

Two Hundred Years Ago

Pierre René Rogue

(Simple statement of witness by a Compatriot)

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On March 3rd 1796, at three o'clock in the afternoon, Pierre René Rogue, Priest of the Congregation of the Mission, gave the ultimate witness to the One, whom he had desired to follow right to the end. This took place at Vannes in Brittany in the marketplace, right beside the Rue de la Monnaie, where he had been born on June 11th 1758. He was aged 38.

Formerly a Diocesan Priest of the Diocese of Vannes, he had been accepted into the Congregation of the Mission on 25th October 1786; from then on, throughout the brief period of his ministry, he was to give himself with great generosity to the formation of Priests in his native town in the Seminary, while also providing a faithful Pastoral service in the Parish of Le Mené, attached to the seminary; which was a situation according to the wish of St. Vincent in regard to those of his missionaries called to the Formation of the Clergy.

Pierre René had taken on these offices in the midst of the troubled conditions of the French Revolution, and especially in the context of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, which the Revolutionary power was about to impose on the French Church. In entitling his biography of the Blessed Martyr "*a martyr to loyalty*", Fr. John Gonthier had the right idea. If fidelity is a Breton virtue, it is without doubt there also that we find the source of the Witness bequeathed to us by this Vincentian from Vannes, who, even today, still remains very near to us.

Reading the various biographies, one might be tempted to consider him a "*very ordinary Vincentian*". He was that "*little Priest*" _ as his compatriots called him with affection _ who quite simply wanted to live in the footsteps of St. Vincent, following the example of his Professors, now become his confreres whom he had known while in the Seminary at Vannes. As regards fidelity however, he had already begun his apprenticeship to that virtue, under the aegis of that lady of strong character, his mother, Mme. Rogue. He was an only son, and having lost his father at an early age, he was to find in her a real instructress. With great generosity she was to work at her son's religious vocation, without any thought of benefit to herself. Right to the end, she would support him in every trial, a woman who would indeed suffer as a result, but would do nothing to hinder her son's apostolic intent.

We can see the character of Pierre René being moulded decisively throughout his time of formation, and especially in the course of the events, which were to lead the non-jurors – that is those Priests who would not accept the Civil Constitution – to take the path of exile. Amongst these, were to be numbered his Vincentian colleagues. It is in this connection that *his loyalty to the Church* showed itself most clearly. In that Diocese of Vannes this ecclesial loyalty is like the air they breathe. Many were the Priests who would choose the road of exile or the Scaffold in order to uphold it in its entirety. As a Professor in the Seminary, as Theologian, he could see what was at stake under the apparently mild externals of the new Law. During Diocesan-Clergy reunions, he was to clarify and guide their thinking. He would point out to his colleagues, the subterfuges by which the Civil Law was casting doubt on the Laws of the Church, and even more so on its Constitution. *"The State has not the right to change the Constitution of the Church. If we accept this Law of 12th July, the French Church will find itself in the same situation as that of England; the Pope will no longer be our Head; it is the King who will rule the Church, and our Church will no longer be Catholic but National. So we must follow the Church, and never accept being separated from her."* The above statement was found in a report of one of the meetings of the Vannes Clergy. It was not a movement of blind fidelity, but a carefully reasoned position, which led the others to weigh-up what was at stake, and what were the dangers involved at that juncture. This Witness given by Pierre René has its own importance for us. As a member of the Team of Formation, he says, the Priest of the Mission owes it to himself to guide his brethren in the truth of the Faith. He is called to do so, however, with full intelligence and fortified by his personal contact with God, on the basis of his own enlightened experience of loyalty to the Church. The Witness of one's life speaks louder than words.

He allowed his confreres to go into exile, in fact even advised them to do so; as to himself, he was to remain in Vannes, in this way, living out while in hiding, his fidelity to his people and to the Clergy of his Diocese.

He proved himself a man of Faith, as can be seen after his arrest on the evening of Christmas 1795. He was neither dull-witted nor an airy dreamer, even though, while in prison, he poured out his deepest feelings in moving poetry. He retained his calmness, his good humour, having regard to his companions rather than for himself. He was to remain close to his confrere-Priests, his fellow-captives, comforting them and helping them to discern the Evangelical signs of their situation. From his prison cell, he continued to encourage those on the outside who were enduring the trauma of persecution. His faithfulness to those whom it was his mission to support in their troubles, and to train in virtue, was available to all, even those who took the oath of loyalty to the Civil Constitution and who had thus become schismatics. His spirituality was that of the present moment. He offered up his life in the exact conditions of the moment. A true son of St. Vincent, he did not seek to *"tread on the heels of Providence"*; that is the Vincentian spirituality of the Mission, to give oneself completely for others, in the place to which one was sent. It is there that he united himself with Christ's sacrifice. He was judged in that Chapel of *"The Women's Retreat"*, where he had

for four years preached, heard Confessions and celebrated the Eucharist of the Lord. It was in this same place that he celebrated his own "*Eucharist*", in which he also was to offer the gift of his own life, so that the Church of Christ might live.

So, therefore, though the undercover work of Pierre René in the service of the Christian Community, was shared by many other Priests, who were also to pay with their lives for that devotion, he can he said to have lived his life to the point of heroism in that generous and freely-given abandonment of himself to those committed to him. The action which best illustrates this, is his attitude to Le Muet, who had betrayed him. No trace of disdain or hatred can be detected in regard to him. He had been pardoned at the very moment of his betrayal. At the moment of execution, Pierre René was to hand over to him his own watch saying "*My son, I have nothing only this watch, here it is for you*". This gesture was highly significant. Pierre René was a Missioner right to the end; he shows by this gesture who it is, that he had the vocation of proclaiming to the "*least and to the poorest*". Le Muet was one of those. This was no spur-of-the-moment decision; he wanted it to be a gesture that would live on. He asked his mother to continue to help that man's family, as she had done long before the betrayal.

Pierre René, a martyr to faithfulness, proves now more than ever before, that Mission has no limits. Engagement in Mission is engagement in martyrdom, that is "*Witness by one's life*" in the fullest sense. A few years before him, two other Vincentians had given this same Witness to Christ, Louis Joseph François and John Henry Gruyer, in their case also, for having refused the oath of acceptance of the Civil Constitution. That was in 1792. After Pierre René, the Congregation was to experience the martyrdom of several other members, Francis Regis Clet (1820), John Gabriel Perboyre (1840), both in China; Ghebre Michael (1855) in Ethiopia. How many more sons of St. Vincent, known or unknown, have given their lives to announce the Good News? It was the same Missionary flame which animated them. It continues today as well, in many countries where the preaching of the Gospel entails risks. Is not every confrere expected to find addressed to him _ each in his particular sphere _ the Call of St. Vincent in his Repetition of Prayer, on 12th November 1656, "*May it please God, gentlemen and my dear brothers, that each one, who joins the Company comes there with the sentiment of martyrdom, with the desire of suffering martyrdom and consecrating himself totally to the service of God, either in far-off lands or this one, wherever it may please God to make use of this poor little Company*".

Pierre René was surely aware of this quotation. He took it literally as a "*simple Priest of the Mission*", willing to complete his mission to the full. He never doubted that it was the normal outcome of the decision he had made when entering St. Lazare on October 25th 1786, to achieve the object of the Congregation by "*clothing himself in the Spirit of Jesus Christ*".

(Andrew Spelman CM, translator)