

Blessed Apollinaire de Posat (1739-1792)



Numbered among the one hundred and ninety one martyrs slain by the French revolutionaries in Paris in 1792 and beatified by Pius XI was the Swiss Capuchin Jean-Jacques Morel. He was born 12 June 1739 in the village Préz-vers-Noréaz, not far from Fribourg. His parents were Jean Morel and Marie Elisabeth Maître and had been married two years. His religious and scholastic formation was undertaken with his uncle, François-Joseph Morel, the parish curate. After theological studies and ordination to the priesthood, this uncle had been sent to his own village of Préz-vers-Noréaz in 1747. Jean-Jacques then followed him to Belfaux when his uncle was transferred as parish priest in 1752. Three years later he continued his education in the Jesuit College of Saint-Michele in Fribourg. There he stayed in his mother's house, who in 1750 had been employed by the State as a professional midwife at Fribourg. At the end of his studies it seemed that he was the most gifted of the students in the college, so much so that he was chosen for a public debate on philosophical topics that took place on 28 July 1762.

His inclination to piety and religious life led to predictions that he would join the Society of Jesus. However, on 26 September 1762, at the age of twenty three, he received the Capuchin habit at the friary in Zug, along with the name Apollinaire de Posat, after his father's place of origin. On completing his novitiate and making religious profession, he was admitted to sacred Orders immediately and was ordained at Bulle on 22 September 1764, in his canton of origin. From 1765 to 1769 he was at Luzern where he studied theology under Fr. Hermann Martin von Reinach. Again he was the best student and defended his thesis publicly in Sion, in Vallese, to the great admiration of the many learned persons present.

Well prepared in piety and knowledge he was launched straightaway into the itinerant apostolate of serving in various parishes and in popular missions. This he did from 1769 to 1774. Thus he frequently changed addresses between Sion, Porrentruy, Bulle and Romont. Towards the end of August 1774, and for the next six years, he filled the office of teacher and director of the Capuchin theology students at Fribourg. Often he was also involved in regular catechetical lessons in the community. In 1780 he was vicar in the friary in Sion and took up missionary activity again for a year. Then he was transferred to the friary at Bulle. He was also vicar there. The local mayor wanted his two children instructed in philosophy. Apollinaire complied and set up premises next to the friary. Other youngsters also came to this little school. This initiative was not well accepted either by the friars nor by some of the local laity. The friars saw it as a disturbance to the silence of the friary. Those lay persons were politically opposed to the mayor to the point of spreading abroad defamatory libel about him. For the sake of peace, Br. Apollinaire asked for a transfer to Altdorf where his novice master, Br. Dionisio Zürcher was superior.

At Stans in 1785 he became director of the school attached to the friary and was catechist to the children of the nearby village of Büren. His talents as an apostle and his capacity to explain doctrine in an interesting way, appealed to many people who came along to join his little disciples. His confessional was always thronged. After the midnight prayer in choir, he

rarely went back to his sleep but applied himself to study, prayer and meditation.

Such an effective apostolate upset the enemies of the faith, disciples of the Enlightenment who upheld the supremacy and centrality of the law of the State. They began to spread calumny, branding the catechism lessons of the friar as unorthodox. They sought to discredit his school teaching by ridiculing it or by undermining his moral reputation. The mayor of the place, Wirsch, defended him publicly. However the sinister campaign grew and he was compelled by superiors to defend himself with an apologia. To avoid further difficulties for his confreres he asked to be transferred and was sent to Luzern on 16 April 1788.

Shortly afterwards, the provincial minister of Brittany, Br. Vitorino de Rennes, who was passing through, learned of these persecutions. He proposed to Br. Apollinaire de Posat to work as a missionary in Syria, alongside French Capuchins. He felt that this was a providential opportunity and arrived in Paris by the autumn of 1788, in the friary of Marais. There he was to learn the language necessary for the apostolate. Providence had arranged things differently however. Paris would become the last field of his apostolate and the altar of his sacrifice. In fact matters deteriorated very quickly, with the outbreak of the revolution. On 14 July the Bastille fell into the hands of the revolutionaries and the revolt spread throughout all of France. The superior of Marais asked Br. Apollinaire, who knew German, to accompany the more than five thousand German speakers in the city.



With the suppression of Religious Orders and the closure of more than three thousand convents, friaries and monasteries, he became vicar of the German speaking faithful in the parish of Saint-Sulpice, as well a chaplain to those incarcerated in Tournelle. With the closure of the friary at Marais, he found accommodation in a house of lay persons which he used as an enclosure. With all the property of the friary appropriated and the Civil Constitution of the Clergy promulgated, the priests of Saint-Sulpice openly refused to take the oath.

Among them was Br. Apollinaire who was struck again with calumny: that he had accepted the oath. This false information reached the superiors of the Order who immediately showed their disapproval. He did not hesitate. He immediately penned a resonating denial that he sent to the editor of *L'Ami du Roi* on 23 October 1791. He denounced the false representation, without any fear of drawing upon himself the cruellest of persecutions. He declared that he would rather "die a thousand times rather than appear to have made the oath to the new Constitution." In a small work he composed (cited in his self-defence) and with the title *Le séducteur démasqué* he declared that obedience to the Church is equal to obeying the Holy Spirit who speaks through the hierarchy. "And," he added, "we must listen to the Church and not the Paris Town Hall. It is eternal wisdom which commands us!"

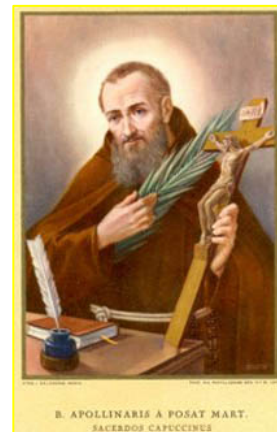
His firm stand provoked serious difficulties. On 1 April 1791 he had to leave the church of Saint-Sulpice and take up a clandestine ministry. Hunted as an outlaw, he found the old Capuchin friary of Meudon outside Paris, and went back into the city later and to the area of his parish where

he remained in the house of a friend. He wrote to the abbot Valentin Jann of Altdorf on 27 April 1792. The letter documents his intrepid and mystical sentiments on the eve of his martyrdom and his joy to suffer for Christ: "Rejoice with me, join me in glorifying the Lord. We are amid insurmountable difficulties, but we do not succumb; we are exhausted, but do not despair; persecute, but not abandoned; beaten, but not lost. Do not weep over me therefore. I am the wheat of Christ. It is necessary that I be ground by the teeth of the wild beast to become pure bread."

On the night between the 13 and 14 August he assisted a dying poor man. In the morning he celebrated Mass "to prepare himself, " – as he wrote in his last letter – "to courageously fight the battle of martyrdom." Then he presented himself to the commissaries of Luxemburg and declared that he had never made the oath, but despite that was not a conspirator. He was immediately arrested and joined one hundred and sixty recalcitrants packed together into the church of the Carmine.

One of the detainees who escaped the massacre on 2 September left this beautiful testimony: "Father Apollinaire arrived in that prison with a contentment and joy that surprised those who were already shut away there. From that moment he was the edification of everyone. Most went to him for confession. He was continuously busy either praying or giving heart to anyone who was down and to encourage anyone who longed for martyrdom. He did not spare himself in anything. He tried to make himself useful to everyone, whether in preparing the beds, that often were only crates, or to set the tables placed in the middle of the church for meals. He sought to do the lowliest tasks like sweeping the church, the only space allowed, or to empty the tubs placed in the side chapels for bodily needs."

The Paris Town Council was the judge of the situation. The terrible Danton was its minister of justice. They decided to eliminate the rebel priests. On 31 August a decree of deportation was issued so as to conceal the massacre that had already been scheduled for the following Sunday. Saturday was a day of preparation in intense prayer. The following day, with the rumour abroad that the Prussians were marching on Paris, Danton was organising the resistance and ordered the extermination of those assembled in the prisons. Maillard's thugs then broke into the abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés like men possessed and massacred everyone they could find. After this first slaughter, the remaining prisoners were led into the church with the charade of a procession and were put immediately to the sword, or butchered without pity with sabres and daggers. The terrible butchery finished at six in the evening, leaving one hundred and thirteen martyrs in lake of blood. The commissary who presided over the executions said with dismay; "I do not understand anything any more. These priests went to their deaths with the same joy of someone going to a wedding!"



Br. Apollinaire was one of them. When writing to his old superior, Br. Hermann Martin a few months earlier he showed his joy about his imminent immolation and prophesied a re-flowering of the Christian spirit in France: "There is a baptism I must receive and I look forward to the time of its arrival. If the seed of grain does not fall into the earth and die, it remains a single grain ... As a man, I am afraid. As a Christian I hope. As a

religious I rejoice. As shepherd of those five thousand souls I am jubilant because I have not taken the oath at all. We can do everything in him who strengthens us. All my enemies, my persecutors present, past and future, I embrace them and give them the kiss of peace as my greatest benefactors ... Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia! In truth, in truth I tell you, soaked with the blood of so many martyrs France will soon see a re-flowering of religion on her soil."

Translation based on the article by COSTANZO CARGNONI in *Sulle orme dei santi*, 2000, p. 205-212.