

Father Joseph Cassant, OCSO

By Thomas Merton

*This year marks the centennial of the death of Marie-Joseph Cassant (1878-1903), a French Cistercian of the Monastery of Sainte Marie du Désert near Toulouse, whose cause for canonization also took a step forward during the current year. The decree confirming a miracle attributed to the intercession of Père Cassant was read in the presence of Pope John Paul II on July 7, 2003 in the Clementine Hall at the Vatican. A date for beatification has not yet been set. In the early years of his monastic life, Thomas Merton took a great deal of interest in Père Cassant and in the possibility of his being canonized (see *Entering the Silence*, pp. 55, 56, 83). When a French biography of Cassant was planned, Merton was invited to provide a preface, which was written in English and published in French translation with the biography in 1961: see *Dom M.-Étienne Chenevière, OCSO, L'Attente dans le Silence: Le Père Marie-Joseph Cassant, O.Cist.S.O., Préface de Thomas Merton* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1961) 9-13. This brief essay, originally entitled "Preface to Prière et Silence (Life of Fr. M. Joseph Cassant)" (evidently the working title of the biography) has never appeared in the original English. It is published here, from the original typescript with numerous hand-written additions, by permission of the Merton Legacy Trust, through the assistance of Merton Center Director Paul M. Pearson and Brother Patrick Hart, OCSO.*

About the time when the obscure hero of this biography was living out his short life as a Trappist, H. G. Wells was entertaining his numerous readers with the story of an Invisible Man. The character of that novel was a scientist who had found out a way of rendering himself permanently invisible. This made life very simple, except for the times when he wanted to be seen as well as heard. At such times he had to swathe his face in bandages and put on clothes, for only the coverings of his body could be seen.

Joseph Cassant (though he had nothing in common with a Wellsian character), was in his own way, another such invisible man. He was permanently invisible. He had never *become* invisible: he had been so from the beginning and remained so until the end. If he some day paradoxically realizes his ambition to become a canonized saint (an ambition which he expressed unconsciously and implicitly in his desire to "arriver sur les autels") he will surely remain the most invisible of saints. All that we see of him, ever, at any time, is accidental, extraneous to him, and one feels that it is often completely unrelated to the real and mysterious person within whom he himself was the first to ignore. In other words, all that we see of Père Joseph Cassant are the resolutions and the affections and the elevations that were the inevitable fruit of the busy, self-conscious and overproductive spirituality of his time and place. These are almost entirely unoriginal, completely familiar, and exactly like the resolutions, affections etc. of any other religious of his age. They are only the bandages and garments which have been wrapped about an invisible man in order that we might be able to see him. And I think that is why they leave us vaguely uneasy.



They do not show us the fully human face that we want to see. That face must remain invisible.

It would perhaps not be too strong to say that Père Joseph Cassant is a "saint" of alienation and frustration. His greatest suffering was caused not precisely by his abject spiritual and intellectual poverty, but by his alienation from himself, an alienation which became acute when he subjected his weak, sensitive and poverty-stricken nature to an active, rugged asceticism designed to tame the ardors of passionate and richly endowed beings. Joseph Cassant, in a Trappist monastery at the turn of the century, was inevitably a David in Saul's armor. And in consequence his life was one of almost unrelieved frustration, which we must be very careful not to equate with the genuine monastic ideal. Certainly this heroic little Father lived as a perfect monk, but it was not his frustration that made him perfect, only his fidelity in spite of frustration.

As an example of the anomalies that complicate the very simple life of this child of God, we may take his vocation. He entered a Trappist monastery "*in order to become a priest.*" This may not strike the popular mind today as anomalous, and it certainly seemed to Joseph Cassant to be the most natural thing in the world. Yet the priesthood is something entirely accidental, by its very nature, in monasticism. In the early days of monasticism the Desert Fathers fled from bishops (who might be tempted to ordain them) just as zealously as they fled from women (who might ensnare them in the bonds of matrimony). But of course Joseph Cassant as a child knew only one way of giving himself to God: that was by "becoming a curé." And if he could not be a curé anywhere else he would become one in La Trappe. What sounds slightly absurd to us was the most obvious thing in the world to him. And from this initial misunderstanding of the monastic life came many of the chief complications and frustrations which made him suffer in ways that seem to us at times to have been completely needless. We are tempted to think that he might well have lived longer, more happily and even more perfectly in his monastery if only he had not insisted on the almost impossible task of achieving his ambition to "say Mass."

Yet the most elementary Catholic sense, as well as the most rudimentary knowledge of God's ways with men, prohibits us from making this facile judgement of his case. In actual fact, it was by his tenacious fidelity to this attraction which called him "to the altars," that he gave his whole life to God. Far from criticizing him for it, we must praise him without reserve.

We have said his life was one of almost uninterrupted frustration. This is true. He never seems to have had much spontaneous joy in anything. He was always too worried, too concerned, too blocked. He was always sweating like Sisyphus behind some great stone which, as he well knew, would inevitably roll back down the hill as soon as he had reached the top. He was always confounded by his lack of strength and by his dim intelligence. The liturgy was not a joy but a series of humiliating faux pas. The manual labor did not refresh him, it only left him exhausted. His reading was not a spiritual recreation and a joy, but an arduous duty. He read and studied "without understanding" and "just to please Jesus." It must be said again, and without equivocation, that such an existence in the monastery is not to be regarded as normal. May God have mercy on those who think that novices have to be "formed" exclusively on some such Procrustean pattern. If Père Joseph lived like this, it was certainly not the fault of his own Novice Master and Spiritual Father, Dom André Malet.

The relationship of Père Joseph and his Spiritual Father is the one exception that brings relief to his life of frustration. This should be remembered. Here we have the one great *positive* factor in his monastic life. Here he found not frustration but comfort. He found understanding, love, patience.

He found a man who was able to treat him not as an object but as a person. He found a man whom he could regard as Christ because that man saw and loved Christ in him. This paternal affection was entirely supernatural but it was also warmly human. It is the most completely human element in a life which, if Père Joseph had had his way, would have been without humanity. It is in this relationship that we find the true Joseph Cassant, and perceive something of the real “invisible” man that he was. What we see is of course perfectly simple, perfectly poor and full of human weakness. Through Dom André Malet the Church, the Mother of Souls, sweetly embraced this helpless child and filled his life with the radiance of Christ: and this was what he needed. He needed mercy, he needed the assurance of God’s inexhaustible pity and grace. He needed to know that his poverty did not matter because grace is given most abundantly to those who have nothing else. Dom André told him all this many times over, and perhaps after a very long time Père Joseph dared to understand it. If he is a saint, then this is his sanctity.

We are tempted to compare this humble, hidden monk with another man who was in many ways like him, but who was much more richly endowed. Charles de Foucauld became a Trappist at Notre Dame des Neiges just a little before Joseph Cassant came to Notre Dame du Desert. These two monasteries of the Midi were after all not so far apart. Both men had very much the same kind of spirituality, both expressed themselves in very much the same terms. The meditations and resolutions of Charles de Foucauld are certainly more articulate than those of Père Joseph, and show him to be what Père Joseph was not – a spiritual genius. Yet in their substance they are pretty much the same: they reflect the same maximalist need to give oneself entirely to God.

The lives of the two men turned out to be in many ways different. Charles de Foucauld, hermit and apostle in the desert, died tragically, murdered outside his little cell. He was certainly more colorful than Père Joseph both in life and in death. And yet the two shared much the same poverty, the same frustration, the same insatiable hunger for something that was always out of reach. They both exhausted themselves in efforts to fulfill the mission God had given them, and both, in the long run, gave themselves to God in the same way: by perfect fidelity to the attraction He had implanted in their hearts, and to the counsels of the Director who pointed out the way. They loved God and therefore they obeyed Him perfectly, one in the cloister and the other in the desert. And it is not too much to say that the spiritual poverty of Joseph Cassant has in it many elements that we now associate with the Little Brothers of Jesus.

The Rt. Rev. Dom Étienne Chenevière has drawn upon all the available material and, with his rich knowledge of the order and of the spiritual life has given us the definitive biography of Père Joseph Cassant.