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Pictures from the Past: Châtillon-sur-Chalaronne

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Pictures from the Past: Châtillon-sur-Chalaronne

JOHN E. RYBOLT, C.M., PH.D.



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Scenic postcard views of Châtillon-sur-Chalaronne.

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Turn-of-the-century aerial views of Châtillon-sur-Chalaronne.

*Vincentiana Collection, DePaul University Special Collections, Chicago, IL;
Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute*

The town of *Châtillon* dates from 1273, but the area was inhabited for centuries before. The name Châtillon, meaning “little castle,” refers to the one built on the Roman site called *pagus dumbarum*. The remains of the fourteenth-century castle are still visible on the hill above the town. The name of the town in Vincent’s day was Châtillon-les-Dombes, that is, the Châtillon at the Dombes, the Dombes being the small ponds left in the region after the glacial period. Most of these ponds lie south and east of the town. The name of the town today means “Châtillon on the Chalaronne,” referring to the small river flowing through the town north to the Saône River. The town numbers about 4000 inhabitants, twice the size it was in his time.

Before the town existed there were two parishes in the region, Fleurieux to the west and Buénans to the east. These gradually lost their importance as Châtillon grew. Although Vincent was pastor of Buénans and Châtillon, which depended on Buénans, and was also prior of Fleurieux, he lived in the “newer” town. The distinction between his two churches had little meaning. The Buénans church disappeared in the eighteenth century, and that of Fleurieux at the time of the Revolution. In Vincent’s time in Châtillon, formerly part of Bresse, and French only since 1601, its inhabitants mainly spoke Bressan, a franco-provençal dialect that their pastor had to learn.



View of the castle walls leading to the town below.

Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute.



The chronology of Vincent's few months in Châtillon is spelled out below. All authors agree that his motives for leaving the Gondi household to come here are unclear, but they point to Madame de Gondi as one of the reasons. It seems very likely that rich, beautiful, powerful, pious, and emotionally needy as she was, Marguerite came to occupy too much of Vincent's time and emotional energy. In addition, he and his two employers were practically of the same age. He wrote, however: "I used to hold it as a maxim to consider the General in God and God in him, and to obey him as God, and his late wife as the Virgin."¹ He also noted that one of the qualities that a chaplain in a noble house should have is that "he should be very chaste."² In this dangerous emotional and spiritual mix, the 36-year old priest undoubtedly had to break free to make his own way. He was still nominally the pastor of Clichy, but he undertook to become the pastor of Châtillon as well. Why he came to Châtillon and not somewhere else is probably a question of circumstance: the town needed a pastor and Vincent was available. The intermediary for getting this information to him was very likely the Oratorian François Bourgoing, who had preceded Vincent at Clichy.

In Châtillon, Vincent founded the Confraternity of Charity. This, the first of his major works, began as a response to a pressing need. He later recounted for the Daughters of Charity what happened here, but the accounts differ in several details. Abelly, his first biographer, adding some details, made the resulting account less clear but more coherent. In any case, Vincent found it necessary to organize the response of the ladies of the parish to similar needs in the future. Besides the confraternity, he also did much good in strengthening priestly life, religious instruction, the proper celebration of the sacraments and generally gave good example of a Christian life.

1 Letter 244, "To Robert de Sergis, in Roye," 29 September 1636, in *Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, ed. and trans. by Jacqueline Kilar, D.C., Marie Poole, D.C., et al, 1-14 (New York: New City Press, 1985-2014), 1:344. See: http://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentian_ebooks/25/ Hereafter cited as *CCD*.

2 Conference 14, "Ministry of Chaplain in the Service of a Nobleman," *CCD*, 11:20. See: http://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentian_ebooks/37/



An etching and photograph illustrating the façade of the church of Saint André.

Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute;

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Postcard views of the interior of the church of Saint André.

Vincentiana Collection, DePaul University Special Collections, Chicago, IL; Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute



Important Vincentian sites in Châtillon

The Church of Saint André

This building dates from the fifteenth century but succeeds one or more earlier churches dating from 1272. It is colorful, with its brick facade, clock, rose window, and red tile roof, and it is exceptionally high for a church in this region. A curious octagonal tower (from 1736) encloses the bells.

Inside it is in Flamboyant Gothic style, but the furnishings (such as the main altar, statues, and organ, represent later styles, after Vincent's time. On either side of the sanctuary and the nave are fourteen chapels, a surprisingly large number, built and decorated by the rich families of the area or by various guilds. Some of these chapels now have other uses, but their existence points to the large number of clergy at various times associated with this church. These were responsible for celebrating weekly or monthly masses for specific intentions, and they lived from the endowments of these chapels. In Vincent's day, about five of these priests lived in Châtillon.

The stained-glass windows in the sanctuary were done in 1890-1892 to commemorate the foundation, in Châtillon, of the first Confraternity of Charity. Other windows recall Vincent's career.

During a renovation of the church undertaken in 1966, some coats-of-arms were brought to light that had not been completely effaced at the time of the Revolution. These show the date 1615, that is, before Vincent's brief pastorate, and designate the La Chassigne and Bachet de Mizériac families. Collet, Vincent's second biographer, identified Madame de La Chassigne as the one who urged him to speak about the needs of the sick poor in



Postcard featuring the stained-glass windows of the church.

Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute.



Early photograph of the nave of the church.

Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute.



his homily. She was one of the first members of the Confraternity of Charity in Châtillon, and her family castle can be seen between Châtillon and the nearby town of Neuville-Les-Dames. The present castle, however, dates only from the nineteenth century.

In a space under the roof above the nave, accessible through a stairway opening in the body of the church, is an area used in times past by the many *prêtres sociétaires*. These were the priests whose principal responsibility was to celebrate the canonical hours in church with the pastor, and to say mass occasionally for the departed in one or other of the fourteen side chapels. Mentioned as early as 1433, these clergy were forbidden to exercise certain pastoral ministries — those belonged to the official pastor — and they consequently passed their time in some idleness. They used to meet in the upper area, probably for companionship. The windows of this area, however, can be seen from outside the church, on the market side, particularly at night. Tongues wagged in the town, and it was widely, though probably incorrectly, assumed that the priests were engaged in immoral or at least idle pursuits in their upper meeting room, commonly called the Kingdom.

One open question is the use of the rite of Lyons in Châtillon. For centuries, the primatial see of Lyons had its own distinctive usages of the Roman Rite. Whether Vincent followed this usage is unknown. He never referred to it. An old inventory of one of the chapels, however, lists liturgical items proper to this rite, leading to the conclusion that it had been followed here.

The Market

This seventeenth-century market adjoining the parish church is built mainly of wood. The previous market burned in the town fire of 1670 that also destroyed most of the houses. Its vast roof rests on 32 pillars made from trunks of individual oak trees from a nearby forest. Old houses surround the marketplace.



Another early photograph of the nave from a wider perspective.

Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute.



Turn-of-the-century postcard of the town's covered market.

*Vincentiana Collection, DePaul University
Special Collections, Chicago, IL*



The Former Hospital, with its Antique Pharmacy

A hospital (more correctly, a hospice for impoverished pilgrims and beggars) existed here from before 1273. It was restored in 1432, was nearly in ruins in 1614, and was completely rebuilt in 1727. The main stairway is noteworthy. Materials for the rebuilding, including the church bell, were taken from the old church of Buénans, among other places.

Either in the (previous) chapel of this hospital, or in another one, the Chapelle des Pénitents (located just behind the hospital and taken down in 1900), the first Confraternity of Charity was founded on 8 December 1617. Its original membership, in August, consisted of nine women but grew to thirteen by the date of its December founding. Jean Beynier was appointed the treasurer. Besides Vincent, three priests attended, all inhabitants of Châtillon and attached to the parish church. The present chapel was opened in 1732. Inside is a painting of Blessed Vincent de Paul, also dating from 1732. Although not a wonderful work, it testifies to the veneration for him in the town. Above the main altar is another painting of Vincent bringing the eucharist to a person sick in bed. This rare depiction may have been taken from one of the many copies of the “Lord of Charity,” a canvas prepared for the Confraternities of Charity during his lifetime.

The antique pharmacy is maintained as a reminder of how old pharmacies worked. A triptych, painted in 1527, is also on view. It represents, among other things, the burial of Christ, and it was probably in the church in Vincent's day.

A large seated statue of the saint, dating from 1855, is located in the Place St. Vincent de Paul in front of the hospital. The statue, a gift of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul,



Postcard view of the hospital of Châtillon-sur-Chalaronne.

Vincentiana Collection, DePaul University Special Collections, Chicago, IL



Postcards featuring the statue of Vincent located in the Place St. Vincent de Paul at the front of the hospital.

Vincentiana Collection, DePaul University Special Collections, Chicago, IL



bears several inscriptions: "Good people of Châtillon: wherever I go, you will always be present to me before God." "Saint Vincent de Paul, pastor of Châtillon in 1617." "Erected 29 September 185[5]". Inscriptions on the statue itself mention that it was designed by E. Cabuchet in 1854, and poured by the foundry of Eck and Durand in 1855. It was erected with solemn ceremonies 27-29 September 1856. (A statue of the same design, dated 1827, is found in the church of Saint Sulpice in Paris.) Behind this square is the former Ursuline convent, founded here in 1639.

The Home of Vincent de Paul

By the side of the marketplace stands the house where Vincent lived. This was originally two houses, now joined into one. That on the right was used by the pastor and the sociétaires, and that on the left belonged to Jean Beynier, Vincent's host. The priests' residence had been leased to a layman, but Vincent was able to get it back. The effective date of this seems to have been 11 November 1617, about a month before he left. His room in Beynier's house has been enlarged and turned into the chapel for the Daughters of Charity. They bought the house and the old adjoining presbytery in 1878 at the urging of the bishop and local pastor. The staircase and certain doors date from Vincent's time. In the chapel are shown facsimiles of the original rule of the Confraternity, signed by him in 1617, and other documents. The large painting on the back wall, completed in 1883, furnished the subject for the main stained glass window in the parish church, depicting the foundation of the Confraternity of Charity. A large painting of the traditional subject of Vincent and the foundlings in the snow, a gift from Napoleon III in 1868, was moved from the church and is now located in the sisters' home. The original of this painting, completed



Postcards featuring views of the exterior of Vincent de Paul's home

Vincentiana Collection, DePaul University Special Collections, Chicago, IL



A view of the towers and ramparts of the castle.

Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute



by Nicolas-André Monsiau (1754-1837) about 1817, popularized the pre-revolutionary statue by Stouf and is the source of the common images of Vincent and the children in the snow.

The Castle

Only the walls and small gates remain of the old brick and stone castle, dating from the 1270s in its earliest part. Its prominent location above the town looking down onto the valleys of the Relevant and the Chalaronne point to the strategic importance of the town in ages past. Formerly attached to Savoy, this area became part of France in 1601. The castle had been destroyed definitively on 10 May 1595 in the battles leading to this change of government.

Below the castle is an interesting restored building, formerly the old salt stores. It had been a part of the ancient village clustered around the foot of the castle before its charter as a town in 1273.

The Villars Gate

This ancient gate leads out of the town toward the east and leads to the city of Villars. Traces of the mechanism for the old drawbridge are visible. The present gate is the best-preserved piece of military architecture in this region.



Several postcard views and an etching of the Porte de Villars.

Vincentiana Collection, DePaul University Special Collections, Chicago, IL;

St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online



The Bridges

Five small bridges and one covered passageway span the Chalaronne. These have been beautifully decorated with flowers in recent summers, and small boats filled with flowers have also been placed in the stream. Châtillon's energies earned it the highest awards in a Europe-wide contest for floral decoration. One new bridge, on the Avenue Clément Desormes, is called the Buénans bridge, inasmuch as it leads to that old settlement.

Only a few houses remain in Buénans, the main town where Vincent had been appointed pastor. In his day, the main parish was Saint Martin of Buénans, and its chapel was the Châtillon church. A small plaque on highway D2 recalls Vincent's pastorate, but nothing remains of the church. Its stones were removed in the eighteenth century for other uses. A small farm is confidently pointed out as the residence of their saintly pastor, but no evidence for this exists apart from local tradition. He may have lived here before taking possession of the pastor's house in Châtillon, 11 November 1617. The town of Buénans has ceased to exist.

Environs

Outside of Châtillon, on D17 to the south, is Maladières. In the Middle Ages this was a hospice for lepers, cared for by the Fleurieux parish. It is believed that it was at this small



An etching of the scenic flower gardens along the Chalarnonne.

St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online



Views of the chapel inside Vincent de Paul's home.

Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute

farm that the poor people lived whose sad condition was reported to him. His response and that of his parishioners led to the Confraternity of Charity, an organization that still exists in the parish. The present house dates only from the nineteenth century.

Some distance to the east is Pérouges, named by Celtic refugees from the Romans, homesick for their native Perugia in Italy. In the nineteenth century the use of home looms declined, the former weavers' houses were unsuitable for farm workers, and then the railroads bypassed Pérouges, set on a hill above Meximieux. Consequently, the population of Pérouges departed, and the town was left as it had been in medieval times. Its rough cobblestone streets and open spaces offered authentic locations for the film *Monsieur Vincent*, for one of the many *Three Musketeers* films, and for others. The Place du Tilleul and the Rue des Rondes in particular are worth visiting. Because of its medieval appearance, the town has decided against allowing many modern elements, such as electric lights and wires, on the fronts of buildings. The parish church of Sainte Marie Madeleine was built at the beginning of the fifteenth century and contains several fine examples of religious sculpture. Despite its museum-like character, Pérouges numbers about 900 people.

Count Balthazar de Rougemont was one of Vincent's notable successes in Châtillon. This aggressive duelist was converted to religion, lived a very pious life, and sold his Rougemont property for the sake of the poor. He had a castle at Chandée, north of Vandeins, now a town of 1000 people. Vincent visited him there, where the nobleman recounted the dramatic story of his act of detachment when he smashed his sword against a rock. The ancient castle no longer exists.

East of Vandeins is Bourg-en-Bresse, an important city of some 40,000. The Congregation of the Mission had a house here from 1701 to 1791. Its purpose was originally to give retreats for clergy and laity, as well as missions. The founder of the



Turn-of-the-century postcard picturing the castle tower and walls located above Châtillon-sur-Chalaronne.

*Vincentiana Collection, DePaul University
Special Collections, Chicago, IL*



house, a diocesan priest, had been touched by the original inspiration of Vincent, and he sought to bring the advantages of that charism to his region. The house concentrated, in fact, on missions.

Southeast of Châtillon is Ars-sur-Formans, the renowned pastorate of Jean Baptiste Marie Vianney (1786-1859), known familiarly as the Curé of Ars. His parish church and residence have been preserved. Although Vincent had nothing to do with Ars, he is venerated here, and Vianney kept engravings of his fellow pastor in his home, where they remain. Today, Ars, like Lourdes, lives off pilgrimages. It has a population of about 900.

Vincent de Paul in Châtillon: Chronology

1614

- 5-7 May: Pastoral visit by the archbishop of Lyons, who finds the church in good repair, and the priests' residences as well, although the hospital was in poor condition. There are some 900 parishioners at this time.

1616

- 18 October: The archbishop of Lyons writes to Pierre de Bérulle, suggesting that Châtillon be given to the Oratorians. Bérulle, their founder, must have suggested Jean Lourdelot, who became pastor 7 January 1617.

1617

- 19 April: Lourdelot resigns his pastorate of Saint Martin of Buénans and its dependency, Saint André of Châtillon. He does not resign the parish to anyone in particular, but leaves the space blank in the document for inserting the name of his successor later.
- 26 May: Inventory of the furnishings of the chapel of the Ladies of the Holy Rosary, perhaps the nucleus of the Confraternity of Charity. The furnishings of this chapel in the Châtillon church were abundant and in good condition.



The town hospital with the statue of a seated Vincent de Paul in the foreground.

*Vincentiana Collection, DePaul University
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- May-June: The canon-counts of Lyons, temporal lords of Châtillon, again ask the Oratorians to propose a successor. Bérulle suggests Vincent.
- July: Vincent visits Lyons, asking for information on Châtillon.
- 29 July: Vincent de Paul, “a priest, bachelor in theology, of the diocese of Dax,” is named pastor. He remains pastor of Clichy.
- 1 August: Vincent de Paul, “priest and bachelor in holy and sacred theology, of the diocese of Dax,” takes possession on a Tuesday afternoon of Buénans and Châtillon, in the company of two priests associated with the parish, Jean Besson and Pierre Genoud.
- August: The town council agrees to pay Vincent and the sociétaires a regular salary.
- 16 August: Louis Giraud (or Girard, his spelling), doctor in theology, joins Vincent as his assistant. On the same day, Vincent signs the baptismal register as “curé” for the first time.
- 20 August: Exhortation at Sunday mass in favor of the sick at Maladières. [Probable date]
- 23 August: Charter meeting of the Confraternity of Charity.
- September: Monsieur de Gondi writes his wife with the news of Vincent’s intention not to return to their household.
- October: Monsieur Du Fresne, secretary of Monsieur de Gondi and a friend of Vincent’s, comes to ask him to return to Paris. Vincent then goes to Lyons to consult with Monsieur Jean Bence, superior of the Oratorians, as to whether he should leave Châtillon.
- 13 October: Monsieur de Gondi receives a letter from Vincent, written in Lyons, announcing a brief trip to Paris to help him discern his future.
- 24 November: The archbishop of Lyons approves the rules of the Confraternity of Charity (a name taken in imitation of the hospital of Charity in Rome).
- 3 December: Vincent celebrates his last baptism in his parish. (He celebrated only four baptisms during this period; his associate, Girard, did the majority of them.)



Early photograph of a shrine honoring Vincent de Paul in the chapel inside his home.

Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute



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- 8 December: Formal establishment of the Confraternity, consisting of twelve noble or bourgeois women, one servant. Election of officers, done in the presence of three priests: Jean Besson, Jean Benonier, and Hugues Rey, sociétaires of the church in Châtillon.
 - 12 December: Revision of the rules. Signed: "V. Depaul, curé." Four more members join.
 - 15 December: Vincent gives to Charlotte de Brie, the treasurer, an account book still in existence. It records the first meeting of the Confraternity.
 - 18 December: Vincent leaves the parish to return to Paris.
 - 23 December: Vincent reaches Paris, after about five months in Châtillon.

1618

- 5 January: Second meeting of the Confraternity of Charity in Châtillon.
- 31 January: Vincent formally resigns as pastor of Châtillon.
- 18 July: Louis Giraud, Vincent's associate, succeeds him as pastor of Buénans and Châtillon.





Scenic postcard views of Châtillon-sur-Chalaronne.

Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute;

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Turn-of-the-century aerial views of Châtillon-sur-Chalaronne.

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Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute





View of the castle walls leading to the town below.

Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute





An etching and photograph illustrating the façade of the church of Saint André.

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CHATILLON-s/CHALARONNE - Intérieur de l'Eglise



CHATILLON-sur-CHALARONNE (Ain)
Intérieur de l'Eglise - Ce fut l'Eglise de St Vincent-de-Paul, en 1617

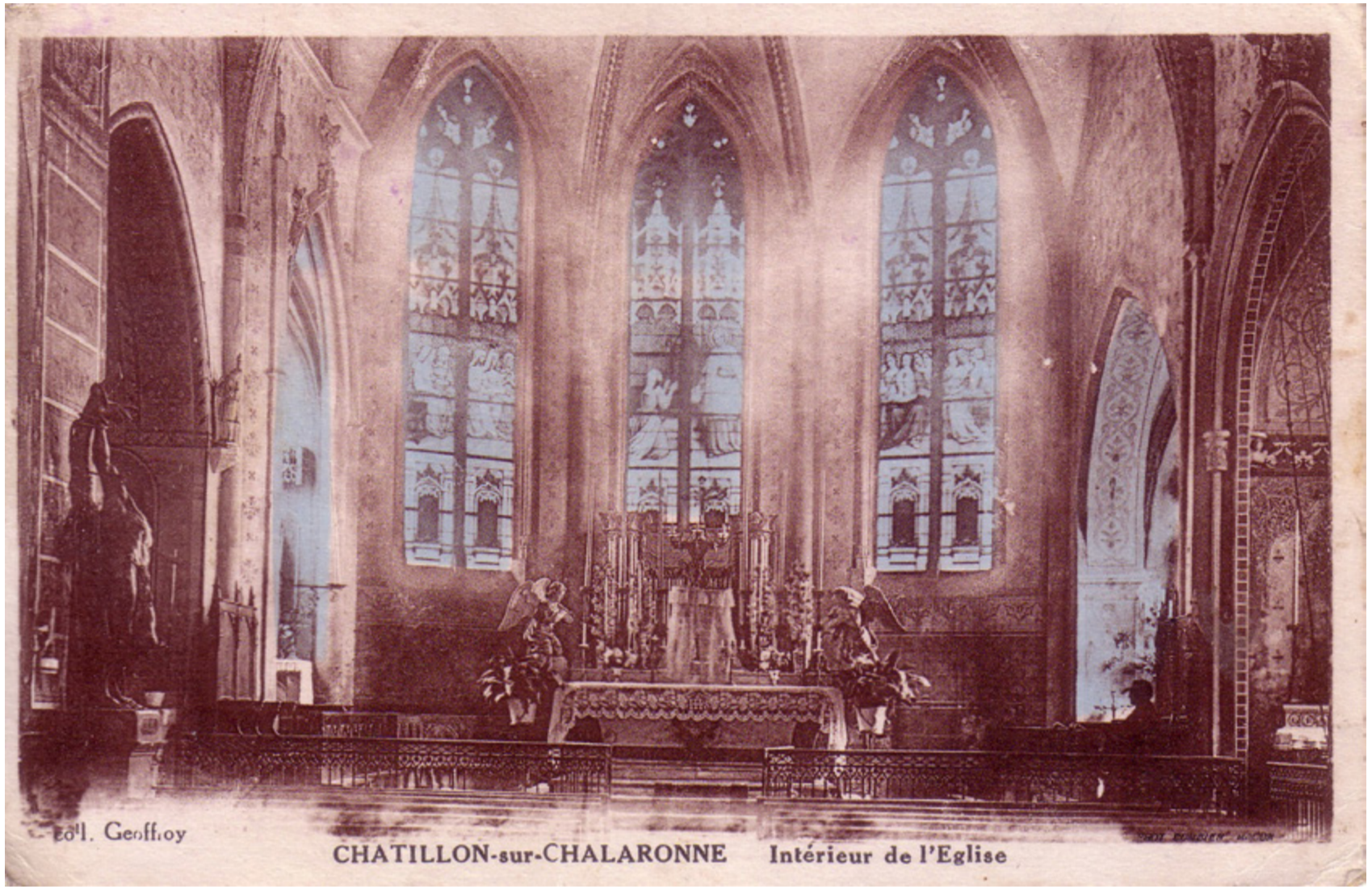
J. C.

Postcard views of the interior of the church of Saint André.

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Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute





Postcard featuring the stained-glass windows of the church.

Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute





Early photograph of the nave of the church.

Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute





Another early photograph of the nave from a wider perspective.

Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute





Turn-of-the-century postcard of the town's covered market.

Vincentiana Collection, DePaul University Special Collections, Chicago, IL





Postcard view of the hospital of Châtillon-sur-Chalaronne.

Vincentiana Collection, DePaul University Special Collections, Chicago, IL





Postcards featuring the statue of Vincent located in the Place St. Vincent de Paul at the front of the hospital.

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Postcards featuring views of the exterior of Vincent de Paul's home.
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A view of the towers and ramparts of the castle.

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Several postcard views and an etching of the Porte de Villars.

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Les berges de la Chalaronne

An etching of the scenic flower gardens along the Chalaronne.

St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online





Views of the chapel inside Vincent de Paul's home.

Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute





Turn-of-the-century postcard picturing the castle tower and walls located above Châtillon-sur-Chalaronne.

Vincentiana Collection, DePaul University Special Collections, Chicago, IL





The town hospital with the statue of a seated Vincent de Paul in the foreground.

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Early photograph of a shrine honoring Vincent de Paul in the chapel inside his home.

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