

SAINT ANTHONY MARY CLARET

Spanish Light of the Church



In December of 1850, St. Anthony Claret was saying good-bye to friends in Spain before leaving to take charge of the Archdiocese of Santiago, Cuba. At dawn one day he took a stagecoach to go to visit the Archbishop of Tarragona. When the coach drew into Villafranca del Panades, about seven A.M., all the priests of the town were there to meet it and begged Archbishop Claret to interrupt his journey and come to their aid. As soon as he heard their story he dismounted and sent word to his host that he had met with a delay.

Four criminals were to be executed there that morning – three boys in their late teens and a man of forty – and all four had absolutely refused to confess and receive Communion.

The pastor of the town pressed Archbishop Claret to have a quick cup of hot chocolate and hurry over to the prison. No, said the Archbishop, they must first go to the church and place the affair in God's hands. When they had done this, they went to the prison, and the missionary was at once admitted to see the condemned men.

St. Anthony Claret's warm, fatherly pleas soon conquered the three younger criminals. They made their confessions, and the chaplain prepared to administer them Viaticum, the last Communion. He asked the young men, according to the custom, if they forgave all who had injured them. Two replied yes. The third said yes, he forgave everyone except his mother. Archbishop Claret prostrated himself and kissed the boy's feet. *"My son,"* he said, *"if you do not pardon your mother you will be damned. For God's sake and for my sake I beg you to forgive her."* *"No,"* the young man said, *"it is on her account that I am in this trouble. If she had punished me in time I would not be here. I do not forgive her."* The four prisoners were covered with execution robes, mounted on mules, and led to the scaffold. The moment before his sentence of death was carried out, the unforgiving youth shouted, *"I forgive my mother from my heart. Pray for me!"* Then the older man, the toughest of the four, held up his arms and asked to confess. Seated on the bench, with his head covered, he confessed and was absolved. Then the four men were put to death. Sometime after, God revealed to Anthony Claret the judgment the four had received. In a public conference he emphatically stated: *"The four criminals of Villafranca were saved."*

The life of St. Anthony Mary Claret is full of such striking variety that a rapid glance scarcely reveals the thread that links everything he did. This 19th-century saint was a missionary, a religious founder, an organizer of the lay apostolate, a social reformer, a queen's chaplain, a prophet and wonder-worker, a writer and publisher, an Archbishop, and a promoter of devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. What, then, is the thread that ties together these and the many other aspects of his career? A clue is to be found in the episode of the four criminals of Villafranca – an episode like hundreds, like thousands of others in his lifetime. The thread of unity, the dominating force of his life was his apostolic drive. **St. Anthony Claret had a quenchless thirst to rescue souls.**

Early Life

This zeal for the salvation of souls showed up very early in his life. One night in 1813, when he was only five, he had just said his prayers and climbed into bed when a sober thought struck him. He sat up, serious and still, heedless of the iron bars of the bedstead pressing into his back. The day before, in catechism class, he had learned that in hell there is eternal fire and that many sinners are condemned to go there. This observant boy had already seen that there are many in this world who suffer – the poor, the aged, the sick. He did not want people to suffer. So tonight as he was about to close his eyes the thought of the suffering in hell came back to his mind. He began conjuring up pictures of long ages of time, of ages and eons of tremendous duration, throughout which the sufferings of the damned must continue. But the endlessness of it he could not grasp. This fearful realization stamped itself on his memory for life. With it came the lasting desire to save souls from such a fate.

Anthony was the fifth of the seven children of Juan and Josefa Claret. He was born on Christmas Eve, 1807, in the village of Sallent, in Catalonia, Spain. As a child he was remarkable for his piety, modesty, and obedience. He took great delight in receiving and visiting the Blessed Sacrament, in making pilgrimages to the Shrine of Our Lady of Fusimanya, near his village, and in reciting the rosary. Notwithstanding his piety, the boy was harassed by two severe temptations. The one, against chastity, he simply resisted. More recurrent was a curious urge to rebelliousness against his mother and against his Heavenly Mother Mary – a cruel mental torment provided by Satan. Over this, too, through prayer, patience and humility, he eventually triumphed.

From the beginning Anthony wanted to be a priest. His seminary life was exemplary and he was ordained on June 13, 1835. He resolved never to waste a moment of time and during his 35 years as a priest he wrote 144 books and preached some 25,000 sermons. On one trip, besides traveling, he preached 205 sermons in 48 days, 12 in one day. To make sure his efforts might be recognized for what they were, he started off by reminding his hearers that the ordinary motives for labor are money, pleasure, or honor. But these were not his motives: "... *not money, for I do not want a cent from anybody... Nor do I preach for pleasure, for what pleasure can I possibly take in spending myself all day, in being fatigued from early morning until late at night?... I must be in the confessional most of the morning, the whole of the afternoon; and in the evening, instead of resting, I have to preach. This is not just for a day, but... for months and years... Perhaps I labor for honor... no, not for honor either... A preacher is exposed to many calumnies. If praised by one, he is misunderstood by another, treated as the Jews treated Jesus, Who was calumniated by maligners of His person, of His words and works, before they finally seized, scourged, and killed Him by a most painful and shameful means. But like the apostle St. Paul, I fear none of these things, since I value my soul more than my body. At any cost I must discharge the ministry I have received from God Our Lord, which is to preach the Gospel... I have no worldly end in view, but... that God may be known, loved, and served by all the world... that sins and offenses against Him may be hindered as much as possible... Another thing that spurs me on to preach ceaselessly is the thought of the multitude of souls which fall in the depths of hell... Who die in mortal sin, condemned forever and ever... I see how many live habitually in mortal sin, so that never a day passes without increasing the number of their iniquities. They commit sin as easily as they drink a glass of water, just for diversion, or for a laugh. These unfortunate ones run to hell of their own accord, blind as bats... If you were to see a blind man about to fall into a pit or over a precipice, would you not warn him? Behold, I do the same, and do it I must for this is my duty... You may tell me that sinners will insult me, that I should leave them alone... Ah no, I can't abandon them. They are my dear brothers. If you had a beloved brother who, sick and in the throes of delirium, were to insult you with all the angry words imaginable, would you abandon him? I am certain you wouldn't. You would have even more compassion for him, do your utmost for his speedy recovery. This is how I feel in regard to sinners. These poor souls are in a delirium and the more in need of our pity... You may say the sinner doesn't think of hell, nor even believe in it. So much the worse for him. Do you by chance think he will escape condemnation because of his unbelief? Truth is independent of belief... I must warn sinners and*

*make them see the precipice which leads to the unquenchable fires of hell, for they will surely go there if they do not amend their ways. Woe to me if I do not preach and warn them, for I would be held responsible for their condemnation... How often I pray, with St. Catherine of Siena: 'O my God, grant me a place by the gates of hell, that I may stop those who enter there saying: **Where are you going, unhappy one? Back, go back! Make a good confession. Save your soul. Don't come here to be lost for all eternity!**'* Further he boldly proclaimed: ***"The sole reason why society is perishing is because it has refused to hear the word of the Church, which is the word of life, the word of God. All plans for salvation will be sterile if the great word of the Catholic Church is not restored in all its fullness."***

Fr. Claret's first appointment as a young priest was as assistant to the pastor of his hometown, Sallent. But, though his work there was fruitful, he felt himself called to be a laborer in the foreign missions. With this view in mind and being impelled by a desire to shed his blood for Christ, he went to Rome to consult the Prefect of the Propagation of the Faith. As the Prefect was absent, he began his annual spiritual exercises under a Jesuit director. After this retreat he was invited to enter the Jesuit novitiate in Rome, and he gladly accepted. But after some months of happy community life with the Jesuits – catechizing, preaching to convicts, ministering to hospital patients – he developed a chronic, crippling pain in his right leg. The General of the Society of Jesus pronounced this a sign that God had other plans for Father Claret.

By the time he reached his next assigned post, the mountain parish of Viladrau, Catalonia, he found himself cured. That district, despoiled by the recent Carlist civil war, was still scourged by robber bands. The doctors had abandoned the town and sickness and misery were everywhere. *"What else could I do,"* the saint wrote, *"but become a doctor of corporal as well as spiritual ailments...?"* By applying simple herbs and salves, he cured the most severe and varied diseases, even in people at the point of death. The cures, he believed, were God's way of calling attention to the importance of the Word of God, which he, God's missionary, was preaching to them.

Late in 1842, Father Claret was appointed an Apostolic Missionary to all of mountainous Catalonia, with its 13 cities and 400 towns. Religious practice there had suffered much from the French invasions, the Carlist war and the shift of political power into the hands of the anti-religious Liberal Party.

The Miracles and Virtues of Father Claret

In these years of traveling and preaching in Catalonia, Father Claret worked countless wonders of healing, both bodily and spiritual. On his way to a certain town to deliver a scheduled sermon, he was crossing a mountain pass when two armed robbers stopped him and searched him for money. Angry that he had none, they threatened to kill him. Father Claret was unafraid but asked them, as a favor, to wait. He had to preach to the people who were expecting him. When he had finished he would return and put himself at the bandits' disposal. The robbers let him go. The next day, at the same hour, he was back. The robbers, overcome by his faithfulness to his word, did not shoot him, but rather knelt and confessed their sins to him.

To demonstrate against the rising vice of greed, Father Claret always traveled from mission to mission as the poorest of men. His baggage consisted of a razor, a pair of socks, a breviary, a map of Catalonia, and half a loaf of bread. Father Claret explains the necessity of poverty which he possessed so fervently: *"I knew it was the will of God that I should not have money nor accept anything, except the necessary food, only at the moment in which I should take nourishment, but not receive provisions necessary to take me from one point to another. Noticing that such abnegation edified everyone and made a deep impression, I did all in my power to continue the practice."* This habit of holy poverty created a horror of money in his heart which the world does not understand, as is proved in an incident referred to by him: *"Putting my hand into my pocket one day, I became frightened because I thought I had a coin in it. I took it out to throw it away or to give it to a beggar, but on*

looking at it, I found it was a medal.” “If at times,” he said, “money was offered me for sermons, I refused it saying that I did not need it, for on my trips I neither need horses nor coaches; neither do I lack money for clothes or shoes, because God preserves them for me for a long time.”

He never went by carriage, or even by mule, but always walked: often by back roads, trails, and cross-country; in rain, in snow, and in burning sun. He put each of his missions – from three days to nine or more days long – in the hands of our Blessed Mother, and before beginning a sermon would have the congregation recite the rosary with him. Then he would begin to preach, perhaps on one of the four last things, or the gravity of sin, or perseverance in virtue, or on the conversion of St. Mary Magdalen or St. Augustine.

As much as he hated and dreaded sin, he did not scold, ridicule, or terrify sinners, for he learned that only meekness could win them to repentance. With these softer qualities, in which he trained himself, he touched their hearts. Of help to him, too, was his eloquence in the Catalan language and his apt metaphors drawn from the life of Catalonian cities and countryside. People came from miles around to hear him preach. Once they heard him, they waited outside his confessional for hours or even days with lunches they had brought from home. Often he could read the consciences of these penitents far better than they themselves could. The pulpit, the altar, and the confessional occupied almost his entire day. He ate and slept very little. Sometimes he found time for apostolic writing or planning for his project, the Religious Publishing House. For 30 consecutive days people filled the huge Church of St. Stephen in Olot to hear his **three hour** sermons. Although he himself heard confessions as long as 15 hours a day, 24 other confessors were also kept busy in Olot. Three priests spent the entire morning distributing Holy Communion. The voices of those reciting the rosary in the afternoon sounded like “rolling thunder”. And in one chapel, there constantly were people making the Way of the Cross. Souls had come from distant places for this event: The “Great Mission” of Olot. God was able to accomplish this wonderful and indeed miraculous spiritual movement of souls through His humble servant, Father Claret.

Missionary to the Canary Islands

When Fr. Claret's life was threatened by anti-clerical enemies, his bishop sent him to the Canary Islands, a Spanish possession off the coast of West Africa. Father Claret reached this post in March of 1848 and started the same life and work that he had pursued in Catalonia. Though he had now to preach in Spanish with a Catalan accent (which some scoffers mimicked), his success was once again overpowering.

On May 1, 1848, he opened a 28-day mission in the town of Telde, on Gran Canaria Island. The place was experiencing a great drought and the farmers were preoccupied with fear for their crops. He said to them, *“I can promise you, brethren, that before this mission is over there will be a plentiful rain that will revive your plants, quiet your homes, and rejoice your hearts.”* While he was preaching the closing sermon, the rain began. Morals were lax in Telde; theft was especially prevalent. The mission of Father Claret wrought a great change. The pastor of Telde wrote to the bishop: *“This town has never seen the like of it. The bitterest of enemies have made peace. Scandals, both public and private, have been terminated, and amends made. Broken marriages have been mended. Restitutions have been made. Why? Because no one can withstand the fire of his preaching, the kindness and liveliness of his manner, his forceful reproofs... and the impact of his reasoning. The appeal of his words breaks his listeners' hearts, and everybody, even the proudest nature, falls at his feet weeping.”* But it was not only his preaching that won the veneration of the townsfolk for Father Claret. Many of his penitents here made known that in the confessional he had seen into their consciences, reminding them of sins that through ignorance or forgetfulness they had failed to mention. And there were droves of penitents. He began hearing their confessions at dawn but they started lining up the evening before. Here at Telde he also performed two striking cures. One was that of Antonia Hilaria, 25, afflicted with epilepsy from early childhood. During her convulsions six to eight men were required to restrain her. The most casual event could bring on one of her spells. One occurred during an evening service at Father

Claret's mission. As he came into the sacristy he asked what the crowd of people was doing there. *"My sister has taken a nervous spell,"* a man said, *"and when that happens she needs the help of all of us."* Father Claret took the girl's handkerchief, dipped it in holy water, and then said to the people holding her, *"Let her free! Let her free!"* They could not, they replied, for she would throw herself on the floor and hurt herself. *"Let her free,"* Father Claret insisted. *"No harm will come to her."* They did so. He put the moistened handkerchief on her eyes. The girl sat up and was quiet. *"Take the cloth from her eyes,"* Father Claret said. Usually her eyes were glazed and bulging after an attack. Now they were calm and natural. She walked home, slept peacefully and shortly afterward was able to take a job. She lived many years, but never had another epileptic spell.

Early in July he opened the mission in Arucas, also on Gran Canaria. So many people gathered that the large church could not contain them all. It was decided, therefore, that Father Claret would preach his sermons each evening in the plaza before the church, from an improvised pulpit. As the square was without illumination, each family was asked to bring a lantern from home. Suddenly, one night, a mysterious wind swept in to the plaza and blew out all the lanterns. At the same moment an invisible force snatched the lanterns from their owners' hands and dashed them to the pavement. Then, throughout the plaza, the voice of Father Claret was heard: *"Don't be frightened, brethren. The demon has put out the lanterns. The demon has thrown them to the ground. But be assured, not one lantern has been broken. God has not given him permission for that. Just pick them up and relight them."* They did this and found every lantern intact.

Father Claret tried to organize the Missions so that they were held at a time most favorable for the people, but at times his excessive work and the commands of his superiors arranged the date. This happened in a certain town. He was obliged to give a Mission during harvest time. The wheat was ripe, and the people were obliged to work in the fields. Father Claret visited the homes of the principal workmen and told them: *"Do not fear to come to the Mission; God will bless you."* *"But Father,"* they replied, *"that is impossible. The entire harvest may be lost in a single day. We are Catholics and appreciate what pertains to the church, but we cannot lose so many days."* *"God is the master of the fields, of the wheat, of the rain, and of hailstorms"*, was Father Claret's reply. *"In God's name I say to you, that if you come to the Mission, your wheat fields will be more productive, and all danger of rain and hailstorms will be averted. If, however, you do not come, your harvest will be destroyed."* Father Claret said no more and began his Mission. Some heeded the call; others did not. In two days all the people saw the fields of those who did not attend the Mission in ruins and their crops lost. A heavy hailstorm had unexpectedly fallen upon the fields. The fields of those who made the Mission, however, were preserved. The stalks heavily laden with the golden grain remained erect and not a grain was touched by the hail in spite of the ruined adjacent fields. The news of this happening spread rapidly through the district and served as a salutary warning.

God manifested Fr. Claret's holiness by extraordinary signs. Among these was the resplendent light that surrounded him while he celebrated Holy Mass. This declaration was made by Father Paul Coma of the Oratory of St. Philip Neri, in the informative process. The following are his words: *"When I was fifteen years of age, I entered the parish church of St. Eugenia of Bergo, diocese of Vich. At the "Rosary" altar, I noticed an unusual splendor surrounding the then unknown celebrant. I drew near and then recognized Father Claret, whose face was transformed. This strange brightness spread its rays as far as the sacristy. I do not remember whether there was, besides myself, any other person in the church. This happened while the servant of God was giving Missions in Catalonia."*

Discernment of consciences was one of the singular graces with which God favored His servant. By a single word of the penitent he knew the secrets of his soul. There were occasions on which, without ever having seen the persons, he knew the state of their consciences.

On a certain day a lady presented herself for confession to him for the first time. Father Claret, without even having heard her confession, said to her: "*Madam, God bless you and preserve you in His grace. You may receive Holy Communion, for you are not guilty of even a venial sin.*" The lady was greatly surprised and received Holy Communion with all tranquility. She told the story herself, affirming that in reality she was not conscious of having sinned. Other penitents said that if, through ignorance or forgetfulness, they had failed to confess some of their sins, Father Claret would ask them: "*Do you not remember other sins? My son, why do you not confess such a sin, which you have committed on such a day, with such a companion, and in such a place?*" And he reminded them of the minutest circumstances of the sins not confessed. Many persons knew that Father Claret had this particular gift of penetrating into the secrets of consciences, and for that reason they tried to place themselves under his authority and direction.

In Vich, when Father Claret was giving the Spiritual Exercises to the Discalced Carmelites of St. Theresa, a deep and serene joy inundated the souls of the religious. What was the reason? The Mother Prioress, Sister Maria Esperanza of the Conception gave the explanation: "*Father Claret has heard our confession. He told us in one of his conferences not to be uneasy about these confessions, because at that very moment he was reading out consciences. All of us have experienced that he was telling the truth; he knew the faults of each on better than the interested person.*" What the orators of the day most admired in Father Claret was his consistency in preaching his sermons. One day, Don Hermenegildo Coll de Valdemia preached a brilliant and animated sermon. Father Claret assisted at the function. Don Hermenegildo received congratulations for his discourse. Father Claret, however, retired silently. On the following day, early in the morning, the celebrated orator visited Father Claret; greatly disturbed, he said to him: "*Your Excellency, pardon me for troubling you with this inopportune visit. I need to unburden my heart to your Excellency. I have not been able to sleep all night. Tell me, archbishop, did my sermon not please you yesterday? Your silence has been a warning and a reproof for me!*" Then Father Claret consoled and encouraged him, but at the same time gave this salutary advice: "***Tell me, Don Hermenegildo, have you ever preached on the salvation of the soul or on the terrible misfortune of the damned?***" "*No, Your Excellency, I have not yet preached on those subjects.*" "***Have you preached on death, on judgment, on hell, on the necessity of conversion, on avoiding sin and doing penance?***" "*I have not preached directly on these subjects either.*" "***Well then, my friend, I am going to speak to you with all sincerity, since you have asked me to do so. It did not please me, nor can I approve the procedure of those who in their sermons omit these great truths of Christianity and only touch upon such subjects as serve but little to convert souls. I do not think that such sermons are either agreeable to or shall be approved by Our Lord, Jesus Christ.***" Don Hermenegildo listened and was silent. A few days later the people of Madrid saw a radical change in the oratory of that famous preacher. Formerly, they applauded his discourses, but now they wept at the unction of his sermons.

Archbishop of Cuba

On October 6, 1850, in the Cathedral of Vich, Anthony Mary Claret was consecrated Archbishop of Santiago, Cuba. Father Claret, who, at the time of his Episcopal consecration, added the name of Mary to his own, gave a delicate example of his devotion to the Blessed Virgin. "*I must leave Madrid in a hurry because before departing for Cuba I have to make three important visits,*" the Archbishop said one day to a friend of his who was urging him to prolong his stay at court. What visits could those be that were so urgent? They were three. There first was to the Shrine of "*La Virgen del Pilar,*" Patroness of Spain, which he had visited in the month of February of the same year, and which he had desired to visit again to place his pastoral ring on the column upon which Our Lady stands. He later wrote to the chaplain asking that a "*Salve*" be recited, after the rosary, for his intentions. The second visit was to Our Lady of Montserrat, Patroness of Catalonia. He arrived at Montserrat on the second of November. A solemn religious function was organized in commemoration of the day. The third visit was to the Virgin of Fusimanya, Patroness of Sallent. The Sallentinos prepared a splendid reception for him. Music and poetry, enthusiastic acclamations and tears of affection were offered on his arrival

in his native town. Father Claret was satisfied now. He had consecrated his three loves at the feet of the three images; namely, his love for Spain, before Our Lady of the Pillar; his love for Catalonia before the Virgin of Montserrat; and his love for his village before Our Lady of Fusimanya. The three visits were a preamble of a happy omen for his episcopate. The following February he arrived in Cuba and was installed in his See.

Archbishop Claret believed that his new post required him to be as much a missionary as he had been before. Accordingly he generally completed a visit of his entire archdiocese – half of the island of Cuba – once every 18 months. So difficult was the terrain and the traveling that even one such visitation had never been completed in all the previous history of Cuba. Each tour meant months of laborious travel over wild, rough country, under a blistering sun one day and through deep mud in blinding rain the next.

Everywhere Archbishop Claret went he preached, ignoring neither the rich nor the poor, the learned nor the ignorant. He would preach a mission in each town or each little group of villages he came to. Besides his mission sermons he would preach special sermons to the societies of the parish. He would also confer with the clergy, and when he could gather a number of them together, he would sometimes preach to them in a closed retreat. Many of his priests had scarcely seen a bishop since the day of their ordination.

To give the faithful the greatest possible opportunity for confession he would hear confessions himself five or six hours each day, for many people would not confess their sins to any other priest. The fruit of his missions was chiefly seen in the unprecedented number of people who received Holy Communion on the closing day. At the end of his mission in Santiago, in Lent, 1851, it took three priests, distributing Holy Communion steadily from 6:00 A.M. until 1:00 P.M., to care for the thousands of communicants.

In his first two years he confirmed 100,000 persons, was instrumental in bringing 300,000 to the confessional, married in the church 9,000 couples who had been living in concubinage, and reunited 300 couples who were divorced. Furthermore, during his first visit alone he distributed free – or in exchange for bad books – 38,217 books, 83,500 holy cards, 20,663 rosaries, and 8931 medals. As Archbishop, he consecrated the Archdiocese of Santiago to the Immaculate Heart of Mary and established the Confraternity of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Refuge of Sinners, in every parish and mission station.

While giving a mission at Manzanillo, he foretold that earthquakes would soon harass the island. Three months later a number of violent quakes left ruin in their wake, demolishing the cathedral of Santiago and leveling the archbishop's residence. One day the archbishop was preaching in a public square when the noise of distant thunder accompanied by tremors was heard. The people gave forth a cry of terror and began to flee. *“Do not fear; that is nothing!”* the archbishop said to them. *“Everything will soon pass!”* He descended the pulpit and, kneeling down, he touched the earth with his hands, causing the earthquake to cease. *“Be tranquil! The quakes will not molest you again today!”* he said, and then continued his sermon. Shortly thereafter an epidemic of cholera broke out according to another prediction he had made. Undaunted, Archbishop Claret visited every part of his diocese giving aid and comfort to the stricken.

One day he made the following comparison: *“God does with many of us as a mother does to a lazy, sleeping child; she shakes the cot or bed so as to awaken him and cause him to arise. If that does not suffice, she whips him. God does the same with many of his children, lethargic sinners. He shakes their beds, that is, their houses, by means of earthquakes, saving their bodies and their lives. If that does not awaken them and they do not arise, He will give them blows, sending them the cholera and the pest. God has made that known to me.”*

So that the spirit of religion might burn brighter in the Archdiocese of Santiago, St. Anthony Claret ordered that at least on Sundays and feast days the rosary should be recited publicly in all the churches and this was one of the points he closely inspected during his pastoral visitations.

One Sunday he dropped into a parish church and found the people gathered to recite the rosary. But the pastor was not present to lead it. The archbishop himself went to the altar steps and led the rosary with edifying piety. The pastor hurried to the church and explained that he had been detained by very urgent business. *“That was what I thought,”* said the archbishop. *“Therefore I ask that you tell me when you are going to be busy; for when I am giving a mission in the neighboring towns I will come personally to lead the rosary when you are not able to do so.”* After that, when the bell sounded at nightfall for the rosary the pastor would say to his companions, *“I will go, lest the archbishop come and take my place.”* On his long journeys through his archdiocese, the rosary was never out of his hands. In the missions he gave everywhere he taught the people how to pray the rosary and urged them to pray it often.

In his six years of ministration he had restored, both materially and spiritually, the languishing Archdiocese of Santiago. He had more than doubled the number of parishes; he had re-established the diocesan seminary from which no priest had been ordained in 30 years; he had lifted the morale and zeal of the clergy and had obtained an increase in their salaries; he had also helped establish a number of communities of religious, where formerly they had been suppressed and prohibited by law.

Confessor of the Queen

Queen Isabella II recalled Archbishop Claret from Cuba because she desired a wise and holy confessor. She believed Archbishop Claret would be the ideal one, but to him the idea of a court post was appalling. He disliked the worldliness, the intrigue and the idleness of court life. He agreed, however, to accept the counsel of the Papal Nuncio to Spain and that of his personal advisers. They urged him, for the good of the Church, to accept. He set three conditions: He was to reside away from the palace, and need come only to hear the queen's confession or instruct her children; he was to be exempted from attending court functions and from abiding by court ceremony; he was to be free to preach, to visit hospitals and jails, and to attend to his apostolic projects. The queen gladly agreed. Archbishop Claret entered upon his duties by reuniting the royal pair and by suggesting a plan of life to the queen. First, he directed her to make a spiritual retreat with the ladies of the court, which became an annual event. To prolong the influence of their retreat he presented the group with copies of a prayer book he had written and published entitled *The Right Road*.

The current Prime Minister, the mildly Liberal General Leopold O'Donnell, made approaches to win the queen's confessor to his party, but failed. Within six months a Conservative, General Narvaez, was Prime Minister and he too tried to get Archbishop Claret on his side. Narvaez argued, truthfully, that the Conservatives were more friendly toward the church. Said the Archbishop: *“I look upon the nation in its present state as like a card table with the players sitting around it. If there is someone who is only an onlooker he ought to keep silent. He would rightly be called imprudent if he showed signs of favor toward one player or another. That is the way it is with me. I am the onlooker, so I will say nothing in your favor. The duty that rests on me is to see that the queen be a good Christian and a good queen. And with God's grace I will let her avail herself of Peter, or Paul, or Zebedee as she may be inclined.”*

But some people doubted the Archbishop's political neutrality, while others detested his Catholic piety. Scarcely had he taken residence in Madrid when one day a big crate, apparently a case of books, was delivered to him. On opening it he found a dead man with a dagger through his heart. There was a note attached which read, *“Within a few days you will be like this corpse.”* There were in Madrid in the year 1866 – according to statistics published in *“Le Monde”* – forty-nine lodges and one thousand Masons. It is certain that they formed a great conspiracy to impede the apostolate of Father Claret and make attempts on his life.

This persecution by the enemies of the Church was one of the greatest glories of the holy missionary. He thereby proved the greatness of his moral personality and the triumphs of his ministry, something which the

Masonic organizations abhorred. The words which he himself wrote to encourage those who suffer persecution for justice' sake, may be applied to the servant of God. *“Have you ever seen a fig-tree laden with figs, and many birds coming to eat them? Do you wish to know which are the best figs? The birds will tell you. The best ones are those that have been picked at most. This agrees with the Gospel. Our Divine Master, Jesus Christ, has said: 'If you were of the world, the world would love you. But since you are not of the world, the world abhors you.’”*

The life of Blessed Anthony was interwoven with persecutions, intrigues, and threats. The world laid snares of death in his path, and God frustrated them from Heaven's heights. This is the historical truth. Fourteen attempts, like fourteen crowns that impiety placed at the feet of Father Claret were made on his life; poisonings, incendiaries, assaults, knife and dagger thrusts; in the house, on the streets, in fields, but above all in the church and the confessional. Defeat was always the result: the poisons were ineffective, the knife thrusts deviated, the daggers discovered. The assassins either converted or died shortly thereafter. Blessed Anthony's attitude toward all these persecutors was that of Jesus before his enemies, – silence. *“Let them alone,”* said Father Claret, *“they are the builders of my soul. Let them alone. I know what is good for me. Poor creatures! If my enemies knew how much good they do me, they surely would not do it.”*

Thus spoke and acted Father Claret! What more have the great martyrs of Catholicism done in presence of their executioners? Yet, the people at large loved him, flocked to his sermons, and heeded what he said to them. He wrote in his journal in April, 1864, *“I have been informed that in the Parish of St. Andrew, (Madrid) where I preached the Lenten Mission, 4000 souls more than in former years have fulfilled the precepts of the Church. Blessed be God and glory to Him. Some men have confessed for the first time in 40 years, and women who had not done so in 30 years. 'Not to us, Lord, not to us, but to Thy name be the glory.’”* “Other than parish churches, he preached in the convents, hospitals, and asylums of Madrid. He preached even more when the queen and her court were on their many visits in the Spanish provinces. Upon arriving in any town, he would leave the party, go into the streets, and ask the first child he met to direct him to the nearest church. There he would go, regardless of the time of day, and ask if he might preach. The news would circulate and a crowd would soon gather. After preaching to them he would go to another church, then still another. As when in Madrid, he would also seek out and preach to those who could not come to him: the sisters in convents, sick in hospitals, and prisoners.

One day the queen said to Archbishop Claret, *“No one tells me things as clearly and as frankly as you do.”* It would have been well if she had even one political adviser as able and unselfish as her confessor but she never did. Another day she said to him, *“Everyone else is constantly asking me for favors, but you never do. Isn't there something you would like for yourself?”* “Yes,” he said, *“that you would release me from my post.”* The queen gasped. She could never do that. Never again did she offer to grant him favors.

By concordat with the Holy See, the Spanish monarch had the right to nominate candidates for bishoprics. Archbishop Claret knew the worthiest priests of Spain and gladly advised the queen whom to nominate. Their piety, zeal, and education were his chief criteria. **Any priest's ambition to be a bishop absolutely disqualified him.** The queen had also the custom of giving funds to convents of sisters. Here, too, the archbishop advised her which were the deserving ones: namely, those that followed canonical rules and strove to practice the evangelical virtues. Besides his preaching, his charities, and his assignments from the queen, Archbishop Claret carried on many other apostolic works which he saw to be necessary. He continued, with his colleagues, to run the Religious Publishing House, making sure that it published good and necessary works, well printed and at a moderate cost. This was the major Catholic publishing venture in Spain at a time when the secular press, dominated by the Liberals, was fiercely assailing the Faith. Only 25 percent of the population was literate at the time, but Fr. Claret still saw the need for the distribution of Catholic literature. By 1866, the organization had published 4,000,000 copies of its pamphlets and books. Fr. Claret sought good

writers, doled out books, and wrote diligently for the press along with all his other duties, choosing his themes according to the needs of the apostolate. Among the most influential of his 120 written works were a Spanish Catechism and a Manual for Seminarians. The Blessed Virgin once audibly commanded him, “*Anthony, write!*” And five times he heard Jesus or Mary tell him that he had written well. History has likewise approved, for the Spanish people have kept the Faith – in which outcome St. Anthony Claret, his writing, and his publishing have played a major role.

Our dear Lord, who had preserved the life of Father Claret from so many attempts, defended his books from the fire of hate as well as from fiery flames. The following incident in April, 1852, gives evidence of the fact: Dominicans, Jesuits, and secular priests were conjointly giving a very solemn Mission in Balaguer. Father Serra, one of the missionaries, gave one of Father Claret's books entitled *Advices to Maidens*, to a young girl who had been to confession to him. “*They have made me a present of a book, a book of Father Claret,*” said the young girl joyfully, as she entered her home. She pressed it to her bosom like a treasure and a relic. “*Such things are for priests and friars,*” disdainfully said the master of the house, an infidel and a blasphemer. A little later, the young girl opened the book and began to read it by candle-light in the kitchen. The man became infuriated and snatched the book out of her hands. “*Take this book which will please you more,*” he said to the young girl, giving her an obscene novel. The young girl rejected it with holy indignation. The man then threw Father Claret's book into the fire, saying: “*Thus I would do with the author, if I could.*” God, however, wished to honor the author in his book. Instantly the live coals burst into flames which spread into the room burning the immoral book but leaving the book of Blessed Anthony intact amid the flames. “*A miracle, a great miracle!*” exclaimed the young girl enthusiastically, The man, filled with terror, left the house. He looked for his friends and told them what happened, saying “*Either my servant and the missionaries are demons, or they have a special protection of God.*” Night came on, but he could not sleep. “*If the flames burn my kitchen thus, how will the flames of hell burn?*” That was the thought which penetrated his mind like a fiery dart. Early in the morning, at dawn, he called a missionary priest. He wished to go to confession. The sacristan saw him in the church. On remembering the deeds of that wicked man, he asked himself with uneasiness: “*Is it confession or a conspiracy?*” The new prodigal's tears of contrition proved his sincerity. His conversion was a miracle. The cause of all of this was one of Fr. Claret's books.

God granted Fr. Claret two great spiritual consolations. In his Autobiography he writes: “*On the 26th of August, 1861, at seven o'clock in the evening, Our Lord granted me the great grace of retaining the sacramental species. Day and night I have the Most Holy Sacrament in my breast. For this reason, I must always be recollected and devoted to Him Who abides so intimately within me.*” Blessed Anthony Maria Claret preserved in his bosom uncorrupted, from one Communion to the other, the sacramental species, from August 26th, 1861 until the date of his death on October 24th, 1870. This was a most singular favor which has scarcely ever occurred in the lives of the saints. The Most Holy Virgin had the sublime privilege of lending her bosom to be the first tabernacle of the world to preserve in it the Incarnation of the God-man; thus he gave his heart for the first tabernacle of the church wherein the Eucharistic God would always be preserved.

It was in Madrid in the year 1864 on Christmas night, during the thanksgiving after the Midnight Mass, in the Convent of the Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, that Father Claret had a vision of Mary holding the Infant Jesus and, like St. Anthony of Padua, was privileged to receive the Child in his arms. Some privileged soul among the Religious of Perpetual Adoration must have seen the apparition of the Blessed Virgin placing the Child Jesus in the arms of Father Claret, for soon the community knew of the favor from Heaven. A letter preserved by Sister Angelica, a religious of Perpetual Adoration, is proof of this fact. “*That Christmas night,*” it says, “*the five hours we remained in the chapel listening to and seeing Father Claret seemed but brief moments to us. No one tired. We felt as though we were in a region of happiness. The Sisters said that during his thanksgiving Father was in ecstasy and had received the Child Jesus in his arms. The Blessed Virgin had given the Child to him.*”

Death and Sainthood

On October 24, 1870, Father Claret passed from this life to receive his eternal reward in heaven. Miracles did not leave him after his death. At death, his color had been ghastly, but it freshened at once and, before the interment, took on a living tint, a little dark as he had been in health. Moreover, the body had remained perfectly flexible for, at the end, it escaped rigor mortis. On the nights of the twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth there had been, for this southern mountain country where he died, an exceptional celestial manifestation. The heavens had been brilliantly illuminated by the aurora borealis. Those who had loved Anthony Claret could not be dissuaded from their fancy that a radiantly smiling Heaven was celebrating his reception into glory! During the funeral and the Mass, a mysterious little bird appeared in the Church. It fluttered over the remains of the archbishop and sang sweetly, joining the psalmody of the monks. The little bird was silent while the celebrant officiated, but when the choir intoned the responses it gave full power to its voice. At the end of the funeral rites it disappeared from the church in the same mysterious way in which it had made its appearance at the beginning. On June 11, 1897, his tomb was opened and the caskets extracted. The outer casket of timber was in an advanced stage of decay, a result of the water which, as shown by the sediment it contained, had, in submerging the cemetery, invaded the crypt. Even the zinc inner casket was badly perforated. This indicated there could be small hope that the remains might be found in recognizable condition. Nevertheless – they were! “... *the body and facial features, were perfectly preserved, the latter, however, a little wasted. The two Narbona doctors who examined the corpse verified the muscular intactment and, in the abdomen, the tension or resistance that indicated the incorrupt state of the internal organs. All who witnessed the exhumation certified that the body gave off no noxious or disagreeable odor.*”

In 1899, Pope Leo XIII declared him venerable. In 1934, Pope Pius XI pronounced him blessed and on May 7, 1950, Pope Pius XII declared Anthony Mary Claret a saint.

This brief account of St. Anthony Mary Claret's life cannot do justice to this great man of God, but it is hoped that it will arouse your interest to study more of his life and read *The Autobiography of St. Anthony Mary Claret*.

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