

The Charitable Missionary in Action: M. Étienne Blatiron (1614-1657)¹

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M. Étienne Blatiron

From an individual's writings we are able to discover something about who they are as a person. From the letters of Monsieur Étienne Blatiron we are able to see that he had a strong personality and was

¹ Étienne Blatiron, a priest of the Mission, was born in Saint-Julien-Chapteuil (Haute-Loire) on January 6, 1614 and was received into the Congregation of the Mission on January 6, 1638. He was ordained a priest in 1639 and ministered in Alet (1639, 1641), Saintes (1641), in Richelieu, Rome (1644-1645) and in Genoa (1645-1647). At the request of Cardinal Durazzo the missionaries began to minister in that city. There, as superior of the new house, he was responsible for organizing everything. Vincent considered him one of the most competent of his Missionaries and a *great servant of God* (LOUIS ABELLY, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God, Vincent de Paul*, New City Press, New Rochelle NY 1993, Volume III, p. 54). Étienne Blatiron died in Genoa, July 24, 1657, a victim of his dedication to the plague-stricken. His biography was published in Volume II of *Notices sur les prêtres, clercs et frères défunts de la Congrégation de la Mission*, pp. 151-203.

enflamed with an apostolic zeal. During the final years of his seminary formation he was profoundly impressed by the missionary spirit of Vincent de Paul... that spirit which, in a conference to the Missionaries, he affirmed as the most perfect way of extending the kingdom of the God among people and thus making people aware of God's offer of salvation, all of which implies a zeal that is the flame of God's love². In the letters that Vincent wrote to Monsieur Blatiron we have a confirmation of the fact that this desire to build up the kingdom of God and this passion for the salvation of people were very much a part of Étienne's personality.

In one of the first letters that Vincent wrote to Monsieur Blatiron, he warned him, in a friendly manner, to *always remember that in the spiritual life little account is taken of the beginnings. People attach importance to the progress and the end*³ and the following year he wrote to him about moderating his zeal. At that time Monsieur Blatiron was twenty-seven years old, had been ordained about a year and was preaching a mission in Alet:

*In the name of God, Monsieur, take care of your poor life. Be content with consuming it little by little for Divine Love. It is not your own; it belongs to the Author of life, for love of whom you must preserve it until He asks it of you, unless an opportunity arises to offer it*⁴.

These exhortations to moderation appear as a constant theme in Vincent's letters. On another occasion he wrote:

*I do not know if it is necessary for me to urge you to take a rest, since you know that the greatest satisfaction you could wish for me in this world is your good health. So, take care of it for the love of Our Lord, and, while others are pushing you to do too much, allow me to invite you not to work so hard. Speak up courageously in my name and, without complaining, say that it is too much*⁵.

With those words Vincent highlighted the active character of Monsieur Blatiron as well as his availability for any mission despite his weak and fragile health⁶. In reality his whole life was a continual

² *Zeal to spread the kingdom of God and zeal to procure the salvation of our neighbor. Is there anything in the world more perfect? If love of God is a fire, zeal is its flame; if love is a sun, zeal is its ray. Zeal is unconditional in the love of God* [CCD XII, 250; SVP.ES XI, 590; SVP XII, 307-308].

³ CCD II, 146; SVP.ES II, 107; SVP II, 129.

⁴ CCD II, 211; SVP.ES II, 157; SVP II, 185.

⁵ CCD III, 198; SVP.ES III, 175; SVP III, 195.

⁶ CCD III, 257-258; SVP.ES III, 234; SVP III, 256.

offering of himself for the building up of the kingdom of God and this offering reached its culmination when he served his sisters and brothers in 1657 during the time when the plague had afflicted the population of Genoa.

The establishment of the house in Genoa

While preaching popular missions in Alet (1644), Monsieur Blatiron was appointed by Vincent as a consultor to the superior in Rome, Monsieur Dehorgny. Soon after that, in 1645 at the request of Cardinal Durazzo⁷ he was named the first superior of the new House in Genoa. The Cardinal had been impressed by the zeal of Monsieur Codoing whom he met in 1645. At that time Monsieur Codoing was traveling from Rome to Paris and had stopped in Genoa where he offered to preach Missions in the Diocese. This created in the cardinal a desire to have the members of this new Congregation present in his city⁸. He petitioned Vincent who took advantage of this offer and sent four priests and one brother to Genoa. This group of Missionaries was

⁷ Cardinal Étienne Durazzo was a member of one of the new noble families of Genoa: the family of Marquis Durazzo who gave Genoa nine dukes (supreme magistrates). He was the son of the Duke of the Republic of Genoa, Pietro Durazzo (1560-1631) and the brother of Duke Cesare Durazzo (1593-1680). He was created a cardinal in 1633 and ministered as the Archbishop of Genoa from 1635-1644. He governed the diocese with much energy and on two occasions opposed the civil authorities. The first of these occasions occurred when the Duke wanted to affirm that his power came from God and therefore he had power over the Church. The conflict became more intense when the Duke wanted to control the hospitals and the confraternities which represented a very powerful network of associations and which had considerable economic and social influence. These confraternities felt as though they depended solely on the civil authorities and rejected the interventions (which were attempts at new reforms) of the archbishop. The second situation arose when the civil authorities wanted to control the seminary. The archbishop would not cede his authority and in fact the reform of the clergy was the primary objective of his episcopacy. In the Synod of 1643, his decisions were criticized by those members of the clergy who were opposed to any reform. In 1648, the Senate of the Republic pressured the Archbishop even more when they appealed to Rome and requested his removal. During the time of the plague the Archbishop labored heroically and he was referred to as the *Borromeo of Genoa*. After 1656 he lived in Rome (1659-1661). When he returned to Genoa the situation was still critical. Then as a result of serious illness he resigned as archbishop and retired in Rome. He helped the religious in Rome and was also kind and devoted to Vincent de Paul and his Missionaries. He died in Rome on July 22, 1667.

⁸ CCD II, 595; SVP.ES II, 463-464; SVP II, 544.

headed by Monsieur Blatiron. Thus the new establishment was begun. In March of the following year, Monsieur Martin, who had been ministering in Rome, joined this group. This new group of Missionaries immediately began to minister and dedicated themselves to the characteristic works of the Congregation: preaching in the rural areas and retreats for the clergy. The pastoral zeal of the bishop allowed them no rest and this reached a point where Vincent, with great respect toward the cardinal, recommended moderation and rest from their ministry. He wanted the Missionaries to avoid becoming overly tired and so he wrote the confreres:

I can appreciate the Cardinal Archbishop's reason for not granting you any respite in your work, on the grounds of his zeal or the disposition and present fervor of the people. However, we must look ahead and preserve the workers, so that the work will endure. So please make some effort toward this moderation. If His Eminence insists, at least be careful to go easier in the pulpit and in the services. Speak to the people more familiarly and in a softer tone, making them come closer to you, for, in the final analysis, virtue is not found in extremes, but in prudence, which I recommend as strongly as I can, both to you and to Monsieur Martin⁹.

Thanks to the zeal of Monsieur Blatiron and Monsieur Martin, their missionary activity moved forward. In light of the great masses of people that came forward to receive the sacraments, they put in place some practices that made it easier to satisfy these large numbers of people. Monsieur Blatiron wrote to Vincent in 1646 about one of these missions:

The number of our confessors has gone as high as eighteen. There have been more than three thousand general confessions and a large number of reconciliations of very great importance, putting an end to disputes which have been the cause of twenty-three or twenty-four murders. Most of the persons involved obtained in writing pardon and peace from the offended parties and will be able to obtain forgiveness from the Prince and be restored to their pristine state.... When I wrote you the order followed on our missions, I forgot to tell you what we were doing for the instruction of the people and the relief of the confessors. We have two young clerics who, outside the time for catechism, teach the mysteries to all those who want to go to confession and, when they are sufficiently instructed, they give them a little printed card to that effect. When a penitent comes to make his confession, he presents it to his confessor who is thereby assured that he is

⁹ CCD III, 101-102; SVP.ES III, 89-90; SVP III, 90-91.

*adequately instructed in Christian truths, and he does not have to take the trouble to question him. In this way, the confessors proceed more quickly and do not keep those near the confessionals waiting*¹⁰.

Following the tradition of the Congregation, the missionaries established the Confraternity of the Charities in the areas that were evangelized. Monsieur Blatiron was concerned about organizing these in the best possible manner and therefore provided them with a Rule and offered them the possibility of coming together in a new way, namely, gathering men and women together in the same Confraternity. Vincent wrote to the Missionaries about his negative experience in this matter but left the final decision to Monsieur Blatiron who was ultimately the one who had to establish these Associations in the manner that he saw most favorable:

*I still have not had time to examine your regulations for the Charity. As for protectors and counselors, however, I can tell you that this custom may be good for Italy, but experience has shown us that it is harmful in France. Men and women working together do not agree on administrative matters. The men want to assume entire responsibility for them and the women cannot tolerate this. In the beginning, the Charities of Joigny and Montmirail were governed by persons of both sexes. The men were responsible for the care of the poor who were in good health, and the women for those who were ill, but because the funds were in common, we were obliged to remove the men. And I can give this testimony in favor of women, that there is no fault to be found in their administration because they are so careful and trustworthy. Perhaps in Italy the women are less capable of these things, so I am not giving you as a rule what I have just said*¹¹.

Together with the preaching of missions and the organization of the Confraternities, Monsieur Blatiron, together with his companions, developed activities on behalf of the clergy, a ministry that was begun immediately after their arrival in Genoa. With the support of the Archbishop they invited all the pastors and priests from the different places where missions had been preached¹²... they invited these individuals to participate in a retreat. In a letter that was written to Vincent in 1646 we find an account of this event:

A good number of pastors and priests [have made their retreat]. I cannot express to you the tremendous consolation they received,

¹⁰ CCD II, 664-665; SVP.ES II, 521-522; SVP II, 609-610.

¹¹ CCD IV, 76; SVP.ES IV, 71; SVP IV, 71.

¹² CCD III, 85-86; SVP.ES III, 75-76; SVP III, 74.

the abundant graces Our Lord bestowed on them, the great modesty and exact silence they observed, their humility and sincerity in giving an account of their prayer, and the admirable and almost miraculous conversions that have taken place there.

Among others there was a pastor who told me, almost in public, that he had come so that the Cardinal would have his income increased. He came with the intention of ridiculing things and more out of hypocrisy than devotion. He said also that the Mission had no greater enemy than he, and that he had said all the evil that could be imagined about it and even about His Eminence. He was a man strongly addicted to vice; he had obtained a benefice by simony, was ordained without any title except this benefice, carried out the functions of a priest, administered the sacraments and performed every parochial duty. He remained in this state for several years, a man given to scheming and enterprising, etc. However, God finally touched him, and touched him in a most efficacious way. He was converted, he wept, he humbled himself, and gave notable proofs of his change. All who saw him during that retreat, or have heard about him, have been extremely edified, and we no less than all the others, who have produced good fruits, each according to his needs¹³.

As a result of the preaching of missions and the retreats for priests Monsieur Blatiron began a vocational recruitment ministry and Monsieur Martin took responsibility for some candidates who requested to enter the Congregation of the Mission. In 1647 Vincent sent to the Missionaries in Genoa a copy of the Rule that was used at the seminary Bons-Enfants¹⁴. In this regard Monsieur Blatiron helped Vincent change his attitude because for a rather long period of time he did not dare to ask God to send new vocations to the Congregation but trusted in Divine Providence. Monsieur Blatiron on the other hand had joined this ministry of vocational recruitment to his devotion to Saint Joseph and Vincent agreed with this approach. We read in his letter of November 12, 1655:

I thank God for the special devotions you are planning in order to ask God, through the intercession of blessed Saint Joseph, for the spread of the Company. I ask His Divine Goodness to accept them. For more than twenty years I have not dared to ask this of God, thinking that, since the Congregation is His work, its preservation and growth should be left to His Providence alone. Reflecting, however, on the recommendations given us in the Gospel to ask Him to send

¹³ CCD III, 85-86; SVP.ES III, 75-76; SVP III, 74.

¹⁴ CCD III, 154; SVP.ES III, 134; SVP III, 144.

*laborers into His harvest, I have become convinced of the importance and usefulness of this devotion*¹⁵.

Vincent became aware of the unity among the missionaries in Genoa: their unity in living out their community life as well as their unity in carrying out their different apostolic endeavors and as a result offered one of the most beautiful prayers that he ever uttered:

*O Divine Goodness, unite in this way all hearts in this Little Company of the Mission, then order whatever You please. Labor will be sweet to them and every task easy; the strong person will relieve the weak one, and the weak will cherish the strong and obtain increased strength for him from God. And so, Lord, Your work will be done as You would like, for the building up of Your Church and Your workers will multiply, attracted by the perfume of such charity*¹⁶.

The zeal of the missionaries did not free them from conflict among themselves. There were evident differences in their approach to evangelization as well as differences in dealing with the clergy. They also found that their zeal was being diminished as they attempted to follow the reforming impetus of the archbishop who seemed to provide no opportunity for rest. And then there was the new house, a house which the cardinal offered to them and which was ready in 1647 but another two years would pass before they could occupy it because they had to wait for the Senate to approve this donation.

The mission in Corsica

The Senate became aware of the impact of the preached missions on the people and in 1652 asked the Missionaries to consider preaching a very difficult mission to the people on the island of Corsica which, at that time, was part of the Republic of Genoa and yet was in continual conflict with the central government. The Missionaries, led by Monsieur Blatiron, left for Corsica. The area that was entrusted to their work belonged to the Diocese of Aleria which at that time had no bishop. The diocese was governed by two vicars, one appointed by the Holy See and the other by the cathedral chapter. These two priests disagreed with one another and this caused great confusion among the clergy and the faithful. The missionary team was composed of seven priests who were members of the Congregation and they were assisted by four ecclesiastics and four religious who had been chosen by Cardinal

¹⁵ CCD V, 468-469; SVP.ES V, 439; SVP V, 462.

¹⁶ CCD III, 258; SVP.ES III, 234; SVP III, 257.

Durazzo. They established their headquarters in Nicolo which was in the center of a long, narrow valley. The missionaries found that they would have to confront multiple spiritual and social problems: family divisions, hatred and resentment among family members, on-going quarrels between different clans which resulted in the injury and death of many individuals. There was such a strong sense of honor and reputation that it was felt these had to be defended at any cost, including recourse to violence. The state of the family was very sad: hatred was instilled in children at a very early age and this resulted in endless hostilities. In addition there were numerous homicides and other crimes of passion and women were not exempt from any of these crimes. All of this together with their resentment toward the central government led to a continued increase in the activity of bandits throughout this area. Efforts to curb this activity seemed to have no effect and the land seemed to favor the bandits since rough mountains and dense forests provided a natural hiding place for these individuals. The mission was most difficult. It seemed impossible to make any impression on these people that would help them change their ways, especially the men who came to the mission, but came armed. Monsieur Blatiron wrote about this mission to Vincent:

All those people were so filled with hatred and a desire for vengeance that, no matter what we said to cure them of this strange passion, it made no impression on them. When we spoke about forgiveness of enemies, several of them even left the sermon. This left all of us very worried; myself more than anyone else, because handling these reconciliations was my special task.

Finally, on the eve of the general Communion, as I was coming to the close of the sermon, after exhorting the people once again to forgiveness, God inspired me to take in hand the crucifix I was wearing and say to them that anyone who was willing to forgive should come and kiss it. Then I invited them to do so in the name of Our Lord, who was stretching forth His arms to them, saying that those who kissed that crucifix would be giving a sign that they were willing to forgive and were ready to be reconciled with their enemies. At these words, they started to glance at one another but, when I saw that no one was coming forward, I pretended I was going to leave. I put the crucifix away, complaining of their hardness of heart, saying that they deserved neither the grace nor the blessing Our Lord was offering them. At that, a reformed Franciscan got up and began to cry out: "O Niolo, O Niolo, so you want to be cursed by God! You do not want to receive the grace He is sending you by means of these Missionaries, who have come from such a distance for our salvation!". While this good monk was uttering these and similar words, a parish priest, whose nephew had been killed and the murderer was present at the sermon, came to

prostrate himself on the ground and asked to kiss the crucifix. At the same time he said in a loud voice: "Let a certain person (his nephew's murderer) come forward so I can embrace him!". When this was done, another priest did the same with regard to some of his enemies who were present. These two were followed by a throng of others, so much so that, for the space of an hour and a half, we saw nothing but reconciliations and embraces. For greater assurance, the most important matters were put in writing and authenticated by the notary public¹⁷.

This mission seemed to make Monsieur Blatiron's zeal all the more obvious and it was also clear that he was a genius at preaching. These gifts were so prominent that Vincent entrusted him with resolving the delicate problem of taking vows in the Congregation.

Sent to Rome to obtain approval for vows

Since the end of 1638 the matter of the vows was uncertain. It was at that time that Monsieur Lebreton was sent to Rome to obtain approval from Rome. He had been unable to obtain said approval and died unexpectedly in 1641. In 1647 Messieurs Portail, Dehorgny and Alméras were sent to Rome and they were also unable to obtain their objective. It was at this time that Vincent saw that this matter was not moving forward and so he took advantage of the fact that Cardinal Durazzo held Monsieur Blatiron in high esteem and sent him to Rome to resolve this matter. Vincent had great confidence in Monsieur Blatiron. He entrusted this mission to him even though he knew that in this regard Étienne held a view that was contrary to his own, a view that he tried to change when he wrote him a rather lengthy letter that was dated February 19, 1655¹⁸. Vincent tried to convince him of the need for all the members of the Congregation to profess vows. We do not know Monsieur Blatiron's reaction but we know that he went to Rome and was able to accomplish his mission in a few months. On September 22, 1655 Pope Alexander VII signed the brief *Ex commissa nobis* which approved the vows.

The plague in Genoa and the death of Monsieur Blatiron

In July 1656 the plague afflicted Genoa and during the course of the next year this disease spread like an oil spill. One of the benefactors of the house in Genoa, Rev. Cristóforo Monchia, died. The authorities

¹⁷ CCD IV, 406-407; SVP.ES IV, 389-390; SVP IV, 412 ff. Cf., L. Nuovo, *Le missioni in Corsica, Carità e Missione* (2004), 1, pp. 51-56.

¹⁸ CCD V, 314-322; SVP.ES V, 296-302; SVP V, 315 ff.

confiscated the house of the Missionaries and opened it as a hospital¹⁹. The first confrere to place himself at the service of those infected with the plague was Monsieur Lucas Arimondo who was working with the patients in the Consolation House for just a few days when he contracted the illness and died three days later²⁰. After him the whole community there distinguished themselves in the ways that they provided spiritual comfort to those who were ill and administered the sacraments. Vincent encouraged the Missionaries but asked them to be prudent in exposing themselves to infection²¹. No area of the city was able to escape being infected. Each day hundreds of people died²². A miracle would have been necessary to keep the missionaries free from infection. In the repetition of prayer that occurred on July 17, 1657, Vincent exhorted the Missionaries to be willing to become martyrs. Here he was thinking about the confreres in Genoa about whom he had received no news since ordinary mail service had been suspended as a result of the plague:

I recommend to the prayers of the Company our confreres in Genoa. They have a great deal to suffer now because they have had to leave their own house and rent another one in order to give over their home to the plague-stricken. The wear and tear of moving was the greater because they had only one week to do it. Yet, by the grace of God they are enduring this in the right spirit, and happy are they to suffer for the people – for God, in the first place, and then for the people. You see, my dear confreres, we should all be so disposed and have this desire to suffer for God and our neighbor and to wear ourselves out for that purpose. How happy are they to whom God gives such dispositions and desires. Yes, Messieurs, we must be all for God and the service of the people, we have to give ourselves to God for that, wear ourselves out for that, and give our lives for that, strip ourselves naked, so to speak in order to be clothed with Him – at least, we should desire to be so disposed, if we are not already – we should be ready and willing to come and go wherever God pleases, whether to the Indies or elsewhere; lastly, to devote ourselves willingly to the service of our neighbor and to extend the empire of Jesus Christ in souls; and I myself, old and infirm as I am, must, nonetheless, have this disposition, even to go to the Indies to win souls to God there, although I were to die on the way or on board ship; for, what do you think God asks of us?

¹⁹ *Notices...*, cit., Vol. II, p. 193 and CCD XI, 355-356; SVP.ES XI, 279-280; SVP XI, 402.

²⁰ Cf., *La Congregazione della Missione in Italia dal 1640 al 1835*, pp. 30-31.

²¹ CCD VI, 155-156; SVP.ES VI, 132-133; SVP VI, 137-138.

²² CCD VI, 345-346, 468-470; SVP.ES VI, 311-312, 418-419; SVP VI, 323, 450.

*Our body? Oh, not at all! What then? God asks for our good will, a firm, genuine disposition to seize every opportunity of serving Him, even at the risk of our lives, to have and to foster within ourselves this desire for martyrdom, which God sometimes accepts willingly as if we had actually suffered it*²³.

In fact, the community of Genoa was wiped out during the summer of 1657. Vincent received news about this from the community in Rome and on September 23rd, 1657 he spoke to the community that gathered together with him and told them of the death of Monsieur Blatiron, as well as that of Messieurs Duport, Domenico Bocconi, Tratebas, Francesco Vincent, and Ennery. The only survivor was Monsieur Leguge²⁴.

Vincent words concerning Monsieur Blatiron remain as a monument to his apostolic charity and reveal the spiritual stature of this missionary who, at the young age of forty-three, gave his life on behalf of his sisters and brothers:

*His Divine Majesty has finally taken from us that great, holy man M. Blatiron, of whom you have so often heard me speak. That apostolic man, by whom God has wrought such great things, is no longer with us. God has taken him from us... M. Blatiron, ah, what a loss! This man, whom we have seen here, was a pillar of the infirmary for the space of three or four years; yet you know what he has done, what and how many conversions God has brought about through him – even bandits! It was unheard of for bandits to be converted; yet there have never been so many conversions since the Priests of the Mission have been in Italy... our good M. Blatiron, he was a man who never stopped working. I am amazed how he was able to keep it up. He was a priest whose very look inspired veneration and respect for him. I assure you, Messieurs, that, when I looked at him, I felt within me a certain respect and reverence for this man of God*²⁵.

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²³ CCD XI, 357; SVP.ES XI, 280-281; SVP XI, 402.

²⁴ LOUIS ABELLY, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God: Vincent de Paul*, New City Press, New Rochelle NY 1993, Volume II, pp. 68-69. The Community needed another year to rebuild itself because areas remained infected with the plague. In August, 1658, the Community, under the leadership of Giacomo Pesnelle, slowly renewed their ministry and their life together. The Internal Seminary was reopened and several postulants, who were attracted by the heroic virtues of the missionaries who died while attending those afflicted by the plague, were admitted into the Congregation.

²⁵ CCD XI, 379-380.