

**TWO HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS BY
A JANSENIST CONCERNING
THE PARISH OF ST ROCH IN
PARIS**

Sent by Br. Clément-Marcel Martinais

It is a well known fact that the "*Nouvelles Ecclésiastiques*" was a Jansenist publication which, on a number of occasions, referred to the Brothers as *ignoramus* (ignorantins).

Br. Clément Marcel, who brought to light the interesting "*Conversation between Mr Gobet and an ignoramus Brother*" (cf. LASALLIANA N° 27, 1st article), now offers us two historical accounts from the "*Nouvelles Ecclésiastiques*" published on November 26th 1784.

The first is an ironic description of the procession which marked the beginning of work to extend the school run by the Brothers in the parish of St Roch in Paris. There had been a school there in the time of the Founder between 1705 and 1708. After a period of closure it was re-opened. The Jansenist author took advantage of the "picturesque" event to criticise the parish priest of the time, M. Marduel.

The criticism of the author is much more biting when he describes the last days of the famous Diderot, the driving force behind the *Encyclopédie*. The contrast between the behaviour of the parish priest of St Sulpice and that of St Roch is very striking. There were Brothers working in both parishes as the 18th century came to its troubled close.

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**PARIS
Extension of the St Roch school**

I. On Monday September 6th, between 5 and 6 p.m., there was quite an extraordinary procession in the parish of St Roch. It gave a very good idea of what present-day clergy are like.

The purpose of the procession was to bless and lay the first stone of the building M. Marduel, the priest in charge of the parish, was having built as an extension of the boys' school run by the Ignoramus Brothers behind the church in rue d'Argenteuil.

This sort of masquerade came out of the main doors. At its head, there were 500 children in two files, each with a little ignoramus Brother at its head. After the children there came two guardsmen on horseback and drummers, heading two lines of building workmen. The first of these pushed wheelbarrows. Next there came those with sticks for mixing mortar, followed by others with tools called "*oiseaux*". Many carried their shovels upright with the handles in the air, others had their trowels. The sawyers carried their saw blades and their iron hooks. The masons carried their hammers, the surveyors their measuring rods decorated with ribbons, and finally the stonecutters with their big callipers on their shoulders and their measuring instruments in their hands. All these workmen were in their working clothes. They wore hats with blue and red rosettes and new linen aprons.

The stonemasons were followed by the locksmiths. Two of these carried an anvil on a stretcher. From the anvil there rose up an iron rod decorated with ribbons and surmounted by two crossed keys. The triumphant progress of the anvil was preceded by a workman holding a bunch of files and chisels. To right and left, there walked the blacksmiths with their great big sledgehammers on their shoulders. These were followed by ten or twelve carpenters, some carrying planes and others saws, etc.

At this point came the cross, two acolytes, the altar servers and a great number of clergy preceded by the parish verger. In the middle of the clergy was the brass band of the French Guards. Behind the clergy and to the right, there walked the archbishop in cope and mitre, blessing the people. To the left, there was the parish priest wearing a stole. On the Archbishop's side of the procession there was Madame de Matignon, dressed in white and accompanied by a number of young ladies said to be her daughters. This lady was paying for the celebration and was due to lay the stone which the archbishop would bless. On the parish priest's side were to be found most of the ignoramus

Brothers. The rear of the procession was brought up by a beadle.

All the bells were ringing loudly, but the clergy walked in silence. The procession went along the new rue St Roche to the place of the blessing and returned along rue d'Argenteuil and rue St Honoré. The only thing that told you this was a religious procession was the edifying attitude of the archbishop who, as likely as not, was unaware of the composition of this parade, which was quite worthy of M. Marduel. The zeal of this priest to maintain the practice of demanding confession certificates is well known.

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The last days of Diderot

II. After sending into exile a number of respectable clerics from his parish during the time of M. de Beaumont; after forbidding kind confessors; after refusing the sacraments to pious lay people in his parish; after all this in order to fall in with the schismatic views of this prelate, the parish priest of St Roch found little difficulty in providing a church burial for such a publicly self-confessed unbeliever as the famous Diderot. He was one of the principal authors of the *Encyclopédie* and of the Thesis of Abbé de Pradres, and was known for having written, either under his own or under assumed names, a number of anti-religious tracts.

This wretch was lying ill in bed in his usual lodgings on the grande rue de Taranne in the parish of St Sulpice. He was suffering from a form of dropsy, and a young doctor, whom he liked a great deal, tended the sores he had on his legs. Towards the end of July, the doctor saw that the swelling was increasing and that the fact that the sores had turned black meant the patient was beyond help.

He spoke of his worries to a member of the clergy he knew. On his advice, he ventured to mention to the patient the danger he believed he was in, and urged

him to put his affairs in order. The reaction to this suggestion was better than he had dared hope. The member of the clergy for his part wrote to the parish priest of St Sulpice to inform him of the dangerous state of his parishoner. M. de Tesserac went to the patient's bedside without delay and spoke with him. Thinking that he might be able to get this so-called philosopher to make reparation for some of the public scandal he had given, he visited him a second time and went away with even greater expectations.

He was about to make a third visit when some of the dying man's friends, fearing what they would have considered a weakness on his part, took him away, on the pretence of offering him more salubrious surroundings, to a house in Chaillot where they had him kept till he died.

Although they were most keen to avoid associating any signs of Christianity with him, they were anxious to see him buried in Paris with full Catholic ceremonial. In order to bring this about, they felt they needed to steer clear of the parish priest of St Sulpice, who would have seen through their plan very easily and would have ruined it.

On July 31st, they moved the body to the parish of St Roch where they thought quite rightly that the parish priest and his clergy would be more amenable. When the body arrived at a large house in rue Richelieu, near rue Villedot, a priest was called from the parish to hear the supposedly sick person's confession. The priest came straightaway. He later told anyone who cared to listen that the body was cold when he arrived in great haste to fulfil his ministry. No one thought to enquire any further into what he had said.

The following day, the house was draped in solemn black hangings, and a most impressive cortege accompanied the body to St Roch. Here, he was interred as if he were a member of the parish, even though he had arrived in it only the day before.

It was fitting that someone who had hurt so many good people during their lifetime and at their death should tread roughshod over laws in order to give an inveterate blasphemer the honours of a Christian burial and defile his Church by such an interment. ●