

SISTER JOHN

OF JESUS CRUCIFIED

NAGLE



*BORN TO EARTHLY LIFE:
SEPTEMBER 13, 1936*

*BORN TO ETERNAL LIFE:
OCTOBER 25, 1968*

Sister John Nagle
Province of U.S.A. & Canada
1936 - 1968

Sister John of Jesus Crucified is the first flower which the Divine Gardener came to gather in his private domain: the province of the United States and of Canada - the Benjamin of the Provinces of the Congregation - or better still, she was the first fruit which ripened on this tree, still so young but "green and vigorous", a figure of our nine houses of North America. In this relatively short existence - 32 years, of which 10 in the religious life - there blossomed the soul of a child ... the soul of an artist ... a consecrated soul ... a missionary soul ... And the crowning of this life would be her identification with Jesus Crucified: for which her name in religion seemed to predestine her.

First of all, her soul of a child. Claire Nagle was born in Newport, Rhode Island, U.S.A. on September 13, 1936. She grew up in the midst of five brothers and a little sister, which explained her behavior, her manner, which her distressed mother considered "unladylike". Claire gave the impression of a child "badly brought up", but she was idolized by her brothers who associated her in their roughest games.

Claire's name suited her well, for her eyes shone with a playful assurance which revealed a fine intelligence, and she had about her such a freshness, such energy and eager curiosity, that she succeeded easily in her studies. Her young mind moved in an atmosphere of light. For her all was clear and simple, and she found it difficult to understand that others did not grasp immediately what appeared so evident to her. Her intelligence was concrete, she had aptitudes for rational reasoning, was attracted to metaphysics. Nature had favored her, the future was bright. A shadow, however, was cast over these undeniable gifts: a certain lack of balance between this fine intelligence and the affective life, which was prejudicial to maturation. It was manifested by surprising childish reactions which she did not entirely succeed in overcoming.

Moreover, Claire had the soul of an artist. Her sensitiveness vibrated to all beauty, expressing itself in an unfeigned emotion. The imagery appearing at will in her memory would be expressed by a sketch or a picture painted with originality. She excelled in the art of portrait painting. Her pictures seemed to be animated by a soul, and yet Claire was always dissatisfied with her work. It did not respond to her interior vision. It was, doubtless, impossible for our artist to communicate the beauty seen! She was also gifted with a talent for music. From the organ, her fingers drew forth harmony which, for her, mingled earth with Heaven - the only voice which, here below, could murmur some beginning of things infinite.

Claire's soul was rich with a virile faith, a precious heritage of her own parents, who were descendants of a family which came from beautiful Ireland, "the Island of Saints"! Another voice was heard by the young girl: that of the mysteries of the future world, the murmur of the unique voice which vibrated the most intimate chords of her soul. She then went from doubt to hesitation, from certainty to joy, and in a final chord Claire answered "Yes"! She would be a soul consecrated to the Spouse of Virgins. At the end of High School studies, she made a decision which she would never revoke. It was to detach herself gradually from everything, to attach herself and to give herself to the exclusive love of Christ and His work of Love and to help men to advance on the way that leads to the Father. So, from the beginning, Claire pledged herself and gave herself body and soul to Him Who would be her life, her unique love.

She had now to find an Institute in which would be realized to the maximum God's plan for her. Her ideal was to be a missionary in order to serve with a more entire disinterestedness, to live more intensely a greater love. With this end in view, she corresponded with several missionary Institutes: The Columban Sisters, the Marist Sisters. While she considered these Religious with esteem and admiration, she could not see herself being one of them. She then applied to other courageous missionaries, the "Maryknoll Sisters" of New York and asked for admission. The answer was slow in coming. Through an error

Maryknoll had sent it to a wrong address. However, it finally reached Claire, but in the meantime, disappointed by this incomprehensible silence, she followed another star which led her to Saint Joseph of Cluny. The instrument of Providence was the Chaplain of the Newport Novitiate. He knew well this student of the Academy where he gave classes in religious instruction and where he was a youth counselor, helping them to orientate their lives. Although Claire was not at all expansive in communicating her intimate sentiments, the Chaplain fathomed the depths of this life marked by God. He also knew her upright, loyal character, her acute sense of justice. He invited her - not to come and speak to him - but to come to see the film "JEYA". Claire saw it, and made her decision which nothing would shake. It was in Newport, in the Novitiate of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Cluny that she asked to make the apprenticeship of a consecrated and missionary life.

June 1954 - the end of her studies. After the religious ceremony, while the other students of the Academy prepared to celebrate their scholastic victory on "Graduation Night", Claire came to the Novitiate to place her orchid at the feet of Mary. It was doubtless her filial homage, but along with her flower she entrusted to the Queen of the "FIAT" her own 'YES'. She remained a long time in prayer and when she rose from her knees smiling and decided, she went back to join her companions, mingling with their gaiety, for she loved life intensely.

In agreement with the Mother of Novices, Claire deferred her entrance into the Postulate for a year, and she decided to work in the Post and Telegraph Office in Newport. This contact gave her an opening on the world, quite different from that of a very united family. It revealed problems, the gravity of which she quickly grasped, and for which, in her charity, she sought a solution which, alas, it was not possible to find! She became the voluntary guide of a young blind girl. On Sundays, the Parishioners of Saint Mary's could see a fashionable young lady leading Bill carefully ... helping her to climb the Church steps ... leading her right up to the choir where her beautiful voice would guide the singing

of the People of God. The ceremony over, Claire would lend Bill ... her eyes, her arm, her joy of living and of "serving".

On the Feast of the Sacred Heart, June 17, 1955, Claire entered the Newport Novitiate to learn therein the greatest service and to give herself to the greatest love. Her chubby, rosy cheeks shone with health and joy. She seemed to adapt herself easily to Novitiate life. She found prayer easy, interior prayer had no great difficulties for her. The respect and dignity with which she acquitted herself of the duties of sacristan were a proof of her faith.

The young postulant made real efforts to understand and to live the divine Intimacy. In the light of faith, Claire made the "acquaintance" of Claire. Gifted with a pronounced aesthetic sense, her soul responded to moral beauty as much as to artistic beauty. All taken up with the ideal, all given to Christ, she soon perceived the long and bitter combat she would have to maintain to do always what pleased the Lord, and to avoid all that displeased Him. The Postulant set herself to work with all the fervor of her love. She had, however, moments of discouragement when contrary winds blew her sails: contrasts of the reality with her ideal, for example. At those times, she would let go the helm and yield to discouragement. But the Lord who seized her was there. He would never again let her go. And she, on her side, would cling ever more strongly to this "Rock".

On March 19, 1956, Claire was ready to take another step into this path which would lead her further on in the mystery of her vocation: the insertion into Christ. Joyfully she put on our holy Habit and was called Sister John of Jesus Crucified. Henceforward, she would study in depth the message of the Crucified and Risen Jesus, the evangelical Counsels. She realized that the presence of a consecrated soul in the world of today should be a sign and a reminder of the Kingdom of God. At the same time, she penetrated herself with the spirit of our Blessed Mother Foundress whom she loved filially.

The canonical year terminated, Sister John began her studies for a degree. Very detached with regard to study as with the rest, she was classed as indifferent. It was because she understood that the development of the person is not achieved through human aptitudes but in the accomplishment of the choice made on entering the Convent: the pursuit of the Lord and of souls.

On March 19, 1958, Sister John of Jesus Crucified pronounced her first Vows: the pledge to live totally her baptismal life in her consecrated life, anchored in the supernatural, counting on God for His Strength, His Friendship to accomplish the mission he would confide to her. She would be a missionary. In order to be able to serve better, she prepared for a degree in mathematics, but she did not seek in her studies human promotion, only the possibilities of a better service.

During these years of study, she had apostolic joys and relaxation from all the weekends which, along with three companions, she spent in Westerly, a parish situated 80 kilometers from Newport. The parish had no catechists or Religious. Sister John gave the best of herself to inculcating the message of the Gospel in the souls of young girls. She formed, with the most fervent among them, the "Marian Youth Group", and in short time her choir stimulated the singing and the participation of the parishioners in the celebration of the Eucharist. And when a religious Congregation could give Sisters to reside there, Sister John, always detached, simply handed over to others the fruit of her apostolic effort. The letters which she received later testify that at Westerly she really oriented souls towards the Kingdom of God.

On two occasions, during the long vacations, Sister John took the direction of Canada and offered her services to our Sisters to accompany them towards the North, in order to bring the living word of Christ to the children of the great plains where Priests and catechists were lacking, and to prepare youth for the Eucharistic meeting. She came back from these journeys full of enthusiasm. she kept a nostalgic souvenir of them all her life.

Having obtained her degree, Sister John received her obedience for "Cluny School", as mathematics and Science teacher. Sister John's perfect submission left those around her unaware of her intimate preferences, for India was her chosen mission. But she adhered to all that was manifested to her by the divine Will; she would be a missionary in "Cluny School", "she would blossom where God had planted her". Henceforth, teaching was "her" mission. She then strove to create an atmosphere of the Gospel spirit in her class. Conscious of her responsibility for the formation of adolescents, she endeavored during her Science classes to give them an opening on the world ... and on God, to lead them to develop their personal values, in a word to prepare them for their role in the earthly city of tomorrow. She wanted especially to get across to these baptized souls the message of Christ: that was truly her "mission". To make these young people discover the supernatural realities and spiritual values in this materialistic world which seeks continually comfort and temporal possessions: a very apostolic task, indeed, but how difficult! A work of art, woven with patience and effective love - with deceptions and silent sufferings - renouncement and generous prayers: Sister John knew well that these are the only means of an efficacious apostolate; and so, courageously she set herself to work and gave herself unstintingly to the young people entrusted to her.

At this time, she accepted simply, as always, the proposal to continue her mathematical studies in Washington. The term comprised Summer courses during a period of 5 years which would give her a higher diploma. It would, she thought, be useful in the future for a better service. Was not human science the best means of witnessing to the "supereminent Science" of Jesus Christ, and of making the disciple conform better to her well-loved Master? This perfect conformity to the plan of God is the best proof of disinterestedness. Sister John realized this very well and she went ahead. But in a little while, the Lord canceled her beautiful plans and made known to her His own mysterious plan. He proposed to her a "mission" entirely different from the one already foreseen.

It was remarked, indeed, and without any apparent reason, that Sister John's smile gradually diminished. A deep line showed on her forehead; there was a strange look in her eyes and her gestures betrayed an unusual abruptness. Rest brought no relaxation nor relief. The doctor consulted considered the case attentively and his diagnosis was terrible: our young Sister of 26 years was nearing the end of her life, her years were counted ...unless science rapidly found the remedy capable of arresting the malady, it could not cure it. There remained a miracle to be obtained. The community, overwhelmed, stormed Heaven for this miracle. Masses, novenas, sacrifices went up to God so that His Goodness would make the impossible possible, and leave Sister John to the affection of her Sisters and of her parents.

She was doubtless the first to know all. From the first sign of the malady, before the doctor pronounced the diagnosis, she guessed, she knew she was starting out on a voyage from which there was no return. What she did not know, however, was the duration of the journey, the storms to be faced, the fury of the waves. But, in advance, she adhered to the divine will. Soon, she would see her Pilot Face to Face! Her faith made her see her Christ, invisible, at the helm, and this loving presence was leading her surely into the Kingdom of the Father. However, before entering the Port, she must live the mystery of Jesus Crucified: "I only want what He wishes... my life, my death are in His hands", she repeated after our Blessed Mother Foundress, when asked to unite herself to the prayers said for her cure.

In hospital, she yielded simply to the annoying or painful treatments. She amazed her nurses by her serenity. When the treatment was finished, Sister John resumed her classes. When weakness or fatigue was excessive, she rested for a time; again courageous, she came back to her task for it had to be finished "before night"! A finished task!... all that Sister John undertook from now on remained unfinished: little by little, she had to lessen her work... she had to be replaced for her classes... it is thus that the Lord led her from trial to trial, from detachment to detachment. Some of the treatments seemed to give results: then each time, a return to life and activity, but always for a short time.

It is during this period of ups and downs that our dear Sister made her third year in Newport. Since her first "Yes", her promise was definitive; so, acting with full knowledge, on the 22nd August 1964, Sister John of Jesus Crucified promised "forever" to Jesus Christ Crucified and Risen all that remained to her of life, discovering already the eternal shore where awaited her the Face to Face.

Her soul was thus fortified to meet the great storm which would toss her frail barque. Sleep failed her more; the starless night was interminable while illness tortured and suffocated her. Night after night, she had to make a superhuman act of faith in Him who was leading her. If the morning hours brought some respite, she would go back to her pupils in the afternoon, calm and serene, dominating the fatigue which never left her, she gave them the best of herself. But soon, this semi-activity was beyond her strength, although every new treatment seemed to reanimate her. In the month of August 1965, our Very Dear Mother, hoping to consolidate an improvement which took place at the time, authorized a voyage to France. An immense joy for Sister John: to go to the Mother House... "to delight in the spirit and the heart of our Foundress" to whom she was so deeply attached... then, to go to Lourdes with the secret hope of a cure... This beautiful program took place normally, but, at Lourdes, the Immaculate Virgin gave the answer to her child, and it was "No"! In place of a miracle, the little missionary of desire received choice graces: a flood of light inundated her soul. On the return journey, she stopped three days in Rome; Sister John was in jubilation. The souvenir of this pilgrimage would remain ineffaceable.

From now on, in good form, it seemed to her, she resumed the school year, but only for a short time. Placed in hospital several times, she submitted with a good grace to all the treatments which they made her undergo; but it was in vain that they tried to arrest the malady. Each time, the improvement of a few weeks was followed by a more acute exhaustion. The nights of insomnia were more painful. In December 1966, our dear patient was very ill. The waves unchained against her poor barque threatened to crush it with violence. In this torment, she

could see nothing any more, could feel nothing any more, she was crushed- in body and soul.

The doctors then wanted to attempt a last chance and proposed to send her to a Boston hospital - far from the community, consequently - to try a last treatment. Asked what she thought of it, Sister John reflected for a few moments, and unhesitatingly gave her answer: "If it pleases God better that I continue to live this miserable life rather than die, I consent to submit to all that awaits me there... for souls". And with tears in her eyes: "I want all that God wills". She left for Boston after Christmas, went through a whole gamut of suffering, and after this treatment came out of hospital with new found life. Returned to Cluny School, she asked for work and was named Librarian of the school. Hope returned once again: was it that her boat went only half way? During some months her Pilot made her sail in calm waters, but when the Autumn wind began to blow in the apparently dead branches, Sister John was at the end of her strength, and put aside, definitively this time, all work, Her face bore the mark of accepted suffering; her courage gave way, she could not go on any longer. Her condition became alarming.

This was in 1968. Our very Dear Mother General authorized a voyage to France for Sister John of Jesus Crucified. It would be the last port of call before reaching Eternity. The divine Pilot led her to a foreign land, and not for a short time as in 1965. She did not know the French language. It was a point of resemblance to the other missionaries for whom the ignorance of the vocabulary of their adopted country is very difficult in the beginning.

A Sister matured by suffering, "unalloyed metal", arrived in the Mother House, smiling and serene, completely abandoned to the Divine Good Pleasure. She was surrounded by so much affection, so much fraternal charity, so much solicitude in the Mother House as in Pasteur, that she profited to the maximum of the care and treatment. She "blossomed" again and she caressed the hope of returning to her dear community of Newport for Christmas.

But soon, after this calm her physical strength grew less and less. The nights became difficult, and Sister John gave once again her adhesion to the program traced by the Divine Master for the last hours of her earthly day. The holocaust was consummated in a hopeless battle with the malady. In a loving expectation of the Meeting, Sister John, by her calmness and serenity in the face of death, edified doctors and nurses. She was in her 33rd year.

Let us here allow Mother John of the Sacred Heart to speak, she was so close to our dear patient during her stay in Pasteur:

"On her arrival in France, Sister John knew the gravity of the illness from which she suffered for several years, and she followed lucidly its phases. Her generous acceptance of suffering and the perspective of an early death were based entirely on the love of the Lord, the will to resemble Him and to do His Will in everything. There was not a trace in her of a morbid attachment to suffering nor of a proud stoicism. Spontaneously, she loved life, beauty, art... and she rejoiced simply at the improvement which followed a new treatment, happy then to go out into the garden for a while, to make herself useful, little as it was.

"...While often a long malady or convalescence leads the sick to consider themselves as dispensed from a certain exactitude, and to portion out, according to their fantasy, the work they can have, in Sister John there was not a trace of such an attitude. She did not dispense herself spontaneously from anything, and attached herself with the maximum of fidelity to do what she was allowed: work, rest, prayer, music... asking very simply all useful permissions.

"Her docility and simplicity were particularly in evidence in the manner with which she submitted herself to all the consequences of her malady: examinations, varied treatments, often very painful. She accepted all... as she had accepted the error of the diagnosis, fortunately quickly rectified, which attributed her cough to a psychological cause. Once only, she spoke of it to say: 'The doctor thought it was nerves, he thought I coughed because I wanted to ... it was hard!' She never again

came back on this episode which nevertheless had hurt her very much. She had however one desire: to return to her country, to see her family again, her community. When her condition was improved she asked the doctor if she could return to America. She also expressed this desire to our Dear Mother who was thinking of the means of realizing it. But she never insisted. She accepted gladly the enforced delay, and, in the end, the perspective of dying far away - a sacrifice which the Lord would mitigate in permitting that her parents would arrive in time to see her.

"I saw her self-possession especially when she had to leave the Mother House to return to Pasteur Hospital. At the hour named, Sister John was waiting in the infirmary, with her usual brave smile. But scarcely had she taken a few steps when she had to stop, suffocating completely. She had to be carried down in our arms to the car. On getting into the car and turning to look at the Mother House, a look which she knew was the last, she burst into tears, but quickly, energetically, she kept them back, trying to unite herself to the "Ave" murmured beside her. When she reached Pasteur, her bright smile had returned to greet the sisters who awaited her."

At the news of her impending death, her parents and one of her brothers left the United States in haste, to see for the last time she who bore them such great love, and whom the whole family followed during the six years of her painful ascent of Calvary. The divine Pilot slowed down the course of the barque which was ready to land this time, so that the much-loved faces could bend for a last time over this child and sister. Heartbroken but full of faith, they assisted, they participated in the last gift, in the final holocaust. They had given her to God for his service, they offer her to him this time for Eternal Glory. Sister John kept all her lucidity to the end. Her last words were: "It is too hard... I cannot go on any longer!" She had truly given all, and on October 25, 1968 at 2.00 a.m. all was consummated. Sister John had persevered to the end in the love and in the adhesion to the Will of Jesus Crucified and Risen. In Newport, it was 10.00 p.m. on the 24th October when our well-loved sister saw her divine Pilot "Face to Face"!

The parents, profoundly afflicted by this loss, but so valiant in their faith, asked and obtained permission to bring back the dear mortal remains to Newport. On Sunday, October 28, on the feast of the Kingship of Christ, at 2.00 a.m. the superiors of Cluny Convent, several sisters and the chaplain, brought from Boston the remains of the regretted deceased. The parlor was transformed into a chapel, and parents, friendly families, present and former pupils united with the sisters to render a last homage to this young religious who transmitted to them during her life a message of Eternity. Before the coffin could be seen, Bill, the young blind girl of former days, praying fervently.

In the shadow of the great cross, Sister John of Jesus Crucified awaits the Resurrection. Numerous Masses were offered for the repose of her soul, God leaving us in ignorance of what happens in the World Beyond. Those who knew her and loved her ask the Father of Mercies to admit her into His Presence without delay.

"Dear Sister John, you have preceded us into the House of the Father, but you remain for us a signpost and a leader. By your life, so human, so interwoven with light and shade, this life so given in joy and suffering, in work and enforced rest, in life and in death, help us to follow Christ Crucified and Risen unto the end. Remain for us a loving presence in our consecrated and apostolic lives. Au revoir... in Heaven!"

