

Sébastien de Nancy (1749-1794)



Among the five hundred and forty seven victims of the “pontons de Rochefort,” and the sixty four priests beatified as martyrs to the French Revolution,¹ we meet the Capuchin Br. Sébastian de Nancy. The drama of his life story is a little better documented. François François was born on 17 January 1749 in Nancy. His parents were Domenic and Marguerite Verneson. The following day he was baptised in the church of Saint-Nicolas. His father was a carpenter. François’ godparents belonged to high society and the nobility. This would indicate that his family was well-off and belonged to the *bourgeoise*. It was not difficult for the young François to meet the Capuchins. They had set up on the outskirts of Nancy in 1593 and later moved to a better friary in 1613 and which had been renovated through the generosity of Duke Léopold of Lorraine and king Stanislas in 1746. In fact, the parish of Saint-Nicolas, founded in 1731, made use of the Capuchin friary church until 1770. The friars used to gather in the choir behind and the altar and animated the secular Franciscan Order. The friary was an important location in the provincial capital and produced the wool needed by the Province to make habits and mantles for the friars in Lorraine. Their apostolic spirit and dynamic charity towards the poor, the plague victims and all those suffering made them very popular and in great demand. However when in 1768 at nineteen years of age the young François entered the friary of Saint-Michel, the novitiate since 1602, a certain crisis in vocations was already in evidence. In 1766 the king of France instituted the Commission of Regulars to correct abuses and reform monasteries and convents. It issued a royal edict in 1768 to fix the minimum age for solemn vows to twenty one years. This had helped accelerate the crisis.

The novice master, Br. Michele de Saint-Dié clothed him in the Capuchin habit on 24 January 1768 and gave him the name ‘Brother Sébastian’ and one year later received his solemn vows. His profession was marked in the official register and was the first for 1769, as was the record of his baptism in the parish register in 1749 in the church of Saint-Nicolas. After novitiate Sébastian went to the Capuchin student house in Pont-à-Mousson, a friary founded in 1607 and renovated in 1764. At that time nine Capuchin priests, six clerics and one lay friar lived there. The city had been chosen for the house of studies since there was a Jesuit College. There he stayed while completing his studies and was ordained priest, though the actual date is not known.

On 5 June 1777 he was approved as confessor in the friary in Sarreguemines, where he also need to know the German language used in that border region. In 1778 the documents indicate that by then he was a confessor in the friary of Sarrebourg in the diocese of Metz. The fraternity was exemplary in its poverty and observance of the Rule. The documents are very eloquent regarding the years 1782 to 1784. These are the registers of the parish of Saint-Quirin where Sébastian frequently exercised pastoral ministry with baptisms, weddings and so forth, making up for the shortage of local clergy. On 26 August 1784 the provincial chapter appointed him to the friary in Commercy where he remained until 1787, or

¹ cf www.foi-et-contemplation.net/amis/pretres/pretres-deportes/64-pretres.php (4 July 2009)

probably until 1789. But for a brief pause in the friary of Dieuze he continued in the busy apostolate helping the clergy.

From 1789 Br. Sébastien is in the friary of Epinal on the left bank of the western branch of the Moselle and was there when the French Revolution erupted with all its antireligious and anticlerical consequences. The Municipal Officers conducted an inventory search of the friary on 30 April 1790. A year later all the furniture and effects of the friary were sold, while Br. Sébastien, who had refused the loyalty oath to the Constitution, headed for the friary of Châtelsur-Moselle after the friars had been evicted. The Municipal Council had designated the Châtel as a common house for the Capuchins. They will also be expelled from here for not participating in a procession led by a Parish Priest who had sworn the oath to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. With the friars homeless on the streets, the people welcomed and helped them. Then on 9 November 1793 he was to the house of tertiaries in Nancy that was being used as a prison for non-conformist clergy. This was the response of the supervising Committee to whom he had presented himself, asking to conform to the law that stipulated prison for the non-conformists.

On 26 January 1794 the district administrator of Nancy came to assess the situation of all the detainees, the reasons for their arrest, their ages and possible infirmities. He noted that Br. Sébastien was a recalcitrant and had no infirmities and was ready, therefore, to join the list of rebel priests to be sent to Rochefort. Forty eight priests and religious left on 1 April. After a difficult journey lasting four weeks, stripped of everything they had, they reached Rochefort on 28 April. A few days later, aboard the prison hulk, the "Deux-Associés", already loaded with three hundred and seventy three priest and religious prisoners, they were transported to the islands of Aix and Orlean where the ship was moored. A dispiriting prospect faced Br. Sébastien : those hundreds of pale prisoners, with long untrimmed beards and unwashed clothes, represented a prison of the dying. In fact one old schooner served as a kind of hospital for the sick and infected, but it had no medicine and no doctors. Those aboard simply waited there for death to take its course. A skiff took and transported ten or twelve corpses each day to be buried in the sand on the shore.

"Our ship, engulfed in priests and religious," wrote one survivor, "was like an altar of holocaust erected by Providence on the waves of the sea for the perfect consummation of sacrifice." The bodies of the victims, stripped naked as in the Nazi concentration camps later, were transferred to the sandy shores. Some of the prisoners who still had a semblance of health had to bury them in the sand without being allowed to openly recite any prayer or raise to heaven any of the Church's hymns.



"God allowed this daily scene of agony," wrote another survivor, "to increase the value of our sufferings, giving us a more perfect likeness to His divine Son in His Passion. There was no consolation in our afflictions, nothing to strengthen us in our trials, except the thought of Jesus who reigns in heaven, and from His heavenly throne is attentive to our struggle.

Before us and on our behalf He had been flogged, beaten, spat upon, crowned with thorns, dressed like a madman, given gall and vinegar to drink, nailed to a cross, insulted and cursed by His enemies. This spiritual thought about our Redeemer produced in our hearts an ineffable sweetness. We felt happy to have been chosen among so many to travel this sorrowful way and follow our divine Master. We suffered not only with peace, but with relish and we died with joy. We thought that Jesus Christ had wanted, in the different ages of time, each dogma of the faith to be preserved and even consolidated in his Church by the blood of a more or less great number of martyrs, according to the importance of the truth being attacked. And we thought it a great honour for us to be persecuted and sacrificed in order to strengthen that spiritual authority, which is independent of the world, and which is divinely attributed to the Apostolic See and to all the episcopate in general.”

This valuable testimony has also left us a striking portrait of Br. Sébastian, plucked like a special flower of virtue in that fragrant bouquet of martyrs. These are the words of the witness: “The Lord had shown the holiness of another of his servants, Father Sébastian, a Capuchin from Nancy, who had arrived to die on this same schooner. This holy religious was held in singular veneration among us for his striking piety, virtue and touching devotion. He prayed incessantly, especially during his final illness. One morning he was seen kneeling, with his arms outstretched in the cross. His eyes were raised to heaven, and his mouth open. Nothing was made of this because we were used to seeing him pray in this way during his sickness. Half an hour passed and we were amazed to see him persevere in that pose, which is so uncomfortable and difficult to maintain, because the sea had become rough and the ship pitched and rolled a lot. He was probably in ecstasy. Then we approached to look closer. Touching him and his hands we realised that some hours earlier he had already consigned his soul God while in that position. We never managed to explain how his body would have kept that praying position given the continuous rolling movement of the small vessel. The sailors were called immediately. At that sight even they did not manage to suppress their cry of amazement and their tears. At that moment faith awoke in their hearts. His bare his arms revealed to all the image of the cross tattooed with a hot stone, and some of them decided to return to the religion they had abandoned.” It was 10 August 1794.

The memory of Blessed Sébastian leaves a powerful image of man who not only prays, but who is, above all, transformed by prayer in life and in death – a prayer that has become man, incarnated, like Francis of Assisi.

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