

KING LOUIS XVI, BENEFACTOR OF AMERICA, AND MARTYR¹

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ABOUT a year and a half ago the news dispatches from France carried reports of a rumor that should have been of interest to all Americans, particularly to all American Catholics in any way acquainted with their country's history. The report itself was short, concise and conservative. The rumor it reported was vague and hard to trace, like some aroma that permeates the air, is detected by several at different points, but the source of which is difficult to locate. Indeed, when those who reported it were questioned as to their authorities, they hastily answered that they were not certain whence the rumor sprang, nor were they even sure where they had seen it recorded; it was in either "La Vie Catholique" or "La Croix,"—two very reputable publications—in December, 1928. One thing alone was certain—the rumor existed. It was thus reported in the Paris Letter of the N. C. W. C. News Service, February 8, 1929: "It is rumored here that the Vatican will be asked to consider the beatification of Louis XVI, on the grounds that he was guillotined, not merely as a victim of political hatred, but as a defender of the Faith."

That was all. A year and more has passed and little if anything more can be learned about the proposed Cause; it seems to have melted into thin air, though the rumor still comes up persistently in unexpected places and on unlooked for occasions. The very vagueness of both report and rumor were enough to arouse the interest and pique the curiosity of anyone interested in history, either secular or ecclesiastical. King Louis XVI of France is not an altogether unknown figure in American history, to put it mildly. He was in a sense the "God-Father of our Nation" and particularly of our liberty

¹ In accordance with the decree of Urban VIII we declare that in the use of the term "Martyr" or any other word or phrase contained herein, we do not intend to anticipate the judgment of the Church, to which we humbly submit our opinions.

as Catholics. It was his army under Rochambeau and his fleet under de Grasse that brought about our final victory, at Yorktown, securing our independence as a nation, which he, first of all sovereigns and states, had recognized. Almost everyone knows that much about him. Many know a great deal more. They will recall that he was the King the revolution first dethroned and then killed, Marie Antoinette's husband, the father of the "Lost Dauphin." But none of these titles explains to us why he should be talked of as a candidate for the Altars; why his death should be regarded as martyrdom. We must look into history, theology and Canon Law, to find out whether or not there is any justification for introducing his Cause on the grounds proposed, namely, that he died, not merely as a victim of political hatred, but as a defender of the Faith, or in other words, that Louis XVI was a holy martyr.

What conditions are required for martyrdom? Taken in its theological sense, martyrdom may be defined as "sufferance of corporeal death in testimony of Christian truth."² This definition itself seems to extend the meaning of martyrdom further than is generally supposed. We popularly regard as martyrs those who, upon being commanded under penalty of death to deny the Catholic faith, have refused and in consequence have been killed. Such are truly and indisputably martyrs, but a consideration of the definition just given will show that they are not the only martyrs. St. Thomas asks "Whether faith alone is the cause of martyrdom," and answers that though the "cause of all martyrdom is the truth of faith," yet "all virtuous deeds inasmuch as they are referred to God . . . can be the cause of martyrdom."³ And in the answers to the objections he says expressly that "to suffer as a Christian is to suffer for doing any good work, or for avoiding any sin, because this comes under the head of witnessing to the faith,"⁴ and later he lays down a principle⁵ from which Billuart on the authority of Cajetan and Sylvius concludes that even those killed in a just war in defense of their country are true martyrs, provided they have defended their country for God's sake and out of love of justice and the divine law.⁶

The canonical notion of martyrdom does not differ essentially from that derived from Theology. It is a little more particularized

² Dom. Prummer. *Manuale Theologiae Moralae*. (4th and 5th ed., Fribourg, 1928) II, 484 et seq.

³ St. Thomas. *Summa Theologica*. IIa IIae, Q. 124, A. 5.

⁴ *ibid.* loc. cit. ad lum.

⁵ *ibid.* loc. cit. ad 3um.

⁶ Billuart, "De Fortitudine." Diss. I, A. 2.

and insists more on external manifestations of the motives of both the persecutor and the victim. The keynote of the canonical notion is that the penalty of death must be inflicted in hatred of the faith, "*in odium fidei.*" The great authoritative work on all questions relating to the processes of canonization is that of Benedict XIV, *De Servorum Dei Beatificatione et Beatorum Canonizatione* from which principles pertinent to this case can be selected.⁷

First of all, the persecutor must inflict directly the pain of death or the mortal wound, or condemn to prison, exile, or tortures resulting in death. He must be motivated by hatred of the faith. Now this phrase is not to be taken in too narrow a sense. For one thing, the persecutor may be an infidel or even a Catholic who acts through hatred of a virtue connected with the faith or *hatred of ecclesiastical discipline.* We have examples of such martyrdom in the cases of Saint Stanislaus, a martyr to the seal of confession, and Saint Thomas of Canterbury, who was martyred because of his uncompromising defense of ecclesiastical discipline and the privileges of the clergy. His case, it should be noted, is substantially similar to the one under consideration, though of course there are accidental differences between the two victims and the two persecutors.

This hatred of the faith need not be the avowed motive behind the martyrdom. Any pretext may be used as long as the final cause is hatred of the faith, "for the whole act receives its true species from its final cause."⁸ It does not seem that the "final cause" here mentioned need be the absolutely final cause, or that it need be altogether unmixed. For instance this hatred of the faith may itself be caused by the conviction that the faith, or some part of it, is pernicious to the State. This was the case in most of the Roman persecutions; it was the case with the Elizabethan martyrs; and it was partially the case with the martyrs of the French Revolution. Again, as in the present instance, the Cause of the Church may be so intertwined with some external Cause that the hatred of the one includes, in practice, the hatred of the other. The hatred of Christianity in the Orient is an example in point. To the Oriental, Christianization and Westernization are so bound together that enmity towards the latter means enmity towards the former.

Another canonical point remains to be examined: How can it be proved that the persecutor acted in hatred of the faith? Hedde,

⁷ N. R. Hedde "Martyre—Notion Canonique après Benoit XIV" *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*, Fascicule LXXX, (Paris, 1927) p. 223 ff.

⁸ *ibid.* p. 226.

quoting Benedict XIV, gives four ways, three of which are applicable to the case of Louis XVI and his enemies, viz: a) by the sentence of the persecutor in which it may be explicitly stated; b) by the discussion between the persecutor and the martyr; . . . e) it may appear *concludenter*, that is to say, by way of conclusion and as a result of the circumstances, acts and proceedings⁹ both of the judges and of the condemned.

Having seen the theological and canonical requirements for obtaining the judgment of martyrdom, the history of Louis XVI can be briefly outlined in their light.

Louis XVI, third son of the Dauphin Louis and Marie-Josefa de Saxe, and grandson of Louis XV, was born at Versailles, August 23, 1754. The immediate family into which he was born seemed particularly marked for temporal sorrows and eternal blessings. His eldest sister and two elder brothers died in infancy; his father, the noble and virtuous Dauphin, true "Son of Saint Louis" and imitator of the virtues of his grandfather the pious Duc de Bourgogne, died when the young prince was but eleven years old; his mother, the wise and excellent Saxon Princess, lived less than two years longer. Of his brothers, the elder, Provence (Louis XVIII), was to his contemporaries what he has remained to historians—an enigma. The younger, Artois (Charles X), after a gay and dissolute youth, became a deeply religious prince, and his loyalty to the Church and Clergy cost him his Crown in 1830 as it had earlier cost Louis his head; but his warm and generous heart survived two exiles and a throne and his last years were spent in voluntary penance for the excesses of his youth. As to the daughters of this family—no praise seems too extravagant for them. The first, Clotilde, Queen of Sardinia, has already been accorded the title of "Venerable" by the Church. The other, Elisabeth, called even by the *sansculottes* "Saint Genevieve of the Tuileries" is known to history as the "Saint of the Revolution," a title which Pope Pius VII himself applied to her in 1804 at Paris.¹⁰

This background is significant, and should be borne in mind, when forming an estimate of the moral and religious character of the future Louis XVI. Thus orphaned at an early age and brought up at the corrupt court of his grandfather, the new Dauphin remembered and followed well the early teaching of his excellent parents and

⁹ *ibid* p. 227.

¹⁰ Hon. Mrs. Maxwell-Scott, *Madame Elisabeth de France* (London, 1908) p. 126, footnote.

preserved intact a rugged honesty, unimpeachable purity and sincere piety and devotion to religion.

Two months prior to the death of his mother, the Duc de la Vauguyon, governor of the princes, wrote to Father Berthier, "There is nothing good that cannot be said of *Monseigneur le Dauphin*."¹¹ The same thing could be said of him when in 1774, at the age of nineteen, he ascended the Throne of Saint Louis, already undermined by the scandals and corruption of his grandfather's reign. The new king was not without defects, some natural and some acquired. Rough, awkward, and shy, he lacked confidence in himself and in his own judgment. Although slow to decide his judgment was usually sound and accurate. His lack of energy and repugnance to strong measures are well and widely known, and in later, darker days proved fatal enough, though at his accession they did not loom dangerous. In fact many of these defects seem to have been engrafted on his natural character, in itself full of promise, and a contemporary goes to great lengths to show that old de Maurepas was the responsible party.¹² Bertrand states that there was not in Louis "any of those passions so common to his years, but the seeds of all the precious qualities with which Providence endows the minds of those princes who do honor to the throne and are destined for the happiness of the people."¹³ All admit his moral purity and sincere piety and devotion to the Faith. His purity won for him the approbation and admiration of his subjects,—rejoicing at the relief from the scandals of the preceding reign. His piety was never understood by the majority, and in the end cost him his life. But as yet all that was in the distant future; at the time he ascended the throne, all was peaceful, full of hope and promise. These hopes and promises were not to go unfulfilled. Louis XVI was by no means undeserving of the title voted him by the National Assembly in the early days of the Revolution—"Restorer of French Liberty"—and he began to earn it soon after his accession. His reign may be summed up in the words of de Sèze found in his "*Defense*" at the trial of the King: "Louis mounted the throne at the age of twenty. . . . He always showed himself the constant friend of the people. The people wished for the destruction of a cruel tax which weighed them down, and he destroyed it. The people wished

¹¹ Celestin Cloquet, *Il Re Martire ossia Luigi XVI, re di Francia*. (Genoa, 1874) p. 1.

¹² A. F. Bertrand de Moleville, *Private Memoirs of the Last Year of the Reign of Louis XVI*. (Boston, 1909) Vol. I p. 100.

¹³ *ibid.* p. 101.

for the abolition of slavery [serfdom], he began by abolishing it on his estates. . . . The people wished for liberty, he gave it them."¹⁴

The American War brought the last glories to the Old France; Yorktown, where the Stars and Stripes intertwined with the *Fleur-de-lys*, was the last triumph. American Independence had been established with the indispensable aid of the French Monarchy, but that Monarchy, and Louis XVI personally, had, like the pelican, given their life-blood to establish it. We were born, but they died giving us life. The enormous national debt, so magnified by the cost of this war, brought on the crisis which necessitated the convocation of the States-General and the precipitation of the Revolution.

There is no need of touching upon those momentous days of the opening of the States-General and its self-transformation into the National Assembly, but there is need of remarking the King's attitude towards the innovations and reforms at this time. After the first skirmishes regarding the question of three chambers or one had died away and the violence attending the fall of the Bastille had calmed, all who remained in the kingdom honestly coalesced to bring about order, reform, and peace. Louis heartily supported the generous sacrifices of August 4th; he was genuinely solicitous for the welfare, liberty and happiness of his people, but as summer gave way to autumn he began to see how difficult was to be the task of placating the Assembly and at the same time preserving his own just and necessary authority. The attack on Versailles and his forced removal to Paris showed him quite convincingly what might be expected. Even yet, however, he did not despair; he was not entirely set against the Revolution. It was the first attacks on religion and the Church that definitely set him in unalterable opposition to it all. This is a fact conceded by almost all historians of the present day¹⁵ whether they be favorable or unfavorable to the King.

I do not intend to demonstrate that the Royal Cause was itself so just and righteous, the defence of it an act so virtuous, that death for it alone was sufficient to constitute martyrdom. However it is a demonstrable proposition, but it will suffice to point out briefly that the cause of the Throne and that of the Altar were so united that the defence of one was the defence of the other, and an attack on one an attack on the other. It is an indisputable fact that the Revolution

¹⁴ M. & Mme. Guizot, *The History of France*. (Boston 1869). vol. VI, pp 151-152.

¹⁵ L. R. Gottschalk, *Fall of Louis XVI*. (Girard, Kansas. 1924) p. 41.
J. S. Penman, *Lafayette and Three Revolutions*. (Boston, 1929) p. 147.
Bede Jarrett, O.P., *A History of Europe*. (London, 1929) p. 399.

attacked both, and two authorities, as far removed from one another as pole is from pole, contend that the primary intention of those who prepared and generated the Revolution was to attack the Church rather than to attack the Monarchy. These two authorities are Pope Pius VI, in his allocution on the death of Louis XVI delivered to the Sacred College on June 17, 1793¹⁶; and Charles Guignebert, a modern Robespierist historian and Professor in the University of Paris, in his work¹⁷ published this year.

Two proverbs throw a true light on the religious side of the Revolution: "A stream does not rise above its source," and "By their fruits you shall know them." The source of the Revolution was the Godless philosophy of Voltaire and the Encyclopaedists, the irreligious political theories of Rousseau, atheistic and violently anti-Catholic to the core. The fruits of the Revolution were the broken shrines, the desecrated altars, the martyred priests, the uprooted Faith and the "goddess of Reason" on the altar of Notre Dame. The participants were the eighteenth century Bolshevists, as the Russian tyrants of today are the twentieth century Jacobins. Their task was easy, for Religion was dead. Only a small group of Catholics—of whom the King was one—kept alive any idea of loyalty to Rome. To the rest Roman unity was merely a support of the throne, a convention of the old regime, and, as in Pagan Rome, anyone who clung to it in defiance of the national will was a traitor.¹⁸

On July 12, 1790, the Assembly, engineered by Masons and atheists, pushed through the "Civil Constitution of the Clergy." After much negotiation, and on the advice of the two Bishops to whom he had been referred by the Pope, Louis reluctantly signed it, December 27, 1790. Four months later it was condemned by the Pope. Loyal priests refused to take the oath of allegiance to the Civil Constitution, and the persecution began. Religious Orders had already been suppressed, clerical dress was now forbidden, and priests refusing the Oath were made liable to imprisonment (November, 1791) and to perpetual banishment (May, 1792). Louis XVI vetoed both decrees. It was the last veto that brought about his fall. The veto of the camp outside Paris was entirely secondary, as the *Memoirs of Dumouriez* conclusively prove. The *pièce de resistance* on both sides was the decree against the clergy. Dumouriez at his last interview with Louis vehemently urged him to sanction the decree,

¹⁶ Celestin Cloquet, *op. cit.* pp. 45 ff.

¹⁷ Charles Guignebert, *History of the French People*. (New York, 1930) vol. II. p. 235.

¹⁸ v. Hilaire Belloc, *Marie Antoinette* (2nd ed. New York, 1924) pp. 344-345.

warning him that terrible consequences would follow his veto. The king replied: "I expect death and I pardon my murderers beforehand."¹⁹

His Most Christian Majesty vetoed the decree on June 19, 1792. On June 20, a mob attacked his palace, threatening him with death if he refused to sanction. With admirable fortitude he faced the insurgents, and, though he put on the red cap, resolutely refused to sanction.

They left, telling him they would come again. They came, on the 10th of August, and this time were successful. The treason of most of the National Guard opened the way to the palace; in the ranks of the guard that very morning the cry, "Down with the Veto," was heard. The heroic resistance of the Swiss and loyal knights was in vain, and the king and his family were forced as prisoners into the arms of the assembly. It was the end—the last trail to the scaffold had begun.

There is no need to linger on the months in the Temple. Suffice it to say that these days only served to perfect the character and virtue of the Confessor of the faith. He had entered a weak and bewildered Prince; he left a strong, heroic Christian.

It was December before they acquired courage enough to try him. The trial was a farce. Three charges interest us: he was accused of vetoing the decrees against the clergy; of writing a letter to the Bishop of Clermont, stating his intention of re-establishing Catholicity on his return to power; and of opposing the robbery of Avignon and Venaissin from the Pope. He made no attempt to deny these specifications. He was prejudged. Fear of the cut-throat enemies of all order, employed by the Jacobins, Masons and their ilk, wrung from an unwilling convention, representative of a still more unwilling nation, the sentence of death.

He refused all attempts at rescue which would endanger anyone else, wrote that glorious will of his, and gave his son heroic and most Christian counsel. Armed with the grace of the Sacraments he went to his death on a martyr's feast, January 21, 1793, with the calm fortitude and heroic charity of a Christian martyr.

Six months later in the allocution above referred to, Pius VI states, "There is not lacking one condition for acknowledging him a true martyr," and he draws the clear parallel between Louis and Mary Stuart, who was called a martyr by Benedict XIV. In 1873, a Primary Commission adopted unanimously the resolution of Abbé

¹⁹ Bertrand de Moleville. *Op. cit.* "Editor's Introduction," p. 58.

Cloquet, concluding that it was possible and opportune to petition the Holy See to introduce his Cause as a martyr. At that time it looked as though Henry V would soon bring back the White Flag and Bourbon lilies to the throne of France. The cause languished with the delay of the Restoration.

Now this new effort too seems to have languished, though why it was allowed to do so is not clear. In at least two ways Louis can be proved to have been killed out of hatred for the Faith and as a defender of the Church. The time is opportune. Russia today is similar to the France that killed its king. The moral effect on that frontier of the canonization of Louis would be incalculable. We Americans might do much for the cause of Louis XVI. We owe Louis much more than we can repay. We should do all in our power to forward the movement for his beatification and canonization. American Catholic Societies should take it in hand to work and pray that they may soon hail the martyr Louis as Louis the Martyr.