

Fall 1987

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## Recommended Citation

Carven, John W. C.M. (1987) "Martyrs for the Faith," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 2 , Article 2.  
Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol8/iss2/2>

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## MARTYRS FOR THE FAITH

by

*John W. Carven, C.M.*

*How two Daughters of Charity met death during the French  
Revolution*

On May 22, 1983 Msgr. Jean Orchamp, Bishop of Angers, wrote to the people of his diocese:

On Sunday, February 19, 1984, unless something unforeseen happens, Pope John Paul II will proclaim to the whole Church that the priest, Guillaume Repin, and his 98 companions gave up their lives because of their faith. . .

The Beatification is not intended to make us dream about the past, but it presents the past to us to read over again so that we may relate it to the time God gives us, that present time in which Christ asks us, in our turn, to be His witnesses.<sup>1</sup>

Who were these martyrs? Twelve diocesan priests; three women religious: two Daughters of Charity and a Benedictine nun; and eighty-four lay people: four men and eighty women or young girls, of all social classes: nobles, peasants, businessmen, domestics, and craftsmen. Fifteen of them were guillo-

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<sup>1</sup>This article has been compiled from three sources: 1) "Sister Marie-Anne and Sister Odile, Martyrs of the Faith," *Echoes of the Company* (1983), 7-8 (July-August), 355-370; 9-10 (September-October), 406-415; 2) Yves Le Gall, "L'Histoire des Martyres d'Angers," *La Semaine Religieuse d'Angers*, 45 (December 11, 1983), 745-771; and 3) *Martyres de la Foi*, Paris: Hallepee, 1984. 65 Pp.

tined in Angers, the other eighty-four were shot at the Arvrille Field of Martyrs on February 1, 1794.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Two Daughters of Charity**

Who were the Daughters of Charity in this group? They were two of the thirty-nine Daughters who worked at the Hotel-Dieu of Saint-Jean, the hospital in Angers: Sister Marie-Anne Vaillot and Sister Odile Baumgarten.

Marie-Anne Vaillot was born at Fontainebleau and baptized there on May 13, 1734 by Father François Brunet, a Vincentian. Not quite a month later, June 8, her father died unexpectedly at the age of thirty. The years spent with her mother and the origin of her vocation are not known, although she appears to have profited from the education of the Daughters of Charity in Fontainebleau. Marie-Anne was twenty-seven when she became a postulant with the Daughters of Charity; she entered the Seminary (novitiate) in Paris on September 25, 1761. In June of 1762 she was sent to the hospital of Saint-Louis in Fontenay-le-Comte in the Vendée. In 1769 she went to Longue, from where she was later changed to Saint-Pierre-Montlimont, and finally to the hospital of Saint-Jean in Angers to be in charge of the steward's office.

Odile Baumgarten was born on November 15, 1750, at Gondrexange in Lorraine and baptized the following day. From her father she heard of the efforts of Saint Vincent de Paul to succor Lorraine during the horrors of the Thirty Years War; at the hospice in Vic-sur-Seille she encountered three Daughters of Charity whose Company had cared for the sick

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<sup>2</sup>The guillotine was used for well-to-do people since their condemnation carried with it the confiscation of the condemned person's goods, which were used to pay the executioner and his assistants. The Daughters of Charity underwent the method of execution used for the poor.

and elderly there since 1696. Some time in 1775 she left her family to become a postulant with the Daughters in Metz and on August 4, 1775, began her Seminary in Paris. Her first appointment brought her to the military hospital in Brest. When the hospital was totally destroyed in 1777, Sister Odile was missioned to Saint-Jean in Angers where her superiors soon gave her charge of the pharmacy.

On the eve of the French Revolution Sisters Anne-Marie and Odile were among the thirty-five Daughters<sup>3</sup> who performed the mainly simple, repetitive, and obscure tasks for the poor sick at the hospital of Saint-Jean. They were numbered among a long line of Daughters of Charity who served God in the sick of Angers.

### **Hotel-Dieu of Saint-Jean**

The hospital of Saint-Jean was one of the oldest hospitals in France, founded in 1175 by Henri Plantagenet, Count of Anjou and King of England, to expiate for the murder of Thomas Becket. By the seventeenth century it needed restructuring, as the mayor, aldermen, and townspeople attested. The Bishop of Angers, Claude de Rueil, and the Abbé de Vaux<sup>4</sup> addressed themselves to Saint Vincent with the request for the Daughters of Charity. In December 1639 Saint Louise de Marillac herself brought there the first Daughters of Charity, the first to leave the environs of Paris and the Motherhouse. The contract between the Company of the Daughters of

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<sup>3</sup>In March of 1790 there were thirty-five Daughters of Charity at Saint-Jean, thirty-nine in October, 1793.

<sup>4</sup>The Abbé de Vaux, Guy Lasnier, was one of the most remarkable ecclesiastics of the seventeenth century and prime mover in bringing the Daughters of Charity to Angers. The Daughters there had no protector more dedicated or a counselor more enlightened than the Abbé de Vaux.

Charity and the administrators of the hospital was signed February 1, 1640.

In the rules which he wrote in collaboration with Saint Louise, Saint Vincent specified the reasons for the mission to Angers:

The Daughters of Charity of the poor sick have gone to Angers to honor Our Lord, the Father of the Poor and His Blessed Mother, to assist, both bodily and spiritually, the sick poor of the Hotel-Dieu in that city. Corporally by ministering to them and providing them with food and medicine, and spiritually by instructing the sick in the things necessary to salvation and, when they need a confession of their whole past life, by arranging the means for it, for those who would die in this state and for those who would be cured by resolving never more to offend God.<sup>5</sup>

Saint Vincent then proposed for them the means to be faithful to God and to become Good Servants of the Poor:

The first thing Our Lord asks of them is that they love Him above all and that all their actions be done for love of Him. Secondly, that they cherish each other as Sisters whom He has united by the bond of His love, and the sick poor as their masters since Our Lord is in them and they in Our Lord.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Pierre Coste, ed., *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondance, Entretiens, Documents*. (14 vols., Paris: Lecoffre, 1920-1925, XIII: 539.)

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

The Daughters of Charity served there from 1640 to 1869, with a slight break forced on them by the French Revolution.

### **The Revolutionary Period of 1789-1794**

The French Revolution could not have been a completely unexpected event. In the 1780s the new fashioned ideas of liberty and equality became more and more accepted in France because of the discontent of many people. The elements of order, of tradition, of faith, which prevailed under Louis XIV (1642-1715), had been attacked by the philosophes of the Enlightenment. The unpopularity of Louis XV at the end of his life and then of Louis XVI favored the progress of the new ideas. The Church, political and social institutions, the very fabric of society felt the development of the cult of reason and progress, the law of total liberty, and the unfavorable view of everything.

In an attempt to remedy the political, social, and economic troubles which threatened the country, Louis XVI convoked an Estates-General in 1789.<sup>7</sup> The Revolution became a reality when the Third Estate (craftsmen, laborers, peasants, and professional people), joined by some clergy and a minority of the nobility, declared themselves the Constituent Assembly and forced the king and the First Estate (nobility) and the Second (clergy) to accede to their demands. The people, dissatisfied with the King's reaction and some of his decisions, revolted and on July 14 took possession of the Bastille, a symbol of the absolute power of the King.<sup>8</sup> During the night of

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<sup>7</sup>An Estates-General had not met since 1614. Its structure and function did not satisfy those desiring radical change.

<sup>8</sup>The Bastille contained only four forgers, two lunatics, one dissipated noble put there by his father; however, its guns, manned by a meager number of soldiers, threatened much of the surrounding area.

August 4 the Constituent Assembly established a constitutional monarchy and at the end of August promulgated *The Declaration of the Rights of Man*, the charter of social and political democracy. It proclaimed freedom for all under the law and suppressed all privileges. The old political and social order was destroyed.

In the following year the Assembly ordered the confiscation of all religious property and on July 12, 1790 promulgated the *Civil Constitution of the Clergy* which made the clergy functionaries of the state and the Church a national church. In November the government demanded that the clergy take a prescribed oath: "I swear to be faithful to the nation, to the law, to the king, and to uphold with all my power the Constitution decreed by the National Assembly and accepted by the king." The clergy split into two different groups: the minority who took the oath (juring clergy) and formed the Constitutional Church supported by the government, and the majority who refused to subscribe (the non-juring) and became known as the refractory clergy, proscribed by the government.<sup>9</sup>

The developments of the early years of the French Revolution led to insurrections against the government, first the Constituent Assembly and, when it promulgated the final constitution, the subsequent government of the Convention. The coalition of European powers against France and the civil war centered on the Vendée gave rise to the formation of the Committee of Public Safety to combat insurrections. Revolutionary committees and military commissions were estab-

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<sup>9</sup>Blessed Louis François, C.M. had inveighed against the oath in a number of pamphlets and this work and his reputation aided many to form their consciences in a period of great confusion. (See Thomas Davitt, C.M., "Louis-Joseph François," *Vincentian Heritage*, Vol.V, No.2 (1984), 65-85.)

lished throughout France to arrest and judge suspects -- they had the power of life and death. France endured a regime of Terror, with its executions and heinous butchery.

It was in this context of insurrection in the Vendée and the Reign of Terror that the guillotine was permanently installed in Angers and religious houses (monasteries, convents, seminaries, and even churches) were turned into prisons for suspects.

### **Company of the Daughters of Charity During the Revolutionary Period**

On January 1, 1789, shortly before the Revolution erupted, Mother Renée Dubois, Superioress General, sent the customary New Year circular letter to all the Daughters of Charity:

Time is short, my very dear sisters. . . . We are living through bad times; however, every moment of it is precious. Let us not lose one of them, let us employ them usefully for our progress in the solid virtues prescribed for us. . . . For, what purpose would be served if we were to gain the whole world and enjoy the seductive advantages it could offer us, if we finally lost our soul, which is so dear to Jesus Christ and that He judged it worthy of being redressed at the cost of his Precious Blood. . . . Sufferings, the heaviest of crosses, are the food of Divine Love. Saint Vincent did not judge virtue to be sound until it had been tried by suffering. . . . It is this which constitutes excellence and which will be the material of the rich crown God is reserving for your fidelity, if it is courageous and persevering in his service. . . .

Almost prophetic words on the eve of the Revolution are these. Their sufferings began on the night of July 13-14. Saint-Lazare, the Motherhouse of the Congregation of the Mission and the residence of the superior general, the head



not only of the Vincentians, but also of the Daughters of Charity, was pillaged and sacked by a band of brigands -- 150 in number -- from two o'clock in the morning till evening time. The Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity, across the street from Saint-Lazare, also was visited by some of the maniacs. Terrified by the intrusion, the ninety-eight seminary sisters and the elderly sisters in the infirmary watched the mob scour the house. This was the prelude to many anguishing incidents.

The superiors in Paris realized the dangers only too well. The Circular Letter of January 1, 1790, longer than usual, expressed very well the anxieties of these troubled times:

I am not going to remind you this New Year of all the calamities of the two preceding years. We do not know what God has in store for us in the year we are beginning, but let us be ready for all the misadventures it may please Him to send us, so that we may receive them all with submissiveness we ought to have in regard to his adorable designs meant for our sanctification. . . .

Let us anew redouble our patience. We possess such efficacious means as long as they are animated by that perfect confidence in God which is never confounded when we invoke His help with faith, fervor, and perseverance. He has promised to be with those who are afflicted and never to abandon them. Let us not then be cast down, and let us keep up our hopes. God will be won over in our favor, above all if we redouble our zeal and fidelity in His service. . . .

Let us redouble our patience and unite to it a charity which is most meek, most compassionate, and most attentive to the needs of the poor; let us draw on all possible resources to alleviate their wretchedness in this unhappy time.

Let us expect to be exposed on their behalf to irritating and disagreeable treatment. More than ever we must support them without a murmur, without any complaint which might upset them. Let us be careful of the tone of our voice so that they may not receive the least little unpleasantness from us. Let us suffer with them and for them. Let us accept their unjust, mortifying, and undeserved reproaches as symptoms of the excess of their wretchedness.

Once it began, religious persecution grew in intensity. On Good Friday, April 6, 1792, a speaker in the National Assembly demanded the suppression of all teaching congregations. Another went further by asking at the same time for a suppression of congregations devoted to the care of the sick, and a bishop of the Constitutional Church wanted a ban on religious and ecclesiastical dress to be added to it. After a stormy discussion, the motion was carried.

On April 9, almost immediately following the debates in the Assembly, Mother Marie-Antoinette Deleau, who had taken over the task of superioress general, sent the following letter to all the houses:

My very dear daughters, I have to tell you that on Good Friday, the 6th of this month, the National Assembly decreed the suppression of all ecclesiastical and lay corporations, and their dress, and although we are not specifically named, we are included in this category. My dear daughters, let us adore in a spirit of Christian submission the judgments of God, and let us respect the orders of this Providence which is watching over us. While awaiting the final arrangements of the Assembly and an honest treatment which present circumstances make us hope for from the attention and

justice of the legislators, I beg you, my dear daughters: 1.- not to abandon the service of your poor unless you are forced to do so; 2.- to ask the administrators for the cost of your first dress, if they demand that you lay aside your habit immediately after the sanction of the king. As this is a purely civil law, we can obey it, but dress simply and modestly, as is fitting for Christian women. In a word, in order to be able to continue the service of the poor, give way to all that could honestly be asked of you in the present circumstances, *provided it is not against religion, the Church, and conscience*. As soon as the king has sanctioned the decree that concerns us, I shall advise you about your line of conduct with regard to your vows. Above all, be sure not to let yourselves be disheartened or discouraged; it only remains for us to redouble our faith, our confidence, and our prayers.

The arrangements to be made at the time of the anticipated dissolution were considered during an extraordinary council of the Community. Mother Deleau notified the houses of the Province about the decisions taken, in a letter dated April 18, 1792:

My very dear daughters. Our present position demanded that we should take certain measures which, ensuring uniformity among us, would forestall any complaints or discontent which a spirit of self-interest could suggest. If we are forced to part company, there will have to be a sharing of goods acquired at our own expense in each house, being careful to take nothing belonging to the poor, in accordance with the spirit of justice and consideration which has at all times been observed among us.

The circular letter laid down how the distribution was to be

made among the sisters, according to their age in vocation.

It is most probable that the sisters began to pack out of a spirit of obedience, and also because they were well aware of the imminent danger. In early October the Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity had to submit to the quartering of soldiers in some parts of the buildings. Some days afterwards, under the pretext of stocktaking, they pillaged papers, contracts, deeds, and money. At the beginning of November, the Superior General, Father Felix Cayla de la Garde, and his assistants, among them Father Carlo Sicardi, Director of the Daughters of Charity, had to flee France. The sisters witnessed the massacre of priests and religious and the deportation of others.

Mother Deleau remained in Paris as long as was prudent, trying to give guidance to the Daughters of Charity. On November 27, 1792, she sent a last circular letter to the Sisters:

Let us submit, my very dear daughters, to the designs of God who is permitting this trial. Let us submit also to the law which, though suppressing our principal house, is not destroying for certain the hospices or works of charity. Continue, then, to fulfill your service to the poor, each one in the houses where you are as far as you see fit and with all the zeal you have shown up to now. Do not forget me before God, in whom I am still with most tender affection, my very dear sisters, your most humble servant, M.-A. Deleau. -- Once again, do not write me any more. Do not reply to the letter.

Under the aegis of a new government, known as the Convention, the Reign of Terror established itself throughout France. On January 21, 1793, Louis XVI was led to the guillotine. Mother Deleau remained in Paris till November, 1793, at which time she returned to her native Picardy.

### The Reign of Terror in Angers

During March-April 1793, the Convention passed a series of decrees condemning to death all those ecclesiastics who had not taken the oath or who had been denounced for treachery. In September this *law of suspects* was applied to all categories of people. *Representatives of the People*, an arm of the Committee of Public Safety, sallied into the departments to supervise the enforcement of these exclusionary laws. They had pleni-potentiary powers, the local authorities and administration having been put under their domination.<sup>10</sup> From July 10, the two extraordinary tribunals worked in Angers with such fervor that it could be said that nowhere were they surpassed, not even equalled, for their cynicism and cruelty. The names Felix, Vacheron, Francastel, and Hentz earned their sinister reputations for ferocity.

On September 2, the local revolutionary club, the People's Society of the West, meeting at the church of Saint-Jacques, was annoyed to hear that the sisters were still working peacefully at the hospital of Saint-Jean. A petition was sent to the municipality: at all cost, and as soon as possible, the sisters must be made to take the oath and shed their habit. The municipality submitted to the dictates of the club and immediately placed a bodyguard of fifteen men at the hospital doors in order to prevent the egress of the sisters. It was hoped that this would frighten them and make them capitulate.

The administrators of the hospital then involved themselves. They had already tried many times to convince the

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<sup>10</sup>Two of the instruments of this tyranny were the *revolutionary committee* (committee of surveillance), which had the task of making inquiries about all the people suspected of counter-revolutionary ideas and to arrest them, and the *military commissions*, which were empowered to judge all cases, in an almost summary fashion.

sisters that they should bow before the storm. They tried once more in order to attempt to avoid that violent persecution of the sisters which they felt was imminent and from which they wished to save them. They did not comprehend that the sisters "would prefer to die rather than displease God."

The administrators have left a report of their meeting with the sisters:

Today, Tuesday, September 3, 1793, the administrators went to the steward's office where they found the superioress of this house and three other sisters, her assistants. They explained their motives and earnestly exhorted them to take the oath in question and to change their habit by showing them that the law required them to obey on these two points. They thought they must warn the sisters about what they had heard the people saying and to get them to submit to the law as they had done earlier at various times. They represented to them that their refusal could cause the greatest disorders in this house and that the poor sick would thereby suffer greatly.

The Sisters replied that the decrees concerning the oath were meant only for public officeholders; that they were not in this category; that they were not teachers; and that their sole function was to look after the sick and give them all the care for which they were responsible; that up to this time their way of thinking had not disturbed public order and had not prevented them from watching over their sick as they had always done; that, for these reasons, they considered themselves dispensed from all oaths, and that they would not take any; that, with regard to their clothes, it was in the interests of the house that they should change nothing; that their habits were not extravagant in any way; that they lasted at least twelve to fifteen years and made them more easily recognized

by the sick when they needed their help -- it was indispensable for them; that, moreover, if they had to clothe anew the thirty-nine Sisters who were in the house, it would cost nearly 12,000 *livres* more for each of them; that for more than a year not one of them had gone out of the house and that they would continue not to go out, if they were able to keep their ordinary clothes.

The report continued:

The administrators, after having repeated their pressing recommendations to the sisters to make them decide to acquiesce to all that was said above, having represented to them all the unfortunate results of a refusal, and, likewise, having charged the superioress to communicate to all her sisters the observations and representations they had just made to her, withdrew to their office and drew up the present minutes, on the day and the year stated above.

All this drama was played out amidst the stacks of material in the office of the steward where Sister Antoinette Taillard happened to be holding a brief council with her assistants, among whom must have been Sister Marie-Anne, whose domain this was, and Sister Odile. The third sister cannot be identified.

The battle was now joined. Some weeks later the sisters were made to change their habits. It is not difficult to imagine at what emotional cost the sisters did so. We learn from Sister Marie-Anne's own words, on the day of her interrogation, that the sacrifice of the holy habit was one of the most painful of her life. On their new headdress the sisters put the national cockade, the wearing of which had been made obligatory for women since the law decreed on September 21. But their dress, though changed, was similar enough to that of former days for the sisters to be distinguished from other women.

On October 18, the Community, assembled in the refectory by the administrators, received a singular proposition from one of them:

The same member who had already spoken to them about their dress afterwards informed them, in the name of his colleagues, that there was, or there shortly would be, a register opened by the municipality for people who wished to consecrate themselves to the care of humanity to enroll; he added that, as the desire to relieve their brothers had led them to take up the nursing state, they had every reason to hope that they would be the first to register their names. The administration invited them to reflect on what they should do, each one for herself, without being influenced by any other consideration save love for the fatherland and humanity, submission to the laws, and a desire to cooperate in the strengthening of the Republic, which is the sole means of obtaining our peace and happiness.

Notice some nuances in this little discourse. The administrator carefully refrained from telling the sisters that the register, opened for more than a month, still had blank pages. The need for replacements forced them to ask the sisters to register. The sisters, however, recognized a potential trap which was being set. The sisters who might enroll themselves could then be considered public officials and, therefore, subject to the oath. The sisters understood this and refused to sign. Furthermore, by asking the sisters to reflect "each on her own, without being influenced by any other considerations," the administrators appealed to the spirit of independence always lying dormant deep in every human heart.

The Community, thoroughly united around Sister Antoinette, remained firm and were given a few days of



respite. The year 1793 drew to a close amidst continual alarms. On the night of November 11, the cathedral of Angers was pillaged, the statues mutilated or broken, the tombs desecrated. The clock of the church of the Trinity, close by the hospital, was pulled down, the crucifix destroyed. Christmas passed without Mass. The very name of the feast had been eliminated from the Republican calendar.

### **The Arrest of Three Sisters**

Angers witnessed the continuation of the terrible military commission, the guillotine ready to execute all the judgements passed, without any appeal, by this tribunal of death. On January 1, 1794, the guillotine claimed five victims. The executions continued the following days. Father Gruget, a refractory priest, hidden in a friend's house, noted down daily the names of the victims whom, from the window of his garret, he saw fall on the scaffold and to whom he gave final absolution. Some days later, when the sisters refused to meet the demands of their enemies, they knew that they would be subject to whatever penalties the latter would impose. Direct persecution was now very close.

The administrators of the hospital again assembled the sisters, and one of them stated "that it was important that the sisters charged with the care of the sick in his house be instructed in the dispositions of this law concerning them so that they might conform to it and take the oath prescribed."<sup>11</sup> The administrators again attempted to save the sisters from the consequences of their refusal to take the oath, a refusal which would make them suspects in the eyes of the law. Each

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<sup>11</sup>On January 5 a decree was passed by the Convention making the oath obligatory for all religious, the oath to be taken within ten days.

day for a whole week a delegated administrator came back to the hospital. He took the superior to one side, the sisters in small groups, gave them his own explanation of the law, left them a copy of it, gave them the formula of the oath — promises, flatteries, everything was tried.

The main point of his strategy was to interview each sister separately, probably at the turning of some corridor, and by surprise. Shrewdly he realized that to withdraw the sisters from the influence of the superior was the only chance he had of possibly bringing them around to his point of view. He gave them to understand that the law of the people is that of God and that to disobey the law is to disobey God; that each individual, in no matter what state, was obliged to submit without distinction to all the laws of that state, without examining or studying the motives which gave rise to those laws; otherwise, there would soon be great disorder; that the oath in question was purely civil; that it had already been taken by most of the former religious in the town; that by taking this oath they would place themselves in a position of being able to continue in the service of the poor sick, as they had always done with such great zeal; that, in the contrary, by refusing, they would deprive these same sick people of their help because by disobedience they would be regarded as suspects, treated as such, and suspended from their ordinary duties; that the time for taking this oath was about to expire; finally, that since they appeared to have the intention of observing all the laws of the republic, as they had done up to the present, it should not be difficult to promise by an oath to be faithful to that republic, to maintain with all their vigor its unity and indivisibility, as well as liberty and equality.

Could the truly diabolical composition of this argument be misunderstood? It begins with reasons based on obedience due to all constituted authority, with turns of phrases which must have recalled the counsel received in the Community on the spirit of obedience necessary to the good order of societies.

Then there are the appeals made to the spirit of charity and of devotion to the poor. There is even the suspicion of an exaggeration (maybe lie) in the statement that the greater part of other communities had taken the oath.

The pressure from the municipal authorities and the administrators of the hospital continued. One of the administrators finally reported that, in spite of his having expressed very clearly the desire of the board that they should conform without any repugnance to the law which in no way contradicted their religious opinions, it appeared that only three of them, namely Sisters Halicot, Melanie, and Adelaide, would make no difficulties about taking the oath, but that the others were not disposed to do so on the pretense that by their former institute they were not obliged to any oath.

These three sisters took the oath in a formal ceremony arranged by the administrators to give publicity to it. The Mayor, Citizen Berger, three municipal officers, and many people watched as the three sisters swore to be faithful to the Republic and to uphold with all their might unity and indivisibility, as well as equality and liberty. Thirty-six sisters clustered closely around Sister Antoinette Taillade, the other three separated from them — a lamentable division foisted on them. The wrath of the municipality against Sister Antoinette is evident in the report of the proceeding which the mayor gave his council:

The Citizen Mayor said that this morning he went, accompanied by Citizen Hébert, Municipal Officer, to the hospital of this town, and received the oath prescribed by law from Citizenesses Marie Halicot, Jeanne-Barbe-Melanie Busset, and Perrine [*sic*] Gaillardot; that as a result of the various informations he had been given, perhaps many of the others would have taken it if they had not been prevented by the perfidious suggestions and evil propositions of the ones called Antoinette, super-

ior, Marie-Anne, and Odile, other sisters of the said hospital. It is urgent that these three persons should be referred to a judge because they are so dangerous for the hospital as well as for their companions.

The Council applauded the mayor's idea and "decided that the said Antoinette, Marie-Anne, and Odile should be arrested immediately and placed in the Calvary house of detention, as suspects, that the Revolutionary Committee should be informed, and, furthermore, that the administrators of the aforesaid hospital should be invited to replace these women." The arrest was made that same Sunday evening, January 19, 1794.

### **Imprisonment and "Trial"**

Three sisters were taken to the Calvary, a former convent now used as a prison, where the prisoners were crowded together in extremely dirty and wretched conditions. Two days later, the commissioners came to take Sister Antoinette to the Penitents, another convent. She refused to leave her sisters until she was assured that they would also be sent to the Penitents. Why this painful separation? It had been decided to sacrifice Sisters Marie-Anne and Odile in the hope that the separation would bring about a capitulation by the superior and the others who had refused to take the oath. Despite the assurances, the two sisters were escorted to the convent of the Good Shepherd.

The prisons had not been chosen haphazardly. Both the Good Shepherd nuns and those of the convent of the Penitents had taken the oath some days earlier, so it was hoped that their example would persuade the Daughters of Charity to do the same. The commissioners waited for several days, but as the sisters did not submit, they proceeded to carry out the threats they had so often made.

On January 27, just eight days after their arrest, Sisters

Marie-Anne and Odile appeared before their judge, Vacheron, of the military commission, and his assistant, Bremaud. Three Good Shepherd nuns who were witnesses to the interrogation later reported that Sister Marie-Anne was asked, "Where do you come from? Why are you here?" "I don't know," she replied, "unless it is because I refused to take the oath." Why? "My conscience will not allow me. I made the sacrifice of leaving my parents when I was very young so that I could come and serve the poor. I made the sacrifice of laying aside my habit and even that of wearing the national cockade." This last sentence so infuriated Vacheron that he shouted at her, "Don't you realize that transgression against the law is punishable by death?" His ire so agitated Sister Marie-Anne that all she could do was to say to him, "You will do whatever you like with me." Once again he became violent and ordered a gendarme to rip off her cockade. When her turn came, Sister Odile made replies similar to those of Sister Marie-Anne, with the same effect on Vacheron.

The Departmental Archives (Vendée) contains the manuscript document for the interrogation of "people condemned to death by firing squad who were imprisoned in the "so-called Good Shepherd Prison." On the fourth page we read:

Marie-Anne Vaillot, aged sixty, born at Fountainbleau, Daughter of Charity of the Hotel-Dieu of Saint-Jean, where she was living and where she was arrested a week last Sunday (old style<sup>12</sup>) by some citizens; has said that the reason for her arrest is because she has not taken the oath, does not wish to do so, has no fear of anything whatsoever which

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<sup>12</sup>The Republican Calendar completely renamed the days of the week, and months. *Old style* and *enslaved style* indicate the persuasion of the scribe.

might be done with her; it is plain to be seen from her replies that she is a fanatic and a rebel against the laws of the country; has never attended a mass celebrated by a priest who has taken the oath.<sup>13</sup>

Audile Bangard [*sic*], aged forty-three, born at Gondrechange in Lauraine [*sic*], Daughter of Charity of the Hotel-Dieu of Saint-Jean of Angers, where she lived and was arrested a week last Sunday (enslaved style) by some citizens; said that the reason for her arrest was that she did not take the oath, does not wish to do so, and has no fear of whatever treatment might be give her; it is plain to be seen from her replies that she is a fanatic and a rebel against the laws of her country.

In the margin, opposite the two paragraphs relating to the two interrogations, are the numbers 32 and 33 marked by a cross for emphasis, and below each number a small letter f, which signified condemned to be shot.

After their interrogation, the sisters were taken back to their prison without being told the decision taken by the judges. Thus they spent two days with no definite information. The sisters were visited in their prison by an employee of the hospital, Mlle. Martha, who left us the following account:<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Priests of the Constitutional Church.

<sup>14</sup>In November 1794, after the fall of Robespierre and the end of the Reign of Terror, another Revolutionary Committee was empowered to investigate the excesses of the various commissions and judges during the Reign of Terror. From these documents come the responses of those interviewed, such as Mlle. Martha and the Good Shepherd nuns.

On Friday, Sister Marie-Anne said: "It seems that we are to die tomorrow, and that I shall simply be wounded at the first round of the firing." "Yes," said Sister Odile, "but I shall die immediately from several bullets."

Thus the Lord himself seems to have forewarned and strengthened his martyrs before the struggle.

### Execution

On the morning of February 1, a commissioner arrived at the prison with a list in his hand from which he called the names of the victims for that day. Some tried to hide in order to escape death. What a heinous scene was this reading of names and the devilish search for the victims. Another no less atrocious spectacle awaited the unfortunate prisoners. They were to become, on this cold and rainy morning, part of a procession of more than 200 persons (mostly women), tied in pairs to a central rope. Guarded by mounted troops and gendarmes, the prisoners moved with painful slowness along the narrow street. At intervals during the passage, carts were loaded with those who could no longer walk. According to witnesses, they were piled one on top of another like sacks of wheat. Some suffocated before reaching the place of execution; others pleaded to be killed then and there.

When she saw the fettered prisoners, Sister Odile drew back involuntarily. "Gentle Sister Odile," says an anonymous document,<sup>15</sup> "seemed rather disturbed at the sight of these preparations and feared she was lacking in courage, but coming out of prison leaning on Sister Marie-Anne's arm, for

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<sup>15</sup>This is a manuscript preserved by the Daughters of Charity. It details much of what transpired on February 1 in Angers.

the two were bound with the same rope, she drew from the steadfastness of this noble friend a strength of soul which thereafter banished all fear."

The condemned prisoners were herded along between lines of gun carrying soldiers. At the initiative of the sisters, psalms and canticles of the Church were recited. Those condemned to die received inspiration and strength from others. The anonymous document notes: "They looked at one another with pious and tender affection, and witnesses all along the way heard from the lips of these two touching victims the following words, often repeated and never interrupted by a tear: 'A crown is destined for us, let us not lose it today.'" The sisters kept on saying to their nearest companions, "just a little more effort and victory is ours."

A dramatic incident, faithfully remembered and handed down by tradition, halted the procession for a few minutes:

Sister Odile dropped her rosary; she was probably wearing it under her clothing, for otherwise such an object would not have been tolerated. Wanting to pick it up this poor sister bent down and rested her hand on a stone, but just at that time, one of her executioners came up and gave her a blow on the hand with the butt of his rifle. One of the women in the crowd who knew the hospital and who up to then had been swallowed up in the crowd following the condemned prisoners, then grabbed the rosary, which she later took to the hospital when peace had been restored.

After a death march of some two miles, the convoy arrived at a small plateau and entered the enclosure of Haie aux Bonshommes. On the eve of the execution trenches had been prepared. The victims had to make their way over the mounds covering victims of preceding days. It was at this moment that Sister Marie-Anne in a strong voice intoned the Litany of Our



Lady. These invocations were repeated by the crowd of condemned people.

According to Mlle. Martha, this scene was so moving that one of the most furious and most irreligious of the Angers' revolutionaries was impelled to pity and remorse. "It hurts," he said, "to see such women die," and he left the scene.

In the words of the manuscript preserved by the Daughters of Charity, the victims of this day "encouraged one another to die in a Christian manner after the example of Marie-Anne and Odile, whose names were repeated with love and fervor." The commander of the execution squad, probably a man named Menard, tried to save the two sisters -- pity and admiration had taken possession of his heart. He said to them:

Citizenesses, there is still time for you to escape the death with which you are threatened; you have rendered services to humanity; what! because of an oath you are asked to take, you would give up your lives and not continue to render services that you have always carried out; don't take the oath since it is repugnant and vexing to you. I will take it upon myself to say that you have taken it, and I give you my word that nothing will happen to you nor to your companions.

Sister Marie-Anne replied, "Citizen, not only do we not wish to take the oath of which you are speaking, but we do not want even to appear to have taken it." This reply disconcerted the commander, who, being himself subject to the Reign of Terror, was afraid that he had been too merciful, especially with the feared military commissioners being so close at hand. To insist was to compromise himself.

While the pious singing continued, the victims, in groups of twenty, were moved one after another before the firing squad, but gradually the voices lost vigor as the numbers diminished. Bodies fell into the trenches, others slumped on the edge and

tried to rise. There were cries and groans. The sisters seem to have been the last victims. True to their prediction, Sister Odile was killed immediately, Sister Marie-Anne first suffered only a broken arm before she was killed.

With their death a great silence and peace settled over the Field of Martyrs.



*I know there are some among you, my dear sisters, who, by God's grace, love their vocation so much that they would let themselves be crucified, torn to pieces and cut to ribbons rather than give way to anything contrary to it.*

St. Vincent de Paul

*They shall be faithful in having a pure intention of pleasing God in all things and to prefer to die rather than to displease Him.*

St. Vincent de Paul



*How short this wretched life! How endless, blessed and desirable, eternity! The only way to get there is to follow Jesus, always laboring, always suffering.*

St. Louise de Marillac



*Sufferings are the ties, the bands, which fasten and unite us to our Dearest.*

Mother Seton