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Thematic Issue (Inspiring Faith)

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St. Jean-Théophane Vénard: Martyr of the 19th Century

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Words of Wisdom: “Now there is no one who approaches God with a true and upright heart who is not tested by hardships and temptations” (St. Albert the Great, in *On Cleaving to God*)(1). This is certainly true of all the saints and especially the martyrs who, despite great suffering, exemplified supernatural peace and joy, even in the face of one of the most terrifying prospects of all—death. The lives and deaths of the saints illustrate the power of God’s grace, which both strengthens and pacifies amidst even the greatest of difficulties.

Many details of the life of St. Jean-Théophane Vénard are related by Rev. James Anthony Walsh in his book *A Modern Martyr: The Life of St. Théophane Vénard*. I have endeavored in this article to present a sketch of the life of St. Théophane Vénard, in the hopes that many will benefit from the example of this little-known saint.

CHILDHOOD AND EARLY STUDIES

St. Jean-Théophane Vénard was born in the small, scenic town of St. Loup-sur-Thouet, France on November 21, 1829—the feast of the Presentation of Our Lady. His father, Jean Vénard, who served as schoolmaster of the town, and his mother, Marie Gueret, an exemplary Catholic, were a saintly couple who took great care in the Christian upbringing of their four children. Thus, in his youth, Théophane Vénard was blessed with the virtuous examples of both his parents and with a solid Catholic formation that prepared him to embrace the future vocation to which God was calling him (2).

Vénard successfully “combined the loving, gentle character of his mother with the firmness and resolution of his father”(3). A thoughtful, quiet child who often delighted in the beauty and solitude of the outdoors, he often availed himself of the opportunities which the countryside offered for recollection and silence (4). One day, while sitting on a hillside with his friends, Vénard read aloud an account of the life and martyrdom of a foreign-missions priest, Venerable Charles Corney. Having finished the

book, Vénard, in tears, prophetically exclaimed: "And I too will go to Tong-king, and I too will be a martyr!"(5).

In 1841, Vénard began his studies at the College of Doué. (In France at this time, the term "college" was applied to what today are called high schools.) An admirable example to his fellow students, Vénard performed his studies with great diligence. He was likewise noted for his piety, cheerfulness, and spirit of mortification. During this period of Vénard's studies, however, he and his family suffered a sorrowful trial in the death of his mother. Although this loss, which he experienced at so young an age, was an occasion of great suffering for Vénard, years later he related the following to his family (6):

I think I may assure you positively that our good mother is in Heaven... At the time of her death, one night when I was watching in prayer, an angel took me by the hand and led me, as it were, into a great and wonderful Light, in the midst of which, surrounded by other glorified bodies, I distinctly saw her whom we so fondly loved, and for whom we had wept so bitterly (7).

Owing in great part to the sorrows which they both experienced at the loss of their mother, Vénard and his sister, Melanie, often corresponded by letter, nurturing a deep and holy bond which would continue and increase until death. Sharing similar aspirations for the glory of God and the salvation of souls, they often wrote to each other about spiritual topics, and they became each other's confidants, finding a source of great encouragement in one another (8).

VÉNARD'S CALL TO THE PRIESTHOOD

As the years passed and the time came for him to choose a state of life, Vénard, after adequate reflection and even some hesitation, decided to pursue the priesthood, believing that God was calling him to embrace the sacerdotal life. Thus, Vénard attended *Le Petit Séminaire* at Montmorillon, soon afterwards advancing to *Le Grand Séminaire*. In a life characterized by an immersion in the various liturgical ceremonies throughout the year, as well as by the careful study of philosophical and theological truths, Vénard found a great sense of fulfillment, and he excelled in all his studies (9).

Upon ordination to the subdiaconate, Vénard expressed his joy and gratitude in a letter to his sister:

Your brother is at last a sub-deacon! My soul overflows with joy, but with a joy so sweet and so pure that I cannot express it. I should like to be able to tell you all I

feel, but I cannot put it into words. I took the terrible step without trembling. God, in His infinite goodness, spared me the agony of fear at the moment (10).

SEMINARIAN FOR THE FOREIGN MISSIONS

As Vénard continued to advance towards the priesthood, he certainly could have chosen to become a priest for one of the dioceses of his homeland. Instead, his thoughts turned towards the foreign missions in Asia and how he might become a missionary to bring the truth to unevangelized peoples in the East. Thus, having obtained the consent of his spiritual director, Vénard applied for admission to *Missions Étrangères*, a foreign missions seminary in Paris (11).

After his application was accepted by the seminary, Vénard faced the great difficulty of informing his father of his intention to become a missionary for Asia. Although such news was a great blow to his father—given the likelihood of Vénard's death, owing to the virulent persecutions launched against Christians in the Orient—Vénard's father readily offered God so great a sacrifice, and he very generously agreed to Vénard's desires (12).

Having bid a final farewell to his family, Vénard departed for Paris to continue his priestly studies at *Missions Étrangères*. The superiors of the seminary, taking into account Vénard's evident holiness, permitted his early ordination to the priesthood. Therefore, on June 5, 1852, at the age of twenty-two years, Vénard was ordained a priest for the foreign missions, and he said his first Mass on the Feast of the Holy Trinity (13).

MISSIONARY TO TONG-KING

On September 19, 1852, Vénard left France to begin his journey to Asia. After a difficult and wearisome passage overseas, he reached Hong Kong, where he would stay for fifteen months before departing on his first missionary assignment. During this respite, Vénard prepared himself for his future missionary work by studying Chinese. The climate in Hong Kong, though, caused a decline in his health, often making it difficult for him to engage in his studies (14). However, being invited to teach philosophy at a Catholic college in Hong Kong, Vénard "gladly accepted, delighted to find some definite work during this time of weary waiting...."(15).

In February, 1854, Vénard was assigned as a missionary to the western part of Tong-king (16). In a letter to his family, Vénard describes the location of this missionary assignment and the perilous circumstances into which he was about to enter:

It is in the Annamite country, which includes Tong-king and Cochin-China, where the spirit of persecution is most active. A price is put on the head of each missionary, and when one is found, they put him to death without hesitation. But

God knows His own, and only to those whom He chooses is the grace of martyrdom given.... In spite of the violence and the universality of the persecution there, the missions are the most flourishing (17).

Three months later, Vénard began his journey to Tong-king. The circumstances accompanying his missionary assignment seemed far from promising. Entrance of Christians into Tong-king was extremely dangerous, given the intensity of the persecutions. Moreover, after the missionaries' secret entrances into the country, they often had to remain as concealed as possible, attempting their travels only by night so as to avoid the notice of authorities. In addition to these and innumerable other difficulties, Vénard experienced a rapid decline in health, often being afflicted with potentially-fatal illnesses from which he suffered greatly (18).

Despite such trials, Vénard found great joy in fulfilling the will of God in his vocation as a missionary priest. His duties included visiting and overseeing the parishes of the district to which he was assigned, preaching retreats, and providing the sacrament of Confirmation when a bishop was unable to be present to confer it. Vénard had a great paternal love for the souls under his care, and the laity, in turn, often expressed their great devotion and gratitude towards him (19).

FURTHER PERSECUTIONS IN TONG-KING

In 1858, an edict was issued in Tong-king to intensify the persecutions of Christians (20). Such an edict, in Vénard's own words, was "more bloody than any that had preceded it" (21). For example, spies were sent to find and report Christians—especially missionaries—to authorities; consequently, many priests and laity were arrested, tortured, and put to death. The missionaries' churches and living quarters were destroyed, and many houses of the faithful were burned, leaving both priests and laity to flee to remote caves and tombs to avoid the notice of spies. Many missionaries were martyred, and some died of exhaustion (22).

Vénard's great faith and love for God gave him strength to endure the countless adversities which he suffered during this time. In a letter he wrote to a friend, Vénard enumerates his sorrows, adding afterwards: "But as for myself, dearest friend, I have confidence in God that I shall accomplish my course, preserving intact the deposit of Faith, Hope, and Charity; and that finally, by the merits of our Lord, I shall share with His friends the crown of the just" (23).

MARTYRDOM OF VÉNARD

Despite the persecution, Vénard continued to perform his priestly duties of administering the sacraments and preaching, taking great care to encourage the faithful in the midst of such difficult circumstances. However, on November 30, 1860,

spies discovered Vénard in his home, and he was arrested and kept in a cage. Moreover, while awaiting trial, he continued to preach the truths of the Faith, giving a marvelous example of the fortitude and trust in God which many missionaries in Tong-king possessed in the face of persecution (24).

Vénard was soon sent to Kêcho, the old capital of Tong-king. After interrogation, he was kept in his cage near the prefect's house, not knowing when his death sentence would be pronounced. During this time, Vénard was visited by many noble pagans who tried to speak with him as to a diviner. Vénard, however, took advantage of such opportunities and, instead, spoke to his visitors about the truths of the Catholic Faith (25).

As the days of his imprisonment continued, Vénard wrote: "I am now only waiting patiently for the day when God will allow me to offer Him the sacrifice of my blood. My exile is over. I touch the soil of my real country; earth vanishes, Heaven opens, I go to God"(26). After about two months had passed, Vénard received his death sentence and was to be executed the same day. As he was led to the place of his execution, amidst an escort of two hundred soldiers and two elephants, Vénard, dressed in a special robe which he had made for the occasion, cheerfully sang hymns and Psalms to Our Lord (27). When asked by the executioner what he would offer for his execution to be performed quickly and less painfully, Vénard simply replied: "*The longer it lasts, the better it will be!*"(28). He was beheaded on February 2, 1861—the feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, also known as Candlemas Day (29).

"A LITTLE SAINT"

One of the most popular saints of the 19th century, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, had a special devotion to Vénard. Thérèse, whose spirituality of "The Little Way" has encouraged many, considered Vénard to be "a *little saint*"—one whose "life was not marked by anything extraordinary"(30). In this way, Vénard became a special model for Thérèse, whose own way of life was so simple.

Vénard's writings became a deep source of encouragement and spiritual nourishment for Thérèse. She once commented: "[Vénard's] soul and mine have many points of resemblance, and his words but do re-echo my thoughts"(31). In fact, Thérèse, who is popularly known as "The Little Flower," borrowed such a *sobriquet* from the writings of Vénard, (32) who wrote: "A slight sabre-cut will separate my head from my body, like the spring flower which the Master of the Garden gathers for His pleasure. We are all flowers planted on this earth, which God plucks in His own good time, some a little sooner, some a little later"(33).

Thérèse composed a poem in honor of Vénard in which she describes Vénard's disposition at his martyrdom:

Blessed martyr, at the hour of your torture,
You savored the happiness of suffering!
To suffer for God seemed a delight to you;
Smiling, you knew how to live and die.
To your executioner you hastened to say,
When he offered to you to shorten your torment:
*The longer my painful martyrdom lasts,
The more it will be of value, and the happier I will be!* (34)

Like Thérèse, we may all draw great inspiration from the life of St. Jean-Théophane Vénard, whose exemplary faith and fortitude, and his simple and profound spirituality are worthy points for reflection and imitation. The examples of the martyrs teach us the immense value of suffering when it is patiently endured and united to the sufferings of Christ's Passion. Following the example of the saints, we can find immense spiritual profit in offering our trials and sufferings to Our Lord for His greater glory and the salvation of souls. "...[I]f you partake of the sufferings of Christ, rejoice that when his glory shall be revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy" (1 Pet. 4:13 [D-R]) (35).

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