

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

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Unsung Heroes

We have introduced (1) the three prospective martyrs who died on the PONTONS at La Rochelle in 1794. They will, it is ardently wished, soon be honoured by the Church as "Blessed;" their cause is being actively pursued in Rome by the Diocese of La Rochelle. (2)

However, there were four other Lasallian heroes who deserve, at least, to be revered even if it were *"en passant"*. Three of them *"plus jeunes et plus solides, venus de Nantes"* (3) survived the awful life on board the prison-ships: they are Brother Jugon (Jean-Pierre-René Melnotte: b. 1767; fsc: 1785; †?); Br. Donat-Joseph (Claude-François Trimaille: b. 1740; fsc: 1763; †?); Br. Avertin (Pierre-François-Alexandre Vaillant: b. 1762; fsc: 1781; †?). Unfortunately they left no written account of their frightful experience.

We know only a little of Brother Pierre-Christophe Scheck who was the last Lasallian to die on the prison-ship, the *Washington*. For lack of sufficient information and relevant documentation about him, his name has been dropped from the list of the candidates for beatification of the Martyrs of La Rochelle. (4)

Brother Pierre-Christophe Scheck was born at Hoste (or Oberhost) in the Forbach *canton*, on September 6, 1737. He was the 7th of ten children born to Pierre (Cheque) Scheck (5) and Eve Jacque. He entered the Brothers' Institute, making his novitiate at Maréville, in 1766, and his final vows in 1776. No more information about his life and work has been traced. All we know is that at Metz, *"he was an ex-Frère, a cook and a gardener of the house of the Christian Doctrine when, in August 1792, he refused to take the oath and was arrested in his native village when his Community was closed and dispersed."* (6)

On April 17, 1794, the *departement* of La Moselle condemned Brother Pierre-Christophe and his companions to be deported for "not having taken the oaths prescribed by the law of December 26, 1790", that is "the oath of *la Liberté*". All the property of the Brothers was confiscated and *"fell into the hands of the Nation"*. From Brother Pierre-Christophe the Nation gained very little; he had only 65 livres. In early June, Brother was sent on the *Washington* which was moored in the roadstead of La Rochelle and was berthed near *Les Deux Associés*.

The village people of Lorraine, writing a declaration in quite orthographically incorrect French, stated *"that (Brother Christophe) owns nothing in our village, no land, no 'gardin' (sic) –from German parlance– no house, no furniture...he gave all his wealth to the convents (couvangs) for his life and food...He is at present serving a poor man..."*

Rigault adds: *"They (the revolutionaries) separated him from his spade and wheelbarrow to honour him with the dignity of a religious" (he was a "frère servant") (7).*

Br. Uldaric, of whom we have already written, had died during the night between the 27th and the 28th August (1794). Brother Christophe followed him soon after, on the 6th September. That very same day he was celebrating his 57th birthday on earth. He too was buried on the Isle of Aix. He probably was the only member of his Congregation left on the *Washington* where the sanitary conditions seemed less bad than those of *Les Deux Associés* (8).

The road to Calvary

Br. Roger and Br Léon, of the Moulins Community were arrested on different days, in April 1793. They were imprisoned in the former Poor Clares monastery, *Sainte Claire*. The cloistered nuns were thrown out on the street.

The revolution authorities planned to humiliate and intimidate to the utmost the faithful followers of Christ; they even occasionally went beyond the limits of the law.

Before embarking their victims on the ships and isolating them from humanity, the guards made the prisoners travel a long distance and witness many sacrilegious events. From Moulins on bumpy carts to Souvigny, through Montluçon, Guéret, Limoges, Angoulême and Cognac before reaching the point of embarkation, La Rochelle.

Brother Uldaric joined the two Lasallians at Angoulême. The three of them may have met Br Pierre Christophe. There were 51 prisoners at the Moulins Sainte Claire prison; 27 left on November 25, 1793, at 8 a.m.; and the 24 others left the following Thursday, November 28. Br. Roger formed part of the first contingent. The second group joined the first at Angoulême. The prisoners were huddled on jolting carts without any cover or protection in spite of the wind, rain and snow.

Strange scenes

All the revolutionary guard was mobilized; the gendarmes accompanying the prisoners dressed themselves up in chasubles, copes, surplices, etc., dancing before them and singing *"La Carmagnole"*. They made the victims pass between two iron hedges till they reached the Allier square where a guillotine was permanently erected ready for use. At the sight of the red machine, the good and worthy ecclesiastics imagined they were to be immediately killed. *"We are not afraid"*, cried several of these generous martyrs, and they rushed to climb the steps of the platform.

"Be patient! Be patient!" answered the cannibals (*sic*); *we will show you how it works somewhere else!"* Three times the carts went round the guillotine platform while the crowd sang the famous *"Ça ira!"*

After the third round, the procession resumed its course. Another procession of prostitutes and other rough men and women awkwardly wearing chasubles, and square bonnets danced in front of the carts; they yelled the *"Libera..."* sung usually at funerals. The leader of the party was wearing a mitre and carried a crozier, solemnly miming a prelate's gestures, presiding over the whole shameless display. When they reached the bridge, he ended his savage parody by intoning, in a hoarse voice, tracing in mockery the sign of the cross: *"Requiescant in pace..."*

"Thank you, my good friends," wittingly answered one of the prisoners, Pierre Lucas, the parish priest of Rodes, *"We do not owe you anything, since the rituals have been abolished!"*

Brother Roger, who was among this group of victims, witnessed this humiliating and horrifying scene. There were still others in reserve for him. The victims were exposed to the inclemency of the weather. *"Canons, parish priests and religious were all huddled together on rickety carts: lucky were those who could protect themselves; the others could just as well die."*

They reached Savigny. Years later, an old man, who at that time was a young boy, remembered how one day he saw the cart full of monks dressed in white. His naive imagination had deceived him. They were all in white because they were covered with snow. Corpses lay all along the road. (9)

A strange welcome

The party resumed its course. At Limoges, the second group, among whom was Brother Roger, received a very strange welcome: "The Allier *departement* priests, 24 in number, led by the Apostolic Vicar of the Moulins diocese, the former Jesuit Fr Imbert, arrived at Limoges. At the entrance of the town they found an immense crowd of people who driven by curiosity had hurried there to watch a quite unusual scene. A great number of donkeys and billygoats, caparisoned in priestly garments, was slowly advancing in a long row. A huge pig, dressed up in pontifical vestments, closed the procession. A mitre fixed on the head of the last mentioned animal, bore this inscription: "Le Pape." The person presiding this irreligious feast which he had invented, gave orders to stop the carts loaded with the priests. He summoned these venerable men to come down, ordered them to follow the animal set two by two. The sacrilegious procession entered the town. When they reached the municipal square, they were told to stand in the form of a circle around a platform on which stood erected the fatal instrument, called guillotine. The circle opened to allow the *gendarmes* pass. They were escorting a deacon, M. Rampnous V., who having refused to take the oath had just been condemned by the tribunal to this kind of torture. He was executed on the spot in front of the others.

The executioner then showed the crowd the head he had just severed dripping blood and said: "Those other wretched men you see here deserve to be treated in the same manner as the one I have now executed. By whom do you want me to start?"

The crowd shouted: "By whomsoever you want".

The terrified victims were sent to spend the night in prison. Br. Roger is on record as having been amongst them "the servant of all, looking after the sick, comforting with words of hope those who were suffering for the Faith; he was a cause of admiration to all by his simplicity, his good humour, and his kind manners." (10)

At Saintes: La Marseillaise

At Angoulême where the first group of victims were kept for three days before being joined by those of the second group, the authorities showed the victims some consideration and compassion. Both convoys of victims reached Saintes on December 14, 1793. This city had already lost its bishop, Mgr Pierre-Louis de la Rochefoucauld, massacred the year before at *Les Carnes*, at Paris, with his own blood brother, the Bishop of Beauvais and our Brother Salomon. (11) The prisoners were allowed to write letters and received some food and help. Fr Imbert, full of humour, faith and wit, composed words to be sung on the tune of *La Marseillaise*. Here is the first stanza:

*"Allons, enfants de l'évangile,
Loin de ces climats dangereux,
Chercher en Afrique (12) un asile
Où l'on puisse être vertueux.
Allons gaiement chercher des hommes,
Aux lieux où règne le lion;
Ils ont une religion;
Et je n'en vois plus où nous sommes.*

*Courage, chers amis, bravons les passions!
Courons (bis) porter la foi chez d'autres nations"*

If this "religious" *Marseillaise* was sung (and Abbé Labiche affirms that "nous la chantions à l'envie") it must have encouraged the martyrs in their resolve to remain faithful to the end to God, and it must have at the same time enraged the authorities and the executioners.

The victims were kept more than three months at Saintes. Brother Roger, aged 70, and twelve other elderly priests, sent a written petition, as was within their rights of Liberté-Egalité to the *Convention* asking, as allowed by the decree of February 26, 1793, to be transferred after 15 months of imprisonment back to the Moulins prison, because "of their age and health". Their request was rejected. The victims were probably allowed to say Mass during their stay at Saintes.

Destination: La Rochelle.

Once again the convoys were on the move this time for their final destination: La Rochelle. However, two of the victims had to stay behind: Fr. Maurice Deschamps de Pravrier, who had started his journey suffering from hernia, died on December 11; he was buried at Angoulême; Charles Bougarel, curate of Biozet, was dying: he eventually died on December 30.

The preparations on the prison ships at La Rochelle were actively pursued. In the calm and clear water of the bay lay silhouetted *Les Deux Associés*, the *Washington* and *Le Bonhomme Richard*. 400 detainees had to be embarked. There was no building in the town large enough to accommodate them all. Work seemed to progress too slowly. Citoyen Laly, a midshipman of a small launch *La Dédaigneuse*, was now commissioned to take over the command of *Les Deux Associés*. This officer, a good sailor, stockily built, would suit the purpose well; he was rough and would be more exacting with the prisoners.

Les Deux Associés was not yet ready to receive 400 men. These were temporarily accommodated on the smaller ships. Before they were embarked on *Les Deux Associés* the priests were thoroughly and conscientiously searched. They were greeted with shouts of "Brigands, the authorities must have shown a virtue more than human in tolerating you alive!" by the captain of *La Soirée*. Citoyen Juquante was ordered to take away all money from the victims. The sum of 98.997 *livres*, 1 *sou* and 9 *deniers* was collected and forwarded to the district of La Rochelle.

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Notes and references

- (1) LASALLIANA 28-9-B-128 and 28-10-B-129.
 - (2) *Positio super martyrium*... See Note at the end of this article.
 3. Rigault: *Histoire Générale de l'Institut* T. III, p. 146.
 4. *Positio*, op. cit. p. 12-26.
 5. The incorrect spelling is probably due to the influence of the German population in contact with the French. It is based on phonetics.
 6. Frère Gustave-Marie (GM) *Les Frères de Moulins*... p. 153.
 7. Rigault op. cit. p. 306.
 8. Rigault op. cit. p. 309.
 9. G.M. op. cit. p. 120.
 10. *Légendaire d'Autun*, quoted by G.M. in op. cit., p. 164-165.
 11. Rigault op. cit. p. 301.
 12. The destination or deportation to La Guyane was later changed to any other place on the Eastern coast of Africa. See Rigault op. cit. p. 299.
- For the other stanzas see G.M. op. cit. p. 124-125. The Blessed Compiegne Sisters had composed their own version of the *Marseillaise*