Spring 1993

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Simone Zurawski Ph.D.

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Saint-Lazare in the Ancien Régime: From Saint Vincent de Paul to the French Revolution

BY
SIMONE ZURAWSKI

In just a few moments we will be visiting the first Vincentian motherhouse, the Clos Saint-Lazare in Paris, which has been newly rebuilt for us in a diorama. I would now like to preview that tour with some background and additional thoughts.¹

Saint-Lazare, the motherhouse and administrative center of the Congregation of the Mission from 1632 until 1792 (fig. 1), was also the physical embodiment of Vincent de Paul’s mission to reform the French Church, much dispirited by the recent wars of religion. The theme of spiritual rebirth was sensitively developed for us by Father Raymond Deville, S.S., and will be further addressed tomorrow by Professor Barbara Diefendorf, Sister Louise Sullivan, D.C., and Father Edward Udovic, C.M. As a counterpart to their discussions, I present my own work on the architecture of Saint-Lazare, which was

¹This paper, presented at the inaugural session of the symposium, was intended as a prelude to the tour of the Vincentian exhibit on permanent display of the Lincoln Park Library of DePaul University. The exhibit, entitled “The Clos Saint-Lazare, Paris, and its Neighborhood in the Time of St. Vincent de Paul and his First Successors, ca. 1630-1792,” features an original diorama of the property as it appeared in 1783, just prior to the French Revolution. It was fabricated by Chicago artist Jeffrey Wrona at the author’s direction, and is based on research she conducted principally in Paris in the Archives Nationales (where the papers of Saint-Lazare have been deposited since the Revolution). In addition to the diorama, DePaul’s exhibit includes materials related to the history of the Clos Saint Lazare, for example, artifacts once belonging to Saint Vincent de Paul while he lived at Saint-Lazare, maps and views of Paris in the Ancien Régime, the set of prints representing Vincent de Paul’s Life, and street views showing the property as it appears today. A select number of these works on exhibit are mentioned and illustrated in this paper, and a complete exhibit checklist with commentary is found in the catalogue, The Vincentian Mission: From Paris to the Mississippi, A Catalog of Three Historical Exhibitions Relating to the Heritage of Vincent de Paul (Chicago: DePaul University, 1992), 1-17.
Fig. 1—Overview of the Clos Saint-Lazare, Paris, as it appeared in 1783, looking toward the rue Saint-Denis; detail from the diorama of Saint-Lazare, executed by Jeffrey Wrona after the research of Simone Zurawski for the DePaul University Library, Lincoln Park campus, Chicago, 1992 (Photo: James L. Balodimas).

part of the renewal of Paris started by King Henry IV in about 1600 (fig. 2). The year 1600 represented a new century with new hope, and Vincent de Paul’s new community, the Congregation of the Mission, was to be a promising part of it.

Vincent and his confrères were first housed in a collège or townhouse called the Bons-Enfants, located on the left bank in an area now occupied by a post office. The Bons-Enfants was too cramped for the growing community, and this situation was remedied by the archbishop of Paris, who presented to Vincent the ancient priory of Saint-
Lazare, on the right bank, which was the largest property in or around Paris. These two views illustrate the appearance of Saint-Lazare at about that time from ground level (figs. 3, 4). We see here a monastery, first established back in the twelfth century and sited on the royal road to Saint-Denis, an important north-south link into Paris. Saint-Lazare's placement at the edge, really beyond the city, would determine its various roles in history: as a farm or fief dotting the rural landscape and as a hospice for lepers, whereby it was far removed from the populations of the inner city. There was also a more ceremonial role played out here, since Saint-Lazare served as the official stopping point for the kings en route between the Louvre palace (in the city of Paris) and the Abbey of Saint-Denis outside of town to the north.

Fig. 4 — After Bonardot, view of Saint-Lazare, ca. 1618, from L. Brizard and J. Chapon, Histoire de la Prison de Saint-Lazare, du Moyen Age à Nos Jours (Paris: 1925) following p. 40.

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Stafford Poole, C.M., “Saint-Lazare as a Prison,” Vincentian Heritage, 2 (1987):127-40. Mostly concerns the maison de force, that is, dating back to the middle ages and the one inherited by Vincent and his successors; not to be confused with the post-revolutionary prison mentioned in this paper.


When Vincent de Paul took possession of Saint-Lazare in 1632, its medieval glory days had long passed; he saw instead broken-down buildings and neglected farms spread out onto about seventy-five acres. Vincent rolled up his sleeves and tackled the work of rebuilding, a task which I view as part of his mission in revitalizing the Church.

This point is echoed in Article 21 of the Bull of Canonization, which states “Vincent devoted himself to reestablish the beauty of the house of God.” Indeed Vincent put a new face on Saint-Lazare; he repaired the service buildings along the main road and built a proper entryway (fig. 5). Moreover his fresh work in clergy formation took architectural forms, namely, a new house for the ordinands (those awaiting ordination), and a seminary dedicated to Saint Charles, which was used as well as a humanities college (fig. 6). I may also point out on this map the field house which Vincent built for the students, who needed a good place for their recreation, especially billiards.

As for the old farm, Vincent renovated the crumbling buildings and replanted the fields with several varieties of grain, all
meant for the feeding of the poor (fig. 7). This farmer's son also tried experiments, such as breeding sheep whose milk would nourish the abandoned children, a major work undertaken by the Company of the Daughters of Charity, which as you know Vincent had co-founded with Louise de Marillac. And for Louise and her sisters Vincent acquired a home across the street (fig. 8), as well as residences nearby for the abandoned children and for the indigent elderly. Instead of attaching these aspects of his mission—that is, the
Daughters, children, and "seniors"—to Saint-Lazare, Vincent considered them as autonomous. They were near to but not of Saint-Lazare, which Vincent enclosed within walls (fig. 9), thus forming a near rectangle with the rue Saint-Denis to the east, boulevard de la Chapelle to the north, rue Poissonnière to the west, and rue de Paradis to the south (fig. 10). This move of enclosure, above all, protected the precious grain fields, the true wealth and heart of Saint-Lazare. Also, these walls reflected Vincent's quality of mind to provide a wholeness around the parts.

When Vincent died in 1660, his successors quickened the pace of the maintenance of the prop-

Fig. 9 — Extant fragment of the walls of the Clos Saint-Lazare, Paris, first built by Saint Vincent de Paul in the 1640s and rebuilt in subsequent years, located at the north on the present-day boulevard de la Chapelle (Photo: author).

Fig. 10 — Modern plan showing boundaries of the former Clos Saint-Lazare, Paris, from Jean Parrang, C.M. "Saint-Lazare," Petites Annales de Saint Vincent de Paul, nos. 3-4 (1902-1903):23.
The first among them, René Alméras and Edme Jolly, moreover, established their own agenda. This was to conserve the remains of their founder in a conspicuous tomb in the chapel of Saint-Lazare (figs. 11, 12). Vincent’s tomb was not to be the private possession of the Vincentian community but a treasure of France, which all were encouraged to visit. Alméras, then Jolly principally, enlarged the church in order to accommodate the pilgrims coming to the tomb,
a daunting challenge because the church, built in the Gothic period, was the oldest and most venerable monument of Saint-Lazare, and also quite small. As a solution it seems Alméras and Jolly first considered extending the nave along its longitudinal axis, as I may demonstrate from two (out of six extant) ground-plans, apparently submitted in a competition (figs. 13, 14). None of these entries was actualized, perhaps because of reluctance to violate the integrity of the original Gothic apse, placed right on the street, and its entrance tower, facing into the grounds.

Fig. 13 & 14 — Plans for the extension of the nave of the chapel of the Clos Saint-Lazare, Paris, architects unidentified, pen on paper, ca. 1680s, Archives Nationales, Paris, N III Seine 306 no. 1 and 3 (Photos: Service Photographique des Archives Nationales).

Fig. 15 — After LeFèvre (or LeFebvre), plan of the chapel of the Clos Saint-Lazare, as of 1796, from Jean Parrang, C.M. "L'Eglise de l'ancien Saint-Lazare," Petites Annales de Saint Vincent de Paul, nos. 3-4 (1902-1903):49.
Alméras, or Jolly, came up with the winning solution of adding several altars along the lateral flanks of the interior, as well as creating a more pronounced entryway for lay visitors coming in from the street (fig. 15). This project of placing Vincent's tomb in the public domain coincided with, and I believe was directly linked to, the production of Vincent's first biography, which Bishop Louis Abelly was composing while living in retirement at Saint-Lazare (fig. 16). Alméras began to refurbish the church around the tomb, in the manner of a shrine, and commissioned Abelly to write the biography at about the same time, that is, closely following Vincent's death, with the greater goal of advancing Vincent's canonization. Since canonization was based on evidence of miracles brought about by the candidate's intercession, this prospect was much increased if persons outside the immediate Vincentian community would come to know of Vincent both through Abelly's biography and through visits to the tomb at Saint-Lazare.

Another development of the fabric undertaken by Jolly in this period—still the 1600s—was the handsome tripartite entrance portal, which gave authority and an emphatic central interest to the buildings along rue Saint-Denis (fig. 1). One visitor complimented it as "elegant in the manner of Mansart but with a rustic flavor." Alas, the more modest gateway built by Vincent, which was shown earlier (see fig. 5), had to be demolished. Jolly's new portal led to a courtyard needed for receiving carriages, which in turn was attached to the grandiose block of building, which consisted of a central corps-de-logis and projecting wings at right angles to it. Their rectilinear arms embraced the second courtyard, spilling out into terraces and flower gardens, new ornamen-
Fig. 17 — View of the buildings and second courtyard of the Clos Saint-Lazare, detail from the diorama of Saint-Lazare, executed by Jeffrey Wrona after the research of Simone Zurawski for the DePaul University Library, Lincoln Park campus, Chicago, 1992 (Photo: James L. Balodimas).

Fig. 18 — View of the refectory of the Clos Saint-Lazare, Paris, after Jane Chapon, from L. Brizard and J. Chapon, Histoire de la Prison Saint-Lazare du Moyen Age à Nos Jours (Paris: 1925), following p. 95.
Fig. 19 — Map of Paris showing the building history of the walls of the city, from W. Braunfels, *Urban Design in Western Europe, Regime and Architecture, 900-1900*, trans, K.J. Northcott (Chicago: 1988), fig. 165.

Tal features of Saint-Lazare (fig. 17). This great block housed the community as well as the growing numbers of retreatants, clergy and laity alike. The "retreat industry" that sprang up certainly enhanced the repute of Saint-Lazare as a must-see attraction in Paris, and the guide books praised the hospitable dining hall which could seat between 100-200 persons, depending upon who was counting (fig. 18).

Fig. 20 — View of the extant "Five Pavilions" apartment house block, located on rue Saint-Denis on the former grounds of the Clos Saint-Lazare, Paris (Photo: author).
By this time, crawling toward 1700, the city walls that were expanding outwards away from the core of Paris were already demolished, thus bringing Saint-Lazare closer to the city, or vice-versa, pushing the city into the shadow of Saint-Lazare (fig. 19). The middle classes began pouring into new housing developments in the district, and one of the choicest addresses was the apartment house block that the Vincentian fathers built on an underused garden facing the street (figs. 20, 21). Most of this building group is still intact, revealing well-built, worthy examples of middle-class housing of the 1720s. The year 1729, in fact, marks another turning point. For amidst the urban renewal taking place at Saint-Lazare, Vincent de Paul was beatified. Vincent’s remains were

exhumed and examined by papal authorities. They were then reinterred in a silver rococo casket that looked just like this image (fig. 22). Canonization followed in 1737. In commemoration of this long anticipated event, the Vincentians filled the church of Saint-Lazare with a festive parade of oil paintings representing Vincent’s life. These pictures were copied almost at once in prints, which were made available as souvenirs in Saint-Lazare’s sacristy. This example illustrates a scene of Saint Vincent preaching (fig. 23). DePaul University acquired a set, which is now on permanent display in the Vincentian exhibit of the new Lincoln Park Library.

Fig. 21 — Close-up of the portal of one of the units of the “Five Pavilions” apartment house block, located on the rue Saint-Denis on the former property of the Clos Saint-Lazare, Paris (Photo: author).
Canonization boosted the morale and fame of Saint-Lazare, which prospered in the 1780s. Contractors’ reports from that decade illuminate the quality of life within the 600-plus rooms, and I would like to share some of these findings with you:

*Item.* There was a previously-unknown marble statue of Saint Vincent placed in the church of Saint-Lazare, as I discovered in contracts for the decoration of its niche. *Item.* The art and craft of elaborate carpentry flourished at Saint-Lazare; this paneled doorway, dating from the seventeenth century, is a fine example (fig. 24). *Item.* Saint-Lazare had a
fabulous library numbering 18,000-20,000 volumes; this is its bookplate stamped with the insignia of Saint-Lazare, showing Christ and the resurrected Lazarus (fig. 25).

Item. Saint-Lazare housed one of the most celebrated pharmacies in Paris, and its experiments were evidently carried out in the hospital work of the Daughters of Charity. There was a physics laboratory that had a telescope, microscopes, and an "electric machine," making Saint-Lazare, it seems, party to the scientific age.

Last Item cited. There were extensive water conduits; for instance, nine lines fed the dispensary. This is unglamorous but telling evidence for the good management of the house, and makes the point that Saint-Lazare controlled the only fresh water supply in the neighborhood over the centuries.

Saint-Lazare, then, was great in stature, if far from luxurious, by the


Fig. 25 — Engraved bookplate for the library of the Clos Saint-Lazare, Paris, showing the arms of the community, from L. von Matt and L. Cognet, *Saint Vincent de Paul*, trans. E. Crauford (Chicago: 1960), fig. 141.
mid-1700s, as witnessed on the great Turgot Plan of Paris (figs. 26, 27). Saint-Lazare was also caught in conflict between its historic identity as a farm or fief in the medieval sense and as an institution keeping pace with contemporary urban life. Which of these directions would Saint-Lazare take in the future? The answer came from without, starting in 1784, with the erection of the customs gates (called barrières) around Paris, and also the barracks of the Royal Guard built to protect them, a number of which pricked Saint-Lazare at critical points. One set of barracks occupied property obtained from Saint-Lazare at the west (fig.

Fig. 26 — View of Saint-Lazare, from the Plan of Turgot of Paris, 1734-39, modern facsimile ed. in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

Fig. 27 — View of Saint-Lazare, from the Plan Turgot of Paris, 1734-39, modern facsimile ed. in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.
Fig. 28 — Carved stone relief showing military images from the casernes (barracks) of the Royal Guard, rue Poissonnière, ca. late eighteenth century, located on the former property of the Clos Saint-Lazare, Paris (Photo: author).

Fig. 29 — Berthault after Prieur, "The Pillage of Saint-Lazare on the Night of 13 July 1789," engraving, illustration from Collection Complète des tableaux historiques de la Révolution française (Paris: Auber, an XIII-1804), impression in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris (Photo: Bibliothèque Nationale).
The custom gates and barracks infuriated the people, frustrated by taxes and food shortages, and also visions of abundance being stored in Saint-Lazare's copious multiple cellars. Riots brought down the customs gates and threatened the institutions of the city. Saint-Lazare was one of the first victims of the violence, a story unto itself whose horror nevertheless, can be sensed from this print (fig. 29). This pillage was like a dress rehearsal for the capture of the Bastille, which took place on the next day. One act of violence led to another, including a massacre of seminarians at the old Bons-Enfants, mounting into full-scale revolution. Saint-Lazare, like other religious houses, was confiscated and its community expelled. Most unhappily, the grounds were turned into a revolutionary prison.

Figure 30 shows one of the plans made by an architect of the Revolution for the conversion into a prison. Although it is difficult to say with certainty how many of these ideas were in fact implemented, we may view some authentic glimpses of the Maison Lazare (as it was then called), painted by an artist who himself was imprisoned there (figs. 31, 32).

The confiscation lasted over a three year period of terror, confusion, and uncertainty. A great number of surviving diaries and inventories serve as windows into this experience. In one instance a group of Saint-Lazare's students, apparently fired up by ideals of revolution, complained to the Directoire (the ruling body of France at that time) about the Vincentians and their supérieur general; in another scene, seminarians sent impassioned letters to authorities swearing patriotism and
loyalty to the cause; and in one memo the superior general pleaded with the military against conscripting his seminarians as a breach of their Holy Orders. Invoices list repairs that were made following the pillage, dispassionate but most vivid witnesses of these events. There are bills for locksmiths, of course, also for carpenters and masons, and for the replacement of thousands of broken tiles. The sacristan's account
ledger included one of the last entries, dated just prior to final expulsion. In a weary and trembling hand he notes the costs of dusting the church and its pictures, that is, the canvases representing Saint Vincent's life, the starching of the altar linens for Sunday mass, and fees paid to the organist. These are extravagances, or so it would seem, at a time when the holdings of Saint-Lazare were being carted away in liquidation. What rings true to me, however, is the interlinear meaning of that entry, that while facing destruction of life as it once was, the community wanted its church to continue and
wanted to employ the faithful laundress and organist (an old married couple, perhaps?) until the very end.

The great chunks of buildings along rue Saint-Denis served as a prison or hospital until they were demolished in the 1930s. The farms were sold off and resurfaced as a near blank canvas for a modern new city. Figure 33 is a view of the neighborhood as it looks today. All but nothing is left of Saint-Lazare now except for a few fragments, here, for example, of the Gothic church (fig. 34). You may, however, enjoy a lofty overview of the property on your next visit to Paris, from the vantage point of Montmartre, picking out the copper roof of the nineteenth-century church dedicated to Saint Vincent de Paul, which only seems a fair exchange (fig. 35).

Fig. 35 — Panoramic overview of the former property of the Clos Saint-Lazare, Paris, from Montmartre (Photo: author).