
Jean-Baptiste Etienne

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2001

Preface

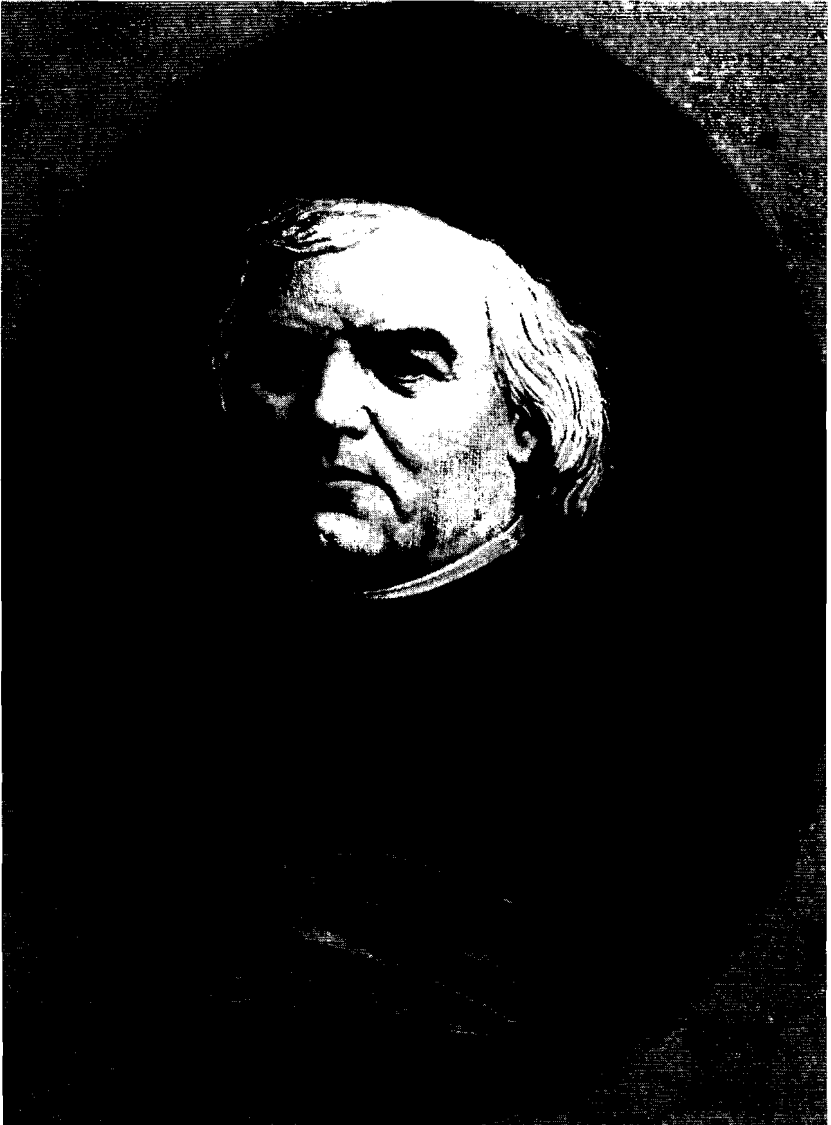
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Jean-Baptiste Étienne

*In Memory of Very Rev. J. B. Étienne
Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission and of the Sisters of
Charity.*

by
*Abram J. Ryan
(1870)*

*A shadow slept folded in vestments,
The dream of a smile on its face,
Dim, soft as the gleam after sunset
That hangs like a halo of grace
Where the daylight hath died in the valley,
And the twilight hath taken its place.
A shadow! but still on the mortal
There rested the tremulous trace
Of the joy of a spirit immortal,
Passed up to its God in His grace.*

*A shadow! hast seen in the summer
A cloud wear the smile of the sun?
On the shadow of death there is flashing
The glory of noble deeds done;
On the face of the dead there is glowing
The light of a holy race run;
And the smile of the face is reflecting.
The gleam of the crown he has won.
Still, shadow! sleep on in the vestments
Unstained by the priest who has gone.*

*And thro' all the nations the children
Of Vincent de Paul wail his loss;
But the glory that crowns him in heaven
Illumines the gloom of their cross.
They send to the shadow the tribute
Of tears, from the fountains of love,
And they send from their altars sweet prayers
To the throne of their Father above.*

*Yea! sorrow weeps over the shadow,
But faith looks aloft to the skies;
And hope, like a rainbow, is flashing
O'er the tears that rain down from their eyes.
They murmur on earth "De Profundis,"
The low chant is mingled with sighs;
"Laudate" rings out through the heavens
The dead priest hath won his faith's prize.*

*His children in sorrow will honor
His grave; every tear is a gem,
And their prayers round his brow in the heavens
Will brighten his fair diadem.
I kneel at this grave and remember,
In love, I am still one of them.*

PREFACE

BY

ROBERT P. MALONEY, C.M.

There are painful moments in our personal lives that we would sometimes like to forget. We rarely succeed, however, in doing so. Nor is it healthy to block out the dark days of the past completely. We can learn and grow from them.

That is the case too with institutions. Each has its history, with bright moments and dark ones. If we fail to examine our institutional history or ignore its lessons, we run the risk of repeating its mistakes.

I am very grateful to Father Edward Udovic for illuminating one of the darkest periods in the history of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity, a period out of which—we might say from a theological perspective—darkness gave way to light, death gave way to life. Has the Vincentian Family ever known a more troubled time than the years that followed the sack of Saint Lazare on the eve of the French Revolution? The Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity were soon suppressed in France. Its members were dispersed. A number of Vincentians and Daughters suffered martyrdom; others, exile. Some remained faithful to their vows; others abandoned their companies. Tensions among Vincentians in Italy and France, in the turbulent nationalistic context of the times, produced a divided rule which withstood many attempts at reconciliation and reunification. Vicars general, with separate jurisdictions, simultaneously exercised authority for nearly three decades. Then only shortly after the Congregation began to reexperience a united government under a single superior general, the scandal surrounding Jean-Baptiste Nozo occurred, leading to the intervention of the Holy See and Nozo's clouded departure from office and from the Congregation. With great lucidity and detail, Father Udovic analyzes these events and the sometimes ambiguous role of Nozo's successor, Jean-Baptiste Étienne.

Father Étienne became a hero in the Vincentian Family, many regarding him as its “second founder.” During his generalate, the Congregation witnessed a remarkable revival, rapid growth, and missionary expansion. The Daughters of Charity likewise experienced an explosive increase in numbers and vitality. Father Étienne’s later account of these years is, at least in part, a rewriting and reinterpretation of what happened. Father Udovic sifts through the data to analyze Étienne’s actual contribution during the period, and his strengths and weaknesses.

Whatever Jean-Baptiste Étienne’s faults may have been—and it is evident from Father Udovic’s work and other recent studies that they were significant—there is no doubt that the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity flourished under his government. Both companies had been weakened, scattered, and divided at the beginning of his long generalate. Thirty-one years later, at his death, they were vibrant apostolic societies, unified in life and ministry as evangelizers and servants of the poor.

Étienne had a positive relationship with some of the great heroes of the Vincentian Family: John Gabriel Perboyre, Catherine Labouré, Frédéric Ozanam, Rosalie Rendu. But he had sharp conflicts with others: he clashed with Justin de Jacobis, now canonized, and he cut off from the Congregation (and even from its prayers for deceased members) several Vincentians who became bishops without his approval, including John Timon, first bishop of Buffalo, and John Lynch, first archbishop of Toronto, as well as Buenaventura Codina, bishop of the Canary Islands, whose cause of beatification was recently introduced.

In many ways Étienne is hard for us to understand today. He was tough, wily, authoritarian. Yet it is clear that providence used him to guide the Vincentian Family through a very difficult period that gradually became one of intense growth. I am very grateful to Father Udovic for helping us grow in insight into this complex man’s thought and actions.

INTRODUCTION

The figure of Jean-Baptiste Étienne (1801-1874) dominates the postrevolutionary, pre-Vatican II, history of the Congregation of the Mission and the Company of the Daughters of Charity. Excepting their founder, Saint Vincent de Paul (1581-1660), no other person so determinatively shaped such a significant portion of the communities' history. Thus, Étienne's traditional, if controversial, title as their "second founder" seems to be fitting.

For the final years of the Ancien Régime, Saint Vincent's communities operated within the altar and throne polities of Catholic Europe, especially Bourbon France. The French Revolution and its aftermath swept them away along with the other ecclesiastical institutions of the Ancien Régime. After the 1801 concordat, the communities reestablished a legal foothold in France within the new order. This classic Gallican relationship with the government remained surprisingly unchanged through the First Empire, the Bourbon Restoration, the July Revolution, Louis-Philippe, the revolution of 1848, the Second Republic, Napoleon III, and into the Third Republic.

Amid the handful of men's communities afforded legal recognition in anticlerical France and the greater number of women's communities afforded such recognition, the Lazarists and Daughters of Charity stood highest in governmental favor. The advantages provided by this relationship, the rapid growth of the French provinces, and a *de facto* French dominance of the communities' leadership, enabled the French Lazarists and Daughters of Charity to reassert control over the foreign provinces and missions of their now far-flung communities. This constitutive Gallicanism proved problematic with respect to the Holy See, urged on by intransigent conservative, ultramontane, and legitimist elements of the French Church. Throughout his career, Étienne tried to maintain a balance between being Gallican enough to satisfy the French government while being just ultramontane enough to satisfy the papacy and like-minded French Catholic constituencies. He always was able to satisfy the French government, which meant that he could rarely satisfy Rome and its allies. French domination also proved problematic for many of the Congregation's other nationalities, notably the Italians and Spaniards.

During Étienne's lifetime and his long generalate (1843-1874), the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity experienced the century's struggles between the forces of democratic, liberal, "chaos" and conservative, hierarchical, "order." Étienne envisioned a worldwide "reconciliation" of democracy with Catholicism on the basis of shared conservative principles according to a French model. Internally, Étienne resolved intense struggles unambiguously in favor of the principle of "order."

According to Étienne, the Double Family (as the two communities are known) underwent a "rebirth" rather than a "restoration." This distinction was an important one. The communities were not "restored" as they had existed before the French Revolution. Étienne saw their previous existence in the later years of the Ancien Régime as having been far from the ideal envisioned by Saint Vincent. Instead, he believed that the communities providentially emerged from destruction to be "recreated" or "reborn" to a new existence, in a new century, with new worldwide destinies.

The communities were "reborn" only when a new generation of Lazarists and sisters (Étienne's own generation) successfully recaptured the communities' lost "primitive spirit." According to Étienne, the evidence of this achievement was the Double Family's vocational explosion and breathless international expansion that became apparent by mid-century. Étienne concluded that because of their fidelity, the achievements of the contemporary communities surpassed even those of Saint Vincent's lifetime.

As secretary general, procurator general, and then as superior general, Jean-Baptiste Étienne played an irreducible role in these events. His greatest strengths were an instinctive sense for correctly reading the "signs of the times," a commitment to the evangelization and service of the poor, knowing best how to achieve uniformity, and how to take full advantage of its benefits. His greatest weaknesses were his French nationalism, his narrow authoritarian horizons, his paternalism, and the almost unlimited price he was willing to pay to achieve absolute obedience, order, and uniformity within the Double Family.

Étienne believed that the success of this rebirth was "the work of God alone." In his mind these events led to a divinely-ordained triumph. Naturally, from a faith perspective it would be unthinkable to question the results of God's will accomplished in history. In this

regard, Étienne quoted Saint Vincent who had always spoken of the Congregation's foundation in this way: "Can you say that something was the result of human effort if no one foresaw, willed or purposely sought after this end?" By cloaking the story of the "rebirth" with a providential cover, and by insisting that he could take no credit for its success, Étienne hoped to preclude any questioning of the very human means he had foreseen, willed and purposely sought after to accomplish what not all of his contemporaries would agree were "divine" ends.

Throughout his generalate, Étienne consistently interpreted and reacted to contemporary events in light of his highly idiosyncratic perspectives. He finally compiled these interpretations into a classic creation myth retelling, for the sake of future generations, the story of the Congregation's rebirth and new life. He entitled this work, *Notice sur le rétablissement de la Congrégation de la Mission après la révolution de 1789*. Étienne's mythic leadership shaped the Double Family throughout the rest of the nineteenth and far into the twentieth centuries.

In the absence of any other critical efforts, Étienne's myths have stood for the last one hundred and twenty six years as the only substantive accounts of the Congregation's revival. The present study is an attempt to recover this history, in part through the deconstruction of Étienne's central creation myth, and in part through research-based narrative construction. The resulting work examines within the context of contemporary events, secular and religious forces, and internal struggles, how Étienne's leadership shaped the rebirth and new existence of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity.

It is not surprising that in a community that has had little tradition of historical scholarship that there have been no previous studies of Étienne or of this period in the Double Family's history. The 1881 biography of Étienne by Edouard Rosset, C.M., while valuable, does not stand as a critical contribution. Presently, the superior general of the Congregation of the Mission has commissioned the first comprehensive multi-volume history of the community. However, to this date only one volume of the projected five volume work has been completed. No critical study of the Daughters of Charity, which is arguably the most important apostolic women's congregation in the Church's history, is contemplated.

It is also surprising, given the unique role of Étienne, the Lazarists, and the Daughters of Charity in nineteenth-century French history, that they also have received almost no attention from outside scholars. It is hoped that the present study will represent a modest contribution to both Vincentian historiography and the historiography of nineteenth-century religious history. While a paucity of critical studies of Étienne and nineteenth-century Vincentian history exists, abundant resources are available on the general history of the era. Besides these secondary sources, a wealth of mostly untouched primary source materials exist in the various provincial and general archives of the Congregation of the Mission, the Holy See, Propaganda Fide, the French National Archives, the archives of the French Foreign Ministry and elsewhere. Many of these resources were consulted for this work.

This study begins with an introductory chapter that spans the period from the sack of Saint-Lazare in 1789 to the communities' legal dissolution in August 1792. The chapter also provides a brief review of the foundation of the Congregation of the Mission and its history under the Ancien Régime. Special attention is given here to the community's struggles with nationalism and absolutism and its eighteenth-century decline.

The second chapter introduces the figure of Jean-Baptiste Étienne, and examines his *Notice* as a creation myth. The chapter also traces the Congregation's history from its 1792 dissolution to its 1804 Napoleonic restoration. The next chapter reviews the events of the Napoleonic period, the second suppression in 1809, the Bourbon restoration in 1816, and the confirmation of the governmental schism.

The fourth chapter details the period from Étienne's entrance into the community and includes the end of the governmental schism, the papal appointment of Pierre de Wailly as superior general in 1827, and the 1829 election of Dominique Salhorgne as superior general. Salhorgne's election marked the restoration of full constitutional government in the Congregation for the first time since the revolution. This was the period when the newly-ordained Étienne rose quickly to the highest levels of community government.

The fifth chapter reviews the period from Salhorgne's election in 1829 through the scandal-ridden administration of his successor, Jean-Baptiste Nozo, from 1835 to 1841. The next chapter examines the controversy surrounding the community's 1841 sexennial assembly

that elected Antoine Poussou as vicar general in preparation for a showdown over Nozo's leadership. Chapter seven examines the events of 1842-1843 that led to Nozo's forced resignation from the generalate, an Italian-French succession struggle, and the planned election of a new general. Throughout these chapters Étienne's leadership is highlighted.

The eighth chapter begins with Étienne's election to the generalate in 1843 and briefly examines the accomplishments and defects of his administration. A final chapter looks at Étienne at the end of his life and offers a retrospective to his career.

An underlying premise to this study is that the rebirth and restoration of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity during the nineteenth century reveals the scope of the task that confronts the members of these same communities as the dust continues to settle from the revolution that was the Second Vatican Council.