

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

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### Life on the Ships

On May 1, 1794 *Les Deux Associés* was ready to receive the 400 prisoners and weigh anchor were it not for two great obstacles: "the awfully bad state of the French Navy at that time and the superiority of the English Navy which during those war years could be met on all routes of the ocean." (13)

The conditions on the prison-ships could hardly be worse. On the *Le Bonhomme Richard* the prisoners were constrained to sleep at the bottom of the lowest hold of the ship or on the floor or on warped staves of old barrels. "However, some of the crew were kind towards the priests and helped them in some ways." (14) "On the *Washington*," wrote one of the surviving victims, "we suffered almost all that could possibly be inflicted on a human being: sleeping always on a plank; being squeezed and pressed one against another, we could hardly breathe...and breathe what? Forced to stay in a space not larger than 1 ft by 5 ft and a few inches: obliged to stay up to 16 hours at a stretch without being allowed to go out to breathe fresh air, we were always locked up. We were given a bucket each to satisfy nature's needs... Moreover, there were a number of old people, invalids or sick who spread an unbearable stench. The heat was so intense that we felt as if we were in a furnace. On top of all this, as if this was not enough, some persons amongst us were covered with lice; many perspired so abundantly that their perspiration could be collected in spoonfuls: our clothes soaked in sweat..." And concludes this writer, "add to all this the bad treatment by nearly all the crew; the continuous swearing, the constant menace of guns charged with grape shot, and the severe threats to those who made the least sign of praying in public." No wonder that three fourths of the deportees perished before long. (15)

### On "Les Deux Associés"

If life was that bad on the *Le Bonhomme Richard* and the *Washington* it was worse on *Les Deux Associés*. The description makes one shudder and one's mind finds it hard to accept that such an inhuman treatment could possibly be

meted out by the authorities of a country to its citizens and for such a reason!

Rigault briefly sums up life on the ship in the following terms: "The existence of the deportees appears to us like an awful nightmare: vermin and dysentery, typhus and gangrene, scabies and scurvy and sleeping on their mean beds – they suffered these forms of torture. The moaning of feverish men in the crowded quarters: sometimes a burst of sudden insanity, revealed by strange yells."

### Dante's "Inferno"

"Disinfecting the holds, whether a real need or just a pretext, meant the prisoners were asphyxiated by regular fumigations with burning tar; the hatchways were kept closed all the time of this "sanitary exercise." The victims were afterwards exposed in the open air on the deck soaked with perspiration no matter if it rained, or if a cold wind blew. The deck where the prisoners were kept was divided in two sections by a barrier of iron stakes. They were given for food a noisome soup in which weevils swarmed and they often had to swallow it without the use of a spoon. They were running short of clothes; those they had were in tatters and they were not allowed to obtain new ones, or anything better. Reading or even saying vocal prayers was forbidden them. Not a moment of silent relaxation; a perpetual embarrassment to each other, their bodies touching one another, and naturally, contaminating one another. Insults, threats for a word uttered between themselves or for any sign to communicate with one another. It is a setting, a scenario, of a company of demons in an abyss of distress which Dante had not yet imagined" (16).

Medical help was below human standards: care or remedies needed were neglected by doctors of mediocre ability or attention. The victims took it in turns to help each other, like good samaritans, the best they could – and when they could! – Some priests had succeeded in hiding some hosts which they broke into infinitesimal parts and Holy Oils. With them they comforted the spirit while they tried to nurse bodily wounds. Absolution, secretly administered, brought peace and solace to troubled consciences, reconciling those who had gone astray, including some lay persons punished for political reasons, before they breathed their last. Death occurred every day. Brother Leon died on May 21, 1794; Brother Uldaric, as we have already said, died during the night between August 27th and 28th, Brother Christophe, on September 6th, Brother Roger, on September 12th. They were all buried on the Isle of Aix. Priests volunteered to go in turns and bury their companions; they were taken on a small boat, escorted by armed sailors. Their graves have since been discovered.

### Hope and Faith

One doctor, worthy of this name – commissioned by the authorities to make an enquiry about the situation, concluded his report in the following words: "If four hundred dogs were made to spend one night only in the place of these priests, they (the dogs) would have, the following morning, either died or become enraged." (17)

After their embarkation on *Les Deux Associés* the witenesses of Faith had written a resolution. "We shall not, they promised, unduly worry about our deliverance (...) we shall make a profitable use of the detention, meditating on the past years to prepare the future so that in the captivity of the body we find the freedom of our souls." (18) They also resolved to

treat "like brothers" the political detainees who were amongst them. The priests further promised not to be over-anxious to obtain political news; it would be enough for them to pray for the welfare of the Mother Country; and, if God granted them to go back to their dear ones at home, to live an edifying life and be a model of virtue for all the people. (19) To endure such a martyrdom needs faith and heroic constancy.

How right was St La Salle, when he wrote in the meditation for the feast of the Holy Innocents: "*St Gregory says that the life of a Christian should be a continual martyrdom... This kind of martyrdom, in fact, is often more difficult to sustain than the actual shedding of blood, for it is incomparably longer and therefore requires a greater endurance.*" (20) If the ordinary life of a Christian, as described by St La Salle, is an "incomparable martyrdom", compared to the actual shedding of blood, like that of Blessed Salomon and Br. Moniteur, how incomparably more meritorious is that of the martyrs of La Rochelle?

The list of the other martyrs who suffered and died at La Rochelle and elsewhere in France during the Revolution, would be far too long to include in our short account. However, I feel two other Brothers deserve a mention.

### They cut his ear

Brother Raphaël was 73 years old when in October 1793 the revolutionaries found him in his bed. He was a member of the Nîmes community. Some revolutionaries invaded the house. His younger confrères had time and agility to run up to the attic and made their escape. Brother Raphaël was sick in bed; he had a high temperature. The revolutionaries, mostly young men, attacked him as he lay in bed. They beat him. He recognized amongst them some of his former students and reminded them of his former teaching; he appealed to them, repeating his lessons on the fear of God. This enraged them more. One of the gang cut off one of his ears which he carried away as a trophy of their cruelty. Then they threw him through the window into the street. He did not die immediately. Some good samaritans took him to the public hospice of the municipality. He died a few days later. His name does not appear on the list of the martyrs.

### A bright Star at night

The other victim of the French Revolution is Brother Agathon, Superior General at that time. He joined the Institute and entered the St Yon Novitiate when he was 16. A fortnight earlier "*le saint Frère Irénée*" had died, "*one of the greatest and purest glories of the Institute*" (21). Brother Agathon soon excelled as an teacher especially in higher mathematics and hydrography, and other subjects too. He was a very good religious. At 25 he made his final consecration to God by perpetual Vows. He had sterling natural qualities. No wonder then that at 30, he was elected to take part in the General Chapter of 1761; he was 46, in 1777, when at that year's General Chapter he was chosen to replace Brother Florence who had given in his resignation. Brother Agathon became the 5th Superior General after the Holy Founder. The Institute made great progress qualitatively and quantitatively during his generalate. He wrote outstanding Circulars for the Brothers, real treatises of spirituality and sure guidance and leadership especially during the catastrophic years of the Revolution of 1790. He composed

wise "Regulations for the running of Boarding Schools"; there were eleven such institutions in France at that time. He had started a revision of *La Conduite des Écoles*. But his *magnum opus* is the wonderful treatise about the twelve virtues a good master should have, as enumerated by the Founder *Les Douze Vertues d'un Bon Maître*.

During the Revolution he was three times imprisoned; on one occasion he was kept locked up for nine months. His health suffered. He was compelled to stay in hiding, cut off from what could be still alive, in individual Brothers, of the Institute. He had been suffering from both eye and stomach trouble. Isolated from most of the faithful Brothers scattered all over France and those living in Rome, he was compelled to ask the authorities for financial help because of his illness.

He knew that his Secretary General, Brother Salomon Leclercq had been massacred at Les Carmes on September 2, 1792, and Brother Abraham imprisoned at Les Carmes but was helped to make his escape; he probably learnt of Brother Moniteur being guillotined in Rennes in 1794. The news of the imprisoned Brothers, including his predecessor Brother Florence and many others too, saddened him beyond description; he may have also learned of the four Brothers on "*Les Pontons*" at La Rochelle. All this bad news must have broken his fatherly heart. It was a psychological martyrdom equal to if not greater than that of the shedding of blood. He died in isolation, surrounded by only two faithful and courageous Lasallians, on September 15, 1798.

Brother Agathon must have suffered a cruel and long martyrdom in his heart and mind – a psychological martyrdom – to see his beloved Institute that he had led to great prosperity and glory collapse like a pack of cards in such a short time. He was 67 when he died. Rigault says of him: "*He was a powerful man, a remarkable Lasallian, a great soul, of all the Brothers the man most capable to reunite, after the crisis, the present of his Congregation to its past.*" (22)

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### P.S.

A letter, dated 30 November, 1993, from Brother Morelli, Postulator General, informed the present writer: "The Cause of the *Pontons* Brothers Martyrs is advancing, and in the month of January 1994 the *Positio* on the martyrdom will be discussed. A letter sent by the Bishop of La Rochelle foresees the beatification as likely in 1995."

Let us hope all will go as foreseen and pray that the cause of Brother Moniteur will not be forgotten or neglected. ●

13. Rigault op. cit. p. 302.
14. *ibid*, p. 302.
15. Rigault op. cit. p. 315.
16. Rigault op. cit. p. 307-308.
17. Rigault op. cit. p. 309.
18. Rigault op. cit. p. 307.
19. *Ibid*.
20. Meditation on the Holy Innocents, December 28.
21. Rigault op. cit. p. 382.
22. Rigault op. cit. pp. 368-369.