

HEROES OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION ON THE PRISON-SHIPS OF LA ROCHELLE (1/2)

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If Brother Moniteur, Maurice Martinet, (1) was the only Lasallian hero guillotined during the French Revolution, three other Lasallian victims were submitted to an even harsher, prolonged and more degrading sort of martyrdom: Brothers Roger, Léon and Uldaric were condemned, with many other priests and religious, to die a slow-consuming death, morally and physically, on the prison-ships, Les Pontons de La Rochelle.

The French revolutionaries resorted to all kinds of ways to clear the Republic of any citizen who dared choose to follow his conscience – in the name of Liberty, so loudly proclaimed! – and "to obey God rather than men" (Acts. 5:29) Remember the Paris massacres, at Les Carmes and in other prisons; the guillotine, at Rennes and elsewhere, prisons everywhere... All this did not seem good and fast enough. The prisons were full to capacity. They imagined and organized (if organized is the proper word to suit this purpose!) ships turned into horrible, inhuman, floating prisons for these conscientious objectors. About these prison-ships and the conditions the victims were submitted to, one kindly doctor wrote: "If 400 dogs were to spend one night only in the place of these priests, the following morning these (dogs) would have died, or become mad or enraged with rabies." (2)

The Victims

Among the hundreds of priests and religious victims of the French Revolution, originating from various dioceses, there were seven Lasallian Brothers Roger: Léon and Christophe; Jugon, Donat-Joseph, Aventin and Uldaric. We shall speak of the first two and the last one mentioned, as they shared together the same fate on the same prison ships, and they will be beatified by Pope John Paul II on October 1st, 1995.

Infamous Decrees

The "General Assembly" of the French Revolution hastily passed one decree after another: Any priest or religious person who refused to take the constitutional oaths, demanded by the Revolution, was condemned to be exiled; any one knowing of such person in hiding was obliged to denounce him or her; any one accused of "incivism" (lack of loyalty to the Republic) was immediately banished to Guyana.

On November 18, 1793, it was however decreed that there would be deported only persons whose health was not imperilled by the strain of the journey and/or other consequences. Eleven days earlier, doctors had certified that of the 51 prisoners they had examined not one was found not enjoying good health, and therefore, eligible to evade the law of deportation.

On November 4, the "Directoire of the (Moulins) Department" decreed that since these prisoner priests and religious had not obeyed the decrees of August 26, 1792; and because some priests were spreading "false teaching and fanaticism"; that the 'incivism' of these priests in the Moulins prisons was well-known; that since they had not taken the oaths required from them by the laws; and since their behaviour was changing according to the "victories or defeats" of the Republican Army, they would be deported within 24 hours."

Brother Roger

Pierre-Sulpice-Christophe Favergé (Brother Roger) was born on January 25, 1745, in conditions that seemed to put his life in serious danger. The Parish doctor, who assisted at his birth, prudently and hastily administered the sacrament of Baptism. However, the next day, the Canon-in-charge of Saint-Euverte church, conditionally re-baptized Pierre fulfilling "all the prayers and the beautiful ceremonies of the Church for Baptism." (3)

Rigault remarks that "in spite of the dangers besetting his birth he would not be one of those young thieves who steal Heaven." Pierre survived. He became a Brother and endured the sufferings of the Crucified Lord Who had died for His suffering friends.

We have little knowledge about Brother Roger's apostolic work and his educational career. We can assume that having been a pupil of the Brothers, their example induced him to follow the life of the Brothers who taught him.

He made his Novitiate at Maréville in 1767. He pursued, in this principal administrative house, his pedagogical formation and studies. He taught with success in some Lasallian schools. He was appointed Headmaster of the School of Moulins and Superior of the Brothers of that school.

About his pedagogical qualities, Abbé de Reignefort wrote: "He was a kind person, a very enthusiastic teacher of youth; he showed an uncommon ability in

the administration and the running of the Moulins school. He enjoyed to a high degree the esteem of the public". Another author adds: "He was one of the best...He had many good qualities; he was a saint." (4)

On June 11, 1793, Brother Roger (for these good qualities?!) was sent to prison. The large building which had, up to the outbreak of the Revolution, been the monastery of the cloistered Poor Clare Nuns – then thrown in the streets, – was turned into a prison. He had already been imprisoned a few days earlier in another place. That very same day, another Lasallian, Brother Léon, was also imprisoned and joined him.

The 'Positio' or Informatif Report, (5) presented in Rome in 1992, in view of the recognition of the martyrdom and eventual beatification of the Pontons of La Rochelle heroes, quotes Abbé Labiche:

"Brother Roger originated from a 'Department' that has furnished several men of great merit to the deportation and he was not amongst these one who had the least merits. Pious, zealous for the instruction of youth, he had an uncommon degree of leadership and enjoyed, in Moulins, a great esteem. He excelled in, besides other external talents, that of a superb penmanship." (6)

Abbé Guillon, adds:

"To keep himself usefully busy for the benefit of his unfortunate companions he humbly started repairing their shoes. He was", said one of them, "excellent for the kind of teaching he had dedicated himself to and was full of virtues." (7)

And Brother Lucard further informs us that Brother Roger was

"a worthy son of Venerable de La Salle; he surprised the other prisoners by his joyful humour and his heroic resignation, always ready to help the sick and those depressed; he endeavoured by his loving

care to turn their minds away from their sufferings. When they had no books to read, he made up for their need by giving them familiar conferences or spiritual conversations on topics of cosmography and navigation. Every day he spent some of his free time to repair the shoes of the priests whose poor health had suffered considerably by walking in the mud, snow or ice. "Like good soldiers," he humourously used to say, "we must know a bit of every trade, and occasionally become a good shoemaker". – "This Brother Roger", exclaimed one day one of the Moulins prisoners, "is amongst us as calm and as cool as if he were in a class." "To every one he was a man full of talents and virtues." (8)

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(1) LASALLIANA N° 28-9-B-128

(2) Rigault. *Histoire Générale...* t. III, p. 309, quotes L. Audiat.

(3) Rigault *op. cit.* t. III, p. 297.

(4) *ibid.* p. 297.

(5) The author of this article received this note, in 13-5-92, from "Évêché de La Rochelle": "Souhaitons qu'en octobre 1994, on pourra célébrer solennellement la béatification de tous nos martyrs". One rightly asks, "what about the Martyrs of Rennes among whom there is our guillotined Brother Moniteur".

(6) *Positio super martyrio et fama martyrii canonizationis Servorum Dei JOANNIS-BAPTISTAE SOUZY et LXIII Sociorum...* MCMXCII pp 352-353.

(7) *ibid.*

(8) *Annales de l'Institut des FF. des EE. CC.* t. II, p. 645-646.