

Father René Alméras, C.M.: Second Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission (1661-1672)

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Father René Alméras, C.M.

Presentation

I present a brief article about Father René Alméras, C.M.¹. He was the second superior general of the Congregation of the Mission and the immediate successor of Saint Vincent de Paul. He was elected on January 17th, 1661 and continued in that office until his death on September 22nd, 1672.

¹ LUIGI MEZZADRI - JOSÉ MARÍA ROMÁN, *Historia de la Congregación de la Misión* (1), *Desde la fundación hasta el fin del Siglo XVII (1625-1697)*, La Milagrosa, Madrid 1992, pp. 87-101.

1. Origins

René Alméras² was born in Paris on February 5th, 1613. He was one of six children of the second marriage of his father. His father, also named René, was secretary to King Henry IV of France and his wife Marie de Medici and later he became general controller of the mail. He had a position that in seventeenth century France was considered somewhat prestigious. He was originally opposed to his son entering the Congregation of the Mission but then, impressed by the life of Vincent's missionaries, he himself, at the age of eighty-one, entered the Congregation. He died at Saint Lazare on January 4th, 1658.

In 1637, at the age of twenty-four and after a significant experience as consultor in Public Administration, René Alméras entered the Congregation of the Mission. After his ordination he dedicated himself to ministry with great apostolic zeal which at times meant neglecting his health. He was given the task of visiting various houses of the Congregation and was superior in Rome from 1647-1651. Then he returned to France and was named superior of Saint Charles Seminary. Later he was entrusted with the distribution of alms to the poor in Picardy and Champagne. In the following years he was appointed Assistant General and Visitor of the province of Poitou.

Father Alméras was very out-spoken but also very open. He was candid in sharing his point of view and at times during meetings openly disagreed with Vincent³ but was always willing to respect the decisions that were made. He would maintain this characteristic throughout his life.

2. Election as superior general

At the time of Vincent de Paul's death there were two hundred fifty members of the Congregation of the Mission. For administrative purposes the Congregation was divided into six Provinces (France, Poitou, Champagne, Aquitaine, Savoy and Italy). These were not rigid divisions and the Visitors did not necessarily reside in their own

² For his biography: S.A., *La vie et les vertus de M. René Alméras. Deuxième Supérieur Général de la congrégation de la Mission et des Filles de la Charité*, Debécourt-Canuet, Paris 1839, 115 pp.

³ In the Assembly of 1651 he disagreed with Vincent on the matter of the vows: he was opposed to the members of the Congregation taking vows. But when Vincent's position prevailed, he submitted and then became a convinced defender of the vows. CCD, XIIIa: 374 ff.; SVP XIII: 333 ff.; ES X: 395 ff.

provinces and the confreres were generally moved from one province to another.

The need for a smooth transition of governance was foreseen and Vincent de Paul had named René Alméras vicar-general who was entrusted with the administration of the community until the election of Vincent's successor.

The principal duty of Alméras was the celebration of the General Assembly which took place in Saint Lazare, Paris and began on January 15th, 1661⁴. Nineteen Missionaries participated in the Assembly (three from each of the six provinces in addition to the secretary of the Assembly). They were called together to elect a superior general, a successor to Vincent de Paul.

During Vincent's retreat (October 2-10, 1659) he had written on a piece of paper the names of two confreres whom he considered most suited to succeed him as superior general. That paper was folded and sealed and lock in a small box which was then placed inside a larger box. Two keys were necessary to open the inner box and one key was given to Fr. Antoine and the other to the oldest confrere of the house. During the Assembly, on January 17th, the box was opened and the names of the two persons were revealed: René Alméras and Thomas Berthe. In the same document⁵ Vincent also noted that the members of the Assembly were not obliged to follow his suggestion. When the election was held Father Alméras was elected on the first ballot with eleven votes (two more than needed for the required majority).

3. Alméras as superior general

Alméras had poor health and this fact, together with being the immediate successor of the founder to govern the Congregation, could have led him to simply continue the policies that were already in place. His administration, however, was not simply a prolongation of that of Saint Vincent.

Jean Dehorgny, Thomas Berthe and Edmund Jolly were elected assistants and Dehorgny was also elected director of the Daughters of Charity. With the collaboration of these confreres, Father Alméras took some important steps for the Congregation.

First, he initiated the preparation of a biography of the founder of the Congregation of the Mission, Vincent de Paul. This work was

⁴ RAYMOND CHALEMEAU, *Les assemblées générales*, in *Vincentiana*, 18 (1984), p. 743.

⁵ The document is dated October 9, 1659, CCD, XIIIa: 484-485; SVP XIII: 410-412; ES X: 555-556.

entrusted to Luis Abelly, a personal friend of Vincent and was published in 1664, four years after Vincent's death⁶.

Then in 1666 Father Alméras published a document on preaching. The document indicated that Alméras viewed the sermon to be composed of three parts: a beginning, the body of the sermon and a conclusion. The body of the sermon contained the motives, the definition of the theme, and the means. He also published document on liturgical ceremonies and the norms of office and made a series of recommendations to the houses of the Congregation concerning the Act of Consecration to the Blessed Virgin Mary (to be made on the feast of the Assumption) and the Act of Fidelity to Jesus Christ (to be made on January 1st, New Years Day). He insisted on the cultivation of the spirit of poverty and gave detailed directives concerning the spending of money.

In 1668 Father Alméras convoked the second General Assembly which began on July 16th and concluded on September 1st. Twenty-two confreres participated and there were thirty sessions. Among the decisions and resolution of the Assembly, we highlight here those that concern the missions and seminaries (the two fundamental works of the Company). We also mention here a Memorandum on the means to preserve the primitive spirit of the Congregation. The Assembly also approved decrees concerning the superior general, the governance of the Company, rules for Visitors, local superiors, consultors, admonitors and procurators. The *Constituciones Selectae* concerning the superior general were submitted in 1670 to the Holy See and were approved by Pope Clement X⁷. The Constitutions of this Assembly would guide the life of the Congregation until 1954 when their content would be included in the Constitutions that were approved by Pius XII⁸.

4. Some difficult decision

Among the questions that Father Alméras had to confront during his tenure as superior-general, there were some that would have a great influence on the Congregation.

⁶ LOUIS ABELLY, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul*, New City Press, New York 1993.

⁷ CLEMENT X, *Ex injusto nobis* (June 2, 1670), *Acta Apostolicae*, pp. 33-39.

⁸ For more information about the historical development of the Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission, consult CARLO BRAGA, C.M., *The Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission: Historical Notes*, in *Vincentiana*, 4-5 (2000) pp. 289-307.

A difficult decision involved the cessation of sending missionaries to Madagascar. This was a work that Vincent held in high esteem. The Congregation had sent nine groups of missionaries to Madagascar and the majority of the confreres died during the ocean voyage. Those who survived did not have much success in their missionary efforts. Many years later, however, missionaries of the Congregation were able to return to Madagascar and today it is a province of the Congregation with about eighty members.

Another decision was to continue the work in seminaries. While Father Alméras was superior general seminaries were established in Metz (1661), Alet (1661), Amien (1662), Troyes (1662), Noyon (1662), Saint-Brieue (1666) and Narbona (1671)⁹. Even though the bishops asked the Congregation to minister in their seminaries Alméras did not accept all these requests and in fact rejected a number of their petitions because the conditions were not favorable.

A third question revolved around the acceptance of royal chaplaincies and parishes. The first situation arose when Anne of Austria, the queen-mother, petitioned the Congregation to accept the parish of Fontainebleau. Initially Alméras was determined to resist the pleas of Anne but eventually on November 27, 1661 the Congregation assumed responsibility for this royal parish. Then in 1672, Louis XIV, seeing the good work of the Congregation in Fontainebleau, petitioned Father Alméras through the Archbishop of Paris to assume ministry in the parish at Versailles. This was not finalized during the time of Alméras but the tendency to become involved in these works continued during the time of his successor, Father Edmund Jolly, and in later years this would have serious consequences for the Congregation.

Conclusion

Father René Alméras was a worthy successor of Saint Vincent. He found the Congregation in a time of growth and he left it in the same condition. During his eleven years of administration 210 priests and 120 brothers entered the Congregation. He encouraged the promotion of vocation and protected the Congregation from possible desertions.

He avoided adventures but he did not simply maintain the status quo. He never enjoyed good health and during the later years of his life his health became even worse, but he never lost his ability to judge clearly the situations that were placed before him.

⁹ *Annales de la Mission*, Tome LXII, Année 1897, Imprimerie D. Domoulin, Paris, pp. 155-158.

Upon the death of Father Alméras, on September 22, 1672, Father Edmund Jolly succeeded him as superior general. This would mark another important chapter in the history of our Congregation.

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