

Saint John Francis Regis

Patron
of the Secular Branch of the
Congregation of the Sacred Hearts
(1597-1640)



CONTEMPLATION and ACTION

CONGREGATION OF THE SACRED HEARTS OF
JESUS AND MARY
Rome
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“We also recommend great devotion to Saint Francis Regis, Apostle of Vivarais, whom we have given as Patron to the Exterior Association of the faithful, who, through prayer, are in communion with us.”

Pierre Coudrin (14 April 1817)



“It is not by chance that we have been established in the diocese where his greatly venerated tomb is.”

**Henriette Aymer de La Chevalerie
(29 April 1803)**

Table of Content

FOREWORD	7
I. CONTEMPLATION AND ACTION	8
II. A MAN OF PROVIDENCE	11
III. THE “ZEALOT”	13
IV. THE “ADORER”	15
<i>His mortification</i>	15
<i>His spirit of prayer</i>	15
<i>Apostle of the Eucharist</i>	16
V. THE “MISSIONARY”	18
VI. SAINT FRANCIS REGIS OR SAINT MARGARET MARY?	21
BIBLIOGRAPHY	24

FOREWORD

This little booklet was first printed in French over 65 years ago.¹ Understandably, the language reflects the time. It was written to explain and clarify the relationship that has always existed between St. John Francis Regis and the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. As I read through the booklet, I realised that there were some parts that I didn't fully understand. This happy fault led me to read more about the beginnings of the Congregation in order to clarify terminology and understand better the birth of the Congregation.

You will notice how the terms 'Exterior Association' and 'Society of the Sacred Heart' are used repeatedly and interchangeably throughout the booklet. At the time of the Founders the Society of the Sacred Heart was a small clandestine group of women based in Poitiers who came together to aid the persecuted Church in whatever way they could. Some of the members chose to live together (interns) while others remained in the family homes (externs). Our Foundress, Henriette Aymer de La Chevalerie, joined this group after leaving prison with her mother in 1794. She lived at home and went daily to where the group met and prayed. They were directed by a council of priests.² Our Founder, Pierre Coudrin, was in contact with this group. To avoid detection the Society of the Sacred Heart also went under the code name "Immensity" – their way of describing 'the greatness of Divine love and the work undertaken'. In practice the group 'had the role of a diocesan centre for charitable works'.³

It is thanks to the existence of this group that the Good Mother and the Good Father providentially met. As the group developed some of the women, including the Good Mother, wanted to live more as religious. A simple rule was written for them by the Good Father and on 25th August 1797, the Solitaires – as they were first known - took the habit, a tunic of white wool under their secular clothes, and during the celebration each one pronounced the resolutions they had written by hand. We now have effectively present the foundations for the Secular Branch and the Sisters. In the spring of 1799 the first buds of the male branch begin to show. On 20th October, 1800, the Solitaires went on to make their first religious profession into the hands of Henriette who had earlier been named Superior for life. Immediately before midnight mass on Christmas Eve, 1800, the Good Father consecrated himself as a "zealot of the love of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary". The Good Mother that same day professed the three vows of religion and so the Congregation was born.

¹ This booklet was first published in the French/Belgium SSCC publications of *SERVIR* in 1953 (Vols. 3 & 4). The English translation was completed in 2020 by Derek Laverty, ssc.

² Known as the 'Society of Priests of the Sacred Heart of Jesus'. See Bernard Couronne, '*Un homme avec un cœur enflammé*', (2000).

³ Ibid.

I.

CONTEMPLATION AND ACTION

On 9th July 1802. Fr. Coudrin writes to Poitiers:

“On Monday we will be in La Louvesc for the translation of the relics of Saint Regis⁴ On Tuesday, we will have the most beautiful ceremony that has been seen in France for many years. It may be necessary to preach; there will be more than 10-12,000 souls in the procession: for sure, people will come from as far away as 10 leagues.

I am still okay with bending over the tomb of Saint Regis, in the hope that he will “obtain for all of us a small portion of that zeal that enabled him to convert the whole country.” who is maybe so good that he is in heaven so that he can accompany us on earth”.

On 15th July 1802, following the ceremonies that took place on 13th he writes:

“I was bowed down under the precious bones of the glorious Saint Regis, my good friends. The translation took place in a wonderful ceremony. From 8 – 1pm, we left neither the saint nor the Church.”

“I had the consolation, along with the administrator of the Diocese, of carrying the relics on my shoulders for more than a half hour and placing the precious treasure so revered in these lands in a superb alcove.”

“I remembered you all, and you must not doubt that I did so with good heart.”

Fr. Hilarion makes clear that Fr. Coudrin “preached at this great solemnity with that skill which for him is normal”.⁵

One senses in the tone of these letters, traces of a genuine and confident devotion to Saint Francis Regis, a Regis who is not unknown to the founder, nor to the one to whom he is writing, to whom he gives not a word of explanation.

A brief article in the first Rule of the Society of the Sacred Heart of Poitiers (1793) gives us one reason for having such a sense:

“We have chosen as the patron of the Society, Saint Francis Regis, and every year, on his feast day – 16th June – we will have our assembly”. (General Rule, 1793, Chap 1, art. 10)

⁴ For fear of the Revolution, the remains of the saint were secretly taken from the church at La Louvesc on 7 January, 1794 and hidden in Grangeneuve at the home of the Buisson brothers. It is from there, on 13 July, 1802, that Mgr de Chabot, bishop of Mende, will preside at their solemn translation in the reconciled church. The Concordat of 1801 meant that La Louvesc passed from the diocese of Vienne (Mgr d’Avaiu) to that of Mende. La Louvesc: pronounced “La Louvé”. It is sometimes written as Lalouvesc.

⁵ At the Buissons farm in the evening of the 12th, the relics were formally recognized and there was great cooperation in preparing for the Pontifical Mass on the 13th, at which the panegyric was pronounced by Fr. Picancel, parish priest of Annonay.

Mother Henriette commented on this in a letter from Mende to Mother Gabriel, Superior in the house in Poitiers:

"I forgot to tell you that there will be an assembly (of the externs) on the feast day of St. Francis Regis (Do you recall the Rule of 1793!). We must inform the Sisters in advance that it is in honour of the Saint who protects us in a special way⁶. It is not by chance that we have been established in the diocese where his greatly venerated tomb is". (29 April 1803)

Father Coudrin added a postscript, that was addressed to Father Isidore, superior of the same house:

Yes, it is Saint Regis who has (sic). You will solemnise his Feast with a sermon on his life and his miracles and say (a word) about who we are at his tomb.

SAINT Francis Regis, patron of the Society of the Sacred Heart, yes, but why and how? Our documents are silent on this. In what way was Saint Francis Regis a MODEL for the priests and sisters, interns and externs, of this "happy society"? What was the particular grace that people were asking for through his INTERCESSION? We are not told.

We are not, however, reduced to simple conjectures, as it is very certain his story was very well known in Poitiers, popularised by numerous writings, and the many rumours that circulated around him over the years, the Jansenists ...

On the other hand, we know that between 1716 and 1737 the Bishop of Poitiers was counted among those who, with all his authority, petitioned the Sovereign Pope for Regis' canonisation.⁷

In 1759 the sainted Martial-Louis de Beauvoir of Saint-Aulaire became the Bishop of Poitiers alongside his vicar-general, Father Charles François d'Aviau du Bois-de-Sanzay, a valiant defender of Catholic orthodoxy against heretics and schismatics.

At that time, Fr. Coudrin was a seminarian completing his priestly formation with the *Aa*⁸ under the direction of Father d'Aviau.⁹ Could it not be here, in this cenacle of holiness and of the apostolate, that Fr. Coudrin came to know Saint Francis Regis whose patronage and help he desired for the kind of life he wanted to lead, in service of the Lord? The example of Regis would have stirred him, as happened a little later at the Motte d'Usseau – a second and decisive step - on the Feast Day of Saint Caprasius.

On 3rd January 1790, Father d'Aviau was consecrated Archbishop of the diocese of Vienna en Dauphiné. Father d'Aviau held Fr. Coudrin in esteem, seeing him as "a tree which, upon spreading out its branches, will bear good fruit" At the time of his appointment as Archbishop of Vienne, La Louvesc and the tomb of Saint Francis Regis fell within his diocese.

⁶ Saint Francis Regis "appeared to the Venerable Mother (the foundress) in the first days of March, 1803, and promised to intercede for the Congregation" (Cf. "Life of Mother Henriette", N° 156, by Fr. Hilarion Lucas).

⁷ "La Vie de Saint Jean François Régis", Guillaume Daubenton. Ed. 1819, p. 390.

⁸ The 'Aa' was the name given to a 'closed and secret' confraternity dedicated to deepening commitment and devotion among the clergy. It was a movement that had its beginnings in France but spread further afield (Savoy, Italy, Germany). Cf. "Church and Society in Eighteenth-century France: The Religion of the People", John McManners, 1998. On the 'Aa and its spirit', see "Le Père Coudrin", Antoine Lestra. Paris, 1952, p. 35-45.

⁹ On Fr. Regis and the "Aa", see Lestra, op. cit., p. 221

It seemed that Bishop d'Aviau had – as Fr. Coudrin would later have in Mende – the feeling that heaven was going to bless him with a great grace. His tender devotion for Saint Francis Regis, say the chroniclers, led him to La Louvesc every year, even several times a year; it was there, on his return from Rome to the aid of his diocesan priests¹⁰, that he came to draw strength for his difficult apostolate, and receive through the intercession of the saint, the devotion and courage that enabled him to brave all the dangers and overcome all the difficulties presented by hateful people who were opposed to his zeal.¹¹

No doubt during the years 1790-1793, Bishop d'Aviau continued to be interested in the *Aa* of Poitiers, and particularly in Fr. Coudrin in whom he placed great hope for the Church. And he would surely not have failed to draw the attention of his former students to the life and the virtues of Regis.

In March 1801, Fr. Coudrin presented to Archbishop d'Aviau of Vienna, his first deacon, brother Isidore David, who was to be ordained a priest. The Bishop - said by Pius VI to be “a saint in the way of the first popes of the early church” - handed over to the new priest for the Congregation, a relic of Saint Francis Regis¹² as a sign of communion, as a pledge of abundant blessings, as an ideal and a call.

In short, through Fr. Coudrin and perhaps also through the Dean, Father Dancel de Bruneval (who, don't forget, at the same time was Vicar General), Saint Francis Regis became for the Society of the Sacred Heart an intercessor and model.

Such was the religious situation in Poitiers, around 1792, that one could repeat the words of Clement XII cited in the Bull of canonization of Regis (1737):

*It is not without the delicate attention of Divine Providence that ... in these times of affliction for the Roman Church, where we have more than ever need of the suffrage (support) of Saints ... this intercessor and new protector is granted to the faithful.*¹³

“The faithful” means, if we wish, the “little gathering” that wants to be at least a symbol and leaven.

Two things would have struck our founder:

1. Saint Francis Regis was effectively “a man of Providence”.
2. He was, in the fullest sense of the term a “zealot”, as well as an “adorer”, and to the same degree had a charitable and redemptive spirit.

¹⁰ In 1797, disguised as a labourer, he was given “full powers to restore worship in the Cevennes”. Georges Guitton, “Saint Jean François Régis”, Paris, *Spes*, 1937, p. 583.

¹¹ Daubenton, op. cit., p. 424.

¹² Lestra, op. cit., p. 397.

¹³ Guitton, op. cit., p. 579.

II.

A MAN OF PROVIDENCE

This aspect stands out all the more because when Francis Regis was beatified there had been no Francis placed on the altars for three and a half centuries.

He was inspired by God (1597), just when the French Wars of Religion (1598) were coming to an end, and he devoted all his life – which would be taken soon enough – "to repair the damage accumulated by heresy". "Such a ministry," wrote Father Vitelleschi, Superior General of the Jesuits, "demanded hardy, skilful and hardworking workers."¹⁴ Regis would be such a person.

He prayed and made sacrifices. He went to the people, because the countryside had been mostly abandoned; he went to children, because they were the future, and through them he could reach parents. And like the Good Samaritan he bent towards all misery, body and soul; he combatted ignorance through his catechisms and missions and relieved suffering through works of charity. He never ceased to convert hearts to the love of Jesus and Mary.¹⁵

This is our man, thought Father Coudrin, Mademoiselle Geoffroy, and the others who joined with them to raise up the ruins caused by the great Revolution.

Regis also made good use of his life, his actions and message, in relation to JANSENISM, to which he provided an historic counterweight, while arming the Christian people against this new and pernicious error.

Historically, the comparison was striking: Regis and Jansen were strictly contemporaries. Birth and death: 1597-1640 for the first and 1585-1638 for the second. Jansen's manuscript, "*Augustinus*", appeared in 1640, the same year as the death of Regis, and the doctrine was condemned by Pope Clement XI in 1713 (Bull: "*Unigenitus*"). This Pope in the previous year (1712) had declared the heroism and virtues of Regis and his willingness to beatify him (1716).

Spiritually, the contrast was no less great: it suffices to recall the tender and ardent devotion that Regis had for the Eucharist and the Virgin Mary and the constant "good humour" of this man – even if he was austere towards himself; and how, after his death, he extended to those who came to his tomb in great

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 193.

¹⁵ No less "providential" was that other apostle of charity, missionary and "father of the poor", who on these shores was to receive the honours of canonization (16 June 1737), Vincent de Paul (1581-1660).

By a remarkable coincidence on 16th February, 1634, the founder of the Congregation of the Mission wrote to one of his priests: "Listen, sir, to what my heart says to yours: how it feels extremely anxious to go to work and die in the Cevennes, and that it will leave if you do not come soon to these mountains, from where the bishop is crying for help; he has commented how this land, which was once the most flourishing in piety in the whole kingdom, is now all in sin. and that the people are dying from hunger for the word of God". (We have borrowed this episode from Joseph Vianey's work on Francis Regis. Cf. François Régis, 2nd Edition, 1914, p. 90). At the time Vincent de Paul launched this appeal, his wish was being fulfilled: Regis was beginning to "work" in the Cevennes country, "and soon he was going to die there", after having fed a superabundant people, who indeed "were dying of hunger for the word of God." The Congregation of the Mission was earmarked for other regions. And what "providence" Regis turned out to be for so many troubled in body and soul!

numbers "compunction of heart and salvation of soul" through confession of their sins and holy communion (said by some to be a form of "practical anti-Jansenism"!)¹⁶

There will still be a need to resort to Regis to restore to France - first evangelized less than a century before by Saint Grignon de Montfort - the "true devotion" and the beautiful balance of a fully Christian life.

¹⁶ This is according to several statements made during the informative process. Guitton, op. cit., p. 566

III. THE "ZEALOT"

Is this not what Clement XI equivalently expressed when he defined Regis as a "truly apostolic man, whose heart was constantly expanded by the Holy Spirit,"¹⁷ whom he described as someone endowed by God with "a wonderful charity and an invincible soul strength": the strength of loving service"?¹⁸

And the witnesses to the various proceedings that led to his glorification: do not they not confirm that he was a person of "active humour", who had "passion for the kingdom of God", who was consumed by "the divine fire of love"? ... etc.

All these apostolic traits and others like them portray Regis so well: that happy mixture of intense piety, Eucharistic and Marian, his boundless devotion to neighbour, prayer and action, his austerity and "bonhomie",¹⁹ the balance of nature and grace, would have pleased Fr. Coudrin: Fr. Coudrin would have wanted all of this to feature in the Society of the Sacred Heart and in his Congregation, in order to do, as soon as possible, the most good possible.

The starting point of the life of Regis, as will be the case for Father Coudrin, is a "great compassion" of the Church ... and the sense that God has given him the desire to redress it.

It is in school that Regis' first ambitions for the apostolate are expressed, and which are answered by modest but effective achievements.

It was his desire to praise God by winning souls, at a time when souls were losing themselves by forgetting God that inclined him to religious life, to the Jesuits in preference to the Benedictines, and left him in a hurry to receive the priesthood "as soon as possible".

"My sweet Saviour", he says. "Shall I defer more to my imperfections, which forbid me to desire preaching, than to your divine perfections which solicit me to desire it, and by considering my indignity, must I despise the dignity of so many souls THAT I CANNOT SAVE EXCEPT BY THIS MEANS?"²⁰

Once a priest, nothing stops him. Neither the cold, nor hunger, nor tiredness, nor the dangers on the road, nor hate, nor threats, nor contradictions, nor the extent of the work to be done One cannot help thinking of Saint Paul.

"Without respite or rest" the watchword of Pius XII to the apostles of the XX century, seems to have been Regis' motto of choice. He was clearly possessed by the Spirit of the Lord.²¹ He attacks sin,

¹⁷ Apostolic Letters for the Beatification of Francis Regis, 8 May, 1716.

¹⁸ *"Mirabili caritate et invicta patientia decorasti"*. Prayer composed by the Holy Father himself for the Mass of the newly Blessed.

¹⁹ A kind nature imbued with simplicity that the "Good Father" Coudrin and the "Good Mother" Henriette wanted so much to see in their children.

²⁰ Guitton, op. cit., p. 139.

²¹ Entrance Antiphon to the Mass of St. Regis (Luke 4:18).

the opportunities for sin, the aftermath of sin.²² He is good, compassionate, open to all, wearing a "happy face", welcoming.

"Always ready" to be of service, he gives food to those who are hungry, provides work for those who do not have it, focuses on the sick and the afflicted: he is "the father of the poor"²³ His zeal was industrious, his word direct: he spoke to the people in their language. He preached! In the churches, in the squares or at the foot of calvaries, in huts and barns ... And crowds came to hear this word without prompting, drawn by words overflowing with faith and charity.²⁴

He spent hours every day confessing, sometimes whole days, without worrying about meals ... He absolved, but also directed, and usually left his penitent able to receive holy communion. To prolong the benefits of his apostolic activity, he made a rule to establish, in the villages where he passed through, a guild of the Holy Sacrament.²⁵

On two occasions, "seduced above all by the prospect of harsher sorrows and the hope of martyrdom,"²⁶ he asked his superiors to be allowed to go too far-away missions...

But Velay and Vivarais was to be his mission land and would involve far more than he could imagine.

And he would die a "martyr" yes, "the martyrdom of charity to the confessional" mid-mission in Louvesc, at midnight on 31st December, 1640, at midnight. He celebrated his last mass on the morning of the 26th, the feast of Saint Stephen, the first martyr, ... but did not stop his ministry. "In his last days," says a witness, "the Father preached and confessed for as long as he had a breath, and then, HAVING JUST TAKEN THE NECESSARY TIME TO RECEIVE THE SACRAMENTS, and while lying down, he welcomed the penitents wanting to die in their midst."²⁷

I see Our Lord and Our Blessed Lady opening to me the gates of Heaven" then "in manus tuas:".

This was his farewell to earth.

²² This was one of the main motives for his "social action" that was extraordinary for the time. Among other achievements: workers' housing from which was excluded promiscuity; working at home; the repatriation of seasonal workers; establishment of shelters for the rehabilitation of "girls and women who were living badly" (Cf. Guitton, pp. 354-355, etc.); defence of lace-makers of Valay. "This trade will not be destroyed!..." (Ibid. pp. 486 ff), etc.

²³ It is to be noted that he did not simply content himself with doing charity, but that he organized charitable works: the "ladies of mercy", the "soup handouts". (Cf. Guitton, pp. 168, 331ff; also p. 355, etc.)

²⁴ In the index of the different houses that he lived in, not once is he referred to as "concionator" (preacher). Rather, the more enviable terms of "catechist" and *missionnarius* are used.

²⁵ Guitton, op. cit., p. 177.

²⁶ Ibid. p. 240. Regarding his desire for martyrdom, see also pp. 77, 89, 175, 247, 280.

²⁷ Ibid. p. 539.

IV.

THE "ADORER"

We would like to understand this term, one that is familiar to us, in respect of the whole "contemplative" life of Regis, that is to say his share in the "hidden life" and "crucified life".

This sharing was great: the extent of his love for God and for people and his hatred of sin, the extent also of his apostolic activity, came from his interior life which was the life-giving sap and "regulator" of his life.

"God, or rather the love of God, was the soul of his soul," said a witness.²⁸ In this way for Regis, God is first served, to say the least. He served God alone: other than that, nothing mattered. Thus there was unity in him

Through a "VIGOROUS ASCETICISM" on the one hand, and a "PRAYER EVERY HOUR" on the other, Regis tempered his fever for action: "Far from evaporating his energies outside, he powerfully concentrated them on the sole necessary task",²⁹ standing united to God and placing himself totally in his hands, he assimilated himself to Christ; he worked for those whose salvation he wanted and obtained for them grace upon grace ... And "the fire of that charity that animated him shone forth on his features", in his word, in all that he did, to the point that his mere presence touched hearts.³⁰

His mortification

According to the evidence of those who knew him, he preserved until death his baptismal innocence, and, as he confided, had "never by the grace of God, suffered the rebellions of the flesh."³¹ Nevertheless, he treated his body with ruthless rigour: floggings, vigils, fasting, abstinence, deprivation of all kinds that he imposed upon himself, missing nothing, all of this added to the providential crosses of daily life, which abounded, and to the multiple sufferings attached to his ministry in a mountainous country, without roads at the time, impoverished, often hostile, and so cold in the winter! ...

His spirit of prayer

As a novice: "he was often seen at the foot of the altar, motionless and in a kind of rapture".³²

As a scholastic: during the plague of Toulouse, it was winter, as if to compensate himself for not being able to devote himself with his elders to the sick, "every evening, after a short sleep, he left his

²⁸ Ibid. p. 367.

²⁹ Ibid. p. 365.

³⁰ Ibid. p. 366 et passim.

³¹ Ibid. p. 364.

³² Ibid. p. 77.

bed and spent time, in silence, in prayer most of the night". - "Make sure you do not disturb his prayer..." said a Superior who knew him well, to his companions.³³

As a missionary: spending five consecutive winters in the mountains - passing Pradette, he stopped and prayed for a long time in front of the cross that stood at the centre of the village, still, despite the cold ... and to the astonishment of the locals, whom he hastened, moreover, to evangelise.³⁴

The winter of 1637-1638 was, it seemed "harsher than ever". And yet, says the priest of Saint-Bonnet-le-Froid:³⁵

I noticed that Father Regis was secretly going out every night from his room, and I was curious to know where he was going. I found him in front of the church door, on his knees, hands clasped and bareheaded, despite a violent wind blowing. No matter how I tried to show him the danger to which he was exposing himself, I could see that he was determined to continue his conversations with God, and so I had to give him the key of the church, so that at least he would have been protected with the harshness of the winds. And Regis, confirmed the priest, continued to spend every night in the church.³⁶

One of his entrances to the village of Montregard has remained famous.

According to a lady of the area, Regis, totally soaked by rain and snow, at night-time, and before showing himself to anyone, went straight to the church to worship the Blessed Sacrament. Finding the church locked, he knelt, bareheaded, in front of the door to pray to Jesus Christ.

It was in this posture that he was surprised by passers-by, "motionless, despite a cold and a very sharp wind". We had to "seize" him and lead him to a neighbouring house and "force him to recover a little".³⁷

Apostle of the Eucharist

"The love of Jesus in the tabernacle" clearly describes Regis's compassion.

Given the facts that we have just reported, and above, we can say that his haste to be a priest - "was interiorly motivated by a double vocation, an anxious desire that the Host be brought to earth and a burning desire to bring souls up to heaven"³⁸ and his zeal to restore the frequent use of the Eucharist and to establish wherever he was preaching Blessed Sacrament Guilds. This goes back to the time when he was just a student, and also a catechist on occasions, and the Eucharist, "for nearly two centuries, has given beautiful fruits."³⁹

³³ Ibid. pp. 130-131.

³⁴ Ibid. p. 407.

³⁵ An altitude of 1200 metres. Here is a name that delivers what it promises. A little further south is "Fay-le-Froid" ... We are near La Louvesc where Regis died in the depths of winter.

³⁶ Ibid, p. 418.

³⁷ Ibid. p. 472.

³⁸ Ibid, p. 141.

³⁹ Ibid. p. 95.

However, it is noted, "he was not only impelled by the tenderness of his affection, but also by his desire to make reparation for the many Eucharistic profanations that were committed during the Wars of Religion".⁴⁰

Philosophy student at the Jesuit University of Tournon, - he was a "perfect student of the Company", the Eucharist became more and more the source of his fervour. As the custom of daily communion had not been established, he offered himself to the sacristan "to the point of annoying him" to SERVE AT MASSES; and when he could obtain the grace of A SURPLUS OF COMMUNIONS, he exuded great joy.⁴¹

His desire for martyrdom, alas (!) found food in contemporary and local history,⁴² as it enkindled in him the memory of "those martyrs of the Eucharist, who since his childhood he had loved so much" - Fathers Jacques Salés and Guillaume Saultemouche. These two men had been massacred in Aubenas on 7th February, 1593, by heretics who hated the "Holy Mass" and wanted to "drive" it forever out of the country! How he loved to see the places where they had fallen and to collect himself in the chapel where some of their bones were preserved!⁴³

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 62.

⁴¹ Ibid. p. 91.

⁴² In June, 1629, in "Boutieres" (where Fr. Regis worked in 1635), Fr. Jerome de Condrieu was tortured by Calvinists for not renouncing "Papism". He was one example among many. (Guitton, p. 247).

⁴³ Guitton, p. 280. Cf. pp. 90, 175.

V. THE “MISSIONARY”

Such, then, is the protector and model who was given to the Poitiers-based Society of the Sacred Heart: a true MISSIONARY.

It is, indeed, the title that best defines him, just as the title “Zealot” will contain everything for Fr. Coudrin.

Here we have the ideal of Regis, who is called “Francis”:

Francis of Assisi was his patron saint for his baptism, and he always remained faithful to him through his worship of “Lady Poverty” and his devotion to the humble. But very quickly Regis wanted to be associated in a special way with a second protector, Francis Xavier, a saint in whom the flame of zeal burned.⁴⁴

Regis developed a deep and intense devotion to the Apostle of the Indies.

“Even tradition - papal documents and letters postulating his beatification and canonization, propers of the office and mass – placed more emphasis on Regis as a MAN OF APOSTOLIC ACTION without stressing sufficiently that his ministry (all God’s love) radiated from ongoing contemplation.”

St. Rose Philippine Duchesne (1769-1852), the spiritual daughter of Saint Madeleine Sophie Barat and a missionary for 34 years among peoples in America had, since a young age, an equal devotion to Saint François Xavier and to Saint John Francis Regis. She was reported to have said, “We would attract them more quickly with liquor than with sermons”.

In 1800, at the sight of the ruins accumulated in France by the Revolution, Philippine went up to La Louvesc and consecrated herself to Saint Francis Regis, because “his works”, she wrote, “being more obscure (than Francis Xavier’s), were more relevant than those I could undertake.” She would go on to become an apostle.

Vestiges, perhaps, of her devotion, are the “Saint Regis hotels”, “curiously spread through the United States in the city centres of New York and Chicago, and also the Saint Regis mountain and Lake St. Regis, situated in Franklin County, New York State, NY ... “

She was beatified by Pius XII on 12th May, 194.⁴⁵

Some years later, in the summer of 1806, a young man aged 20 was in Louvesc, praying and meditating. He wanted to be a priest but he was not able for the studies. He asked for “the grace to

⁴⁴ So, too, Fr. Coudrin began his religious life under the patronage of Saint Caprasius, the Bishop-Martyr who on 20th October, 1792, had shown him the path of absolute devotion in the service of love.

⁴⁵ Guitton, p. 584. Cf. A.A.S XXXII, 1940, p. 351.

know Latin so as to study theology“ so that he could become a priest and save souls. His name was Jean-Marie Vianney, the future Curé of Ars.⁴⁶

In imitation of Regis, Vianney was a wonderful CATECHIST, and perhaps even more than Regis - certainly for longer than Regis - a untiring CONFESSOR. Once, to save his family of orphans from hunger, he was forced to come before God begging for bread, and wanting beforehand to ensure a powerful intercession, he placed a relic of Saint Regis in the midst of the grains of wheat in the hope that they would multiply. A short time before he died he instructed his servant, Catherine Lassagne to repay a “debt of gratitude” that he owed to the apostle of La Louvesc.⁴⁷

In 1802, (as stated earlier) Father Coudrin himself went “to bend over the tomb of Saint Regis”, in order to present his children, all his children, brothers, sisters and associates and ask for them “a small portion of that zeal that enabled him to convert the whole country.”

ZEAL. Have we given enough thought to what is the object of his prayer? How, through the example and intercession of Saint John Francis Regis, may we become “converters”, fishers of men” and “apostles”?

SUCH is the protector and model whom the Founders entrusted to the Exterior Association. We have tried to get to the heart of the MISSIONARY, whose love was life, a true love, profound and effective, a love that was nourished through prayer and union with God and which was expressed in the fruits of the salvation for souls.

The Exterior Association (what we today refer to as the Secular Branch), in all the places where it has been established, has as its patron, Saint John Francis Regis. The Rule states as such.⁴⁸ Hopefully we now we have a better understanding of his patronage and what he can teach us.

Indeed, Fr. Coudrin himself said, in his Circular dated 14th April, 1817, announcing the approval of our Constitutions by the Holy See:

We also recommend to you a great devotion to Saint Francis Regis, APOSTLE OF VIVARAIS, whom we have given as patron to the Exterior Association of the faithful who, through prayer, are in communion with us.

The APOSTLE. He could not be called otherwise. Nothing more could be said.

An APOSTLE burning with ZEAL, “an untiring champion who could only breathe divine glory ... (and who) in his ministry did not hold back for any human consideration”.⁴⁹ The liturgy - that of his

⁴⁶ Beatified in 1905 and canonised in 1925 by Pius XI, Vianney was declared patron of all the Parish priests in Rome and throughout the Catholic world.

⁴⁷ Guitton, p. 85; Francis Trochu, "El cura de Ars", Vitte, pp. 50-52. Our Founders equally attributed certain favours granted to the intercession of St. Regis: the marvellous multiplication of bread and wine that had taken place (in the house in Mende) in September 1803. Mother Françoise, who also reported this event, concluded with these words: “we have reason to believe that this miracle is due to the protection that Providence gives to our establishment and to the prayers of St. Regis, who has promised his help” Mother Henriette had gone to visit his tomb at the beginning of May of that same year.

⁴⁸ See "Servir", No 1, p. 14, text and observations.

⁴⁹ A superior of Regis writing to Fr. Vitelleschi, General of the Jesuits (9 February, 1639).

feast day - never hesitates in presenting Saint Francis Regis as a faithful image of Christ the Saviour, something he himself wanted to achieve by entering the Company of Jesus, in the hope that the peoples he evangelised would have been pleased by what they saw in him. This is the ideal presented to the Secular Branch members for devotion, those who want so much, by way of their vocation, to be like Jesus - who gave his life, drop by drop, day after day, in the midst of the world, and who became one of us, for glory of his Father and for the salvation of all.

To be “an associate” according to the heart of our Founders, we could say according to the heart of the Church, since the Congregation is fully sanctioned by its authority, one must be an APOSTLE, an apostle like Saint Francis Regis. This involves getting to know him, invoking him, having confidence in him, out of simple respect for the choice made by the Founder, a choice that was ratified by the Vicar of Christ. The Founder’s choice would have been valued as much as the word of Jesus to his Church: Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven.

To those responsible for making him known, we remind you of the words spoken by Father Coudrin to the Superior of Poitiers:

“You will solemnise his Feast with a sermon on his life and his miracles, and say (a word) about who we are at his tomb.” (29/4/1803)

This is the least you can do, although the sermon does not necessarily have to be given on the day of the feast, and it is not always or only by means of a sermon, that you can bring the Apostle back to life in the eyes of your Secular Branch members ...

VI.

SAINT FRANCIS REGIS OR SAINT MARGARET MARY?

We have a small leaflet on “The Exterior Association of the Sacred Hearts”, in which the writer, long before it was published “Servir” (No. 1, p.16), wanted to use the same text of the rule that had been approved by Rome for the brothers to define canonically the position of the Association and its spirit. Thus the articles of the Constitutions of the brothers (451-464) were centrally positioned in the leaflet.

“In addition to the actual text” one thing was clearly added, in plain language, without any brackets or explanation, namely that the Exterior Association has two Patrons: Saint John Francis Regis and Saint Margaret-Mary Alacoque!

Truly, this is not right. The work has nothing to gain from such tactics.

It was suggested in the new Statutes that Saint Margaret Mary REPLACE Saint Francis Regis on account that the first is more well known today whereas the second no longer represents the ideal to the Associates.

We cannot follow this path.

It was the Founders themselves, WITH FULL KNOWLEDGE OF THE FACTS who chose and put into place Saint Francis Regis for the External Association, just as they did with Saints Pachomius, Augustine, Dominic and Bernard for the whole Congregation. Our first duty as we try to understand this is to respect their will. This will has been expressed in the Rule, approved by the Church, and as such compels us to comply with it, and to desist from changing even one iota without serious motives, which are totally lacking here. Moreover, any changes would need the consent of the Holy See.

May the faithful of the twenty-first century become more familiar with the confidante of the Sacred Heart, even if they may be far from using all the resources of his spirituality! But the rule is simple, we have already said it: that we “preach” Saint Francis Regis, and make him known in all places.

The whole question is to know whether in this case Margaret-Mary and Francis Regis are interchangeable, does their patronage has the same meaning, substantially and in the eyes of the Founders. We do not judge this to be so, as can be seen from the little we have said of Regis in the preceding pages.

Saint Francis Regis, it was said, would no longer have the same relationship with the Exterior Association. So, is it that the spirit of the Association has changed, and if so, how? This is a serious matter.

The problem can be overcome: the patronage of the “Apostle of Vivarais” can help us understand the Association, its spirit, its trends, its requirements, as it was first conceived and wanted by Father

Coudrin and Mother Henriette in their overall plan for the Association to be of service to the Sacred Hearts.

To their religious family - associates included - our Founders paternally provided powerful patronages, including SAINT FRANCIS REGIS.

Indeed, it is to the WHOLE INSTITUTE that Father Coudrin addresses himself when, after having spoken of the saints that we should count among our protectors (Circular of 14 April, 1817, already quoted above) he added:

We recommend to you a great devotion to Saint Francis Regis, APOSTLE OF VIVARAIS, whom we have given as patron to the Exterior Association of the faithful who through prayer are in communion with us.

And he makes no distinction when, in his petition to the Holy See in December, 1814, he stated:

This CONGREGATION has for its protectors: Saints Benedict, Pachomius, Augustine, Dominic, Bernard and ST. JOHN FRANCIS REGIS.

The latter was specially entrusted to the External Association.

Does this mean to say that the "Apostle of Vivarais" is of less interest to the Brothers and Sisters or that the Associates are estranged from the other patrons of the Congregation? Assuredly not.

In Saint Francis Regis, the Associates will see a master of LIFE, always MORE CHRISTIAN who can help them serve the Sacred Hearts without leaving the world and from whom they can learn how their whole life must be turned towards God to love him, and consequently, turned towards their neighbours to save them, so that they in their turn love God.

But, in order to complete in themselves the image of "child of the Sacred Hearts" as foreseen by Father Coudrin and Mother Henriette, they cannot do without either Saint Benedict nor Saint Pachomius nor any of the others, from whom, like us, they will learn precious lessons and who, with us, they can praise and invoke.

It was at the request of the General Chapter of 1919 - belatedly - by a rescript of 14th July, 1920, that the Holy See established St. Margaret Mary⁵⁰ as a secondary patron of the Congregation, of the WHOLE Congregation, "following on from our four particular Protectors ...".⁵¹

By no means did this rescript seek to express in its integrity the spiritual physiognomy of the Congregation. Nothing had been suppressed, we have not cast to the shadows those great servants of Love who have for so long guided and supported us.

Father Ildefonse Alazard wrote that for us, children of the Sacred Hearts, Saint Margaret-Mary is more than a protectress, she is a doctor and a model, that each of us must study and know well.⁵²

⁵⁰ Canonised 13 May 1920.

⁵¹ "Annals of the Sacred Hearts", 1920, p. 241.

He is right. But, we must say this about ALL our Heavenly Protectors, each and every one of them, because it is also a matter of understanding their mission to us.

ALL of them (including St. Margaret Mary and St. Francis Regis) are needed by ALL OF US, Brothers, Sisters and Secular Branch, so that we do not distort or impoverish the charism, nor limit its scope, nor silence its calls.

It remains then, for the Secular Branch, by express decision of the Founders and the Church, that the "Apostle of Vivarais" will be the intercessor and the model par excellence, who will look at them with predilection, towards whom they will turn with more confidence, praying to him as "their" saint, endeavouring to imitate him more faithfully. Consequently, it is for the Secular Branch to study him and get to know him before all others and more than any other.

*O God, who sent Saint John Francis Regis
so that travelling through villages and cities
he might proclaim peace,
call workers who will also join in the works of your Son today.
Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.⁵³*

⁵² Ibid. p. 144.

⁵³ Collect Prayer – Mass of Saint John Francis Regis.

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