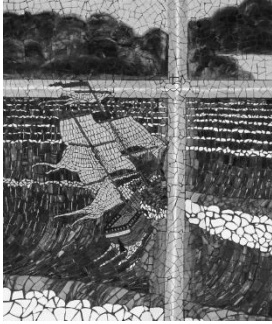


Sr. Calixte Le Gris and the “Marie-Joseph”

(1843)



The first group of missionaries had arrived in the Sandwich Islands in 1827. The closing of schools in France in the 1830's freed new missionaries to go to the Polynesian Islands and Latin America. There were short stays by ss.cc.'s in California and the East Coast (USA).

In 1837 the Good Father died with the names “Valparaiso, Gambier” on his lips. His successor, Raphael Bonamie (1837-1853), sent dozens of missionaries westwards possibly because he was unable to realise his mission in the Near East, his “Iraqi adventure”, so to speak. The sisters began their mission *ad extra* in 1838. (Cléonisse Cormier).

The building of the “Marie-Joseph” had a double purpose: to save on transportation expenses (25 people: 15 brothers, 10 sisters) and to have one's own boat as a shuttle between Hawaii and the central Pacific islands.

Alas, the Community didn't have the necessary means to build a ship that would meet these requirements. The “Marie-Joseph” was too small and too light. The preparations were followed closely by the whole family. The general wrote three circular letters, a model of the boat was placed before the statue of Our Lady of Peace in the chapel of Picpus. The farewell in Saint-Malo involved a huge celebration and a feast.

The missionary group was formed of volunteer brothers and sisters or those who had asked to be part of the expedition. All were very young, from 22 to 35 years with only four aged between 40 to 44 years. One reads in a letter of the Superior General, Mgr Bonamie, to the Fr. Léonce Sales: “Tell Fr. Roman that I appoint him to accompany Mgr. De Nilópolis [Etienne Rouchouze], providing he is not reluctant to go to the missions” The Superior General of the sisters, Françoise de Viart, made mention of the same criteria.

Volunteering for the missions is an SS.CC practice, from the beginning until now no one is ‘forced’ to go on the missions.

In a letter written in October 1842 by Sr Ailbée Baurly (22 years) to her parents and to her sister, we read: *“I don't know how to express to you my joy when I think of how it has pleased God to cast his eyes on me ... May the hope of a better life, where we will finally meet - never more to part - sustain you and help you to bear the pain that will come when your heart is once again wounded.”*

The departure and the pride in being SS.CC, in belonging to the family: *The missionaries assembled in S Servan around the two Superior Generals. Then came the solemn moment of the blessing of the boat – 8th December 1842. Mgr Rouchouze celebrated the Pontifical Mass in the cathedral of St. Malo and Mgr Bonamie gave the homily. Then the crowd headed toward the “Marie-Joseph”, anchored in the port, for the blessing of the boat by Mgr Bonamie. It was very solemn. The ship was decorated with oriflammes and banners. The one that dominated the others was white – it was ours - with a big cross and the two Sacred Hearts embroidered in red. The cannon of the brig fired a salvo, joining in the general joy of the occasion.*

The boat was overloaded, carrying among other things: some thousands of kilos of wire, a goat, some rabbits, doves, partridges and 63 chickens ... an oven that was able to produce 5 kilos of bread per hour and distil sea water at the same time”. [Pires 30] When some visitors came on board, the boat sunk down under sea level.

In a letter from Sr. Mechilde Viel (27 years), superior of the sisters, news was received of the unexpected death of **Sr. Calixte Le Gris (24 years) who died from yellow fever while at sea:**

“Mgr. gave her absolution and if you had heard her repeat with so much devotion, 'long live the SS.CC. of Jesus and Mary... If I could tell you all that happened [during the requiem] in my heart at the time of the 'Paternoster!' Never had 'Fiat' made such an impression on me. I felt as if the sacrifice that God had asked of me was not going to be the last.”

Mgr Rouchouze did not want to cast the body into the sea, as was the custom. Everything possible was done so we could keep the coffin until we reached Brazil... Sister Calixte will be buried in the parish of Saint Michel after a solemn celebration in the presence of all missionaries ...

On arrival at St. Catherine Island in February, the burial took place of Sr Calixte and the young Évariste, who died of the tuberculosis in the hospital. After this event, nothing MORE – a mystery still unsolved ...

Our family lost all hope and the Superior General wrote a circular letter dated November 16, 1844: "... the good bishop, the Priests, Brothers, Sisters who left us two years ago to bring the blessed fragrance of Jesus Christ to far away places ...

[A lot of rumours and information] *All of that together leads us to believe that in effect they all perished".*

25 SS.CC missionaries and a team of 12 sailors probably perished in bad weather while going round the Cape Horn, near the Falkland Islands. In 1863 Damien's group erected a monument there.

The citations are taken from : María Bernarda Ballón-Landa SS.CC. :

« The 'Marie-Joseph' – an unforgettable page in our history », Rome, INFO 67, June 1993, 58 – 93.

Mary Dolorine Pires : "Looking back more than a century and a half later", Cahiers de Spiritualité n° 1998, Rome 1998, 25 – 31.