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Jean-Baptiste Étienne, C.M.
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BY
Edward R. Udovic, C.M., Ph.D.

Introduction

Jean-Baptiste Étienne, C.M. (1801-1874), served as the fourteenth successor to Saint Vincent de Paul (1581-1660) as the superior general of the Congregation of the Mission and the Company of the Daughters of Charity from his election on 4 August 1843 until his death on 14 March 1874. Monsieur Étienne has often been described (but not without considerable controversy) as the “Second Founder” of these communities.

This title was first publicly ascribed to him in January 1870 when he began a year-long celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of his entry into the Congregation of the Mission. The first assistant general of the Lazaristes, Eugène Vicart, said at a New Year’s gathering: “We are fond of regarding you as our second founder. If ever anyone contests this title, if one day the Company should forget what you have done for it, the stones themselves will cry out and rightly accuse us of ingratitude.”

It is well-known that the identity, community life, and ministries of the Daughters of Charity, which re-emerged in the first half of the nineteenth century from the chaos of the revolutionary, Napoleonic, and restoration eras, led to what Monsieur Étienne described as “a hitherto unexampled and ever-increasing influex of Vocations; a development of your Company which widens daily and seems to have no bounds; an innumerable multitude of poor and sick comforted and strengthened, supported and relieved, instructed and saved; we see in fine, an incomparable prosperity beyond the

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1 Paper originally presented at the conference Des Filles de la Charité aux sœurs de Saint-Vincent-de-Paul: quatre siècles de “cornettes” (XVIIe-XXe s.), held 7-8 October 2011, Université Paris-Sorbonne, France.

For a complete discussion of the leadership of Jean-Baptiste Étienne, C.M., see Edward R. Udovic, C.M., Jean-Baptiste Étienne and the Vincentian Revival (Chicago: Vincentian Studies Institute, 2001). Hereinafter cited as Étienne. For a contemporary biography see Edouard Rosset, C.M., Vie de M. Jean-Baptiste Étienne (Paris: Congrégation de la Mission, 1881).

2 For Monsieur Étienne’s view of the restoration of the Vincentian Family see Jean-Baptiste Étienne, Notice sur le rétablissement de la Congrégation de la Mission après la revolution de 1789 (Paris: Congrégation de la Mission, 1870).

comprehension of the human mind. We must indeed exclaim with the royal Prophet: This is the work of God; the hand of man cannot claim it.” ¹⁴ These characteristics of the community remained largely unchanged for more than a century until the seismic shift to modernity, followed by the tsunami of post-modernity.

I would argue that in the end Monsieur Étienne deserves his title of “Second Founder,” though the attribution must be contextualized and nuanced. There are consequences to accepting this title for Monsieur Étienne, consequences which include acknowledging him as one of the most important, if not the most important figure in the modern histories of both communities until the Second Vatican Council. It is this contextualization and nuance that is the topic of my paper today.

To posit that Jean-Baptiste Étienne was the “Second Founder” is not to claim he was a second Saint Vincent de Paul. Sanctity was certainly not one of his personal attributes. Rather, it is to acknowledge that as superior general he possessed a remarkable grasp of the timeless “esprit primitif” bequeathed to the community by Saint Vincent de Paul; namely: a community based on a Christo-centric discipleship whose rule called for a preferential, direct, disciplined, skilled, personalistic, prayerful and effective service to the most abandoned of the poor and sick. Monsieur Étienne was obsessed with this concept of “l’esprit primitif” and he made it the organizing principle which guided ALL of his rhetoric, policies, and actions as superior general to restore the community and make it successful in the brave new nineteenth-century world.

As Monsieur Étienne noted:

Hence my very dear Sisters, God did not only inspire our Holy Founder with the thought of establishing your Company; he was also pleased that he should provide it with the means calculated to secure to it the blessings of Heaven which it possesses, and the future success of the works entrusted to you. It was not enough to found the institution, it was necessary that he should impart his spirit to it, and perpetuate in its bosom the inspirations which he had received from Heaven; that the Daughters of Charity who are destined to carry on his mission in future ages, should be imbued with the same maxims, formed in the same school, and be in possession of the means of success.

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¹⁴ Circulars of the Superiors-General and the Superioresses to the Daughters of Charity: and notices upon the deceased Sisters of the Community (Emmitsburg, MD: St. Joseph’s, 1870), 119. Hereinafter cited as Circulars.
as those whom he had formed himself to the life of your holy state. Now the book of your Holy Rules is the precious treasure in which are contained all the resources necessary to maintain it in its spirit and feed the flame of divine charity which he enkindled in it. It is not our industry nor the use of human means that can support and perpetuate the works of St. Vincent, but the blessing of Heaven alone. And this blessing is not attached to us nor to our endeavors but to your Holy Rules, that basis on which St. Vincent erected the edifice of your Company… Like the maxims of the Gospel, of which they are but the application, and participating in their immutability, they are for every age and every circumstance, an infallible means of successfully fulfilling the great mission entrusted to you… Therefore, the more strictly regularity is observed amongst you, the more fit will you become for the accomplishment of the designs of God; therefore again, the more you endeavor to revive the primitive spirit in the Company, the more you will secure its prosperity and development.5

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5 Circulars, 120, 141.

Mid-nineteenth-century holy card, French, Paris.
Saint Vincent de Paul presenting a Daughter of Charity to Jesus Christ. “Lord, behold she who is sacrificing herself for you. Come, good and faithful servant, enter into your Master’s joy.”
Images collected by the Vincentian Studies Institute
Monsieur Étienne’s background and experience

Monsieur Étienne owed his vocation as a Lazarist to the Daughters of Charity. As a young seminarian for the diocese of Metz he became ill and was cared for at a hospital run by the Daughters. During his illness, one of the sisters gave him a copy of Pierre Collet’s biography of Vincent de Paul. He soon entered the Congregation of the Mission at the new maison-mère at 95 rue de Sèvres in October 1820. Jean-Baptiste Étienne belonged to the “rising generation” of young men to enter the precariously-restored community after a quarter-century hiatus in recruitment. At the maison-mère he was surrounded by a small number of middle-aged and elderly confreres (“precious relics”)6 who had survived the interregnum and had chosen to rejoin the community.

After his ordination in 1825, Étienne began serving in senior leadership roles at the maison-mère; first as secretary to the French vicar-general, and then simultaneously as Secretary and Procurator General of the Congregation.7 As he rose to prominence in the twenty-five years prior to his assuming the generalate (during the Bourbon Restoration and the July Monarchy) he naturally acquired a set of religious, cultural, political, ecclesial, theological, aesthetic and other values characteristic of contemporary French Catholicism.8 These values were forged in the midst of some tumultuous years within the communities.

During this time, Monsieur Étienne witnessed the Daughters of Charity and the Congregation of the Mission in France struggle to re-establish themselves to something approaching their “former lustre.” There were chronic nationalistic divisions among the Lazarists. Regular constitutional government had been suspended since 1801. The communities in France were governed by a French vicar general headquartered in Paris, and the communities elsewhere by an Italian vicar general headquartered in Rome. The communities in what was left of Poland were cut off by Russian imperial mandate. The Daughters in France, and at the maison-mère, still felt the lingering resentments of their schism during the Napoleonic period.9 Even after the papal restoration of constitutional government in 1827, with the appointment of Pierre de Wailly as superior general, the communities’

6 See, Étienne, 51-52, 111-114.
7 Ibid.
trials were not ended. Then the scandals that accompanied the disastrous generalate of Jean-Baptiste Nozo from 1835 to 1841 followed. Monsieur Nozo and Monsieur Étienne were from the same rising generation, and were unedifying rivals and deadly enemies.

After Nozo’s summons to Rome and forced resignation by the Holy See, infighting again broke out between the Italian provinces on one side, and the French Lazarists on the other. With the support of the government of Louis-Philippe (especially the Foreign Minister François Guizot), the Holy See had little choice but to restore order on terms dictated by the French Lazarists led by Jean-Baptiste Étienne. Upon his subsequent election as superior general, Monsieur Étienne knew exactly what needed to be done, and he had a clear plan on how to go about the successful refounding of his beloved communities and their recovery from “past griefs.”

Étienne's Reform and Restoration Agenda Revealed:
“…experience furnishes numerous proofs....”

A year-to-the-day after his election as superior general Monsieur Étienne wrote a circular letter to the Daughters of Charity. These letters were a venerable tradition, and served as the primary means for the general to regularly communicate with the sisters to convey news, spiritual exhortations, and admonitions. In the case of Monsieur Étienne, over the course of his long generalate, these letters by the dozens reveal the unvarying narrative of his leadership.

A letter of 4 August 1844 is worth examining because it is the first comprehensive statement of that narrative at the start of his generalate. The importance that Monsieur Étienne ascribed to this missive is illustrated by the fact he directed this letter to be read annually at every community retreat. The letter was written at the end of a special retreat held at the maison-mère in Paris for the sister-servants of the community in France and Italy. Étienne wrote with unrestrained emotion:

My heart has long anticipated the moment in which I might give you some account of... that memorable meeting which has left indelible recollections on my mind. It has realized all my hopes and surpassed all my expectations... One must have been present at this touching meeting, my very dear Sisters, to form an idea of the deep impression produced

10 See, Étienne, 81-252.
11 Circulars, 121.
on every heart. An emotion impossible to define and which filled the soul with consolation, was experienced by every one... a heavenly balm which diffused joy and happiness everywhere. The finger of God was there, and everything announced that the Holy Ghost was accomplishing a work of regeneration.... I thought I saw the Heavens open, and St. Vincent from his throne of glory looking upon them (the sisters) with love, applauding all their generous resolutions, encouraging their confidence, blessing them with me, in all the effusion of his heart, and promising them a protection as efficacious for the prosperity of the Company, as it would be powerful to protect it from the perils that might yet await it.... I don’t think, that at any period, your Company ever presented so touching a spectacle...12

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Mid-nineteenth-century holy card, French, Paris.
Model Daughter of Charity. “For God and for the poor. To love Jesus is my joy. To serve the poor is my happiness.”

Images collected by the Vincentian Studies Institute

12 Ibid., 116.
This experience confirmed for Monsieur Étienne that “a powerful protection of Heaven watches over the Community, and that Providence has special designs over it.”¹³ It convinced him that “the spirit of Saint Vincent animates all souls, that there exists in each one of you a tender affection for your holy state, an ardent zeal for the right fulfillment of all its duties, for the faithful observance of its Rules and for the perfect practice of all its virtues.”¹⁴

Monsieur Étienne’s world view:
Vincentian-centric, Romantic, Gallican, and Authoritarian

The four adjectives which best describe Monsieur Étienne’s personality, his leadership style, and his reform agenda as superior general are: Vincentian-centric, Romantic, Gallican, and Authoritarian.

It is not an exaggeration to say that Monsieur Étienne viewed the world, the church, and the Lazarists and Daughters of Charity from only two vantage points: one located at 95 rue de Sèvres, and the other located nearby at 140 rue du Bac.

Geo-politically speaking he was an ardent French nationalist and enthusiastic imperialist who believed that France (no matter what its government at the moment; monarchy, empire, or republic) was providentially destined to political, imperial, cultural, and religious greatness if not predominance on the world stage. He believed that the source of France’s greatness and destiny was its historic link with Catholicism. This link was memorialized in the Concordat of 1801, and the legal recognition, favor, and protection afforded by the French State to the Daughters of Charity and the Congregation of the Mission whom it always understood to be French congregations.

Étienne’s own Catholicism was traditionally Gallican, and it is fair to say he was one of the last Catholic leaders in nineteenth-century France who resisted the ultramontanism which swept through the Church under his some-time nemesis Pio Nono. In 1870, during the debates over papal infallibility Étienne was an “inopportunist” opposing the timeliness of the definition. In the very last stages of the conciliar debates, however, he switched sides and sent Pius IX his statement of submission.¹⁵

Monsieur Étienne’s view of “l’esprit primitif” was distinctively Gallican. It defined and described a community based on the timeless mission and heritage of Saint Vincent de Paul, but also the distinctively FRENCH community Étienne believed Saint Vincent had founded.

¹³ Ibid., 117.
¹⁴ Ibid.
¹⁵ See, Étienne, 273-279.
At this point let me comment briefly on the almost total absence in this era of any acknowledgement or appreciation by Monsieur Étienne, or indeed by the community itself, of the role of Louise de Marillac in the foundation of the Daughters of Charity. Louise living half-forgotten in the shadows of community history until recent years is an interesting topic, but beyond the scope of my present purpose.

In Étienne’s view, the Vincentian charism was at its heart a Gallican charism, and thus even outside of France the international community’s life, spirit, and ministries needed to absolutely mirror that of the rue de Sèvres, the rue du Bac, and the community in France. He could not conceive of the possibility of anyone other than a Frenchman being superior general, let alone of the relocation of the Lazarist’s headquarters to Rome. In fact, time and time again he enlisted the support of successive French governments to forestall any moves in this direction. At one point he even went so far as to tell the Holy See that it would be better for the communities to be suppressed than to change anything of their constitutive Gallican identity as bequeathed by Saint Vincent.

In the circular letter of 1844 Monsieur Étienne recalls his initial visit to the sisters in Italy: “Did I not owe to myself the gratification of becoming acquainted with those Daughters whom Providence has given me in that distant country, and who express so well, although in a foreign language, the maxims and spirit of your holy Vocation.”

Monsieur Étienne always viewed the sisters outside of France as sisters operating in “strange” lands (meaning any land outside of France), and speaking “foreign” (not French) languages. He notes: “With what pleasure I saw in those Sisters whom nature has made natives of a strange land, the same spirit, the same regularity, the same sentiments, the same habits which make true Daughters of Charity in France! With what pleasure I also witnessed their tender and filial affection for the maison-mère and their desire of coming some day to drink at that pure fount of the spirit of their Vocation!”

He described his visit to the seminary at Turin: “In that moment above all, did I feel how dear to me was that new family! The illusion was complete; I no longer thought of myself on foreign ground: I was in the maison-mère, so true and striking a copy was Turin of the original of Paris!”

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16 Ibid., 244-245.
17 Circulars, 118.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., 119.
Monsieur Étienne’s Gallicanism is best understood through recognizing its underlying religious Romanticism. His imaginative recapturing of a simplistic past ideal state, represented by “l’esprit primitif” and the consistent narrative he used to transmit normative truths, was always framed in terms of an appeal to strong emotions, blind faith, and the acceptance of complete uniformity in community identity, values, and behavior. This was at the expense of any inconvenient realities and any expressions of individuality, nationality, or any other competing narratives which he always described as being dangerous “illusions.” These so-called “illusions” were the constant target of the pointed arrows let loose by the always drawn bow of his authority.

Just as Romanticism provided the underpinnings of his Gallicanism, it also provided the underpinnings of his authoritarianism. For Monsieur Étienne all earthly sovereign authority vested either in Church or State was divine authority whose purpose was to order all creatures, and indeed all of creation, in unquestioning obedience to the unchanging divine will and divine salvific purpose being revealed at every point in history. This authority, being divine authority, was by its nature paternal, and because it was paternal, it was also patricarchal and hierarchical.

From the perspective of Monsieur Étienne, his role as superior general of the Daughters of Charity and the Congregation of the Mission vested him with the authority of Saint Vincent de Paul, in a way analogous to how the papacy was invested with the authority of Christ. Just as it was the Roman Pontiff’s responsibility to guard the deposit of the Church’s faith revealed in Scripture and Tradition, it was the responsibility of the superior general to guard the deposit of the Vincentian faith as it was found in “l’esprit primitif.” At one point he said:

You all compose but one body under one head. All the members must receive from the head the principle of life and action… What am I amidst you? The father of the family, whose task is to prove for the spiritual and corporal wants of each one among you. On the day the Lord appointed me the successor of St. Vincent on earth, he not only entrusted me with his authority over you, but moreover, he especially transmitted to me, the treasure of his loving solicitude for your welfare, and his zeal for the direction of each of you in the sublime path of your Vocation. Thenceforward, the discharge of this important and honorable mission could be no longer for me superogatory; it became a rigourous duty, an obligation to which my own salvation is attached. I shall
have to answer before God, for the state of your Company, and for the position of each one of you… I must no longer be a stranger to what interests you, and my heart must be a treasury, in which you may all seek strength, succor, consolation and encouragement in every circumstance in which you can be placed… The more your Company extends, the more necessary does it become to preserve unity of purpose and of means in its administration, and that all those who are the depositaries of my authority, should follow one same line of conduct in the government of your Houses. Now, they will never have a uniform manner of fulfilling their employments and of acting alike, if they do not all seek the direction which must enlighten them at the fountain-head of the authority entrusted to them.\(^{20}\)

Filial obedience to this authority, and the authority of the example of the maison-mère in Paris, was thus always to be encouraged, and rewarded by the superior general. He made it clear that any dissonance in the relationships between the superior general, the director general, the superioress general, and the council was a thing of the past.\(^{21}\) Disobedience, illusions, and abuses were therefore always to be forbidden, and swiftly addressed by authority. This was necessary because such disobedience was deadly, in that it was “sufficient to cause the branch to separate from the parent stem, and to be deprived of the sap that can alone make it fruitful.”\(^{22}\)

Étienne cited the experiences of the French sisters during the Napoleonic schism, when the community “was on the verge of total ruin,”\(^{23}\) and the contemporary example of the province of Poland:

Being no longer based on the firm foundation laid by St. Vincent in your Constitutions, no longer deriving its principle of life from the pure spring of lawful authority, it has since had but a fictious existence; it has fulfilled its destiny in an irregular and therefore fruitless manner; and by degrees it has become a relaxed and degenerate Community, which yet retains your holy habit, and some exterior appearances of your state, but which no longer possesses its spirit, and can no longer perform its works.\(^{24}\)

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 128-130.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 131.

\(^{22}\) Ibid., 130.

\(^{23}\) Ibid., 131.

\(^{24}\) Ibid., 130.
He also ascribed the same fate to the province of Spain. Throughout his generalate, nationalistic and other tensions between the French and the Spanish, between Monsieur Étienne and the Spanish Lazarists and sisters, were very public, very divisive, and very ugly.25

Étienne’s “salutary counsels: the road that each must follow.”26

Even in the midst of effusive emotion and flowery prose Monsieur Étienne always had a laser-like logic that went to the heart of the matter (at least from his perspective):

In this age, my very dear Sisters, we hear nothing but talk about progress and improvement, and these must be found even in Religion. But it should be remembered that the works of Religion cannot often be improved, without detriment to their spirit. New methods of advancing in human sciences are invented; but no trouble is taken to discover those

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25 For a full account of the Étienne-Spanish struggles see, Étienne, 253-273.
26 Circulars, 121.
which may more efficaciously mould hearts to virtue. Now, you must bear in mind, that the principal object of the mission entrusted to you by Heaven, is the salvation of the poor; that for this end you embraced your holy Vocation; and consequently, that you must never lose sight of this purpose, in the fulfillment of your duties. St. Vincent has placed you beside the sick to serve and relieve them, with the sole view of affording them health of soul, through the means of bodily care... He sends you to visit the poor in their wretched hovels, only that you may exert over them a salutary influence and instill into them the love of virtue, whilst you pour the balm of consolation and relief on their woes. He has given to your charge the education of poor children, only that you may train them to a Christian life... and place them out of reach of the maxims and corruption of the world. All improvements therefore, which may be proposed to you, and which would distort this sublime end of your Vocation, must be rejected by you, with unyielding resistance.27

With respect to the successful re-establishment of the community, Monsieur Étienne said experience proved this could only succeed by sisters using “every means, every effort, every sacrifice in order to reproduce in yourselves the first Daughters of Charity”28 through re-establishing the “observance of the Rules.”29 Étienne notes:

I have mediated on these important considerations, my very dear Sisters, at the foot of the altar, and before the precious remains of our Blessed Father... From thence do I incessantly visit in thought every point of the universe that you inhabit; I have penetrated into the interior of the numerous Houses entrusted to you by Providence; I have assisted at the different exercises that engage you; I have considered the numberless works that you perform; I have examined the intercourse with the poor and with the world to which your functions give rise; I have also weighed the difficulties that you have to overcome, the dangers to which you are

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27 Ibid., 133.
28 Ibid., 120.
29 Ibid., 121, 117.
exposed; in a word, I have directed my attention to every circumstance in which the obligations of your Vocation can place you, in order to satisfy myself on the manner in which your holy Rules are observed in the Company. And after a year’s reflection on these various subjects, I have summed up my observations, and formed them into salutary counsels which I have resolved to give you.30

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The Apotheosis of Monsieur Étienne. This engraving commemorates the fiftieth anniversary of his entrance to the Congregation of the Mission.

Images collected by the Vincentian Studies Institute

30 Ibid., 121.
Monsieur Étienne then launched into a minute examination of more than fifteen prevalent abuses and violations of the Rule. In each instance his detailed analysis pointed out the dire personal and communitarian consequences of disobedience, and by contrast the always sweet results of genuine simplicity, blind obedience, and absolute uniformity shorn of any and all expressions of individuality. His ideal presumes that preferential service to the poor, the defining and unchanging element of the Vincentian “l’esprit primitif,” required that the Community of the Daughters of Charity, and each individual sister, be uniform, unchanging, and undistracted not just in their preferential option for serving the poor, but in every single element, and every single detail, of their personal, spiritual, and communal lives. Everything was presented hermetically sealed, everything was pre-defined, pre-determined, and beyond any individual choice, beyond any questioning, and certainly beyond any change. And it was successful. Wildly successful.

Monsieur Étienne: An Assessment

Returning to the question of the aptness of Monsieur Étienne’s title as Second Founder, I hope to have presented enough evidence to demonstrate its correctness. The community as it existed from the time of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise to the French Revolution successfully situated its charism in the geo-political and geo-cultural world of the Ancien Regime, which ecclesially speaking I would describe as Tridentine. With that world washed away forever, Monsieur Étienne and his generation effectively recovered “l’esprit primitif” and created a thriving place and parameters for the community to serve the poor productively in the modern world and in the church of Vatican I.

Taking into account the towering personality and force that was Monsieur Étienne which cut across the swath of our history, the fact is that his model was in its substance “received,” or accepted in faith, by the contemporary community and by the overwhelming numbers of individual Daughters of Charity from Paris to Shanghai, from Madrid to Manila, from Rome to Emmitsburg. As always happens in history, the extreme, unworkable, and idiosyncratic elements of this model were, even in Monsieur Étienne’s own lifetime, opposed or more often quietly ignored, gingerly circumvented, gradually changed, or dropped with relief. The center held, however, and it held for a long time; the center was, of course, “an innumerable multitude of the poor and sick comforted and strengthened, supported and relieved, instructed and saved.”

31 Ibid., 119.
Monsieur Étienne waxed eloquently, and at times even prayerfully and beautifully:

May your charity also abound towards your neighbor; may it render more and more dear to you, the name of servants of the poor; may it fill you with respect and veneration for your dear masters, the suffering members of Jesus Christ; may it dilate your hearts and inspire you with a generous zeal which may enable you to assist, relieve and save them! In a word, may you, while spreading everywhere over the surface of the earth, and among all nations, diffusing everywhere the same spirit of St. Vincent... showering everywhere the riches of divine charity on all the woes of humanity; may you also be everywhere a spectacle to the world, to Angels and to men, for the edification of the Church, of which your Company is one of the brightest ornaments, for the glory of the great Saint who has transmitted to you the inheritance of his works, and for the consolation of him, who notwithstanding his unworthiness, has been called to fill amongst you, the place of that Saint.32

32 Ibid., 141.