

Blessed Marie-Joseph CASSANT (1878-1903)



Portrait by Sr Anna-Maria, Vitorchiano

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O Lord. Glory of the lowly,
who inspired a burning love
for the Eucharist in Blessed Joseph Mary,
and led him into the desert
through the Heart of Jesus;
grant, we beseech you,
that by his intercession and example
we may prefer nothing to Christ,
that he may bring us to life everlasting.
Who lives and reigns...

Biography

Joseph-Marie Cassant was born on the 6th of March, 1878, at Casseneuil, Lot-et-Garonne, in the diocese of Agen, France, into a family of orchard-keepers. The second child born to the family, he had an elder brother already nine years of age. He was a lodger at the boarding school of the La Salle Brothers in Casseneuil itself, and it was there that his poor memory began to cause him difficulty in studying.

He received a solid Christian education at home and at school, and little by little the deep desire to become a priest grew within him. Father Filhol, the parish priest, thought well enough of the boy to help him with his studies, but his weak memory kept him from entering the minor seminary. When it became clear that he was drawn towards silence, recollection and prayer, Fr. Filhol suggested that he would think of the Trappists, and the young sixteen-year-old unhesitatingly agreed. After a trial period, Joseph entered the Cistercian Abbey of Sainte-Marie du Désert, in the diocese of Toulouse, France, on December 5, 1894 .

The Novice Master at the time was Fr. André Mallet, a man skilled at understanding the needs of souls and responding in love. From their very first meeting he showed this when he said to the young man, "Only trust and I will help you to love Jesus!" Nor were the other monks of the monastery slow to appreciate the newcomer: he neither argued nor grumbled but was ever happy, ever smiling.

The young monk would often meditate upon Jesus in his Passion and on the Cross, and so became deeply imbued with love for Christ. The "way of Jesus' heart" which Fr. André taught him is an unceasing call to live the present moment with patience, hope and love. Brother Joseph-Marie was well aware of his lacks and weaknesses, and so was led to depend more and more on Jesus, his strength. He had no interest in half measures but wished to give himself completely to Christ. His personal motto bears witness to this: "All for Jesus, all through Mary". On Ascension Thursday, 24th May 1900, he was admitted to final vows.

Then came his preparation for the priesthood. This he viewed primarily in relation to the Eucharist, which was truly to him the living presence of Jesus among us. The Eucharist is the Savior himself, wholly giving himself to men; his Heart is pierced on the Cross and then tenderly gathers in all those who trust in him. There were times during his theological studies when, because of his great sensitivity, he suffered much from the lack of understanding of the monk teaching the course. But, as in all his contradictions, he relied upon Christ present in the Eucharist as his "only good upon this earth" and confided his suffering to Fr. André who would cheer him up and help him better to understand. In the end, he did well enough to pass his examinations and had the great joy of being ordained a priest on October 12, 1902.

At that point it became clear that he had contracted tuberculosis and that the disease was already well advanced. The young priest spoke of his pains only when it was impossible to hide them further. How could he complain, he who meditated so lovingly on the Lord's Way of the Cross? In spite of a seven weeks' stay with his family which he undertook at his abbot's request, his health continued to deteriorate. He then returned to the monastery, where he was soon sent to stay in the infirmary. Here was one more opportunity to offer up his sufferings for Christ and the Church: his physical pain became more and more unbearable, and was even worsened by the infirmarian's neglect. Fr. André continued to accompany him and became more than ever his constant aid and support. He had said, "When I can no longer say Mass, Jesus can take me from this world." Early in the morning of the 17th of June 1903, Father Joseph-Marie received communion and left this world to be with Christ Jesus for ever.

The sheer ordinariness of his life has been noted by some: 16 quiet years at Casseneuil and 9 years of monastic enclosure spent in doing the simplest of things: prayer, studies, work. They are indeed simple things, but lived in an extraordinary way. They were the slightest of deeds, but performed with limitless generosity. Christ imbued his mind, clear as the water that leaps from a spring, with the conviction that God alone is our true and highest happiness and that his kingdom is like a hidden treasure or a pearl of great price.

The message of Fr. Joseph-Marie has great meaning for us today. In a world filled with distrust and often with despair but thirsting for love and kindness, his life can provide an answer, and in a special way to today's young who seek meaning in their lives. Joseph-Marie was a youth without any standing or worth in the eyes of men. He owed the success of his life to a meeting with Jesus that redefined his very existence. He showed himself a follower of the Lord in the midst of a community of brothers, with the guidance of a spiritual father, who was to him a witness of Christ as well as one who knew to receive and to understand him.

For the meek and humble he is a superb example. Watching Joseph-Marie, we learn how to live each day for Christ with love, zeal and fidelity, accepting at the same time the help of an experienced brother or sister who can lead us in the footsteps of Jesus.

On the 9th of June 1984, the Holy Father, John Paul II, acknowledged his heroic virtues. He was beatified by the same Pope on October 3, 2004.

Letter of Blessed Joseph-Marie Cassant to his parents

23 December 1902 / 24 May 1903).

Everything for the Heart of Jesus!

My dear Parents,

Christmas is here, like dawn of the new year; let us not let it pass without examining our thoughts. First, it must be said that this year has been a year of graces for the whole family: on 22 February the diaconate opened the door to the priesthood and on 12 October we saw the fulfillment of all our longings. We would be most ungrateful if we didn't see in all this the special protection of the Heart of Jesus.

For such a long time we hoped against hope to be able to have the whole family together after my ordination so as to share the joy of being present and receiving communion together at my first Mass. The good Lord heard our deepest wishes. It now remains to us to thank him and to enter more and more deeply into the greatness of the priesthood. Let us never dare to equate the Sacrifice of the Mass with earthly things.

So I wish you all a good, happy and holy New Year, in every way. No more worries! You all know that I am a priest now and will never forget you.

Let us be resolved to take advantage of the time given us in this life, which can be compared to water which flows away, to a puff of smoke which the smallest breath scatters, or to a flash of lightning which splits the clouds and then vanishes. Nevertheless, this brief time on earth must be well spent. To this purpose, we must do all out of love, being one with the Heart of Jesus, and rejecting any useless worries.

The best thing I can hope for is that you ever abide as one in the Heart of Jesus. Thank you for your letter, written by your very heart!

I have just received the beautiful photos, and I thank you. They will make a fine family memento. May the Heart of Jesus be praised in all this. I want you always to revere this Heart, which is enshrined in your house. Let us be one in the Heart of Jesus as we beg his protection.

As for my health, it is always problematic. I am very well cared for. I am not going to any of the community exercises, but still, with the heat, my breathing is somewhat difficult. I also have a cold which is making me cough. All for the Heart of Jesus!

I end with the wish that we always be one in the Heart of Jesus, on earth as in Heaven.

What does Fr. Cassant offer to us today ?

Dom Bernardo BONOWITZ, (O.C.S.O.)

What does Fr. Cassant offer to us today ? Why do we need him to be beatified ?

First of all, he instructs us. A man of little intellectual capacity and a surprisingly humdrum experience of prayer, Cassant is nonetheless a theologian of the monastic life. He saw, and makes us see, that the personal relation with Jesus is the heart of Christian monasticism. He understood that the central monastic practices-obedience, silence, and humility-are Christological realities, expressions of Christ's sonship and means of our conformity to Christ. He understood instinctively and profoundly that God truly seeks and saves us day after day in the Eucharistic celebration, which is therefore the "source and summit" of the monastic life. He perceived that Christian monastic existence means being offered to the Father, offering oneself to the Father -in his own case, as a priest. He insisted on the apostolic nature of the monastic vocation, that its obligations, struggles, and sacrifices are to be lived as intercession to bring men and women to the knowledge and love of Christ. There is nothing unusual or original about any of these assertions, and certainly not in the context of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century French spirituality. What is unusual is the complete dominion that these contemplative perceptions exercised over Cassant's heart and action. And perhaps for us at the beginning of the twenty-first century, exposed to so many currents and combinations of spiritual reality, there is something new and illuminating about the single-mindedness and loving certainty of his convictions.

Cassant reassures us. Those entrusted today with vocational and formation work in our communities anguish over the quality of current candidates. What would we have thought of Joseph Cassant? In so many ways, he appears a nightmare vocation. Intellectually slow, incapable of making friends, afraid of the opposite sex, lacking manual dexterity, of few interests, overly dependent, tending to somatize his inner conflicts-could it possibly be fair either to him or to a community to admit him to religious life? Without wishing in any way to derogate from the importance of solid and thorough vocational discernment, I see Joseph Cassant calling us to consider and give due weight to another factor in our evaluations: the mysterious spiritual core of the candidate. Fr. Malet intuited in Joseph, at a level deeper than the young man's psychological limitations, which he came to see with ever-deepening clarity, an authentic and radical desire to give himself to Christ, a desire that was not the product of Joseph's incapacities but prior to them and somehow untouched by them. To this core desire Malet constantly addressed himself, affirming it, educating it, fortifying it. At least in part because of Malet's approach as spiritual director, Joseph did not languish or regress in his disabilities but learned increasingly to surpass them. There is no Trappist monk or nun who does not know that our vocation is a lifelong process of healing. Joseph Cassant is a monk who was "cured," and Fr. Malet by betting on and developing the essentially healthy aspect of Joseph was the instrument of the cure. It would be interesting to think of a co-beatification.

Another significant and undeniable point: Cassant entered the Trappists without any clear notion of or desire for monastic life. He wanted to be a priest. In my experience in Latin America, many young men come to the monastery as candidates without a clear idea of our vocation. They wish to embrace a welldefined and serious form of religious life; sometimes they wish to embrace it in the hope of future ordination. It is certainly good to make clear to these candidates the specificity of the monastic charism. But I personally do not think it is necessary-or wise-to insist that before

entering the community they reach the certitude that they have "our" vocation, our whole vocation, and nothing but our vocation. They will find out as they immerse themselves in the initial stages of formation. Besides, is there (do we want there to be?) such a sharp line of division between monastic life and other forms of Christian religious life?

Finally, Cassant challenges us. The tools he brought to the monastery were few, but indispensable: a good and upright will, a consistent practice of fidelity and generosity, an interior and exterior obedience to the formation offered by his superiors. He staked his spiritual destiny on the sanctifying power of the *conversatio* and was sanctified by it. A monastery is, inevitably, a *conversatio*, an organized, detailed, all-embracing way of life meant to lead its members to holiness. As long as the monastic practices continue to remain in place, the only variables are conviction and dedication, faith and zeal. Cassant challenges and abashes us by the reckless abandon with which he gave himself to monastic living.

Joseph Cassant, *frère et père*, instructs, reassures, and challenges us. May he pray for us as well. For a good word (from his mouth to God's ear) is worth more than the best gift.

Dom Bernardo BONOWITZ, (O.C.S.O.)
Prior of Novo Mundo , Brasil

Reflections on Bl. Marie-Joseph Cassant

by Fr Lode van Hecke, ocsa, 2004.

We sometimes know very little about the saints of our Order, and I wouldn't want Fr. Joseph, who is in many regards very simple, to slip through the cracks.

But in what way is Joseph an inspiration for us? It is perhaps not obvious for people of today, especially the last generations. We are usually struck first of all by things which draw us away from him, and the list can be long.

Let us recall, first of all, that he had a very short life : **March 6, 1878 - June 17, 1903**, twenty-five years. Joseph, as a child, had many draw-backs, even if he came from a well-to-do family. Small and of a weak constitution, he had trouble following in class, to the point that his difficulty in studying was an obstacle to his admittance to the seminary : he so longed to become a priest ! Finally, he entered Saint-Marie-du-Désert on **December 5, 1894**. His life there was very ordinary, but it's his vulnerability which strikes. He needs a Spiritual Director who must continuously reassure him against his scruples. He will never be given any position of responsibility. He is at times nerve-racking by his clumsiness at work. The "little way" as epitomized by Thérèse of Lisieux perhaps finds an even better candidate in Joseph in that he does not possess Thérèse's natural gifts.

Furthermore, after 100 years, many things in his life have become dated. According to our standards, he was too young to be admitted to the monastery: a child of 16 years old. You will say that Thérèse of Lisieux was 15 years old and that Fr. André Malet – his Spiritual Director, of whom I'll speak again – entered at 14! But at first glance, our Joseph is not a man of their stature. He will always seem fragile and dependent. He is, for example, haunted by the prospect of having to leave the monastery and face such an anti-clerical France. The "law on associations" which entails the expulsion of religious congregations comes into effect in 1901. The threat then is very real and the abbot orders the moving of part of the furniture and the library. We are getting ready to leave if necessary. Thanks to Dom Chautard's intervention, the Trappists will never have to leave France, a fact little known to Joseph. But he is also obsessed by the idea of being abandoned by Fr. André,

who continually calms his scruples and encourages him. He has such a great need of him. “The world” appears in his eyes as dangerous and hostile. It will take a good deal of personal work before he comes to progressively accept any eventuality. Thérèse of Lisieux lived at the same period (she dies the year of Joseph’s simple profession). But she, on the other hand, dreams of martyrdom and the idea of confrontation spurs her on. Joseph doesn’t have either the intellectual acumen of the Carmelite who was interested in studies beyond the strict minimum required. Joseph studies with a great deal of difficulty, notwithstanding his intellectual curiosity, which is limited to what is necessary to be a good monk and especially a priest. His difficulties in studies will remain his cross throughout. A last comparison with Thérèse : she would’ve loved to be a missionary and is interested in people to convert while Joseph’s interests did not go beyond the walls of the abbey.

But I am nevertheless struck by his qualities, less spectacular, but solid: his faith and his confidence, his uprightness, and his good sense (he is not stupid), a good discernment, a will of steel. He reads assiduously: he feels the need to feed his mind, even during mental prayer (otherwise, he falls asleep or his spirit wanders!). He writes a great deal: he makes note of important passages, prayers and reflections. I will mention only this one: “What’s the point of religious life if one does not change himself?” It’s a good formula which implies a great deal of faithfulness. The verb in French is not usually used in that reflexive way. To change *oneself* (“se modifier”), for Joseph Cassant, implies on the one hand, to remain true to self – you cannot become completely different - , but on the other, that a real transformation (which is sought out) is in order – otherwise it is stalemate. Important question which I can ask from time to time: do I really change *myself*? Fr. Joseph probably applied it only to himself, but the question can be extended (the expression “religious life” points in that direction): does my community transform itself, and the Order? In that sense, changing *oneself* is simply part of life.

What is his specific grace? I believe that it is his “innocence,” to be child-like, which most of us lose, except some rare exceptions like him, and never get back. We see it on his face in a picture that was taken in 1897. (Of the rare pictures that we have of him, it’s by far my favorite.) What makes this innocence real is his peasant good sense which keeps him well-grounded and an exceptional strength of character which made him go forward regardless of the obstacles. If Joseph is not very muscular, he is nonetheless a lumberjack. He is clear-sighted not only for others but also for himself. Recognizing his limits, he has learned to accept them without withdrawing into himself. All of these qualities make him a rather sturdy individual. But at the same time, his child-likeness makes him disarming. But one can push this even further. Because of his devotion to the Sacred Heart, with his sense for the Eucharist, he is truly on a mystical quest. He has been ordained priest on **October 12, 1902**. His motto “Everything for Jesus,” in his case, should be taken strictly to the letter. There is no question of sentimental devotions or superficial spirituality. Through this slant – together with his child-likeness -, he reaches back to a tradition which dates back to the 12th century, even to the Bible. How could he be other than a man of heart, and loved by everyone: everyone? Except for a member of the community, a professor of theology (no less), who later became his infirmarian: this brother never missed an opportunity to humiliate him. The heroic virtues of Joseph start here and will cumulate in his terrible death from tuberculosis, incurable at the time and detected much too late. It is, of course, this last trial which places him above any form of sentimentality or head in the clouds. Joseph lives up to the situation and proves himself to be of the caliber of a little Thérèse. “To live only of love and for love” could’ve been written by Saint Bernard or the Little Thérèse: no, it was written by Joseph.

To synthesize the teaching of Father Joseph, I readily take the words of Dom Bernardo Olivera during his homily at Sainte Marie du Désert, June 17, 2003 :

- Joseph was : a simple man who accepted himself as such ; a disciple of Jesus who let himself be instructed ; a young monk who accepted direction ;

- Joseph knew : how to seek peace and pursue it ; he was able to forget himself to server others; he managed to renounce his self-will in order to follow that of his Lord ;
- Joseph is : a lover, who let himself be crucified ; a thankful individual who let himself be transformed in thanksgiving (Eucharist); a priest of Christ who sacrificed himself on the altar.

I cannot but mention the important role of Fr. André Malet, his Master of Novices, Spiritual Father, and professor of theology - he will later become abbot of the community - a figure of high stature, a guide without compare. Without him, Joseph would not have been what he later became. Father André will know how to discern an austerity sought for itself and how to direct it towards a spirituality which is more monastic and even mystical. The danger was that penitence would smother contemplation. The point is to love; the rest has its place, but subordinate. He will communicate to Joseph devotion to the Sacred-Heart – very popular at the time – and a keen sense for the Eucharist. You have the impression that everything was already there in the first sentence that Fr. André said to Joseph when he first came to the monastery: “I will help you to love Jesus.” In the spiritual adventure in which they shared, Joseph became an example of confidence and obedience; Fr. André will become a model of spiritual discernment. Finally, the disciple will precede the master. The latter understood this very well when he said that he hoped, one day, to be buried at the foot of his disciple.

We therefore understand that the Abbot General, every chance he gets, loves to speak of our little brother as a patron for our times and for our Order. At a time when precariousness is found everywhere, Fr. Joseph can be a help to those who suffer from the limits they must endure. He is an example that holiness is within their reach.