



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of August 28, 2015,
Feast of Saint Augustine

Dear Friends,

BRINGING God's loving caress to our suffering people." With this expression, Pope Francis described José Gabriel Brochero, an Argentinian priest beatified on September 14, 2013, in the city that from now on will bear his name. For this occasion, the Holy Father wrote: "That Father Brochero finally joins the Blessed is a great joy and a blessing for the Argentine people and for devotees of this shepherd who had the smell of his sheep, who became poor among the poor, who always fought to stay close to God and to the people".

José Gabriel Brochero was born on March 16, 1840 in Villa Santa Rosa, in the province of Córdoba, in western Argentina. The revolutionary disturbances did not reach the simple and good inhabitants of this town, far from the provincial capital. Gabriel's parents were respectable farmers, firmly rooted in their faith. They would have ten children, of whom seven survived. Gabriel, the fourth, would later say: "Unchanging peace amidst constant activity reigned in this home, that was poor in worldly terms but rich in virtues that made joy flourish in everything we did." The Brochero children learned love of God and righteousness. They made it through adolescence without losing their innocence or purity. Although rather sickly, José Gabriel was nevertheless joyful and eager to help. At a very early age, he felt an attraction to the priesthood but did not reveal it. When he discerned the Lord's call more clearly, the child ran to proclaim it to his parents who, as exemplary Christians, thanked Heaven for this marvelous gift to their family.

A rich source

In 1856, José Gabriel entered the seminary of Our Lady of Loreto, in Córdoba. Trials and humiliations were not lacking during his years in minor and major seminary, for his rather modest circumstances made him out of place among his fellow students. However, he applied himself to his studies with discipline and perseverance. It was at this time that José Gabriel discovered the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius. He was to drink constantly from this rich source that would help him to know, love and follow Our Lord. He heard JESUS tell him: "Whoever wishes to join Me in this enterprise must be willing to labor with Me, that by following Me in suffering, he may follow Me in glory" (*Spiritual Exercises*, no. 95). Every year, he renewed his retreat with the Jesuits in Córdoba, and very soon, he began to work with them. He became a "catechist" and "lector" during the *Exercises*, the right-hand man of the priest leading the retreat. In order to be



Blessed José Gabriel Brochero

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able to do so, he sacrificed many hours of his free time. In 1858, he went to the main national University in San Carlos, where he made the acquaintance of many who would later become influential.

José Gabriel was ordained to the priesthood on November 4, 1866. The fire of divine love that burned in his heart would enlighten and guide him on all his paths. His priestly mission for the salvation of souls would bear the bitter taste of sacrifice, but this taste seemed so noble and worthy to him that he aspired to attain it as quickly as possible. A providential opportunity to show mercy presented itself. In 1867, Córdoba was struck by a cholera outbreak which quickly killed more than 4,000 people. Distress and panic overwhelmed the population. Risking his own life, the young priest gave himself body and soul—he displayed an unflinching dedication and an unwavering courage until the end of the epidemic. A witness attested, "Brochero left the home he had just moved into to put himself in the service of suffering humanity. In both city and countryside, he could be seen running from one patient to another, offering religious comfort to the dying, hearing their last confessions and giving absolution. This period was one of the most exemplary and heroic of his life."

In December 1869, Father Brochero was named pastor of San Alberto parish, now called the "Valley of Traslasierra", which was enormous: more than 4,000 square kilometers of valleys and mountains, largely uninhabited and overrun with bandits. Ten thousand

inhabitants were scattered there, in great poverty, with neither roads nor schools, cut off from all communication by mountains over 2,000 meters (6,500 feet) high. It took three days on the back of a mule for the new pastor to cross the mountains to go from Córdoba to San Pedro, the administrative center of the department. Shortly thereafter, he would move to Villa del Transito for good. He would remain there for more than forty years, preaching the Gospel by word and example, and contributing more than anyone else to the development of this nearly deserted area. Father Brochero deeply loved this land and the faithful who had been entrusted to him.

Pope Francis confides, "I imagine the good priest Brochero on his mule; travelling along the barren and desolate roads of his immense parish... He came to know every corner. He did not stay in the sacristy combing his sheep. It was like a visit of JESUS Himself to each family. He would have with him an image of the Virgin, a prayer book with the Word of God, and the things he needed to celebrate Mass. They would invite him in to drink maté; they would chat and Brochero would speak to them in a way they could all understand, so that the faith and love he himself felt for JESUS would well up in their hearts" (September 14, 2013).

A "Créole pot-au-feu"

The priest identified with his parishioners, making himself all things to all people, to win them to Christ. Not all went to church; so, boldly, armed with his crucifix, his courage, and his legendary friendliness, he set out in search of the lost sheep. And these, in return, loved him unconditionally. He deserved it: while he spoke to them of God and the Gospel, he built them churches and schools, bridges and roads, ditches and canals. To achieve his ends, he was not afraid to approach the governor of the province, state ministers, and even the president of the Republic when necessary. Every Monday Father Brochero would read the Gospel for the following Sunday, to meditate on it daily during the week and adapt it to his listeners in appealing homilies. As far away as the cathedral of Córdoba, he served his listeners what he called a "Créole pot-au-feu", rather than refined sermons. Overcoming fear of human respect, he was not afraid to condemn vices. Once when he was preaching before the governor himself and a large congregation, he denounced detraction and calumny, threatening eternal damnation to wagging tongues that would stab their neighbor.

Father Brochero saw in the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius a particularly suitable means for reforming morals and developing virtue. "José Gabriel Brochero always centered his pastoral action on prayer," observed Pope Francis. "As soon as he arrived in his parish, he began to take men and women to Córdoba to do the spiritual exercises with the Jesuit fathers. At great sacrifice they crossed the Sierras Grandes range, covered

with snow in winter, to pray in the capital." The priest untiringly recruited retreatants, by the hundreds. Thanks to him, faithful from all walks of life participated in retreats. With this wonderful tool, Father Brochero infused in souls and into the entire community the Christian spirit, which shone in the most varied of places. In 1948, Pope Pius XII would say, "the *Exercises* of Saint Ignatius will always be one of the most efficacious means for the spiritual regeneration of the world".

In the spiritual treasure of the *Exercises*, two pearls, among many others, merit particular attention. First the "Principal and foundation" (no. 23), a consideration that opens the retreat: "Man is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save his soul. All other things on the face of the earth are created for man to help him in attaining the end for which he is created. Hence, man is to make use of them in as far as they help him in the attainment of his end, and he must rid himself of them in as far as they prove a hindrance to him." After having meditated on these lines, the retreatant knows why he is on earth. The retreatant is then instructed to: "Imagine Christ our Lord present before you upon the cross, and begin to speak with Him, asking how it is that though He is the Creator, He has stooped to become man, and to pass from eternal life to death here in time, that thus He might die for our sins. Reflect upon yourself and ask: 'What have I done for Christ?', 'What am I doing for Christ?', 'What ought I to do for Christ?' As you behold Christ in this plight, nailed to the cross, ponder upon what presents itself to your mind."

"The lungs of the spiritual life"

The retreats that Father Brochero offered lasted at least a week, and often he gave them himself. A project ripened in his mind—to open an immense house for the *Spiritual Exercises* in his parish. In spite of pessimistic predictions, his plan was realized in 1877, after two years of work. In 1979, Saint John Paul II would describe places where the *Exercises* are given as "lungs of the spiritual life for souls and Christian communities". The house was officially opened with 500 retreatants. The retreats that followed were even larger. In 1878, only five retreats were held—two for women and three for men—but the total number of participants was 3,163! Despite this impressive number, silence reigned throughout the house. In the church, preachers elaborated on the great truths of the Gospel: God's plan for mankind; eternity, death, hell, and Heaven; and the life, Passion and Resurrection of Christ. Thanks to the external silence that promoted internal silence, and to the prayer, these truths penetrated to the deepest depths of hearts, where God speaks.

"Still today, practicing the *Exercises* is an irreplaceable school to introduce souls to a greater intimacy with God," declared Blessed Paul VI, on February 9, 1972. And on November 17, 1989, Saint John Paul II

emphasized that they “are even more important as the evolution of our way of life seems to increasingly take away from modern man the time and opportunity to reflect on himself.” Their valuable rules of spiritual discernment illumine our spiritual path:

“First Rule: In the case of those who go from one mortal sin to another, the enemy is ordinarily accustomed to propose apparent pleasures. He fills their imagination with sensual delights and gratifications, the more readily to keep them in their vices and increase the number of their sins.

With such persons the good spirit uses a method which is the reverse of the above. Making use of the light of reason, he will rouse the sting of conscience and fill them with remorse.”

“Second Rule: In the case of those who go on earnestly striving to cleanse their souls from sin and who seek to rise in the service of God our Lord to greater perfection, the method pursued is the opposite of that mentioned in the first rule. Then it is characteristic of the evil spirit to harass with anxiety, to afflict with sadness, to raise obstacles backed by fallacious reasonings that disturb the soul. Thus he seeks to prevent the soul from advancing. It is characteristic of the good spirit, however, to give courage and strength, consolations, tears, inspirations, and peace. This He does by making all easy, by removing all obstacles so that the soul goes forward in doing good” (nos. 314 and 315).

The terror of the region

In addition to the simple mountain villagers, Father Brochero also invited “unbelievers” to the retreats, motivated by divine mercy as well as human justice. “God’s grace is like the rain, which falls on everyone,” he liked to say. Some of them were ill at ease, as were the people who saw them enter the haven of peace that was the retreat house. One day, the fervent priest asked the preacher to give the meditation on hell a second time for four “clients” who were in particular need of it. “Come down hard on them, because you have four men here who are so hard-boiled that the devil isn’t worried about them anymore!” He himself tried to get the terror of the region, the bandit Guayama, back on the straight and narrow path; a man who, with his band, attacked convoys. Father Brochero managed to meet him. He sought to make him promise to renounce his evil plots and to henceforth lead an honest life by enlisting in the army. He assured him that he would obtain from the provincial governor an exemption releasing him from any prosecution; moreover, he promised to help him pay his debts, on the sole condition that he make a retreat. The bandit signed the request for the exemption required by the governor. Unfortunately, Guayama was captured in an ambush shortly thereafter and imprisoned. He then appealed to Father Brochero, who moved heaven and earth to obtain his pardon, but to no effect. Guayama was shot. The good pastor wept for this man who he had

thought of as a friend. He prayed, and asked for prayers, for the salvation of his soul.

“His apostolic courage,” declared Pope Francis, “his missionary zeal, the courage in his heart full of compassion, like that of JESUS,—that made him say: ‘There’ll be trouble if the devil robs me of a single soul!’—spurred Brochero to win over people leading bad lives and hard cases to God. One can count by the thousands the men and women who, thanks to Brochero’s priestly ministry, gave up their vices and quarrels. They all received the sacraments during the *Spiritual Exercises*, and with them the strength and light of faith to be good sons and daughters of God, good brothers and sisters, good fathers and mothers in a large community of friends committed to the good of all, respecting and helping each other.”

Little theologians

The “house of Exercises” was not yet finished when the enterprising missionary began thinking about founding the “Sister Servants of the Most Sacred Heart of JESUS,” a congregation of women religious dedicated to the education of girls. Yet another great expense was before him: to build them a spacious house. He relied on the generosity of his friends, who were always there to support his works, so much did his beneficial charity engage their hearts. Nevertheless, trials were not lacking. Storms and earthquakes destroyed his church. Without allowing himself to become discouraged, the tireless priest crossed the mountains to go cap in hand to ask generous souls and the government for money. Newspapers spread word of his constant activity. A conference was being organized in Buenos Aires to introduce instruction in Catholic doctrine throughout the country. Priests were invited to give their advice. Brochero related the results in his parish—everyone knew the catechism, and, what is more, “there is not a boy or girl who, from the age of 12, is not a little theologian, knowing by heart many pages by Saint Alphonsus de Liguori. Even children at the breast know it because every day, their parents explain it to them!” Out of humility, and feeling his strength diminishing, Father Brochero asked several times to be relieved of his duties as pastor of San Alberto, but the bishop thought it best for him to remain in the service of souls—the house of Exercises and the religious still needed him. However, in 1898, the bishop granted him relief from his duties as pastor and appointed him canon of the cathedral. Everyone rejoiced at this honor except the person concerned, for whom this change, even though he had requested it, was nevertheless a great sacrifice. He moved into the home of an old friend, still intending to remain poor. All he earned as a canon he gave to the poor, such that he never had the money necessary for his own needs. When he was reproached for this, he would say: “God will provide, because the poor are in greater need than I am.”

Father Brochero, Pope Francis notes, “was a pioneer in going to the peripheries to bring to all the love, the mercy of God... he wore himself out on the back of his mule, going out to find people, a “street priest”, a *callejero*, of the faith. This is what JESUS wants today, missionary disciples, “callejeros” of the faith! Brochero was an ordinary man, frail like the rest of us, but he knew the love of JESUS, he let his heart be forged by God’s mercy.”

A terrible disease

Inactivity was painful for the new canon, who followed the progress of his old parish from afar. Pastors succeeded each other without managing to become accepted by the faithful, who pined for the return of their former pastor. On December 1, 1902, the bishop gave him permission to return to his former pastoral duties. As he was bidding farewell to his colleagues, he took off his canon’s mozzetta as though it was bothering him, saying, “This pack is not made for my back, or this mule for this stable.”

The reinstallation in his parish gave him new blood that brought him back to life: he was as fervent as ever to sow the divine word. But soon he was struck by a terrible disease—leprosy. He contracted the illness in going to visit a leper to win him for JESUS CHRIST. He shared his meals with him, drinking from the same cup. Despite the affection the faithful had for him, many kept at a distance from him, no longer daring to receive communion from his hand for fear of contagion. In 1908,

Father Brochero, explained Pope Francis, “learned how to leave behind the petty selfishness we all have, overcoming his own weakness, defeating with the help of God the inner forces the devil uses to bind us to comfort, to seek pleasure, to avoid hard work. Brochero listened to the call of God and chose the sacrifice of working for His Kingdom, for the common good..., and he was faithful to the end.” May these words direct our lives so they might be, with the help of the Virgin MARY, a source of comfort and hope for all who suffer!

the bishop relieved him of his duties and named a new pastor for Villa del Transito. The poor sick man asked his sister to take him in, adding insistently, “May the Sister Servants lend me what I need to say Mass, and also help me provide for the needs of the poor who will come knocking at my door.” In 1910, he wrote his will: “May the executors of my will find a local carpenter to make me a very simple box, may he earn something for this work, and when my corpse has been put in it, may it be buried anywhere on the main path of the cemetery!”

Nevertheless, the Lord continued to purify his faithful servant by trials. As a result of the leprosy, he lost his vision, but continued nevertheless to celebrate the Mass and preach. Three days before his death, he celebrated a Mass for the Dead. At these words from the Gospel, *Et ego resuscitabo eum in novissimo die (and I will raise him up at the last day—Jn. 6:40)*, he fainted, then had to lie down to prepare himself for the great passage. “Though the devil is searching for something in me,” he declared, “he’s mistaken—everything is paid for by the Blood of JESUS CHRIST.” Sticking with his everyday language, he compared himself to a beast of burden: “Now, all the bags are loaded on.” These were his last words. He peacefully rendered his soul to God on January 26, 1914, at the age of 73. On September 14, 2013, Cardinal Angelo Amato presided over Father Brochero’s beatification, in the presence of about 200,000 faithful, nearly all of Argentina’s bishops, 1,200 priests, the President of the Chamber of Deputies, and numerous political leaders.

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