

Blessed Jean-Louis Loir de Besançon (1720-1794)



Among the more than eight hundred priests and religious amassed on the infamous “pontons de Rochefort” moored near the island of Aix in 1794 there were some Capuchin friars. They would have been deported to Guyana but the English ships that cruised the French coast prevented such voyages. Many died for their faith in the pitiful conditions within these floating, death camp prototypes. On 1 October 1995 John Paul II recognised that this sacrifice was the grace of martyrdom for Jean-Baptiste Souzy, vicar general of La Rochelle and his sixty four companions, among whom were the Capuchins Jean-Louis de Besançon, Protase de Seéz and Sébastien de Nancy, whose story we now wish to tell briefly.

Jean-Baptiste (this was his baptismal name) was born on 11 March 1720 at Besançon (Doubs) to Jean-Louis Loir and Élisabeth Juliot and baptised the same day. He was the sixth of their eight children. His father, a Parisian, was director and treasurer of the Zecca of Bourgogne at Besançon and in 1730 was elected director of the same at Lyon where he went to live with all his family. There his son Jean-Baptiste began school, although almost nothing is known of his childhood. However it is known that at twenty years of age, in May 1740, he became a Capuchin in the friary of the city and received the Capuchin habit and the name Jean-Louis. He made profession on 9 May 1741. The Capuchins had two friaries in Lyon. One was under the title of Saint Francis and called the “grand couvent”, founded in 1575 in the quarter of Saint-Paul. The other was built in 1622 and dedicated to Saint Andrew and called the “Petit Forez”. The future martyr spent most of his religious life in one or other of these two friaries. At least twice he held the office of superior, once in the friary of Saint Andrew from 1761 to 1764, and a second time in the “grande couvent” of Saint Francis until 1767. Beyond this information the archives are silent.

An abbot who knew him then has left this important testimony: “Endowed with all the virtues that could render him suitable, he never sought to receive any office, saying that he did not enter the Order to command but to obey, not to dominate but to submit. He humbly dedicated himself to the salvation of souls and exercised the ministry of the confessional very fruitfully. He seemed tireless. The friars never organised any mission for which he did not offer his zeal. He preferred the simple people and the poor, but even important people of standing who were pious felt attracted by the noble urbanity and affability of his imposing and gracious appearance. It would be difficult to count the number of conversions that he worked, or the number of souls of all social classes whom he brought back to God.”

In 1791 the revolutionaries obliged priests and religious to swear allegiance to the civil constitution of the clergy. Br. Jean-Louis was seventy-four years old and in Saint Francis friary when the Constituent Assemblée ordered an inventory of the persons and assets of every religious house. He declared that he wished to remain within the Order. However around October he left Lyon and withdrew to Bourbonnais, to a castle where Nicole-Élisabeth lived with her son Gilbert de Grassin. Two Dominican nieces also took refuge there. Suspicious rumours and a tip-off by some malevolent character led to an investigation ordered by the Directoire on 3 February 1793. Even if this bore no result all the inhabitants of the castle

were transported to Moulins where sixty six “insermentés” – rebellious or refractory priests had be shut away either in prison or in the old monastery of Saint Clare.

In the list of ecclesiastics who had not sworn the oath we find Br. Jean-Louis, classified as “ci-devant capuchin” (a former Capuchin). His age would have spared him further sufferings had it not been for the terrible, atheistic accord at the end of 1793 that tacitly allowed the elimination of these elderly clerics who, in fact, were transported in three different consignments to Rochefort even though many were ill. Br. Jean-Louis left Moulins on 2 April 1794 in the third consignment with twenty six canons, curates, Trappists, Capuchins, other Franciscans and Brothers of the Christian Schools. Along the way, in carts escorted by gendarmes and the National Guard, the people took pity on them and helped them. They reached Rochefort towards the end of April. Searched for all their possessions, they were packed into two hulks moored on the sea coast.

Br. Jean-Louis was transferred to the ship “Deus-Associés”. The captain and his crew were prison inmates. Onboard more than four hundred persons were literally crammed together in pitiful conditions, a forerunner of the concentration camps. One foul mess tin was used for the meal of ten persons who had to be content with spoiled meat, cod or broad beans. They ate squeezed together and standing up. They had no plates, glasses, cups or utensils, just a wooden spoon. This was torture by hunger. In addition to this there were other dreadful torments in the area of hygiene and sanitation, without let up. Then there were the insults and jibes of the jailer sailors. The hardships were much worse at night. A whistle signalled time for sleep. That human throng with many elderly and sick was compelled to crowd together below decks in the hold like sardines in a can. Night time was hell, one more refined cruelty, a preview of the gas chambers. To purify the air, tar was set alight in barrels. This produced fireballs and suffocation, acrid fumes that caused tremendous perspiration and relentless coughing. Weaker persons succumbed. In that state they were crudely dragged out in to the open air of the ship’s deck where they all had to squeeze together. The tremendous contrast made their teeth chatter as they shivered from the cold.



The greatest pain however was in not being able to have a breviary or any other spiritual book. Nor could they pray together. Nevertheless one hid a breviary, another a gospel book, or holy oils – or even the Blessed Sacrament. And in that cess-pit, those martyrs administered sacraments that strengthened them to face death with joy.

These were the sufferings of Br. Jean-Louis. Despite these his lively and spirited character fostered courage among his companions. One of the survivors testified that the Capuchin “although venerable in age, had become the joy of all. In fact he was still like a young man of thirty years, trying in this way to lighten our sufferings, while hiding his own that were wearing him down terribly. He died serenely as he had always lived. In fact on the morning of 19 May 1794 when they prisoners awoke below

decks they found that this excellent religious had died kneeling down in his place. And no one would have thought that he suffered any sickness. After he had gotten up, he knelt down to pray and in this way he breathed his last. Seeing him in this humble posture, next to his hammock pole, it seemed that he really was praying. However, he had died in that attitude of supplication as the Holy Scriptures present the patriarchs of the Old Testament in their moment of death.”

He was the first of twenty two Capuchins to die at Rochefort.

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