on, his piety and knowledge of divine matters began to be recognized. Appointed canon of the Cathedral of Saint-Veran in Cavaillon in 1578, he zealously fulfilled all the duties of this post, before being ordained a priest in August 1582. His simple preaching bore fruit. “We formerly admired him in this town,” said the citizens of Cavaillon, “in the midst of the most pleasant company. Now we see him in the pulpit, condemning the vanities that he had so loved.” Assiduous in the confessional, he directed many souls. Reading a biography of Charles Borromeo, the holy bishop of Milan who had just recently died in 1584, left a profound impression on him. At his bishop’s request, he worked to reform the clergy and religious, and to refute the errors of the Protestants. But soon, in 1587, the love of contemplation and solitude led him to a hermitage on the heights

overlooking Cavaillon, where he devoted himself to prayer and penance.

Pope Paul VI observed, "The blessed's spiritual journey was not without fits and starts—moments of discouragement, of darkness, of uncertainty. We have been struck, nevertheless, by what would be a characteristic of his entire life from nearly the beginning... We wish to speak of his spirit of penance. Penance was not an empty word for him. He pushed it to the extreme, he returned from afar! He had to dominate the passions that would otherwise have enslaved him, a violent and perpetual battle. Through penance, he learned to seek and love sacrifice, for sacrifice configures us to the suffering and victorious Christ. Offering himself as a libation, abandoning all things to the hands of God at the cost of the greatest personal sacrifice seemed to have been his leitmotiv, the constant goal of his efforts. And when at the end of his life, crippled by illnesses and afflicted with blindness, he would finally be able to prepare himself for the supreme gift, he realized how useful asceticism had been to master the old man. He would be ready to meet the Lord. His joy would be complete" (April 27, 1975).

### **To transmit to everyone**

**I**n 1590, Cesar left his solitude. He was struck by the religious ignorance in the countryside. Reading the Catechism of the Council of Trent gave him the idea to found a society of priests dedicated to catechesis. He wanted to transmit to others his intimate and sweet knowledge of Christ. He felt called to put into place a new method of teaching the truths of the faith to all, in particular to the uneducated and to those living in the dechristianized countryside. "We must teach the catechism with everything within us, and our conduct must make of us a living catechism. ... I would that my body be cut up into an infinite number of little pieces if from each piece a catechist could spring up." With his bishop's permission, Cesar began to comb the towns and countryside to catechize those he would call his "flock". His cousin, Jean-Baptiste Romillon, who had converted from Calvinism in 1579 and then had been ordained a priest in 1588, accompanied him in this apostolate. Soon, our two apostles were giving veritable missions in the surrounding regions, all the way into the Cévennes. Some young disciples joined them.

"The intuition, or one might say genius, of Cesar de Bus," noted Pope Paul VI, "was the ability to put his finger on a primordial need, of which the Fathers of the Council of Trent had had such a shrewd presentiment with the catechism they ordered to be written, so that all pastors, from the bishop to the priest in a small parish, might possess a reference manual. But the land still lay fallow. The people's destitution was extreme, and the devotion of its ministers was not enough in itself to alleviate it. Intelligently formed in the Ignatian school by his director Pequet, Cesar de Bus would then come to know

the lives, the spiritual doctrine, and the works of other leading thinkers of the day: Peter Canisius, Robert Bellarmine, Philip Neri, and Charles Borromeo. The latter two in particular left an indelible impression on him. He became permeated with their inspirations, modeled his actions on theirs, and burned with the same zeal they did."

"His method," continued Pope Paul VI, "was to teach the faith to all classes of the population, distinguishing by degrees, of course, between those capable of taking in a great deal, and those with whom, at first, he would have to be satisfied with just a little. But the important point was that all be evangelized, that all receive whatever instruction they were able to grasp. The words were simple; the formulas few, well presented, and easy to remember. Onto this plan he would graft preaching steeped in Holy Scripture, also adapted so that concepts, once learned, would be built on, and be transformed into a spiritual attitude and way of acting—in a word, into life."

On September 29, 1592, Cesar de Bus founded the Congregation of the Secular Priests of Christian Doctrine with his first five companions, in L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue, in the Vaucluse, first with the approval of Bishop Bordini of Cavaillon, then in 1598 with the approval of Pope Clement VIII. "We must be convinced," he told them, "that we do not preach for ourselves, but for the benefit of those who hear us." Father de Bus instituted a gradual system for teaching the catechism that consisted of presenting the main points of the doctrine in three successive courses. The "little doctrine," directed at those who had no prior knowledge, taught the sign of the Cross, the main prayers, the commandments, the sacraments and the mysteries of the faith. The "middle doctrine" first gave an explanation using familiar teachings, and then a glimpse into Scripture and the Fathers of the Church. The "great doctrine" was delivered from the pulpit on Sundays and solemnities.

### **"Teaching the faith is something beautiful!"**

**C**esar used language that spoke to the senses and the imagination. He had families participate in catechism. He presented the doctrine starting from centers of interest in people's lives, and composed and sang lyrics that illustrated his teachings. He himself painted or had others do paintings on religious themes, and explained them over several days. Cesar likewise emphasized the need to link teaching, prayer, and commitment to Christian life.

His concern is shared in our day by Pope Francis: "Catechesis is a pillar of faith education and we need good catechists! ... teaching the faith is something beautiful! It is perhaps the best legacy we can pass on: the faith! To educate in the faith, to make it grow. To help children, young people and adults to know and love the Lord more and more is one of the most exciting aspects of education. It builds up the Church! ... Catechesis is a

vocation : 'being a catechist', this is the vocation, not working as a catechist. So keep this in mind : I didn't say to do the 'work' of catechists, but to 'be' catechists, because this is something that embraces our whole life. It means leading people to encounter Christ by our words and our lives, by giving witness. ... Being a catechist means witnessing to the faith, being consistent in our personal life. This is not easy!" (September 27, 2013).

In 1593, a new house was opened in Avignon, initially within the monastery of Saint Praxedes, then in the monastery of Saint-Jean-le-Vieux. Noting the ignorance and lack of training in homemaking among many women, in 1594 Father Cesar de Bus founded the Institute of Daughters of Christian Doctrine, to provide training and instruction to young women. But the years that followed were marked by opposition and some despondency among his followers. Father de Bus then resigned his post as a canon to be freer to follow the divine call. To ensure the stability of his enterprise, he deemed it wise for members of the congregation to be bound by vows. From 1600 on, Father Romillon was opposed to this desire, and in 1602 he instigated a schism in which he and some other members of the congregation left and joined the Oratory of Saint Philip Neri. Father de Bus was elected Superior General of his congregation, but due to his health, which had been seriously compromised by great physical and moral sufferings, he soon had to relinquish this duty. He became blind, but continued in spite of everything to preach and hear confessions, often repeating, "Nothing that I ever saw or read compares with what God has shown me since I became blind." When he spoke of God and His perfections, his face was aflame. "It seems to me," he said, "if I am not mistaken, that I love nothing in this world other than the God of my heart." But he became increasingly ill, and died in Avignon on April 15, 1607, at the age of 63, on Easter morning, just as he had predicted : "This will be doubly Easter for me ; that is, it will

be the Lord's passage, and my passage to Him." His body, initially buried at the monastery of Saint-Jean-le-Vieux, in the nineteenth century was transferred to the Roman church of Santa Maria in Monticelli. Cesar de Bus performed miracles during his life, but even more after his death. His spiritual sons devote themselves primarily to teaching and, for close to two centuries, young students have flocked to their schools in France and Italy. In 1789, the congregation numbered 64 houses, schools, and seminaries. It was dissolved in France during the Revolution. Attempts to reestablish it in France failed, but the Italian branch still survives, and maintains missions in Brazil, as well as a presence in Spain, Switzerland... and in Cavaillon.

### *A solid foundation*

**T**he life of Cesar de Bus is a lesson for our time, as Paul VI remarked during the beatification : "In a period when the world was in crisis, as it was then, in which many values, even the most sacred, were rashly questioned in the name of freedom..., it seems to Us that an additional effort needed to be courageously undertaken to give the Christian people, who awaited it even more than one thought, a solid, exact, and easy to remember catechetical foundation. We understand well that adhering to the faith is difficult in our day, particularly among the young, who are prey to so many uncertainties. They have the right at the very least to know with precision the message of Revelation..." In our day this message is offered to us in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), which we can read or even learn summary passages by heart, as well as in the *Compendium of the CCC*, or in Pope Paul VI's Credo of the People of God. These are universal and sure references because they come from the Church. They can be read in a group, as a family, or individually. If our reading of these documents is to bear fruit, it must be accompanied by meditation and memorization, which provide food for prayer.

We can make the prayer of Pope Paul VI our own : "Blessed Cesar de Bus, you who have left us the admirable example of a life completely given to God, you who burned with the desire to communicate the life of God to your brethren, intercede for us now with the Lord, so that we might burn with the same fire, and be urged by the same charity !"

*Dom Antoine Marie*  
o.s.b.

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