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MONASTIC WISDOM SERIES: NUMBER FIFTY-EIGHT

# Happiness in God

Memories and Reflections  
of the Father Abbot of La Trappe

*Dom Marie-Gérard Dubois*

Translated by  
Georges Hoffmann and Jean Truax



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# CONTENTS

Preface vii

Dom Guerric Reitz Séjotte, Abbot of La Trappe

Foreword ix

Georges Hoffmann

A Note on Notes xi

Jean Truax

Chapter One: The Two Faces 1

Chapter Two: Only Angels Have the Right to Fly 19

Chapter Three: “Beware of the Trap” 33

Chapter Four: The Gates of Silence 55

Chapter Five: Learning How to Speak in the Cloister 91

Chapter Six: Different Journeys, Same Call 113

Chapter Seven: The Age of Reform 149

Chapter Eight: They Were Lay Brothers 177

Chapter Nine: Father Abbot of La Trappe 203

Chapter Ten: The One Who Leaves 235

Chapter Eleven: “So, I Am Studying Hebrew!” 251

Chapter Twelve: New and Ancient Communities 279

Chapter Thirteen: Nevertheless, There Is a World  
Out There! 305

Chapter Fourteen: God's Violin 331

Chapter Fifteen: Beginnings without End 349

Bibliography 375

Index 383

## PREFACE TO THE ENGLISH EDITION OF *LE BONHEUR EN DIEU*

In writing *Happiness in God*, Dom Marie-Gérard Dubois has led his readers beyond the monastic cloister and made them enter into the daily life of the Trappists as it has evolved during the last decades. In so doing, he has allowed the public at large to join the human and religious experience of numerous men and women who entered the monastery and who have lived and still live in accordance with the Rule of Saint Benedict and the Constitutions of the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance.

To a certain extent this book, which is first and foremost a personal testimony, refutes the traditional clichés associated with the monastic life, which turn it into a caricature or distort it, and enables the reader to perceive that life in its effective reality. It is probably this authenticity that made the book successful among French-speaking readers. They then considered monks and nuns not as unusual people, cut off from the world, but as beings totally similar to themselves, who, like them, have faithfully tried to answer a particular call of God to the best of their abilities. These people who had previously seemed so remote from readers have thus become like familiar friends.

Consequently, readers feel personally called, and these monks and nuns make them understand that they too are called to a spiritual life of intimacy with the Lord and of service to their brothers. They perceive that this search for God in a brotherly community is accessible to them. Through this book they too may

practice, within their capabilities, liturgical prayer, silent meditation, and *lectio divina*. They learn to “never lose hope in God’s mercy” (RB 4.73). A kind of intimate collaboration, a sharing of life, is established between each reader and the brother and sister Trappists portrayed in this book. A bond is created of sympathy, solidarity, and affection in God that enriches and transforms life. *Happiness in God* leads us to live an experience of communion.

We, the brothers of La Trappe who lived with Dom Marie-Gérard as the abbot of our monastery and still have in our memory the sound of his voice when he was teaching us in chapter, telling us the recent history of the Order, and sharing his anecdotes, are delighted that his testimony is becoming accessible to English-speaking readers.

We want to express our sincere thanks to Georges Hoffmann, who took an avid interest in *Le Bonheur en Dieu*, for undertaking this translation. May he receive here all our gratitude and our appreciation. We are overjoyed to know that readers on the other side of the ocean will make the same discovery of the reality of the Trappist life and will also seek to join the spiritual and brotherly experience lived in the monastery. Their brother and sister monks and nuns, who pray for them in the Trappes of the whole world, walk with them on this life path, where “our hearts and bodies prepare for the battle of holy obedience to his instructions” (RB Prol. 40).

Br. Gueric Reitz Séjotte  
Abbot of La Trappe  
May 2017

## FOREWORD TO THE TRANSLATION

During one of my business trips to Europe in late October 1995, I visited my parents in Brussels, Belgium. As was often the case during such visits, my father went to sleep around 10 p.m., and my mother and I stayed up to chat about family and work back in Atlanta, Georgia. The television was set on the France 2 channel. At 10:30 the literary program *Bouillon de Culture* came on, presented by the French journalist Bernard Pivot. The program featured famous philosophers, actors, authors, and politicians discussing their most recent books. It was immensely popular. That night Pivot had invited two monks. Dom Marie-G rard Dubois, abbot of La Trappe, was interviewed about his recent book, *Le Bonheur en Dieu*. He was there with a younger monk.

While it was not unusual to have theologians and religious pundits appear on television, it was rare to see a monk, especially a Trappist, appear in monastic habit to talk about the essence of God's call to his choice of a monastic life. Happiness radiated from these two monks throughout the whole program. Because of the popularity of this TV program, the book sold very well in France. I read it at different times when my spiritual journey was taking side roads, not to say dead ends. Each time it led me back to that elusive call of God. I believe that there was no coincidence in my visiting my parents that night and our watching that program.

Moving forward twenty years. After many detours, my spiritual journey brought me to the Trappist Monastery of Our Lady

of the Holy Spirit in Conyers, Georgia, and its group of Lay Cistercians. After reading some of the monastic authors, I thought that the reflections of Dom Marie-Gérard could still be an inspiration to all of us listening to God's call today.

These are the words and reflections of an abbot relating how he and some of his brothers encountered God's call and discovered the Cistercian answer to this call that led them to enter the walls of a monastery. It is also the story of the Trappist Order laboring through the post-Vatican Council II reforms as told by one of the leading forces behind these reforms.

The last question Pivot asked Dom Marie-Gérard in the 1995 interview was, "What would you like God to tell you when you get near heaven's gates?" Dom Gérard answered: "Come on in. Let me now watch over those you took care of." I suspect that God told Dom Marie-Gérard Dubois exactly that when on July 2, 2011, he called him home.

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I am very grateful to Dom Guerric Reitz Séjotte, abbot of La Trappe, for his enthusiastic approval and support of the translation of this book and for having written the Preface to *Happiness in God*. My sincere thanks and admiration to Jean Truax, PhD and Independent Scholar in Medieval History, for having generously given her time and knowledge to review the translation and the footnotes. To both Dom Guerric and Dr. Truax my most sincere thanks.

Georges Hoffmann

## A NOTE ON NOTES

A glance at the bibliography for this book will show that Abbot Marie-Gérard Dubois was a well-read man. He sprinkled his memoir with quotations from a variety of sources, ranging from “a thirteenth-century Cistercian manuscript” to Martin Heidegger. Feeling that some readers will want to explore further, we have replaced Dubois’s footnotes to French editions with references to the latest English editions where possible.

Many of the documents of the Cistercian Order, both ancient and modern, are readily available in the Resources section of the official website, <http://www.ocso.org/resources/>. This includes the current *Constitutions* of the Order. References to the *Constitutions* are abbreviated Const and are parenthetically embedded in the text. Encyclicals, conciliar decrees, and other papal documents can be found on the Vatican website, <http://w2.vatican.va/>. The documents of Vatican II can be found at [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/). The Rule of Saint Benedict can also be found online at <http://www.osb.org/rb/text/toc.html#toc>. References to the Rule are abbreviated RB.

We have also done our best to provide sources for the quotations that Dubois did not footnote. Sometimes we have not given specific page numbers because the statement is not a direct quotation, but rather Dubois’s own summary of central ideas contained in the work. In other cases, we have not been able to supply any information beyond the author’s name given in the text, and we believe that these are Dubois’s reflections based on his familiarity with the authors and his own thirty years’ experience

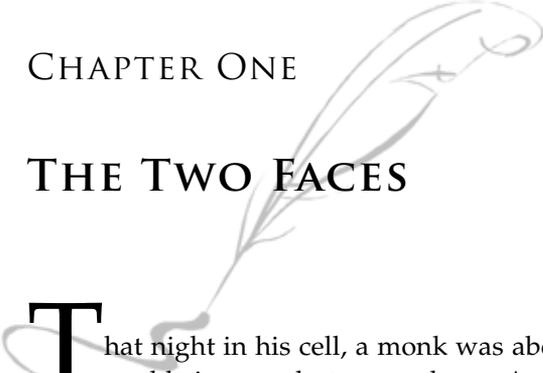
as a monk, abbot, and member of various commissions of the Trappist Order. The text also contains a number of explanatory footnotes on historical figures and events, some written by Abbot Dubois and others by Georges Hoffmann. All of our notes, both bibliographical and explanatory, are enclosed in brackets {}.

Before I had the good fortune to join Georges in this project, my knowledge of the Cistercians pretty much ended with the twelfth-century fathers. Now, after having encountered one of the great voices of the modern Order, I can truly say that Dom Gérard and his colleagues are worthy successors to Saint Bernard of Clairvaux and his contemporaries. I will be eternally grateful to Georges for introducing me to them.

Dr. Jean Truax

## CHAPTER ONE

# THE TWO FACES



**T**hat night in his cell, a monk was about to complete his earthly journey, but no one knew. A monk who dies slips away quietly. He is laid in the ground, without a coffin, and no one speaks of it. His first name is inscribed on a simple cross with the date of his death. No last name, no birth date, no date of entry into the monastery, no titles or obits in this small cemetery within the walls of the cloister. Nothing, except that the word *priest* is added if it applies to the deceased. The cowl that he wore as a monk, the long white choir vestment with the hood of the Trappists, will be his coffin. I have seen so many of them go this way. I have thrown so many shovelsful of dirt on the bodies.

This monk was so quiet you might have thought he was passing into death as through a veil. Brother Jean-Baptiste was one of our elders at La Trappe. He had been following his path of prayer and detachment for a long time. Step by step he reached the end of his journey, so far away and with so much peace and confidence, that he never looked back to ask for our help or to give us a sign. But we were all surprised.

He experienced his transition without any agony, maybe without even realizing it. Death was a simple and easy act. We didn't expect him to die then, to start his transition that evening. Our world was already touching eternity without our seeing it. There is not far to go from this earthly life to infinity, and Brother Jean-Baptiste

went there in the same way a person walks from one room to the next, without any ceremony. He went through a fog or through a light, barely a thin screen in passing the threshold into this other world. A curtain, that's all.

He didn't warn us. He sat down in his chair and that was it. The monk who was taking care of him in the infirmary was just coming in to get him ready for bed. "It is not going very fast" was Brother Jean-Baptiste's response to his brother's greeting. He passed while talking to the other monk. Nothing easier, in the blink of an eye, his sentence barely finished.

It was Thursday. At La Trappe we had never witnessed the celebration of the perpetual vows of one monk and the funeral of another on the same day. In two days' time a monk who had been living among us for five years was scheduled to make his solemn vows. It would be a great celebration, with many people coming to the monastery church. Among them a good number were coming from his village of Cauville, close to Étretat in the region of Caux. They were about to leave on the two-hundred-kilometer trip with the new monk's close family. I was thinking about this celebration, and at the same time I was thinking about our brother, who had just left us so suddenly and so quietly. Everything had been ready for a long time for Brother Aelred's vows. Our neighbors from around the abbey were about to arrive. What to do? It was impossible to postpone the funeral and keep the body in our midst in the August heat. It was obvious to me the celebrations had to be linked.

A burial in a Trappist monastery is one of the most impressive events one can witness, but so is a celebration of perpetual vows. I had already been struck by this at the age of eighteen, when I first attended the burial of a monk. I didn't know what to expect at all. The monk was a former superior of La Trappe, and I didn't know then that one day I would succeed him. When he became ill, he resigned and was sent to the Cistercian Monastery of Montdes-Cats, close to Lille, where I had entered a couple of months earlier. The chants and the ceremony at the cemetery, while the body was laid without a coffin at the bottom of the freshly dug

grave, made me feel that I was accompanying him on his entry into Paradise. The Easter-like character of this burial touched me so much that I trace back to that very moment my interest in the liturgy, especially the burial liturgy, as well as any reflection relating to death.

I intended to preside over the funeral on Saturday afternoon, since the vows were planned for Saturday morning. The time that Brother Aelred would spend close to us and close to our deceased brother would be particularly poignant and solemn. I just had to add a homily for the funeral to the one that I had already written for the vows.

We Trappists do not hide anything about death. If we show it, notwithstanding its horror and incomprehensibility, it is because we give it a celebratory tone of triumph over death. The community first gets together, as close as possible to the place where the monk, in this case Brother Jean-Baptiste, finished his journey, to say the first prayers and to bless the body with incense and holy water. We ring the bells. Then the deceased is carried on a bier to the choir in the church, face uncovered and not trapped in a coffin. Two monks, if possible, but at least one, will stay with him constantly, day and night. He will never be left alone. The usual prayer services and the Mass will take place in his presence. To hide death and to leave the parents and the families to their grief is a modern attitude often absurd and cruel, which poorly hides a revolt against something that is beyond our understanding. In our monastery, we live and experience death together. We are bound during our lives, and we are united in this unique moment.

I knew that Brother Aelred was sufficiently prepared, but these circumstances reminded me of a decision we took three years ago for his simple vows. He didn't take them like the other monks in our chapter room, where, as in each monastery, the community gathers every day to receive spiritual teaching, instructions, and sometimes practical information. At the end of Brother Aelred's novitiate, a television crew led by Patrick de Carolis was preparing a program on monastic life for the magazine *Événements*, and

they asked to film the ceremony. In order for it to take place more comfortably and with a solemnity lacking within our monastic cloister, we held the ceremony in our church during Lauds, our second community prayer of the day. Brother Aelred, absorbed by his commitment, barely took notice of the cameras. On the other hand, his parents had the joy of seeing him on television in their house in Normandy. Now at twenty-seven years of age, he would once more be accompanied, but in a different way, a more solemn way. Death would be there behind him. Young monks coming from other monasteries for a formation session would also be present.

We do not become monks for ourselves alone. Monastic solitude includes the presence of all those who walk beside us on our earthly journey. I was happy that so many people gathered on that day in our house, close to the cloister, which for the monk is already a reflection of Paradise. Monks are withdrawn from the outside world, or, better, they try day after day to be more withdrawn, but it is different from abandoning the world. It is to rediscover it, to live it in another way, and to take up the struggle. Brother Aelred had already intensely experienced this separation from the world for the last five years. His life had come to fruition, he told us. He had gambled it all in his search for redemption, in betting on the invisible.

When he was twenty years old, while he was wondering about God's existence, he had already observed these cloistered men. He thought that maybe their lives provided a silent answer to that question. Monastic life represented a challenge in his eyes. Monks not only stated in words that God was alive; their very existence constituted such an affirmation. It deserved, he thought, a closer look, and perhaps eventually following in their steps. At that time in his life, Christ did not really appeal to him. He had a number of criticisms for him. What about the church? What about God in all this? Was there something that could explain the existence of men, animals, mountains, stars? In his search for God, he didn't see how a man who lived two thousand years ago and whose existence was not sufficiently proved could be

of use to him. And prayer? What was prayer? What were the monks doing behind those high walls? These were some of the questions of his youth.

Years had gone by. As is true for many of us, the perpetual vows were neither the most remarkable moment in Brother Aelred's spiritual journey nor his strongest awareness of personal commitment. To cross the threshold of the monastery or to take on the monk's habit is often a more decisive event.

Two days later, on Saturday, August 27, 1983, Brother Aelred woke up as he did every day at 4 a.m. and walked to the church for Vigils, which lasts one hour. The monks relieved those who had kept the vigil all night next to the body of their deceased brother, allowing them to go to their rest. The vigil continued. Nobody likes to get up in the middle of the night, to wake up from his sleep, to hurry up and enter a sometimes very cold church. This time it was an important day for Brother Aelred. It was his day, as it was for his elder brother, who had just passed away.

A strange although familiar feeling overcame him. He had already tried to suppress it without success, because this feeling doesn't let go easily—the feeling of ever-present death. It is there—the “scandal of death.” This scandal arose again before him and within his heart on the very day of his perpetual vows. Could death track him down any more persistently? Could it pressure him any more at the last minute? Yes, the question he had originally had was “what do the monks do and what is their use?” He had answered those questions, but death was still so close and God was still so invisible—Faith! Only faith to take one more step and to sign the *cedula* of perpetual vows that he would then put on the altar!

Brother Jean-Baptiste rested among us. The presence of death remained and filled up the church. A summer night is never cold, even under stone arches. We waited for the bells to sound for the start of the first prayers, of the first shout that the monk directs early in the morning in faith to his God: *Lord, open my lips, God, come to my rescue, Lord, hasten to help me.* Yes, come to

my assistance. The monks raised their supplication to God and to the whole world. The rustle of the white cowls and the soft steps of those still hurrying to their wooden stalls before the start of Vigils, the rustle of the pages of the song books as pages were turned—everything showed that the community, even struck with emotion so close to the body, was not shaken and did not change its customs.

A Trappist, even on the day of his perpetual vows, can still be scandalized by death. It is so close, so overwhelming, silent and insidious, always wanting to lure us into nothingness and have the last word. Today death is defiant. Isn't death invincible? Its ultimate provocation, at the moment of Brother Aelred's perpetual vows, became insignificant, and far from scaring him off, it convinced him that he was right to engage in the fight. Death was an abject thing in his eyes. Together with Christ, he was fighting against death, and he wanted to conquer along with him. God did not create humans for death or for the absurd. And Brother Aelred, like all contemplative monks, wanted to thank God for his creation.

Now came the end of the morning's celebration, and he lay down on the floor, in a gesture of complete surrender to God, identical to that of a priest at his ordination. His hands were crossed on his chest, his forehead touching the ground, his head uncovered. The remains of Brother Jean-Baptiste were still close to him. While the entry of a young monk into the monastic life was taking place in the presence of death, the mortal existence of the other was tipping over into eternal life peacefully and without a sound, just as if death hadn't been there between the two of them, just as if it had been pushed aside and already conquered.

In the audience, among the family members and the strangers gathered to celebrate, a young man looked on. He was stunned to see this monk facing the ground and behind him another one facing up toward heaven. This picture touched him so much that he saw in it a symbol of something grand, of all that he felt and all that he wanted to express, just as if that scene were a summary of life on earth and of entrance into heaven. It struck him so strongly

that it constituted, without our knowing it, the last stage of an internal evolution. This unexpected situation appeared to him to be filled with a rare spiritual value. At the end of the ceremony, he went to the park and sat down near the pond of La Trappe, where Bossuet<sup>1</sup> and Abbot de Rancé<sup>2</sup> exchanged their religious beliefs in these peaceful forests at the border between Normandy and La Perche. The young man came then to see me:

“I want to be a monk.”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty years old.”

“You have to think about it seriously. How long have you been thinking about it?”

“One hour.”

“One hour?”

“I was touched by this celebration. I sat down next to the waterfall—and it happens to be my birthday—I’ve thought about it thoroughly.”

He was about to start his studies to become a priest in Paris. He was registered in the Grand Seminary of Issy-les-Moulineaux for classes starting in October, but he had decided to do a retreat in our abbey first. I did not encourage him to change his plans; I only left the door open. The call to monastic life is always mysterious, and it can take many different roads. The decision at twenty years of age to shut yourself up behind those strange walls with the intention of never leaving them is only made after intense preparation. Wanting to become a priest seems to put someone on the way, but it may be an illusion due to a misunderstanding of monasticism. You don’t switch from one call to the

1. {Jacques Bossuet (1627–1704), French priest and preacher who became the tutor of Louis XIV’s eldest son, the Dauphin. His eulogies were famous. He used his talents to speak up for the rights of the French church against the papal authority. See also p. 294, n. 19.}

2. {Armand le Bouthillier de Rancé (1626–1700), abbot and reformer of the Trappist monastery of La Trappe and one of the founders of the Strict Observance of the Cistercian Order.}

other as fast as you change clothes. The life of a diocesan priest is totally different from the life of a Trappist. The priestly vocation is completely different. The idea of becoming a Trappist in the monastery of Rancé can send chills down your back.

The young man's voice had a certain self-assurance and enthusiasm. He explained to me that at the end of August he would meet with Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger<sup>3</sup> to decide what direction he should take in the seminary. I encouraged him to go to that meeting. On the day he had agreed to come back to the monastery, he arrived fifteen minutes early, but it was simply to inform me that he was entering La Trappe.

Two years earlier, in November, he had spent a couple of days in the guesthouse of our monastery. He was then a senior in high school. It was freezing, and he hadn't met any of the monks yet. During that first visit he was bored out of his mind, he explained, but he noted in a diary that two things struck him, the smiles of the monks, which seemed to reflect a sincere joy, and their personal poverty. Together they could use all the goods belonging to the whole community, but they did not own anything individually. Even though the joy appealed to this potential postulant, the prospect of individual poverty scared him a bit. He would be poor and without any social standing, giving up everything until his last day.

No, entering La Trappe was not what made him dream. This was not the way he envisioned a successful life, one useful to others. In fact, he had a lot of friends in Paris and did not want to leave them. Why isolate himself from them and from his family? Why never travel again? He wanted to finish his studies and serve the community, imagining that in the distant future, fifteen or twenty years from the present, he might finish his life sheltered in a monastery. He still had not decided to withdraw

3. {Aaron Jean-Marie Lustiger (1926–2007), archbishop of Paris from 1981 to 2005. He actively defended Catholic education against secularism and was an outspoken opponent of racism and anti-Semitism. He was born to a Jewish family and converted to Catholicism at the age of 13.}

from the world so young; taking on the habit and integrating into a community still scared him a little.

He still had these feelings during his following visit. When he entered the church he saw one monk face down on the ground, face hidden, and another one looking up at the heavens, his face illuminated by all the lights. The former in the shadow was looking at the earth, the latter was radiant with the mystery of God when I pronounced these words: "There are only two moments in life where you can meet God, the present moment and the moment of death—these are the two moments mentioned in the *Hail Mary*: 'pray for us now and at the time of our death.'"

For the young man, this liturgy led him into an impressive spectacle of sound and light, where the beginning and the end of human destiny meet, and it was a shock. He had never interpreted the prayer to the Mother of Christ in this way. The present moment was symbolized by this monk face down toward the earth and the moment of death by his brother on the bier. He thought that if one really meets God in the present moment and at the hour of one's death, it might be better not to further delay his desire to become a monk. This idea came to him, dazzling, and it did not leave him.

He watched Brother Aelred celebrating his vows just as if death, arrogant and impenetrable, weren't trying to tease him. Death sat on Brother Aelred's shoulders, of him who thought that if he persevered in his vows, one day he would be in the same place where his dead brother was lying. For him, death was still inconceivable and inadmissible. He didn't understand it, but he lined up his footsteps with Christ's footsteps, and his hand was in Christ's hand, walking toward a triumph that he could not yet envision. Faith was to believe that it was possible; faith was to risk his life for it. It was to trust the invisible and to know that our desires would be fulfilled beyond any expectation. Pure faith was to accept as authentic what our eyes did not see. As was the custom, Brother Aelred knelt down in front of each monk, asking him, "Pray for me." When he got up, each monk embraced him, and then he moved on to the next stall. It was a

celebration for the community to welcome a new member, but there was no shortage of sadness, thinking of the brother who had just passed away. All these contrasts were joined and illuminated in the Easter candle lit in the middle of the assembly.

The young man understood that the present moment was a moment in eternity and that it was sufficient for him to take the first step toward it. The gift had to be in the present and not in the future. I received the commitment of Brother Aelred. I told him that he was not fleeing the world or the responsibilities that he would have assumed by marriage and work, but that he was now carrying out a gesture of more complete poverty by abandoning the intention of serving the church and others that was still burning within him when he entered the monastery. To let everything go, that is what a Trappist is called to do—to abandon even what appears good, even what appears to be the best, even a secret dream of sacrifice and prayer for the world, of a life hidden under heroism or love. The greatest challenge for a monk is the total abandonment of himself to God's will. For the best among them it is no longer a personal project when someone else takes it upon himself to show him what to do. I spoke to the assembly of this total self-abandonment to the Father, of this monastic life, which means assuming no new responsibilities, no penance or punishments, no harassing constraints, no reaching a sublime ideal by using supra-human or non-human means, but an act of poverty and liberty. While I said all this, the body of the deceased lay among us on the bier. Our eyes could not completely get away from it. He had completed the journey that another was starting that day.

It was the first time during a profession of perpetual vows that I had had to explicitly address the subject of death. I spoke about a new birth arising out of death. But who was I talking about? The one who closed his eyes to this world and transitioned to eternity or this young monk who, by committing himself, died to the world, so to speak? This is really what the vows imply, a self-abandonment and a renunciation of certain legitimate activities

in order to experience true happiness, the submission to the discipline of the community and to a superior, to the communal will of a group of men or women, entrusting themselves completely to God until the end of their earthly lives. A crazy project if the earthly existence ends up in nothingness, a completely useless project for anyone if God does not exist. Folly of the cross, folly of the faith. Mountain climbers, also called the “conquerors of the useless,” can gain some media glory, sportsmanlike satisfaction, and money if they’re lucky. But monks?

That afternoon, with death still present, in the middle of prayers for forgiveness for the one who, like each one of us, was a sinner, we sang songs of hope and of triumph. The family of the young professed monk stayed, and I appreciated the discreet happiness, which, notwithstanding the pain, accompanies most Trappist funerals. We always insist on our faith in the resurrection, and this paschal aspect of the liturgy is essential, as I said in the beginning. The large candle lit at Easter is again lit next to the body. The songs recall the exodus of the Hebrews out of Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea, and the pillar of fire guiding them, while the procession goes to the cemetery, with the bells tolling. The cemetery is not a simple collection of dried-out bones. It is not intended to be a place of death. It is the waiting room of heaven. It symbolizes Paradise to a certain extent. We lead the body to the kingdom of life. It awaits the resurrection, but the spirit of the deceased enjoys the vision of God and eternal life, perhaps after a certain trial period, if—as theologians state—it was not sufficiently purified at the time of death. The spirit participates in the joy of heaven, and that is what makes us joyful, really full of confidence.

A monk carrying the candle, symbol of Christ, leads the way. The bier is carried by four brothers. As abbot, I follow them. Then come the priests wearing their purple stoles. The other monks, wearing their white cowls, follow in order of seniority, and then come the faithful. Everyone follows the deceased brother, who precedes us and guides us. At one point, close to the grave, we have to stop while he continues his journey. We will entrust him

to God in a last *adieu*—"on the threshold of the house, our Father awaits us."

In the first prayers, we call upon the angels to come and meet the one who is leaving us. The liturgy picks up on ancient themes of the Christian tradition, like the account of the agony of an old monk of the Egyptian desert in the fifth century. Surrounded by his companions, he suddenly saw Abraham and then the martyrs, the apostles, and the angels running towards him. "I see Abraham," he said. "I see the martyrs." They came to fetch him, but he asked them to grant him one more moment to do penance. Everybody told him that he was a saint, so "Why wait one more moment? The angels are ready to take you." The old monk answered that he realized that he hadn't started to serve God yet. This revealing story concludes with Jesus himself coming to fetch the soul.<sup>4</sup> The liturgy reenacts this very scene, in which we ask the angels and the celestial world to come for the brother who just left.

Some bodies have a peaceful appearance, others look tormented. We don't hide them; we don't conceal anything. That's what death is all about. If it is hot, the body will give out a distinctive smell. It is said that incense was adopted to cover that up. But can one totally erase it? The smell is there, for it is part of death. Our society wants to hide death, cheat it, avoid thinking about it. We do not wipe it out; we do not erase anything. The brother infirmarian simply washes the deceased and adjusts the clothing. Certain bodies remain in good condition, others do not, and the impression is different each time.

The practice of burial without a coffin was originally not specific to the monks. The poor also laid bodies directly in the earth. It was common, and we have kept that custom as a sign

4. [A story similar to this is found in the *Lives of the Desert Fathers*, except that the dying monk is given three years instead of only one day to amend his life (*The Lives of the Desert Fathers: The Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* 10:17–19, trans. Norman Russell, introduction by Benedicta Ward, CS 34 [Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1981], 84–85).]

of poverty and the fact that we represent very little in this world. The brother infirmarian goes down into the grave to receive the body and to lay it down. He pulls down the hood and puts a veil on the face to protect it from the dirt. I throw the first shovelful of dirt. Other brothers follow me, without haste, until the body disappears. A last prayer, a last goodbye, and a very beautiful litany in which we chant the supplication "Lord, have mercy on this sinner." And then we entrust the deceased to God and the celestial world. Just before that, the grave is blessed with a prayer recalling the three days Christ spent in the tomb and his resurrection.

Until the last minute, the face is visible. He is present and we can see him. Contrary to what one might think, by doing it this way the process is much more human than if the face were masked. I attended the funeral of my brother-in-law in Cachan, Val-de-Marne, on March 6, 1993. He was a well-known journalist, a member of the Bayard-Press group, Étienne Camelot, nephew of Father Camelot, who had published numerous books on theology. He was a member of the city council, and he fell ill as he was on his way home from a meeting. He had barely made it home when he collapsed at my sister's feet. The day of the funeral, I went to the hospital, where he had been transported without ever regaining consciousness. His body was kept in a side row of the large funeral room. I made it there just in time for the closing of the coffin. The lid was half closed and we could hardly see him. Without paying too much attention to us, probably out of decency, the physician simply unfolded the sheet, adjusted the lid and sealed it, and left. Since Étienne's face appeared twisted, my sister didn't want the children to come close a last time, so under those circumstances I didn't approach him either; the last time I saw his face was thus a few months earlier when he had come to La Trappe. Everything was dignified but felt cold. The closing of the lid was a quick and painful formality, almost reduced to a legal verification that it was he and nobody else. The deceased was hidden. I tried to say some prayers, but the mood seemed sad to me. Of course, hospitals do what they

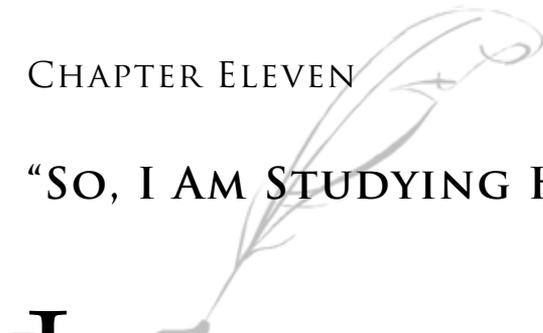
can, and my point is not to blame them. Our funerals at La Trappe are less dramatic. I am not talking about our belief in immortality, but about the human aspect and the sequence of events.

I was present in the funeral home only as a family member and not as a priest. Because of their dwindling numbers, priests don't have the time to attend either the preliminary rites of death or those at the cemetery. They can only handle the church ceremony, and barely that. One can regret this and wonder if it is acceptable. The death of a loved one is an important event in the life of a family and an opportunity for evangelization not to be ignored. Luckily, in more and more cases, lay Christians assume this ministry of accompanying the family in its bereavement, for it is essential that no one end up grieving in solitude, facing the absurdity of death, which remains disconcerting, revolting, and incomprehensible. Our whole being resists death until our last breath. But for the faithful, death is only a transition, and the moment you have to capitulate is precisely the moment at which you conquer. But you have to be conscious of it. It is difficult for everyone involved.

We know that Saint Bernard was torn by the death of his brother Gerard. He described the scene vividly, saying that Gerard "was dying while singing and singing while dying."<sup>5</sup> These are the two faces of a funeral: the sorrow of those helplessly witnessing the departure of the loved one, and the hope that this passing is for the deceased an entry into true life. Regarding the passing of Saint Bernard's brother, there is a Cistercian document of the thirteenth century that doesn't hesitate to proclaim, "We are using you, O death our enemy, to go towards happiness, although you are the mother of sorrow; opponent to the glory, we are serving you up for glory; we are using you, gates of hell, to enter into the kingdom; from you, grave of distress, to find redemption."<sup>6</sup>

5. Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs II*, 26.11, trans. Kilian Walsh, CF 7 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1983), 70.

6. {Dom Dubois provides no further information about this document.}



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### “SO, I AM STUDYING HEBREW!”

I had been abbot of La Trappe for two years in 1979 when a breeder and trainer of racehorses asked to be accepted into the community. He had Jewish origins. In the novitiate he soon wanted to learn Hebrew and meditate on the rabbinic commentaries on the psalms. I realized that this search for his origins and Jewish thought were important to him. I allowed him to contact people who were educated in the Talmudic schools to assist him in his studies. He did not know any Hebrew when he got here and had never paid any attention to the Jewish faith. This was an exceptional situation. We didn't push him with preconceived ideas, but in our community he went back to his roots.

How was he able to find his Jewish identity at fifty-four among Catholic monks? The monastic life reveals to us our inner selves; there may lie the explanation for this journey. To encounter Judaism in La Trappe is contrary to the image we have of what we can expect in a monastery. That could be because we are generally not aware of the surprises that the search for God and the soul baring can bring. Brother Jean-Pierre had no idea what to expect when he left his job as a business leader to knock on our door. He later confided that his journey back to the sources was linked to events that had marked him deeply and played an important role in his spiritual formation—the persecution of the Jews from 1938 to 1944. We had to take that into account.

He was arrested and held in custody three times and incarcerated in the Drancy camp<sup>1</sup> when he was seventeen years old. Before that, in 1940, he was first sent to Gurs, a camp of legionnaires in the Pyrenees, which had been set up for Spanish fighters and other foreigners. Three of his grandparents were Jews, along with his mother. He was born in Vienna in 1926 and had Czech origins.

Forty years after the end of the war, after he had entered La Trappe, he was visiting one of our monks in the ICU of the hospital in L'Aigle, a nearby town. The anesthesiologist on duty started a friendly conversation with him and said, "I often come to La Trappe, but they never let me visit. It is too bad." "Next time, call me," answered Brother Jean-Pierre. "I will show you around. But tell me your name."

"Marcel Galli."

"Marcel Galli!" he shouted out, dismayed. "Are you related to a Mr. Galli, who worked at the police department in Nice?"

The face of the anesthesiologist turned white. He stepped back and said:

"You were in Drancy!"

"Yes, but what is your family relation with this man?"

"He was my father."

"He arrested my mother."

"Was she deported to the camps?"

"He saved her life."

"How so?" he asked with relief in his voice.

During the large-scale round-ups at the end of August 1942, ten thousand Jews of the Free Zone<sup>2</sup> were to be turned over to

1. {The Drancy internment camp was used by the Germans in World War II to detain Jews and other people classified as "undesirables," who would later be transported to extermination camps. It was located in Drancy, a suburb of Paris, and was initially guarded by the French police. Between June 22, 1942, and July 31, 1944, 67,400 French, Polish, and German Jews were arrested and deported from Drancy, among them 6,000 children. The SS took over the camp in 1943; Alois Brunner became camp commander.}

2. See above, chap. 3, pp. 37–38, n. 2.

Hitler following an agreement with the Vichy government.<sup>3</sup> A three-day manhunt ensued. Brother Jean-Pierre's mother was abruptly released thanks to the intervention of the father of this anesthesiologist, whom he had just met in the hospital in L'Aigle.

"Your father was in charge of the Jewish question in the whole Free Zone."

"Yes. He died two years ago. What happened to you?"

I also asked Brother Jean-Pierre to tell us about these events, which had taken place fifty years earlier. It was an opportunity for us to remember this dramatic deportation and better to integrate it into our prayers. His adventure went beyond his personal case. It addressed the problem of the relations of the Catholic Church with Judaism as well as the responsibility of church fathers for the anti-Semitism throughout the centuries that led to the massacre of the Jews. He was almost a victim of that anti-Semitism, as many members of his family had been. Beyond this dark page of our Western history, both sides of us humans appeared, the one turned towards the darkness and the one lit up by a light. Often the same human being could have contradictory attitudes without being reduced to a simplistic explanation.

Jean-Pierre (his birth name) had had a very happy childhood. His mother, Lucia Gutmann, was born in Vienna. Like the large majority of assimilated Jews in the city, she had given up any religious practice, although she remained attached to Judaism. In her grandfather's generation it was traditional for the firstborn son to become a rabbi. The older brother of her grandfather, David Gutmann, was named Wilhelm. He was sent from his birthplace of Leipnik in Moravia to Hungary to complete his rabbinic studies. It didn't bring him what he was expecting, and so he changed direction. He turned to commerce and then to industry. He was immensely successful after in 1853 having with David founded the company Brothers Gutmann, with the symbol G.G. (Gebrüder Gutmann). Many businesses grew out of that enterprise. Wilhelm

3. See above, chap. 6, p. 122, n. 6.

became the president of the Jewish community of Vienna and David the president of the Israeli Alliance, while Lucia's grandfather was the head of the Jewish community of St. Petersburg. The brothers Gutmann were the founders of the Jewish Viennese Institute for Hebraic Theology in 1893. The name Gutmann was well known in Vienna.

Jean-Pierre's father, Kurt Ippen, was a Czech Protestant born of an old-school Catholic mother. She was the only one of his grandparents that Jean-Pierre ever knew. At that time in Austria, non-practicing Christians still wanted to give their children a Christian education. Jean-Pierre's sister, Ruth, two years his senior, remained Jewish and was sent to a Jewish school. He, on the other hand, was baptized and sent to a Protestant elementary school. Then in the sixth grade he went to a state high school, which in Austria was Catholic. He nevertheless followed the Protestant curriculum. After the Anschluss<sup>4</sup> of March 12, 1938, the students labeled as Aryan were separated from the Jews within their classrooms. Jean-Pierre spontaneously went with the Jewish children.

Soon after the racial laws of Nuremberg, which prohibited Jewish students from attending public schools, were enacted in Austria in May 1938, the principal came early in the morning to announce the new regulations. Then under the supervision of the teacher, the Aryan students stood up and kicked the Jewish children out of the classrooms. Jean-Pierre was among these and was actually very happy for these unexpected vacation days. He didn't understand why his mother seemed so affected.

In May 1939 the Ippen family finally got a visa for France and took refuge in Nice. When school started, the war had already

4. {The Anschluss was the forced union of Austria with the German Reich in March 1938, part of Hitler's plan to build a united "Gross Deutschland" of all the German-speaking countries. Very little opposition to the union occurred on either side of the border. The harassment of the Jews began immediately. This action ended in "Kristallnacht," on November 9, 1938, in which all synagogues were destroyed and six thousand Jews were arrested.}

been declared, and Jean-Pierre was not accepted in the state school, so his parents registered him in a Catholic school. Since it offered no Protestant curriculum, he received Catholic teaching. They used the manual written by Abbé Auguste Boulenger, which we today consider rigidly dogmatic.<sup>5</sup> Strangely enough, this teaching with its absolute and unnuanced certainties sparked Jean-Pierre's enthusiasm, because he had only known a moralizing reading of the Bible. He was looking for a logical basis for the articles of the Christian faith. He quickly figured out that Boulenger was following the three parts of Thomas of Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*. Over time he acquired the fifty booklets of the *Summa* in a youth publication. Every night he spent two hours avidly reading them. He hid this activity from his father, who, although not opposed to religion, still thought that moderation in all things was better. He only made peace with the fact that his son became a Catholic when his daughter converted and also asked for a Catholic baptism. He had always wanted her to become a Christian.

Because the validity of a Protestant baptism was not a sure thing at the time, Jean-Pierre was conditionally baptized in the Catholic church. The celebration took place in the convent of the Poor Clares in Cimiez on September 12, 1941. The date was significant—it was the feast day of the Holy Name of Mary, established in memory of the liberation of Vienna from a Turkish siege. Legend tells us that this victory was due to the praying of the rosary, which was promoted by the Dominicans. In love with the intellectual game of the scholastic, Jean-Pierre dreamed of becoming a Dominican, and for that purpose he kept learning Latin, which was necessary for his religious education. His more pragmatic father, though, was hoping that he would turn to science.

Comforted in his Christian faith and wrapped in his good conscience, Jean-Pierre was appreciated at school and felt perfectly safe

5. *Manuel d'Apologétique: Introduction à la doctrine catholique*, ed. Emmanuel Vitte (Paris: Lyon, 1928).

in the Free Zone. So did his family. His father had served under French command in the Czech army, adding to the certainty that he would be protected, whatever might happen. He had nothing to fear. Therefore he submitted to the census of the Jews without any afterthought, relying on the appeasing statements of the government employee.

On August 26, 1942, the BBC evening news broadcast on regular intervals coded messages that roundups would take place that same night in the Jewish refugee community of the Free Zone. His parents rushed to the phones to warn their acquaintances, then went to bed lamenting the lot of those they could not reach. They did not feel at risk at all. Jean-Pierre did not suspect anything. He was lost in his theological dreams. But at 2 a.m. he was abruptly yanked from his bed by a police officer. Half asleep, he didn't understand anything. He said to him, "Hello, sir."

Before he was able to ask the police officer what he wanted, he saw his pajama-clad father roughed up by another policeman, who ordered him to get dressed in a hurry. He understood that the situation was serious. A few minutes later, the whole family was led away to the Banquet Hall of Nice, just across the street from the hotel where they lived, Rossini Street. The room was still empty. Slowly other families came in, totally stunned. Around 6 a.m. they did a triage, sending those over sixty and those under sixteen home. Buses came to pick up the others. Jean-Pierre's parents and sister were taken to an unknown destination. He was alone and went back to the apartment. He waited until 8 o'clock in the morning and went to see the director of the school, a priest. Distressed by what he heard, the priest boosted Jean-Pierre's morale and wrote a long letter to the bishop of Nice, Mgr. Reymond, a classmate of Pope Pius XII. He gave the letter to Jean-Pierre, telling him to hurry up; the bishop could intervene effectively, he assured him.

When he got to the diocese, he was disappointed to learn that the bishop was not in Nice at that time. Another prelate came to the door. He had an impressive stature that reassured Jean-Pierre. The prelate only read the first couple of lines before

turning towards him, saying: "My poor friend, let me explain to you what is going on."

He told a parable: "It is as if we were both on the boardwalk. You made one misstep, and you fell in the water. You were drowning, but I couldn't swim. Why would you want me to try to save you? Goodbye!"

Jean-Pierre was very surprised at this parallel and disappointed by the dismissive answer. He couldn't expect anything more from the religious authorities. So he went to the civil authorities. But his parents, who were refugees, didn't have any close connections with the city leaders. They were only on good terms with one shopkeeper, Mr. Vieil, president of the grocers' union. Jean-Pierre ran to the grocery. Mr. Vieil was scandalized by these arrests and declared in front of his customers that it was a shame not only to do these things but also to let them happen. He told Jean-Pierre not to worry about it, because he was going to take care of this situation. He called the police chief, who was one of his friends. He found him at his domicile. "I have something important to ask you." "Well, come over right away, I am available."

The grocer left his customers and went with the boy to the chief, who lived a couple of hundred yards from there. He welcomed them cordially and asked them to sit down in the living room. After a few courteous exchanges, he asked them what brought them to him. The police chief turned to Jean-Pierre and asked him, "Is your mother a foreigner?"

"Yes."

"Has she been in France for ten years?"

"No."

"Is she older than sixty years?"

"No."

"Is she Jewish?"

"Yes."

"And you tell me that she was arrested and detained?"

"Yes."

He turned to the grocer with a large smile and stated, "What more do you want? Everything is in order!"

The grocer got up, took Jean-Pierre by the arm, and went out, slamming the door behind him. Jean-Pierre then switched to direct action. He found out that the victims of the raids had been gathered at the military base at Riquier. When he left the hotel to take their identity papers to his father and sister, he noticed a policeman running after him when he crossed the Place Mozart. He recognized the policeman who had dragged him out of bed. He wanted to know if his parents had returned home. He then advised Jean-Pierre to hurry up to present the papers: "Don't waste a single minute. In three days it will be too late."

What did he know? At least his demeanor revealed that, notwithstanding the brutality of the arrests, his heart was not in his job, and he wished for the freedom of his victims. For Jean-Pierre's mother, who was Jewish, they needed a special intervention. His father and sister would have been able to go home on their own. Mgr. Bruno, his parish pastor, to whom Jean-Pierre went, was sincerely sorry not to be able to help. He didn't want to send Jean-Pierre away empty handed, so he wrote a letter to the Prefect of the Alpes Maritimes, without any illusions about the possible outcome. It was only a goodwill gesture. When Jean-Pierre got to Police Headquarters, the same scenario played out as at the diocese: "The prefect is actually not in Nice." Jean-Pierre was received by the prefect's secretary, a nice young woman who was moved by his distress. After thinking for long time, she told him, "Personally, I cannot do anything for you, but, if you don't tell anyone that I gave you this information, I can tell you that it is Mr. Galli who takes care of these files; you need to contact him and only him. He has complete discretion in this matter."

When the grocer heard that the man in charge was Galli, he jumped for joy: "No worries anymore! He was my best friend in school. There won't be any problem with him."

But at police headquarters they did not see it that way. It was impossible to get near the man. "Mr. Galli does not see anyone," they were told. "You're not allowed to let me in, but nothing prevents you from giving him my business card," the grocer suggested.

Three minutes later: "Sir, please come in."

"You too are coming for a Jewish matter?" Galli shouted, when he heard the purpose of his friend's visit. "If I had ever suspected that, I would never have let you in. I thought that you were coming for a grocery problem. Get out of my office."

"I would never have thought that you were capable of these horrible acts. I won't leave your office until you sign the freedom papers that I am asking of you."

The grocer told Galli all he had on his mind, and after five minutes of yelling, Galli allowed the file to be brought to him.

"You can tell your friends that I will go to the Riquier barracks at 4 p.m.," he said. "I will sign."

As promised, at 4 p.m., Lucia was freed. She was crying as she left her friends behind the walls. Two days later the train transport left without her for Auschwitz via Drancy.

Jean-Pierre learned later that this man who was in charge of the Jewish question in the Free Zone changed sides after the large raids of August 1942. He joined the Resistance and actively participated in the Liberation of Paris. This fact led to his not being prosecuted after the war.

The story that Jean-Pierre told gives a reliable account of what the atmosphere was like at that time and how complex the situation was. It allows all of us to wonder about the failures of civil and religious authorities<sup>6</sup> and about the reactions of people asked to help. We also wonder about the psychology of the executioners, the gendarmes, and the man in charge, Mr. Galli, who were neither innocent nor totally guilty. One should also remember that faced with despair, one should not be satisfied with saying that you cannot do anything. Even if you cannot objectively eliminate despair, a gesture or a smile can sometimes bring about unexpected miracles. The letter addressed by a priest to a prefect might have appeared useless. Nevertheless, it was sufficient that the letter fell into the right hands for a secretary

6. Later, in 1943, Mgr. Raymond asked the religious communities of his diocese to support to the extent possible an organization set up to save Jewish children. He worked skillfully to prevent numerous deportations.

with a good heart to provide information that caused the wheels to start turning and for a series of events to lead to the saving of a life. If this act of goodwill had not taken place in the beginning, nothing could have happened. First of all, it was necessary for Jean-Pierre to take the first step. We will never know on this earth what good or bad our actions and words have produced or all the good that our inaction may have kept from taking place. The secretary of the prefect never knew that she had saved a life.

"We cannot visualize the distant consequences of our actions," said Brother Jean-Pierre. We will only see later how we succeeded or failed. This may be one aspect of what we call the Last Judgment. He liked to remind us of a passage in Exodus, in which when the Egyptians were pursuing the Hebrews, Moses cried out to the Lord, who answered him, "Make them move forward!" (Exod 14:15).

God created a passage through the Red Sea. Nevertheless, the Midrashim, the rabbinic commentators, observed that God could raise the waters on the left or on the right side like a wall, but the children of Israel would not have been saved if they hadn't stepped forward. Everything comes from God, but if humans do not move forward, God cannot do anything. Christ multiplied food to feed the crowds in the desert, but it was necessary for a boy to bring five loaves and two fishes.

Later, during the summer of 1943, the Germans took over the occupation of the French Riviera from the Italians. The evening before the official transfer, the Germans sent a Gestapo patrol to take over the hotel where the Ippen family lived. The Italian Cease Fire Commission occupied the second floor. Upon the request of the SS Commander, the owner of the hotel gave them the names of all the Jews who were living there. When the Germans barged into the Ippens' apartment, they once again took Lucia away. Her husband wanted to follow her so as not to be separated, but the SS held him back. Nevertheless, he joined her in the lobby of the hotel as soon as he could. An SS officer made him climb the stairs backwards with a machine gun pointed at his stomach.

After the SS left with their prisoners, he took his daughter Ruth to safety with their friend the grocer. He then took a cab with his son to look for the location where the prisoners had been gathered. He had crisscrossed the streets of Nice in vain for an hour when, as he came up Boulevard de Cimiez, he noticed that the SS were guarding the entrance to the gardens of the Riviera Palace. No doubt that had to be the gathering place. He went to the guard, who recognized him. He turned to his colleague:

"He drove us crazy during the arrests. If he really wants to, let's book him, and we'll see what we do with him later."

Nobody was paying attention to Jean-Pierre. He followed his father, happy to see his mother again and thinking that she would be happy to see them coming. On the contrary, she was quite shaken. Almost immediately the group was taken to the train station. It was late at night when they reached Marseille. A truck took them to a dark building, the Saint-Pierre prison. They went through dark hallways dominated by iron watchtowers patrolled by soldiers with machine guns. They separated the men from the women before pushing them into already overcrowded rooms. Two weeks later they were taken to Drancy. The men were handcuffed two by two. Jean-Pierre and his father were able to remain together.

This trip lasted more than thirty hours, and Jean-Pierre did not handle it well. It was the end of September, and it was already cold around Paris. He only wore flannel pants, a short-sleeved shirt, and sandals, with a handkerchief as his only luggage. He developed a fever of 102 degrees that took him to the infirmary. This spared him from the questioning that each prisoner had to go through if they thought that they had some reason to be released. He would have been scared to death. The prisoners were punched or hit with an iron rod to force them to confess the falsehood of their allegations. Sometimes those who had legitimate arguments didn't dare to bring them up and preferred to be deported rather than to be exposed to the blows from Ernst Brückler, nicknamed "the Beast," the worst brute of the four SS men in the camp. The parents of Jean-Pierre waited outside the interrogation rooms. Through the door they heard the yelling and

the moaning. At last, the prisoner being questioned came out, an ear half ripped off, and they went in. The room was stained with blood. The infamous SS Hauptsturmführer Alois Brunner<sup>7</sup> had become the head of the camp in June 1943, but he had established his headquarters in Nice to better track the Jews. Seated behind the desk was his substitute, Josef Weiszl, a SS officer from Vienna.

"You are Jewish?" he asked Lucia.

"Yes, I am Jewish."

He turned to her husband aggressively: "And you, you pretend not to be Jewish?" In order to leave Vienna in 1939, Kurt had applied for a German passport. For this he had to produce an *Aryennachweiss*, a proof that he belonged to the Aryan race. He had obtained false documents from the City of Sadova, where his father was from. Without saying a word, he put his German passport on the desk. Weiszl, surprised, shouted out: "We signed that document! No problem, you are free!"

"And what becomes of my wife?"

"She won't be deported, but she will be sent to a work camp."

"I do not want to leave her alone," her husband protested. "I can work in her place. That will be more efficient."

Weiszl, who had belonged to the Eichmann<sup>8</sup>-Brunner team installed in Vienna after the Anschluss, wanted to scare Kurt and told him in a contemptuous tone,

7. {Alois Brunner (1912–?2001) was an Austrian SS Officer known for his brutality and charged by Adolf Eichmann to execute plans to deport Jews throughout Europe to extermination camps. He was commander of the Drancy camp in France (see above, n. 1). After World War II he escaped prosecution and fled to Syria, where he remained until his death. The date of his death remains uncertain.}

8. {Adolph Eichmann (1906–1962) was a German Nazi commander and planner of the implementation of the "Final Solution," that is, the Holocaust. He reported on the progress of the plans for Jewish executions directly to Reinhard Heydrich at Hitler's headquarters. After the war he escaped to Argentina, where Juan Perón protected former Nazis. Subsequently captured by the Israeli intelligence service, Eichmann was tried and found guilty of war crimes and hanged in 1962.}

"You took advantage of Jewish money!"

"Without a doubt," he answered him.

"Why didn't you get a divorce after the Anschluss?"

"Because I had no reason to do so."

Weiszl thought about this for a moment and concluded: "That is true. If you had divorced, you would be a jerk. I will see if I can do something. Come back to the office tomorrow."

The next morning, he offered Kurt work as a translator. "That way you will be able to stay with your wife and your son, who will be assigned to the Category C1<sup>9</sup> to work in the camp. In fact, she will be exempted from work, and he will be charged with helping to clean the courtyard."

The three of them remained in the barbed-wire zone between the office of the Germans and the main camp. One day a visit by Brunner to inspect the camp was announced. All the interned prisoners were frightened, because they knew through the stories of those who had been there longer about the past and the perversity of this SS officer. Brunner was one of the three leading Nazis responsible for the implementation of Hitler's primary objective, the extermination of the Jews. His action was not limited to France. He had operated in Vienna, Berlin, and Salonica, and he would continue later in Bratislava after the liberation of Paris. He can be held directly responsible for the death of 130,000 people, with a particular relentlessness toward children. He enjoyed unlimited power, even over the military, and he liked to take advantage of his authority. Some SS members feared him, sometimes looked down on him, and hated him.<sup>10</sup>

Jean-Pierre and his parents were anxiously awaiting the decision that Brunner would make with regard to the "Ippen case,"

9. {After taking control of the Drancy camp, Brunner introduced a classification of all prisoners according to their competence and experience. C1 referred to prisoners with a certain level of education who were employed by the camp.}

10. See Didier Epelbaum, *Alois Brunner, The Inflexible Hate*, preface by Serge Klarsfeld (Paris: Callmann-Levy, 1990).

hoping that they would not have to meet him. The young man fetched soup every day from the camp kitchen. That day, when he was about to go out and before he could put his hand on the knob, the door opened and he was face to face with Brunner. The SS officer was furious that a prisoner was present in this forbidden area. In a contemptuous tone, he ordered the boy to explain himself. Jean-Pierre, terrified, stared at the famous whip that Brunner always held in his hands. He could already feel the whip hitting his head. Gathering all his courage, he answered as calmly as he could: "I am bringing a meal to my father."

Strangely, Brunner's demeanor changed, and his voice softened. He abandoned his harsh German accent, and without going into the vulgar dialect of his henchmen, he said with a reassuringly light Viennese accent: "I will get information on his case later." But the SS chief left for Nice without changing their situation.

Having learned a little later that the Gestapo had confiscated all his assets in Nice, Kurt was allowed to return to Nice to try to recover them. He wanted to assert that the process was illegal since he was not Jewish. He had to appear before Brunner at the Gestapo headquarters at the Hotel Excelsior. He recognized his own Citroën parked in front of the door. A guard told him that it was owned by the Hauptsturmführer Brunner himself. Once Kurt was led into the office, Brunner asked him if he had already found some of his assets.

"Yes," he said, "my car."

"Who took the liberty of taking your car?" Brunner shouted.

"I don't know who, but what I do know is that I have the honor of noticing that it has been placed in your personal service."

"Do you need it?" Brunner asked, stunned.

"Here is the registration," Kurt said, opening his wallet. "In Drancy, I do not need a car."

Brunner took the registration card and made this counter proposal:

"You work as an interpreter in Drancy and you're not incarcerated. I will tell our services at Avenue Foch to compensate you."

He offered a substantial amount that Kurt refused out of hand: "You know that I work in place of my wife, who is incarcerated. I do not want to be paid for that."

Brunner agreed, surprised.

"You are right. This work does not fit you. Find a job and housing. By Christmas I will stop in Drancy on the way to Vienna. If you have found something I will authorize the release of your wife and son. So hurry up."

Thanks to another incarcerated prisoner categorized as C1, who worked in the administration, Jean-Pierre's father got a fake contract to manage a racehorse stable in Maisons Laffitte. He rented a house near there. When Brunner came by Drancy he kept his word and signed the freedom documents, while warning Kurt, "The only thing I ask of you is to do nothing against us. You do understand that we end up knowing everything, and if you betray me by joining the Resistance, you will be the last Viennese that I pull out of the shit."

You can imagine the surprise of the Ippens when in April 1944 a van belonging to the General Union of Israelites of France, assigned to the incarcerated prisoners of Drancy, stopped in front of the gardens of Maisons Laffitte. André Kann, the liaison with the German authorities, announced to them that Brunner would come to visit the following morning at eight o'clock. Apparently he wanted to ride a horse. Surprise gave way to consternation and panic. What could be the real reason for this visit? Was the SS not rather coming to check on Kurt's "equestrian activities," which existed only on paper? If he became aware of the trick, he would have them all deported without a doubt. Kurt informed the trainer whose staff he was supposed to supervise. He rented a riding horse in a hurry and put it in the barn without deluding himself. If Brunner showed up in uniform, he probably had other ideas in mind.

Jean-Pierre left us the story of this unusual visit: "The next morning from seven-thirty on, I was at the window of the first-floor living room. My mother was on the second floor. My father sat next to me, reading the newspaper to hide his nervousness.

At eight o'clock sharp a black limousine that we knew all too well drove up our street. It was the car with a driver that the police prefect put at the disposal of the SS of Drancy. My father went straight to the gate to the garden. I stayed at the window. Brunner stepped out of the car. He was in a riding outfit. What a relief! Nothing prevented my father from leading him to the horse barn, since it seemed that he really wanted to ride a horse. Everything should be fine then.

"My father talked to Brunner at the gate. Instead of going to the barn, they both entered the gate and walked towards the house. I went to open the door, anxious about why there was a change of plans. My father reassured me immediately—Brunner had not had his breakfast yet.

"He was led into the dining room, and before he sat down, he told my father: 'You know, I don't think that I ever had the pleasure of being introduced to your wife.'

"Dismayed, my father didn't know right away how to react. Why was he making that inappropriate comment? After a brief hesitation he sent me up to fetch her. Brunner noticed how anxious we were. I went up the stairs without knowing how to announce this to my mother. Feeling awkward, I told her simply: 'Mom, you need to come to the living room.'

"I went down without waiting for an answer, or maybe instinctively so that I didn't have to give her any explanation. I waited standing next to the door to the living room. My father was standing next to the window, while Brunner was eating breakfast by himself. After a few minutes that seemed like an eternity, the door opened and my mother entered, pale but calm. Brunner got up right away and walked towards her and at a respectable distance greeted her with perfect courtesy. My mother didn't show any emotion. To avoid an embarrassing silence, Brunner asked her if she was enjoying her stay in Maisons Laffite. She answered honestly that she didn't really feel at ease. In our immediate neighborhood, there were a number of villas that were occupied by German officers. The Gestapo had an office close to us. Brunner in turn said, 'At least I hope that you are not missing Nice?'

"'Well yes, in fact I miss it a lot,' my mother acknowledged.

"'Oh Madam, believe me, you have nothing to miss,' he said cynically. 'Since we have been there, it has ceased to be pleasant to live there.'

"After a brief silence, without the slightest gesture, my mother turned around and left the room. There was a deep silence in the living room, but the atmosphere was not tense. Slowly Brunner went back to his seat and, gazing into the distance, started a long monologue. With a certain emotion, he mentioned his childhood in Hungary and his youth in the cultural climate of the Austro-Hungarian Empire of the time. You could not doubt the sincerity of his words. He painted a very accurate portrait of Austria after the defeat of 1918. We knew the background all too well: the virulent anti-Semitism of the Catholic clergy inculcated into the children from kindergarten on, and the popular piety, especially among farmers, who were filled with it. In the popular imagination, the devil's powers acted concretely through the Jews. Brunner mentioned the sufferings created by unemployment, the misery that had progressively taken hold of his family, and the deprivations that he had had to suffer before he joined the Hitler Youth. He made sure to mention that in his house, his school, his entourage nobody doubted that the Jews were responsible for all these calamities.

"Then, without any animosity and without showing the least hostility, he turned to my father and made clear that this popular opinion seemed to be confirmed by the fact that an important part of the economy of the country was in the hands of the Jewish upper middle class of Vienna. He added: 'You have to understand; it was with these convictions that I joined the Hitler Youth. How could I not have agreed enthusiastically with what they taught us?'

"As soon as he finished his argument, he got up and my father went with him to the stable. Along the way, he expanded on the theories of the Nazi regime to my father. The Jews were at the root of all the world's evil. It was necessary to get rid of them once and for all with the most efficient methods and without showing

any weakness. In conclusion, Brunner observed that history offered other examples where moral and political authorities who were unanimously respected had used deceit and even cruelty to physically eliminate individuals or groups of people judged harmful to society. Upon his return from the stable my father felt very distressed by what he had just heard and experienced, but we were relieved that the danger had passed, and we wanted to forget this visit."

Jean-Pierre was never able to share within his family the impressions left by this encounter. Close relatives on both his mother's and his father's side had perished in the Holocaust, and he dared not touch on this subject. Of the fifty-nine people he shared his cell with during the two weeks he spent in the prison of Saint-Pierre in Marseille, fifty-three had been deported shortly after their arrival in Drancy. He had very painful experiences as he witnessed the drama of the deportations and the many convoys leaving for certain death. All this murderous hate marked him deeply and had for him one face: Alois Brunner.

He had a hard time believing what he had seen and heard in Maisons-Laffitte. It is obvious that we cannot minimize Brunner's culpability or grant him any mitigating circumstances whatsoever. How could we, when we think of his relentless and unceasing cruelty? There was nevertheless one nagging idea that grew in Jean-Pierre's mind and would never leave him: Brunner had also been marked by anti-Semitic propaganda in which—unfortunately—Catholics participated, even including some church fathers. Of course, these were their own views and not those of the Church itself. Jean-Pierre's story strengthened my conviction, shared by others, that the highest authorities in the Church should dissociate themselves from these acts and publicly express regret for the use that was made of the Catholic faith for perverse ends, which ultimately influenced the development of the Nazis responsible for the start of the Holocaust. Vatican Council II went in that direction, "deploring solemnly the hate, the persecution, and all anti-Semitic manifestations from whatever their authors

or whenever time were aimed at Jews."<sup>11</sup> It is a source of satisfaction for us Cistercians to note that Saint Bernard in the Middle Ages rose up against the massacres of the Jews in the Rhineland in the middle of the twelfth century:<sup>12</sup> "Defend the grave of your Christ," he cried out to the crowds that he came to soothe, "but do not touch the sons of Israel and only talk to them with kindness, because they are the flesh and the bones of the Messiah. If you hurt them, you will hurt the Lord in the apple of his eyes."<sup>13</sup>

After being released from Drancy in 1944, Jean-Pierre had to pursue his schooling. He very much wanted to study philosophy in a Catholic institution. The closest one was the Saint-Erembert School in Saint-Germain-en-Laye. There were only a dozen students in elementary math, and he was the only one in

11. {See *Nostra Aetate*, [www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vatii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_nostra-aetate\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vatii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html). In March 1998—three years after the original publication of this book—the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews published the document *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah*, Pope John Paul II, letter dated March 12, 1998. In this document the Vatican condemned Nazi genocide and called for repentance from Catholics who had failed to intercede to stop it ([www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_16031998\\_shoah\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_16031998_shoah_en.html).)}

12. "There are not words strong enough to condemn the monk Raoul, who would inflame the passions of the crowds: 'Oh monstrous science! O infernal wisdom, contrary to those of the prophets and enemy of the one of the apostles, subversion of religion and of mercy! Oh sordid heresy! Sacrilegious prostitution that, engrossed by a spirit of lies, conceives in pain and gives birth to injustice!'" (Letter 365). {Bernard of Clairvaux, *The Letters of St. Bernard of Clairvaux*, trans. Bruno Scott James (London: Burns and Oates, 1953), no. 393, 465–66.}

13. See, from the second half of the twelfth century, the chronicler of Bonn, Rabbi Ephraim, son of Jacob, in his *Book of Remembrance*. In the sixteenth century Joseph ha-Cohen of Avignon found inspiration in his Valley of the Sorrows. Joseph ben Meir, in a chronicle of these massacres in the Rhineland, mentions that the "wise and righteous man" had a strong voice and a disinterested mercy that prevented the projected evil from taking place.

the philosophy and literature section. His philosophy teacher, who also taught him religion, was an unconditional Thomist priest. They understood each other perfectly, and Jean-Pierre was completely happy. At the outset of the quarter a three-day retreat with other students in a monastery was announced. He was delighted, but his father rejected that idea categorically, sensing a danger in his attraction towards religious questions.

Jean-Pierre's strongest desire was to complete studies in theology at the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium. That was totally out of the question, so he then chose political sciences. Since his father didn't want to deny him everything, he reluctantly accepted this plan, aware that his son was not making that choice for a practical reason. On the contrary, Jean-Pierre lived perfectly at ease in a dream, as if their situation had not changed because of the war. In February 1948 a thunderbolt brought him back to earth. The Communist coup in Czechoslovakia destroyed any hope that the family could recover the assets left behind there. The game was clearly over. They had to face the harsh daily reality, and Kurt applied for a license to train racehorses.

Jean-Pierre helped his father in these activities. Soon it became a full-time activity, because his father had to undergo critical surgery. Nevertheless, Jean-Pierre fully expected that one day circumstances would allow him to pursue his project of a religious life. He soon realized, though, that these plans would take much longer than anticipated, and he slowly gave up any thought of achieving something serious intellectually. Therefore he wondered if it would be wiser to envision a contemplative life in a monastery. He asked the question in 1958 of his old college chaplain, with whom he had kept in close contact.

"I cannot give you any advice," the priest answered. "You cannot envision that life style without trying it out first."

That was also impossible, because his parents needed him. His sister had married an Egyptian Jew and lived in Cairo. In 1964 his mother fell into a respiratory coma. She had suffered from emphysema for the last couple of years and was getting worse. She was rushed to the hospital. The verdict was terrible:

survival of a maximum of forty-eight hours without intervention or the possibility of resuscitation with a breathing machine, with the risk of constant need for assistance in the future. The family chose resuscitation. She regained consciousness, and for the following three months she read, wrote, and listened to the news. One day the respiratory specialist told them, "I need the breathing machine for patients who can recover but can't turn the corner without assistance. Take her home, it cannot last more than three days for her."

Dismayed by this proposition, Kurt bought a breathing machine and had it installed at home. The doctor assured him that it was crazy and that he had no idea what an adventure he was embarking on. The use of such a piece of equipment was delicate, and the doctor predicted a catastrophe.

"We are not risking a worse catastrophe than the one you are proposing," Kurt countered. Lucia's condition required a constant presence day and night; for four years Jean-Pierre did not leave the house while his father took care of the horses.

"That was my real novitiate," he said.

Lucia had only a couple minutes of respiratory independence a day. She ate with the family in the dining room and spent time reading and doing small tasks. These four years of constant intimacy with his mother marked Jean-Pierre profoundly. Both of them lived in the far-away past, looking at photo albums as she told him the circumstances in which the pictures were taken. She would talk about family members on her mother's side whom he had never known, especially those in Russia who for three generations had played a major role in religious and cultural affairs as well as in social action. Lucia accepted her condition with good humor, because she knew that her husband and her son were happy with her presence. Jean-Pierre felt that she would have liked to know more about the Jewish faith. She regretted not having been better initiated. Never did she make any allusion to the fact that her son was a Christian, except once when she was getting near to her death. She said, thinking more about him than about herself, "I am concerned about you! I am afraid that you

worry about my salvation. I would have liked to reassure you by sharing your faith, but that is impossible for me.”

She died on June 2, 1968, Pentecost Sunday. That year the Jewish Pentecost fell on the same day, as often happens.<sup>14</sup> Jean-Pierre was impressed by that fact and had an inscription made on her tombstone: her dates of birth, January 1, 1901, and death as well as the corresponding date in the Jewish calendar, “6 Sivan 5728.” His father, who had been diagnosed with cancer in 1967, died three years later. The six years of Jean-Pierre’s parents’ illnesses caused the material condition of the family to deteriorate badly. Jean-Pierre was facing a difficult future. When the law gave him four months to accept or reject his inheritance, he remembered the advice of his old chaplain and took advantage of this delay to try a stay in a monastery. He quickly realized that he would always be blamed for trying to evade his problems by entering a monastery, not thinking that he was capable of earning a living alone. He had to wait again and take up the estate of his father.

A short time later he himself was hospitalized and diagnosed with Hodgkin’s Disease, which at that time was still an incurable cancer. Humanly speaking everything seemed lost. Nevertheless, it was from his hospital bed that he concluded the greatest transactions of his life. The first groom of the stable came every day to report to him on his work with the horses and to consult about their management and their training. Thanks to the dedication of Alain Leclerc, his financial situation was straightened out. For Jean-Pierre it was as though the biblical story of Gideon had come true, in which God made Gideon reduce the number of his soldiers before a battle so that he would not imagine that he was responsible for the victory, so that he would understand that it came from the hand of God (Judg 7:1-8).

After many years of chemotherapy, Jean-Pierre was able to announce to our novice master, with whom he kept in contact,

14. {Since *Shavuot* occurs fifty days after the first day of Passover, Hellenistic Jews gave it the name *Pentecost*. According to Jewish tradition, Pentecost commemorates God’s giving the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai fifty days after the Exodus.}

that a new medication had defied the statistics and that the doctors had started to believe in his complete recovery. "You have to be able to make a decision," the father master wrote back to him, "and not miss the rendezvous that the Lord is giving us." He needed three more years to free himself completely of all the contracts that bound him. Such was his journey when I welcomed him to the novitiate in 1979.

He right away communicated to me his strong desire to engage in studies of theology and philosophy. He felt that he needed that education to lead a serious contemplative life, and he wondered if he wasn't too old for us to let him do that because the investment did not seem to make sense. I reassured him that it was not a question of return on the investment. The needs of a monk are a sufficient reason for him to receive instruction. My response gave rise to a misunderstanding. He understood that I promised him to let him do the studies he wanted, while I was only thinking about the studies to be completed in the monastery.

"After my temporary promises," he told me, "I would like to push my studies further for a better experience of God."

"The question must be asked on a more fundamental level," I answered him. "What relationship is there between an intellectual asceticism and a spiritual or mystical experience? Grace is always free and is never proportionate to our efforts. It is not by completing a course of studies that you compel the experience of God; you don't acquire that experience, you receive it!"

"Shouldn't we expand our knowledge as far as we can?" he argued.

"The only requirement is to do what is reasonably possible to avoid laziness," I added. "God does not reward laziness. The point is to find out what is necessary so as to define what is reasonable. It will depend on each person's capacity, temperament, or culture. In any event, the goal we pursue, the knowledge or the experience of God, will never be in proportion to the number of hours devoted to study. Everything will be a free gift from God and not the result of our efforts. An obsession about our formation might be the sign that we rely too much on secondary means

that will always be inadequate. Study alone will not bring us the Lord. Almost everyone knows this or presumes it, but sometimes in our fervor we forget this.

“In religious life, you have to be ready to sacrifice everything, even what appears to be the best—even your asceticism or your studies if God asks for it through the circumstances. It will not be to the detriment of our spiritual life. The one who is not ready to sacrifice everything cannot get to know the Lord.”

“It is very possible,” I went on, “that after your formation we may have to entrust you with material responsibilities that would have you perform manual work. It may even involve more time than normal, like the duties of guest master or bookkeeper. Those people do not always have time to study as much as they would like. I cannot guarantee you the studies that you’d like. Do you think that the abbot is in a different situation? What matters is the inner availability.”

He had been hoping to acquire this intellectual formation for so long that it didn’t seem right to relegate these plans to the background now. He figured, moreover, that the prayers of a priest automatically had a higher value than those of lay persons. Therefore he was also disappointed to hear that I didn’t envision the priesthood for him. Why did we seem to attach so little importance to it? His idea of the quest for God included an effort to acquire theological knowledge for a better contemplation of Christ’s mystery and an engagement to follow in his footsteps in the priesthood. If La Trappe did not offer him either one of these ways to get to God, why would he enter it?

“You are taking away the objective reasons I had for becoming a Trappist,” he told me. “Of course, I like your life style, but is this a sufficient motivation? I would have scruples about joining only to have a happy old age. If only I found some difficulty in it, it would be commendable! But not even that!”

“The difficulty of the monastic life,” I assured him, “will come precisely from that inner availability I am talking about, from that self-offering to another, which is a more profound soul baring than an exterior life style or the asceticism required by the

intellectual effort. Some from the very beginning experience our life style as too painful. On the contrary, others can immediately feel perfectly at ease, because they are escaping a bad situation or because they cannot adapt to their situation in the world. They soon experience problems integrating themselves into our community. Then there are the others with all kinds of nuances imaginable, of whom you are part. They need a time to adapt that can be shorter or longer. But you do not come here to mope or suffer. God wants people to be happy. The one who is not happy to be a monk is not in the right place here. In any event, merit does not come from the pain or the difficulty, but from the love that we put into each one of our actions."

He was going to discover—in fact—that by trusting the abbot one can reach whatever is essential to become oneself. It took him awhile to persuade himself. As the thought process of Paul Claudel<sup>15</sup> had not changed suddenly after the staggering moment of his conversion, close to a pillar in Notre-Dame in Paris, so also the thoughts of our brother only changed slowly over time.

During his novitiate, Jean-Pierre needed surgery on his hip. He wanted to take advantage of his recovery period to read the five volumes of the *Histoire de la Pensée* written by Jacques Chevalier. After the novice master, Father Emmanuel, refused him, he wanted to read the four volumes of the *Introduction to the Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* by Father H. D. Gardeil.

"Even less," Father Emmanuel answered him, concerned for him first to finish his novitiate before authorizing him to start these studies.

As a last resort, and to ask as a joke for something totally incompatible with the novitiate, he requested: "So, can I learn Hebrew?"

15. {Paul Claudel (1868–1955) was a French diplomat with a successful career. After the war he became ambassador of France to Japan and to the United States. His writings conveyed his Catholic beliefs, having converted to Roman Catholicism at the age of eighteen on Christmas Day while listening to a choir singing Vespers at Paris's Notre Dame Cathedral.}

"Fine, learn Hebrew then," said the novice master to his great surprise.

Brother Jean-Pierre had never been interested in Hebrew. He was nevertheless quickly seduced by using a teaching method employing audio cassettes. His fascination grew when he realized that the sense of the Hebraic roots corresponded with what he sensed in the deepest part of his being. He became absorbed and dug into Gerhard Kittel's ten-volume *Dictionary of the Bible*<sup>16</sup> and the *Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Midrash* by Hermann Strack and Paul Billerbeck.<sup>17</sup>

This time he discovered a totally different dimension to his reading of the Holy Gospel. He discovered that the Jewish exegesis was closer to Saint Bernard's and those of our other Cistercian Fathers than to a good number of current exegetes. His western formation was marked by a Greek spirit and an approach to the Gospel that wanted to be scientific. It was only in La Trappe that he realized how this approach was put against a background of reality and that this wasn't best suited to him.

His *lectio divina* was complemented by reading from rabbinic commentaries in Hebrew. He prayed the psalms in this language in the church while we were singing them in French. Truth be told, he could not sing, so he could use the Hebrew original for himself without any scruple. The psalter is one way to reach union with God.

Later Jean-Pierre was in charge of running the guesthouse for a time; there he would sometimes meet retreatants interested in learning the language of the Bible. He formed a group of fifteen people who met monthly around a teacher coming from Paris. I also authorized him to welcome international Hebrew sessions, which occupied our whole guesthouse for a week once a year. In

16. {Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977).}

17. {Hermann Leberecht Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, 2 vols. (Munich: Beck, 1922).}

1986 I entrusted him with the book section in our store. Among the four thousand titles offered to the public, a substantial number were dedicated to his specialty. He found joy in helping those interested in Hebraic studies at all levels to pursue their research with maximum pleasure and spiritual profit. He organized short sessions for that purpose. To present the rabbinic commentaries as they were understood in the living tradition of the Jewish community, he invited orthodox Jews who were deeply living this tradition. He also invited highly competent teachers who remained faithful disciples of their Jewish masters. One of them, Pierre Lenhardt, director of the Ratisbonne Institute,<sup>18</sup> a Christian center for Jewish studies, was a regular visitor to La Trappe.

"Why didn't you invite him to talk to the whole community?" I asked Brother Jean-Pierre when I saw this member of the Congregation of the Fathers of Sion leaving our abbey one day. Our brother was concerned that his passion would irritate others. He didn't like to talk about it, because he often wondered if his endeavor was really acceptable. It was probably not in the eyes of a Jew, because of his Christian faith, and from the Christian perspective, could his research into the rabbinic commentaries not bring up a certain suspicion? Would the discomfort of his endeavor not be a way for him to live his original unsettled Jewish condition, which means to be totally settled nowhere? Somewhere he also felt a certain discomfort in using a tradition that he had totally ignored during the persecution, so much so that he consulted a rabbi from the Consistory with authority on the subject. The rabbi did not discourage him from pursuing his studies, so Brother Jean-Pierre continued to do so without any scruple. Sometimes he wondered if the direction taken by his monastic commitment was the only response that he could now give to the echo of a voice that he perceived and that Fackenheim

18. {In the nineteenth century the brothers Theodore and Alphonse Ratisbonne founded schools in the Holy Land that were open to students of all faiths. For more information on the Ratisbonne Institute, see <http://www.brothersofsion.org.il/Eng.asp>.}

called “the prescriptive voice of Auschwitz.” There are 613 commandments in Judaism, but a 614th was added after Auschwitz, forbidding any Jew to give a posthumous victory to Hitler by forgetting his Judaism.<sup>19</sup>

Brother Jean-Pierre realized that I was offering him all the means to get to know the Hebraic tradition. He thought about it and told himself, “By closing other avenues and by driving me to Hebrew, didn’t Father Abbot lead me to my real identity? What I first experienced as a trial made me discover the real aspirations of my being. Finally, I would not have liked to become a priest and to get set in the narrow thoughts I had before entering the monastery.” Before his perpetual vows, he asked for a meeting with me: “I had problems trusting someone I thought had deceived me,” he confessed to me. “I think that for someone to commit to the monastic life and to promise obedience, it is good to have gone through the trial of Abraham.”

From a human point of view, God had deceived the great patriarch by asking him to sacrifice his son, after he had promised him a large number of descendants (Gen 22; Heb 11:17–19). But Abraham’s faith saved him. Brother Jean-Pierre added that it had been necessary for him to clear that difficult hurdle to understand in hindsight that he hadn’t been deceived. By giving up what is not essential to our personal relationship with God, the trial sometimes appears indispensable to our own good, which is to become our self. He confided in me that it only became possible because his novice master had himself given up everything first.

19. {Emil Ludwig Fackenheim (1916–2003), a noted Jewish philosopher and Reform rabbi. *To Mend the World: Foundations of Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 10–14, 294–300.}

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# INDEX

- Abbot general, 22; 88; 102;  
164; 170; 171; 185; 198–200;  
302; 349–53; 355; see also  
Nogues, Dominique; Olivera,  
Bernardo; Sortais, Gabriel
- Abbots *In commendam*, 293–95
- Adam of Perseigne, 87
- Aelred of Rievaulx, 87; 232; 233  
and nn. 26, 27
- Anacletus II, anti-pope, 289
- Anschluss, 254 n. 4
- Anticlericalism, 222–26
- Antisemitism, 268; 269
- Aquinas, Thomas, 127 n. 11; 255  
276; 289–92; 298; 341; 342; 362;  
363; 367–69; 371; 374
- Bernard, monk of Caux, 345; 346
- Besret, Bernard, 237; 363 n. 18
- Bethlehem, Brothers and Sisters  
of, 282
- Bloy, Léon, 30 n. 7
- Bossuet, Jacques Benigne, 7 n. 1;  
91 n. 1; 294 and n. 19
- Bourgoint, Jean, see Cîteaux,  
monks of, Br. Pascal
- Brunner, Alois, 252 n. 1; 262–68
- Bugeaud, Thomas, marshal of  
France, 77; 78
- Bamberger, John Eudes, 213 n. 7
- Barratt, Alexandra, 159 n. 9
- Beauvoir, Simone de, 99
- Bell, David N., 295 n. 22
- Bellay, Jean du, Cardinal, 293
- Benedict of Nursia, Saint, 72; 83;  
84; 89; 217; see also *Rule of  
Saint Benedict*.
- Benedict XVI, pope, 141 n. 19
- Benedictine reforms, 356
- Bernard of Clairvaux, Saint, xii;  
14 and n. 5; 20; 70; 71; 80; 87;  
89 nn. 12, 13; 114; 115; 173;  
183; 201; 228; 232; 233; 269;  
276; 289–92; 298; 341; 342; 362;  
363; 367–69; 371; 374
- Canonical exemption, 211; 212
- Carmelites, 322; 357
- Carthusians, 157; 282; 356; 357
- Chabanis, Christian, 17 n. 8
- Chardin, Pierre Teilhard de, 141  
n. 19; 142
- Charismatic Renewal Movement,  
237; 282; 283
- Charter of Charity*, 165; 185 n. 15;  
352 n. 2; 355 and n. 4
- Chateaubriand, François-René  
de, 30; 297
- Chautard, Jean-Baptiste, abbot of  
Sept-Fons, 224; 225

- Chieze, Fr. Pierre, 39; 40
- Cistercian life
- Abbatial elections, 22; 89; 195; 210; 211; 233; 295 n. 21; 298
  - Ancient Usages of the Cistercian Order (Ecclesiastica Officia)*, 163 n. 13
  - Autonomy vs. uniformity in usages, 162–66; 351–56
  - Book of Usages of the Order of Cîteaux*, 57
  - Chapter of faults, 75; 76; 110
  - Cell(s), 1; 28; 221
  - Compline, 50; 51; 56; 59; 93; 220
  - Cowl, 1; 6; 11; 61; 101 and n. 6; 163; 195
  - Desks, 59; 220; 221
  - Divine Office, 60; 61; 82; 105; 153; 154; 196; 197; 219; 220; 315
  - Dormitory, 74; 75; 221
  - Ecclesiastica officia*, see *Ancient Usages of the Cistercian Order*, and Cistercian life, Usages
  - Eucharist, eucharistic, 102 n. 7; 111; 156; 160; 185; 194; 208; 216; 224; 283; 361; see also Mass, masses
  - Friday discipline, 74; 75
  - Friendships, 85
  - Funerals, 2–6; 11–16
  - General chapter(s), 22; 149; 151; 154 n. 4; 160–66 n. 16; 170; 186; 187; 195–97; 199; 313 n. 3; 350; 352–54; 362 n. 15; 369 n. 28; 370 n. 29
  - Good Friday, 78; 151
  - Guests, 207–10; 312–18
  - Haircuts, 101
  - Lauds, 4; 82; 161; 162; 202; 219; 220
  - Lay brother(s), 146; 147; 150; 153; 156; 177–202; 220; 320; see also *Decree of Unification*
  - Little Hours, 220
  - Manual labor, 48; 64; 65; 77–79; 85; 93; 195–98; 202; 209; 296; 313
  - Mass, masses 3; 39; 82; 105; 106; 128; 132; 153; 156; 202; 207; 220; 225; 248; 324; 333; 367 n. 26
  - Meals, 64–67; 76; 77; 216
  - Observances, Common and Strict, 7 n. 2; 164 n. 14; 295 n. 21; 295 n. 21; 296; 298; 356 n. 6
  - Observance(s), monastic, 67; 75; 88; 114; 150; 160; 162; 165; 166; 170; 187; 197; 210; 231; 232; 295; 296; 349; 351
  - Oratio* (personal prayer), 28; 66; 82; 85; 93; 200; 295; 308; 310; 316; 345; 348; 361
  - Prayer(s), choir/community/liturgical, 1; 3; 4; 5; 9–13; 28; 43; 58; 60; 61; 64; 66; 70; 82; 86; 93; 96; 100; 102 n. 7; 106; 119; 129; 131; 146; 150; 151; 154; 158; 159; 161; 166; 169; 178; 181; 184; 194; 195; 196; 198; 202; 208; 209; 219; 220; 222; 228; 231; 232; 239; 240; 253; 274; 282; 289; 313; 315; 318; 320; 325; 333; 337; 357; 361–63; 367; see also *Oratio* (personal prayer); Eucharist, eucharistic

- Prayer books, 185
- Property, 59; 63
- Salve Regina*, 50 n. 10; 86; 93
- Shops, 321–23
- Sign language, 58; 79; 80
- Time, concept of, 91–93
- Time keeping, 81 n. 10
- Usage(s) (usages and customs), 66; 73; 74; 76; 87; 88; 156; 160; 162; 163; 165; 172; 212; 240; 285; 301; 352; see also *The Ancient Usages of the Cistercian Order*; Autonomy vs. uniformity in usages; *Book of Usages of the Order of Cîteaux*
- Vigils; 5; 6; 74; 82; 161; 162; 219
- Vows, perpetual (solemn) vows, 9–11; 72 n. 5
- Vows, simple, 72 n. 5; 100; 101; 217
- Cistercian(s), Cistercian monasteries, Cistercian Order, 2; 7 n. 2; 14; 20; 22; 28; 44; 62; 68; 72; 78; 87; 88; 106; 128; 153; 162; 163; 165–69 n. 21; 170; 173; 177; 183; 190; 192; 198; 212; 224; 232; 239; 269; 276; 288 n. 9; 292; 295 n. 21; 298; 301; 329; 349; 352 and n. 2; 353–56 n. 6; 368 and n. 27; 369 n. 28; 372; 374 n. 35; see also Cîteaux; La Trappe; Mont-des-Cats; Tibhirine; and Trappist(s)
- Cîteaux, abbots of, Alberic, 199; 288 Bêlorgey, Godefroid, 129; 132; 185; 200 Chanut, Jean, 145–46; 188; 189; 193; 194
- Loys, Samson; 22
- Quenardel, Olivier, 22; 168 n. 19; 331–42; 346–48
- Robert, 199; 287; 288
- Stephen Harding, 199; 288
- Cîteaux, monastery, 21; 22; 44; 87; 163–65; 173; 178; 179; 182; 183; 186; 187; 198; 199; 286–89 n. 10; 292; 295 n. 21; 301; 315; 318; 326; 352; 356; 369; 372
- Cîteaux, monks of
- Albert, Br., 201–2
- Baudouin, Fr., 25–29; 114–18; 121–32; 137
- Denis, Br., 201
- Guy, Br., 301–3
- Henri, Fr., lay brother master, superior of Grandselve, Cameroon, 186; 188; 193–94
- Marie-Joseph, Br., 138–47; 188–91; 194–95
- Michel, Br., 344; 345
- Pascal, Br., 178–94; 302
- Thibaud, Br., 115; 118–22; 129; 130; 132–38
- Waton, Pierre, 40
- Clairvaux, monastery, 87; 289; 290; 292; 295 n. 21; 369; 374
- Claudiel, Paul, 275 and n. 15
- Clemenceau, Georges, premier of France, 224–25 n. 13
- Cocteau, Jean, 178–87 nn. 2, 15
- Collège des Bernardins, 168 n. 19
- Commission Francophone Cistercienne (CFC)*, 167–69
- Common Observance (OCist), see Cistercian life, Observances, Common and Strict
- Communauté du Pain de Vie*, 283

- Congar, Fr. Yves, 110; 111; 127; 151; 206–7
- Conrad of Eberbach, 288 nn. 9, 11  
*Constitutions of the Cistercian Order*, 170–72; 196–97
- Cordier, Bernard, see Monks of Cîteaux, Fr. Baudouin
- Coste, Maurice, monk of Tamié, 40
- Danielou, Fr. Jean, 111  
*Decree of Unification*, 195–99; 201; see also Cistercian Life, Lay brother(s)
- Defaux, Jules, 40–41; 53; 81; 82
- DelCogliano, Mark, 233 n. 26
- Delfieux, Fr. Pierre-Marie, 280–82
- D’Estaing, Valéry Giscard, 286 n. 8
- Dimier, Anselm, 30 n. 8
- Drancy, 252 n. 1; 259; 261–65 n. 9; 268; 269
- Dubois, Marie-Gérard, abbot of La Trappe  
Abbot of La Trappe, 21; 203–33  
Brother’s death, 81–82  
Cantor, 106–8  
Decision to write *Happiness in God*, 22–24; 29  
Discerning vocation, 39; 40; 43–53  
Experiences during WW II, 34–38; 40; 41  
Family and youth, 33–53  
Liturgical reform, 149–77  
Meets Pope John Paul II, 286  
Military service, 93–96  
Novice at Mont-des-Cats, 70–83
- Ordained priest, 101–2  
Perpetual vows, 100  
Postulant at Mont-des-Cats, 55–70  
President of *Commission Francophone Cistercienne* (CFC), 167–69  
Reading the Cistercian fathers, 87; 88  
Scout, 41; 42  
Studies in Rome, 102–6  
Sub-novice master, 108–11  
Superior *ad nutum* of Cîteaux, 21; 22  
Temporary profession, 88; 89
- Dutton, Marsha L., 233 n. 26
- Echourgnac, abbess of, 355  
Economy, changes to, 318–24  
Elder, E. Rozanne, 286 n. 9; 288 n. 8  
Escot, Jean-Marie, prior of Tamié, 40  
Eucharist, eucharistic, see Cistercian life, Eucharist, eucharistic  
Eugenius III, Pope, 290
- Fackenheim, Emil Ludwig, 277; 278  
Father immediate, 89; 170; 206; 211; 215 n. 8; 331; 354; 355  
Fénelon, François, 91; 92  
Foucauld, Charles, 280; 325  
Francis, Pope, 30 n. 7; 141 n. 19; 362 n. 15  
Francis de Sales, Saint, 229 n. 23  
Freeman, Dom Brendan, 368 n. 27

- Fried, Gregory, 16 n. 7
- Gabriella, Bl., nun of  
Grottaferrata, 19–21
- Galli, Marcel; 252; 258; 259
- Generalate, OCSO, 102; 103 n. 8; 113
- Gertrude of Helfta, Saint, 159 n. 9; 338; 348
- Gervaise, abbot of La Trappe (1696–1698), 218
- Gide, André, 63; 180
- Gilbert of Hoyland, 87
- Gregory the Great, 205 n. 2
- Gregory of Nyssa, 80 n. 9; 374
- Guerric of Igny, 87
- Heidegger, Martin, 16 n. 7
- Hugo, Jean, 181 n. 10; 186 n. 15
- Hugo, Victor, 30 n. 7; 182; 185 n. 15; 223; 246
- Huysmans, J. K., 183
- Innocent II, Pope, 289–90
- Irenaeus of Lyons, Saint, 210 n. 5
- Isaac of Stella, 87
- Isaiah of Scetis, 215 n. 9
- Jerusalem, Monastic Fraternities of (Community of Jerusalem), 280–82
- John XXIII, Pope, 107; 110 nn. 10, 11; 149; 172
- John Paul I, Pope, 21
- John Paul II, Pope, 19; 110 nn. 10, 11; 175 n. 26; 244; 245; 269 n. 11; 285; 286; 300; 315 n. 4; 327 n. 9; 357; 358; 361; 365–66; 370; 371
- Kipling, Rudyard, 230 n. 24
- Krailsheimer, Alban John, 297; 298
- Kristallnacht, 118; 254 n. 4
- La Ferté, monastery, 289
- La Trappe, abbots of, see Rancé, Armand le Bouthillier de; Gervaise; Dubois, Marie-Gérard
- La Trappe, monastery, 207–10; 216–19; 221; 222; 226; 292–301
- La Trappe, monks of
- Aelred, Br., 2–10; 16; 342–44
- Augustin de Lestrangle, Fr. (novice master), 299–301
- Emmanuel, Fr. (novice master), 275; 276
- François, Br., 305–12
- Hugues, Br., 16; 17
- Jean-Baptiste, Br., 1–6
- Placide, Fr., 315; 316
- Lay Associates, 368 n. 27; 369 n. 28
- Lay Brother(s), 146; 147; 150; 153; 156; 177–202; 220; 320; see also *Decree of Unification*
- Le Bail, Anselme, prior of Scourmont, 86 n. 11
- Lectio divina*, viii; 28; 64; 93; 147; 197; 219; 276; 320; 372
- Lefebvre, Marcel, 175 n. 26
- Lekai, Louis, 295 n. 21
- Liturgical reform, 149–76
- Lives of the Desert Fathers*, 12 n. 4
- Louf, André, abbot of Mont-des-Cats, 88; 358
- Louis, Fr., 235; 236; 239–41; 243; 247–49

- Lubac, Fr. Henry de, 110 n. 11
- Luc, monk of Tibhirine, 95 n. 3
- Lustiger, Aaron Jean-Marie, cardinal and archbishop of Paris (1926–2007), 8; 279; 281
- Malraux, André, 365 n. 21
- Marist Fathers (Society of Mary), 38–40
- Maritain, Jacques, 127; 179 n. 3; 180; 185; 189; 192; 193
- Maritain, Raïssa, 127 n. 11
- Martelet, Bernard, 19 n. 1
- Matarasso, Pauline, 289 n. 12
- Melville, Gert, 352 n. 2
- Mermoz, Jean, 24
- Merton, Thomas, 28; 128; 157
- Michelina, nun of Grottaferrata, 19; 21
- Mitterand, François, 36 n. 1
- Monasticism, Eastern, 357; 358; 361
- Monastic mission, 96–100; 358–74
- Mont-des-Cats, monks of  
Francis Decroix, Fr. Francis (novice master at Mont-des-Cats, abbot of Frattocchie), 49; 55; 56; 62–64; 68–70; 73; 87; 88; 157; 232
- Lambert, Fr., 19–21
- Sébastien, Br. (sub-novice master), 58–61
- Yves, Fr., 47; 48; 89
- Morimond, monastery, 289
- MRP (Popular Republican Movement), 41
- Munster, Frosca, 181; 183
- Naël, André, see Cîteaux, monks of, Marie-Joseph, Br.
- Newman, Martha G., 289 n. 12
- Nogues, Fr. Dominique, abbot general, 185
- Nuns, status in the Order, 349–51; 354; 355
- Observance, Strict, see Cistercian Life, Observances (Common and Strict)
- Olivera, Bernardo, Fr., abbot general, 198–200; 353; 354
- Pascal, Blaise, 56 n. 1
- Paul VI, Pope, 127 n. 11; 153–57; 161; 167; 175; 222; 236; 241; 242; 313; 364; 366
- PDP (Popular Democratic Party), 41
- Perseigne, monastery, 295
- Pétain, Philippe, marshal of France, 37–38 n. 2; 40 n. 5; 122 n. 6; 123 n. 8; 124; 134; 226
- Peter Damian, Saint, 75
- Picasso, Pablo, 178 n. 2; 185 n. 15
- Pius VII, Pope, 300
- Pius X, Pope, 223; 224; 239; 285 n. 6
- Pius XI, Pope, 362
- Pius XII, Pope, 95; 103; 104; 106; 256
- Plessis, Armand Jean du (duke of Richelieu), see Richelieu, Cardinal
- Polt, Richard, 16 n. 7
- Popes, see Urban II, Innocent II, Eugenius III, Pius VII, Pius X, Pius XI, Pius XII, John XXIII,

- Paul VI, John Paul I, John Paul II, Benedict XVI, Francis
- Poverty, 324–28
- Prayer, see *Oratio* (personal prayer), and Prayer(s), choir/community/liturgical
- Proust, Marcel, 185 n. 14
- Rancé, Armand le Bouthillier de, abbot of La Trappe (1626–1700), 7–8 n. 2; 163 n. 12; 217–19; 293–301; 356 n. 6
- Religious life, leaving, 235–50
- Richelieu, Cardinal (Armand Jean du Plessis, duke of Richelieu [1585–1642]), 293 n. 18
- Rigaud, Hyacinthe, 217; 218
- Rommel, Erwin, 120 n. 4
- Rotrou III, count of Perche, 292; 293
- Rouvroy, Louis de, duke of Saint-Simon, 217, 218
- Rule of Saint Benedict, vii; xi; 26; 44; 56; 60; 62; 68; 70; 71; 79; 81 n. 10; 82–84; 88; 113; 131; 133; 147; 162; 163; 165; 172; 173; 197; 205; 213; 216; 219; 231; 245; 287; 296; 299; 301; 326; 329; 351; 357; 368
- Russell, Norman, 12 n. 4
- Rzewuski, Ceslas, O.P., 182; 188
- Saint-Exupéry, Antoine de, 24; 115; 216
- Savage, Paul, 288 n. 9
- Séjotte, Br. Gueric Reitz, viii
- Sheepfold, 305–9
- Sillon de Marc Sangnier*, 41
- Sortais, Gabriel, abbot general, 164; 350
- Spahis, 122 n. 5; 133
- Stiegman, Emero, 291 n. 16
- Talleyrand-Périgord, Maurice de, Bishop, 298 and n. 25
- Thérèse of Lisieux, Saint, 69; 70; 286; 340; 357; 362; 368
- Tibhirine, Monastery of Our Lady of the Atlas, 94–96; 374 n. 36
- Trappist(s), Trappistine, Trappist monasteries, vii–x; xii; 1–3; 6; 7 n. 2; 8; 10; 11; 19–21; 23; 29; 40; 43; 44–47; 49; 51; 52; 55; 61; 63; 65; 80–82; 92–94; 95 n. 3; 96; 98; 102; 103; 156; 157; 165; 178; 179; 182; 183 n. 12; 193; 217; 220; 224; 229; 235; 239; 274; 300–302; 307; 319; 345; 349; 354; 356 n. 6; 368
- Truax, Jean, 232 n. 25
- Urban II, Pope 288
- Vatican Council II, x–xi; 75–77; 110 nn. 10, 11; 149; 150; 153; 155; 156; 169; 170; 175 n. 26; 189; 197; 210; 240; 268; 269; 316; 325 n. 7; 361; 364; 373
- Veilleux, Armand, 95 n. 3; 369 n. 28
- Vichy, 37–38 n. 2; 122–24 nn. 6, 9; 134 nn. 14, 15; 253
- Vincent de Paul, Saint, 359
- Vivian, Tim, 205 n. 1
- Vocations, 21; 25; 30 n. 7; 40; 47; 48; 52; 53; 63; 70; 71; 76; 86; 87; 97–99; 102 n. 7; 129; 130; 133;

- 147; 163; 172; 174; 177; 182; 186; 188; 190; 196–201; 211; 225; 236; 239; 242; 249; 250; 300; 327; 329; 353; 368 n. 27; 369
- Ward, Benedicta, 12 n. 4; 288 n. 9
- Weiszl, Joseph, 262; 263
- William of Saint-Thierry, 87
- Ziegler, Henry, 28
- Waddell, Chrysogonus, 177 n. 1; 288 n. 9; 326 n. 8; 355 n. 4
- Zola, Émile, 140 n. 17
- Zouaves, 94 n. 2