

Brother Mathieu Re(g)nard

A Missionary who Worked Wonders

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The man about whom we are going to talk inherited from his father a last name which included the “g”. When Mathieu was an adult many of his admirers, including the queen of France, eliminated the “g” from his last name and so he became known as Renard, which in his native language, French, means fox. This was not done to insult him but rather was seen as a tribute of their admiration. Moved by this same sentiment, another of his admirers, Vincent de Paul, spoke of him in one of his letters and said: *Brother Mathieu is working wonders*¹. Here Vincent used the word “brother” in the technical sense: a member of his Congregation who was not ordained.

Mathieu Regnard was born in 1592 into a respected and wealthy family who lived in Brienne-le-Chateau² in the arrondissement of Aube, not far from the city of Troyes. He was twelve years younger than Vincent. Nothing is known about him prior to his entrance into the Congregation of the Mission in 1631, when he was almost forty years old. Very little is known about his life in the Congregation (except for what will be said here) aside from the details that appear in the personnel book: he pronounced his vows in 1644³ and died in 1669, nine years after the death of the founder of the Congregation.

Everything that is known about him is based on writings that are no longer in existence, writings of Brother Mathieu which were done at the request of the authorities of the Congregation who were looking at the possible canonization of the Founder. In reality, the writings

¹ CCD, 1: 582.

² In CCD, IX: 70 note 4 the birthplace of Mathieu is also referred to as Brienne-Napoléon. This was the site of a military academy where during the final years of the eighteenth century the young Napoleon studied the art of war.

³ The practice of taking vows at the conclusion of the two years in the Internal Seminary became a practice as a result of the 1641 Decree of the Archbishop of Paris (CCD, XIIIb: 315-317). Thus Brother Mathieu took vows thirteen years after his entrance into the Congregation.

of Brother Mathieu do not speak about the virtues or the actions of the founder but rather narrate what he (Mathieu) was able to do. His writings describe what a member of the Congregation could be when motivated by the man who founded the Congregation.

Apart from the details of the official registers, the testimony with regard to Mathieu's life and his character appear in the 1639 letter of Vincent that was mentioned above. Vincent stated: *Brother Mathieu, who is working wonders in that regard by a very special grace Our Lord has given him [...]*⁴. Brother Mathieu has a special grace that comes from God and is revealed *in that regard*. In the context of the letter *in that regard* refers to a program directed by Vincent, a program of material and spiritual assistance for the people of Lorraine who were overwhelmed by the wars between France and the troops of the Empire.

The devastation of Lorraine continued for some seven years, until 1643, the year for which we have another testimony of Vincent and the last one that we find concerning Brother Mathieu. This last testimony describes in a concise way the quality of the soul of the one *who did marvels: A few days ago, Brother Mathieu wrote to me from Lorraine, and his tear-stained letter informed me of that province's misfortune [...] The sorrow in my heart is so immense that I cannot express it to you without weeping because of the extreme poverty of those people*⁵.

Little more is known about the quality of this man's soul, even though in this regard it would probably be very similar to that of the various priests of the Congregation of the Mission of Monsieur Vincent who also worked in Lorraine during the same years and for the same reasons as Brother Mathieu. Like him they were engaged in an activity, that though never letting aside the spiritual needs of the people, was mainly centered on helping people whose material situation had been shattered by the movements of the army.

In the letter cited before in which Vincent speaks of Brother Mathieu and praises him, Vincent also mentions the missionaries, in this case priests, who were sent to *Nancy, Verdum and Bar-le-Duc and are going to send others to Metz to assist corporally and spiritually the poor country people who have been given refuge in those cities*⁶.

The dedication of these priests in alleviating the needs of the people in this devastated area is made known to us through sources outside the Congregation. It is an account written by a Jesuit in whose house one of the missionaries had been lodged, a missionary who died of

⁴ CCD, I: 582.

⁵ CCD, IX: 70.

⁶ CCD, I: 582.

exhaustion at the age of twenty-eight. About six hundred poor people participated in his funeral, people who *really owed him this recognition. He had become ill healing their diseases and lightening the burdens of their poverty. [...] He would hear their confessions with such assiduity, both morning and afternoon.*⁷ The Jesuit priest concludes his account with an impressive phrase that he applied to all the missionaries whom he saw working in Bar-le-Duc: *Your men are flexible and docile about everything, except the advice they are given to take a little bit of rest. They believe that their bodies are not made of flesh, or that their life is supposed to last only a year*⁸.

Besides the dedication which was like that of his brother priests, Brother Mathieu was also gifted with a sagaciousness and cunning (not to say astuteness) that led his admirers to remove the “g” from his last name and name him Renard which is the way his name appears in the books that deal with the history of the Congregation of the Mission. But what distinguishes the ministerial action of Brother Mathieu is the fact that on more than one occasion he took risks that could have resulted in his death.

Abelly, the first biographer of Saint Vincent, who personally knew him and also Brother Mathieu, refers to his exploits in two places but does not mention his name. He refers to him as *the missionary who carried the money to Lorraine*⁹. He concludes the second reference by saying: *God gave him a cleverness, and favored him with special protection, either to avoid the robbers or to escape from them when he was taken. Even the queen delighted to hear of his adventures, and several times had him recount his experiences and the innocent stratagems he used in avoiding difficulties. For his part, he always attributed his good fortune to God’s protection of him, and because of the faith and the prayers of Monsieur Vincent*¹⁰.

Innocent stratagems? Certainly all of them were innocent in the moral sense, and innocent also if speaking from a strictly strategic point of view. Thus Mathieu and Abelly probably had reason when they attributed this incredible immunity that Mathieu seemed to enjoy to the prayers and faith of Saint Vincent. In some cases he was protected by tricks that appeared to be very obvious. But on other occasions it could be said that he was protected by his surprising ingenuity which led his admirers to remove the “g” from his last name.

⁷ CCD, II: 29-30.

⁸ CCD, II: 30.

⁹ LOUIS ABELLY, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God, Vincent de Paul*, New City Press, New York 1993, Vol. II, p. 330.

¹⁰ ABELLY, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 331.

The biography written by Abelly is dated 1664, just four years after the death of Saint Vincent. No other major biography was published until 1748, eighty-four years later. This new biography was written by Pierre Collet, a theologian and a member of the Congregation of the Mission (Abelly was a member of the diocesan clergy). In Collet's account Renard's name is mentioned but in a footnote and only to say that he was *the one who carried the money* to Lorraine. Saint Vincent collected more than two million libras in Paris and then forwarded this money to Lorraine. But later, when Collet narrates the events that we are going to examine, he does not mention him by name and only says that their protagonist was *a brother of the mission*. It would seem that in Collet's account, different in this point from that of Abelly, he did not consider Brother Mathieu a *missionary* because he was not a priest but a brother. Later the reader will see why this question is raised.

Whatever the case may be Collet says that brother Mathieu made fifty-four trips from Paris to Lorraine, carrying great sums of money that on one occasion amounted to more than fifty thousand libras. These trips occurred between 1639-1649 and it appears that the written accounts of Mathieu are limited to a description of the eighteen "more dangerous" trips.

Another century would pass before Michel Ulysse Maynard, a canon from Poitiers, would publish the third great biography of Vincent de Paul in 1860. In his work he does justice to Mathieu Renard, referring to him by name, using the altered form of his last name, and in four pages narrates in detail some of his exploits. He states that all this was *an odyssey of a new type in which neither marvelous deeds nor adventure was lacking [...] an odyssey in which there is constant divine intervention to free the humble hero from danger*. In this case the *divine intervention* is Vincent himself since brother Mathieu attributes his safe deliverance from peril to the prayers and merits of the saint.

We admit that the pen seems to have slipped from our good canon or perhaps his hand slipped. Without a doubt his Christian name Ulysse suggested to him a classic model that was well-known, a model to which he compares his humble hero. The comparison, however, is not precise but can be understood since Collet was a writer during the Romantic Age, well-formed as a canon and knowledgeable in classic mythology. It must be admitted that the comparison of Vincent's action with some pagan divinity is not what one would reasonably expect from a canon.

Maynard is the first author who gives an account that appears to complete the writing of Mathieu or at least the more interesting and more important aspects of his writing. None of the biographies that have been written since the time of Maynard provide any additional information regarding the transfer of money from Paris to Lorraine.

Coste, in his biography, refers to another type of transfer in the opposite direction, from Lorraine to Paris. Vincent speaks about this activity in the letter mentioned at the beginning of this paper and informs Louis Lebreton that *he [Brother Mathieu] brought in a hundred [people] last month [September, 1639], among whom were forty-six young women, some from good families, and others. He fed them and accompanied them right into this city where the greater number have already been placed*¹¹. Coste adds other details, particularly the action of Brother Mathieu that enabled *one hundred and sixty young girls escape the dangers that awaited them*¹².

Thus Mathieu Renard never lost time and never traveled empty-handed, neither going to nor returning from Lorraine. How he was able to make these trips without losing a single libra and without any young woman being sexually assaulted (this is known with certainty as an historical fact) is due to his fearlessness and imaginative ability, to his astuteness, if you will, or if that word sounds too harsh when applied to a saint, then we can say it was due to his imagination, his ability to invent openings in seemingly impossible and extremely difficult situations. What escapes the notice of history is the truth that is found in the conviction of the protagonist, namely, that his actions were possible because he was protected by the prayers and merits of Vincent de Paul.

Historically it can be stated that Mathieu was motivated by the spirit of Vincent de Paul. In other words, his person and actions were powerfully influenced by the person and actions of the founder of the Congregation. The opposite is also true since Vincent saw in Mathieu a living example of how one ought to be and act as a member of the missionary Congregation that he founded five years prior to Mathieu's entrance into it. Mathieu did not enter the Congregation to be a priest, but to be a missionary among poor and impoverished people. In this regard there was no difference between him and his brother priests. His brother clerics added priesthood to their missionary identity, ministerial functions that Mathieu could not exercise. But these priests had to know that even though they were priests they had joined the Congregation to be missionaries of the poor and not primarily to exercise their priestly ministry among whatever class of people. Therefore the priests had to be very careful and not allow the reality of their priesthood to prevent them from caring for the poor in material

¹¹ CCD, I: 582.

¹² PIERRE COSTE, *The Life and Works of Saint Vincent de Paul*, translated by Joseph Leonard, C.M., The Newman Press, Westminster (Maryland) 1952, Vol. II, p. 393.

needs. This should be the fundamental character that should inspire every other dimension of their priesthood.

A few years after the campaign in Lorraine was completed, the missionaries began a similar campaign that involved two hundred villages in the area of Champagne-Picardy. There was a time when the original number of eighteen priests and brothers was reduced to three, and the three were brothers and among them was Brother Mathieu. We have testimony about the activity of these three men from a woman in Paris, a Lady of Charity, who stated: *If the Brothers of the Mission are so successful in doing the good we have just heard, what will the priests not do!*¹³.

This woman seemed to understand how the vocation of the priests of the Mission should be lived. The fact that it was possible to live this style of missionary-priest is proven by the lives of the priests who worked in Lorraine during the same time that Mathieu was there; they were all missionaries and Mathieu was a missionary-brother.

Here we are not going to speak about the many exploits of brother Mathieu since these can be found in the better known biographies of Saint Vincent. We do highlight, however, some events that seem almost incredible and yet at the same time are most significant. The truthfulness of these events is based on the moral character of him who lived through and wrote about these events. Brother Mathieu is certainly credible even when he writes about himself and his actions.

One day Mathieu was carrying 34,000 libras in his saddle bags when he came upon an individual mounted on horse with a pistol in his hand. He made Mathieu walk to an out of the way place where he could then easily rob him. At first Mathieu thought there was no way to escape this situation. But then it occurred to him to play the role of the fool. He began to look askance at the thief, hoping for some distraction. Suddenly the would-be-robber turned his head and Mathieu took advantage of this opportunity to hurl his saddle bags into the nearby grass. After a short distance Mathieu turned his back and began to bow down and reverence the thief, dragging his feet and doubled over. The rider began to think that his victim was out of his mind. In fact, however, Mathieu was marking the recently ploughed field so that he would be able to find his saddle bags. The rider continued to push Mathieu toward the edge of a cliff but when he searched Mathieu the only item he found was a knife Mathieu remained unharmed because he was thought to be insane and the rider simply moved on. Mathieu was then able to recuperate the money that he had hidden in the grass.

¹³ CCD, XI: 307.

Mathieu made many trips over the course of the years and he was known throughout the region and awaited by soldiers and scoundrels, not however, to escort him. On one occasion it became known that he was in the Castle of Nomeny and carrying a large sum of money. A group of mercenaries, aware of this fact, took up position on all the roads that led to the castle and waited for him. Mathieu asked that a sally port be opened and he left before dawn and escaped on a secret path that was little used.

There were many such episodes and these became so well known that he was admired by even those people who wanted to rob him. There was one thief who admired Mathieu because he put his life in jeopardy in order to save the lives of hundreds of poor people and as a result he would not allow Mathieu to be robbed. On one occasion, this captain, with his band of men, was hiding in the forest near Saint-Mihiel, when he was informed that Renard was near-by. When he saw that his men were preparing to leave and rob Mathieu he took out his pistol and spoke in a tone of voice that left little doubt: *I will split open the head of anyone who harms a man who does nothing but good.*

With these words of a thief: *a man who does nothing but good* for poor people and the words of a saint: *Brother Mathieu is working wonders*, do we not have a faithful characterization of the life-style of a missionary as envisioned by Saint Vincent? Do not these words reflect the type of man, the type of Christian, that Vincent de Paul wanted to inspire when he founded the Congregation of the Mission?

Conclusion

The historical figure of Mathieu Renard that is presented to us does not correspond in any way to the official definition that Vincent de Paul himself left us concerning the role of the brother in his Congregation. Notice that here we refer to the official definition, not to the high esteem that Vincent expressed on more than one occasion concerning the non-ordained members of his Congregation. Indeed, on one occasion he said that the brothers imitate Christ in what he did during thirty years of his life while the priests imitate Christ in what he did during only the last three years of his life¹⁴.

The official definition states: *The lay members help in these ministries like Martha in whatever way the superior wants them to. This help includes prayers and tears, mortification, and good example*¹⁵.

¹⁴ CCD, XI: 99-100.

¹⁵ *Common Rules*, I: 2.

In the history of the Church there has always been a common understanding about the difference between Martha and Mary. Martha prepared the meals and cared for the house. Without a doubt Brother Renard accommodated himself to this role and it can be supposed that he did so with complete docility when he resided in Saint-Lazare and was not traveling to Lorraine. The image of traveling with large sums of money does not coincide with the image of Martha; we will be honest: it breaks the Martha image into thousands of pieces.

Yet the same man who wrote the Common Rules sent Renard and later Parre and other brothers to risk their lives in order to assist people impoverished by the wars. And these were not the only brothers who do not appear to fit the official description. Vincent had brothers as personal secretaries, Ducournau and Robineau, and their activity in no way coincides with said role of Martha.

In later times during the history of the Congregation, little was known for many years, in fact for two centuries, about the true history of the brothers, but everyone knew what was stated in the Common Rules. Thus, with few exceptions, the model of the brother that came to predominance in all the provinces was that of the brother modeled on the person of Martha, the diligent woman. The truth is this is not a bad model and it has produced not only many anonymous saints but also in many cases the regular well-being of the community depended on the brothers who cared for it. The fault resides in making this model of the brother the only model. The founder himself knew and promoted other models.

Another important aspect that arises in the life of Renard refers to the activity of the priests of the Congregation. In the Common Rules I, 2 the proper ministries of the ecclesiastics of the Congregation are listed. These are normal activities and it could be said that they are the activities of any priest in the Catholic Church, with the exception of establishing the Confraternity of Charity wherever missions are given.

But some of the activities of the priests in Lorraine and later in Champagne-Picardy, as some of the activities of the priests in Paris, had nothing to do with the establishment of the Confraternity of Charity and were not mentioned among the ministries listed in the Common Rules. In this case the same occurred to the priests as occurred to the brothers. The Rules were known but the history was not and in the Congregation a type of priest came into predominance that in its pastoral activity was basically a duplicate of a "normal" priest in liturgical, sacramental, devotional and bureaucratic parishes.

Note: we said came to predominate. There was never lacking in the entire history of the Congregation of the Mission (and in some cases

predominated, especially in mission countries) the type of missionary that was similar to the missionaries in Lorraine, Picardy and Paris, missionaries dedicated to serving people not only in their spiritual needs but also in the material or physical needs. And yes, like the missionaries at Lorraine, some of them also died of physical exhaustion.

The definitive text of the Common Rules was distributed to the members of the Congregation of the Mission on May 17, 1658, two years before the death of their author. Vincent began to comment on the Rules in weekly conferences. Even though there was not sufficient time for commentary on all the rules, we have only to read the conferences that we have in order to understand the richness of Vincent de Paul's spiritual vision for the Congregation. What is not found in the Rules is found in his oral teachings, in his letters, and in his own activity as well as the activity of his confreres. Indeed, among these confreres, and no less an example, we see the activity of one who was baptized Mathieu Regnard and died as Brother Mathieu Renard.

On December 6, 1658, a few months after the distribution of the Rules, Vincent gave a conference in which it could be said that the Founder corrects what he had written in the Rules. He adds a fundamental aspect that does not appear in the Rules. This text, often cited and well-known today, could be viewed as the final definition, a type of testimony concerning what a missionary of the Congregation, priest or brother, ought to be. We conclude with this text as a summary of all that we have desired to say in this study concerning the amazing example of brother Mathieu:

So then, if there are any among us who think they are in the Mission to evangelize poor people but not to alleviate their sufferings, to take care of their spiritual needs but not their temporal ones, I reply that we have to help them and have them assisted in every way, by us and by others¹⁶.

¹⁶ CCD, XII: 77.