

Fall 1989

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Recommended Citation

Rybolt, John E. C.M., Ph.D. (1989) "Notable Vincentians (4): Francis Mary Simonin," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 10: Iss. 2, Article 4.

Available at: <http://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol10/iss2/4>

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Notable Vincentians (4): Francis Mary Simonin

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This young French confrere came to the United States in September 1835 with five other recruits under the leadership of John Mary Odin. Simonin was already a deacon when he left France. The group arrived at the Barrens on 5 December 1835 and barely two weeks later he entered the Congregation of the Mission. Simonin lived only briefly after his ordination. In keeping with the practice of the time, John Timon, the provincial superior, sent a notice of his life and virtues to the mother-house in Paris.¹ The following biography is somewhat fragmentary but has been translated practically as it appears in the large manuscript collection of notices submitted for publication. This is its first publication, and it complements a previous article in this issue on the mission to the American Indians undertaken by John Brands and Francis Simonin.²

I. Sources for His Life

Born at Saint Vincent de Boisset near Roanne (Loire) [on 18 March 1810], Francis [Xavier] Simonin, C.M., died at Saint Mary's of the Barrens on 15 September 1838. M. [Pierre] Meout, [superior] of Lyons sent us some letters about Father Simonin.³ They belong to Father Gillet, who retired at Feurs (Loire). The list of the letters is as follows:

¹John Baptist Étienne to John Timon, Paris, 23 December 1838, Archives of the University of Notre Dame (hereinafter cited as AUND), Timon collection, microfilm reel 2, no. 233. Étienne sent his regrets at the death of Simonin; he was grateful for the report on his life, which would be printed in *Annales de la Congrégation de la Mission*.

²Source: *Notices VI, 1801-1847*, Archives of Saint Lazare, Paris, pp. 1207-20.

³Pierre-Auguste Meout was superior in Lyons from approximately 1901-1904. The date of the notice may therefore safely be placed at approximately 1905, although the letters it contains are contemporary with Simonin's life.

1830: He was a student of the Jesuits at Fribourg.

April 1834: He attended the major seminary of Lyons; also in 1835, he was a deacon.

15 September 1835: He left from Le Havre for the United States missions.

31 April 1836: He wrote from Cape Girardeau to his brother and godfather, director of the major seminary of Nevers. He had joined the Congregation of the Mission [21 December 1835], and he was making his novitiate; he was studying English and giving missions among the Indians. Interesting.

21 July 1837, Saint Mary's of the Barrens: He announces a trip of Father Odin; in four months he will make his vows [which he did on 22 December 1837]; missions among the Indians.

19 June 1838, from Saint Mary's of the Barrens: Missions with Father Odin, and he is in good health (published in the *Annales de la Congrégation de la Mission* 5 (1839: 35-44).

20 September, Seminary of Saint Mary's of the Barrens: Father Odin announces his death to his mother and eulogizes him.

II. Letter of Father Simonin from Cape Girardeau, 31 August 1836

[Summary on the state of the clergy: mention of the Jesuit fathers, the college, the novitiate, and Saint Louis, and the beginning of the mission to the Indians; secular clergy are few.]

The remainder are priests of the Mission. Bishop [Joseph] Rosati and his vicar general, the latter being bishop of New Orleans, Bishop [Leo] DeNeckere, belonged to the Congregation. Up to the present, its members have lived apart without much relationship with one another. But a new arrangement is going to put them in a safer position for themselves and more useful for the good of the people. Stable establishments, served by a minimum of two or three missionaries, are being formed in several places. Father [John] Bouillé [Boullier] from Roanne, who built two churches with his own money and a priests' house at Old Mines—it is more than ten leagues below Saint Louis—will work at this mission together with Father [Peter] Doutreluingne, a Belgian. The French language is more common there.

Farther from Saint Louis, about fifteen or twenty miles from the Mines [Old Mines], live two other missionaries who serve the parish of Sainte Genevieve. This town and the surrounding countryside are

inhabited by three families, more or less equal in number, who are French, English, and German.

Some 150 miles farther south of Saint Louis on the banks of the Mississippi, whose sound I hear as I write to you, a small mission is beginning. Father Odin began it last April. Since I have been its pastor for three or four days, let me give you a small idea of the country. Cape Girardeau is a charming place on the banks of the Mississippi. The town, which can easily have fifty houses, does not contain more than 150 inhabitants. But everybody agrees that its advantageous location destines it to become, in a short time, perhaps very soon, an important spot, perhaps the major one between Saint Louis and New Orleans. Only a few Catholics live there, but nonetheless forty-two people made their Easter Communion, and this does not count certain people who come from time to time to prepare to receive the sacraments. You should know how much the people love Father Odin, how they seek him out, and how much they respect him. Protestants come to listen to him regularly in our small chapel; they come to the house and often visit here. A larger house has just been promised us here. The Congregation in this area possesses some large properties and a fine house. Only a small amount of revenue comes in at present.

Lastly, the oldest parish under the direction of the priests of the Mission is Saint Mary's of the Barrens, between Saint Louis and Cape Girardeau. It is their first establishment and also their largest. White and black Catholics—both free and slaves—number about 2,000. Thanks be to God, fervor reigns among them. A church worthy of our country [France] has been begun. Several years ago they had to suspend the work, but finally they have begun at this moment to finish it. One of the great difficulties is getting workers. Carpenters in Saint Louis cost more than 12 francs a day. They have built a beautiful cathedral in Saint Louis, and a beautiful church at Sainte Genevieve, another at the Barrens where they propose building others, but we need, oh!, we need priests, priests of Jesus Christ. The hour of mercy has sounded for this beautiful American land. If this were the fact in this country, Catholicism would make rapid progress.

Francis M. Simonin

III. Letter of John Mary Odin

Father Odin wrote to Madame Simonin née C. Rochard, at Saint Vincent de Boisset, canton of ^ÉPerreux, near Roanne (Loire) announcing the death of her son at the Barrens on 15 September 1838.

Madame:

God, to whom you have already made the generous sacrifice of your son in consenting to his departure to the foreign missions, is again going to demand of your faith and your piety a new act of resignation. This is the sad news that it is my difficult duty to communicate to you. What a source of affliction for a tender mother. Your son is no more.

On the 15th of this month, we had the sorrow of losing an excellent confrere, a holy priest, a zealous missionary. Toward the end of July he began to feel indisposed. He experienced at that time violent pains in his stomach, accompanied by a strong fever. He promptly received medical attention. We had up to five doctors come to him, but they were never able to produce the least change in his situation. The stomach pains ceased, nevertheless, at the end of the week. He seemed then not to experience any violent pain. He never complained of his extreme weakness, yet the fever never left him. On 8 September he vomited up an abscess which had been formed internally, and only then were the doctors able to explain the origin of this stubborn fever, against which all the resources of medicine proved useless.

From the beginning of his illness, we turned to heaven to obtain the continuation of the life that was so dear and so precious. Every day the holy sacrifice of the mass was offered for this purpose, and hardly had we finished one novena than we began another. Oh, what we would not have done to keep a confrere who seemed of such excellent qualities and to be the principal support of our young missions. But God had other plans for him; he was mature enough for heaven. He himself had a suspicion that his end approached because a long time before his death he told me, "I'm going away, my dear Odin, I'm going away, I'm going to God," and this idea seemed to produce in him a sweet transport. He twice received holy viaticum during his long illness. Oh, what fervor and what piety did cause him to break forth in these moments. We all began to weep. How edifying and moving it was to see his resignation and submission amid such great and long sufferings. His spirit was always occupied with God; he spoke only of God. "I don't know how to pray anymore," he told me one day. "Think then about your Divine Savior and about his cross," I told him. "Oh! I do this more than five hundred times a day," he answered. Even in the delirium of fever, he spoke to me of missions and of the occupations of the holy ministry. Sometimes he sought to convince a protestant, and sometime he exhorted in a touching way a poor sinner to return to his God. The sweet names of Jesus and Mary were his last words that his dying lips uttered.

A faithful servant of Mary, it was the day of the octave of the birth of this good mother, when heaven called to take him, and he left for his triumph.

A life full of fervor, of generous sacrifices for the Lord, a burning zeal for the glory of God, and the interest of religion, a great love for prayer and recollection, everything doubtless had already prepared him for heaven. One cannot doubt that he exchanged a life of pain for the happiness of the elect. Weeping seems weeping for joy, and yet up to the present it has been difficult for me to submit myself to this horrible blow. I was so attached to him! We worked together so often, and I was permitted to see what great fruits of salvation heaven worked through his ministry. He had often evangelized the inhabitants of Sainte Genevieve, of Petit Canada, of Old Mines, of Cape Girardeau, and New Madrid, Fredericktown, and Saint Louis. He had visited many Indian nations, and everywhere God made use of him to do a great good. His modest behavior, his sweetness, his patience, his instructions full of power and unction, everything in him drew people in crowds, and he gained hearts for his divine master. His death has caused universal regret. He made no will; he only witnessed to me his desire of turning to the use of the missions a box of church goods which his brother had sent him, but his box has not been received. He was buried in the seminary church, and we will build a little monument to him.

Please accept, Madame, the expression of my sincere condolence and profound respect.

Your humble and obedient servant
John Mary Odin

**IV. Extract of the Biographie Universelle
of François Xavier de Feller
(Simonin edition, 4 Vol., [Nevers, 1845])**

Simonin (François-Marie), missionary of the Congregation of Saint Lazare, brother and godchild of the author of the *Biographie Universelle* was born in the month of March 1810 at Saint Vincent de Boisset, diocese of Lyons, of an honorable family.⁴ He died 15 September 1838 at the age of twenty-eight. Nature had endowed him with a pleasant disposition, and a careful education had developed it. Everywhere he obtained the

⁴The vow book records his name as François-Xavier. It may be that he took Marie as a vow name, a common custom in later years.

most brilliant successes, notably at the boarding school in Fribourg, Switzerland, directed by the Jesuit Fathers. Struck by a deadly sickness, he owed his cure to the intercession to the venerable [Saint Peter] Canisius, founder of the college in Fribourg.

His parents destined him for a law career but, struck by the dangers to which he found himself exposed in the world, he determined to embrace the ecclesiastical state and entered the major seminary of Lyons. There, for three years, he became a model for numerous fellow students, by his practice of all the virtues and by the progress which he made in priestly knowledge. He attached all hearts to him by his good spirit and by his engaging and affable manner. He was not content just to make to God the sacrifice of the world and devoting himself to the service of the altar; he also wanted to offer the sacrifice of his family and of his native country, and he consecrated himself to the foreign missions.

Having well nourished this idea and having conferred a long time with his director, he courageously made his good-byes to everything that he held the most dear to join Father Odin, later the bishop of Claudiopolis and vicar apostolic of Texas, and he left on 17 September 1835 from Le Havre to go to the diocese of Saint Louis in America. He was then only a deacon. He entered the seminary of Saint Mary's of the Barrens. He requested admission among the priests of Saint Lazare who were in charge of the seminary and of missions in the area. For the two years of his novitiate, he gave, as at Lyons, a great example of edification. He was ordained a priest in 1836, and he immediately began to exercise his holy ministry and was put in charge of visiting and frequently evangelizing the congregations of Petit Canada, Apple Creek, Fredericktown, New Madrid, and the Mines.

In 1837 he went through a great part of the states of Missouri and Arkansas; he visited many Indian nations, leaving everywhere the seeds of faith and bringing abundant fruits of blessing. When he would come to some place, people ran to his instructions. He had a strong, clear, and sweet voice; distinct pronunciation; a modest and dignified attitude; an extraordinary unction; clear, just and compelling reasoning; a pure and simple language; all of this contributed to giving a great deal of success to his instructions. The spirit of God breathed in all of his discourses. During the mission which he gave at Sainte Genevieve in the Lent of 1837, he made a strong impression on all hearts, and numerous conversions resulted. This marked a happy beginning for an apostolic ministry. It gave reason to hope that one day he would be an

instrument which God would use to perform great good in the country where the workers were so necessary.⁵

He was on the point of leaving for a second trip among the Indians, whom he loved tenderly and to whose salvation he desired to consecrate himself entirely, when sickness put an end to his apostolic career at age twenty-eight.⁶ On the 7th of August it became necessary to think about administering holy viaticum to him; although weak, he absolutely wanted to kneel down on the floor. He seemed to expire for love of God. On the feast of the Assumption, he was also able to enjoy the same happiness. On the 30th, he received the extreme unction; he received the sacrament with sentiments of a living faith, and all those present were moved with edification. During the delirium which lasted for several days preceding his death, he spoke only of the missions and the occupations of the holy ministry. Sometimes he sought to convince a protestant, sometimes he exhorted in a touching way a poor sinner to return to his God. The last words that his dying lips pronounced were the holy names of Jesus and Mary.

He always had a tender devotion for Mary. She obtained for him the grace of dying on the octave day of her birth. It had been three years since he left France, and it was the very day of her birth that he had said his farewells to his family. He pronounced his religious vows and on that occasion wrote to his brother, Father Simonin, "Finally I have fixed by irrevocable bonds the inconstancy of my poor heart. From the bottom of my heart I bless, and I never cease blessing, the Lord who has given me this knowledge. How many dangers a secular priest faces. I fear exaggerating, and yet a little experience acquired by some events has almost convinced me that far from being a great saint it is quite difficult, almost impossible, to procure one's salvation when one could even be an occasion of salvation for so many others, '*non temere dico, sed sicut affectus sum.*'"⁷

While he was still in the seminary, he had translated from German the introduction to *The History of the Religion of Jesus Christ* by Count [Friedrich Leopole zu] Stolberg. He had titled it, "Count Stolberg to his

⁵In testimony to his abilities, Bishop Joseph Rosati asked him to preach in French for Holy Week in the cathedral in Saint Louis. Rosati to Timon, Saint Louis, 5 March 1838, AUND, reel 2, no. 129.

⁶This detail is confirmed in Rosati to Timon, Saint Louis, 23 April 1838, AUND, reel 2, no. 152.

⁷"I do not say it outright, but according to my impression."

Children." This translation, written with a remarkable talent, has been reprinted several times.⁸

**V. Extract from a Letter of John Mary Odin
to John Baptist Étienne, Superior General,
from Saint Mary's of the Barrens, 25 September 1838**

[Published in the *Annales de la Congregation de la Mission* 5 (1839):45-51, this extract has been added to the original "Notice" to complete the account of Simonin's virtuous life. This same letter furnished many of the details in the article quoted in section IV above.]

Monsieur and my very dear confrere:

Because my heart is crushed with the deepest sorrow, I have determined to inform you of the cruel loss which our American mission has just suffered. I have no doubt that you will share in my sorrow and regret. Providence has just demanded a great sacrifice. On 15 September 1838 we had the sorrow of losing our excellent confrere, M. François-Marie Simonin, after a seven week illness. Since I was a friend of his as well as yours, I feel obliged to send you some details of his wonderful life which have come to me ...

He observed the rules rigidly, at all times and in all places, but did so without any affectation. We never heard him make a remark which might in any way wound charity. He knew well that an interior life and union with God were indispensable for a good missionary, and he always worked at acquiring this ever more deeply. We often saw him absorbed in holy thoughts. We could judge the quality of his spirituality in chapel, at the altar, or during his meditation, on account of his recollection and his respectful attitude toward the living faith which animated him ...

So many holy dispositions of his wonderful soul have shined out during the long illness which has led him to the grave! He was always patient and resigned and never made the slightest complaint. To overcome the repugnance which he felt in taking the medicine prescribed for him, it was only necessary to recall that this was the superior's wish. His heart was always occupied with God and ever

⁸Count Stolberg, 1750-1819, was a poet, literary scholar, and historian, and became a convert to the church. His fifteen volume history was admired in his time, but was quickly superseded. A French translation of the entire work is known (Paris, 1838), but the translation of the introduction by Simonin does not appear to be readily available to scholars. Stolberg is also known for a biography of Saint Vincent de Paul, *Leben des Heiligen Vincentius von Paulus*, (Muenster, 1819); a Dutch translation also exists (Amsterdam, 1820).

turned toward heaven. One day he complained at not being able to pray enough. It was suggested that it would be enough in his situation simply to form some good aspirations toward God. He replied: Ah, I am always doing that.

He received the last sacraments with great fervor. It softened our hearts as we listened to his pious preparation to receive the visit of his God on his bed of suffering, and the thanksgivings which he uttered after receiving the eucharist. During a delirium which lasted several days, caused by the violence of his fever, he spoke only about missions and journeys for the glory of God and the salvation of souls.⁹ He still wanted to go to the confessional where he said his penitents were waiting for him, or he wanted to prepare for mass. He kept catechizing or exhorting sinners to repentance. This all happened with such tender piety that those who listened could not restrain their tears ...

The whole house has been plunged into deep sorrow over the loss of M. Simonin. Our memory of him and of his virtues will always live in our hearts. In a short time he accomplished a long and beautiful career. He leaves a great gap in our midst. I am confident that from heaven he will protect this mission which weeps for him and which was so dear to his heart.

Odin

Priest of the Mission

⁹His death was announced by John Baptist Tornatore, the local superior, to Jean-Baptiste Nozo, from the Barrens, 15 December 1838, Archives of the General Curia, Rome, microfilm collection, reel 1, no. 531. Tornatore complained that Simonin's death from some intestinal ailment was hastened by his treatment with calomel, a poisonous compound of mercury much favored by American physicians of the time. Felix De Andreis is supposed to have died from the same treatment.

The more we pray, the more we wish to pray.

*(Saint Vincent de Paul, conference to the Daughters of Charity,
31 May 1648)*

What food is to the body, prayer is to the soul.)

*(Saint Vincent de Paul, conference to the Daughters of Charity,
31 May 1648)*

Prayer is the soul of our souls, that is, what the soul is to the body,
prayer is to the soul.

*(Saint Vincent de Paul, conference to the Daughters of Charity,
31 May 1648)*

There is no action in life that makes us know ourselves better or
shows us more clearly what is God's will than prayer.

*(Saint Vincent de Paul, conference to the Daughters of Charity,
31 May 1648)*