

1. Antonio Maria Claret y Clará

1.1 A Childhood Marked with a Strong Experience of the Spirit

Born in Sallent (Barcelona), of the Diocese of Vic, on December 23rd, 1807, he was the fifth child of eleven, that were born from the marriage of Juan Claret and Josefa Clará. They were a very religious family of weavers. He received the sacrament of Baptism two days after his birth, on Christmas 1807. He was given the names of Anthony, Adjutor and John.

Claret has described in his *Autobiography* a powerful experience of the Spirit which he had when he was only five years old:

“The first ideas I can remember date back to when I was five years old. When I went to bed, instead of sleeping—I never have been much of a sleeper- I used to think about eternity, I would think “forever, forever, forever.” I would try to imagine enormous distances and pile still more distances on them and realize that they would never come to an end. Then I would shudder and ask myself if those who were so unhappy as to go to an eternity of pain would ever see an end to their suffering. Would they have to go on suffering? Yes forever and forever they will have to bear their pain!”¹

This marked his life and when in his mature years he writes about it, he continues to experience the same shudder thinking of “always, always, always.” Through his faith journey, he will complete little by little this experience which will be at the foundation of his ecclesial vocation.

If in his childhood this idea is the reason for his compassion for the salvation of his neighbor, this experience will ripen and be completed with the experience of God as Father, which will be the fundamental reason of his vocation as an evangelizer. The fatherhood of God over his children and the unhappy eternity of he who will not allow God to be at the center of his life will be the *stimulus and spur* of his apostolic zeal and will remain with Claret in future experiences.

When he was 12 years old, he received another peculiar grace which he explains in “*Review of his Life*,”² as follows:

“1820, 12 years old, God called me, I offered myself to his most holy will.”³

Short, clear and to the point. He is aware that the call is a gift and requires an answer which he gives promptly. This was an event that marked his availability, as a starting point, for whatever God might want. Many years will have to pass by until he will discover how God wants him to fulfill his vocation, which he had felt, for the first time when he was 5 and 12 years old. It will be a long journey and, sometimes difficult to discern, but the experience of these two events will be as a backdrop curtain for future situations; in them he has discovered the need to work for the salvation of mankind and the fatherhood of God, situations which will help him to remain attentive to God’s Will, to which he answers with a full availability.

1.2 Called to the Textile Manufacturing

¹ Aut. FC, 8.

² This is a writing he composed when he was Archbishop of Cuba in 1856. He summarizes events of his life between 1813 and 1856. It was written five years before the *Autobiography* and contains it like in germ. In *Escritos Autobiográficos*, (BAC: Madrid, 1981), 426-430.

³ Brief narration of his life *Escritos Autobiográficos*, 427.

The life of Claret goes on. As any other young man he is initiated in the world of labor, at the family loom. Anthony has a especial ability for the textile manufacturing. His father made him do all sorts of tasks, and he even made him go over what the workers had not completely finished.⁴

The work of manufacturing thrilled him; he felt it as his own, to the point to ask his father to let him go to Barcelona to get a better education.

His creativity and his natural gift for handicrafts and for practical things make him feel satisfied with what he does. He does not have anything else to learn.

Anthony is portrayed in his *Autobiography* as a young man determined, oriented, and called toward the textile manufacturing, for which he has good abilities and gifts. He was satisfied and happy in his work; he felt he was lacking nothing. In his twenties it seems that his life is completely on track. Now he only needs to put in practice what he has learned in Barcelona

1.3 His Conversion

If he had followed this way; we could not say that he had done anything wrong, but looking at the history of his entire life, with the perspective that time gives to us, we can truly say that he would not have fulfilled the plan God had for him, the plan he glimpsed in his childhood. His professional orientation almost became for him the center around which he organized everything, even his relationship with God. Now God will encounter him, and with the same availability that he had when he was 12 years old, he will follow the call.

Textile manufacturing had become for him an absolute. His conversion will be to discover what is the concrete call he had to follow. This does not mean that textile manufacturing was not something good in itself and a possible way of life for someone, but this was not Claret's call; for this reason he will have to leave it and change direction.

His conversion comes about in contact with the Word of God:

"In the midst of this whirligig of ideas, while I was at Mass one day, I remembered reading, as a small boy, those words of the Gospel: What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and suffers the loss of his soul?(Mt 16,26). This phrase impressed me deeply and went like an arrow to my heart. I tried to think and reason what to do, but to no avail."⁵

Through the events he lived in Barcelona, he discovers in them signs that tell him he has to abandon manufacturing: the experience of nearly drowning,⁶ the intent of seduction of a woman⁷ and the disloyalty of a friend,⁸ which he reinterpreted under the light of his experience and in contact with the text of Mt 16,26. He sees in them the voice of God who calls him to a change in the orientation of his life.

Claret felt a deep incompatibility between his mind, full of machines, and his relationship with God. And as a background music, the Word of God: *What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and suffers the loss of his soul?*

⁴ Cf. Aut. FC, 33.

⁵ Aut. FC, 68.

⁶ Cf. Aut. FC, 71.

⁷ Cf. Aut. FC, 72.

⁸ Cf. Aut. FC, 73-76.

Once Anthony decides something he will fulfill it in the most radical way. But a very insignificant event, at least at first sight, as a storm, makes him realize that his health is not strong enough for that way of life. He interprets it as a sign that God does not call him to this path.⁹ He will have to continue his search, which will take many more years.

He goes back to Vic; he is 23 years old. He continues to study Philosophy, and in the second year he experiences an event which is going to be decisive and will mark the direction of his life: *Initial Experience*, which we will discuss when the time comes.

Before finishing theology, he is ordained as a priest and appointed parochial Vicar of Sallent; in this town he continues to study the three years of theology that he needs, and he goes to take his exams in Vic. At the same time that he studies, he has a very active ministry: mass, confessions, catechesis, visitations to the sick, preaching.

1.4 I determined to leave the parish and go to Rome

After his *Initial Experience* and in touch with Sacred Scriptures, Claret discovers his vocation as an Apostolic Missionary for the Church and he makes the resolution to offer his life:

“...thus it was that I determined to leave the parish and go to Rome, to present myself to the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith so that they could send me anywhere in the world.”¹⁰

His love for the Church impelled him always to look for more, for the places where it would be more difficult. However, we wonder why, after the dangerous journey to Rome,¹¹ he enters the Company of Jesus. The reason was a non transcendental event, such as the Cardinal in charge of Propaganda FIDE being in vacation for a month.¹² Claret uses this month to do the Spiritual Exercises and it is, in this context, and by means of the Jesuit who gave him the book to do the Exercises, that he enters the Company of Jesus.

He stayed in the Company for four months, and it was an important formation period in his journey to become an Apostolic Missionary for the Church.

Knowing the discernment methods of the Company of Jesus, it is surprising that the reason for him to leave the Company be a pain in his knee, which he never mentions again. Claret was already very determined in his priestly vocation; maybe the Jesuits took advantage of the pain of his knee to tell him that God had other plans for him, as so it was.

He goes back to Spain convinced about what the Father General of the Company of Jesus had told him: “God brought you to the Company not that you should remain in it, but that you might learn how to win souls for heaven.”¹³ Surprisingly this sentence is not found in any of the three letters written by the Superior General of the Jesuits.¹⁴ However, he consigned this in his *Autobiography*, which is a proof that he experienced this period of his life as a training for the universal mission in the service of the Church, completely in tune with his childhood worries for the salvation of mankind.

⁹ Cf. Aut. FC, 89.

¹⁰ Aut. FC, 120.

¹¹ Cf. Aut. FC, 121-136.

¹² Cf. Aut. FC, 138.

¹³ Aut. FC, 167.

¹⁴ Cf. Aut. FC, 167, note 48.

1.5 Apostolic Missionary for the Church, in the Style of Jesus with his Apostles, in Poverty and Itinerancy

He came back from Rome; he went to Vic and his Bishop sent him to Viladrau to dedicate himself completely to preaching:

“I started giving missions in the parish of Viladrau on August 15, 1840, conducting a novena in honor of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Next I gave another in the parish of Espinelvas, an hour away from Viladrau. Then I went to the parish of Seva. The mission here was more sensational than the others. A large number of people underwent conversion and made general confessions. This was the start of my fame as a missionary.”¹⁵

He says candidly, that *this was the start of my fame as a missionary*. He was 32 years old. From this moment the large missions begin. During eight years he is free from the parish responsibilities and available to go from one town to another wherever the Bishop would send him (1840-1848). This is another characteristic of Claret as a Missionary for the Church, the itinerancy in the style of Jesus and his Apostles. In poverty like them, without purse, or sandals, accepting the hospitality which is offered to him.

As he was dedicated to the missions, on July 9, 1841, the Holy See, granted him the title of Apostolic Missionary. Although this was an honorary title, he considered it as a confirmation of his identity, in the way as in the Bible the imposition of a new name, manifests a new vocational purpose.

Missionary meant for Claret, from his vocational experience, his way to be in the Church as servant of the Word, offering his own life to the service of the Gospel.

Apostolic, although in the language of the Roman Curia, it meant the Holy See that conferred it to him, he understood it to be a mission in the style of the Apostles in communion of fraternal life and of evangelical testimony, of full availability and itinerancy for the universal mission.

Jesus had told his disciples that, their preaching would be accompanied by some signs: healing of the sick, raising of the dead, cleansing of the lepers and driving out demons (Cf. Mt 10,7). And those signs accompanied the life of Claret. In the theme about demons he was very cautious as we can see from the title of Chapter IX of Part II of the *Autobiography: On Healing the Possessed, and on the Many Fictitious Cases of Possession*.

For Claret, to be an Apostolic Missionary is to be at the service of the Word in the Church, and this with only one goal: *for the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls*.¹⁶

M^a Antonia, even before meeting Claret, through the experience of the Spirit of God acknowledged him as an *Apostolic man and the grace for evangelic preaching he had received*

“One night while praying and in bitter tears, pleading to our Lord that by the merits of His Passion and death to have mercy on the necessities of His church which at that time were many, our Lord told me and pointing at Mgr. Claret as if I saw him between our Lord and me.” This, my daughter, is the apostolic person whom you have asked me for so many years and with so much tears”.

¹⁵ Aut. FC, 172.

¹⁶ Cf. Aut. FC, ch. XI.

“His Divine Majesty showed me the grace He poured on that holy soul for the preaching of the gospel, and our Lord told me that there was no other remedy for the peace of the church. I did not know that person. Only a few days before I heard that a certain chaplain by the name of Mosen Claret began preaching with much zeal about the honor due to God and the salvation of souls. I think this [the vision] happened at least eleven or twelve years ago.”¹⁷

1.6 Apostolic Missionary for the Church in situation of stability: Archbishop of Cuba and Confessor of the Queen

Claret has lived his vocation as Apostolic Missionary in very diverse situations that, in some moments, seemed to be contrary to this vocation. However he will always know how to profit from all the circumstances of his life to fulfill his vocation.

He receives the nomination as Archbishop of Cuba on August 11, 1849; at first he does not want to accept it. In substance he feels a deep incompatibility between being a missionary and the way to fulfill the ministry as a bishop on his time. To be an Archbishop at that moment was considered to be an honor, and the work had a bureaucratic nature, which seemed to be in contradiction with his vocation as an Apostolic Missionary.

Although he insists on his unworthiness and incompetence, in substance what is happening is that he finds himself caught between different duties; on one hand, he does not want to accept because he sees his vocation as an Apostolic Missionary in danger; and on the other hand he was involved with the foundation of the Claretian Missionaries(men), the Religious Library, and the final composition of the Constitutions of the Carmelites of Charity of Mother Vedruna. He prays and asks people to pray for him. He leaves it in the hands of the mediations; he sees in their insinuations the will of God and he accepts.¹⁸ Once again obedience prevails.

In this new situation Claret will make his identity as an Apostolic Missionary compatible to the call from God to be Archbishop of the Diocese of Santiago de Cuba. What at the beginning seemed to him a danger for his identity as Apostolic Missionary, will enlarge the horizons and will make of the Diocese of Santiago de Cuba a permanent place of Mission.

His pastoral visitations were true missions. Time of familiar sharing with the missionary team that accompanied him and of an intense evangelization. With his new way to live his ministry as a bishop, he will be an example for the other prelates. The renewal of the Church worries him and he shares these worries with M^a Antonia París. During the six years of his leadership in the Diocese, he made three pastoral visitations remaining about thirty days in each town.

The intent to kill him in Holguin will be the beginning of a new period in his life. It was for him a shock, although it was at the same time a joy to be able to partake in the sufferings of Christ for his Body which is the Church.¹⁹ During his convalescence he conceives the Plan for San Michael's Academy.²⁰ Claret dedicates all his energies to the Apostolic Mission, even when his strength is weak.

¹⁷ Aut. MP, 19.

¹⁸ Cf. Aut. FC, 495.

¹⁹ Cf. Aut. FC, 585-587.

²⁰ Aut. FC, 581.

He was at the beginning of his fourth visitation when he received the nomination from the Queen Isabel II to be her confessor. In this new mission, Claret will have the opportunity to accomplish greater apostolic plans: his worries for the Church at the national level and even at the universal level. He imposes three conditions on the Queen before accepting his nomination, which she agrees with:

"May 28 (1857) Second meeting with the Queen Isabel II... the Queen accepts the three conditions: that he will not have to deal with politics; that after fulfilling his duties in [the] palace he will have free time for his own works; that he will not have to lose his time waiting when he goes to [the] palace..."²¹

This is a very fruitful time: he has a direct influence on the Queen of Spain and thus, in some way, in the leadership of the Country. He works for the renewal of the Church of Spain with his constant influence in the nomination of bishops, electing worthy and authentic shepherds. He establishes the Academy of St. Michael, as a meeting place between faith and culture. He publishes many books, booklets, and flyers. He works on the consolidation of the popular libraries. He establishes the inter-diocesan seminary in El Escorial and a university college for the formation of the new leaders of the new society, in which faith and culture will have to dialogue.

His apostolic activity has been important for the Church during these years. However, in reading these chapters of the Autobiography we realize that there is a deep tension between his spirit of universality and his itinerancy, as it had been during the period in which he was an Apostolic Missionary and the forced stay in the Court;²² between his fidelity to the apostolic vocation and his voluntary withdrawal from politics;²³ his apostolic work and his spiritual life.²⁴ In a synthesis, he explains very graphically how he feels his spirit in this situation:

To fulfill the will of God will always be the motive of his work for the Church.

1.7 Apostolic Missionary until the end

It is the last period of his life. He arrived in Rome from his exile in Paris, on April 2nd 1869 with the purpose to participate in the priestly jubilee of Pope Pius IX. The Pope invited him to take part in the preparation of Council Vatican I that, in these dates, already was very much advanced. He tells us about this event in the *Autobiographical Documents*.²⁵

The Council was announced publicly on June 26, 1867. His taking part in the Council was also an expression of his ecclesial vocation.

Two months later, in a letter to Currius he explains in more detail the benefits he expects from the Council:

"I have been very busy in getting information for the Council... many expect material benefits from the Council... I expect spiritual benefits. We will know what to do; I expect that the Council and his Doctrine will be a beacon which will show us the harbor of

²¹ San Antonio María Claret, *Escritos Autobiográficos y Espirituales*, (BAC: 1959), Edition prepared by José M^a Viñas, 26.

²² Cf. Aut. FC, XI.

²³ Cf. Aut. FC, XII-XIII.

²⁴ Cf. Aut. FC, XIV-XIX.

²⁵ Cf. *Escritos Aut. FC*, 450-504.

salvation in the midst of the storm which will still become stronger and greater. Alas of the earth!..."²⁶

He does not say what these benefits are, but he says they are spiritual; and besides, from his former letters we know that those benefits are in the line of the Renewal of the Church in the difficult society of the XIX century. From the *Notes of a Plan...* we know that his preoccupation was the Church and, in it, the renewal of the clergy and the religious men and women, the good formation of the seminarians. He felt the need for the Church to live in poverty, that each one according to his vocation be faithful to his or her Christian commitments and proclaim the Gospel; only in this way will the evils that surrounded the Church disappear.

His presence in the Council was constant, in spite of his ailments. The weather of Rome did not help him. We know from the records of proceedings that he was present to all the general assemblies and to almost all the congregations.²⁷ He spoke only once there to give witness of his willingness to martyrdom in favor of the Papal infallibility. S. Antony M^a Claret considered his presence and action in the Council as his last service to the Church, the consummation of his vocation as Apostolic Missionary in the Church.

He thinks that he has accomplished the plan God had over his life. He died in exile, at the Monastery of Fontfroide (France), at 08:45, October 24, 1870.

²⁶ EC, II, 1425.

²⁷ Cf. *Escritos Aut. FC*, 451, note 126.