

Fall 1987

## Saint Lazare as a Prison

Stafford Poole C.M.

Follow this and additional works at: <http://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj>

---

### Recommended Citation

Poole, Stafford C.M. (1987) "Saint Lazare as a Prison," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 8: Iss. 2, Article 3.  
Available at: <http://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol8/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Vincentian Journals and Publications at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in Vincentian Heritage Journal by an authorized administrator of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact [mbernal2@depaul.edu](mailto:mbernal2@depaul.edu), [wsulliv6@depaul.edu](mailto:wsulliv6@depaul.edu).

## SAINT LAZARE AS A PRISON

by

Stafford Poole, C.M.

*The famous Vincentian motherhouse also served as a house of correction.*

On 7 January 1632, Saint Vincent de Paul signed a contract whereby the buildings and enclosure of Saint Lazare were transferred to the recently founded Congregation of the Mission. By this means the young community was guaranteed a large and productive motherhouse which for many centuries and in many lands would give its name to Vincent's company. In addition, the little Congregation of the Mission had taken on most of the previous functions of Saint Lazare, including the administration of a prison, or, better, a house of correction.

Saint Lazare had a long and complex history. As the name indicated, it had originally been founded as a leper hospital. The earliest reference to it is found in a charter of Louis VI, dated 1122. King Louis VII (1137-1180) expanded its buildings and gave its direction to the Knights Hospitaller of Saint Lazarus, a military religious order that had been founded at Jerusalem in the mid-twelfth century. The Hospitallers were a charitable organization whose original purpose had been the care of lepers. The order had come to be particularly influential in France.

Over the course of time, Saint Lazare became an important ecclesiastical *seigneurie* (in English seignory), that is, a fief with tenants and certain independent rights. It had armorial bearings and its own law court. It was a traditional stopping place for royalty prior to their formal entrance into Paris, and it was there that the monarchs received the oath of allegiance from the various classes of the city. It was also the last stopping place for royal funeral corteges prior to burial at Saint Denis.

As leprosy became less common in Europe, attempts were made to suppress the Hospitallers of Saint Lazarus. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the administration of Saint Lazare was transferred to the canons of Saint Victor, a congregation founded by William of Champeaux in 1109 and centered in the famous monastery and school of Saint Victor in Paris. As a result, Saint Lazare became more monastic in character. All those living there, whether canons or not, followed the rule of Saint Augustine. The grounds were spacious, the total compound enclosing some ninety-two *arpents* (between 105 and 150 acres). There were also extensive farms and gardens. By the time that Saint Vincent acquired Saint Lazare, the community there had shrunk to eleven members.

### **Saint Vincent and his "boarders"**

At some unknown, but early, point in history, Saint Lazare began to exercise some of the functions of a prison.<sup>1</sup> Separate buildings were designated for this, and in the principal square there were stakes, with iron collars for the exposure of criminals. In 1632, when the Congregation of the Mission moved in, the prison was almost empty. It contained two classes of inmates: young men of reputable families (called the "incorrigibles") who had been sent there to be reformed, and some three or four insane persons. These two groups, whom Saint Vincent called "boarders" (*pensionnaires*), stayed on. Under this direction, the house of correction and hospice for the mentally ill revived, and the number of inmates increased notably. In 1659 it varied between fifty and fifty-six. Because

---

<sup>1</sup>For a general history of Saint Lazare as a prison, see Léon Bizard and Jane Chapon, *Histoire de la prison de Saint-Lazare du moyen-âge à nos jours* (Paris, 1955).

of their proximity to his community, he purchased a house at a greater distance near the stables in 1659. It was there that the boarders were lodged. Although, as prior of Saint Lazare, Saint Vincent administered some other prisons in the vicinity, that of Saint Lazare is the one that holds the greatest interest.<sup>2</sup>

While Saint Vincent's attitude toward the mentally ill is rather well known, there is less documentation about his direction of the house of correction or his attitude toward his prisoners. During his lifetime he was adamant about not receiving anyone who was not sent by proper royal or judicial authority. Some of the inmates during the saint's lifetime were errant priests or vagabonds and beggars who had posed as religious. There were also public blasphemers, atheists, alcoholics, and even highwaymen. Sometimes women would avenge themselves on faithless lovers by arranging to have them sent to Saint Lazare.

The majority of prisoners, however, were wayward young men who were sent to Saint Lazare by their parents or relatives. In 1634 Jean de Montholon was incarcerated by his guardian for having secretly married a woman of a lower social position. In 1660 the Marquise d'Esne wrote to Saint Vincent and asked him to take in her eldest son, aged twenty. The young man, in addition to blaspheming, denying religion, and frequenting brothels, had recently taken advantage of his parents' absence and stolen all the money and silver plate from their home. There is no extant reply from Saint Vincent, but he probably granted the request. On another occasion, a certain M. Demurard, treasurer of Lyons, had his son forcibly

---

<sup>2</sup>A general description of the functioning of Saint Lazare as a prison in Saint Vincent's lifetime can be found in Pierre Coste, C.M., *The Life and Works of Saint Vincent de Paul*, translated by Joseph Leonard, C.M., 3 vols. (Westminster, Maryland, 1952), 2:309-14.

carried off to Saint Lazare. The young man had been intended for the clerical state, but he preferred to get married. He resigned his benefice, but not to his brother, whom he did not consider worthy of it. When Saint Vincent learned the circumstances of the case, he threatened the father with legal action if he did not free the son. In another case, a free-living young man made a retreat at Saint Lazare and immediately resolved to reform his life. His mother thought that the retreat was a good opportunity to imprison him and guarantee his reformation, but Saint Vincent emphatically refused.<sup>3</sup>

In Saint Vincent's lifetime, of the five houses of correction in Paris directed by religious, Saint Lazare had the best reputation for reforming wayward young men. One man of quality had a nephew who was so debauched that he occasionally threatened to kill his uncle. A city magistrate suggested sending him to Saint Lazare, "where there was a good program of discipline to set him right."<sup>4</sup> According to Louis Abelly, Saint Vincent's first biographer, some young men entered the religious life after completing the program at Saint Lazare. He also tells the story of a gentleman of rank who once praised the saint to his face, calling him the "refuge of sinners". Saint Vincent replied that the title was proper only to the Son of God and his mother.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>From an undated conference of Saint Vincent in Pierre Coste, C.M., *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondance, Entretiens, Documents*, 14 vols. (Paris, 1920-1925), 11:21 (hereinafter cited CED).

<sup>5</sup>Louis Abelly, *La vie du vénérable serviteur de Dieu Vincent de Paul Instituteur et premier supérieur général de la Congrégation de la Mission* (Paris, 1664), book 2, chap. 6, 312, 313. The English translation of Coste's biography of Saint Vincent, *Life and Works*, 2:314, says that it was a "woman of rank" who made this comment. Abelly clearly says "un homme."

The results were not always so successful. There was one known escape from Saint Lazare in Saint Vincent's lifetime. The brother of Guy François de Montholon made his escape in March 1635, almost from under Saint Vincent's nose. It is not clear, however, whether the brother was mentally ill or one of the incorrigibles.<sup>6</sup> On another occasion, one of the priests who was an officer of the house complained to Vincent about a young inmate who seemed impervious to all correction, and suggested that the young man be returned to his family. The saint replied with firmness:

Do you not think, Monsieur, that the principal purpose that we must have in receiving boarders in our house is charity? Now tell me, is it not a great charity to us to keep this man, since if he were outside, he would fall back into the trouble that he has caused his parents up to now? They have imprisoned him with the permission of the magistrate because he is an evil young man and they could not get anywhere with him. They have brought him to us to have some peace in their family and to see if by this means God will be pleased to convert him. So, wanting to send him back while he is still in his original state would be the same as wanting to send the trouble back into the family, which is now in peace during his absence. His threats are not worth bothering about, because by the grace of God no great harm has come to the community because of this young hot-head and we must hope that none will in the future. Do

---

<sup>6</sup>Saint Vincent to Guy François de Montholon, after 28 March 1635, CED, 1:291-93.

you not think, Monsieur, that this young man knows that it is his parents who keep him here? He knows quite well that it is they who have had him put here and not we.<sup>7</sup>

For the most part, the boarders, both the mentally ill and the incorrigibles, were supported by funds donated by the Company of the Blessed Sacrament. Those families that could do so paid a fee. The prisoners were allowed no visitors. They were also kept separate from the Vincentian Community, and were neither seen nor known by any but the correctional staff - a measure that helped preserve the reputations of the families involved. This isolation was one of the means used for bringing the young men to their senses. The incorrigibles stayed until such time as they gave evidence of a sincere conversion. Before leaving, they were required to make a retreat in preparation for a general confession and communion.

In 1656, Vincent learned that the brothers and domestics were giving the boarders inferior food and wine, and even serving them leftovers. In all probability, this was done more to the mentally ill than to the incorrigibles, but the Saint did not make any distinction. "This, my brothers, is wrong!" After administering a tongue-lashing to all involved, he gave strict orders that the boarders were to be treated exactly like the priests. "Look, my brothers, this is a matter of confession and I ask the confessors to be aware of it."<sup>8</sup>

Saint Vincent believed that the work with the incorrigibles and the mentally ill was a holy one that had been entrusted to

---

<sup>7</sup>Abelly, *ibid.*, 311.

<sup>8</sup>Repetition of prayer, 16 March 1656, CED, 11:331.

his community by God. "Let us thank God, gentlemen, that he dedicates this community to the care of the mentally ill and the incorrigibles. We did not look for his work; it was given to us by his providence, like all the other works in the community."<sup>9</sup> With regard to the incorrigibles, the saint sounded a familiar note when he declared, "The others whom we have in this house and who are in their right minds, but who do not use them well, give me grounds for saying that in the world today one sees, among young people, a great rebelliousness and dissipation, which seems to get worse day by day."<sup>10</sup> In 1658, two years before his death, the saint again commended the work with the mentally ill to his confreres, and by implication, that of the incorrigibles.<sup>11</sup>

The best known prisoner of the seventeenth century was Henri Louis de Lomenie, the Count of Brienne. After the death of his wife in 1664, he joined the Oratorians and then gave himself up to poetry and travel. During one of his journeys abroad, he fell in love with the Duchess of Mecklenburg and declared his passion for her. Since this constituted a crime of lese-majeste, complaints were made to Louis XIV, who recalled the count and had him imprisoned, first with the Benedictines, then at Saint Lazare (1674). He remained there for eighteen years on the grounds that he was mentally ill. When one of his tenants refused to pay rent, the count wrote to the government, which sent a civil lieutenant to investigate. The count made no complaint about either the Vincentians or their superior general, Father Edme Jolly, who, he said,

---

<sup>9</sup>Extract from undated conference, CED, 11:21.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Conference of 6 December 1658, CED, 12:88.



treated him well. He did, however, ask to have a room away from the prisoners and the mentally ill. The lieutenant found the count to be quite rational. "I suggested to the gentlemen of Saint Lazare that they put him in a room in their house. I thought they would be very happy to have a fee of 2,000 *livres*, but they are not in a mood to give the least care." The count had actually wanted to pay more, but the Vincentians had refused, fearing some sort of extravagance. All was settled, however, when the count was released in that same year.<sup>12</sup>

### The prison in the eighteenth century

By the eighteenth century, the French Vincentians were accustomed to refer to the prison building as the *maison de force*, though house of detention or correction would describe it better. By that time many of the prisoners were priests or Huguenots who had been sent to be converted (some of whom escaped), but the majority continued to be the errant sons of good families whose parents incarcerated them at Saint Lazare (as they did at the Bastille) in hope of reforming them. The sentence was usually handed down by means of a *lettre de cachet*, a royal order that delivered an individual over to arbitrary imprisonment. This or an order by a judge were the only ways that a person could be imprisoned at Saint Lazare. Families were expected to bear the cost of lodging as much as possible. The minimum was 600 *livres* per year, an amount that took care of food, candles and laundry. Medicine and firewood were also paid by the families. The average cost was between 600 and 1200 *livres* per year. Vincentian brothers took care of the housekeeping and physical requirements of the prison.

An ordinary term at Saint Lazare was one to three months.

<sup>12</sup>Bizard and Chapon, *Histoire*, 90.

In 1732, there were forty-four prisoners, including priests, deacons, merchants and young men of good families. In 1771 there were fifty-six prisoners, in 1788 about forty, and in the following year twenty, of whom 16 were mental patients.

The program at Saint Lazare sought to reform the inmates through a combination of punishment and spiritual retreat. There was a prefect who was assigned to keep in touch with the young men's families and to see to the observance of the rules. A spiritual director said mass for them daily and tried to improve their minds, especially by giving them spiritual books to read. In addition, corporal punishments and whipping were used. One contemporary wrote, "The brothers' establishment is a sort of banking house, on which checks are delivered to the bearer payable in a certain number of blows."<sup>13</sup> A special employee was kept for the purpose of administering the whippings. As time went on, a ridiculous ceremony accompanied by an exaggerated patois grew up around this flogger. He would enter his victim's room and with a bow and flourish of his hat, he would say in a fractured and almost untranslatable French, *il faut, Monsieur, que je vous fessissons et que si vous regimbissiez, je recommencissions*.<sup>14</sup> His whip was called *Père Fouettard* - the old man who, in French folklore, accompanied Santa Claus on his rounds. He carried a birch rod or bundle of twigs to whip naughty children and a basket on his back in which to take away those who were especially naughty. The term was equivalent to "bogeyman". It was the custom for entering "guests" to be subjected to a preliminary whipping

---

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 93.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 91. The general meaning of the flogger's words were, "Sir, I have to spank you. If you balk, I will begin over again." The French, however, is a confusion of tenses and persons.

by way of introduction. This was also true of the insane for whom, according to the medical opinion of the age, it had a calming effect without equal.

One result of all this was that the prison of Saint Lazare became "the terror of Paris".<sup>15</sup> Incarceration there also had tones of social lowering. The Chevalier de Marlière, after several forced visits, wrote to the Prince de Conti, "Saint Lazare is the sort of place that categorizes a man. If they had sent me to the Bastille, I would have, on leaving, taken my place among the well-behaved people. On leaving Saint Lazare, I had to enroll myself among the ne'er do wells."<sup>16</sup> In a similar vein, d'Hartricourt, the Abbé de Longue, wrote to the Dauphin (the heir to the French throne) in 1706 to complain about his treatment at Saint Lazare during an imprisonment. He claimed to have been treated "with excessive rigor" and to have been put there by the plots of his enemies. Despite the fact that he should have been released, he was still there, he wrote, "because of the ill-will of the procurator of Saint Lazare in the plot to keep your suppliant here for the sake of a very large fee, whose attraction causes people here to resort to strange things." He also complained of threats, blows and other indignities.<sup>17</sup>

The most famous prisoner at Saint Lazare in the years before the French Revolution was Pierre Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, the adventurer and author of *The Barber of Seville* and *The Marriage of Figaro*. The intrigues and plots that surrounded the production of the latter play, as well as its

---

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 91.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 89.

subversive message, caused Louis XVI to dispatch Beaumarchais to what one biographer called "that infamous prison".<sup>18</sup> Beaumarchais had expected to go to the Bastille (which was considered preferable), but ended up in Saint Lazare, where he stayed for six days (March 1785). He revenged himself with some verses.

An inflexible Lazarist  
 Enemy of so much rest  
 Takes a terrible instrument  
 And uses it on his back.  
 By this horrible punishment,  
 Caron is annihilated.  
 Let those of evil reputation beware.<sup>19</sup>

In fact, it seems very doubtful that Beaumarchais encountered Père Fouettard. Similarly, a famous engraving showing him in Saint Lazare is of doubtful authenticity.

### During the Revolution

When Saint Lazare was confiscated by the revolutionary government in 1792, the entire complex became one vast prison. At times it held as many as 12,000 prisoners. Among the notables who spent time there as boarders, not of the Vincentians, but of the French Revolution, were the diplomat

---

<sup>18</sup>A. Michaud, *Biographie universelle*, 103.

<sup>19</sup> *Un lazariste inflexible*  
*Ennemi de tant repos*  
*Prend un instrument terrible*  
*Et l'exerce sur son dos.*  
*Par ce châtement horrible*  
*Caron est anéanti.*  
*Caveant male noti.*

Talleyrand, the poet Jean Antoine Roucher, and the Marquis de Sade. Probably the most poignant of imprisonments was that of the poet André Chenier, who was kept at Saint Lazare prior to his execution.<sup>20</sup> It was there that he wrote one of his last poems, titled, appropriately enough, *Saint Lazare*. In it he described the reactions of his fellow prisoners to the wait for certain death and his own attitude toward the revolution that was devouring its children.

We live. We live in infamy. So what?  
 We must.  
 The infamous one, after all, eats and sleeps.  
 Right here, in these enclosures where  
 death makes us graze, where the ax  
 takes us to our destiny, fair love letters  
 are written. Husbands, lovers, are dupes.  
 Gossiping, the intrigues of fools.  
 We sing there. We play there. We lift up  
 petticoats there. We make songs  
 and clever words there.  
 One man pushes and bounces a balloon, all inflated  
 with wind, on the ceilings, on the windows,  
 like the speeches of the seven hundred dull  
 scoundrels, of whom Barère is the most learned.<sup>21</sup>  
 Another runs, still another jumps. And the  
 would-be politicians and reasoners  
 bawl, drink, and laugh.

---

<sup>20</sup>This fact is preserved in the opera *Andrea Chenier* by Umberto Giordano. Its third act is located in *la prigione di San Lazzaro*.

<sup>21</sup>A reference to the Convention, the legislative body that ruled France at that time. Bertrand Barère de Vieuzac (1755-1841) was a delegate from the Upper Pyrenees.

And on hinges of iron the doors suddenly cry out,  
 the purveyor of the fierce judges,  
 our lords, appears.  
 Which one will be the prey that the ax calls today?  
 Everyone shudders, listens.  
 And everyone sees with  
 joy that he is not yet the one.  
 It will be you tomorrow, senseless fool!<sup>22</sup>

In 1850 Saint Lazare became exclusively a women's prison and remained so down to the final demolition of its buildings at the beginning of the twentieth century. With that a centuries old tradition came to an end. The history of that tradition is a mixed one, both superior to and part of the ages through which it passes. Its best aspiration, as usual, was summarized

---

<sup>22</sup> *On vit; on cit infâme. Eh bien? Il fallut l'être;  
 L'infâme après tout mange et dort.  
 Ici même, en ces parcs ou la mort nous fait pâître,  
 Ou la hache nous tire au sort,  
 Beaux poulets sont écrits; maris, amants sont dupes;  
 Caquetage, intrigues de sots.  
 On y chante; on y joue; on y leve des jupes;  
 On y fait chansons et bons mots;  
 L'un pousse et fait bondir sur les toits, sur les vitres,  
 Un ballon tout gonflé de vent,  
 Comme sont les discours des sept-cents plats belîtres  
 Dont Barère es le plus savant.  
 L'autre court; l'autre saute; et brillent, boivent, rient  
 Politiqueurs et raisonneurs;  
 Et sur les gonds de fer soudain les portes crient,  
 Des juges tigres nos seigneurs  
 Le pouvoyeur paraît. Quelle sera la proie  
 Que la hache appelle adjourd'hui?  
 Chacun frissonne, écoute; et chacun avec joie  
 Voit que ce n'est pas encouffe lui;  
 Ce sera toi demain, insensible imbécile!*

by Saint Vincent de Paul:

Let us bless God, gentlemen and my brothers, and thank him for having dedicated us to the care of these poor people, deprived of reason and the ability to control themselves, because, in serving them, we see and experience how great and varied is human suffering.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup>Extract from an undated conference, CED, 11:24.