

## **VERY REVEREND MOTHER BENJAMIN LE BLAIS AND HER EIGHTY-FOUR PICPUS COMPANIONS**

Since the 17<sup>th</sup> of March 1871, the Commune reigned supreme in Paris: confiscations, arrests, and so on.

Massacres were the fashion of the day. Churches were closed after their ornaments and sacred vases were seized; the sacred species were desecrated; the prisons were filled with priests and religious guilty of "adoring a God that the Commune does not recognise". The more good was done, the more one was exposed to insults, harassment and mistreatment.

The Congregation of the Sacred Hearts had to be among the victims: at La Roquette, eleven Fathers were detained. Rue Haxo, four martyrs - the RR. PP. Ladislav Radigue, Polycarpe Tuffier, Frézal Tardieu and Marcellin Rouchouze - shed their blood for the cause of God. The Sisters escaped the massacre, but not imprisonment.

Their Superior General at the time was T. R. Mother Benjamine Le Blais, "virtue personified", as the venerated Foundress fondly called her.

Mother Benjamin was born in Saint-Jean-de Luz where her father was commander-in-arms of Fort Socoa. She entered the novitiate in Picpus in 1822, where she pronounced her vows on July 9, 1823, on the feast of Our Lady of Peace, whom she honoured with filial devotion.

A lively faith, a trusting surrender to Divine Providence, a deep humility, a great stirring of feelings, distinguished the venerated Mother. The sensitivity of her heart, her indulgent kindness, her gentleness and the inexhaustible charity with which the Cil had enriched her soul led her to be chosen by the T.R. Mother Henriette, in 1828, as the founder of the House of Alençon (Orne). In 1837, the T. R. Mother Françoise de Viart entrusted her with Chartres (Eure-et-Loir); then, after a nine-year stay at the Mother House, Mother Benjamine was called to the direction of the Establishment of Mortagne (Orne). Appointed Prioress of Picpus in 1853, a very large majority finally appointed her to the general administration of the Institute in 1866.

On April 12, 1871, the federates, numbering sixty, invaded the Mother House; it was the Superior who received them. Greeting them with her own distinction and grace, she asked them what they wanted: "We don't have to answer to you!" replied Clavier, leader of the sinister band. "Bring us all your keys and follow us. Then he turned to one of his captains: "Go," he said to him, "post a sentry at all the doors, and if any of these women try to get out, put a bayonet through their bodies".

Then, odious searches began in Mother Benjamin's room, her papers, the most confidential letters, and even her will, everything was seized and examined:

"Nothing here is yours, citizen Le Blais", the rude Clavier would reply when she timidly risked making a remark. "If I learn from the newspapers that you have given knowledge of what is happening in your house today, I will have you all taken to Saint-Lazare".

Fortunately, in anticipation of events that were believed to be close at hand, the Most Reverend Mother had sent most of the novices living in Picpus to the Provincial Houses; the boarding school was closed and only two pupils remained there who, due to circumstances, had not been able to return to their families.

Leaving Mother Benjamin's room, the bandits then went to the chapel. The Adoratrices, dressed in their red mantle, were at the praying to God; "I was at the adoration at 1:30, wrote one of them, "when I heard the door being pushed loudly". The federates came in speaking loudly, making a great noise with their weapons; they invaded the chapel. One of them went towards the tabernacle and, shouting, asked for the key; as it was taking a long time to arrive, impatient, he forced the door with his bayonet, grabbed the sacred vessels and poured the Holy Species on the altar. The Prioress, who was running to the altar, asked him graciously not to desecrate the Sacred Hosts any further: "Get out of here, or I will put the bayonet through your body! " shouted this enraged man. And he continued the sacrilege:

"... The miraculous statue of Our Lady of Peace was taken down from its place; we begged them to leave it with us; after a moment's hesitation: "It's wood, let's leave it with them! Thus was saved the blessed Virgin of Picpus who, carefully hidden, came out of her retreat when the Sisters returned home.

When the searches were completed Clavier announced that half of these men would be housed and accommodated in the convent, at the expense of the Sisters; then he withdrew. The venerable Mother Benjamin was put under guard night and day. The nurse in charge of the service of the federates, carried out her mission with a kindness and devotion that these wretched men were obliged to acknowledge; and yet they were not their demands!

To pass the time, these idle men, rarely fasting, found nothing better to do than to vent their rage against the Sisters. The Most Reverend Mother was the target of their brutal insults; guilty in their eyes of the worst atrocities, she deserved nothing less than to be shot. Following the example of Jesus, she kept silent and prayed for her executioners. Father, forgive them..." »

The month of April passed amid anguish that grew more poignant with each passing day. Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, continued night and day, it was the great consolation of the poor Sisters; but the divine Prisoner had to take refuge successively in various parts of the house, before settling in the infirmary of the boarding school.

"Towards the end, as things were still going badly, the Superior General, fearing a new profanation, decided that the Holy Species which had been collected and kept until then and around which, day and night, adoration had continued, would be consumed...

"The Sisters, one after the other, but without the ministry of any priest - they were all in prison - approached not to receive, but to take Holy Communion. When they had all received Holy Communion, there were still a few Sacred Hosts left, which were consumed by those whom the Superior deputed for this purpose; only a small piece was left before which Adoration continued. After Holy Communion, the Sisters all went down to the chapel (the ceremony took place in the infirmary) to renew their vows before dying, if, as everybody feared, it meant dying".

The time to die was not yet ripe for them, but events were about to precipitate: 29th April - Two thousand people invaded the Mother House, driven by curiosity. The most horrible slanders had been spread by the press against the Sisters as well as the clergy.

May 2 - "Ten thousand people enter the community, passing through the windows of the boarding school and spreading from the attic to the cellar..."

Summoned to put order to these home visits, the captain of the federation had the following inscription placed on the portal: The public will not enter until Justice is pronounced.

May 6 - The day is spent in prayer and adoration: first Friday of the month! At seven o'clock in the evening, two large cellular cars cross the gate and enter the main courtyard.

The "Citizen Superior" is invited to appear before the Council meeting in the house of the Fathers of the Congregation. She asked to be questioned at home, but Mother Benjamin was refused and left with two Sisters: Mother Téléphore, bursar, and Sister Athénodore, principal of the boarding school.

The Superior appeared first before fifteen citizens seated around a table, lit by candles from the chapel. When her interrogation was over, she was locked up in a room under a staircase; she remained there until 9 o'clock in the evening and Mother Telesphore came to join her there while the principal of the boarding school obtained permission to go and meet her two pupils.

The Sisters gathered in the common room to pray for their venerated Mother. At 9 o'clock, they were asked to go down to the large parlour, where they had the joy of meeting again the one they had feared they would never see again. It was impossible to say a word to her! Clavier was in a hurry to finish and began the call starting with the oldest ones. Sixteen answered.

"Follow the citizen! ", the commissioner shouted, pointing to a national guard who led them into the courtyard and, without allowing them to change their clothes, made them get into the cars parked near the community gate in their white robes.

Mother Benjamin asked a question: "That's none of your business; Le Blais! " replied the raging Clavier; " you are nobody here anymore... ".

It is eleven o'clock in the evening, the Holy Hour in the Congregation... The nurse remains in Picpus with a few sick people; Mother Benjamin makes her understand that she must consume the Host fragment kept in the infirmary: Jesus then ceases to reside physically in the midst of his spouses and perpetual Adoration is suspended...

May 6, 1am - Six more cars arrive to "load" the rest of the community. Each one finds a place in a cell. A few national guards surrounded a good old lady, clutching her stick with both hands, with a sneer; you only have to look at her to understand that she is making a last plea to them. What does she want? - To stay in the infirmary, because she is no longer young. "If she is eighty years old, she has lived long enough to die!... .." is the answer thrown in her face. Approaching her Superior, dear Sister Michel discreetly renews her vows and allows herself to be dragged along with her sisters.

Now everyone is " packed in "; the cells are all full. And Mother Benjamin... - Ah, for this one the corridor is still too good; let her stand there!... And the venerable Mother obeyed: not a word, not a murmur; she prayed, united to her Master.

Where are the prisoners taken to? - It is the unknown. When they get out of the car, they will realise that they are in Saint-Lazare, the prison for women lost to vices. Unbeknownst to them, the executioners have made a happy choice for " reparation women ".

3 a.m. - The last car crosses the gate; we meet again. Piled up in a corridor on the ground floor, some sitting on the floor, others standing, leaning against the wall, the eighty-four Sisters wait to be directed to their respective rooms or dungeons; there they will be five or six in each cell.

Very Reverend Mother Benjamin is held in solitary confinement: "a prison cell, with no other furnishings than the modest bed, not very clean, a wooden saddle without a backrest, an earthen

bowl and a water jug". - The venerated Mother is 69 years old and is recovering from illness! The bursar and the principal of the boarding school are placed under the same roof.

May 7 – Sunday. There is no Mass.

May 8 - "Search" torture. The director of the prison, Mouton, a former shoemaker and convicted convict, appoints a supervisor for the operation. "She puts all the severity that her masters are entitled to expect money, objects of piety and even the scapulars which are an integral part of the Sisters' costume...".

Serving eighty-four people in cells really does make it too much of a hassle! The prisoners are transferred to a holding cell on the fifth floor of the building. In this room, "90 beds, so close to each other that they barely leave enough room to get through". It does not matter; the joy of being together and being able to comfort each other makes up for the rest. Ah! if only the good Mother Benjamin were with them...

Little by little, community life is organised: at 7 o'clock, prayer and meditation; adoration is done regularly, almost as in Picpus. The Sisters turn in the direction of a church and, in the greatest recollection, make their guard of honour in spirit, at the foot of the Tabernacle.

Around 9.30 am, they go to the refectory that the inmates have just left, in what condition! "We ate from bowls and drank from doubly disgusting tumblers...". The menu was simple: soup 'which looked like dishwater' and a black bread roll of about a pound and a half, the provision of the day.

Free time until recess; some read, others knit - good souls provided books and wool - sewing, etc. An hour's walk in the courtyard. Again, free time and rosary.

3:30 a.m., supper: "Beans or potato Ratatouille, that's it! On Sundays and Thursdays - four times in total - we were given meat; and once I had no knife, fork or spoon to eat it with; judge for yourself".

Mother Benjamin, needless to say, is subject to the same regime: "The Good Lord gives his blessing, and I find it good... ", she answers when asked how she puts up with this coarse food.

May 12 - The Most Reverend Mother and her two companions are reunited in the same cell but separated from the rest of the community. "There we were quite well," writes Sister Téléphore. "The door was left open until the evening closing time, but we were not allowed to go any further; moreover, we were watched over by guards...".

13th to 17th May - "It was a rather curious sight to see the eighty-four nuns gathered in this prison; also, in the salons of the Commune, people would make an appointment to come and see them. The visitors were forced to admit that the attire of the Sisters was perfect. Everyone admired their silence, their piety and their charity, but who could have understood what they suffered from being thus "a spectacle to God and men"?

One evening, Mother Benjamin came to greet her daughters, all touched to see her at last. From that day on, the Sisters were able to enjoy her presence during recreation.

May 18 - The communards do not feel safe. Furious at having had to return the money seized from ten Sisters who had been released following an intervention by the American ambassador, they took revenge by once again putting Mother Benjamin in solitary confinement.

May 19 - The army of Versailles enters Paris, but the prisoners are unaware that the hour of deliverance is approaching.

May, 21 - "Cannon, banging, screams of prisoners inside, movements of employees in the courtyards, noise of weapons outside".

May 22 - "The guards speak of the entry of the Versailles army into Paris, but each of them comments, and they are generally in favour of the Commune".

The captives are taken down to a workshop on the ground floor because, it is said, there is danger because of the cannon. They will stay there for three days and three nights on benches, with their heads on their packs as pillows.

"... I will never be able to describe to you the whistling of the bombs and shells that were heading towards our prison; we could hear the collapse of the houses and barricades by the cannon and the machine gun; it was frightening".

May 23— A sleepless night, because near the prison a shop is on fire; all you can see are swirls of flames and smoke. Bombs and shells whistle, explode, pass and intertwine... It is really dreadful.

May 24 - Bullets and shells rain in the courtyard. 4 hours. Visit from Mr Mouton, the prison director; he does not seem reassured: "I am lost! I am lost!" he tells the Sisters; but I have not been mean to you, I hope you will justify me. I was charged with getting you out on the barricades where you would have been machine-gunned, I did not do it". The Sisters promise to save him, if possible.

5:30 a.m. Another visit from the poor director. He gives all permission, but too late, to go and fetch Mother Benjamin and finally takes refuge himself in the midst of the Sisters. The Mother arrives.

Immediately a loud noise is heard in the corridor; it is the victorious soldiers; they open the workshop and General Clinchant introduces himself: "Where is the director? "The unfortunate man comes forward trembling. "This is how you hide among women! Who are you ladies? - We are religious women. - And are you prisoners of the House or of the Commune? - Of the Commune, General. - Prisoners of the Commune?" shouts the indignant general three times, stamping his foot: "Well, ladies, you are free, and do as you please in the house".

May 25 - The Sisters are taken from their temporary shelter and housed in the part of the jail previously occupied by the Sisters of the prison. Thanks to their intercession, M. Mouton is saved.

May 27 - A first joy! Father Louis Faye, also a prisoner of the Commune, visits the nuns in his prisoner's costume. One cannot help laughing at the sight of him in this costume, and then we move on to the serious things: it is the eve of Pentecost, each one confesses with a view to the next day.

May 28 - Great joy: there is mass at the prison. Officers, soldiers, and a large number of people attend. It is the dawn of peace.

May 30 - Cars, but this time it is no longer administrative cars that come to pick up our dear prisoners. We pass through a curious but friendly crowd and, in the evening, the Very Reverend Mother Benjamine and her daughters return to Picpus. Everything there is quite upset, soiled, in disorder; there is no noticeable damage to the chapel. The same evening, the Sisters began the restoration of the sanctuary: how could they not wish to have Holy Mass without delay so that they could begin adoration again?

May 31 - The gloomy drama was over. In prayer to God, the adorers thanked Jesus for having saved them and asked Him to pardon so many crimes committed. They found the venerated statue of Our Lady of Peace with inexpressible happiness. "Honour this holy image well", said the Most Reverend Mother Henriette to her daughters; "one day you will owe it your preservation...".

These words received a resounding affirmation in Mary's visible help during these critical days.

Surrounded by the affection of her daughters who tried to make her forget the harsh trials she had just gone through, the Most Reverend Mother Benjamin continued to govern the Congregation: the vigour of her soul and the lucidity of her spirit were surprising.