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Vincentian Heritage Journal

Volume 18 | Issue 1 Article 5

4-1-1997

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Recommended Citation
Rybolt, John E. C.M., Ph.D. (1997) "A Recently Discovered Portrait of Antoine Le Gras," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 18: Iss. 1, Article 5.
Available at: http://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol18/iss1/5

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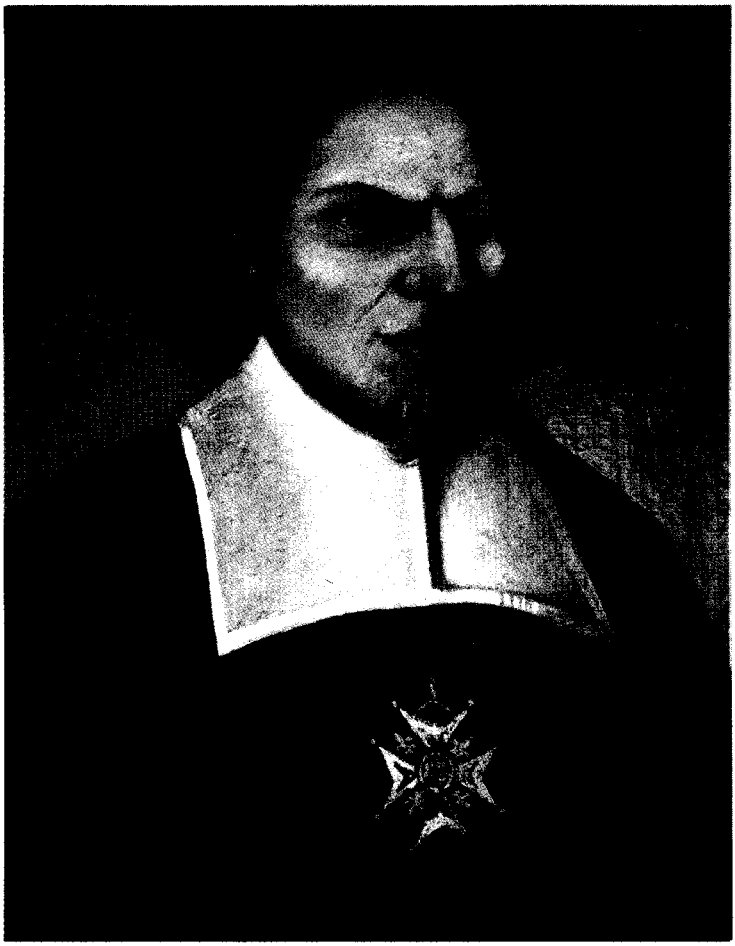

(2) A Recently Discovered Portrait of Antoine Le Gras

COMMENTARY
BY
JOHN RYBOLT, C.M.

As far as is known, there is only one extant portrait of Antoine Le Gras, husband of Louise de Marillac. This oil painting, probably painted from life, was discovered recently at the Maison-Mère of the Congregation of the Mission in Paris and was restored by its resident artist, M. Borgetto. Its identification is supported by the title on the back of the canvas, as well as by the family coat of arms in the top right-hand corner. The portrait's history is unknown, as is the identity of the artist. It is reproduced here for the first time.

Antoine Le Gras came from a solidly established family of the Auvergne in south central France. His relatives had lived in Paris at least from the sixteenth century, and they took an active part in the affairs of their parish, Saint Gervais. His father was Antoine Le Gras and his mother, Marguerite Atour. As a testimony of how little we know of him, we do not know either the year of his birth, much less his birthday. By the time he met Louise de Marillac, his future spouse, he was already working in the household of Marie de Médici, queen mother and regent of France. He was one of her secretaries. Perhaps in recognition of his work in the royal household, the artist depicted him wearing the emblems of the Order of the Holy Spirit, of which the king was the grand master.

His family, although noble, was not of the same level of nobility as the Marillacs. Louise's illegitimacy, however, which was publicly acknowledged in their marriage contract, kept her from marrying at the same level of society to which a legitimate birth might have entitled her. Hence she was regularly called Mademoiselle rather than Madame, even though some biographers attributed the first title to her. Vincent de Paul, of course, always addressed her as Mademoiselle Le Gras, never as Sister or Mother or by her maiden name. This arranged marriage took place on 6 February 1613 at Antoine's parish church.

Somewhat less than nine months later, Antoine and Louise became parents of Michel Antoine, born 18 October 1613. Louise's family circle increased when the Le Gras also received the care of seven other children, her orphaned relatives. Antoine and Louise clearly had enough money to manage a large family, but Louise reflected in later years that her husband had strained his resources to the breaking point. His condition did not improve when his employer, the queen mother, went into exile in 1617. Since extant documents mention no other work in connection with him, it is presumed that he was effectively out of work. Yet, by Louise's account, he spent his time managing his property and in caring for the poor, as she did.

In 1621 or 1622, Antoine began to show signs of what is believed to have been a form of tuberculosis. In the meantime, Mademoiselle Le Gras met Vincent de Paul and began to think of him as a spiritual advisor, though her initial feelings were not positive. Death came to Antoine on 20 or 21 December 1625. She was alone with him. Although they lived in the parish of Saint Nicolas des Champs, he was buried in a family chapel at the parish of Saint Paul. Louise's will stipulated that members of the Congregation of the Mission should celebrate three masses there each year for her good husband. She continued to remember the anniversary of his death and prayed for him on that day.

A Daughter of Charity should not only attend to the bodily wants of the poor, she is bound, and in this she differs from many, many others, to instruct the poor.

(Saint Vincent de Paul, conference to the Daughters of Charity, 9 February 1653)

Now it must be admitted - - this is a rule laid down by Saint Augustine - - that when the author of a work cannot be discovered, then it is God himself who accomplished it.

(Saint Vincent de Paul, conference to the Daughters of Charity, 24 February 1653)

Listen to him, O my soul, as if he were speaking to you alone, "I thirst for your faithful love."

(Spiritual Writings of Saint Louise de Marillac, A. 21)