

Benjamine Le Blais and the Commune

As of March 17, 1871, the Commune controlled Paris. There were confiscations, arrests and massacres. Churches were pillaged and closed. Many religious and priests were thrown in prison.

On May 26 four ss.cc. brothers, Ladislas Radigue, Polycarpe Tuffier, Frezal Tardieu and Marcelin Rouchouze, were massacred on the rue Haxo in the twentieth arrondissement. They were the four general councilors, the "cream" of those arrested. Marcelin Bousquet, who was Superior General, escaped because he was not in Paris at the time.

The sisters also came face to face with the Commune. The Superior General was Benjamine Le Blais, born in 1802, professed in 1823, chosen by the Good Mother to found Alencon in 1826, and by Françoise de Viart to begin Chartres in 1837, the year of the schism. She was elected general in 1866.

On April 12, 1871, a group of the "federated" invaded Picpus. The Reverend Mother welcomed them and was forced to give them the keys of the house. "And if one of these women tries to leave she'll get a bayonet through her body."

The chapel was sacked, the tabernacle opened, the hosts thrown on the floor. It was certainly a difficult trial for these women whose lives were centered on the Eucharist. Since the statue of Our Lady of Peace was wood, it was judged to be valueless and so was not touched. Some of the soldiers lodged in the house. Most of the novices had been sent to other houses.

April 29 was declared "open house" day. Two thousand people came to see the "mysteries of Picpus" spread all over the newspapers and they found nothing (no skeletons in the closet.) On May 2 there was the same kind of thing and it is said that ten thousand of the curious came.

May 5, first Friday, the "citizen Superior" was interrogated and arrested along with 83 other sisters. That night they were transferred to the Saint Lazare prison, "the prison for women of low life." There divided up five or six to a cell. The general, sixty-nine and sick, was put in a cell with two others.

The Sisters organized their common life which began at 7:00 AM with morning prayer, followed by meditation. They made adoration by turning toward a nearby church.

Meals were simple: soup like dishwater, a bit of black bread, dirty bowls. There was free time for reading, embroidery and sewing. They had an hour to walk in the prison courtyard. Supper was at 3:30 PM. After two weeks, they allowed the superior to spend her free time with the sisters. There was great joy.

On May 22, the troops of Versailles entered Paris. The Sisters, not knowing what was happening when they heard shooting and explosions, stayed three nights with their bags ready sitting on benches. They were freed on May 25, celebrated Mass in the prison on the 28 and returned to Picpus on the 30th. They attributed their liberation to Our Lady of Peace who protected them from her hiding place in Picpus.

Mother Benjamine continued her term for another eight years. "the vigor of her soul and the lucidity of her mind were astounding." She died as she had lived, working among her family. She had an attack while in town to buy a statue of Saint Joseph. She was brought back to Picpus where she died peacefully the next day, April 22, 1879.