

The following article was first published by the Benedictine Monks of Sainte Joseph de Clairval in France. I have found the articles in their newsletter very interesting and inspiring. With the permission granted me by Père Jacques, I present for your edification random selections from past and present issues.

Please visit the web site of [Abbeye Sainte Joseph de Clairval](#) to view some of the beautiful work of these sons of Saint Benedict.

October 18, 2000

Dear friend of Saint Joseph Abbey,

These days, the theme of the dignity of man is often addressed, and rightly so, for it is of great importance. Yet the most basic foundation of this dignity is not always highlighted. Too often, it is forgotten that man's greatness lies in his divine vocation. God, infinitely perfect and blessed in Himself, created man out of sheer goodness, in order that he might participate eternally in His life of love. This intimate and vital relationship which unites man to God is unknown or rejected by many of our contemporaries, who organize their lives as if God did not exist, or even go so far as to deny his existence (atheism)

The church, faithful to the truth about God and man, rejects atheism, for it contradicts reason and common experience. She teaches that when the support of faith in God and hope in eternal life are absent, man's dignity is seriously diminished; the mysteries of life and death, of error and suffering, remain insolvable. Thus, too often, men and women fall into despair. The church knows that its message is in accordance with the truth and with a secret base of the human heart, and that this message offers hope to those who no longer dare believe in the greatness of their destiny; except for this message, nothing can fill the heart of man: "You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts know no rest until they rest in you" (Saint Augustine).

Discrete but vital presence

In the face of atheism, the church maintains that "God, the first principle and last end of all things, can be known with certainty from the created world by the natural light of human reason (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 36). In the world and man, by their transitory nature and their limits, indeed attest that they in themselves are neither their first principle, nor their final end. Therefore, there necessarily exists a reality which is the primary cause and final end of everything, that Being without origin and without end that is called God. But contemporary man is often more affected by real-life testimonies than by doctrinal statements. It is for this reason that living examples, and particularly those of contemplatives, are sometimes a more efficacious remedy against atheism. It is for this reason

important “to honor the charism and the specific role of contemplatives, their discrete but crucial presence, and their silent witness which constitutes a call to prayer and the reminder of the truth of God’s existence“ (Instruction *Verbi sponsa*, Congregation of Institutes of Consecrated Life, May 13, 1999, no. 8).

On May 10, 1998, Pope John Paul II beatified Mother Maravillas of Jesus, the Carmelite who died in 1974 who “lived motivated by a heroic faith, in response to an austere vocation, placing God in the center of her existence... Her life and her death are in an eloquent message of hope for the world, which so greatly needs values and which is so often tempted by hedonism, ease, and a life without God“(Homily of the beatification).

Maravillas was born in Madrid on November 4, 1891. Her mother, remarkable for her charity, prudence, and lively intelligence, had a great devotion to Our Lady “de las Maravillas” (of Marvels), patroness of Cehegin (in the south of Spain), from which the family originated. Her father, the Marquis of Pidal, was the Spanish ambassador to the Holy See. A fervent Christian and profoundly humble, he placed in the service of religion and the homeland the great moral and intellectual qualities which God had given him.

Maravillas heard with pleasure the lives of the saints that her maternal grandmother would tell her. At the age of five, touched by the example of Saint Agnes who had consecrated herself to Christ by the vow of chastity, Maravillas decided to do the same. This “vow” of virginity was the fruit of a special grace from God. In 1939, Mother Maravillas wrote to her confessor: “I received the grace of vocation at the same time as the use of reason and I perceived the Lord’s call so clearly that I was then as determined to be a contemplative as I am today; I have never known the slightest shadow of a doubt about it during my entire life.”

Nevertheless, the child was not perfect, and she received compliments with pleasure. “One day,” she told, “I found myself with several individuals whose judgment I greatly esteemed, and whom I knew to be in my favor in every way; and leaving them, I delighted in these thoughts when I distinctly heard inside myself, ‘And as for me, I am considered a fool.’ These words (of Jesus) made such an impression on my soul that from then on, all these vain desires changed very quickly into the ones I’ve had since then: to be despised.” However, Maravillas should not be considered a little melancholy girl; on the contrary, she bubbled with joy, and loved lively, even violent and dangerous games. When she and her brother and sister hurled their battle cry, “We declare war!” the entire house began to shake

On December 19, 1913, the Marquis de Pidal left this world for eternity, followed soon thereafter by Maravillas’ grandmother. Maravillas was her mother’s sole remaining moral support. But the young woman burned with the desire to enter Carmel. When would this be possible? One day in 1918, during a walk, her

mother suddenly asked her, "Listen, Maravillas, are you still thinking about the same thing?" After a pause, she insisted, "If you don't answer me now, don't count on my having the courage to talk about it again!" Then Maravillas unveiled to her her attraction to Carmelite life. Carmel! Madame de Pidal would never have imagined such a hard life for her daughter, but she accepted nonetheless. It was thus that, on October 12, 1919, Maravillas entered the Carmel of the Escorial, close to Madrid.

From enthusiasm to surrender

Also in the year 1919, on the Hill of Angels, in the geographic center of Spain, fourteen miles from Madrid, King Alphonso XIII unveiled a monumental statue of the Sacred Heart, King and Divine Protector of the Spanish people. The crowds and the people's piety were impressive. But in the months that followed, the monument was little by little abandoned to the point of becoming a deserted place, overrun by weeds. It became necessary to make an effort to climb to the Hill, and many turned towards more accessible pilgrimage sites.

Shortly after her novitiate, Sister Maravillas heard the appeals of the Lord who urged her to found a Carmel on the Hill of Angels. "In this place, I want you and the other souls chosen by my Heart to build a house in which I will take my delight. My Heart needs to be consoled. I want this Carmel to be the balm that dresses the Wounds opened in Me by sinners. Spain will be saved by prayer." Sister Maravillas confided in Mother Josefa, the foundress of the Carmel of the Escorial. The latter's surprise was great when, a short time thereafter, Mother Rosario of Jesus, the sub prioress, came to share a similar confidence. Faced with this double appeal from the Lord, Mother Josefa, with the Prioress' consent, sought the advice of prudent priests. All gave their approval to the project, which the Bishop of Madrid likewise welcomed with great interest. On May 19, 1924, the first of four Sisters destined for the foundation moved into a small house in Getafe, very close to the Hill, while waiting for the new monastery to be built. On the 30th, Sister Maravillas made her perpetual profession there. Shortly thereafter, despite her reluctance, she was named Superior. She who desired to be the last would remain Superior for 48 years. On October 11, 1925, she additionally received the duty of novice mistress.

When a postulant enters Carmel, the Mother quickly discerns if she has a true vocation--from the first weeks, she takes into consideration whether the postulant, despite the heartbreak of having left her family, feels this interior liberty incomprehensible to the eyes of those who did not know it. Mother Maravillas, simple and natural, inspired such confidence that her daughter's told her everything; and two words from her were enough to completely change all preoccupations into hope and joy. She led the novices on the way of contemplative life taught by Saint Teresa of Avila and her writings, especially in

The Way of Perfection. “Everything is said there, and so well said!” she would remark.

The cloistered contemplative life often appears useless to our contemporaries. Why should anyone lock oneself up behind walls and grilles while so many charitable work is in need of devoted workers? Are not the restrictions imposed by the cloister hindrances to human liberty? Do not contemplatives withdraw into an egotistical spiritual comfort that renders their life sterile? In response to these objections, the Church recalls that the contemplative life as a singular grace and a precious gift of holiness, a sign of the union of the Church-Spouse with the Lord She loves above all else (cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrate*, March 25, 1996, no. 59).

You will love

Tradition links the contemplative life to Jesus’ prayer in a deserted place. The Son of God, always united with His Father, wanted to have private moments of solitude and prayer. The Holy Spirit invites the contemplative, the spouse of the Word Incarnate, to share in the solitude of Jesus Christ and to live wholly in meditation with Him in God. Thus, she observes to a high degree the first commandment: *You will love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind (Lk 10:27)*. She arrives towards perfection in charity in choosing God as her sole need, and in loving Him in an exclusive manner. God loves mankind with the love of a husband for his wife. The Son of God comes as the Spouse-Messiah, to bring about the wedding of God with humanity (cf. *Mt 22:1-14*). The vocation of cloistered contemplatives expresses in a special way this spousal characteristic of the Church. Their lives call to the minds of all the fundamental vocation of man to meet with God, a meeting which will reach perfection in heaven.

So that she might live only with God in adoration and praise, the contemplative must be free of all attachments, of all agitation, of all distraction. This is the reason for the enclosure. This feature, in limiting the occasions of contact with the exterior world, eliminates to a great extent the dissipation that results not only from a multiplicity of images, a source of worldly ideas and vain desires, but also from information and emotions which turn the individual from the one thing necessary. Because of the enclosure, the contemplative remains in an atmosphere of peace and holy unity with the Lord and with the other Sisters. Pope John Paul II likewise said, on March 7, 1980: “Abandoning the enclosure would mean sacrificing what characterizes one of the forms of religious life, by which the church manifests to the world the preeminence of contemplation over action, of that which is eternal over that which is temporal.”

The enclosure also encourages profound union with Christ’s Passion and Resurrection. By choosing a limited area in which to live one’s life, cloistered religious participate in Christ’s abasing Himself, in poverty which is expressed by

the renunciation not only of material things, but also of space, of human relations and many goods. In addition to the dimension of sacrifice and expiation, their offering also takes on the meaning of thanksgiving to the Father, united with the thanksgiving of His beloved Son. The cloistered life thus appears as a joyful proclamation of the possibility offered to every one to live for God alone, in Jesus Christ (*cf. Rom 6:11*).

A strange question

Although physically separated from the world, contemplatives nonetheless bear in their hearts and prayers the sufferings of all. By this perpetual intercession, their lives become supernaturally fertile in the fruit of graces for the salvation of souls. The example of Mother Maravillas can help us to understand this. On October 26, 1926, she moved with her sisters into the convent on the Hill, near the monument of the Sacred Heart. In 1931 began the social agitation which would end in civil war—convents and churches in Madrid were burned. Despite the dangers, the community serenely proceeded with its life, intensifying its prayer and increasing its sacrifices. “When they asked me if we are concerned, if we are afraid, it seems to me terribly strange!”, wrote Mother Maravillas. “I think that anything that can happen to us is of so little importance and that only the Glory of God is important... Seeing so many offenses against God penetrates me to the deepest part of my soul; then lights up in the depths of myself like a silent love, in the darkness, but so strong that it sometimes seems irresistible.”

On May 1, 1936, an armed band tried to attack the monastery by climbing the walls. The Mayor of Getafe made haste to warn the Carmelites. Mother Maravillas received him in the parlor. This man, nicknamed “the Russian,” was a militant communist. Mother maintained a serenity and presence of mind that impressed him; as a result, he helped the Sisters as best he could. Soon fighting would take place on the Hill. Under the whistling of shells and the pattering of machine guns, the Sisters heard of the arrest and death of many religious. Mother suggested to her daughters that they return to the shelter of their families. All of them, however, remained without hesitation at the monastery, thereby risking martyrdom. On July 22, the Militiamen (the name given to one of the armed groups) enjoined the Carmelites to leave the Hill. They were received with open arms by the Ursulines and Getafe.—with the help of a crane, the Militiamen toppled the statue of the Sacred Heart while shouting out horrible blasphemies. The nuns sorrow was profound, but they maintained their peace.

Coaxed by gentleness

As the Carmelites “honor guard” over the Monument of the Sacred Heart had lost its basis for existence, they took refuge in Madrid. There, thanks to an underground priest and devoted laypeople, they received the Eucharist from time to time. One evening, men came to search the Sister’s premises. The leader installed himself in front of Mother Maravillas, his pistol aimed at her. This man,

who had come in like a wild animal and who would later given in to having killed more than 2000 people in a clandestine prison, was little by little won over by Mother's peace and kindness. He ended in telling her, "Mother, Mother! You and I can't get angry with each other," and the man left without taking the Sisters with them, contrary to what had previously been decided.

Soon it was necessary to evacuate Madrid. Mother arranged, not without trouble, for the Carmelites not to be separated. They crossed into France and arrived in Lourdes on September 16, 1937. Exhausted but burning with love for Jesus and Mary, they remained there 24 hours before returning to Spain, to the "nationalist" zone in which the Church was free, to the convent in Las Batuecas, not far from Salamanca. In this oasis of greenery, they enjoyed a precious rest. Mother was occupied with the work of restoring the premises, with prayer, and with the care of her daughters. Exteriorly, nothing could be seen but her even disposition, her constant serenity, and her attention to all. The Sisters were, however, astonished by the attitude of Father Florencio, the community's confessor. Full of gentleness and condescending towards everyone, he was severe with Mother, and sometimes even openly disagreeable. The reason for this conduct would be apparent after Mother's death, by letters and examinations of conscience which Father Florencio had kept like a treasure. Thirsting to suffer for Jesus, to participate in His Passion and in the painful humiliations that he endured for our salvation, Mother wrote to her confessor: "I am writing to you today to ask you with all my soul, for the love of God, to make use of the greatest possible severity towards me, that you never give me what I would like, that you would despise me in front of the Sisters and that in their absence, you give me what is bitterest... I have a burning thirst for this!"

In 1939, the civil war having ended, the Sisters returned to the Hill of Angels. The monument was demolished; the convent was uninhabitable. But Mother and some of the Sisters settled there nevertheless. At the request of the local Bishop, a group of Carmelites remained at Las Batuecas. The separation which resulted was heart-rending for the Sisters, but all willingly accepted the holy will of God manifested by the prelate. Peacetime brought with it a remarkable upsurge in vocations, the fruit of sufferings offered during the difficult years. Founding of Carmels would follow one after another at an astonishing pace---first Mancera de Abajo (1944); then Duruelo (1947), the place made holy by St. John of the Cross; later on, Arenas de San Pedro (1954); San Calixto (1956); Aravaca, close to Madrid (1958); and La Aldehuela (1961), not counting the restoration of "The Incarnation of Avila" and of the Carmel of the Escorial; the transfer of Las Batuecas, which was handed over to the Carmelite Fathers, to Cabrera; and the strengthening of the Carmel in Cuenca, Ecuador.

From 1961 on, Mother Maravillas of Jesus regularly lived hidden in the convent in La Aldehuela. Her many works had worn her down and, on November 07, 1962 she suffered a first heart attack. She recovered from it, but her body remained weekend. Paradoxically, in the degree that her physical strength diminished, her

activity and the service of her neighbor seemed to become more intense. Seated at her work table, or in the parlor, to everyone she gave freely of herself. She helped many Carmels for men and women, encouraged seminarians' vocations, brought about by the building of high schools, and supported efforts to assist a poor neighborhood; shortly before her death, she offered what was needed to build a clinic to receive sick contemplative religious, and grouped her monasteries into an association to offer each other mutual spiritual and material assistance.

Overflowing life

It is as if the works of Mother Maravillas were the outpouring of her interior life; they burst forth from her intimacy with God, from her abandonment to His will. In her usual recollectedness, she dealt with God in private, and love from her pure heart interceded efficaciously before Him. In fact, the cloistered life is a powerful aid in acquiring purity of heart, by which contemplatives become a mysterious source of apostolic fruitfulness and blessing for both the Christian community and the whole world. "Indeed," writes Saint John of the Cross, "a bit of pure love is more precious before the Lord and of greater profit to the Church than all other works combined." Madame Cécile Bruyère (1845-1909), the first Abbess of the contemplative nuns of Solesmes, writes, "If our eyes would contemplate invisible things, they would see that souls have a proportionate influence: the higher they rise, the further their influence extends; their power spreads with an energy which is proportional to their proximity to God. Their nature does not change; but just as an object warms in the degree to which it comes closer to a hearth, and itself shines in a greater range, so it is with the soul in the degree of its proximity to the divine heart" (*The Spiritual Life and Prayer*). It is for this reason that "one cannot tell how necessary it is for the interests of the church and the glory of God that truly contemplative souls multiply on earth. They are the hidden spring and the motor that gives impetus on earth to everything which is to the glory of God, the reign of His Son and the accomplishment of the divine will" (*ibid*).

On October 27, 1972, another heart attack overcame Mother Maravillas. Thanks to the care of her daughters and devoted Physicians, she lived until 1974, retaining the mental clarity to guide, advise, and maintain herself in prayer. As in her entire life, as in her words, and her gentle yet penetrating manner of action, her final moments on earth were of extreme simplicity, and she peacefully fell asleep in the Lord on December 11, 1974

Blessed Mother Maravillas love to say, "The only thing we must do is allow ourselves to be led by the most loving Providence of God... You will see how everything works out; have great confidence in the Lord." **Note:** Mother Maravillas was *CANONIZED: May 4, 2003 "Lo que Dios quiere" (Whatever God desires*

This is the grace we ask of Saint Joseph for you and all those dear to you. †

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