

Biography of S. Anthony Mary Claret

Childhood



St. Anthony Mary Claret was born in Catalonia, the northeastern corner of Spain, in a town called Sallent on December 23, 1807. He was the fifth son of Juan Claret and Josefa Clará's eleven children. His father owned a small textile factory, but was not rich. Anthony grew up in a Christian environment, and at a very early age had a strong sense of the eternal life that Christ wanted all men and women to enjoy. He wanted to spare sinners eternal unhappiness, and felt moved to work for their salvation. When he was about eleven years old, a bishop visited his school and asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up. Without hesitation he responded: "A priest."

Weaver



As soon as Anthony was old enough, he began working as an apprentice weaver. When he turned 17, his father sent him to Barcelona to study the latest techniques in textile manufacturing and to work in the large textile mills. He did so well in the textile design school that he began receiving offers from large textile companies. Even though he had the talent to succeed, he turned down the offers and returned home after experiencing the emptiness of worldly achievements.

Vocation



The words of the Gospel kept resounding in his heart:

"what good is it for man to win the world if he loses his soul?" He began to study Latin to prepare to enter the Seminary. He wanted to be a Carthusian Monk. His father was ready to accept the will of God, but preferred to see him become a diocesan priest. Anthony decided to enter the local diocesan seminary in the city of Vic.

He was 21 years old. After a year of studies, he decided to pursue his monastic vocation and left for a nearby monastery. On the way there, he was caught in a big storm. He realized that his health was not the best, and withdrew from his decision to go to the monastery.

He was ordained a priest at 27 years of age and was assigned to his hometown parish. The town soon became too small for his missionary zeal, and the political situation -hostile to the Church- limited his apostolic activity. He decided to go to Rome to offer himself to serve in foreign missions. Things did not work out as expected, and he decided to join the Jesuits to pursue his missionary dream. While in the Jesuit Novitiate, he developed a strange illness, which led his superiors to think that God might have other plans for him. Once again, he had to return home to keep searching for God's will in his life.

"Apostolic Missionary" in Catalonia and Canary Islands



Back in a parish of Catalonia, Claret began preaching popular missions all over. He traveled on foot, attracting large crowds with his sermons. Some days he

preached up to seven sermons in a day and spent 10 hours listening to confessions. He dedicated to Mary all his apostolic efforts. He felt forged as an apostle and sent to preach by Mary.

The secret of his missionary success was LOVE. In his words: "Love is the most necessary of all virtues. Love in the person who preaches the word of God is like fire in a musket. If a person were to throw a bullet with his hands, he would hardly make a dent in anything; but if the person takes the same bullet and ignites some gunpowder behind it, it can kill. It is much the same with the word of God. If it is spoken by someone who is filled with the fire of charity- the fire of love of God and neighbor- it will work wonders." (Autobiography #438-439).

His popularity spread; people sought him for spiritual and physical healing. By the end of 1842, the Pope gave him the title of "apostolic missionary." Aware of the power of the press, in 1847, he organized with other priests a Religious Press. Claret began writing books and pamphlets, making the message of God accessible to all social groups. The increasing political restlessness in Spain continued to endanger his life and curtail his apostolic activities. So, he accepted an offer to preach in the Canary Islands, where he spent 14 months. In spite of his great success there too, he decided to return to Spain to carry out one of his dreams: the organization of an order of missionaries to share in his work.

Founder and Archbishop of Cuba



On July 16, 1849, he gathered a group of priests who shared his dream. This is the beginning of the Missionary Sons of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, today also known as Claretian Fathers and Brothers. Days later, he received a new assignment: he was named Archbishop of Santiago de Cuba. He was forced to leave the newly founded community to respond to the call of God in the New World. After two months of travel, he reached the Island of Cuba and began his episcopal ministry by dedicating it to Mary. He visited the church where the image of Our Lady of Charity, patroness of Cuba was venerated. Soon he realized the urgent need for human and Christian formation, specially among the poor. He called Antonia Paris to begin there the religious community they had agreed to found back in Spain. He was concerned for all aspects of human development and applied his great creativity to improve the conditions of the people under his pastoral care.

Among his great initiatives were: trade or vocational schools for disadvantaged children and credit unions for the use of the poor. He wrote books about rural spirituality and agricultural methods, which he himself tested first. He visited jails and hospitals, defended the oppressed and denounced racism. The expected reaction came soon. He began to experience persecution, and finally when preaching in the city of Holguín, a man stabbed him on the cheek in an attempt to kill him. For Claret this was a great cause of joy. He writes in his Autobiography: "I can't describe the pleasure, delight, and joy I felt

in my soul on realizing that I had reached the long desired goal of shedding my blood for the love of Jesus and Mary and of sealing the truths of the gospel with the very blood of my veins." (Aut. # 577). During his 6 years in Cuba he visited the extensive Archdiocese three times...town by town. In the first years, records show, he confirmed 100,000 people and performed 9,000 sacramental marriages.

Confessor to the Queen of Spain



Claret was called back to Spain in 1857 to serve as confessor to the Queen of Spain, Isabella II. He had a natural dislike for aristocratic life. He loved poverty and the simplest lifestyle. He accepted in obedience, but requested to be allowed to continue some missionary work. Whenever he had to travel with the Queen, he used the opportunity to preach in different towns throughout Spain.

In a time where the Queens and Kings chose the bishops for vacant dioceses, Claret played an important role in the selection of holy and dedicated bishops for **Spain and its colonies**.

The eleven years he spent as confessor to the Queen of Spain were particularly painful, because the enemies of the Church directed toward him all kinds of slanders and personal ridicule. In 1868 a new revolution dethroned the Queen and sent her with her family into exile. Claret's life was also in danger, so he accompanied her to France. This gave him the opportunity to preach the Gospel in Paris. He stayed with them for a while, then went to Rome where he was received by Pope Pius IX in a private audience.

First Vatican Council



On December 8, 1869, seven hundred bishops from all over the world gathered in Rome for the First Vatican Council. Claret was one of the Council Fathers. His presence became noticeable when the subject of papal infallibility was discussed, which Claret defended vehemently. This teaching became a dogma of faith for all Catholics at this Council. The Italian revolution interrupted the process of the Council, which was never concluded. Claret's health deteriorated, so he returned to France accompanied by the Superior General of the Sons of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, his congregation.

Last Days in Exile



In France, Claret joined his missionaries who were also in exile. Soon he found out, that there was a warrant for his arrest. He decided to go into hiding in a Cistercian Monastery in the French southern town of Fontfroide. There he died on October 24, 1870 at the age of 62. As his last request, he dictated to his missionaries the words that are to appear on his tombstone: "I have loved justice and hated iniquity; therefore I die in exile." His remains are venerated in Vic. Claret was beatified in 1934 and in 1950 canonized by Pope Pius XII.