
Fall 1992

Notable Vincentians (6): Paul Bedjan

John E. Rybolt C.M., Ph.D.

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

Recommended Citation

Rybolt, John E. C.M., Ph.D. (1992) "Notable Vincentians (6): Paul Bedjan," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 2 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol13/iss2/4>

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 editor of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact digitalservices@depaul.edu.

Notable Vincentians (6) Paul Bedjan

BY

JOHN E. RYBOLT, C.M.

The recent war in the Persian Gulf brought to the consciousness of many observers the existence of a Christian minority living among the Moslems in those ancient lands. Among them are the Chaldeans, a church composed of Catholic Syrians with their own rite and ecclesial traditions. One of the most noteworthy among them was the Persian Vincentian, Paul Bedjan, the subject of this sketch. Characterized by his mother as "mischievous," by a cardinal as the "obstinate Lazarist," and by his confrere Annibale Bugnini as "the most splendid glory of the Vincentian mission in Persia," Bedjan deserves notice.

His life summed up in many ways the cultural and religious problems faced by nineteenth-century missionaries. These well intentioned Europeans and Americans, both Protestant and Catholic, set out to bring the benefits of their culture to mission lands, and in doing so, often transformed those lands and their people. For his part, after his novitiate and theological studies in Paris, Bedjan eventually moved from Persia to Europe to continue his work. He also typified the problems of loss of identity faced by Eastern Christians in a western context. Bedjan abandoned his Chaldean (East Syrian) rite when he entered the Congregation of the Mission, but compensated in some way by continuing to support his fellow Chaldeans through his fund raising and publications.

Life

Paul Bedjan was born 27 November 1838 in Khosrova, a small Christian village in northwest Persia (Iran), not far from the Turkish border. At age twelve, he was a member of the first group to enter the minor seminary founded by French Vincentians in his home town in 1846. Following another of his classmates, he sensed a call to join the Vincentians. He entered the novitiate in Paris, 27 October 1856, and was ordained, in the Roman rite, 25 May 1861. He returned immediately to Persia and set to work first in Khosrova and then in the larger

city of Urmya where he remained for twelve years, teaching, giving missions, and making converts among the Nestorian Christians.

Lack of Catholic books hampered his work there, and this realization was to guide the rest of his life. He had already brought with him on his return to Persia a small lithograph to prepare works in the Syriac dialect spoken by Christians in that part of Persia. In this way was born the Catholic Press of Urmya, under the direction of the Vincentians. The founder was the third priest from that first seminary class to enter the Congregation, Desirée Salomon. Together, Salomon and Bedjan did some work with Syriac type, but, in 1883, the press was destroyed, possibly by an arsonist. By that time, however, Bedjan had already moved to Europe to begin the second phase of his priesthood.

So strong was his reputation among his Persian Chaldean friends that they proposed him three times (1887, 1890, 1903) for the episcopacy. Each time he declined, even against the urgings of Antoine Fiat, the superior general. Bedjan's motives are unclear, but probably included the difficulties of the ministry in the Persia of the time, intra-Church problems, and the satisfaction he already had through his publishing efforts. In addition, he served in some capacity as the European representative of the Chaldean community and raised funds to sustain them in a hostile environment. In keeping with this, he even distributed his popular publications free of charge to those who needed them in his homeland.

In one peculiar event, he became the legal owner of his home town of Khosrova. The citizens came to be increasingly indebted to local money lenders, and in their desperation, they turned in 1894 to their most famous son, Paul Bedjan. He managed to help them on condition that he receive title to the town. The village never paid back what he had always regarded as a generous loan.

The task of preparing nearly illegible manuscripts for publication also took a great toll, since his eyesight began to suffer. After spending the years 1880 to 1885 in Paris and Rome, he moved to the provincial house of the Daughters of Charity in Belgium. Then, in 1902, after a rest in Theux, a house of the Belgian Vincentians, he transferred to the Daughters' house in Cologne. There he served as their chaplain until he died nearly blind, 9 June 1920.

Literary Activities

The amount of Bedjan's literary activities in the twenty-nine years from 1883 to 1912 is staggering, with more than one volume appearing

each year. Doubtless following the example of his confrere Salomon in Urmya, who had published a ritual in 1876, he began with two liturgical publications. Then, chastened by many problems and intrigues, he undertook less controversial works.

For his first liturgical project he turned to the Chaldean breviary. This work had traditionally existed in multiple volumes, suitable only for public recitation. Following his conviction about the value of the Roman rite, he determined to publish in one series a combined liturgy of the hours for the Chaldean clergy. He presented his plans to the Holy See—not, it should be noted, to the Chaldean patriarch and bishops. Convinced by his scholarship and by his simple readiness to listen to the suggestions of others, Rome allowed him to go ahead with this complex undertaking.

As the work progressed, the Holy See declared that the work would be destined solely *Ad usum scholarum*, for scholarly purposes, and hence not strictly for liturgical use. The reason is not hard to discover: Bedjan's lack of referral to the Chaldean hierarchy. He was, after all, not above suspicion, first, since he was from Persia and not from Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) where the hierarchy had been established, and second, because he had abandoned his Chaldean rite. Nevertheless, Rome authorized the liturgical use of the breviary, and it was eventually published in three volumes in 1886 and 1887 by the German press of Drugulin (Harrassowitz) in Leipzig. Bedjan had paid for the volumes through donations from a benefactress in Belgium and through other sources, not the least of which was a subsidy from the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (Propaganda Fide). The Chaldean and even some Nestorian clergy adopted Bedjan's breviary, and the Holy See reprinted it, with some significant corrections, in 1938.

His second liturgical work was less successful. He began to work on a one volume Chaldean missal in 1887, even though, as with most Eastern rites, the text of the Chaldean Eucharist did not exist in a single book. Bedjan's romanizing tendencies also led him to plan to revise the liturgy along western lines. He intended, for example, to restrict reception of the Eucharist by the laity to one species, to have them kneel at the Eucharist, to introduce the Roman chasuble, and to develop the practice of low mass.

Although Propaganda Fide had asked Bedjan, in 1888, to continue to help with the preparation of the missal, in this instance, too, he offended the Chaldean patriarch. The patriarch had wanted to reprint the traditional books without making revisions. The many letters and

reports written about this affair led Cardinal Giovanni Simeoni, prefect of Propaganda, to pencil in to one of Bedjan's papers, "obstinate Lazarist." In fact, the priest seems to have been generous of his time and talents. The missal, however, was never revised, but was printed after several years by the Dominicans in Mosul in proper Chaldean fashion.

Though this experience put an end to Bedjan's liturgical publishing, he did not stop his publishing and his later works covered a wide range of interests. A list which he prepared for the *Annales* of the Congregation of the Mission shows the categories by which he organized his publications: Church councils, theology, canon law, asceticism and piety, history, and literature. These works were mostly in classical Syriac and were editions of ancient manuscripts. His publications in the modern Neo-Aramaic dialect spoken around Urmya were his own translations of works like the *Imitation of Christ*. To prepare his publications, he traveled widely to libraries and repositories to compare variant manuscripts and to make corrections as needed. The most famous of his thirty-five works, besides the Chaldean breviary, are undoubtedly his seven volumes containing the acts of the martyrs and saints of the East (1890-1897). At the time of his death, he had nearly completed a Neo-Aramaic translation of the New Testament. This text has never been published. Since his death, however, at least two of his Syriac texts have been reprinted for scholarly research.

The result of all this work, besides a great output of ancient and modern literature, was support for the struggling Chaldean Church. Almost single-handedly, Paul Bedjan assisted its growth through his many books of piety, and drew the attention of the Catholic world to the richness of Syrian Christianity. One concrete, but probably indirect, result of his work has been the gradual establishment of more and more Chaldean dioceses, including, in 1982, one in the United States. This diocese now counts some 52,000 members in ten parishes caring for Chaldeans who have moved in ever greater numbers away from their homelands.

Bibliography

Note: Besides fairly frequent notices concerning Bedjan's publications in the *Annales de la Congrégation de la Mission*, very few substantive studies have been published on him. The following are the most significant, and have been used for this article.

Bugnini, Annibale, *La Chiesa in Iran*. Rome: Edizioni Vincenziane, 1981.
(He devotes chapter 21 to Bedjan, based principally on the work of Vosté.)

Chatelet, Aristide. "M. Paul Bedjan, Lazariste," *Annales de la Congrégation de la Mission* 110-111 (1945-46):399-420. (This Vincentian offers substantial information not in other sources.)

Dictionnaire d'histoire et de géographie ecclésiastiques, s.v. Bedjan. (Fernand Combluzier, C.M., wrote this balanced notice on his confrere, the first extensive treatment of him by a Vincentian.)

Vosté, J.-M., "Paul Bedjan, le lazarusite persan (27 nov. 1838 - 9 juin 1920). Notes bio-bibliographiques," *Orientalia christiana periodica* (1945):45-102. (This is the most detailed notice on Bedjan, since the author had access to unpublished archival materials from the Vatican.)

Let us try to bear the contradictions and repugnance we meet with in the exercise of our duty. Our actions become that much more agreeable to God.

*(Saint Louise de Marillac to Sister Julienne Loret,
21 July 1651, letter 317).*

You must place your trust in our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the father of the poor.

*(Saint Louise de Marillac to Sister Julienne Loret, I
9 September 1651, letter 327).*