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Very Reverend Raymond Deville, S.S.

The Seventeenth-Century School of French Spirituality

BY RAYMOND DEVILLE, S.S.

The title of this symposium, "*L'Age d'Or: The Roots of Our Tradition*," invites us to explore the French school of spirituality. The term "French school of spirituality" is quite controversial. Some historians disagree with the name; others deny the existence of such a school; still others do not think that Saint Vincent or Saint Louise belonged to it. It is necessary, then, to clarify ideas on the subject.

All historians of the church in France would agree, I think, that the seventeenth century in that country, like the sixteenth in Spain, was the golden age, *le grand siècle*, of spirituality or, better, the golden age of Christian renewal. During that period the entire French church experienced a genuine, strong regeneration that was spiritual, apostolic, and

missionary—altogether. The expression “French school of spirituality” was popularized by Henri Brémond’s famous multi-volume work *Histoire littéraire du Sentiment Religieux en France* (*A Literary History of Religious Thought in France*), more precisely by the volume devoted to Pierre de Bérulle, Charles de Condren, Jean-Jacques Olier, John Eudes, and others.¹ Since then, the name has been used either in a broad sense, including all the leaders of the French renewal during the seventeenth century, especially until 1660 (the year of Saint Vincent’s death), or in a strict sense, limited to Bérulle and his first disciples, Condren, Eudes, and Olier. Although a contemporary, a good friend of the foregoing, and recognized as a spiritual leader in the French church—perhaps the premier leader—Vincent de Paul does not belong to the Berullians in the strict sense. On the other hand, it seems possible to speak of Saints Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort (1673-1716) and John Baptist de La Salle (1651-1719) as belonging to that branch because both were trained by the Sulpicians (Olier’s disciples) and their teaching is very Berullian. In any case, in order to know our roots, to understand the spirit and writings of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise, it is necessary to know what is usually called the French school of spirituality.

Professor James Hitchcock has already presented the historical context of the golden age in France (1560-1660). I shall introduce you (1) to some of the main representatives of the French school (without speaking much of Saint Vincent or Saint Louise), (2) to the principal characteristics of the movement, and (3) to some texts typical of the school (an excerpt from Saint Jean Eudes, a prayer by Olier, and a letter of Condren). Finally, I will draw a few conclusions to underscore the contemporary significance of the French school.

Some Main Representatives of the French School

Although Bérulle is the father of the Berullian school, it is absolutely necessary to say a few words about Francis de Sales (1576-1622). His influence was extraordinary. He may be regarded by all our communities as a common father, a proto-father, from whom each of us has descended—Visitandines, Vincentians, Daughters of Charity, Sulpicians, Brothers of the Christian Schools. Neither a Frenchman nor an Italian, Francis was a native of Savoy and spent most of his life there between France and Italy. I will stress two things about him. First, his connection

¹Henri Brémond, *Histoire littéraire du Sentiment Religieux en France, depuis la fin des guerres de religion jusqu’à nos jours*, 11 vols. (Paris, 1921-1933).

with some of the spiritual leaders of that time. He sojourned in Paris three times. His first stay, from 1578 to 1588, was at the Sorbonne for studies in the arts, philosophy, and theology (very good studies especially in scripture and patristics). At that time he met none of those we are discussing. During his second stay as a bishop in 1602, he gave many sermons and met the circle of Madame Acarie, including perhaps the young Bérulle. Acarie was an influential widow deeply concerned about the condition of the church in the kingdom. Her salon served as a gathering place for those with a similar interest in the religious needs of the time. While in Paris, Francis was introduced to the writings of Saint Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), which he read and reread. His third stay, from fall 1618 to late summer 1619, brought him together with Vincent de Paul and Bérulle. They spoke about more than the weather. The three were engaged in the renewal of the church; they also shared a concern for the unity of the church (the conversion of Protestants) and the spiritual life of lay people and religious. Francis and Vincent became friends, and before death, the former entrusted the latter with responsibility for the Visitandines in Paris. Vincent met often with Jane Frances de Chantal. I may add that in his last year of life (1622), while in Lyons, Francis de Sales visited the Olier family and blessed the young Jean-Jacques, an adolescent of fourteen. His mother was complaining about him and Francis de Sales reassured her. "Madam, a little patience," he told her, "and grieve not because God is preparing in the person of this good boy a great servant in his Church."

The second thing I want to underline about Francis de Sales is the great influence of his writings throughout that period. Everyone read *Introduction à la vie dévote* (*Introduction to the Devout Life*, 1608), which went through many editions. The *Traité de l'amour de Dieu* (*Treatise on the Love of God*, 1616) was not so popular. It is more mystical and represents a different stage in the personal experience of Francis de Sales, probably arising out of his relationship with Jane Frances de Chantal. The *Treatise*, however, was read studiously by Vincent and Louise. So, if we wish to understand their mentality and writings, it is necessary not only to skim through but to examine thoroughly the writings of Francis de Sales.

Unlike Condren and Olier, Bérulle did not live very long (1575-1629). Still, he was a very important figure in the seventeenth century. Books devoted to the history of spirituality contain abundant references to him. As you know, he helped Saint Vincent in both his vocation and orientation. Vincent lived briefly with the Oratorians (founded in 1611).

Bérulle secured for him the pastorate at Clichy (1612) and then placed him as tutor in the Gondi family in 1613. These were the years of Vincent's "conversion." Life under Bérulle's influence was determinative for him.

Apart from the positive influence on Vincent, Bérulle did many other things. He introduced the Carmelite nuns to France in 1604 (he was only twenty-nine!) and founded forty-three Carmelite convents before his death in 1629. In 1611 he founded the Oratory, a group of diocesan clerics whose purpose was to restore the dignity of the priesthood. His writings included the impressive *Discours de l'état et des grandeurs de Jésus* (*Discourse on the State and Grandeurs of Jesus*, 1623)—a huge book, profound and difficult, but very solid theology. What is, in my opinion, most important: Bérulle was a great theologian and mystic who had a strong influence on his time. His "Christian conversion" started during a retreat he made in 1602 with the Jesuits. It is interesting to observe that he progressed through an evolution which consisted of three distinct stages. The first was devoted to accumulating knowledge. Like Pico della Mirandola, Bérulle read and read and read; he wanted to know everything. The second phase, under the influence of Madame Acarie and her circle, brought him in contact with the Rheno-Flemish spiritual movement of returning to God alone in adoration of His fullness—God is God: the rest is nothing—theocentrism. The individual must look at God before all else. This was a reaction against a form of psychologism. The last stage centered on the person of Jesus, the Incarnate Word. Jesus in his holy humanity is the only adorer of his Father, and a disciple must be entirely devoted to living the states and mysteries of Jesus. The key to Bérulle's experience, doctrine, and teaching was mystical Christocentrism leading to an identification with Jesus: "It is no longer I who live but Jesus who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). Although Bérulle engaged in many religious and political activities, it was always, in contrast with Cardinal Richelieu, for the honor of God and the Church.

Bérulle's successor as head of the Oratory was Condren (1588-1641), a very holy man but a bad administrator. He wrote little but had a strong influence on many devout people living in the capital. It was said that "he was the confessor of all the saints in Paris." He knew and admired Vincent. As Olier's director, Condren advised him not to become a bishop but to prepare himself to found a seminary for the formation of priests. At that time there was no systematic formation for priesthood. There were many priests, too many in the big cities, but they

had nothing to do except drink, play cards, and offer masses for the dead. Vincent de Paul used to say that all the evil in the Church came from priests. All the members of the French school, Vincent, Bérulle, Condren, Olier, Eudes, and Adrien Bourdoise, were obsessed by that problem. As you know, Vincent organized retreats for ordinands, established the Tuesday Conferences, and finally founded a seminary. He also played a great role in the appointment of good bishops.

Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac are very well known. I will speak of them at length later on, but I insist on the fact that they were in close relationship with all the spiritual and missionary movements of their time. "No man is an island," said the poet John Donne (1573-1631).

Before becoming the father of Jansenism in France, Jean Duvergier de Hauranne (1581-1643), abbé de Saint-Cyran, was a very good friend of Bérulle, Condren, and Saint Vincent. He helped Bérulle write his book *L'état et des grandeurs de Jésus*. Saint-Cyran was a wonderful scholar, a specialist in the fathers of the church. He was also a great spiritual master. When he fell into strict Jansenism after the publication of Antoine Arnauld's *De la Fréquent communion* (*On Frequent Communion*, 1642), Vincent, as well as many others like Olier, withdrew from him and his friends.² Some Oratorians later followed Saint-Cyran into Jansenist doctrine.

After a conversion of a sort, Jean-Jacques Olier (1608-1657) became a disciple of Saint Vincent. Always an admirer of "Monsieur Vincent," Olier wrote him several letters, made retreats under Vincent's guidance, and was sent by him on several missions in France. Later on, Olier took Father de Condren as spiritual director and, at his urging, founded the first seminary in December 1641. He was then appointed pastor of Saint-Sulpice (the parish that gave rise to the appellation "Sulpicians"), took part in the mission work for Canada, and had hopes of going to Indochina. In 1651 he proposed to the bishops of France a project for a seminary in each diocese. His writings included a series of spiritual books for the parishioners of Saint-Sulpice and many letters of spiritual direction.

John Eudes (1601-1680) was at first an Oratorian, received into the community by Bérulle himself in 1623. A native of Normandy, he preached many missions in his home province and founded the order of Notre-Dame de Charité for prostitutes (the Good Shepherd was a

²About Saint-Cyran and Vincent, see André Dodin, *La légende et l'histoire: de Monsieur Depaul à saint Vincent de Paul* (Paris, 1985), 166-172.

later branch of that order). After leaving the Oratory in 1643, Eudes established the seminary of Caen in Normandy and founded the Congregation of Jesus and Mary (the Eudists). He also published many books and wrote some liturgical offices (Heart of Mary, Heart of Jesus, etc.).

I could add many other people, men and women: Madame Acarie (1566-1618), who became a Carmelite at Pontoise; Marie de l'Incarnation (1599-1672), an Ursuline who went to Quebec; Adrien Bourdoise (1584-1655), pastor and founder of the seminary at Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet; André Duval (1564-1638), professor at the Sorbonne and good friend of all our masters.

I should finally add something about a great man, an Italian bishop, who was much admired by all in France at that time: Charles Borromeo (1538-1584). Nephew of Pope Pius IV, who created him a cardinal and later appointed him archbishop of Milan, Borromeo was one of the first bishops to implement the decisions of the Council of Trent for the renewal of the church. De Sales, Bérulle, de Paul, Olier, and all the others of the French school admired him very much. In 1643 Olier commissioned the publication in French of the *Acts of the Church of Milan (Acta Ecclesiae Mediolanensis [1582])*, a condensation of the work of Tridentine reform mandated by the several synods and provincial councils presided over by Borromeo. In recent times John XXIII did the same, issuing a new edition of the *Acts*. This was no coincidence. The two great councils in modern times were Trent and Vatican II, the latter summoned by John XXIII.

The Main Characteristics of the French School

I will now enumerate several features or aspects of the experience and teaching of the French masters. Their entire movement of spiritual and apostolic renewal had the following characteristics.

(1) A profound spiritual experience. Each of these masters was a true mystic, nourished by a frequent reading of and meditation on the Scriptures, especially Saint John and Saint Paul. Each had experienced a true conversion or at least a profound evolution; the history of their lives was the history of a spiritual and apostolic journey.

(2) An emphasis on certain aspects of the Christian faith and life: a sense of the grandeur of God and of adoration; a relationship with Jesus, lived especially by "communion" in his states, in his mysteries, in his filial and apostolic feelings; great devotion to the Spirit, which is the Spirit of the risen Jesus, to whose action the Christian must abandon

himself.

(3) A mystical sense of the Church, the Body of Christ, the continuation and fulfillment of the life of Jesus.

(4) A very theological and sound, while at the same time simple and pious, devotion to our Lady. Mary was for these masters the Mother of the Incarnate Word and, as Bérulle often wrote, "She is and always will be Jesus' mother." Their great devotion to Mary took the form of a vow of servitude to her. Grignon de Montfort was an authentic son of the French school when he proposed such a consecration in his *Traité de la vrai dévotion à la sainte Vierge* (*Treatise on the True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*).³ This is an important legacy of the French school. Pope John Paul II, for example, loves Montfort, and his motto "*Totus tuus*" ("all yours" or "totally yours") means that he belongs completely to Mary.

(5) A certain concept of human nature (anthropology), Augustinian and pessimistic on the one hand, yet very positive and optimistic on the other: "man, pure capacity for God."

(6) A vigorous, apostolic, missionary commitment aimed both inside and outside of France. The pastoral reform of the seventeenth century was in great part the work of the French school. Renewal of religious life, parish life, catechetics, and works of charity found its best support among its adherents. Olier, for instance, like Vincent de Paul, was "obsessed by a concern for the mission." Bérulle introduced the reformed Carmel in France and contributed to the foundation of forty-three Carmelite monasteries during his life.

(7) A particular concern for the dignity of priests, their sanctity, and their formation. Priestly perfection was an intense concern of Bérulle. Olier was aware of having received from Jesus the order to "bring contemplation into the priesthood." All of the masters engaged in the foundation of seminaries. Although lacking an original theology of priestly ministry, they perceived the importance of the priest's mission and the urgency of a profound coherence between his life and his ministry.

Listening to Some Masters of the French School

Let us turn a few texts of Saint John Eudes, Olier, and Condren which seem to me very typical of the French school. In reading them, we may notice similarities and differences with Saint Vincent and Saint

³Never published in Grignon de Montfort's lifetime, the manuscript of the *Treatise* was discovered in 1842. Ed.

Louise. The first two selections are extracts from the great book of John Eudes, *La vie et la royaume de Jésus dans les âmes chrétiennes* (*The Life and Kingdom of Jesus in Christian Souls*, 1637). He wrote it as a result of many missions preached in countryside and city; it is like a synthesis of his missions.

You see what the Christian life is: a continuation and fulfillment of the life of Jesus; that all our actions must be a continuation of the actions of Jesus; that we must be like so many Jesuses on the earth, to continue his life and his works, and to do and suffer all that we do and suffer, in a holy and divine way, in the spirit of Jesus, that is, in the holy and divine dispositions and intentions with which Jesus conducted himself in his actions and sufferings. Since Saint Paul assures us that he fills up in himself the sufferings of Jesus Christ, we can say in truth that a true Christian, a member of Jesus Christ and united with him by his grace, continues and accomplishes, by all the actions that he performs in the spirit of Jesus Christ, the actions that Jesus Christ performed during the time of his life on earth. So that when a Christian prays, he continues and fulfills the prayer that Jesus Christ prayed on earth; and the same applies to all the other actions which are done in a Christ-like way.

For us today the word “Christian” is ordinary; it has lost its true sense; it is *usé* (worn out), as we say in French. In the seventeenth century, it really meant being “Christ-like,” dependent on Christ according to the quotation of Saint Paul: “Christ lives in me.” Father Olier wrote: “Who deserves to be called a Christian? He who has in himself the spirit of Christ.” This might remind us of Saint Patrick’s breastplate.⁴ The Second extract, from Eudes’s *Kingdom of Jesus*, is as follows:

... being united with him [Jesus] in the most intimate union possible, like that of the members with their head; united with him spiritually by the faith and the grace which he gave us in Holy Baptism; united with him corporally by the union of his very holy body with ours in the Holy Eucharist; it follows from this necessarily that since the members are

⁴The “Breastplate of Saint Patrick” (in Latin the *Lorica*) is a poetic Irish morning prayer attributed to the saint but actually of a later date. One stanza reads:

Christ with me, Christ before me,
 Christ behind me, Christ within me,
 Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
 Christ at my right, Christ at my left,
 Christ in the fort,
 Christ in the chariot-seat,
 Christ at the helm:
 Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,
 Christ in the mouth of every man who speaks to me,
 Christ in every eye that sees me,
 Christ in every ear that hears me. [Ed.]

animated by the spirit of their head and are living his life, we must be animated by the spirit of Jesus to live His life, to walk in His ways, to be clothed again in His sentiments and inclinations, to perform all our actions with the dispositions and intentions with which He performed His, in a word, to continue and fulfill the life, religion and devotion that He exercised on earth.

The next text is a prayer in several versions, one from Condren and two from Olier. Prayers are very interesting because they often best express a spiritual experience and teaching while also nourishing it. A prayer always reveals a soul.

The Little Prayer of Condren:

Venez, seigneur Jésus,
 et vivez en votre serviteur,
 dans la plénitude de votre vertu,
 dans la perfection de vos voies,
 et dans la sainteté de votre Esprit,
 et dominez sur toute puissance ennemie
 dans la vertu de votre Esprit
 à la gloire de votre Père.⁵

The Prayer of Olier:

O Jesus, living in Mary,
 come and live in your servants
 in the spirit of your holiness,
 in the fullness of your power
 in the perfection of your ways,
 in the truth of your virtues,
 in the communion of your mysteries:
 overcome every oppressing force
 in your Spirit
 for the glory of the Father.⁶

Another Version of the Prayer of Olier:

Jésus qui vivez en Marie,
 en la beauté de vos vertus,
 en l'éminence de vos pouvoirs,
 en la splendeur de vos richesses
 éternelles et divines,
 donnez-nous part à cette sainteté
 qui l'applique uniquement à Dieu;

⁵The "Little Prayer" of Condren: Come, Lord Jesus, and live in your servant in the fullness of your power, in the perfection of your ways, and in the holiness of your Spirit, and rule over every hostile power with the force of your Spirit for the glory of your Father. [Trans. ed.]

⁶No French text was given in the original presentation for this version of Olier's prayer. Ed.

Communiez-nous au zèle
 qu'elle a pour son Église;
 enfin revêtez-nous de vous universellement
 pour n'être rien en nous,
 pour vivre uniquement de votre ESPRIT
 comme elle,
 à la gloire de votre PÈRE.⁷

This prayer is well known. The first version, from Condren, is directed to Jesus and is in the singular—"Come, Lord Jesus and live in your *servant*"—following Galatians 2:20. Olier's version, in two forms, is in the plural: "Jesus living in Mary, come and live in your *servants*" and "Jesus . . . give *us* a share. . . ." It is interesting to see the translation made by Gerald Manley Hopkins (1844-1889):

Jesu that does in Mary dwell
 Be in thy servants' hearts as well,
 In the spirit of thy holiness,
 In the fullness of thy force and stress,
 In the very ways that thy life goes
 And virtues that thy pattern shows,
 In the sharing of thy mysteries;
 And every power in us that is
 Against thy power put under feet
 In the Holy Ghost the Paraclete
 To the Glory of the Father. Amen.

The last text is an excerpt from a letter of Condren to a missionary of the Oratory. You may notice many similarities with Saint Vincent. The letter was probably written in 1637.

I beg Jesus Christ, Our Lord, to live in you in the perfection of his ways in the fullness of his virtue, and in the holiness of his Spirit. . . . With all my heart I give thanks to Our Lord for the success which he has given to you in your mission. It is an evidence that he has been pleased that you are *servng him in this kind of work*. Nonetheless the visits, to be really Christian, must not be prolonged. The Son of God often turned to his Father, as on the mountains and in the deserts, even though he did not have the need that we may have to be renewed in the spirit of God and to have healed what time and external concerns may have drained away from the interior resources necessary for the sake of speaking and acting

⁷Another Version of the Prayer of Olier: Jesus who lives in Mary, in the beauty of your power, in the eminence of your authority, in the splendor of your eternal and divine wealth, give us a share in this holiness that applies her uniquely to God; let us partake in the zeal she has for your church; finally, clothe us completely with yourself, so that we may be nothing in ourselves, so that we may live uniquely by your SPIRIT, as she did, for the glory of your FATHER. [Trans. ed.]

with God. In that, he has willed to point out what may be left for us to do. And as he is the origin of the evangelical mission, so he has willed to be the law and the rule of its perfection. He has said: "As the Father has sent me, so do I send you."

The charity that he has left us and that must be the life of true missions seeks God more than people, and seeks people by means of the love we draw from him. That is why it is sometimes necessary to attend to God alone—because he is our God, because our love seeks him within all things, because we owe him our principal duties, because he is the beginning and the end of all that we do, because from him we must draw what we have to do for his glory, to refer what we have to do himself, and . . . to give it back to him when it is finished.

. . . I believe that sometimes from day to day, when he will have given you a new spirit and when you will be ready for a second mission, he will be pleased that you have followed the charity that he has given you for the sake of the areas devastated by heresy. . . . While waiting, it would be good for you to study the most popular, the clearest, and the most efficacious ways to deal with controversies. Very deep study is not so necessary as the acquiring of clarity, and preciseness in proposing and resolving things.⁸

Condren begins: "I beg Jesus Christ, Our Lord, to live in you in the perfection of his ways in the fullness of his virtue, and in the holiness of his Spirit." You see the prayer. He continues: "Nonetheless the visits, to be really *Christian* . . ." There is that word. The rest of the paragraph focuses on Jesus, the only rule of the mission. The letter goes on: "The charity that [Jesus] has left us and that must be the life of true missions seeks God more than people." That seems a bit strange, but it is theocentrism—that everything is turned ultimately toward God. Notice the end of the letter where Condren writes, "It would be good for you to study the *most popular*, the *clearest*, and the *most efficacious* ways to deal with controversies." That sounds like Vincent's "little method" of preaching.

In conclusion, I emphasize the relevance of the French school of spirituality nowadays. In a recent issue of *Chicago Studies* (April 1989), Agnes Cunningham insisted on the importance of knowing the "schools" of spirituality. Speaking of the French school, she writes:

As we try to assess the contemporary value of a knowledge of this school of spirituality from another century and a culture many Americans consider "foreign," we might be surprised to find how many elements seem both modern and suited to our own way of thinking. For one thing, the role of the laity is highly significant in the French school. Renewal of spiritual energy and education of the faith of the ordinary man and

⁸Paul Auvray et André Jouffrey, eds., *Lettres du Père de Condren* (Paris, 1943), 350-53.

woman were priorities for Bérulle and his companions. Women of deep faith and keen insight were readily recognized as spiritual guides by Bérulle, John Eudes, Olier and others. A strong sense of mission inspired these spiritual leaders. If some of them founded religious congregations, it was in response to the desires and requests from women and men seeking a life of dedication to God in that state.

. . . The French school, emerging as it did after the Council of Trent, existed in a post-conciliar age not too unlike our own. At a time when the entire Church is calling for renewal, we can look with confidence to the heritage of Bérulle: a spiritual life based on the great realities of faith; inspiring, meaningful liturgies; an understanding of the church as *mystery*; the universal call of all persons to holiness; priests and bishops who are truly pastors and men of prayer; a sense of God in our daily lives; a personal relationship with Jesus Christ; openness to the Spirit of the Risen Christ; an apostolic spirit for mission and service of the poor; true devotion to Mary.”⁹

“In case of necessity you should prefer the service of the poor to making your prayer but, if you take care, you will find plenty of time for both.”

*Saint Vincent de Paul, Conference to the Daughters of Charity,
2 August 1640.*

⁹Agnes Cunningham, “Horizons of Spirituality,” *Chicago Studies* 28 (April 1989):100-01.