

precedence in Christian annals. Never before has the fame of so illustrious and conspicuous a hero of the Church been forced into obscurity, and in such a short time! Yet never has the world needed more the example, the inspiration, and the heavenly assistance of so splendid a saint. So, America, allow us to introduce Saint Anthony Mary Claret.

Early years

Catalonia, a region of Spain with a dialect all its own, lies against the Pyrenees in the north-eastern corner of that country. It was there, in the town of Sallent, that Señor Juan Claret made a special visit to the parish church on Christmas morning, 1807, to have his day-old son baptized. Surely, he reasoned, in favor of his haste, God would especially bless a child regenerated in grace on the very birthday of Our Lord. And, of course, he was right.

The infant was christened Antonio Juan Adjutorio Claret y Clara. Years later when consecrated archbishop, "out of devotion to Mary Most Holy I added the sweet name of María, my mother, my patroness, my mistress, my directress, and, after Jesus, my all." But in childhood he was known simply as "Tonin."

And that's the long and the short of the heralded name, Anthony Mary Claret.

There was something exceptional about "poco Tonin." There was, for example, his rare disposition and charitable nature which he would later attribute entirely to God's good grace. Constrained by his confessor under formal obedience later in life to write his autobiography, Saint Anthony affirmed, "I am by nature so softhearted and compassionate that I cannot bear seeing misfortune or misery without doing something to help."

This explains his struggling with thoughts about eternity at the mere age of five. "*Siempre, siempre, siempre*"—"forever and ever and ever"—was the shuddering notion that robbed the little fellow of sleep, contemplating the endless horrible suffering that was the lot of the damned. "Yes, forever and ever they will have to bear their pain."

It was "this idea of a lost eternity" that would actuate the extraordinarily holy and eventful career of the apostle, and that would provoke him one day to remark, "I simply cannot understand how other priests who believe the same truths that I do, and as we all should, do not preach and exhort people to save

themselves from falling into hell. I wonder, too, how the laity, men and women who have the Faith, can help crying out."

The diminutive aspirant for the priesthood began school at the age of six and proved to be a diligent student. It was during these years of primary education that the stalwart champion of sound catechetical training learned his most important lesson in life: "Just as the buds of roses open in due time, and, if there are no buds, there can be no roses, so it is with the truths of religion. If one has no instruction in catechism, one has complete ignorance in matters of religion, even if one happens to be of those who pass for wise. Oh, how well my instruction in catechism has served me!"

These were economically hard times for Spain and the Clarets could not afford seminary enrollment for their pious son after his elementary schooling was completed. A local priest offered to give Antonio private instruction in Latin, but the death of that good man a short time later left no alternative but for the boy to take up work in his father's textile shop, to which he devoted his next five years.

By the age of seventeen, a brilliant natural aptitude for the

weaving profession led the young Catalan to want to study advanced techniques in the great trade center of Barcelona. The discovery of his rare talents won him renown and position in the business community of that city, all of which success totally eclipsed his priestly vocation. Worse still, his mind incessantly awl with the challenges of the trade, he found their compelling interests becoming strong distractions even from an ordinary spiritual life. "True," the saint lamented retrospectively, "I received the sacraments frequently during the year. I attended Mass on all feasts and holy days of obligation, daily prayed the Rosary to Mary, and kept up my other devotions, but with none of my former fervor. I can't overstate it—my obsession approached delirium."

Recovered vocation

But the Blessed Mother long ago had chosen Anthony Claret to serve in Her holy labors, and She was not about to leave the young man so far afield of them. Among the means of grace Our Lady used to direct him back on course was this forceful incident:

The extremely hot summer of 1826 and the tremendous strains of his work left the artisan severely debilitated. His only relief



The Blessed Virgin saving Anthony Claret from drowning.

was to take walks along the sea-shore, where he could refresh himself by sipping a few drops of the salt water. While he was wading one day, a huge wave suddenly engulfed Antonio and carried him, helpless, out into the deep. Claret could not swim, yet strangely he was somehow kept afloat on the water's surface. His first impulse was a natural one for any good Catholic; he called out to the Blessed Virgin for help, and just as suddenly found himself safely back on shore!

Having remained remarkably tranquil till this moment, Anthony now commenced to quake uncontrollably as he began to understand the meaning of his dramatic experience. What, after all, were the worldly affairs to which he had become so habituated and attached but themselves a sea of peril! Soon the words of Christ, "What doth it profit a man to gain the whole world and suffer the loss of his soul?" were haunting him. "The

remembrance of this sentence made a deep impression. It was like an arrow that wounded me."

Guilt seared the Catalan's conscience. He became convinced that, through careless neglect of the precious gift of a calling to the sacred ministry, he had shown gross ingratitude to God.

Resolved to make full restitution, Claret at first thought of pursuing "the solitary life of a Carthusian" monk with all its rigorous penitential existence. In fact, in preparation for entering the Carthusian Charterhouse he began practicing harsh asceticism with his confessor's approval, alternating from day to day scourgings with wearing hair shirts. The asceticism was to be continued—and increased—throughout all his holy life, but God soon gave Anthony to know that he was called to become a missionary, not a Carthusian recluse. And so, the saint docilely entered the seminary at Vich to continue his studies.

EXTRAORDINARY CAREER BEGINS

Since the day Saint Anthony Mary Claret was born, Spain had been afflicted with political turmoil, and the agonies of such strife were to remain ever present throughout his lifetime. In fact,

though no one more scrupulously avoided every trace of partisanship, ironically none was to suffer the bitter consequences of this upheaval more than he.

Claret symbolized, in some

sense, the whole Church as the innocent victim and hated enemy of modern world intrigue. There are those, for that matter, who see in Saint Anthony more than just an example, but actually a living prophecy of the persecution that Holy Mother Church and her divine Faith must endure in latter times, suffering humiliation and even apparent defeat before rising again victorious to her greatest glory.

For the enemy who relentlessly persecuted Antonio Claret, while wreaking havoc on Spain and other countries, is that same demonic force which even now seeks the ruin of the Church. Considering this, and also that that force shaped events which formed the matrix of the saint's illustrious career, it will be helpful to take a brief glimpse at the problems in Spain preceding his time.

An enemy hath done this

At the turn of the nineteenth century, the constitution of that nation which boasts scores of saints was still found to open with a profession of the one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic Faith. But the Bourbon dynasty ruling Spain had so degenerated in recent years that its successor to the throne, King Charles III, inaugurated

through what he called "reform" measures his own version of Gallicanism, repudiating Church authority and confiscating her property.

These policies characteristically were followed by the persecution, suppression, and expulsion of religious orders, as in all other countries where the state "liberated" itself from the Vicar of Christ. Also characteristic of such monstrous scheming was the parallel growth of a so-called "intellectual" movement—in this instance known as "Spanish Enlightenment"—which was no more coincidental to the tyranny over the Church in Spain than was the Masonic "Age of Enlightenment" movement to the grotesque Revolution and Reign of Terror in France.

An uprising brought to power a "Liberal" ministry which set up a new constitution. And so, "emancipated" again from what Modernists like to term the "peculiarly narrow Catholic conservatism" of the *ancien régime*, Spain once more was choking in the foul air of heresy—Protestantism and Jansenism—and of atheistic philosophies à la Rousseau and Voltaire. Likewise, there was mounted against the Church a new persecution that was highlighted by the massacre of many

priests and bishops, some of whose martyred corpses were found to be incorrupt and emanating a sweet odor when later exhumed.

Padre Claret

At the time these latter developments started unfolding, Antonio Claret was a seminarian. Strongly impressed by his brilliance and holiness, the Bishop of Vich, Pablo de Jesús Corcuera, decided that the young Catalan should begin preparing for ordination long before his seminary training was completed. The prelate explained confidentially, "I

want to ordain Antonio now because there is something extraordinary about him."

But there was one other reason. Bishop Corcuera had the foresight to know that the increasing political upheaval spelled renewed suffering for the Church which would likely make ordinations difficult at a later time. And so it proved to be. Claret was ordained on the Feast of Saint Anthony of Padua, June 13, 1835, and returned home to celebrate his first Mass in Sallent. It was then that the government, forbidding any further ordinations, seized the seminary and con-



Sallent, Spain, birthplace of Saint Anthony Mary Claret.