

The Soul
of the
Apostolate

The Soul of the Apostolate

By

DOM JEAN-BAPTISTE CHAUTARD, O.C.S.O.

(Abbot of Notre Dame de Sept-Fons)

Translated by

A MONK OF OUR LADY OF GETHSEMANI

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DOM CHAUTARD

A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

It is surely significant that the day on which the author of this modern spiritual classic, the *Soul of the Apostolate*, was born in the French Alps, was the feast of St. Gregory the Great, March 12, 1858. For it is one of the cardinal principles of St. Gregory's mystical and ascetical teaching that there exists an inseparably close relation between the so-called "active" and "contemplative" lives, so much so that though one may dominate over the other (and the most perfect state is that in which contemplation dominates) yet in the soul of anyone called by God to high sanctity the life is always essentially a mixture of contemplation (love of God) and action (love of neighbor).

Now it is precisely this problem which the brilliant and ardent Cistercian abbot of Sept-Fons, in central France sets himself to elucidate and discuss in this pamphlet, which has gone into many editions and hundreds of thousands of copies in many languages, and which was the bedside book of Pope Pius X. The reason why St. Gregory the Great was so perfect in expounding the relation of action and contemplation is that, called from the cloister to the Papacy in one of the crises in the history of the Church, he found out what that relation was in the crucible of trial and labor and distraction and struggle.

And the reason why Dom Chautard has been able to write so well on the same theme for our own age, intoxicated with the confusion of its own sterile and purely worldly activities, is that he too was so often torn, by the hand of God, from the cloister, and made an instrument of Divine Power and Providence and Love to protect the monks and nuns of the Cistercian Order, and to call priests, religious, and layworkers in Catholic Action to a life of closer union with God, in Whom is the only principle of vital and effective social action: divine charity, won for us by the Sacrifice of Christ, His Incarnate Word, upon the Cross.

The Chautards ran a little bookshop, and the father of the future monk was one of those purely nominal Catholics who sometimes go to Mass, but whose principles are entirely vitiated by the materialistic and utilitarian views of the middle class to which they belong. The mother was in a different category. She had more faith, and she saw to it that her children were educated as Catholics.

However, as their son grew into young manhood, neither he nor they had an idea of his entering religion. He went to Marseilles to study economics at the university, with a commercial career in mind. There was a relative in Chile. Perhaps the young man would join him and make a fortune there. The atmosphere of the University of Marseilles was scarcely Catholic, but in a footnote to one of the later sections of the *Soul of the Apostolate*, the author tells us how he was one day much affected by the simple devotion with which a priest was reciting his Breviary, and he began to ask himself why he did not pray more himself.

Soon he began to frequent a Catholic club, founded for the working and lower middle-class youth of the great Mediterranean port by the saintly Father Allemand.

When Dom Chautard describes his experience of this really vital and supernatural brand of Catholic Action in the *Soul of the Apostolate* he is referring to a later visit to Fr. Allemand's club, after his ordination.

But indeed it may be said that Dom Chautard's vocation, and the *Soul of the Apostolate* itself are both to be traced to Fr. Allemand's club, at Marseilles.

If this youth-club had been one of those more or less timid compromises with modern notions that make so much Catholic Action seem like no more than a Y.M.C.A. run by a couple of priests, Dom Chautard would have probably ended by exporting nitrates from Chile. But here he found something more than third-rate amateur dramatics and the atmosphere of a secular social club. This was more than a tame and sheepish attempt to rival the attractions of the dance hall and the *cafe* by vainly trying to beat them at their own game of pleasing and entertaining human nature. There was something more, something that appealed to a much deeper and more urgent and more vital necessity: faith, supernatural charity, a deep and simple and unbreakable solidarity among souls united, as he was to discover, in Christ. And, as a result of all this, he began to taste "that peace which the world cannot give."

It was when he was kneeling in prayer, one day, in the chapel of the club, at the tomb of its saintly founder, that he received the grace of his vocation to religion.

He countered the violent and embittered opposition of his father's *bourgeois* hatred of religious orders, by a barefoot pilgrimage up the stony Alpine roads to Our Lady's Mountain Shrine at Laus, and in answer to his prayers, he was admitted as a postulant to the Trappist Abbey of Aiguebelle, near the Rhone, north of Avignon, in 1877.

Here he began to learn, with inexpressible joy, how to live

the contemplative life as it had been practiced for centuries according to the Rule of St. Benedict and the Usages of the Cistercians. He began to live the life of a White Monk, that life of obscurity, obedience, silence, poverty, solitude, hidden in the "secret of God's face," that is, of His presence and of His will. But it is above all, a life of ceaseless praise.

Dom Gabriel, the abbot of this ancient monastery, was a friend of the great Benedictine Dom Guéranger and he stressed the liturgical character of the Cistercian life above all. That is one reason why a most valuable section of the *Soul of the Apostolate* is the one devoted to the liturgical life. Surely there is nothing more fundamental and nothing that is more closely interconnected with Dom Chautard's conception of Catholic Action as a reproduction of the life of the early Christians: and it was the earliest ages, especially the Patristic age, that were the most purely liturgical and, as we see from the writings of the Fathers, the fullest of pure charity, based on sacrifice, without which Catholic Action is a mockery.

But like so many White Monks before him, like St. Bernard and St. Peter of Tarentaise, Jean-Baptiste Chautard was not destined to taste for long the unmixed joys of contemplation. He was not yet solemnly professed, being still in the midst of his studies, and just ordained deacon, when Aiguebelle was faced with complete ruin.

Dom Gabriel had had some opportunity to estimate the young monk's practical ability, since Fr. Jean-Baptiste had been serving for some time as guest-master. The abbot took the bold step of sending him to Paris to try and use his ingenuity to save his community. But all Fr. Chautard's native ability and eloquence and learning and economics proved useless. Finally he threw himself down in prayer at the shrine of Our Lady of Victories. When, a half hour later, he emerged

into the street, a stranger came up to him saying: "Are you not a Trappist? What brings you to Paris, Father? Can I be of any assistance to you?" The rest of the story can be guessed. Aiguebelle was saved. And Dom Chautard had his first real practical experience of the relative worth of natural activity, and activity aided by, and based on prayer.

The rest of the story of his life is a catalogue of activities that might appall a member of the most active Order in the Church.

After directing, as cellarer, the rebuilding of practically the whole monastery of Aiguebelle and the establishment of a chocolate factory there to provide a little revenue, he became abbot of Chambarand near Grenoble.

After the reunion of the various Trappist congregations in 1892 he was commissioned by the Abbot General, Dom Sebastian Wyart, to see to the repurchase of the old Mother House of the Cistercian Order, Citeaux, which he bought and made ready for occupancy. When Dom Sebastian moved into the Mother House, one of the most important abbeys of the Order, Sept-Fons, needed a new abbot. Dom Chautard was elected.

He made use of his right to refuse, but when Dom Sebastian appealed to the Pope, Leo XIII expressed his desire that Dom Chautard accept, and he yielded to the will of God.

Thus he became abbot of a house at once important and impoverished, and responsible for daughterhouses not only in France and Belgium, but in China, Japan, Palestine, and Australia. Soon he was to add another in Brazil. And the constitutions of the Order require that all such houses be often visited by their Father Immediate, though obviously he could not visit them all each year in person.

In 1901, when one of the frequent attacks against the

Church burst out again in France, Dom Chautard was chosen to represent the Cistercians of the Strict Observance in Paris. He put up such a good fight that Clemenceau, who was no friend of the Church, was nevertheless impressed with his sincerity and fearlessness, and the Order at large was spared. Others were by no means so fortunate.

During the First World War, besides his frequent visits to the monks who had been conscripted and sent to the front, Dom Chautard gave shelter at Sept-Fons to a community of Belgian Cistercians, another community from Palestine, the orphans from an asylum at Arras, and the inmates of an old men's home.

At the same time, Dom Chautard added to this a much more important work of mercy in the spiritual order. A magazine for French priests, conscripted and sent to the front, directed by him, attained such popularity and influence that it was continued with even greater fruit in the difficult period of readjustment that followed the war's end. At that time, these priests, exposed to great spiritual dangers by the moral and physical disintegration which they had seen at such close range, and by the unsettled state of the society to which they returned, needed nothing so much as the consolations and medicine of a doctrine like Dom Chautard's, which placed the greatest emphasis on the one source of all our strength: God's grace, obtained in ever greater abundance by a life of prayer and mortification.

No one was better qualified to help these priests adjust themselves to their difficult situation, and no one was better equipped to train them as good soldiers of Christ, in the active ministry, than this contemplative abbot who had been compelled, as it were, by Providence, to learn from experience the fruitfulness of an active life that had its roots deep in prayer and penance.

But Dom Chautard had long since arrived at the conclusions to which he was now giving his maturest expression.

In the persecution of the Church in France, under Clemenceau, in the early days of the century, Dom Chautard's keen eye had discovered a glaring inconsistency in the reaction of a certain type of Catholic leader. He observed that some priests, some organizers of Catholic Action, imagined that they could fight political enemies with more or less worldly and political weapons. In defending the Church against state persecution, they thought the most important thing was to gain and preserve political and social power. They believed that these gains could best be consolidated by a great material expansion. They expended all their efforts in running newspapers, holding conventions, publishing pamphlets and magazines, and above all, they measured the growth of Catholic life by the number of new school buildings, new Church buildings, new hospital buildings, new orphanages, new social centers. . . . As if the Church of God were built exclusively of bricks and mortar!

Such apostles tended to congratulate themselves when they had raised large sums of money, or when their Churches were filled with great throngs of people, without reference to what might be going on in the souls of all those who were present.

To the eyes of the Cistercian Abbot, a man who had learned his wisdom close to God, in the silence of the cloister, before the Tabernacle, there was a deep-seated and subtly pernicious error in all this. Were these the means to be emphasized in the defense of the King Whose Kingdom is not of this world, and Who said: "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His justice, and all these things shall be added unto you."¹

1. *Matt.* 6:33.

Buildings, newspapers, meetings, conventions, all these things were important, vitally important. But they were not the one essential thing. And those who had become entirely absorbed in this work of more or less material growth, seemed to have lost sight of the fact that the Church is built of *living stones*. It is built of *saints*. And saints are made only by the grace of God and the infused virtues and the gifts of the Holy Ghost, not by speeches and publicity and campaigns which are all doomed to sterility without the essential means of *prayer and mortification*.

Dom Chautard saw, no doubt, that all this came from the subtle infection of Modernism and kindred heresies, bred of contact with a purely materialistic and secular culture. And he, like the saintly Pontiff under whose reign he was then living, saw that the only remedy was a return to the fundamentals of Christian Doctrine in all the power and beauty of their traditional presentation. The only thing that could save the Church was to base all work of reconstruction on the solid foundation of the Gospel as presented in the purity of Catholic Doctrine.

Consequently, Dom Chautard brought out, in 1907, a little pamphlet entitled "*L'Apostolat des Catechismes et de la Vie Interieure*" ("*The Apostolate of Catechism and the Interior Life*"). The title is self-explanatory. More important than all the methods based on modern publicity and display was the old traditional Christian technique of the formation of saints by personal contact and the teaching by word and example, in the charity of Christ. And the most vitally necessary thing in the regrowth of Christian life in countries where the Church was subject to state opposition and interference, was the solid and systematic teaching of the basic truths of our Faith by men and women deeply imbued with the interior life.

It was this little pamphlet that first presented the arguments that form the cornerstone of the present volume, and it was on this foundation that the holy abbot proceeded to build when his book was acclaimed on all sides by Catholic leaders, priests, bishops, and cardinals. The result was the first edition of *The Soul of the Apostolate*, which became one of the favorite spiritual books of Catholic priests, religious, and even laymen, in our time.

Not until after the First World War, however, did the book reach its present size, with the addition of the valuable sections on the Liturgical Life and Custody of the Heart. In its final form, it has been translated into all the most important languages of the world, and its multiple editions have run into many hundreds of thousands of copies.

Far from losing any of its popularity and usefulness, the *Soul of the Apostolate* recommends itself with ever more urgency in our time, when the world is barely recovering from the most frightful social cataclysm in the history of man, with no prospect of anything brighter in the future, if men do not learn to turn their steps in the directions pointed out in these pages: the path that was first shown to men by the incarnate Son of God.

What was Dom Chautard's own interior life? His book itself tells us enough on that score. In it we see the reflection of his own soul, a strong and simple faith and indomitable will to serve God in all things, profound and uninterrupted union with the Indwelling Trinity, an unconquerable love of Christ and of His Immaculate Mother: all these elements kept this sane and prudent and ardent priest on the safe and direct road to heaven, steering clear of the two equally noxious extremes of quietism (which he characterized as "perfumed jelly") and the heresy of works whose obstreperous addicts he

condemned, characterizing them as “the heavyweights” (*les champions de boxe*).

The life of Dom Chautard was a life of labor, of sacrifice, in which perhaps the greatest sacrifice was to be constantly out of his beloved cloister, separated from his monastic community and above all from the delights of the liturgical life as lived from day to day by the Cistercian monks in their choir, which is the court of Jesus and Mary, the anteroom of heaven. In his later years, he was persecuted by ill-health, and spent many nights without sleep, in between his days of arduous work for his Order and for souls. But all this, far from breaking his morale and leading him into the morass of self-pitying discouragement, only intensified his union with God. What was his secret? A deep interior life, a profound and simple spirit of faith which was able to see God’s will in all things—a charity, indeed, which was hungry, avid for that will, under whatsoever form it presented itself to him.

If there is one concept that is capable of summing up Dom Chautard’s spirituality, it is one which is sometimes seen written, most appropriately, over the doors of Cistercian monasteries: “GOD ALONE.” Not contemplation, not action, not works, not rest, not this or that particular thing, but God in everything, God in anything, God in His will, God in other men, God present in his own soul. To do whatever God willed, to suffer whatever He willed, that was enough for Dom Chautard, because all he asked was the opportunity to give himself, to give his will, utterly, without recall, to the infinite Wisdom and Love Who created and redeemed us all.

It is the spirit of St. Bernard, and the spirit of the White Monks. It is the spirit of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

It is the spirit in which these pages were written.

WORDS OF POPE PIUS X

Pius X, in an audience granted in 1908 to Msgr. Cloutier, Bishop of Three Rivers, Canada, addressed the following words to the Bishop, who was laying before His Holiness his many projects for the good of his diocese:

“And now, my dear Son, if you desire that God should bless your apostolate and make it fruitful, undertake everything for His glory, saturate yourself and your devoted fellow-workers with the spirit of Jesus Christ, animating yourself and them with an intense interior lift. To this end, I can offer you no better guide than ‘The Soul of the Apostolate,’ by Dom Chautard, Cistercian Abbot. I warmly recommend this book to you, as I value it very highly, and have myself made it my bedside book.”

AUTOGRAPH LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS POPE BENEDICT XV

to Dom J. B. Chautard, Abbot of the Trappist Monastery of Notre Dame de Sept-Fons, upon the receipt of his work entitled “L’Ame de Tout Apostolat.”

Dearly Beloved Son:

We congratulate you sincerely upon having brought out so clearly the absolute necessity of the interior life for those engaged in good works, a life so necessary for the success of their ministry.

Expressing a wish that this work in which are found gathered together doctrinal lessons and practical advice suited to the needs of our times may continue to spend and do good.

We send with all Our heart to its esteemed author an affectionate Apostolic Blessing.

Given at the Vatican, March 18, 1915.

BENEDICT PP XV

OTHER TESTIMONIALS

His Eminence Cardinal VICO sent, along with the letter of the Sovereign Pontiff, the following lines:

I hasten to send you herewith the Parchment that our Holy Father, Pope BENEDICT XV, had kindly entrusted to me to transmit to you.

You will read in this revered autograph letter the great praise that His Holiness gives to your valuable book *L'Ame de Tout Apostolat*. The Holy Father has read this book with deep satisfaction.

Already PIUS X of holy memory had entrusted me with the care of expressing his warm congratulations to the pious prelate who translated your book into Spanish.

From His Eminence Cardinal SEVIN,

Your book is a golden book. I have read it eagerly. Never has Pius X met with a commentator more pious, more learned, more eloquent, more practical on the thoughts with which he has filled his Exhortation to the Clergy and twenty other Encyclicals.

You may be sure that I have made this treasure known around me. Your book is used in the spiritual readings of both my seminaries. To Bishops and to a number of priests I have expressed a sincere admiration for your work.

*From His Eminence Cardinal MERCIER,
Archbishop of Mechlin*

The events in which I have just taken part did not allow me sufficient freedom of mind and the leisure that I should have had to read your book with the attention which it deserves and to fix my mind on the sublime thoughts that you have set forth with your apostolic ardour.

On looking over your book, I have been struck by the resemblance of your teaching with the main subject of a retreat that I preached in 1910 to the clergy of my diocese.

From His Eminence Cardinal VIVES,

It is no small merit to have been able in your excellent work on the interior life and the Apostolate to condense doctrine and practical methods. . . .

*From His Eminence Cardinal FISCHER,
Archbishop of Cologne*

I fully approve of what you have written with so much learning, so much experience in this matter and so much unction.

*From His Eminence Cardinal AMETTE,
Archbishop of Paris*

I read with much edification your book: *L'Ame de Tout Apostolat*, and I will be happy to recommend it to our priests and to zealous persons who devote themselves to good works. In Paris, especially, where the exterior work of the apostolate is so absorbing, it is of great importance to be always animated by that sap of the interior life which can alone assure its fecundity.

*From His Eminence Cardinal LUCON,
Archbishop of Reims*

I appreciate the truth of the thesis which you develop and completely approve of it. . . .

*From His Eminence Cardinal ARCOVERDE,
Archbishop of Rio de Janeiro*

To put on Jesus Christ, to live the life of Jesus Christ, is the soul of every apostolate as you say in your excellent book. . . .

*From His Excellency D. PENON,
Bishop of Moulins*

Fresh and profound thoughts, impressive comments on several well known texts and on new texts taken from Holy Scripture and the Fathers, striking examples, most of them collected and vouched for by yourself in the good works with which you have been intimately connected, in fine and above all, the personal note, with which you show forth the fecundity of an apostolate, which results from the union of zeal and *piety by the Eucharistic and liturgical life*, add a more powerful attraction and assure a fuller efficacy to what you have already said so well in the first development of your fundamental thesis.

Priests, religious, both men and women, lay people interested in the apostolate, will have no pretext for doing without this *vade mecum*. *Zealous souls* especially may distribute it widely so that it may be for everyone's use, not for reading once only, but *habitually*, so that they may go back to it, employ it for *meditation*, that it may serve for annual and monthly retreats and also for the training of *seminarists* or *novices*. . . .

*From His Excellency DR. MARRE,
titular Bishop of Const., Abbot General
of the Reformed Cistercians*

Nothing has pleased me more than to hear about the new edition of your excellent book, "*L'Ame de Tout Apostolat*."

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