

Blessed Protais de Seéz (1747-1794)



Protais de Sééz was on the same infamous ship, the “Deus-Associés,” as Blessed Juan-Louis de Besançon. Similarly, not a great deal is known about his background. Born on 3 April 1747 he was baptised the next day in the parish of Saint-Pierre in Seéz (Orne). His parents and relatives were well-off. His father, Simon Bourdon was a cartwright and his mother was called Maria Louise Le Fou. There is no particular information about his childhood, His Christian formation nurtured in him the vocation to the religious life. In his twenties he entered the Capuchins at Bayeux where he made profession on 27 November 1768 and received the name Protais. He was ordained priest in 1775. According to the little data known from the archives he lived for a little while in the friary at Honfleur, near the sanctuary of Notre-Dame des Grâces which he directed. On 29 November 1783 he was in the friary at Caen and in 1789 he was secretary of the Provincial Minister of Normandy.

His final destination, as provincial secretary and guardian, was the convent at Sotteville near Rouen. The municipal police found him there with the fraternity when they came to conduct an inventory of the friary and demand the loyalty oath to the civil constitution of the clergy. With his confreres he refused and on two separate occasions he underlined his will to persevere in the religious life, particularly on 26 August 1791 during the final inventory of the friary. The following year the friars were expelled and thrown out onto the street. Br. Protais wished to remain in Rouen. Refusing the option of taking flight, he found hospitality with a gentleman whom he compensated with a little of his pension and alms received for Masses celebrated.

His tenacity earned his arrest on 10 April 1793 and he had undergone an inquiry by two zealous “citoyens”. The triviality and superficiality of the process shows, as usually happens, the flimsiness of such trials. Unfortunately, history is full of such trials. Fortunately the transcript has been kept. Protais answered with great freedom, and the text is clear about his desire to faithfully follow his religious life. He is reserved where the trial deals with his involvement with others.

In the search of the house where he had taken refuge a number of manuscripts and printed books were found, grounds for an accusation against him, because these texts defended non-compliance. Like a good Norman, he did not offer any further explanations that could have compromised anyone else. Nor did he reveal the name of any person with whom he celebrated Mass in secret. His is an attitude that is uniquely religious in facing risk and danger. His focus was an honest, simple, clear faith and he did not adopt any political position. The effect, however, was immediate. He was locked in the old seminary of Rouen Saint-Vivien. The revolutionaries used it for temporary detention. There he waited for a final sentence. This arrived on 10 January 1794: “citizen” Juan Bourdon, or Br. Protais, is condemned to be deported to Guyana for having celebrated Mass illegally and for being in possession of suspect documents.

On 9 March he was transported to Rochefort. He arrived on 12 April. After he was searched he was deprived of whatever he still had: a gold watch in a small box – (this may have been a pyx) – as well as 1303 lire. On board the infamous “Deux-Associés” he shared the fate of the other prisoners.

The desolate picture of sordid suffering, agony and death that made up day to daily life in that prison was the same as that described for Blessed Jean-Louis Loir. After four months Br. Protais died of a contagious disease during the night between the 23 and 24 August. A survivor has left us this testimony: "He was a religious of great merit, praiseworthy as much for his in his initiatives in favour of his deported confreres as for his physical and moral endurance – but above all for his firm faith, prudence, balance, consistency and other Christian and religious virtues."

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