

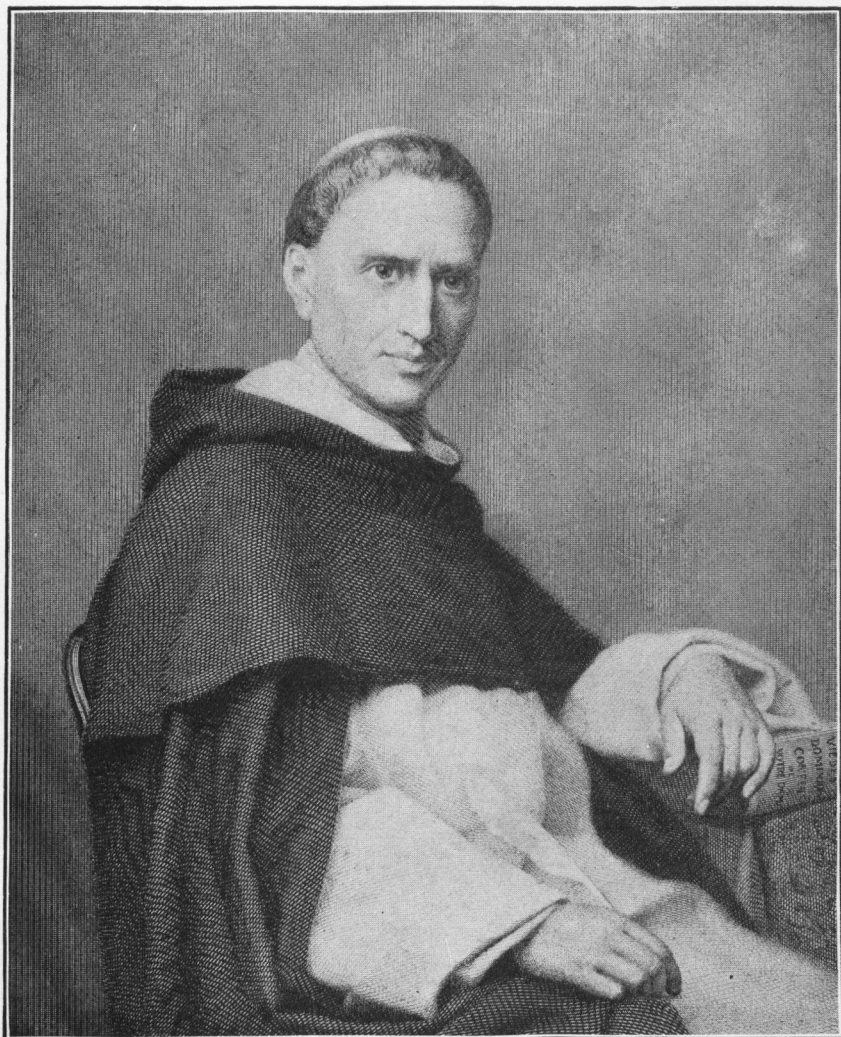
HENRY DOMINIC LACORDAIRE, O.P.

CORNELIUS F. HICKEY, O.P.



N the 12th of May, 1802, the year when Napoleon seemed to have shackled the Church in France to the government forever, there was born in the little Burgundian town of Recey-sur-Ource the century's greatest champion of her liberty, John Baptist Henry Lacordaire. His parents were good and loyal Catholics who had carried their loyalty almost to the point of heroism when, in the face of cruel and speedy punishment, they had hidden the non-juring curé in their home and thus provided the faithful of the village with the consolations of religion. When Henry had reached the age of four, he lost his father, Nicholas Lacordaire, a man of great ability in his chosen field of medicine. This loss forced Mme. Lacordaire to move to Dijon, the home of her own family. Even at this early age, Henry began to manifest tendencies which fore-shadowed his future career. In his little toy chapel he would say mass and preach at great length to his nurses and any of his brothers who might be present.

Though Mme. Lacordaire was not wealthy, she did everything in her power to provide her four sons with the advantages of education. Accordingly Henry took up his studies at the Lyceum of Dijon, a school under government supervision which excluded all traces of religion. Here he was the object of constant persecution at the hands of his fellow students for the whole of his first year and he confesses that only in hiding, with a crucifix before him, meditating on the Passion of Jesus, could he find any consolation. The following years were not saddened by the cruelty of the students but were rendered happy by his winning the confidence and interest of one of the professors, M. Delahaye, a man of great learning and high morality, yet entirely devoid of religion. To him the young student owed his splendid foundation in the classics and that taste for study which characterized his whole life. But neither in M. Delahaye nor in anyone else in the school could he find support for his vanishing faith. Steeped in the writings of Voltaire and Rousseau, yet deprived of the Bible and Catholic literature, he forgot his faith



HENRY DOMINIC LACORDAIRE, O.P.

rather than apostatized. His last act of religion had been his first Holy Communion, at the age of ten. In his own words, "I left college at the age of seventeen with my faith destroyed and my morals injured, but upright, open, impetuous, sensible to honor, with a taste for letters and for the beautiful, having before my eyes, as the guiding star of my life, the human idea of glory."¹

Despite his loss of faith and the study of Voltaire, he always respected the Church and never acquired the hatred toward Catholicism which characterized that vehement author. At this period Lacordaire writes, "I love the gospel, for its morality is incomparable; I respect its ministers, because they exercise a salutary influence on society, but I have not received as my share the gift of faith."²

After two years at the Law School of Dijon, he went to Paris to continue his legal studies. Here in the solitude and drudgery of his work, he yearned for friends, but since he was indifferent to religion, and a liberal, while all his fellows were Catholics and Royalists, and because in public he always wore an icy exterior which covered his burning heart, he had none. Perhaps God, by allowing this pain akin to the suffering inflicted on him by his persecution at Dijon, was again drawing him to the Cross of Christ.

Lacordaire gives us an admirable analysis of his character in a letter written at this time: "There are in me, then, two contrary principles which are always at war and which sometimes make me very unhappy: a cold reason, opposed to a burning imagination—I have a most religious heart and a very incredulous mind."³

Supplementing these characteristics with a courageous impetuosity, irrepressible optimism and a staunch liberalism, we arrive at the true foundation of his many virtues and at the explanation of his few faults.

The solitude imposed on Lacordaire by a lack of friends gave his "cold reason" the opportunity it required. Being a student of society from his earliest days, he gradually came to the conviction that society, necessary in itself, could not exist without religion. Then it was an easy step to the conviction that the Catholic Faith was necessary and true. This form of apologetics shocked some of his contemporaries by its novelty, but he answered them, saying; "We may reach Christianity by many different roads, because it is the centre where all truths meet."⁴ We must not suppose, however, that his

¹ Chocarne, *Le R. P. H.-D. Lacordaire*, p. 25.

² Chocarne, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

³ Chocarne, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

⁴ Drane, translation of Chocarne, *op. cit.*, footnote to p. 62.

conversion was merely a process of reasoning. During his whole life in Paris, his morality and sincerity were a source of endless admiration to his Catholic acquaintances.

No sooner was his conversion complete than he decided to sacrifice all chances of honor and glory to his newly found God by entering the priesthood. Accordingly at the age of twenty he entered Saint Sulpice. During his studies there, the novelty of his objections in class, which often embarrassed his professors, as well as his vivacity, which sought an outlet by his throwing the students' square caps (which he hated) into the fire, raised doubts in the minds of the good priests concerning the genuineness of his vocation, with the result that he was not called for ordination at the usual time. Far from becoming discouraged, or from using the delay as an excuse for going back to the world, he was merely undecided whether his true vocation lay in the religious life as a member of the Society of Jesus or in foreign lands as a missionary. When his spiritual adviser made this known to the directors of the seminary, all objections were withdrawn and he received the priesthood from the hands of the Archbishop of Paris, Mgr. Quélen in the Cathedral of Notre Dame on the 22nd of September, 1827.

Shortly after his ordination he was offered the position of Auditor to the Rota at the court of Rome, but would hear nothing of it and instead accepted the humble post of chaplain at the Visitation Convent where his light duties afforded him an opportunity to satisfy partially his thirst for philosophical study and to supplement his short course in Theology. His favorite authors were St. Augustine, Plato, Aristotle, Descartes and de Lamennais while he also read at great length the history of the Church.

His staunch liberalism was in direct opposition to the state interference with religion in France at that time, so his thoughts naturally turned toward the United States, as a field for his apostolic endeavors. He had, in fact, returned home to bid good-bye to his mother and friends when he received a letter from Abbé Gerbet announcing the new liberal Catholic publication, called *L'Avenir*, to be edited under the direction of the great de Lamennais. Its aim was the liberty of the Church in France with the motto, "Liberty is not granted, it is taken! It strongly advocated the complete separation of Church and State.

Up to this time Lacordaire had not agreed with the philosophy of de Lamennais, nor was he ever to be joined in the system by real conviction nor to its author by ties of real friendship. De Lamennais, in Lacordaire's eyes, presented the rallying point for liberal Catholics

as well as the means of putting their ideals into practice. He accordingly took up his residence at La Chesnaie with de Lamennais and shortly became the most audacious writer on the staff. Here it was that he first met the man who was to be his best friend through life, the Comte de Montalembert, then a youth still in his teens but an ardent liberal as well as a great writer and orator. To test the existing educational laws, Montalembert, Lacordaire and M. de Coux opened a school which was promptly closed by the government. In the consequent trial before the court of Peers, both Montalembert and Lacordaire achieved immortal places among the great orators who had spoken before the body. They were fined the minimum, 100 fr.

Opposition to *L'Avenir* soon made itself felt. It arose from the governmental party and from the conservatives among the Catholics. From the first source opposition was to be expected, but against that of the Catholics, steps had to be taken. Lacordaire suggested that the editors go to Rome to seek approbation from the Pope. His suggestion was accepted, but the editors found a cool reception awaiting them in the Eternal City. A long time elapsed before they even obtained an audience with the Holy Father who, after all, made no mention of *L'Avenir*. It was clear that the Holy See wished by her silence to express her disapproval of the policies of her over-enthusiastic children and at the same time to spare them the disgrace of a formal condemnation. Lacordaire understood and left Rome, while de Lamennais and Montalembert remained. After some four months spent in fighting for a lost cause, the latter two left Rome and met Lacordaire by accident at Munich. There during a public dinner, de Lamennais was given the formal condemnation of *L'Avenir* which his persistence had made necessary. The brief began "*Mirari Vos*" and was dated August 15, 1832. All hastened to render their submissions in writing, but soon it became apparent to Lacordaire that de Lamennais was insincere and Montalembert hesitant. Lacordaire left de Lamennais therefore, but did not cease for two whole years to use every power of his eloquence in his letters to Montalembert to withdraw him from the danger.

The Visitation again welcomed Lacordaire as its chaplain and he plunged into an intensive study of the Bible, St. Augustine and St. Thomas, not to forget the past, but rather to prepare for the future. His hope was to write a treatise on apologetics based on the principles which had brought him back to the faith. In January, 1834, he began a series of conferences at the Collège Stanislaus. The second sermon saw the students excluded from their places by the crowd of outsiders present. But these were not all well impressed and many told Mgr. Quélen that not only Lacordaire's style but also parts of his theology

merited condemnation. This news brought a prompt suspension of faculties for preaching. Lacordaire received this second rebuke with the same spirit of obedience he had manifested at the condemnation of *L'Avenir* and his virtue quickly brought its reward. He was invited, by the Archbishop of Paris himself, to preach in the greatest pulpit of the land, that of Notre Dame. From the beginning, his conferences brought crowds of all classes, Catholics and Atheists, Liberals and Royalists,—all flocked to hear the word of God from this priest who was not yet thirty-three.

After two years of dazzling success, he resigned the pulpit of his own accord, because, as he later wrote, "I understood that I was not yet ripe for the task."⁵ Rome, which had taught him the 'liberty of truth' and the valor of obedience was the retreat he sought and there at the tombs of the Apostles and martyrs, in prayer and study, he prepared for his future. In the meantime, de Lamennais had, by the publication of "*Les Affaires de Rome*" formally broken with the Church. His erstwhile disciple immediately and loyally replied with his "Letters on the Holy See." It was in Rome also that the first idea of reestablishing one of the great religious orders on French soil began to engross his attention. His own words are, "I persuaded myself, therefore, as I wandered through Rome, praying at her basilicas, that the greatest service which could be rendered to Christendom in our time would be to do something for the restoration of the religious orders."⁶

His choice of an order narrowed down to a decision between the Jesuits and Dominicans because the other orders were more concerned with manual labor and self-sanctification than with the active apostolate. But the Jesuits were already in France and so needed no restoration. Moreover, from his own analysis of the two orders, it is clear that the Dominicans would be his final choice. He writes: "St. Dominic had laid a great burden on the body while at the same time he left considerable latitude to the mind; St. Ignatius had restricted the mind within the narrowest limits, but, at the same time, he had set the body free from every rule which could possibly weaken it, or render it less fit for the work of teaching and preaching."⁷ The principle of dispensation as expressed in the Dominican Constitutions portrayed to him the adaptability of the order to the conditions it would be forced to meet in France. Finally his sterling courage overcame his fears of the austerities prescribed, and his mind was practically settled.

⁵ Chocarne, *op. cit.*, 213.

⁶ Chocarne, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

⁷ Chocarne, *op. cit.*, p. 238.

He received an invitation to preach through the winter at Metz. Before accepting, he took council with his three peerless advisers, Montalembert, Comtesse de la Tour du Pin and Madame Swetchine, on whose good judgment and piety he depended at every crisis in his life. But the dreaded cholera broke out in Rome and though his slight knowledge of Italian did not allow him to be of great service, still he could not bear the thought of leaving at such a time. It is a beautiful picture to paint on the imagination—the greatest preacher of France, accused so many times of pride, selfishness and ambition, wandering among the patients of the hospitals, exposing himself to every danger in the hope that he might render some poor soul a religious service.

By September he was able to leave and after preaching through the winter at Metz, where he first met his future Master General, Abbé Jandel, he retired to the Benedictine Abbey of Solesmes, where he devoted himself for two months to the study of the Constitutions of the Dominican Order. In July, he returned to Rome where he interviewed the superiors of the Order and received their approbation for his plan. Back to France he went in search of those who might offer their lives to assist in the project of reestablishment. In the spring of 1839 his "Memoir for the reestablishment in France of the Order of Preachers" appeared and its success assured him of the good will of public opinion which alone could protect his plan in the face of a hostile government. The "Memoir" attracted to him several young men who shared his opinions, but only one, Hippolytus Réquédât, was able to accompany him on his immediate return to Rome. Réquédât, also a convert, was a man of such blameless life that the worst fault he could accuse himself of at the age of thirty, when he made his first confession, was hating the enemies of France. On the 9th of April Lacordaire and his first disciple received the habit in the convent of the Minerva from the hands of the Master General and immediately left Rome for the convent of La Quercia, near Viterbo. The Master General offered to reduce the term of novitiate to six months, but Lacordaire declined.

During an exemplary novitiate in which he performed his share of the more disagreeable tasks, he wrote his "Life of St. Dominic" which also did much to convert public opinion to his plan for the reestablishment of the Dominicans in France. On the 12th of April, Lacordaire and Réquédât made profession and returned to Rome. The Master General then gave them the convent of Santa Sabina as the Novitiate and House of Studies for the French Dominicans. Here Lacordaire collected his other companions,—Piel, the convert architect; Hershheim, of Hebrew extraction, the converted profes-

sor of rationalistic philosophy; Hyacinth Besson; and Abbé Jandel, the ex-superior of the Seminary of Pont-a-Mousson near Metz,—six Frenchmen devoted to the reestablishment of the Order in France, gathered to live a religious life while they awaited the determination of the Holy See with regard to the place of a novitiate.

Leaving his disciples in Rome, Lacordaire proceeded to Paris, where, to the great surprise of all, he appeared in the pulpit of Notre Dame, clad in the prohibited habit of St. Dominic. His precipitant action took his enemies unawares while his discourse on the "Vocation of the French Nation," in which he openly described the Dominican Order, his reasons for choosing it and his plans for its reestablishment in France, gained him the good will of the people and the favorable comment of even the anti-clerical newspapers. M. Martin, the keeper of the seals and the minister of Public Worship whose duty, in the eyes of the government, was to prevent any steps toward reestablishment, gave a dinner in Lacordaire's honor.

Three great sorrows, however, were soon to fall on Lacordaire's already burdened shoulders. God saw fit to call two of his most esteemed companions from this life. Réquédât, the only other professed Dominican, died shortly after his profession. Réquédât's bosom friend, Piel, was to follow shortly. Finally the Holy See, being told that the new foundation would merely be a blind and protection for the pupils of de Lamennais, saw fit to disperse the little flock, and sent some to La Quercia and the others to Bosco for their novitiate, while Lacordaire, momentarily distrusted, was detained in Rome. For a third time the obedience and courage of Lacordaire were tried almost to the breaking point, but remained firm. Finally he obtained permission to return to France where, in his Dominican habit, he gave courses of sermons in Bordeaux and Nancy.

In the latter city, a young man of considerable means offered to give the Friars their first home. The bishop of the diocese had the courage to approve the foundation without consulting the government, and, on the feast of Pentecost, 1834, Lacordaire took formal possession. M. Thierry de Saint-Beaussant, the donor, lived the common life with the Fathers Lacordaire, Jandel and Hiss. Finally he added to the endowment, a refectory and chapel completing his sacrifice by becoming, himself, a novice. The government made many protests to the bishop but all to no avail and Lacordaire was able to return to Paris to succeed Père de Ravignan, S.J., as the Notre Dame preacher for the season of Advent. The Archbishop of Paris attempted to persuade him to wear a soutane instead of his habit. This, Lacordaire believed, would be an uncalled-for concession to his enemies that would indicate a lack of confidence in him-

self and his cause. Finally, he declared that he had no right to remove the habit to which he had bound himself by vow. The Archbishop obtained a dispensation from the Master General but only succeeded in persuading Lacordaire to wear the rochet of an honorary canon of the Cathedral over his habit.

The Cathedral was the scene of intense excitement. Many youthful admirers had armed themselves and surrounded the pulpit to protect their idol in case of violence. The preacher alone seemed confident and cool. He had told the Archbishop that he would have all their hearts at his third phrase and his prophecy came true. His years of retirement and religious life had broadened his view, added depth to his thought and finish to his delivery. The sermon more than fulfilled the prelate's hopes and was a fitting reappearance after an almost unbroken silence of seven years. Henceforward till 1851, with the sole exception of 1847, he continued his "Conferences," always before crowds that filled the Cathedral to overflowing. Unfortunately, his sermons were brought to an untimely close as a result of some rather strong language used in speaking of the government. Lacordaire was never again allowed to preach in Paris.

In the year 1844, the French Dominicans bought an old ruined Carthusian Monastery called "Our Lady of Chalais," not far from Grenoble. The purchase occasioned a volley of letters and threats from government officials. Especially antagonistic was M. Martin who had acted as host at the dinner given Lacordaire after the sermon on the "Vocation of the French Nation." But the friar and the good bishop remained firm while public opinion prevented the government from carrying its threats into action. Accordingly on August 4th, 1845, with Père Jandel, as Prior, and Père Besson, as Novice Master, the Novitiate of the French Dominicans was opened at Notre Dame de Chalais. However, in the subsequent establishment of convents at Flavigny, in 1848, and Les Carmes at Paris, in 1849, little difficulty was experienced. Lacordaire now petitioned the Master General for the canonical erection of the Province. His request was granted on the 15th of September when the French Province was restored to all its ancient rights and privileges, with Lacordaire as its first Provincial.

In chronicling the material progress of the Province, we have passed over two important events in the life of our subject. Following the Revolution of 1848, at the solicitations of Abbé Maret and Frederic Ozanam, Lacordaire undertook the editorship of the *Ère Nouvelle*, a Catholic paper, which, by remaining aloof from all party strife purposed to convey the truth to all sides. Pursuing this ideal, Lacordaire accepted a seat in the Constituent Assembly as a

representative of the city of Marseilles. But after two weeks, he perceived the impossibility of remaining an impartial yet active politician. He therefore resigned his seat in the chamber. After three months under his direction the *Ère Nouvelle* attained the largest circulation among all the papers of Paris. But the motives which led him to withdraw from the Assembly also forced him to resign the editorship of this successful publication.

As we mentioned above, Lacordaire's preaching career in Paris came to an end in 1851. Nevertheless, he continued to preach in the Provinces and to retain the Provincialship of the French Province, which he held, with the exception of one term, almost till his death. Following the passage of a bill which legalized the maintenance of private schools, Lacordaire took charge of the College of Oullins. Four of its professors wished to become Dominicans but fearing that adherence to the severe Rule of the First Order would impair their work of teaching, they finally determined to join the Third Order and live according to a rule more in conformity with their labors. On August 15th, 1853, the four made their profession. One year later, in the name of this newly established branch of the Dominican family, Lacordaire took possession of the famous Benedictine College of Sorèze. Every moment, not required for the administration of the Province, was henceforth to be spent in intimate and affectionate contact with his pupils at Sorèze.

The crowning event of his literary career took place on the 24th of January, 1861, when he was called to Paris to receive membership in the French Academy, an honor which he accepted, not as a recognition of personal achievement, but as a loving tribute to religion, presented by a grateful people. This event graphically illustrates the change that had come over France in her attitude toward Catholicism and France appropriately chose as the recipient of her homage to the Church the man who above all others had helped to bring about that change. It was on this occasion that he described his ideals, saying, "I hope to live and die a penitent religious and an impenitent liberal."⁸

We have described to some extent events of his busy life, but we would miss both the font of his activity and the source of his strength under trial, were we to pass over in silence his interior life. The formula in which he summed up the essence of religious life was this, "We have two great vices to combat, pride and voluptuousness; and two great virtues to acquire, humility and penance."⁹

⁸ Cath. En cycl. "*Lacordaire*," p. 734.

⁹ Vincent McNabb, O.P., "*Lacordaire*," p. 24.

We cannot recount here the flagellations and humiliations of every description he underwent in order to overcome those vices and establish those virtues. He enunciated the principle which animated him when he told his novices, "Jesus Christ Himself knew no other road than that which led to the Praetorium and to Calvary. I keep to that and there I shall live and die." Need we mention that the cross on which he had himself crucified for the three hours on Good Friday is still exhibited with veneration in the crypt of the Carmes in Paris? In his direction of young men, a work which delighted him, he made them follow the same hard road. In Lacordaire as a superior, to quote Fr. Vincent McNabb, O.P., "the principle 'not to do as I do but to do as I say' was paradoxically affirmed by his practice far outdistancing his precepts."¹⁰

This very consideration for others brought him into conflict with certain others, especially his early disciple, Père Jandel, who became the Dominican Master General in 1855. These men thought that only by establishing in the French Province, at the very outset, a religious observance in strict accordance with the Constitutions, could a future laxity be avoided. If that life, after a fair trial, were found to be impossible, the Constitutions themselves should be changed. On the other hand, Lacordaire maintained that an observance, rigorous yet tempered to the abilities of all would exclude the possibility of future decline. This disagreement, wherein either side was animated with pure zeal for the welfare of the Church and the Order, illustrates the fervent devotion to principles exhibited by both Jandel and Lacordaire. Even their strong friendship for each other could not make them waver from the policy which each on his own side conceived as best suited to the promotion of the sanctity of his subjects.

Lacordaire's, indeed, was a life worthy of our emulation. Courageous in defeat, humble in triumph, severe to himself and always considerate of others, allowing nothing to swerve him from the path of fidelity to principle and obedience to authority, he labored heroically for the two ideals of a Dominican vocation, self-sanctification and the salvation of souls. When, at length, on November 21st, 1861, Henry Dominic Lacordaire breathed his last, after a long and extremely painful illness, the people of Sorèze, his pupils and his brothers in religion, in fact all France looked on his passing as the death of a saint. "May the unspoken eloquence of his life nerve us to tread in our own measure the path he trod!"¹¹

¹⁰ McNabb, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

¹¹ V. McNabb, *op. cit.*, p. 24.