

14-21  
toute cette doctrine  
" Je voudrais que la parole d'Éternel avec l'Éternel ; qui d'Éternel  
vous a entre vos bras, le conseil du Dieu ? que les différences sont  
incompréhensibles et combien les voies sont impénétrables !  
elle ajoute toute fois que le Seigneur & l'Éternel cette conclusion

Tout est de lui  
Tout est par lui  
Tout est à lui et pour lui ;  
à lui soit gloire dans les siècles des siècles . ( Rom XI. 33-36 )

ORIGINS  
OF SION

Oh le sublime parole ! peut-être la plus sublime que jamais  
homme ait prononcée ! Tout est de Dieu ; car il est la source  
d'où jaillit l'être et la vie ! Tout est pour Dieu ; car  
il est l'océan immense <sup>enveloppant</sup> de l'être et la vie !  
Tout est par lui ; car il est le canal par lequel la vie  
d'être nous est venue .

Tout est de lui, pour lui, par lui !  
De lui ! car il est l'alpha, le vie de toute vie, le  
de tous les enfants ; il est le premier, comme l'appelle  
l'écriture et comme le concevait notre esprit .

Tout est pour lui, pour lui ! car il est l'alpha  
~~de tous les enfants~~ le premier <sup>et le</sup> dernier  
auquel toute vie pure se fluvie ; il est le dernier  
bien que le premier ; il est le saint <sup>et le</sup> pur  
il est le saint qui sanctifie nous en qui nous sommes  
pour l'éternité à la gloire et

THEODORE RATISBONNE

# MEMOIRS

14-23  
le ciel et la terre ; il est le Fil par lequel tous les  
enfants dispersés sur Dieu sont rappelés à l'unité, et les infidèles  
égarement ramenés au salut .

Tout est de Dieu le père  
Tout est par Dieu le Fils,  
Tout est en Dieu le Saint-Esprit .

3-20  
Tous les dons procédant du Père, je comprendrais par le  
Fils et le Saint-Esprit .

**THEODORE RATISBONNE** (Marie-Théodor Ratisbonne, N.D.S.)  
(December 28, 1802 – January 10, 1884)



Portrait of Marie-Théodor  
Ratisbonne, N.D.S.

(source: Wikipedia)

**Note of the translator:** Translated from the French edition of 1906, containing a long introduction of Mother Marie Alice and the text of Father Theodore's Memoirs. The French edition, which contains other documents, is available from the Generalate of the Sisters of Sion, Via Garibaldi 28, 00153, Roma, Italia.

Translated by Sister Marian Dolan of Sion.

## PART I - INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this introduction is to help the reader understand the contents of these MEMOIRS first by situating Father Theodore in the two milieux which successively forged his personality: the family milieu which marked him with its moral worth and with a deep if somewhat vague faith; the Christian milieu which, from his twentieth year, provided his true vocation. We should also like to complete his story by adding to it other information and some unpublished documents taken mostly from his correspondence.

At the time of the MEMOIRS, he was over eighty years old. We see from a photograph of this time that he was an old man, worn out with the years, his face emaciated and framed in long white hair, and with an expression of peace and kindness. From his armchair, he daily dictated to his secretary, Mother M. Benedicta, everything that came to mind without trying to say everything. He spoke extemporaneously, in a familiar manner; nevertheless, he was a man of his times, and his style, in spite of his love for simplicity, was marked by the rather high-flown manner so foreign to the stark speech of the twentieth century. He had a strong sense of humor and joked easily; if one forgets this, one risks not understanding his thought. There are, therefore, passages in his MEMOIRS which are not to be taken seriously; it is especially essential to be able to recognize certain clichés which only partly reveal his own judgment, but were characteristic of the prejudices of either middle class Jews or of the Catholic circles of the nineteenth century, for example, with regard to Jews and Protestants.

In 1823 we began the special philosophy course given by Mr. Bautain. There were only four of us at this first course, an Irish Catholic, a schismatic Russian and two Jews. Mr Bautain had himself recently resumed the practice of his religion. A former student of the Normal School, a fellow-disciple of Mr. Cousin, he had been appointed professor of philosophy at the age of 20; gifted with great eloquence, he brilliantly taught the eclectic and German doctrines which were popular in contemporary educational circles. But Providence had put him in contact with Miss (*Madeleine Louise*) Humann and God had made her His instrument to unfold to him the truths of Christianity. The philosopher was sincerely in search of truth which he assimilated as soon as it was revealed to him. His public courses were immediately marked by this happy conversion. His reaching was no longer pagan but uncompromisingly Christian, and this so terrified the liberal thinkers of the the time that the government ordered his courses to be suspended. Condemned to inaction, he decided to devote his leisure to private teaching and I was one of the first fortunate beneficiaries of this decision.

Translated by Sister Marian Dolan of Sion,  
member of the Canadian Province.

## THE PACT OF TURKENSTEIN: 1797

Before beginning the story of his life, Father Theodore recalls an event which happened five years before his birth but to which he nevertheless ascribes his vocation, his whole destiny: this was the spiritual act of union signed at Turkenstein (in the province of Lorraine), on the Feast of the Sacred Heart, June 23, 1797, by three outstanding people, Father Colmar, Mrs. Breck, Miss Humann. Later on the last named would be the instrument used by God to lead to the faith many young intellectuals; among them, Louis Bautain and Theodore Ratisbonne were to found congregations of religious women. But Father Theodore never separated the three signatories in his thought: his very strong sense of the communion of saints and of the patience with which God prepares events convinced him that this event was the small seed from which would spring, fifty years later, the congregation of Our Lady of Sion.

### THE FAMILY

The Ratisbonne family took its name from the town of Bavaria from which it emigrated in the eighteenth century to settle in Alsace. In the following century two of its descendants, Louis and Auguste, founded in Strasbourg the bank whose prosperity was in large measure due to their competence – especially to the competence of Louis who was a real family patriarch – and to their complete honesty which was well known and appreciated. A double marriage joined them to the family of Naftali Cerfbeer, one of the pioneers in the emancipation of the Jews at the time of the French Revolution. Auguste married Naftali's grand-daughter, Adelaide Cerfbeer, and they had ten children: Adolphe, Theodore, Gustave, Zelie, Elisa, Henri, Achille, Pauline, Alphonse, Ernestine.

The scarcity of documents about Auguste Ratisbonne and his wife make it difficult to judge their characters. However, the MEMOIRS and the "Notice" composed by Theodore for M. Bautain's book, "The Philosophy of Christianity," give us some fleeting glimpses.'

Auguste was as straightforward in all his actions as he was in his

business, and like all upright people, he gave his confidence easily: "My father," Theodore said, "had always loved me and on all occasions I had his complete confidence." This disposition added to great kindness explains why he did not insist on the child's education; Theodore was never subjected to any discipline or hard work and his father sent him, at the age of sixteen, to learn the banking business in Paris. The failure of his son, who took no interest in financial matters, must have caused him deep disappointment, but had he asked Theodore about his own desires? Whatever the case, he lent his support, with unusual indulgence, to a series of initiatives which he still looked upon as mere adolescent daydreams: scattered studies with no continuity, sometimes at Strasbourg, sometimes in Paris.

As President of the Consistory, Auguste was worried about the wretched conditions under which the poor Jews of Alsace were still living, centering in on themselves and having no education. In 1825 he founded several schools for them and made Theodore their director. When, a little later, he learned of the baptism of this son in whom he had reposed full confidence, he felt profound sorrow, but after a brief period of coolness, he forgave him. "When my parents realized how strong my convictions were," wrote Theodore, "they gave me their respect." Recalling the death of his father on October 31, 1830, he added: "When I went back to Strasbourg I found my father dying. My becoming a Catholic had weakened neither his confidence nor his affection. I often had written and spoken to him about Christianity, and he listened to me with interest, telling me that he deeply respected my convictions."

These few glimpses show us Auguste Ratisbonne as a man of moral grandeur and of integrity, capable of giving disinterested love, with a breadth of spirit which was in some respects a foreshadowing of ecumenism, founded on a respect for persons and their convictions, which the world is today trying to make an essential part of human relations.

## **ADELAIDE RATISBONNE**

The statements which Theodore had consecrated to his mother, whom

he had lost in 1818, show us a woman of great kindness and completely faithful to her duties. Father Theodore wrote of her: "If I was not raised in the Jewish religion, I was at least brought up according to Jewish traditions and moral values. In reality, I received no moral training except the example of a virtuous mother, no lessons in dogma except faith in one God. I loved my mother very much, and this love of a son for his mother was in some respects my only religion." When he tells of his conversion, he says again: "The undying memory of my mother's tenderness helped me have some awareness of Mary's love." We might ask whether, like so many children who have lost their mothers in their childhood, he did not idealize his in his memory. But he was already sixteen when she died, and he had the gift of a penetrating mind: his wise judgements on persons and things proved this. His filial worship which protected him as he grew up, must, therefore, have been motivated by the quality of tenderness which provides happiness and makes for unity in a family.

Adelaide was not satisfied with being the heart of her home and filling it with joy; her son's allusion to "her whose memory remains blessed among the poor, both Jews and Christians," leads one to apply to her the words of Scripture: "She holds out her hand to the poor, she opens her arms to the needy."

This was God's first grace to Theodore: to be born into a numerous, united family of great moral integrity. His brothers and sisters for a long time resented his conversion and his becoming a priest, but his correspondence proves that in 1841, at the latest, they had consented to resume relations with him. Father Theodore later on extended to their children and grandchildren the same affection he had always had for his own family, and exchanges of letters show how important a place he had in the hearts and even in the lives of his kin.

## **CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE: 1802-1823**

### **THE SEARCH FOR THE TRUTH**

Theodore had everything that makes for a happy childhood: a warm family atmosphere, the comfort that comes from riches; yet he

aspired to something else. His studies provided no respite to the uneasiness which possessed him: dissatisfaction of the mind and of the heart still more deeply felt because of the poor quality of the teaching which he was given. It must be said that metaphysical anxiety seems to have been awakened in him when he was still quite young. Mother Benedicta writes: "Theodore assured me that he remembered his impressions from his early childhood. He later related how he tried to find out what was going on around him. He spoke of the tenderness evoked in him at the sight of his mother, and also the astonishment with which he wondered about the reason for his own existence among all things. This questioning sense developed with the years."

At twelve he abandoned his father's house – to which he was quickly brought back – to seek solitude. At fourteen, a boarder at Frankfort, he was unhappy: "I suffered from unbearable homesickness... We were given no religious instruction... Nevertheless, I had a deep attraction to recollection and very often I was seized with a profound spirit of prayer."

Was this nostalgia caused by his temperament or was it a grace from God? Some of each, doubtless. God was making use of the dispositions that He had planted in this child to give him his first awareness of the relativity of beings and put him, although in a confused way, in front of the alternative of an Absolute to which all existence is bound, or of an absurd universe. For long years Theodore was destined to pursue his search for truth, and on this road on which he was venturing, he would be alone; no one could understand him, guide him or even share his anxiety.

### **The first stay in Paris: 1818-1820 (or 1821)**

No sooner had Theodore come home from Frankfort than he left his family again, including his mother whom he would not see again, to go to Paris to live with Mr. Fould. The documents recalling this period paint a picture of the torment of a young man, left too early to himself, and devoured with a desire to know and to love: "By very special divine protection, the first part of my youth passed without



problems and without storms; I was held back by a kind of instinctive virtue, founded solely on the words and example of my mother whom I loved tenderly; the mere memory of her shielded me from evil. Although I was then alone in Paris, free and without supervision, in one of the great banking houses, I lived for several years withdrawn from the pleasures of the world and its dangers. I avoided society, I refused all amusements, so deep and unending was the sorrow that my mother's death had caused me! This deep mourning of my heart contributed a great deal to my taste for serious things, and inspired me with a distaste for passing things which very often leave only remorse behind them...

How a word of religion would have helped me at that time! How I suffered from an indefinable anxiety! I needed to love and I was an easy target for any loving person; I became strongly attached to my friends, to my professors, to the people with whom I lived, asking to be loved and understood although I did not understand myself... My life flowed by in romantic melancholy... I was often alone, and I thought about God, about religion, about a vague object which could fill the void in my soul... I knew no prayers, I knew no man, no book which would tell me about eternal things..."

Indefinable uneasiness... melancholy... vague object... is this the illness of the world? ...But if René takes pleasure in his melancholy and cuts himself off from a world to which he thinks he is superior, Theodore wants truth as the only treasure to which he can give his heart; he suffers because it eludes him; he isolates himself to seek it. One day, he will discover it in God. Then all uneasiness, all anxiety, all melancholy will disappear. His spiritual history is an illustration of St. Augustine's word: "It is You, my God, who tell us to seek our joy in praising You, for You made us for Yourself and our heart is uneasy until it rests in You." It has been said that this sentence summarizes the whole spirit of the *CONFESSIONS*; we believe that it also summarizes Father Theodore's whole being. When he finds peace of heart in God, he will go forward towards the vision in a peace, a serenity never shaken by doubt, never changed by any suffering or any difficulty.

## Return to Strasbourg: 1820 to 1821

Theodore did not lead this “insignificant” life for long. He went back to Strasbourg without accepting a business life, seeking a good which neither money nor the world could give him. Tired of being a rich, idle young man, he reacted by undertaking an austere and stoic form of life: work, self-sacrifice, solitude, anything was good which helped him to assert his selfhood. But this attempt at diversion was balanced by a sense of failure: “How can I describe the sadness and inner void which was causing me to wither up?” In this experience of poverty was the continual anguish of a heart which was trying to give meaning to its own existence: “A mysterious action was going on in my conscience. I was living without religion and I sought neither good nor evil, but I often said to myself: I am twenty years old and I do not know why I am in the world. What is this strange thing we call life? What is my purpose on earth? These questions which gave rise to a thousand others and provoked a thousand theories took possession of my soul to the point where eventually they occupied it to the exclusion of everything else.”

It was the question of his early childhood which was reborn with an irresistible keenness and violence; it absorbed all his faculties. He waged terrible battles. Through much groping and detouring, God was letting him go to the limits of reason depending only on its own resources, thus preparing him to guide to the light all those who later, unbelievers or sceptics, would come seeking his help.

Hoping to find in it the solution to his doubts, Theodore avidly studied the philosophy of the eighteenth century. At the schools of Bayle and Fontenelle, he learned to “wipe the slate clean” of all prejudice, of the weight of tradition. He said of himself: “These readings dried up the last roots of traditional beliefs whose ruins I had hung on to.”

His love of the mysterious – and of election – so peculiar to the Jews, drove him to probe the mysteries of Free Masonry, which gave him no more light than did the philosophers: “A void full of sadness was growing in my soul.” Certainly he was entering that profound solitude which prepares the shattering of the person.

Often, after he has exhausted all intellectual resources man looks at the world about him and asks life to give an explanation of life. It was thus that Mr. Bautain was to write to Jules Level and his friends, Theodore Ratisbonne and Isidore Goeschler: "Visiting a large hospital is the best complement to serious philosophy."

Theodore simply looked at nature; if he was seeking there traces of God, it was not because, as one might think, he was influenced by biblical texts which he had heard or read at the synagogue. It was only later that he had any contact with Jewish hurgy, at the urging of Fr. Bautain, and it was only then that he opened the Bible. Until that time, philosophers had been his only teachers. An admirer of Rousseau, he followed the "Solitary Walker" in his "Dreams." He himself since his childhood had been attracted by the mystery and beauty of created things.

One night, after a long contemplation of the stars, he uttered this cry: "O God, if you really exist, make the truth known to me and in advance I swear that I will consecrate my life to it." This poor man's prayer expressed absolute yearning. It was the prayer of a man who for a long time had himself wandered in philosophical labyrinths, without seeing any opening to the light, to daybreak. Frozen with cold in this much-too-silent night, Theodore let himself fall "on a dungheap, the exact picture," as he said himself, "of my inner life!"

This passage of MEMOIRS is poignant; it is also disturbing: does not Saint Paul tell us that through the universe God manifests His existence to man: "What is invisible about Him... appears to man's intelligence through God's works." How was it that the book of nature remained closed to Theodore? Why did God not take pity on his distress? Why did He refuse to enlighten him?

The discovery of truth depends on what St. Augustine calls the "weight of love," which corresponds to the Gospel expression: "the treasure". which possesses "the heart." It has been said that Theodore "was going directly towards a unique goal;" this reflection of Mother

M. Benedicta, one of those who knew him best, is an exact definition of his fundamental disposition of tension towards truth; he sought it without allowing himself to be turned aside in his quest; is it not to the pure of heart that the Lord promised the vision of God?

As everyone knows, the heart in the biblical sense deals not only with the emotions and the will but also with the intellect; in order that it may be opened to the light, all the faculties of the being must be purified. If Theodore had until that time been preserved of disordered passions, his readings, as he himself has confessed, had "dried him up." That is why he was unable to interpret the signs which at the same time reveal and hide the reality of God. Certainly the Lord could have dissipated in an instant the false ideas which clouded his search. It was to be this way for Alphonse Rattisbonne twenty years later. But God's ways vary: in the persons of the two brothers, he presents, as it were, two distinct types of conversion: for Theodore was reserved the long, painful search in the course of which, through a thousand reflections and a thousand hesitations, mind and free will were to reach truth with the help of hidden graces, while Alphonse would receive the exceptional grace of a sudden enlightenment in which the All-Powerful would manifest Himself, freedom being asked to declare itself at that moment.

### **Second stay in Paris: The Crisis 1822-1823**

At the time when in a lightning moment, the contemplation of the stars had opened "the eyes of the heart" for him, Theodore was again plagued by doubt. He went back to Paris to start studying law. In despair he abandoned the search and for a year he tried to forget it by indulging in the amusements which until this time he had despised. According to his own expression it was "the critical period" of his life, the crucial time when he risked losing everything. He was the lost sheep in the desert which is the world of pleasure, but whom the Good Shepherd mysteriously continued to pursue. Hence this last experience left him more dissatisfied than ever: "These parties made me as worldly as can be imagined, but after the dissipations which were scattered throughout my days, I fell back upon myself into the void and an unconquerable sadness."

At the end of his life, he pointed out striking signs of God's action within him: the refusal with which, in spite of himself, he met the advances of a young actress, thus, without knowing it, preserving his vocation – and the inner voice which repeated to him: “You must leave Paris and go back to Strasbourg.” This voice, comparable to the impulse which one day would urge Alphonse to go to Rome, became so insistent that Theodore, abandoning all that might keep him in Paris, left for Strasbourg. The moment had come when God's Providence would “more visibly take possession of his life.”

Having returned to Strasbourg at the beginning of the year 1823, he continued his law studies. One day, he was accosted at the University by an unknown student, Jules Level, who invited him to follow a course in philosophy given by Mr. Bautain. His acceptance marked the turning point of his life by opening up to him a milieu in which he would reach truth.

### **III – WITH MISS HUMANN – 1823-1836**

#### **Mr. Bautain's Course: May 13th, 1823**

After having regained his faith under the influence of Miss Humann, Mr. Bautain now had only one objective: to communicate the truth which had been revealed to him. Forced to stop teaching in the Faculty of Arts, in May 1823 he began a private course which first brought together four students: Jules Level, Theodore Ratisbonne, an Irish Catholic, and a Russian Orthodox. The strength of his convictions and his admirable gifts in expressing himself explain the influence which he had over these young men who were themselves seeking truth. Theodore wrote: “All four of us listened with delight to the simple but vibrant words which flowed so abundantly from the heart of the master. This teaching was not like any other, it was a true initiation into the mysteries of man and of nature. We listened with surprise and admiration to the development of universal truth which the master derived from the living source of the Holy Scripture whence his word drew its strength, its virtue and its power. This teaching did more than enlighten my intelligence; it warmed my heart, it moved my will, it

melted the ice which covered my soul; finally, the influence of Christianity enveloped me in every part of my being and penetrated me without my being aware of it: fortunately! For I would not have had the courage to face it.” When almost fifty years later Father Theodore recalled his reactions as a young man to Mr. Bautain's course, he gradually found the same expressions, but with an even greater insistence, as if he were reliving the impressions of the past in the present.

To this evidence Jules Level added his own: “I shall not try to describe all that I felt at this teaching which was so new for me. To learn to know man and the world, the bonds which link men to each other and all together to God, to perceive the deepest mysteries of nature, the reason for man's present misery, the goal of human life in this world and the means of attaining it: such were the first fruits of these lessons! Thus all these great truths announced with calmness, nobility and simplicity, operated a complete renewal in my mind... This was the living word which I had so long been seeking, this was the knowledge for which I had so ardently wished.”

The master made it easy for the students to exchange ideas in simple and affectionate meetings: “Outside class time, we were able to see the professor in private; he received us kindly, listened to our observations, enlightened our doubts, and would not let us go without a few words which showed his kindness and his interest.”

The following year, Theodore persuaded one of his childhood friends, Isidore Goeschler, to come to the course. Miss Humann's nephew, Adolphe Carl, was already a member of the group to which were added in the following order: Alphonse Gratry, Nestor Level, Jules' brother, Jacques Mertian, Henri de Bonnechose, Eugene de Regny, all attracted by the reputation of the Christian philosopher.

### **Miss Humann's Influence**

Mr. Bautain's course was given on Toussaint Street at the home of Miss Humann. The latter kept in the background, but her extraordinary radiance could not for long remain unnoticed. Theodore had only seen her once or twice, “but,” he said, “I must confess that her dignified and

sympathic appearance had made a deep impression on me.” As for Mr. Bautain, at the time of the first meeting at Baden, he had noted: “how strongly drawn. he was .to her without any shadow of impurity being part their friendship”; and he insisted on being explicit: “She was neither beautiful nor pretty, and there was nothing attractive about her in this.regard... You ccn see then that there could not be any emotional attraction, any fascination of the imagination between a young man of my age and her. I repeat, it was solely the German philosopher that I loved in her.” At that time Miss Humann was fifty-four years old, he was twenty-five. Having become his spiritual mother, she also received a vocation of spiritual motherhood which was to belong equally to the disciples of this “elder son.”

No one has shown better than Father Gratry the very exceptional influence that she was called upon to exercise on these young intellectuals that she welcomed to her home: “As for the saint that we called our mother, the authority of her virtue, her deep piety, her luminous intelligence and her great heart, had no limit. She was the soul, the beloved soul of our little group. She was for us what in previous ages Saint Gertrude, Saint Brigid and Saint Catherine of Sienna had been for others. She was, as it were, like these great saints, a mother to God's workers. After God, it was through her that the Divine Word, ‘They had but one heart and one soul’, became a reality among us.”

Theodore, whose spiritual guide she was for eleven years, was marked for the rest of his life by this direction, inspired by the pure Gospel message which he summarized in these few lines: “No word, no explanation can give an idea of the delightful days that my friends and I spent with the mother that God had given us. We lived together in the simplicity and the joy of God's children, busy in the present, forgettmg the past and abandoning the future to the care of Divine Providence.”

The life described in this way recalls the double picture of the Acts of the Apostles: 2:42-46; 4:32-35. This model represented in the first Church was certainly reproduced in Toussaint Street as much as it is possible to reproduce it here on earth. Its members called each other

brother, and Mr. Bautain himself, whose teaching continued to form their minds, never wanted any other title.

### **The “Great Friendships”**

In this group of elite people, Theodore found what his loving nature wanted; for him, it was the time of great friendships. Joined together in the bloom of youth in a common search for God, they only became stronger through separations and the long passage of years: first of all, the two Jews, Isidore Goeschler and Jules Level, who were travelling the same spiritual stages as he himself was.

He spoke of Isidore Goeschler as a childhood friend, his “confidant.” After having been Mr. Bautain's student in the College of Strasbourg, he had thrown himself into a life of pleasure. “One day,” he wrote, “by a very special grace that at the time I called chance, because I had no knowledge of the impulse which I was following, I looked for Theodore Ratisbonne, one of my childhood friends whom I saw from time to time but from whom I had been separated because of a difference of opinion about politics. ‘Tomorrow,’ he said to me, ‘we are beginning a philosophy course with Mr. Bautain; several of our friends are following it, you ought to come too.’ ‘Yes, I answered without an instant’s hesitation, and from that time on my existence took a totally new direction.”

Attracted in his turn by Christianity, he felt it was “a waste of time to go through the conversion procedures. Theodore did not feel this way; he upheld the necessity of those procedures with a faith which we regarded as weakness. He found his strength and happiness in this ‘weakness’; he was baptized before me but our union was so deep and our beliefs so in agreement that once he was baptized my position became insupportable. I insistently asked for admittance to the Church, humanity’s salvation. I was baptized fifty days after my friend.”

Jules Level, who had brought Theodore to Mr. Bautain, characterized in a single sentence the union of the three young men: “I had a very intimate friendship with two friends, Messrs. Theodore Ratisbonne and Isidore Goeschler, who were following the same path.” Together



they collaborated on the “Philosophy of Christianity”, not only by their “Notices” but also by the letters which they jointly wrote to Mr. Bautain.

There was also a deep friendship between Theodore, Adolphe Carl and Henri de Bonnechose. When Father Carl died in 1872, Mother M. Benedicta wrote: “This death broke one more link in the chain joining Father Theodore to the early days of his life as a Christian and a priest.” As for Henri de Bonnechose, who became a Bishop and a Cardinal, he never failed to visit Father Theodore every time he came to Paris. On the occasion of his death in 1883, Father Theodore wrote the Grandbourg house: “The death of Cardinal de Bonnechose was announced to me by a touching letter from his secretary; I am going to celebrate Mass at Sion for this eminent Prince of the Church who loved our religious family so much. If I had some free time, I should send a circular letter to all our houses in honor of this great servant of God.”

Finally Eugène de Régny, whom he had introduced in 1830 to Fr. Bautain, was very dear to him, judging by the correspondence which Father Theodore carried on with him until the end of his life.

He certainly had preferences but there was nothing exclusive about his friendships; he was on cordial terms with all. When Father Gratry in 1870 became involved in the campaign being waged against the definition of Papal infallibility, he intervened to help him. Father Gratry was to die in 1872 in complete submission to the Church and in dispositions of admirable charity.

#### **IV - INTERIOR DEVELOPMENT: 1823-1830**

Contemporary documents make it possible for us to situate Theodore in the human milieu where he was to find privileged means of leading him to God: the Word, witness of others, friendship; but it would be even more interesting to be able to know something of his spiritual development. If it is not easy to determine its stages, there are at least some guidelines given in the MEMOIRS, the autobiographical notice ADEODAT, the letters of THE PHILOSOPHY OF CHRISTIANITY. The two first of these works give the impression that the transformation was instantaneous: “The living breath of his warm and

clear words dissipated without opposition the clouds which unhealthy reading had accumulated in my soul... This teaching melted the ice which covered my soul... I had found the path which leads to truth.”

The reality was quite different: Father Ratisbonne glides quickly over his personal story; he only records outstanding experiences and pays little attention to chronological order and precision. The letters in PHILOSOPHY OF CHRISTIANITY prove that he reached the faith in a series of stages; in any case, he was to say himself when he had gone part of the way: “I went from one light to another.”

### **The Philosophy of Christianity**

When on May 13, 1825, Mr. Bautain's course began, Theodore did not even believe in God. Since Isidore Goeschler only joined him the following year, the correspondence with the professor began in 1824 at the earliest. Of the forty-four letters which compose the PHILOSOPHY OF CHRISTIANITY, six are signed by Theodore. The first makes it clear that several lessons had already been given: “What struck us from the very beginning of your lessons was that you based all your teaching on books which are sacred to the Jews... It is you, a Christian philosopher, who have awakened in three Jews respect for the religion and worship of their ancestors; it is you who have reconciled them with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob... It is you who used to say: Become good Jews, truth will do the rest.”

Adeodat and his friends said that they were then attracted to Christianity and asked this question: “Is it possible to be a Christian in here, a Jew in the family circle and a deist to the world?” Of course the answer was “no.” “Jews by birth, conduct yourselves in a noble fashion before the pagans, for the deists of our day, as those of every age, are none other than pagans.” The disciples tried in vain to follow this advice; they asked the master to teach them Christian doctrine.

Henceforth, as the questions were posed to him, Mr. Bautain lectured on the following points:

- Christianity is only the completion of Judaism
- The authority which serves as foundation for the Church is the

Revelation of which the Church is the depository and the guardian

- The Church
- The knowledge of God
- The Trinity
- Faith
- Original sin and evil
- The Redemption
- Jesus Christ, God and man
- The Eucharist

The disciples dealt successively with each of these points; the correspondence, which covers the same period as the course, must have been carried on over a fairly long time; it is impossible to fix its duration since the letters are not dated. In any case, the young men came to Christianity very gradually.

If by conversion one means passing from one religion to another, the term does not apply to them; they never lived Judaism to any great extent; they did not even know it. For his part, Theodore spoke of his “instinctive attachment” to what he called the religion of his ancestors; he knew certain of its prescriptions by seeing one of his grandmothers observing them, but in his parents’ home, there was no sign of any religious practice. He found his way to Christianity starting from scepticism or from a vague deist belief.

### **Meeting the Living God**

In one of the last letters in the PHILOSOPHY OF CHRISTIANITY, Mr. Bautain answers the disciples who were worried about the problem of evil, by St. John’s word: “God is love.” Was it on this occasion that Theodore received the grace which unveiled to him the true and living God and which fact he revealed at the end of his life? “I believed very deeply in the Blessed Trinity... a mysterious triad appeared to me under all the forms of science... These symbols were not always exact from the theological point of view... but... they helped me to have a presentiment of a supreme ideal. This ideal was revealed to me in a single word: God is love. This evangelical word was at the

same time heat for my soul and light for my mind. I had an intimation of the eternal love in the mystery of the Trinity, the mystery of Creation and the reasonableness of all the acts of Redemption.”

In view of the vocabulary used, it would seem that this text alludes to one of those spiritual experiences which suddenly transform a human being, shatter his vision of the world, operate by causing a complete rupture between his anterior life and the one that he will henceforth live with a new vision. Beginning with this grace, Theodore will in future look at everything in the light of eternal Love.

The supposition of a sudden grace is rendered all the more plausible in that he had written in the margin of a lesson given by Mr. Bautain: “Do not say that man has fallen; say rather that he has been pursued, yes, pursued by his Creator, by his God. The God of Moses is a jealous God, a vengeful God, a wicked God, and with the Jewish tradition, Christianity has inherited this God.”

This course was dated 1826-1827; this was the time when Theodore was preparing for Baptism; his discovery of “God-Love” must therefore have preceded the writing of this note; in this case, it corresponded to a time of great anguish in his life, a time of revolt against the problem of evil, which made the young man’s development very human. But it may also be, in view of the chronological precision which sometimes is evident in the documents, that this course was given one or two years earlier; this and the course of 1833 – on the teaching of French philosophy in the nineteenth century, alone bear dates; maybe the dates are not correct?

### **Knowing Jesus Christ**

God had answered all Theodore's questions by revealing that He is love. It would not be long before He made Christ known to him. The MEMOIRS clearly state the circumstances of this new grace, and this was, certainly, a sudden one. “I already had a strong faith in Jesus Christ and yet I could not bring myself to pray to Him, nor even to pronounce His name... I had fallen ill in a Swiss hotel, and my vivid imagination made me think I was going to die... The name of Jesus

Christ came from my heart to my lips in a cry of distress... I felt at home with the name of Christ, from then on I always pronounced it with confidence.”

From this time on, he did not separate Christ and Mary in his mind. This sense of the close relationship between Mary and her Son was one of the characteristics of his life of faith. He wrote: “The closer we come to Jesus Christ, the more do we feel the need of honouring His Mother... It is through Mary’s maternity that we come to know Jesus Christ; it is she who forges our links with Him. Through her, God became the Son of man; through her, man becomes a child of God. Thus the honor paid to Mary, when it is deep and intelligent, is an indication of the depth of our faith, the condition of spiritual progress, the secret of true spiritual happiness.” To appreciate the validity of this attitude we must remember that at the time Father Theodore expressed it, Marian devotion did not have the sound theological base it has today. His meeting with Christ moved him to the depths of his being; his whole spirituality was founded on the love of Christ; about this love he was to say: “If I live, it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me. My present earthly life is lived in faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself up for me.”

However, the early fervour of this period in Geneva was short-lived and soon after Theodore, left without direction and without priestly help, not knowing what steps to take to be baptized, suffered a period of irresolution.

At the same time he was going through a painful time of indecision caused by a situation which daily became more untenable: while his Christian faith was growing, and he assisted clandestinely at Church feasts, he was still the director of the Jewish schools, a position given to him by his father. It was impossible to live this double life for any length of time; it was above all impossible for him not to make a public declaration of the truth which had invaded his soul, not to sacrifice everything for it.

## The Direction of Miss Humann

Theodore thus discovered through suffering that to become a full-fledged member of God's Kingdom, he would have to completely stop playing the role which was no longer his. In addition, his family's plans for his marriage troubled his heart. After months of indecision and interior struggle, he asked Miss Humann for advice. The advice given by Fr. Bautain had been of no avail. She was able to give him the advice which restored his peace of soul, and at that moment he had an intuition that she would be the instrument to bring him to God: "A supernatural bond was formed then between my soul and hers."

Henceforth she was the person who initiated him into the Christian life, brought him from a purely speculative faith to one that was all-consuming. By showing him how to put into practice what he had accepted in his mind and heart, she made it possible for him to see that to accept faith in God meant to be willing to undertake a completely new life; faith does not mean to integrate God into one's own personal way of life, but rather to discover one's own place in God's world, to recognize that one has been possessed by Him, hence to change one's perspective; in a word, it is to be converted in the biblical sense of the term. A note of February 1826 gives a concrete example of the direction given by Miss Humann and the letter that Miss Humann wrote to Theodore makes clear that she had a very high sense of her mission: "You are for me a soul who has been very specially confided to my care."

"So," said Father Theodore, "contact with this very holy mother increased my faith and I ardently wanted to receive baptism." He received it on April 14th, 1827; he had to wait until September 12th of the same year to make his First Communion. Baptism put the seal of Christ and of the Church on him; it thus set him apart; its demands were not slow in imposing themselves. "I understood now the meaning of Christ's word: 'I have come to bring a sword on earth'." Theodore went forward into a place where his loved ones could not follow him and this led to rupture – rupture with the synagogue, rupture, at least temporarily, with his family. Miss Humann welcomed him and supported him

in his suffering. We are reminded of what Edith Stein said: “One of the greatest sufferings in life is to be interiorly separated from those we love, because they can no longer follow us; but such sufferings can also be very fruitful.”

## V — PRIESTHOOD V — STRASBOURG: 1830-1840

From the moment of his baptism, Theodore felt a call to devote himself exclusively to the service of God and mankind by becoming a priest. If the formation he was given at the seminary of Molsheim left much to be desired, God was working in his heart and was beginning to awaken in him the love for Israel which would give direction to his whole life. He received minor orders on October 28th, 1828, and priestly ordination on December 18th, 1830.

“The priest and the altar are one and the same thing.” These words of Father Theodore, written twenty-seven years after his ordination, show the dominant characteristic of his spirituality: to enter ever more deeply into the mystery of the Eucharist which is “communion with the sufferings of Christ and His Resurrection.” After the joy of his ordination, he went to join his brothers, the Priests of St. Louis, in the minor seminary at Strasbourg whose direction had been confided to them. Put in charge of the eighth form, he wrote to Father de Régny: “I've been told that you're working hard and how wise you are! I, for my part am paying painfully for the years I wasted in the world; for me it is a hard purgatory to have to begin learning the alphabet in my old age. This makes me long all the more for heaven where there will be no irregular verbs, and where the language of the angels will not have any odd constructions! Oh! how joyously we shall rest in the eternal tent; after having splashed about for so long in the mud – and the grammar – of this world!... Pray for me, dear brother; I need it badly.”

### **Difficulties with Fr. Bautain**

It cost him a great deal to be tied down by teaching when his whole attraction was for the pastoral ministry; but even more painful was the

misunderstanding which crept into his relations with Fr. Bautain. He had for the master an admiration and a gratitude whose fidelity is attested to in the MEMOIRS. However, they were never intimate friends; their temperaments, as Father Theodore remarked, did not harmonize: "I found no relief in my contacts with Fr. Bautain, whose stiffness and severity contrasted with my own sensitivity which was much too natural." This severity was only on the surface: "In spite of a somewhat cold and austere appearance," it was said after his death, "Fr. Bautain possessed a rare kindness of heart." But his kindness lacked a certain warmth which would have made him a friend and advisor for Theodore as well as the incomparable master he always was. In addition, they held differing views: Fr. Bautain saw "the brothers" as engaged solely in teaching and he could not understand why Theodore would want to do anything else. In another letter to Father Carl, Fr. Bautain made a rather severe judgment on Theodore: true, certainly, when he talked about his noisy, lively nature and his basic pride, but untrue when Fr. Bautain attributes to this pride the young priest's inability to adapt to his teaching duties. Father de Régný assures that "Father Theodore had always shown his predilection for the pastoral ministry." Fr. Bautain could not be unaware of this. He also wrote: "Theodore thinks that he is ill." Yet Father Theodore was not in the habit of sparing himself; Miss Humann, anxious for his health, had been sometimes obliged to temper his ardor. His illness could have been quite real, perhaps even serious.

Knowing his desires, the parish priest of Strasbourg Cathedral asked Bishop de Trevern to appoint Theodore as a curate to him; the plan was carried out but it was not regarded very favorably by Fr. Bautain. If Father Ratisbonne suffered from this, he found, on the other hand great happiness in his parish duties. Many people came to confessional; he felt a special attraction for the direction of souls who wanted to follow "the Lord with all possible perfection." It was at this time that Miss Weywada, a future Religious of Sion, chose him as a director; other young girls imitated her.



## The Priests of St. Louis in Disfavor: 1854-1840

“The staggering blow” which struck the Priests of St. Louis came to snatch Father Ratisbonne from his apostolate. Already in 1831 some members of the Strasbourg clergy had lodged complaints against the teaching of philosophy in the minor seminary.

In 1854 Fr. Bautain and his co-workers were deprived of their posts and were forbidden to preach and hear confessions. Miss Humann – for whom Bishop de Trevern had a great respect – had the courage to write a letter in which she denounced in the strongest terms the plots which led to the young priests losing their Bishop's confidence; the latter, old and timorous, nevertheless maintained his position.

In his MEMOIRS, Father Ratisbonne summed up the whole sad affair in one carefully written page; he paid tribute to Fr. Bautain as a “man of genius... who never failed to appreciate the logical strength of reason; but he was wrong in clinging tenaciously to formulas which were too restrictive.”

One can guess how he and his friends suffered; the only outcome of such a trial must be either heroic obedience or defection. While during this same year 1834 Félicité de La Mennais, placed in similar circumstances, decided for revolt by publishing WORDS OF A BELIEVER, all the Priests of St. Louis submitted.

In order to keep busy they founded schools in Strasbourg. Father Ratisbonne, who had not been involved as were Fathers Carl and Goeschler because he had not taught philosophy, could have broken away but his faithful affection for his brothers would not allow him to leave them especially at a time of trouble. Forbidden all pastoral ministry, he devoted himself completely to the elementary class confided to him.

In the course of the following years he fought many severe spiritual battles. Tempted to complain “he reproached the Gospel which did not give him the hundred fold promised.” His nature and his early education made self-sacrifice “slow and difficult” for him. As time passed, he realized that a work of purification was being accomplished

in him. “I did not know at the time that God had destined me to become the father of a great religious family; it is certainly with this vocation in view that God wanted to eradicate from my soul all that might hinder the new life.” But at the actual moment, he said he would have given in to discouragement if Miss Humann had not taught him to probe more deeply the mystery of the cross. He came out of this crisis strengthened and renewed. When in 1846 this “mother”, who had baptized him and shown him how to live a Christian life, died, he was able henceforth to face all the difficulties that the future held without seeking human support.

Shortly before her death, Miss Humann had named a small team of the Priests of St. Louis to direct the society. Father Bautain replaced Father Ratisbonne, who had been appointed by Miss Humann, by Father de Bonnechose. Father Ratisbonne felt this substitution keenly, especially as it seemed to him to be a betrayal of the final wish of the person most responsible for the unity of the group. He tried to lessen his pain by throwing himself into his work; pen in hand, he studied Holy Scripture, the Fathers of the Church, Christian jurists and philosophers, spiritual authors and historians. From 1836 to 1840 he wrote the Life of Saint Bernard, in the introduction of which he developed the idea of Unity which is the main idea of the book. Bishop Perrone, in a letter to Fr. Bautain, gave the following appreciation of the volume: “I have just finished reading the Life of Saint Bernard by Father Ratisbonne. I am really delighted with this work which revealed to me the beautiful soul of its author. His grace of style, his profound knowledge of the subject he treats and the enjoyment which the reader experiences have delighted me and filled me with true esteem for the young writer. Oh! may he soon enrich France and the Christian world with other equally talented works... I have made arrangements for a good Italian translation of the Life of Saint Bernard; it will probably be published in Milan.”

The author dedicated his book to Fr. Bautain: “You have been the instrument used by God to transmit life, light and happiness to me... Seventeen years ago today divine mercy, taking compassion on my profound wretchedness, directed me to your lessons. Since that time I

have always been with you, and my soul, united with yours, has been encouraged by your example as it has been enlightened by your teaching." This homage was the expression of sentiments which remained constant even after the events which were to separate the disciple from the master.

## **VI — FULFILLMENT OF HIS MISSION: PARIS 1840**

### **N. D. des Victoires: 1840-1841 — La Providence: 1841**

In 1840, after the Priests of St. Louis and their Bishop had been reconciled, they took charge of the college of Juilly under the direction of Fr. Bautain. Father Ratisbonne became a co-worker of Father Desgenettes at Our Lady of Victory, "with the full consent of his brothers," writes Father de Régny. Henceforth the future founder of Sion will be more and more directed towards the mission which had been glimpsed at Molsheim. The following year he was chaplain at the orphanage of La Providence and this work, which responded to his love for the poor and for children, gave him great happiness: "La Providence was for me the school which provided the experience which until that time I had not had."

### **Apparition of Our Lady: January 20th, 1842**

Then there occurred the incomparable, unforeseen event that was the Apparition of January 20th, 1842. Alphonse who "understood everything," was sure that the unusual grace accorded to him was not for himself alone. One of the traits of his character was that he wanted everything done immediately, so he urged his brother to do something for the poor Jewish families whose misery he had seen in Strasbourg and in Rome. The great Jewish organizations which today are spread throughout the world did not yet exist and private efforts, like those of the Ratisbonne family, could not meet the needs.

Father Ratisbonne accepted Alphonse's idea as a message from heaven; but he would not undertake anything unless commissioned by the Church. This commission was given to him in the course of a trip to Rome in June-July 1842, by Pope Gregory XVI. On his return, he

ran into opposition from Father Bautain; the latter thought the mission ill-timed; he believed that God's promises for Israel would be fulfilled only "at the end of the world." Father Theodore, on the other hand, saw a possibility of working "for the realization of these promises," and he believed that he was called to it. In his anxiety, he asked the Blessed Virgin to give him a sign and his prayer was granted. God's Will had been made clear to him, but now he was faced with an unwelcome alternative: either to evade his call or to act contrary to the wish of Father Bautain who was still his superior.

A decision taken by the Priests of St. Louis at this time relieved him of his embarrassment. "The wish of the members of the community of Juilly," writes Father de Régny, "was to pronounce vows in the hands of their superior." The ceremony was fixed for September 16th, 1842. Father Bautain told Father Ratisbonne of this plan only the day before. Father Ratisbonne did not feel he could make such a binding decision in such haste, and when his request for a postponement was refused, he withdrew. He found the separation very painful, but his call, so different from that of his brothers, made it inevitable. In any case, he would need all the freedom of action possible to organize the small community which was beginning to take shape around him.

### **The Foundation of the Congregation of Our Lady of Sion: 1843**

Having no desire to anticipate God's plans, Father Theodore had no thought of forming a congregation, but he saw an indication of God's will in the fact that Mrs. (*Sophie*) Stouhlen and her fellow-workers eagerly desired the religious life. Looking upon the Blessed Virgin as the real foundress, he consecrated his work to her under the title of Our Lady of Sion. "However," he remarked, "names do not make communities. Names must be justified and given life by the spirit which they express. In this respect, the only thing I had in mind was for a purely Christian life, based on evangelical charity." In these few words he stated his whole ideal as founder – charity, the Gospel, that is to say the very essence of the religious life which is nothing other than a "purely Christian life." As for prescriptions and directives which become

increasingly necessary as a congregation's numbers grow, they must flow from the Gospel and have charity as a goal. This ideal found concrete expression as perfectly as was humanly possible in the primitive Church, first of all in the community at Jerusalem which Father Theodore unceasingly offered for the imitation of his religious.

When Sion began, he was forty years old. Suffering had expanded his strong personality by developing gentleness and humility. The Sisters who knew him assure us that his portraits do not do him justice; they make him appear austere whereas in reality he was always smiling and his expression was one of kindness. As soon as he appeared among the children they ran up to him. His simple words were always persuasive, going directly to the point. When he was a seminarian, his friend Nestor Level wrote: "Last week I went to Molsheim to hear Theodore. I was very pleased. I think he has the makings of a good preacher. He is full of life and I was very impressed with him." He took his subjects mostly from the Scriptures, both Testaments. From the very beginning of the congregation, he used to comment every Sunday on the day's Gospel. The first children of Sion belonged to poor Jewish families who had appealed to Father Ratisbonne. None of them was ever initiated into the Catholic religion without the consent of her parents. Soon Christian families were also asking him to admit their daughters, and very soon it was a tradition that girls of every religion and of every country would be accepted. Later on, in Eastern Europe, Turkey and Tunisia... parents of every religion: Jews, Muslims, Orthodox, Protestant, unhesitatingly confided their children to the Congregation, certain that their religious convictions would be respected. Father Theodore bequeathed this motto to his daughters: "Remain firm in your own faith without attempting to impose it on others."

The community grew slowly; many postulants left, unable to cope with the difficulties of a work which was only beginning. The religious lived very poorly, first to follow the lessons of the Gospel and of the primitive Church, and also because they had no choice. The future seemed very shaky; to "hang on" often required the founder's limitless confidence in God's Providence.

## Foundation of the Priests of Our Lady of Sion: 1852

The foundation of the Priests – Society of St. Peter of Sion – was still more difficult. This was due largely to the fact that the vocation for Israel, new in the Church, was not easy to understand or even to explain, because on the one hand, prejudice had piled up over the centuries, and on the other hand, there was a “mystery” surrounding the destiny of the Jewish people. Today the Second Vatican Council and the Ecumenical Movement have cast a new light on this vocation: to be called to live a life of Christ for His people is to bear witness to the truth that Israel is the root of the Church, so that, in mutual respect and honesty, Jews and Christians may discover each other in God’s plan of love for all mankind.

### VII — CONCLUSION

MY MEMOIRS gives us an outline of Father Theodore’s spiritual portrait as he was during the last days of a life always consecrated to the Lord. He could have made his own Saint Paul’s profession of faith: “For His sake, I gave up everything... to gain Christ and to be found in Him, no longer having my own personal justice, that of the Law, but justification through faith in Christ.”

The most striking thing in his account is the intensity of his faith which saw God and His action in all things: this was a gift of the Holy Spirit rewarding his pure and unceasing love of truth. Since he had received the great grace of being able to see Jesus Christ as the outstanding sign of God’s love he could also recognize, in the light of the Redemption and of the Gospel, all the other signs which God gives His creatures; with joy and endless gratitude he found these signs in his past life. It is a sign of a profound faith “to recognize the smallest evidence of God's love.”

Before all else his faith pointed to two “signs” unbreakably linked to Christ:

- His Mother whom He gave to us from the cross: “This is your Mother; accept her as your own.”
- His Church, “That great family whose father is St. Peter.”

Christ's life is communicated to us through faith; but we can only receive it if we love all our brothers as Christ loved them. The naturally warm affection which Father Theodore showed to all those with whom he came in contact was made even greater by the grace of the Holy Spirit and by his sharing in the love of Christ. His kindness was extended to all but it was coupled with austere expectations; he would not tolerate mediocrity and wanted to lead souls very far in the path of self-forgetfulness and love. Humility which is the foundation of love had little by little penetrated very deeply into his soul. By diverting his attention from himself and keeping his eye fixed on God, it reduced the "basic pride" of his "wild nature." Thus it made of him, like Moses, "the gentlest of men." This transformation was the result of twenty years of unremitting struggle and there were glimpses of this struggle in the manner in which he spoke about the graces he had received.

"The man who is inspired by the same will as Jesus Christ enters into union with Him and becomes His brother, member of His Body, sharing the Spirit, child of the same Father, co-worker with Christ." Father Theodore wrote these lines during the first years of his priestly life. From the time of his conversion, he had such an acute awareness of the one only thing necessary – "Do always in union with Jesus Christ whatever is pleasing to the Father" – that he became suspicious of all his own personal initiatives. Contemplative by nature, he would take no decision without first having prayed long over it. To bring Sion into being he dared to ask for a sign.

The fundamental mark of his character is certainly this very biblical attitude of total submission to the Absolute Who is truth and love. That was the secret of his serenity, of his joy, so evident to all who met him. He often said in speech and writing: "Peace and joy" and it is again the words of St. Paul which best express his contemplative Wonder: "How rich are the depths of God – how deep His wisdom and knowledge – and how impossible to penetrate His motives or understand His methods! Who could ever know the mind of the Lord? Who could ever be His counsellor? Who could ever give Him or lend Him anything? All that exists comes from Him; all is by Him and for Him. To Him be glory forever. Amen."

## PART II —- MEMOIRS"<sup>(1)</sup>

Dictated by Father Theodore Ratisbonne to Mother Mary Benedicta – Grandbourg, 1882-1883

Here there appears the bond of a filial relationship with many others, dating to the memorable union at Turkenstein.

Father Grandvau, one of the directors of Saint Sulpice seminary, who has been my spiritual director for several years, has urged me to put into writing the events having anything to do with my conversion and the beginning of the Congregation of Our Lady of Sion.

I have delayed this work for a long time, and for several reasons I did not want to undertake it. First of all, my health has been considerably weakened by many illnesses so that I can scarcely write any longer and my voice is too weak to dictate. My memory is also failing and I cannot get help from any documents since I have never in my life kept a diary. I have some notes on my trip to Rome in 1863. If I ever took any other notes, I have lost them. I remember important actions and events, especially those which touched me, but I have never been able to remember dates and the chronological order of things. I shall only relate then, as best I can, the memories which come to mind; and as these pages are destined only for my spiritual daughters, I shall dictate them very simply, without worrying about the niceties of literature; my sole purpose is to glorify God, in however limited a manner, and to celebrate His eternal mercy.

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Since I must speak of my conversion and of the mission which Providence deigned to assign to me, I must tell about a memorable event which happened before my birth, and which is closely linked with my vocation. Here is the story of this event as it was related in a document about the portrait of Bishop Joseph Louis Colmar, Bishop of Mayence, (*Mainz, Germany*) addressed to the religious of Our Lady of Sion by Father de Régny, chaplain to the Ladies of St. Louis at Jully.

“On Friday June 23rd, 1797, feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, while France was in the throes of the French Revolution, there occurred



in a small chapel lost in the summits of the Vosges, at Turkenstein, one of those events which enrapture the angels and which are the origin of a long succession of blessings for the whole world. Three people vowed their hearts, their strength and their whole life to the Christian instruction of youth and to the care of the sick, putting their union under the protection of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. These three people were Father Colmar who was also the spiritual director, Madeleine Louise Humann and Marie Thérèse Breck.

“Joseph Louis Colmar, who was born at Strasbourg on June 22nd 1760, came from a modest and respectable family. Quick, intelligent and affectionate, the child grew under the protection of parents who took their Christian duties seriously and he felt called by grace to serve God, without any struggle and as if it were part of the natural development of his person. After outstanding studies at the seminary, he received Holy Orders in 1784. Having then been appointed professor at the college, he became well-known for his persistence in promoting the study of Greek and of history. But his preference was for pastoral ministry, and to his work as professor he added that of curate in Saint Stephen's parish. The care of the sick, the administration of the Sacraments, the usual preaching were not enough to satisfy a charity which yearned to undertake every type of work: ministry to the military, youth groups, charitable organizations – Father Colmar animated them all. The success of his preaching was such that parishes vied with one another to have him, in city and country, preach on feast days and at religious clothings. In this way passed the six or seven years preceding the Revolution. The young priest, who “made himself all things to all men”, was unknowingly preparing himself for the more difficult work of a frightening time of persecution.

“In 1790 and 1791 the Civil Constitution of the Clergy and the oath demanded of them led to the dispersal of the clergy of Strasbourg. Father Colmar, forced to cross to the other side of the Rhine, could not remain more than six months outside his own country. He came back to Strasbourg, resolved to face deportation and the scaffold in order to work for the salvation of souls deprived of all spiritual help. He had

the natural qualities needed for this splendid apostolate. He had unswerving courage, a shrewd mind and a knowledge of men. However, it was as a priest that he wielded an irresistible influence, and so ardent was his faith that he regarded martyrdom as the crown of the Christian life. In this way he lived for ten years disguising himself in a thousand ways, sometimes as a soldier, sometimes as an officer, as a mason, a coal-heaver, going from one hiding-place to another in the main houses of the city; always hunted, there was a price on his head; he was often discovered but always escaped, sometimes in rather wonderful ways; and he continued to fulfill his duties of priestly ministry in the midst of all these dangers. If he escaped death on numerous occasions, it was certainly through divine intervention regarded by his friends as miraculous. Such was Father Colmar.

“Madeleine Louise Humann was born in 1766, on September 29th, feast of Saint Michael the Archangel. Her parents, humble farmers with a patriarchal way of life, were richer in virtue than in this world's goods; yet their descendants were able to rise to the highest social positions. Madeleine Louise, the eldest of numerous children, from her earliest years gave evidence of extraordinary intelligence; she taught herself and directed the education of her younger brothers and sisters. To her capacity for study was added a strong and solid piety. In 1788, she was twenty-two when she tested her vocation to the religious life and entered the convent of Our Lady at Strasbourg, the community founded by Saint Pierre Fourier. But the Revolution which broke out at this time upset this plan.

“Obliged to return home, Miss Humann suffered a long period of discouragement and depression which she overcame only when she asked for help from Father Colmar.

“This distinguished director soon recognized that he was dealing with an unusual soul, capable of great things. And indeed, at the peak of the Revolution, she became the centre of all the priest's works of charity.

“Therese Breck was a fairly wealthy young woman from Frankfort,

Widow of a French officer and mother of three small children. In 1795 she made the acquaintance of Miss Humann at Strasbourg and soon developed for her a deep, childlike affection. Mrs. Breck's gentleness, piety and humility were the basis of her complete self-forgetfulness and unending devotedness.

“Miss Louise Humann remained with her family at the beginning of the troubles and she succeeded in keeping them unharmed through her intelligence, her courageous firmness, her sharp mind and her piety. At the same time she was, as we have said, a great help to Father Colmar in his ministry. However, after Mrs. Breck came under Father Colmar's direction, the two ladies decided to live together; and it was in their home that at the most difficult moments of his life, Father Colmar hid. Their house became a secret centre of religion for the whole city of Strasbourg. The united young people of the two families Humann and Breck soon attracted other young people. Their home became a centre of Christian conferences in which the appealing and solid teaching of Miss Humann exercised its own apostolate. Here they celebrated festivals and first communions in a temporary chapel which had to be dismantled at once when the exuberant joy of the fearless young aroused the suspicions of the neighbors. There the faithful who had been notified came to seek help for the dying; and there, too, as in a sanctuary, was kept the Blessed Sacrament. In effect, this sanctified house saw scenes from the Primitive Church renewed within its walls; here were to be found the same ardent faith, the same charity, the same pure union of hearts.

**1797** <sup>(2)</sup>

“The principal event we want to mention took place at this time. During the first days of June 1797, it was decided that the whole family would go to Turkenstein accompanied by Father Colmar whose state of health required some rest. Turkenstein was the name of a property which Mrs. Breck had bought as a way of investing part of her dwindling fortune. As this property did not produce the hoped-for revenue, it was sold again later. One might have said that it had been

acquired for the sole purpose of providing background for the pact of which we are going to speak.

“Turkenstein is situated on one of the summits of the Vosges, the Donon, quite close to the commune of Framont (department of the Vosges). The residence is built a few steps from the ruins of an ancient fortress where there was a little round chapel whose back was against the rock. The trip to the country was hailed by the children and still more by those who planned it. While the children divided their time between religious exercises, study and long hikes, Father Colmar, Mrs. Breck and Miss Humann filled their time with conferences which responded to the attraction which God was giving them. The Feast of Corpus Christi came and was celebrated with a holy joy in this spot unknown to the world. There was a procession in the courtyard of the property; the children carried wreaths of flowers before the Heavenly King, amid the splendor of a magnificent landscape.

“The day following the Octave was the feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus; almost all day long, Father Colmar and his two spiritual daughters remained in prayer in the chapel. Towards evening they signed the pact which, like a small seed planted in the ground, grows with time and under God's action, produces a tree laden with branches, flowers and fruit.

“Here is an extract from this pact:

“The spiritual father speaking to his daughters said:

“Long live Jesus!

“It has seemed good to you for your own salvation and the complete success of the work you are undertaking for the glory of our Divine Master, that the only thing missing is an inseparable union on earth such as you hope to have in heaven.

“I, your spiritual father, have the same thought which, I firmly believe, comes from God, and for some time it has seemed to me that to have you separated would be a misfortune for all and a sure means of opposing God's will. So for a long time I have been praying in this fashion:

“Lord Jesus, grant that their hearts may be one as you and your Father are one.

“But as everything that must endure has to have a solid foundation, I think I should present to you the following plan and that you should sign it in memory of your resolutions and promises:

“I. It will not be only between you two, my friends, but between your father and you that this inseparable union will exist since God has designed to use him as the means of making His designs known to you, and of encouraging you to carry them out faithfully and lovingly. Therefore our three hearts will henceforth be only one in the Lord. We promise to remember this with gratitude each time that we kiss the crucifix which each of us will wear over his heart once I have blessed them.

“II. Since it is the devil’s habit to try to separate those who are united for the greater glory of God, in order to circumvent his stratagems, we promise, burying ourselves in the adorable Heart of Jesus, that this union will be life-long, leaving it up to the Master to re-unite us for eternity.

“III. This indissoluble union will not eliminate momentary separations for the greater glory of God when circumstances require them.

“IV. As of now, I have no further lights except that God wishes this union so that we may minister to the sick and especially for the instruction of the young who are completely neglected. It must also be said that even when education is given, it often lacks a solid basis in religion.

“V. Our refuge in difficulties and temptations will be the adorable Heart of Jesus whose love we want to make known throughout the universe, and whose feast will be for us a most solemn one so that we may be given the necessary graces.

“This is all, my children, it seems to me that God has given me for you for the present. If, as I hope, this is your sincere resolve, sign this document before God and before your spiritual father, and let us look upon ourselves henceforth as eternally united in Jesus and Mary.

“On returning to Strasbourg these Christian women were all the more faithful to the works of charity that they had undertaken. At this time there was some relaxation in the persecution of priests. Churches re-opened; but the respite was short-lived. On 18 fructidor (September 4th, 1797) there was a frightening new outbreak during which Father Colmar more than once just barely escaped capture; however, the thought of the scaffold never interfered with his zeal. He even went into the prison of one of his brother priests, Father Starck, who was to be executed for having performed his priestly ministry.

“However, in the autumn of 1800, the persecution ended; the First Consul ordered the churches opened. Then our apostle, though scarcely recovered from an illness brought on by the hardships he had endured, gave his whole time to healing the wounds suffered by souls. Everyone sought his help and no one could understand how he could do all that was asked of him. His influence was so powerful that, simply by preaching a sermon in the cathedral, he could calm the opposition of all the Catholics of Strasbourg who were against the installation of Saurine, a priest who had taken the oath and who was an ex-Bishop of Landes whom the Pope, after the Concordat, consented to accept as Bishop of Strasbourg if he were willing to retract his past actions. But great was the sorrow of the faithful and still greater the sorrow of the spiritual father when the newspapers announced that Father Colmar had been nominated to the See of Mayence. He did his best to refuse; the First Consul would accept no resistance. Father Colmar was consecrated at Paris by the Bishop of Trèves with whom he was always on the most friendly terms. Returning to Strasbourg, he was the recipient of the most affectionate proofs of the filial love of all classes of society. However, he finally left for Mayence some days after Christmas 1801.

“His nomination to the See of Mayence was a bitter blow to the two souls who now saw themselves separated from their spiritual father. They believed that their small society, founded at Turkenstein, had completed its work, and they seriously thought of burying their dead hopes in a convent in Vienna. But Providence, who, far from being overcome by events, dominates and directs them, had other ideas.

“Towards the end of 1802, during a trip which Miss Humann made to Mayence, she was told of the need for a Christian educational establishment for young German and French girls who had no school which would cater to people in their position. Thus the Josephine boarding school was founded; it was given this name because the Empress gave it her very special protection. This establishment directed by Miss Humann with the help of Mrs. Breck gave remarkable results; Bishop Colmar was the centre of all the good that was accomplished there.

“This is not the place to tell the story of Bishop Colmar's term as bishop. It left permanent effects throughout the country and one of them was the seminary which gave so many holy priests to Germany. The Bishop died a holy death on December 15th, 1818.

“This was the time when the boats from the Rhine were bringing back to Mayence the remnants of an army overcome by typhus. The city was afraid of contagion and no one came to disembark the unfortunate soldiers.

“Then the holy bishop, accompanied by three seminarians, came to care for them himself and brought them away in an ambulance. It was while performing this heroic act of charity that he contracted the illness which killed him a few days later. The young seminarians who had voluntarily joined him in this act of devotedness were Fathers Raess, Weiss and Geissen. Later on the first became Bishop of Strasbourg, the second Bishop of Spire and the last Cardinal-Archbishop of Cologne.

“In the month of March 1819, Bishop Colmar's spiritual daughters left Mayence, their only idea being to bury their life in silence and seclusion in Strasbourg. Once again they thought that the work begun in Turkenstein had ended with the life of the beloved spiritual father, and that this work had been destined by God only for their personal sanctification and the good of the many young people who had been confided to them. But once again, Providence showed that it had other views.

“In 1820, a seemingly chance circumstance introduced Miss Hu-

mann to Mr. Louis Bautain, a philosophy professor in the Faculty of Arts in Strasbourg.”

This professor, who was still very young yet famous when he left the Normal School, was teaching, as was his fellow-disciple, Mr. Cousin, anti-Christian doctrines. But his conversations with Miss Humann soon changed the tenor of his ideas. Gifted with superior intelligence and an honest heart and also touched by divine grace, he understood the beauties and truth of Christianity. From that point on, his teaching, which had been eagerly followed by an elite following, became completely Christian. The philosopher, now a believing and practising Christian, became the disciple and spiritual son of Miss Humann. Soon he joined the survivors of the small society of Turkenstein in Miss Humann's home, on Toussaint Street.

Here there appears the bond of a filial relationship with many others, dating to the memorable pact at Turkenstein.

But before talking about my relationships with Mr. Bautain and Miss Humann which led to my conversion and my vocation, it seems to me that I should say something of the early years of my life since the events and actions result one from the other and bear the imprint of providential action.

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Very often I was seized by a profound spirit of prayer.

My early education was badly neglected. I was sent to several schools in succession, one more insignificant than the other, and finally to the Strasbourg high school where I spent the days of my childhood in utter uselessness.<sup>(3)</sup> Since my parents had no intentions for my future, they left me completely without direction. I was thoroughly disgusted with studying. When I was about thirteen or fourteen years of age, my brother Gustave and I were sent to a boarding school in Frankfort. It was a very odd Jewish boarding school. Boys and girls were educated in the same house. It had attracted my parents because among the students were the son and daughter of Baron Salomon de Rothschild as



well as other children from the richest Jewish families such as the Erlangers, the Sternes, the Beyfus and others whom I have forgotten. I was miserable in the midst of this undisciplined youth, I often cried, I suffered from indescribable home-sickness. We received no religious instruction; the staff only taught us Hebrew; there was no question of God nor of religion.

However, a secret melancholia attracted me to recollection and very often a profound spirit of prayer seized me. My soul was like a flower which opens in the sunshine. I had a vague idea of the meaning of love since I was at the age when the soul feels an irresistible urge to love. I did not know that one should direct this gift to God. My precocious passion found its object in the sister of one of my friends, Betty de Rothschild. We were the same age and it still seems to me that we were equally innocent. We told each other our feelings and we wrote a mutual promise of marriage. I mention this incident because of the influence it had on my adolescence. The memory of this naive promise kept me faithful and saved me from many mistakes. After returning to Strasbourg and separated from my idol, her memory stayed with me as did an insurmountable need to love, a need which later was gloriously fulfilled when I understood and accepted Christian doctrine.

**1817**

I was fifteen when my mother came to take me home from the Saxe boarding school to bring me back to Strasbourg. I was given tutors for private lessons who taught me scarcely anything. At the end of a year, it was decided to send me to Paris to the Fould Banking House so that I could learn the fundamentals of banking and of finance. This was 1818.

**1818**

This year is a memorable one for me for on December 8th I lost my mother. She died at Strasbourg while I was in Paris... I had a tremendous love for my mother and this filial love served me as religion.

I was sixteen; I was inconsolable at the loss of my mother and my

sorrow was increased by my self-pity. In these dispositions I entered the Fould Banking Co., then one of the leading banking houses in Paris.

This was a luxurious, opulent home. The Foulds were old friends of my parents. At this period the family was composed of the old father Fould, a fine but very eccentric man. He had three sons: Benoit, Achille and Louis who, following the example of their father, had no religion; and two daughters, Rose and Violette. Later on the first became the ultra-wealthy Mrs. Furtado; the second died when she was very young. I was treated as one of the family.

The first word addressed to me by old Mr. Fould when I became part of his family will give some idea of the direction which I was to receive. "Son, have you read Rob Roy?" "I've never heard of it," I answered. "In that case, read Rob Roy; that's where you must begin." I had no access to Walter Scott's novels and I did not follow the reading plan which the old banker gave me. I did take other books from the same library and from the same school, without any discrimination. However, I do remember having read with a great deal of interest Chesterfield's Letters translated from English. These letters give sound advice to the young man wishing to live in the world and to carve out a career there.

Yet these readings and the office work to which I was bound left me empty and cold. I had no interest in business and I understood absolutely nothing about it. I must also confess that I have always had a strange aversion for money; the very thought of working to get interest made me blush. In any case I was very well off since I had almost unlimited credit in the Fould bank; all I had to do was to appear at the wicket to receive the sums of money I wanted. I never abused this credit since I never spent anything on amusement. I was free, without supervision, without direction, without religion; the only money I spent was for the English and music lessons which tutors came to give me. I was surrounded by all kinds of temptations and I do not know how I escaped them. I'm wrong when I say that I had no religion: I did have one: it was the memory of my mother. I was overcome by secret mourning and I had only depressing thoughts. I refused to accompany the

Fould family to dances and to the theatre; the parties whose reports reached me made me even more depressed; I spent my evenings foolishly with Miss Violette who was suffering from a fatal illness. During these dark months, I became dreamy, romantic and almost poetical. I enjoyed the country more than Paris; I often went to Passy where the Fould family had rented a magnificent castle and I found my greatest happiness walking along the paths of the park where I shed tears on hearing the song of the birds and the vibrant echo of the winds in the trees. How happy I would have been at this time if I had some religion! But I knew of no person and no book who could teach me about divine truths. In any case I would have disdainfully turned from anyone who mentioned Christianity to me since, prejudiced as I was, I thought of it as idolatry; as for modern Judaism, I was disgusted with it and ashamed of it and the synagogue was a barrier between God and me.<sup>(4)</sup>

Nevertheless I decided to take a tutor in religion. A young modern rabbi came once or twice a week to teach me to pray in Hebrew, and he explained – indifferently well – the meaning of the Jewish feasts and ceremonies. These lessons did not arouse the slightest interest in me. However, I do remember one day when we were discussing the promise of the Messiah, I said to the rabbi: “When will this promise be realized?” He shrugged his shoulders. I continued: “Christians believe that the Messiah has already come. Could they be right?” He made a sign of denial; as I insisted, he said angrily: “If you want to believe it, I cannot stop you!”

Needless to say, these lessons made absolutely no impression on me except that, as a matter of conscience, every day I read long Hebrew prayers for my mother.

**1820 or 1821**

This meaningless life occupied several years. The Foulds saw that I was unutterably bored and they advised my parents to bring me back to Strasbourg. I therefore came home when I was eighteen or nineteen years old; I knew no more about banking than when I left. Yet this was

the career mapped out for me. My father's brother was the second head of the house and he was not happy about my return; he seemed afraid of having a number of nephews growing up around him and taking some of his prestige, therefore he put as many obstacles as possible in their way. In my case I was reduced to a complete idleness which I hated. I spent my days in the office but I had no work; I read novels; I composed poetry and finally I began a drama which I completed as far as the third act.

I had a very limited poetic talent, but my vanity led me to compare myself with Racine and I fully expected to become a member of the French Academy. As my literary tastes grew, so did my dislike of the whole business world; I despised trade, money, all financial questions. I cannot say how I acquired such a dislike for gold and silver... The only reason I ever saved any money was to give it to the poor.

From my earliest childhood, one of my greatest joys was to put some fruit or candy from my dessert into my pocket to give them later to poor children whom I met in the streets.

Eventually I could no longer accept the emptiness of my life so one day, taking my courage in both hands, I asked my father and my uncle to let me leave the office, lock myself in my room, get tutors and prepare for my degree. I intended to get my law degree and sooner or later be a lawyer.

It was my intention to carry out this idea to its logical conclusion so at once I undertook an austere, stoic form of living. I believed that human dignity consisted in denying all bodily appetites and I even starved myself. Often I suffered the pangs of hunger, thirst and the lack of small comforts. I went even farther: I wanted to live the life of the old pagan philosophers. I left the city and went to live alone in a small country village, at Robertsau near Strasbourg. I do not know how I managed to live in this solitude; I had no one to cook, no servant; I spent whole days without eating, and in imitation of my pagan models, I tried to bring my body under subjection. Yet it is impossible to express my sadness and interior emptiness; they were eating me up.

Something mysterious was going on in my soul. I lived without any religion and I sought neither good nor evil; but I often said: "I am twenty years old and I do not know why I exist. What is the purpose of my life on earth? What is at the end of the road? What is my business here? What direction should I take?" These questions gave rise to numerous others and to the wildest conjectures and they soon became an obsession with me to the point where I could think of nothing else. It seemed to me unreasonable that such interesting questions should go unanswered. I felt vaguely that there was some hidden mystery behind them. I believed that somewhere in the world there must be a school, a temple where the secret of present and future life would be revealed to a small number of chosen people. I had heard about the secrets of Free-Masonry; I became a postulant; in all good faith I eagerly asked for admittance. But there was no answer to my questions, to my desire for knowledge. Yet I was faithful in attendance at all Lodge meetings and I was even named one of the five lights of these secret assemblies. At this time I read Rousseau and I swallowed indiscriminately every opinion, every contradiction of this charismatic teacher; I became more and more austere and even eccentric in my way of acting. I talked philosophy with a young man who used to come to Robertsau to see me and whose chief merit was that he listened to me; he didn't understand one word I said. As for me, I thought science held the answer to everything, not only in ideas but in practical life. I had a certain integrity of character, and once I had admitted a principle as true, I followed it to the end regardless of consequences. Wilful faults against logic struck me as being hypocritical, something for which I have always had an instinctive hatred. I thought I would find the answer to my doubts in philosophy and I began to read, with insatiable hunger, the chief works then popular. I read Rousseau, Voltaire, Volney, Bolingbroke, and everything produced in the 18th century, both the attractive and the terrible. These are sad memories for me. The last vestiges of the traditional faith to which I had stubbornly clung withered with these readings. How far away I was then from the path to which Providence was leading me without any awareness on my part!

The search for Truth completely possessed me and I was always

hopeful of finding answers from the philosophers. But the emptiness and sadness of soul were also haunting me without respite. I had a single desire: to know the purpose of my existence; I had not the slightest inkling of what this purpose might be, and my only guides were my own unaided reason and a melancholy imagination. I pondered a great deal during my solitary walks which often went far into the night; more than once, I was still up at daybreak, awaiting sunrise after a whole night spent asking questions of nature which remained silent, of the stars which said nothing to me, and of the mystery of darkness.

I became tired of myself and of my theories. After thinking so much about good and evil, about God's power and lack of power and about the problem of life, I finally rebelled against the whole idea of a divinity. I could not believe in a deaf and silent God, I was crushed by the contradictions of life, and the whole world appeared ridiculous to me. Sometimes I sulked with Rousseau, sometimes I laughed with Voltaire. This latter was Satan's laughter.

One night I spent the whole time in the garden looking at the stars; after a long time, I was amazed that I could ever have thought that such magnificence could be self-created; at sight of their hosts above my head, I knew that an intelligent power must have formed them and must be directing their harmonious being. This thought came to my mind without, however, convincing me; at that moment so full of suffering, I uttered this cry from an embittered heart: "O God, if you really exist, show me the truth and I promise at this moment that I will devote my life to searching for it."

I was pierced with cold; to get warmed up, I went to sit on a dung heap in the garden – and this was an exact symbol of my interior state.

**1822**

In the meantime I was not getting any closer to my degree; I wasted my time composing French poetry instead of working at my Latin and Greek. Then I came to the conclusion that the best thing would be to leave Strasbourg and go to Paris to study law, hoping also to find means of filling the void in my mind and heart in the teachings of the famous

professors whom I would meet. I reached Paris at the end of 1822. I was alone, dependent only on myself; I took a room in a hotel on the Quai des Fleurs and I have no idea how I lived. I had no household help and I refused to be tied to definite meal-times. This was the most critical time of my life. I was friendly with five or six young students whom I had known in Strasbourg; their morals were not evil, but like me, they had neither religion nor principles. We spent our evenings in coffee-shops or at the theatre. I was told that the French theatre was a most helpful means of learning for law students. Yet I must say that dramas bored me to tears, even Racine's tragedies in spite of their musical phrases I found monotonous. I also went to sleep at the Opera.

Amusements took most of my time. A colonel who knew my family said he would introduce me to Miss Duchesnois, the famous tragic actress whose home was open to men of letters and to newspaper men. I cut a sorry figure in her drawing room and I did not go back a second time. Yet this visit presented a danger which might have compromised my whole life. With Miss Duchesnois was a young actress who had just left the Conservatory to make her debut in French theatre. She was strikingly beautiful, and had deliberately added an unassuming pose to her wit.

This young lady, then seventeen or eighteen years old, immediately captivated my overimpressionable heart. Some weeks went by; then I received a long letter from her, telling me that she loved me and hinting it marriage. This letter made a deep impression on me. Yet I do not know what instinctive fear prevented me from answering in spite of the fact that my emotions urged me to write back immediately. I was horrified at the thought of being in the toils of a seductive woman and being drawn into the world of the theatre. How can we not be aware of an invisible grace which drew me from the temptations with which I was obsessed and made me end advances which were flattering to my vanity? I did not answer the young actress and I never again saw either her or the older actress who was her patroness.

I continued nevertheless at this time to appear more often at worldly celebrations. I paid a visit to an old childhood friend who had married

her uncle, Baron James de Rothschild. At this time she was living in their magnificent castle at Boulogne near Paris where she gave parties which attracted all the aristocracy. She invited me to one of these parties and there I met old Talleyrand and many other celebrities whom I was anxious to know, especially the famous composer Rossini whose music I loved. These parties turned me into a thoroughly worldly young man; but at the end of the amusements which filled my days, I fell back into the void within me and into invincible sadness. Soon I was possessed by overwhelming torment, and an extraordinarily powerful and persistent voice kept urging me: leave Paris. I struggled energetically against this strange impulse. Besides the reasons which had prompted me to leave Strasbourg, vanity prevented me from going back. My friends would laugh at my inconstancy and I would be exposed to the ridicule of my family to whom I had said farewell for a long time. Besides, nothing justified my return; but the relentless voice answered all my objections: you must leave Paris and go back to Strasbourg.

**1825**

This urge became irresistible, so I left for Strasbourg, very confused and uneasy. But Providence was about to direct my life more visibly than ever before. Suffering and misunderstanding had made me more flexible. I was in the desperate position of a drowning man who, having fought against the waves until exhaustion, finally abandons himself to the current – only in my case I no longer had the strength to ‘resist the kind hand stretched out to snatch me from death.

Unfortunately I had not yet received my degree, and I needed a Bachelor of Arts diploma in order to enter Law School. Before leaving Paris I had had an interview with Mr. Cuvier, then President of the University. I asked and was given permission to register in Law School on condition that I obtain my B.A. during the course of the year. I therefore registered in Law School at the University of Strasbourg and I was determined to follow all the classes faithfully. I persevered though it was not easy to do so; in addition to the fact that I had no taste for jurisprudence, I had the most boring teachers possible



– in fact no one came to their classes. Out of some hundreds of students only a very few followed the classes. I even remember that the professor of civil law had only three students, and as he dictated from his notebooks without anyone writing what he was saying, I felt sorry for him; I wrote all the time so that his dictations would not be completely useless; but I was the only one; the other three did not pay the slightest attention to what the unfortunate professor was teaching. I found the study of law dry and boring; and during this first year, I did not really work hard at it. In any case, I did not have my B.A. diploma, an absolute requirement, and it was only towards the end of 1823 that I found the courage to sit for my examinations. I knew very little Latin or Greek literature; but thanks to unbelievable indulgence on the part of my professors, I passed and finally obtained the necessary diploma earned by the sweat of my brow.

Encouraged by this undeserved success, shortly afterwards I passed my first law examination despite my limited baggage of knowledge; I could not remember the texts of civil law and I understood absolutely nothing about legal procedure. I was advised to work in a lawyer's office. I followed this advice and for some months I went every day to waste my time in the office of Mr. Briffaut, former President of the Bar, who was extremely kind to me. But he dictated long consultations which I found even more boring than the courses at Law School.

Always hungry to learn, I still found nothing which satisfied my need to know, and I was becoming resigned to living out my life in ignorance when one day, at the end of the year, I was accosted in one of the Law Faculty classrooms by a young man whom I had never seen before but with whom I felt instant empathy; he suggested that I follow a special course in philosophy to be given by Mr. Bautain.

Mr. Bautain was very famous at this time. I only knew him by sight and reputation; often I wanted to ask him some philosophical questions but I had never dared to do so. As for the young student who had made the suggestion to me, I had only noticed that he had a serious and distinguished appearance; I did not know that he was a Jew; I had no suspicion that one day he would be my dearest friend, my brother in

Christ, my fellowpriest. He was Mr. Jules Level of Nancy, then a law student, and later protonotary apostolic and superior of St. Louis des Français in Rome.

I immediately accepted the suggestion which he had made for I always looked upon philosophy as the only way to knowledge and truth. As for religion, it had left not the slightest trace in my free-thinking mind. I had a profound distaste for Judaism as for all other religions whose names I knew.

**1823**

In 1823 we began the special philosophy course given by Mr. Bautain. There were only four of us at this first course, an Irish Catholic, a schismatic Russian and two Jews. Mr. Bautain had himself recently resumed the practice of his religion. A former student of the Normal School, a fellow-disciple of Mr. Cousin, he had been appointed professor of philosophy at the age of 20; gifted with great eloquence, he brilliantly taught the eclectic and German doctrines which were popular in contemporary educational circles. But Providence had put him in contact with Miss Humann and God had made her His instrument to unfold to him the truths of Christianity. The philosopher was sincerely in search of truth which he assimilated as soon as it was revealed to him. His public courses were immediately marked by this happy conversion. His Teaching was no longer pagan but uncompromisingly Christian, and this so terrified the liberal thinkers of the time that the government ordered his courses to be suspended. Condemned to inaction, he decided to devote his leisure to private teaching and I was one of the first fortunate beneficiaries of this decision.

His teaching was unlike any other; it overflowed from a deeply entrenched faith. We listened to him with emotion and admiration as he developed the doctrine which initiated us into the mysteries of man and nature. Until this time I had knocked in vain at the doors of schools of humanity to ask the reason of things, the goal of life, the cause of the mysteries which surround us. Everywhere I had found only hypotheses, contradictions and deceptions. This Christian professor found in

my mind a "clean slate." The conviction of his interesting and brilliant lectures drove away, without any resistance on my part, the darkness which my indiscriminate reading had accumulated in my mind; not only did the lectures enlighten my intelligence but they filled my soul with warmth, joy and peace. The scales fell from my eyes and I caught a glimpse of the light of truth. I saw man as he is and as he is meant to be; I understood that man is no longer as he was when he came from the hands of God. On the one hand, psychology shows us the admirable scope, the harmony, the order of importance of human faculties. However, the reality of history shows us that a profound alteration has taken place in these faculties. Man's moral degradation is an indisputable fact, and I was no longer surprised to find areas of darkness within myself and around me. But how can one explain this general decadence except through an initial fall? The idea of reparation through sacrifice and other truths of religion flowed naturally and logically from this doctrine.

This was Christianity in its most ideal form without any theological formulas. Without being aware of it my soul was being nourished on Christian teaching, and I did not know that under the guise of this enlightening philosophy which gave me such joy, religion was to be found. Without any consciousness on my part, I was enveloped and penetrated by this divine light. I think I would never have had the courage to come face-to-face with Christianity.

This was my state of mind at the end of 1823. The next year's course was held more frequently, and I brought with me one of my young co-religionists, Isidore Goeschler, who soon shared my impressions and feelings. We became more closely attached to our learned professor and to Mr. Adolphe Carl, the oldest and finest of his disciples.

I had to some extent become a Christian without knowing it. I had found the way to the truth which I had sought so much and on which I had called so often; and I finally caught a glimpse of the goal of my life to which all my desires and thoughts were directed. This superior goal was no longer a mystery to me; it seemed as attainable as light is to a man who is willing to open his eyes; and I could not understand the thoughtlessness of those who accept this truth and yet take part in the

amusements of the children of this world, forgetting that life on earth is a passing thing, a roadway which leads to a sublime end. But how shall I explain the struggles which I had to face with my childhood prejudices, my memories, my instinctive attachment to the thing I called the religion of my Fathers! I was not sufficiently educated to see the link between Judaism and Christianity. I thought they were two different religions and that the God of Abraham was not the God of Christians. I was afraid of studying this question at a deeper level, and yet I had a profound belief in the Blessed Trinity without knowing the theological formula for this sacred dogma. It seemed to me that there was a mysterious trio in every form of science and that it derived as a philosophical consequence from a host of analogies in nature. Everywhere I admired a triple distinction in unity, especially in music where three notes form one perfect harmony. These symbols were not always exact according to theology; but since I had no catechism, they gave me an inkling of a supreme Ideal! This ideal was revealed to me in a single phrase: God is love. This evangelical word gave warmth to my heart and light to my mind. It seemed to me to contain the key to knowledge. In the love of God I saw a foreshadowing of the mystery of the Trinity, the mystery of Creation and the reason for all the acts of our Redemption. Eternal Love being love by His very nature and substance begot Eternal Love. What could He have loved before He created beings? Obviously He loved Himself; this means that Divinity consisted of a lover and a loved one. But between these two objects there was a continual flow of life, of communication and of love which constitutes the third term and which completes, as it were, the perfect accord. These vague and imperfect ideas satisfied my thirst for knowledge and I was glad to see that Christians did not adore three Gods – the chief question that keeps Jews from Christianity.

The creation of man and of the firmament also became comprehensible to me. An all-powerful Love would of necessity have grandiose plans and it is easy to understand that He would create many beings to make them happy.

All the acts of the Redemption, all the mysteries of religion, follow

logically from these primary truths. If some parts of this luminous picture were still hidden from me, I did not add to the darkness by objecting presumptuously. I had had too much experience with the weakness of my own reasoning to take pleasure in useless discussions. I was satisfied with the little knowledge I had acquired and I hoped that future studies would in time fill the empty spaces.

It is strange that I already had a strong faith in Jesus Christ and yet I could not bring myself to invoke Him, nor even to say His name, so entrenched was my inherited Jewish hatred for this Holy name. An unusual event put my faith to the test. I had fallen ill in a Swiss hotel, and my vivid imagination, full of unreasonable presentiments, made me believe that I was going to die. I fell into depression and at that decisive moment I did not know what God to call upon. The vagueness of my philosophical beliefs left me a prey to terrible uncertainty; and within me there was an immense struggle between my childhood prejudices and my new faith; I dared not pray for fear of offending the God of Abraham by praying to the God of the Christians. It was a fierce battle but grace won the day. From my lips and my heart the name of Jesus Christ came as a cry of distress. It was evening; and the following day I was so much better that I was able to leave Geneva where I was just passing through. I was so comforted by my invocation of Jesus Christ that I wanted to continue praying; to provide nourishment for my hungry soul, I asked one of the hotel maids to buy me a prayerbook. She brought me back a big awkward book. In spite of its ungainly appearance I hurriedly opened it and read several long-drawn-out pages with few ideas in them. Later, looking more closely at the book, I discovered it was by a Protestant minister named Oswald. That was enough to stop me from reading any more for I had always had an instinctive aversion to Protestantism. I did not know any Protestant doctrines, but I had been friends with many Lutherans, Pietists and Calvinists. In comparison with my Catholic friends, I found their conversation lifeless and lacking warmth. I could not recognize Christianity under the guise of Protestantism... My mind needed specific doctrines and I had no desire to return to the discussions and controversies in which I had wandered until now.

I began to pray quite simply, straight from my heart, without the help of any book or any human formula. My lips became accustomed to the name of Jesus Christ; I pronounced it confidently and I also prayed to Mary. The idolatrous passion which I had experienced in my youth had left in my soul an unconquerable need to love; the name of Jesus fulfilled this need and gave me a hint of the greatness of God's love. On the other hand, the undying memory of my mother's tenderness gave me an intuition of Mary's love. I could not separate the names of Jesus and Mary, they represented to me all the sweetness and sympathy to be found in heaven and on earth. I loved them inexpressibly. Alas! this springtime fervour lasted much too short a time.

Yet I took an ever growing delight in the teachings of Christianity; I had been completely won over to the faith, but I was not baptized; I had no part in the grace of the Sacraments. Mr. Bautain did not put me in contact with any priest; I had no direction and I did not know how to go about getting baptized. Providence had placed me in an unusual situation which required prudent, careful conduct.

My father was president of the Consistory, a title with no religious implications whatever. Jewish consistories are purely civil administrative bodies composed of a few influential men recruited among bankers and lawyers. My father was far removed from the synagogue as were most of his fellow-members. Nevertheless, he was concerned about the question known as the regeneration of the Jews.

People were beginning to deplore the contrast between these poor people and the society which had admitted them to its midst. In the eyes of educated Jews, the regeneration for which they worked so feverishly was nothing more than a superficial civilization. Some wanted to reach this goal through education; others opposed any education outside talmudic schools... The idea of progress won the day; and the laggards, as they were called, had to bend under the pressure of modern influences.

**1825**

At once the Consistory began to found Jewish schools at Strasbourg

and throughout Alsace. My father wanted me to be in charge of these schools. It cost my budding faith a great deal – as it did my old self-love – to accept this mission which would put me in contact with wretched people<sup>(5)</sup> But the thought of the good I could do, and especially the opportunity of passing on my new-found faith, made me decide to eagerly accept this good work and from then on I devoted myself wholly to it.

No one either in the family or outside suspected my leanings to Christianity. They saw that I went regularly to Law School and that I passed all my examinations. But the care of the Jewish schools took almost all my time. Their success exceeded my fondest hopes, and my influence on the Jewish community was truly indescribable. A visible blessing was attached to these schools. My friends joined me and we surrounded them with loving care. We taught there ourselves; and every Saturday, from the platform, I preached (and the term is not too strong) to an audience of Jewish men and women who came from every corner of the city to hear the word of truth; both parents and children seemed to be entering a new era. A society was founded to encourage work; maybe it still exists; another association, composed of women, carried out our wishes for the education of girls...

The history of institutions which came into existence at this time is related in the speeches given to the general assemblies at the City Hall in 1826 and 1827. Christians immediately recognized the spirit which animated these talks; Jews saw them merely as speeches.

This work continued with increasing success and no one could foretell its future. But our Christian faith was also growing and more and more we felt the need of participating in the worship of a living religion. We deplored the limitations of a situation which prevented us from declaring our Christian faith. You have no idea of the thrill of joy which went through me when I secretly assisted at a Church feast! I shall never forget my feelings when for the first time I assisted at a High Mass; when I heard the singing echoing religiously in my soul like prayer and love; when I raised my timid eyes from the back of the Church where I had hidden myself to see the whiteclad priest raise the

host to expose the Blessed Sacrament; his white head was enveloped in clouds of incense and he seemed to me to be clothed in fire. I did not know where he had come from nor how he remained in the air; I thought that he was borne up on the cloud of incense; I looked upon him as almost a celestial creature. This was a new experience for me; I had seen Catholic worship in all its pomp. All my ideas about the temple of Jerusalem and the sacrifices that were offered there came back to my mind. Strange thoughts occurred to me; it seemed to me that the world outside was just a temple of idols surrounded with fear and darkness; the Church alone seemed to me to be the sole home of those who adored the true God.

Thus I went from one enlightening experience to another and each of my aspirations found an echo and an answer in some point of Christian doctrine; my reason was nourished by the works of Bossuet, and in the depths of my soul I found inexpressible delight in the life-giving word of the Gospel. I was eager to read these holy pages; but I made the resolution not to touch the Gospels until I had read the complete Old Testament. I remember these days so well; it was nine o'clock in the evening when I read the last lines of the Old Testament and immediately opened the New Testament to read at least one chapter. I was so attracted by it that I spent part of the night reading it; in fact I did not put it down until I had read the whole of Saint Matthew. The same thing happened when I began St. John's Gospel, and twice later, I could not put it down until I had read it through. This was my state of mind during the last year of my law studies. It was also a period when my family was seriously discussing marriage prospects for me. I could not begin to enumerate all the attempts they made to get me settled in the world. I was 24 or 25 years old,<sup>(6)</sup> and I do not know how I escaped the suffocating tenderness with which I was surrounded. My eldest brother was on the point of arranging an engagement between himself and the sister of Mrs. Helena Fould, a young lady from Cologne whom he had never met. As he was very shy, he did not dare to go himself to Cologne to make the necessary arrangements. He begged me to be his agent, and I was successful beyond my fondest hopes, for my brother's fiancée had a younger sister whom I was ex-



pected to marry. This marriage, very favorably regarded by all my family, was pleasing to me too. But Providence prevented me from becoming entangled in these nets and I came back to Strasbourg to get ready for my final examinations. Then the demands of my family began to assume other forms. Among Jews there are official “matchmakers” for whom arranging marriages is a well-paying profession<sup>(7)</sup> They hounded me like a victim destined for sacrifice and I was all the more susceptible to their lures that my heart was already prepared for them. Now, the only thing I found worth wishing for was a brilliant marriage. It became my over-ruling thought, blotting all other ideas from my head, and fate forced me to think even more about it, for, having like the other students drawn the subject of my thesis by lot, I got the two clauses of the Civil Code which deal with marriage, so that, in spite of myself, my thoughts were forever going around in the same circle. My thesis was printed in 1826, and I successfully defended it in public – a success little deserved! But after receiving my law diploma, a new temptation almost threw me onto the path from which Providence was directing me without me being aware of it.

It was suggested that I marry a young lady from Vienna whose name, fortune and qualities completely dazzled me. Every day pressure was brought to bear on me to assure me that this step would provide me with all the happiness I could wish for. The situation which was being offered to me was in complete contrast with the austere life which I had been leading for some years. But some mysterious power within me counter-balanced my family’s insistence and my own desires. I became ill from the struggle; I lost my taste for prayer and for serious work. More melancholy and dreamy than ever before, I was continuously attracted by the prospects offered in Vienna; and yet I could not bring myself to make a decision; it was as if I were immobilized by an invisible power. All the members of my family, all my friends reproached me for my inexplicable vacillation. I consulted Mr. Bautain but, out of respect for my liberty, he refused to bring any influence to bear on me; and when I asked him for help in deciding my future, he answered, with an indifferent smile: “If you marry, you do well; if you do not marry, you do better.” And he left me to my indecision. Sometimes I

wanted to do well; sometimes I wanted to do better; and for three long months, I battled in the midst of the most cruel perplexity.

**1825?**

Finally, in one of my moments of utter depression, help came from an unexpected source. It was evening; I needed to breathe and I went out mechanically without noticing where I was going, I was praying silently while directing my steps towards the promenade, and raising my eyes to heaven to ask for help, I noticed a brilliant star fall from the heavens and drop in the direction of the street where Miss Humann lived. Certainly this was a phenomenon of nature, but it struck me as being a sign from heaven. I immediately changed the direction of my walk, and went off to the street pointed out to me by the star. A sudden inspiration urged me to go to Miss Humann's.

This holy lady lived in her home with her friend, Mrs. Breck and Mr. Bautain to whom she had offered friendly hospitality. It was thereforth in this house that we met for our courses of philosophy with Mr. Bautain, but we did not know Miss Humann. I had only seen her two or three times and had never spoken to her. But I must confess that her honorable and dignified appearance had made a deep impression on me. In spite of the late hour, I went straight to Miss Humann's. The latter seemed a little astonished at receiving at this late hour the visit of a distraught young man, a very upset young man who said to her without any preamble: "I have come to ask for advice: I am being urged to leave immediately to contract a marriage the prospect of which delights me very much; but I cannot make up my mind whether to go or to stay."

This worthy Christian woman listened to me with angelic goodness and answered in a tender voice: "You must never make a decision when you are troubled. Ask for a three months' delay, and when you have regained your calmness, you will be able to think more wisely about what decision you should take."

These short simple words produced in me emotions which I simply cannot describe. They were like a breath from heaven which passed over

my heart and dissipated all the clouds; I experienced a peace hitherto unknown. At that moment a supernatural bond was formed between her soul and mine; I began to understand the depth of spiritual affections which one never experiences in the world. This new feeling filled me with such happiness that it left no room for other feelings; all thought of marriage disappeared like clouds before the sun. I had found a true mother. She was then sixty years old; but I thought she was more beautiful than all the women I had met before; the attraction of her glance, the sweetness of her voice, the features of her face on which were stamped goodness and kindness, some inexpressible tenderness and light which overflowed from her heart, took me somehow out of this world and gave me a foretaste of the joys of heaven. I loved this mother with a love which was unlike any other love and it brought me close to God; she made me understand the Blessed Virgin and the more I loved her, the closer I came to Jesus Christ, the centre of all true love. No word, no explanation of mine can ever give any idea of the happy days which followed, days which my friends and I spent around the mother whom God had given us. We lived together in the joy and simplicity of God's children, forgetting the past and entrusting the future to Divine Providence.

I had finished my law studies; and proud of my lawyer's gown, I went to take my lawyer's oath before the royal court of Colmar. However, since I had undertaken these studies only for reasons of vanity and ambition, I thought I should give up my law practice as I had given up the bank; and encouraged by the examples of Messrs. Bautain and Carl, I applied myself to the study of natural and medical science. My two Jewish friends, Jules Level and Isidore Goeschler, did the same, and we were united in common studies and ideas. Our intention was to devote ourselves together to some charitable cause, and we proposed, as the noblest of all careers, to devote ourselves to giving free medical care to the poor. Not one of us thought of any higher vocation, something for which, without any awareness on our part, Providence was preparing us. Already Messrs. Carl and Bautain had registered in the Faculty of Medicine. This was more difficult for me since I first had to make up classes in mathematics and physics to get my Bachelor of

Science without which one could not enter the Medical School. I set to work, therefore, and by dint of patience, I passed the necessary examinations. Then abandoning my lawyer's gown – not without some regret – I returned to the life of a student.

For two years I had to take courses in anatomy, physiology and clinical medicine. I had not the slightest liking for these courses; but I was encouraged by the beloved woman whom I obeyed as if I were her child. She advised me also to continue to work hard at the area of training which the Jews had confided to me. She saw in this work the beginnings of an apostolate to which in any case I was very much drawn; but Mr. Bautain was only half interested in it so that henceforth I only followed the advice of Miss Humann, and it was she who gave me the strength to overcome the boredom of my studies and the opposition that I was beginning to sense among the Jews.

Nevertheless, through my contact with this spiritual mother, I felt my faith growing continually, and I was more than impatient to receive baptism. This grace was indefinitely postponed "for fear of the Jews." It was feared that my conversion would provoke an outburst in the synagogue and thus compromise the good work I was doing there. At that time the conversion of a Jew was very rare and almost unheard-of. The only way in which baptism could even be considered would be to confer it in absolute secrecy. I do not know what precautions were taken and what arrangements were made. But one day I received a letter from Miss Humann telling me that I would be baptized on April 14th of that year 1827.

**1827**

It was Holy Saturday.

On that day my most ardent desire was realized. My spiritual mother herself poured the water of regeneration over my head and led me into the Church. It was a simple sprinkling carried out without ceremony, without witness, in utter secrecy. No one else knew what had happened in God's sight, not even Mr. Bautain or my friends. I was a Christian, that was all I wanted. I experienced indescribable happiness

from my baptism; it was a heavenly experience. I willingly compare it to the emotions felt by a man born blind who gains his sight. It seemed that my dry soul had been washed by a refreshing dew and I felt great desires grow in me as I prayed. I could not receive other sacramental graces but I wanted them without knowing what they were, for I had a strong presentiment that there were communications on a deep level between the Master and His disciples. The loving soul, grafted onto Jesus Christ through baptism, feels the need of nourishment for his hungry soul. This hunger for love and union requires a divine object. I did not ask for any explanation of this mystery, and I accepted without any difficulty the word of Christ which revealed this truth. Rational explanations would have weakened rather than justified my faith. Mysteries of love can never be explained to a soul which does not love; the loving soul already feels and tastes the truth in itself without explanation.

I longed to receive Holy Communion. Providence came to my help; I came into contact with a holy priest from Paris who was passing through Strasbourg on his way to Germany. He was Fr. Martin de Noirliu, assistant tutor to the Duke of Bordeaux.

This worthy priest, both holy and learned, showed me an interest full of Christian charity; he understood the difficulties of my situation and offered to take me himself to Mayence so that I could make my First Communion in secret there. This great grace was granted to me in the Bishop's chapel at Mayence, full of the memories of the holy Bishop who had died there some years before.

The diocese of Mayence was administered by Msgr. (*Johann Jakob*) Humann, Miss Humann's brother, who delegated to Fr. de Noirliu all the faculties to complete the ceremonies of baptism and to admit me to the Holy Table. I was given the grace of communicating again the following day. The ceremony took place in September, on the Feast of the Holy Name of Mary. The only witnesses were Messrs. Bautain and Isidore Goeschler. The latter had been baptized a few months after me. We had to wait some more before receiving the Sacrament of Confirmation.

It is to this grace that my first thoughts of a priestly vocation are attached.

The wonderful example of Fr. de Noirlieu, added to the inexpressible delights of my First Communion, drew me with increasing attraction to the priesthood. I could think of no other ministry that was more noble, more beautiful. In all my prayers I asked for the grace to become a priest and it seemed to me that my medical studies should facilitate this goal for me, for my ideal was to become a country pastor. I still looked upon the priesthood strictly from the viewpoint of its pastoral functions and I had no suspicion of how much holiness and education such a sublime vocation demanded; otherwise the knowledge of my own shortcomings and of my unworthiness would never have allowed me to undertake this life. But after my baptism I had become like a little child; I regained the simplicity and gaiety of childhood. In these dispositions I pursued my studies without forcing myself to do any serious study. I recall that at the bedside of the sick I was more inclined to bring spiritual consolation than to study illnesses and cures. A certain natural, almost unconquerable sensitivity, protected my vocation by keeping me away from painful operations and anything that I regarded as beneath the dignity of the priesthood.

However, my family was uneasy about what they called my eccentric life. They loved me and they tried to spare me because of the good I was doing in the schools, but they began to suspect that I was a Christian, and their suspicions were fully justified every day by my lack of prudence at church. I never missed going very early in the morning, hidden in the folds of my cape; but everyone knew my cloak, and without being aware of it, I had become an object of curiosity. Whatever the cause, I felt the uneasiness of my family; my father had always loved me deeply and at every opportunity he gave me proofs of his trust; he had given me a great deal of responsibility in the schools, and he didn't know whether to congratulate me or be worried about my influence. My uncle, Mr. Louis Ratisbonne, second head of the family was even more upset about the rumors which were coming back to him. Finally there was an uproar in the synagogue. The Jews hounded my father to find out what my real feelings and beliefs were. Our position

was no longer tenable. Placed between our faith which we did not dare to compromise by any act or word and works which we had neither the right nor the courage to abandon, we found every day filled with struggle and contradiction. We impatiently awaited some way out the impasse and out of the position to which Providence had directed us; we decided to live day by day according to what each day would bring. Finally a family event persuaded my colleague Isidore Goeschler to resign from his work and from the synagogue. For him this was an opportunity to carry out a desire which we all shared. Freed from all ties and rising above all human considerations, he entered the seminary.

It is easy to imagine the stunned indignation of the synagogue. A few days before, I had gathered the students and their parents in the assembly hall of the school, and since I had to give an address at this assembly, I took as my text Chapter 8 of Deuteronomy where God's blessings and curses on the people of Israel are enumerated. We read these terrible words: "If you will not hear the voice of the Lord your God, Evil will fall upon you and crush you... The sky above you will become leaden and the ground on which you walk will be as iron... You will be scattered throughout all the countries of the world. The Lord will strike you with blindness and insanity so that you will walk gropingly in broad daylight... At all times your name will be blackened with calumny you will be violently oppressed without anyone offering you any help... You will be as the toy and plaything of peoples... These chastisements will remain on you and your posterity as an astonishing sign because you have not served your God with the gratitude and joy of heart which the abundance of His goods should have awakened in you."

These prophetic words made a deep impression; one of the hearers, an irate pharisee, getting up in fury, interrupted my speech and shouted that everything that was being said was contrary to religion. Then striding stormily to the door, he ordered the assembly to disperse. I answered firmly that I had simply read the words of Moses and I resumed my lecture. But the Jew, again shouting to the people to leave, led the way, but he went out alone; not a single person followed him.

In spite of this triumph, we could from that moment foresee the end of our mission. The outburst was indescribable when my friend's decision became known. I was then alone to bear the brunt of the shock; my line of action was clear and I remained firm in it. But I was depressed. However, God had given me a mother who encouraged and consoled me. I had to continue our work until the end and await the indications of Providence to publicly profess my faith. Everyone knew how deeply I shared my friend's thoughts; people no longer wanted to confide their children to me and everyone clamored for my resignation. The president of the Consistory was the only person who could legally ask for it, and the president was my own father. He knew that my resignation would mean my entry into the seminary and he could not bear to think of this. How can I ever explain the suffering he endured because of me and the suffering I endured because of him! I also had to overcome the pity of my family – of my uncle and my sisters. I understood then the meaning of Christ's words: "I have come to bring a sword into the world."

The step taken by Mr. Goeschler, the faithful companion of my childhood, studies, work, and the confidant of my suffering, left no doubt in the minds of those who already suspected that I was a Christian. I was openly accused of having bewitched the children, some of whom had some pious objects in their possession; they were urged to bear false witness; I was called a hypocrite and a seducer; in a word, all the praise which had previously been heaped on me was now turned into insults and outrages.

The limit had been reached; I felt I had to go on; consequently I convoked an extraordinary meeting of all the members of the Consistory and the leaders of the synagogue. I had decided to make a public proclamation of my faith. My father presided the assembly although he suspected my intentions.

The meeting took place at 8 o'clock in the evening; it was like a solemn funeral. My emotion was overwhelming and the members who came in one after another looked at each other in a morose silence. My father in a trembling voice asked me to speak. Then, after having briefly



recapitulated the works to which I had given my services, I tried to make these poor Jews understand that they needed a regeneration and progress quite different from those offered by an empty and superficial civilization. At this point there were signs of a disturbance beginning, so I assumed a more severe tone and reminded them of the unending ingratitude of the nation. Finally, I asked the president to give me a definite answer as to whether I should resign or continue my work. My father consulted the assembly, and a kind old man asked that I remain at the head of the schools provided I would undertake to remain a Jew. At these words, without staying one minute longer than my duties required, I got up and shaking the dust off my feet, I bade an eternal farewell to the Synagogue. This moving scene, which I shall never forget, put an end to the complicated situation which had been weighing on me for several years. In getting rid of my shackles, the fulfillment of my vocation became easier; in some ways it was a preparation for the priestly ministry; it was also to open the doors of Christianity to many souls. The mission which I had carried out with so much love and with which I had just broken with a shattered heart, had left me with a burning desire to bring enlightenment to the Jews.

However, on the day after this memorable meeting, the synagogue had clearly triumphed and my family was plunged in sorrow. That very evening I had left my family home and gone to the hospitality of the home of Miss Humann where several of my friends were already living. I shall not relate the pleas of my family and the very attractive temptations put in my way to bring me back to my father's house. These sad scenes were repeated every day. They thought I was unhappy, and they wanted to avoid a complete break at any cost. But divine grace sustained my weakness and eased my wounds. In any case, in Miss Humann Providence had given me a blessed mother who offered me in profusion the most delicate consolation, heavenly consolation which helped me to rise above every suffering and every cross.

I would need pages and pages to describe the temptations and the steps of every kind undertaken, without end, to divert me from my vocation. But this vocation had a solid grip on me. I remember that

one day my old uncle, in a moment of despair, told me that he would rather see me cut into a thousand pieces than to see me wear a soutane. I answered him very calmly: "You would not gain anything by that, because if I were cut into a thousand pieces, each piece would become a priest; and instead of one soutane, you would have a thousand." However the calm which I showed in the midst of all these painful scenes was only on the surface. I was moved to the depths of my soul by the tears of my young sisters whom I loved very much and to whom I could offer no hope of change. I felt that all the fibers of my heart were being torn apart, one after another; but the grace of God was in proportion to the sacrifices. In any case, I knew about the doctrine of renunciation although it was only later that I understood the need for detachment from the ties of nature. I was destined to contract spiritual ties which cannot be formed as long as natural ties have not been subjugated. The heart-breaks which I had to suffer were therefore necessary; and I am not sure that I would have been able to accept them if it had not been for the mother who supported and assisted me. The supernatural love that I felt for her increased in proportion as my family connections weakened; and in the midst of my sorrows, I began to experience the delights of a love which became for me a foretaste of the joys of heaven.

**1828**

In these dispositions I prepared to enter the seminary. I was happy to receive the soutane in October, 1828, and a few days after, I received minor orders in the Bishop's chapel. Bishop de Trévern showed extraordinary kindness to me. This gentle old man was a relic of the old school. To his natural distinction had been added the polite manners and the stately bearing of the clergy of the court of Louis XIV. Driven from France by the Revolution, he had spent many years in exile in England where he seemed to have forgotten all that had happened in France. He was sixty years old when he was named Bishop of Strasbourg, and to this very Roman diocese he brought doctrines which were quite openly Gallican. He liked to go horseback-riding, and as he did so, he took pleasure scattering blessings with the riding-whip in his

hand. I had developed a completely different idea of the successors of the Apostles. But in Bishop de Trévern I found such a fatherly heart that I grew to love him with a tenderness based on a great respect. The Bishop had a magnificent residence at Molsheim, a delightful little town a short distance from Strasbourg. He wanted me to finish my theological studies there with my friends: Messrs. Bautain, Adolphe Carl, Jules Level, Isidore Goeschler, Henri de Bonnechose.

Bishop de Trévern chose a dozen seminarians to form the nucleus of this school. It pained me tremendously to be obliged to leave my spiritual mother who for me had been the patient interpreter of Christian teaching. I wept many tears at this separation, so much so, that one day when there were no handkerchiefs left, Jules Level gave me a flower vase to collect my unending tears! But I had many other reasons for regretting Bishop de Trévern's arrangements for me; for the deprivation of common life as lived in the major seminary of Strasbourg left many gaps in my priestly education. If there are certain defects in the study programs and the direction of seminaries, there are, nevertheless certain advantages which I, more than anyone else, needed. There the students who are to enter the sanctuary are initiated into the traditions, the age-old customs, the habits of punctuality of which I had no idea; and later I was to suffer a great deal from this ignorance. In addition, because of my exceptional situation, I had no relationships with the seminarians who preceded me in the priestly career; so that I was unknown to the body of clergy of which I was to be part. I often had reason to regret these gaps, and it surely did not help my humility any more than it helped charity.

In addition, the stay at Molsheim did not help my studies. I was left wholly to my own devices. Theological classes were curtailed to one course that the director gave us every day; in the evening after supper, we met in the Bishop's drawing-room at the fireplace. Each one of us in turn read aloud from the works of Frayssinous. But since the Bishop slept – and snored loudly – during the reading, we all got the giggles which stopped the reader from continuing his duty. And when the Bishop woke up, he did not want us to know he had slept, and he

increased our hilarity by giving a resumé of pages which he had not heard because they had not been read.

This was the extent of our superior studies. Happily, several of us profited of the long free hours to do some study on our own. At our disposal we had the Bishop's library which was composed mostly of Gallican and Jansenist works. I got hold of some of those books. But, without ever having probed the depths of such questions, I could not come to terms with the doctrines which limited the powers of St. Peter's successor.

I had a great devotion for this Apostle. It seemed to me that this devotion had filtered into my soul with the baptismal waters. In any case I had come to look upon the Church as a huge family of which St. Peter was the Father. Thus I loved and respected him, and I could not understand doctrines which warned the children against the authority of the father. This was the simple answer – that of a good Christian – which I gave to those who often tormented me to make me share their Gallican opinions. Thanks be to God, never since I have been a priest, in fact never in my Christian life, have I ceased for one instant being an obedient son submissive to the head of the Church. I believed in his infallibility long before the dogma was defined.

The greatest grace that God had granted me during my stay at Molsheim was to bring me into contact with the writings of St. Teresa of Avila. The life of this seraphic soul, written by herself, did me indefinable good. I resolved then to make a meditative reading of an hour every day, and to practise as much as possible the instructions she gave on prayer and meditation. This practice to which I was very faithful for almost two years, was fruitful for my soul and mind, more so than theological arguments. However, I also eagerly read some works of Bossuet, especially his discourse on universal history.

The books which I found most interesting were those which dealt with the conversion of the Jews. All the Fathers of the Church after St. Paul positively announced this joyful event. I believed that I was called to cooperate in it. My soul needed to share with the children of Israel

the overflowing of peace, of light and of happiness which I myself had found in accepting Christian revelation. Perhaps an insignificant incident encouraged my proselytizing spirit. It was a dream which made a deep impression on me as soon as I arrived at Molsheim. During my sleep, I dreamt I was in a garden which soon became crowded with men, women and children. Were they Christians or Jews? I do not know. Soon they were all surrounding a little hill on which I was sitting. However, I heard a rustling behind and I turned my head; leaning on the back of my chair was an old man, clothed in white and with a long white beard. "I am Enoch," he said to me, "and I have come to inspire you about what to say." I was deeply moved; and in spite of my natural presumption, I did not dare to open my lips. Then the saintly old man said: "Do not be afraid; you will talk about the mystery of baptism and I shall whisper to you what to say."

I began to preach at length, but so clearly that on awakening I remembered the whole speech which I was able to write out in its entirety and I sent it to Miss Humann.

Although I did not want to attach too much importance to this dream, I have, ever since that night, had a special devotion to the blessed Enoch and I pray to him every day.

It is here that I must mention an incident which painfully ended my last familial ties. My father was dying and wanted to see me, for my entrance into the Church had not weakened his affection for me. More than once I was able to talk to him about my religious convictions; I had hoped that he would eventually share those convictions but death put an end to this dream. However, he was snatched from me even before his death, and the last crisis was the most heart-breaking of all I had suffered. When I was by his bedside one night, he was dying and unable to speak. I was standing beside his bed, fervently praying for heavenly help, when suddenly several Jews hurled themselves furiously at me; they dragged me towards the door, tearing my soutane. I thought they were going to kill me and I defended myself shouting at the top of my voice: "Jesus, help me!" And this cry, uttered spontaneously, disturbed my poor father on his death bed. May this last word which he heard on

dying be his first cry on entering eternity! Certainly this final rupture with my family was willed by God – and it happened with indescribable violence. A few days later a servant came to tell me that my father was dead. It was October 31st. That same year about Christmas time, 1830, I was ordained a priest by Bishop Trévern in the Strasbourg Cathedral. The same kind Bishop had ordained me a sub-deacon six weeks after I entered the seminary at Molsheim; and the following year I was happy to receive the diaconate because this gave me the power to preach. It was as a deacon that I first mounted the pulpit in Strasbourg Cathedral to preach in honour of St. Lawrence.

At that time the small society of Fr. Bautain's disciples was beginning to grow.

We lived together in Miss Humann's house on Toussaint Street and we welcomed several fine young people, among them Father Mabile and Father de Garsignies; the first became Bishop of Versailles, the latter Bishop of Soissons. I had celebrated my first Mass at St. John's, my parish church, on January 6th, 1831; however, daily after that I celebrated in St. Lawrence's chapel at the Cathedral.

We were scarcely settled in the house on Toussaint Street when our Bishop, in the kindness of his heart, wished to provide more spiritual nourishment for our priestly life. He turned over to us the direction of the minor seminary of Strasbourg, a demanding job with the added advantage of permitting us to live together in the same atmosphere. We accepted working without salary. There is nothing I dislike more than classical teaching and I cut a very sorry figure in the midst of my fellow-teachers who all became professors of the upper classes. As for me, Fr. Bautain put me in charge of the youngest children. I was at the same time their teacher, their confessor and their study supervisor. I needed a strong constitution to support this unending work. My wish and the need of my heart was to look after their spiritual growth; I found it repugnant to spend my energy in literal<sup>(8)</sup> teaching. Much of this repugnance came from my dislike of the text books then in use. To my great surprise, I saw that they were permeated with the spirit of Protestantism and even of paganism. The books of the univer-

sities presented the ideal of good and virtuous examples only from Pagan writings. History books, even those used by children, dated people's emancipation from the time of Luther while, in fact, it was a permanent revolt against the Church's authority. This is the true meaning of Protestantism. It is founded on a word which has led many people astray: this is the right to question freely; what it amounts to, however, is that every individual believes that he has a right to interpret God's teachings as he sees fit and to think what he likes; this is a doctrine which has replaced the principle of evangelical humility and submission, taught by the Church, with the principle of pride and insubordination.<sup>(9)</sup>

I was young and I had neither enough education nor experience to foresee that these false principles would not take long to give rise to free thinkers and to the complete denial of Christian Revelation. These logical consequences were produced only later. Nevertheless, I could not make myself teach them to my students. Who can gauge the harm done to children by filling their minds with such lies and errors! Thank God I avoided this baleful university routine. I appealed to the sources of history which I taught from the Catholic viewpoint, the viewpoint of truth. I also found means of overcoming the deadly monotony of teaching literature.

Obliged to give dictation to my students, I was careful not to use books proposed for the classes. I delighted in composing dictations which taught the students under amusing allegorical forms, so that the students, instead of being bored with dictation, looked forward to it. Remembering how much I had loathed my own classes, I wanted to avoid the same thing for the young people since I am firmly convinced that one of the essential conditions for successful studies is to make them interesting for the students.

It is the boredom which has been their unremitting companion during all their studies which has led to the scientific poverty of so many men. In any case, I had made it my policy to give all my classes a religious slant; prayer at the beginning of class was not just an empty formula. Before saying it, I demanded a few moments of recollection

and I took advantage of these few minutes to say a few words about God's Presence or about some other religious subject. I cannot insist too strongly on the use of this practice; discipline is easy when it is based on religion.

My obvious attraction for pastoral functions was well-known by the arch-priest of the Cathedral who took an affectionate interest in all that concerned me. He thought that he was doing me a favor by asking the Bishop to name me as one of his vicars; their number was already filled and all four were very active and fervent. I was glad to be named a co-vicar without any assigned job, like the fifth wheel on a carriage which did not need one.

Meantime I retained my work at the minor seminary, but Fr. Bautain, who was not in favor of the change in my occupations, placed some obstacles in their way. Nevertheless, I went into them with renewed zeal, with too much presumption perhaps; it was the pastoral career for which Providence had prepared me without any request on my part. I was glad to be in contact with some beautiful souls. The first one who asked me to be her director was Miss Catherine Weywada, the oldest of a patriarchal family of 24 children. She was destined to become one of the foundation stones of the Congregation of Our Lady of Sion. The spiritual needs of these souls led me to the conviction that a catechism of continuing education would be very useful for them. Therefore I decided to introduce a catechetical course of continuing education at the Cathedral for young Christian ladies of the city. I explained my idea to Fr. Yvon, the holy arch-priest, who was in complete agreement with me. But then I met other opposition which fortunately did not stop me. The vicars, among whom there was nevertheless a very holy priest, Father Mühe – well-known for his heroic charity – criticized what they called an innovation and they predicted that it would fail completely. I had to fight against those who opposed a work which did not yet exist. Nevertheless, I found enough courage to begin the work; maybe I was too bold. But God supported my good will; from the first day, I saw the nucleus of an audience which continually grew in numbers. This ministry was helpful to me in several ways; one of



the ways was that it forced me to resume serious theological studies. Dogmatic explanations would have been very flimsy without serious preparation. It was at this time that I became more closely acquainted with the good theologians and historians of the Church. I think that this teaching was good for several people who attracted one another, but I was far from suspecting what the providential results of this work would be. It was among this youthful audience that God's hand had marked the first instruments destined for the foundation of the work of Our Lady of Sion.

My duties at the Cathedral, added to those of the minor seminary, more than filled at my time, and they would have exhausted me completely if the Master of the vineyard had not suddenly interrupted them. This is one of the most painful periods of my life. Father Bautain, like every genius, had enemies who for a long time had been spying on his teaching of philosophy to draw attention to the errors. These errors, whose significance has been widely exaggerated, dealt chiefly with the question of whether human reason can by itself arrive at belief in the existence of God. Fr. Bautain upheld the contrary belief, but in much too dogmatic a manner. He taught that reason alone was unable to reach a knowledge of God without a revelation which is the foundation of its deductions. Those who oppose this thesis claim that reason has its own rights and maintain – not unreasonably! – that the examination of visible things in nature could lead one to presuppose the existence of a Creator. In any case, this opinion finds support in St. Paul's Letter to the Romans. In approving this, the Bishop of Strasbourg automatically condemned the opposing position. Several times he had warned the superior of the minor seminary, but the latter, who had a very rigid character, inflamed the debate by carrying on long discussions. There were misunderstandings on both sides. The Bishop certainly had no intention of denying the power of grace and faith in the work of human reason, and Fr. Bautain never underestimated the logical strength of reason, but he was mistaken in hanging on to formulas which were too rigid and which needed to be explained. The main thought in all his teaching was to attack at its root German

rationalism, which at this time was working with Protestantism to stress the importance of human reason at the expense of divine authority.

The debates were prolonged because the philosophy professor did not want to give in. For my part, I did what I did in simple faith and I hated rationalism. The experiences of my past life had shown me only too well that, left to its own resources, reason is very weak even when seeking truth. It is true that contemplation of nature's wonders leads to a belief in the existence of a First Cause, but who or what is this First Cause? Reason cannot answer this question. Another thorny question cannot be avoided: this world presents an unaccountable mixture of good and evil, and going from the effects to find their causes, it is logical to conclude that two Prime Causes are in opposition. From this belief have come the three most frightening heresies which have ever deceived man's mind: first, manicheism, which posits the existence of two creators, one of good and one of evil; next, pantheism, which makes all creation part of God; and finally, atheism, which despairing of the two others, denies the very existence of God.

It was with the idea of combatting this triple error that Fr. Bautain belittled the value of human reason in religious matters. He probably went too far in discussing this thesis but he had no intention, at any time, of denying the power of human reason in itself, something of which he has often been accused. While he always insisted that faith is the primary condition of divine knowledge, he never had the intention of denying the work of human reason and he never said that everything depended on faith without the work of reason. He was not very clear in this teaching, and it was because of this lack of clarity that he was vulnerable. There was a basic misunderstanding in all these debates; there was no common agreement on what the debaters meant by human reason, since on the one hand, it was being examined in its darkened state which is a result of the original fall, and on the other, it was seen as a faculty which when God created it was a healthy and perfect faculty. It is true that in its original state it was meant to be able to encompass the highest truths.

Whatever the truth of the matter was, the watchful Bishop decided to end the debate with an unexpected move. He published a report condemning Fr. Bautain's thesis. He went even further in his severity and in the same report, he withdrew all spiritual faculties from the master and his disciples. Thank God, however, he allowed them to celebrate the Holy Sacrifice. I was included in this sentence although personally I had never taught philosophy; no one ever asked me for a retraction or an explanation of any kind. I could have avoided the sentence imposed on Fr. Bautain if I had been willing to leave my friends, but I could never have accepted that condition.

The hammer blow which abruptly broke my connection with the minor seminary and the Cathedral was the source of profound suffering. I knew quite well the theory of renunciation and sacrifice, but what a distance there is between theory and practice! I had thought that the shattering of the ties of flesh and blood which had occurred at the time of my conversion had been enough to make me humble. But perhaps the satisfactions that I found in my ministry were too far from being supernatural and it was good for me to be faced with more sacrifices. At that time I did not know that God had decided that I would become the father of a great spiritual family, and it is surely in view of this vocation that the hand of God wanted to eliminate from my soul all that might have presented an obstacle to God's work.

The divine seed that baptism sows in the human soul can only bear fruit if it sheds its natural elements just as in the vegetable kingdom, the fruit appears only after the flower has died. It seems to me now that at that time I was going through this "shedding" process; in any case, I felt within myself the workings of the cross without being able to see its saving effects. On the contrary, I was tempted to criticize my inconsolable sorrows and I accused the Gospel of having presented to me nothing except suffering and pain instead of the hundredfold of happiness promised to all those who have left all to follow Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, I want to go on record as stating that I have never wanted for this hundredfold and I must even say that when necessary, I have been helped without limit.

But today it is impossible for me to recall the sufferings of every kind that preceded the new era in my life. I found no relief in my relationship with Fr. Bautain whose stiffness and rigidity were in sharp contrast with my own soft-heartedness. On the other hand, the sad contentions with the Bishop of Strasbourg closed all avenues of activity to us, and to crown all the humiliations, we were looked upon as proscribed priests and almost as heretics. For me, this was the source of the most acute suffering because, in my heart and in my mind, my only loyalty was to the Church's teachings. I had to fight against temptations of discouragement which I could never have resisted if divine goodness had not given me a mother who showed me the need to crucify my human nature. Alas! how slow and difficult this self-sacrifice was for my nature, especially since I had the kind of racial nature of which it has been said: "What a stiff neck and hard head!" My progress along the path of self-renunciation was not very evident; it seemed that when the threads binding me to the natural man on one side were broken, they loomed much more menacing on the other, and for several years, I lived in a state of suspension.

**1834**

After we left the minor seminary we had all come back to live in Miss Humann's house, and under the direction of this great soul, we lived like children in simplicity and peace, solely given to study and prayer. Mass, which I continued to say every day at the Cathedral, was the source of my strength and my consolation. In any case, we had peaceful consciences; our attitude towards the disputed questions was that of faithful children of the Church, and we were quite ready, beginning with Fr. Bautain, to submit unquestioningly to the decision of the Holy See as soon as it was made known. While waiting for this decision, Fr. Bautain began a great work, under the guise of correspondence with his disciples, which he published under the title of "Philosophy of Christianity." Unfortunately, this work reawakened dormant questions and made us the object of further annoyance.

At the same time, I felt the need of serious work, and with a boldness difficult to justify, I undertook the writing of the history of Saint

Bernard. Fr. Bautain had mentioned this name and I had grabbed it, as it were, in full flight. My only thought was to do some good and this thought which was blessed by God upheld my courage. In any case, I found all the documents I needed in the library. Before everything else, I wanted to have the assistance of divine grace and with this idea in mind I made an eight-day retreat in a Trappist monastery called "The Mount of Olives" (Oelenberg).

Trappists are Cistercians who have kept alive the spirit of St. Bernard. Their life is exactly the same as that lived by the monks of Citeaux and Clairvaux. I cannot express how much I was touched and edified; I was fortunate to share the daily exercises of these holy religious as well as their nightly religious exercises. I envied them their vocation and I would have been happy to stay there. I had never seen anything like it and I felt completely at home in this atmosphere of prayer and silence. During this retreat, I read a pamphlet written by Fr. Olier entitled "Introduction to Christian Life." This book which so clearly explains the living organism of the Catholic Church gave me an idea for the introduction to the life of Saint Bernard. I also examined the old books of daily customs as well as the annals of Citeaux. These preliminary readings prepared me for the work which I began in the small cell of the Trappist monastery and which for several years attracted all my interest. I think that this retreat was in 1834. It was followed by some monotonous years as far as outward events are concerned, but I was very interested in my work and I was in the mood to study. I was also the director of some holy souls who had become attached to my ministry and who came to me for advice.

Among these were Miss Louise Weywada, whom I have already named, a simple upright soul who helped the word to bear fruit in her heart; Miss Emily Lagarmite, a heavenly flower, who was very timid but yet very energetic and firm; finally, Miss Rose Valentin who was remarkably intelligent. There were even more whose names I have forgotten, but the most outstanding was Mrs. Sophie Stouhlen, the widow of a very respectable military officer. She was about fifty years old when I knew her, and she was living with her aged mother who, like

her daughter, was a woman of strong and generous holiness. Later Mrs. Stouhlen was to become the first Superior General of Our Lady of Sion. That is why I want to say a few words about my personal relationship with this outstanding soul. Later I will come back to the story. When she came to ask my spiritual help, she was depressed and ill. Without children, she had no work, no distractions of any kind. The spirit of the world had never entered this house.

It was filled with an unsmiling, gloomy piety. I thought it my duty to introduce into it some active works, and since at this time Fr. Bautain had established at Strasbourg an institution for young girls, I suggested to Mrs. Stouhlen that she become involved with it; she did it with admirable self-forgetfulness – all the more remarkable since she was in very poor health and tired easily. This truly Christian widow was as simple and frank as a child but she had no initiative; her sole desire was to obey, and in proportion as she gave up her own will, she came to experience the profound joy to be found in following the Will of God. She herself taught the small children and she was present regularly at the Bible history lessons which I gave in this school. She came fairly often to see Miss Humann and this gave her the opportunity to consult me. The only purpose of my advice was to support her in peace and submissiveness. At that time, I had no inkling of the meaning of religious life and this idea never entered my spiritual direction; it never occurred to me that one day I would work to organize a religious community.

After we left the minor seminary, Fr. Bautain, at the request of several Christian families, had also opened a school for young boys. I was a religious educator there. In addition to these occupations in which I was engaged, at the same time as I was pursuing more interesting personal studies, I also had the joy of chatting often with Jews who came to ask for instruction in the Christian religion. This was the ministry that was closest to my heart, because I believed that I was called to spread the knowledge of Jesus Christ among the children of Israel. However, at this time I was able to baptize only a few; as for my own family, controlled more by the spirit of the world than by that of

Judaism, they remained untouched by any religious influence. My oldest brother, Adolph, whose wife was Mrs. Fould's sister, was dead. My sisters had married while I was at Molsheim and my young brothers, Achille and Alphonse, still children, were at school. I was not allowed to have any contact with them. I scarcely knew Alphonse who was to be the object of so much divine grace in 1842.

Every year Fr. Bautain was accustomed to take a trip during his holidays – a habit acquired during his university days – and he always took one of us with him. One year, (I forget what year it was) he took me as his companion; we stayed at several castles where I met some very interesting people. We spent several days with the de Lamartines. Mrs. de Lamartines was very pious but her devotion went hand-in-hand with an almost idolatrous attitude towards her husband. The latter had a princely distinction but he practised religion in his own way. We said Mass in the castle's elegant chapel; the poet assisted at it but I remember that he remained seated the whole time, continually patting a small dog which sat on his lap. There are Christians who claim that animals also should benefit from the kindness of their masters. I was happier at the castle of Cirey in the Vosges, home of Mr. Chevandier, whose son had spent some time at our family home in Strasbourg and who later became the unfortunate Minister of the Interior under Napoleon III. We spent a week in this fairy-like castle with the famous Father Lacordaire and the prominent chemical scientist, Mr. Dumas. It did my soul good to talk to these remarkable men. This trip also took us to Grenoble to visit Mr. Planta, and then to Paris where Fr. Bautain knew many people. This stay in Paris would have been insupportable if I had not met Father Desgenettes, parish priest of Notre Dame des Victoires. This tiny parish hidden away in more worldly surroundings had been deserted and abandoned; it had even lost its beautiful name; it was simply called the Church of the Little Fathers. After several empty years, the parish priest was inspired to call on the Immaculate Heart of Mary to beg from her graces of conversion and resurrection. With this in mind he had formed an association of prayer for the conversion of sinners, an association which later the Holy See raised to the rank of Archconfraternity and which produced wonderful results. His prayers having been answered

beyond all calculations, Father Desgenettes could no longer cope alone with his work, and 'like the fishermen of Galilee whose boat was loaded down with fish, he sought helpers. He appealed to my good will as soon as he learned of my sympathetic feelings for his work, and I put myself at his disposal to answer the flood of mail coming to his rectory. He could not guess how happy I was to work in Mary's service. I asked Fr. Bautain to allow me to withdraw from the trip or at least from accompanying him in his visits, to give my time as secretary at Notre Dame des Victoires. I would have been happy to stay with Father Desgenettes but I did not dare hope that this honor would be granted to me. I had no idea that one day Divine Providence would indeed grant it to me. After an absence of several months we came back to Strasbourg, and I immediately became involved in such occupations as were compatible with my humiliating position. We found Miss Humann seriously ill. For a long time she had been suffering from an incurable illness and its ups and downs hinted at approaching death.

**1832**

She had us sign a promise of union which formed us into a hierarchy based on three basic "elements". Fr. Bautain was to head, Adolphe Carl was second and I was third. Next came Jules and Nestor Level, Isidore Goeschler, Father de Bonnechose, Father de Régny, Father Gratry, Father Mertian and the others. Each of the first three was given a crucifix, gift of the Bishop of Mayence.

**1836**

Miss Humann died on September 19th, 1836, at 7 o'clock in the morning. At that moment I was celebrating Mass in her intentions at the Cathedral. I shall not speak of the sorrow which filled my heart when on my return to the house, I found only the lifeless body of she who had been my spiritual "mother." There are sorrows which can never be expressed. Fr. Bautain thought he was doing me a favor by suggesting that I remain with him and Father Carl beside her death bed during the night. But at nightfall Fathers Bautain and Carl disappeared and did not come back. I confess that when I found myself alone



with the corpse, an uncontrollable emotion swept over me. I threw myself on my knees and shortly after I fell fast asleep. The following day, waking at daybreak, it seemed to me that I heard her voice saying to me, "Is this the way, son, that you have learned to keep watch?" While she was entering the joys of heaven, those of us left on earth were like orphans in a deserted house, plunged into mourning. Father Bautain took her place but he did not represent her. He had the perfect gifts for the head of an institution; but he did not have a mother's heart, nor a father's either, and he never assumed the title of father. We called him brother. For my part, I had great respect for him, but there was no meeting of souls between us, and I received no consolation from him, no encouragement. On the contrary he almost led me astray by a completely unexpected action. According to what he thought the best human decision, he decided to give my place in our little society to Father de Bonnechose. So it was that a few days after Miss Humann's death, he changed the order of rank which had been consecrated by our act of union. In addition, he wanted me to give my crucifix to Father de Bonnechose. This decision could easily have been justified by Father de Bonnechose's qualities, and from this point of view I knew that the society would benefit by the change. Nevertheless I could only regret a step which completely shattered my confidence. Our act of union was our only rule of life; it strengthened our fraternal bonds by establishing a specific order. The only rule Miss Humann had given us was the rule of love; I knew that if this was not respected, our harmony would be fundamentally endangered. God alone knows how much I suffered when I gave up my little crucifix. However, Fr. Bautain wanted even more: he asked me to give him the little picture of Our Lady which used to hang over Miss Humann's bed; she had received it from Bishop Colmar of Mayence and she had given it to me as a last keepsake. This I was not able to surrender. I always kept it on my prie-dieu and it gave me much consolation. I intend to give it to Mother Marie-Benedicta of Sion who, among all the people I have known, is most like Miss Humann. I shall say nothing about her here because it is to her that I am dictating these lines; I shall certainly say something about her later when I work on the Gospel Meditations and the Directory of Our Lady of Sion.

Although our situation in the Church was beginning to weigh heavily on us, there seemed to be no way out of the complications caused by our confusion. For a long time Fr. Bautain had believed that the controversial questions which gave rise to this situation were philosophical ones and hence should not be decided by the Holy See. This was his avowed opinion in spite of the fact that he professed a deeply-felt submission to the Church's authority in philosophical matters. Influential friends finally persuaded Fr. Bautain to go to Rome, and to our great joy, he took Father de Bonnechose with him. They were both received with the kindness and warmth always shown to those who humbly come to submit their writings to the judgment of the Head of the Church. Some months went by, and we learned that Rome had not approved Fr. Bautain's thesis on the limits of faith and of reason. I do not know whether his teaching was formally condemned but it was certainly criticized, and Fr. Bautain submitted without argument. No reproach was ever levelled at his disciples. On the contrary, Cardinal Lambruschini, Secretary of State for Gregory XVI, signed, in the Pope's name, a brief approving the Life of Saint Bernard; I was also given a papal decoration.

**1840**

In his advanced age, Bishop de Trevern became childish. He completely forgot all events of the past. A co-adjutor had been given him, the scholarly Bishop Raess, formerly rector of the major seminary of Mayence, whom Bishop de Trevern had appointed director of higher studies in Molsheim. He had given theology courses and had presided at all our examinations. He was more than kind to me and always showed me a good deal of affection. One of his first acts as co-adjutor Bishop of Strasbourg was to restore all my ministerial faculties. Later he also made me an honorary canon of the Cathedral. At this time, Fr. Bautain had a letter from Paris from the parish priest of Notre Dame des Victoires begging him to allow me to be on the staff of his church. Nothing could have given me greater pleasure. For a long time Fr. Bautain delayed answering; but Providence made it possible to grant this request; for at the time Fr. Bautain was negotiating with Messrs.

Salinis and Scorbiac to buy the college of Juilly, situated some miles from Paris.

1840

The sale took place in the year 1840, I think. Consequently our entire small company moved to Juilly. Teaching was the only kind of work that interested Fr. Bautain at this time; this prospective was also pleasant for the others. But for me, who had neither their tastes nor their gifts, the thought of resuming teaching filled me with dread, and I would have found it very difficult to go back. Fortunately the request of the parish priest of Notre Dame des Victoires opened up a much more pleasant perspective for me. It filled my deepest aspirations, in fact it was my only ambition, to become a special servant of the Blessed Virgin; to co-operate with a holy priest in helping souls: this seemed to me the most desirable of all work, and I was impatient to shake off all the obstacles which prevented me from answering the priest's request. Patience is the inevitable requirement of all God's works.

In the meantime, the college of Juilly, formerly an Oratorian abbey, had become our property. To purchase it, we had formed a tontine society which made the building the common property of all the signatories of the purchase contract. I was one of those members and all my inheritance went into it. In any case, since my conversion, I had given over to Fr. Bautain, the earnings from the small fortune left to me by my parents. It was about 100,000 francs. I would have been wealthier if my wealthiest uncle, who died childless, had not disinherited me by name. Even my father, influenced by those around him, had deprived me of available assets. I could say with the Psalmist: "The Lord is my inheritance." As co-owner of Juilly, I was given the rather ridiculous title of honorary director of the college. I saw then that it was only very unwillingly that Fr. Bautain agreed to my settling in Paris. He was afraid that my distance from Juilly would weaken still further the already weak bonds of my submission to his authority.

To avoid as much as he could this inconvenience which he feared, he used all kinds of tactics. First, not satisfied with giving me the titles

of co-owner and director of the college, he obliged me to come every Friday to Juilly to teach catechism in one of the lower grades. Then he wanted my apartment in Paris to be as uncomfortable as possible. He rented for me a small miserable room, unfurnished and unheated, in the attic of a house on the Street of Notre Dame des Victoires; he made me take my meals in the rectory. I suppose this food was in exchange for my services since Father Desgenettes never gave me a cent. I relate these details only to show what plans had been made for me to live in Paris. I can honestly say that at this period of my life, I experienced every form of poverty and even of penury. Sometimes I was given an honorarium for my sermons; but I would have felt guilty if I had kept it; I gave everything conscientiously to Fr. Bautain. I remember that often I put in my pocket a piece of bread from the supper table at Fr. Desgenettes so that I would have something for breakfast. Such was my situation in 1840 when I began to work at Notre Dame des Victoires. It was evident that Father Bautain wanted me to become disgusted with the life which I spent away from Juilly and he hoped that I would soon beg for help.

But while my corporal life was sad and painful, my soul was growing in peace and joy. My ministry at Notre Dame des Victoires had nothing to do with parish service. I was assistant director of the Archconfraternity of the Holy Heart of Mary and it was with this that I did all my work. Indeed, this Archconfraternity which had begun very humbly, had spread almost miraculously in every part of the world; it was this development that had prompted the Holy See to raise it to the rank of Archconfraternity – a title which conferred on it the power to pass on to other confraternities the indulgences already granted to itself. My work was to correspond with all these confraternities and to sign their diplomas of membership.

Yet this work, which brought great graces to so many countries, was almost imperceptible at its source. Sunday services were badly attended; the church was dark; the faithful members of the Archconfraternity only met in the chapel of the Blessed Virgin and gathered around a portable pulpit where the preacher very often had only about

a dozen pious old ladies as audience. I was the usual preacher and I had no gift for attracting crowds; more than once I would have been discouraged at preaching in this cold desert if the parish priest himself, with typical Norman stubbornness, had not each time followed me into the pulpit to tell about marvellous conversions happening in other parts of the world and to exhort his listeners to pray for sinners and to recommend them to the prayers of the Archconfraternity. My confessional was at the feet of Our Lady's statue in the same chapel, and quite often I witnessed the marvels that grace can bring about when it is dispensed by Mary. I remember with deep feeling some of these graces and I am happy to recall here two memories which have never left me.

Leaving the church one evening, I was accosted by a young man who said to me quite simply: "Is this the church where sinners are converted?" When I answered affirmatively, he asked me how one went about being converted. "Nothing is easier," I answered, and pointing to my confessional, I said: "Go in there; I'm going to go in there with you." This gentleman was a university professor. I had him make a retreat with the Jesuits; he entered the seminary and became a holy priest.

Another time, I was in the sacristy when an unknown lady came to give me a letter addressed to me in handwriting I did not recognize which told me that the mother of a family, who for a long time had not practised her religious duties would come to me with a message which she had been asked to give me. It was hoped that this method of getting her to Notre Dame des Victoires would provide an opportunity for her reconciliation with God. Thanks to the attraction of the Heart of Mary, the erring Christian made her peace with God and returned happily to her own country.

An even more remarkable conversion was that of a journalist from Paris who, in order to cast ridicule on Fr. Desgenettes, had announced in his anti-religious paper that on the following Sunday, at exactly 7:00 o'clock in the evening, the parish priest would perform a miracle in the Archconfraternity chapel. This notice brought out a great many curious people including the journalist himself who, of course, wanted to learn

the result of his practical joke. But like Balaam's donkey, he had prophesied and he himself was the object of the miracle. At the exact moment when the choir was singing the invocation of the Litany of the Blessed Virgin which implores: "Refuge of sinners, pray for us," the poor journalist fell on his knees and overcoming every temptation of human respect, struck his breast and went to confession, humble and contrite, that very evening after the service.

It is easy to see how such events and so many others strengthened my faith in Mary and inflamed the loving zeal which I felt for her. In any case, during the first year, I had the opportunity of seeing that Mary's victories were published not only among Christian sinners but also among heretics and unbelievers. The Archconfraternity was also praying for the conversion of the Jews and I was glad to baptize several of them, among them two Jewesses who consecrated themselves to God in the community of the Ladies of Saint-Louis. To obey Father Bautain, I continued to give my weekly classes at Juilly in spite of the rather frigid welcome given to me there.

At this time my health was at its peak and I was almost indefatigable. The result was that, in spite of my work at Notre Dame des Victoires, I eagerly accepted the various preaching assignments offered to me in Paris. Father Martin de Noirlieu, at that time parish priest of Saint-Jacques-du-Haut-Pas, invited me to preach the Lenten sermons in his church; since he gave me a good report, several other priests asked me for the same ministry; I preached successively in Saint-Merry, at l'Abbaye-aux-Bois, at Notre-Dame de Porette, at Saint-Sulpice, at Saint-Roch and in almost all the churches of Paris. I never wrote out any sermon; perhaps a certain somewhat presumptuous confidence made up for my lack of talent. My only help came from a few notes I made each time and from prayer, especially to the Blessed Virgin. I wonder now how I could so blithely accept such a difficult ministry; today I would never dare to undertake such important preaching.

But in the year 1841 an unpleasant change took place in my way of life. Fr. Bautain wanted an apartment in Paris since he often came there with Fr. de Bonnechose to preach. He rented a floor in a house on

Vaneau Street where Fr. Dumarais, parish priest of the Foreign Missions, and his curates were living. I was therefore obliged to leave my own apartment to take up residence in the suburb of Saint-Germain which necessitated a long walk every evening and several times during the day to fulfill my functions at Notre-Dame-des-Victoires.

It must be confessed that however painful this change may have been from several points of view, it had one enormous advantage since it permitted me to fulfill a long-time desire of my priestly life: to live with an ecclesiastical community; this was possible now since we were living in the same apartment house as the priests of the Foreign Missions, who were living in community. This was the fulfillment of one of Archbishop Affre's dearest dreams: to have the parish priest live with his curates and thus provide them with a means of avoiding the dangers which filled Paris for young priests. All the clergy were in favour of this wise step and Father Dumarais had been asked to make the experiment. For this purpose he asked to be allowed to choose the curates who would be willing to live in this way. We came to join this secular community. Unfortunately the attempt failed. No agreement could be reached as to the hours of meals or to the frequency with which a priest's work might necessitate going out. They withdrew one after the other, and I was finally left alone with Fr. Bautain and Fr. de Bonnechose who only came occasionally, and with two young friends of Fr. Dumarais whom he had taken in as boarders while they were studying at Saint-Sulpice seminary. One of these was the holy, studious Charles Gay who later became auxiliary Bishop to Cardinal Pie, the famous Bishop of Poitiers. The other one, still a layman although he wore a soutane, was Mr. Gounod. The latter, possessed with a genius for music, became the noted composer whose delightful compositions can be compared favorably with those of Mozart. During the few years I lived with this little community, I liked them very much, but this life could not replace the one I had left with Father Desgenettes nor could it console me for being so far from Notre Dame des Victoires. In the new Way of life which obedience had imposed on me I was like a stranger in a strange land. I had to give up my regular confession time as well as Sunday evening services with the Archconfraternity which

would have made it necessary, to spend hours on Paris streets late at night. To sum it up, there were more inconveniences than consolations, and I was faced once more with the same kind of blind obedience as when I was at the Strasbourg Cathedral. It is also true that I was more resigned in Paris than I had been in Strasbourg; to strengthen my spirit of sacrifice, I had taken as my guide the words of Scripture: "He became obedient even to the death of the cross." Every evening I repeated them before I went to sleep. It gave me happiness because the cross was already working its purifying task in me, very necessary for the work which divine Providence had in store for me.

**1841**

On Plumet Street (today Oudinot Street), not far from Vaneau Street, there was a large orphanage for girls, founded some time before by Fr. Desgenettes, under the name of Providence House and it was directed by the Daughters of Saint Vincent of Paul. This establishment had more than 300 children and was very poor, having no source of income and being unable therefore to have a regular chaplain. Since Fr. Desgenettes knew that I would not ask to be paid, he urged me to take over the responsibility for religious services in this Providence House. I hadn't the courage to refuse such pleading on his part so I tried to combine this ministry with my functions at Notre Dame des Victoires. However, this proved impossible, and as a matter of conscience I felt obliged to resign from the Archconfraternity to devote myself exclusively to the orphanage.

From then my sufferings began to bear fruit and my interior joy overcame all painful experiences. I became closely attached to my dear little orphans; among them were many souls of great worth, and I was very much impressed by the distinguished qualities and solid virtue which I so often saw in these modest young people. All the poor orphans were my children and I took the same care of them as would a devoted father and pastor. Providence House had become a school for me where I could acquire the kind of experience I had not had up to now. I also loved the happy obscurity of a humble ministry which aroused no one's jealousy; blessed by the Virgin Mary, this ministry was increasingly fruitful.



I was then a little over 40 years old and I could see no way of ever following the irresistible attraction that I felt to work for the conversion of the people of Israel. I thought that I would remain at Providence until my death, but this was not God's plan.

**1842**

At the beginning of 1842 there occurred an extraordinary event which suddenly drew a great deal of attention to me – something which I had never sought. It was the miraculous conversion of my brother. From the start, this conversion caused a world-wide interest whose echoes fell back on me. For a long time I had to hide from the crowd of visitors who, impelled by curiosity or piety, wanted to see and hear the brother of the neophyte of Rome.

I don't think it necessary to tell here the story of this memorable conversion. It has been reported with varying degrees of accuracy in many magazines, I shall only tell how I got the news.

It was evening on February 1st, 1842, vigil of the Feast of the Purification. Preparations for this feast had kept me in the confessional for an unusually long time. On returning to my room, I was eating supper alone when I noticed that there were several letters for me. I was too tired to read them and I hurriedly put aside one whose writing I recognized. It was from Mr. Théodore de Bussière who often annoyed me because he wanted me to proof-read a book on Sicily which he was having printed. I opened it after I had read all the others; it was dated at Rome and it related the story of what had happened at Sant' Andrea delle Fratte. My brother himself added a few excited lines to the end of the letter. I cannot describe my feelings when I read this letter. I could not control my joy, and yet I could not, did not even want to, share the news with anyone because this conversion so far surpassed anything that I could have wished for. I was afraid that I might be suffering from an hallucination and that, if I revealed it today, tomorrow would be obliged to retract. In its present condition, the human heart cannot support great joys; it is better able to support great sorrows. That was my experience in this instance. I spent the whole night in a

fever of happiness. Next morning I went as usual to Providence about 7 o'clock, to say Mass. I was to preach since it was a feast of Our Lady. But in spite of my efforts to control my emotion, abundant tears fell on the altar. They thought I was ill and in great pain; I felt the congregation's uneasiness, so to reassure these compassionate people, I explained to them the cause of my excitement and I told them in simple words the story of the miraculous conversion. This story aroused a joy-filled attention. But the name which I did not want to publish escaped from my lips in spite of myself, and I ended my account with the words: "The young Jew converted in Rome is my brother!" At these words the congregation rose in stunned silence, then with one voice, all the orphans broke into the Magnificat. I shall not enumerate the moments of weakness which overcame me as I finished Mass; I hope God has forgiven me for them. Meantime it was not long before the news from Rome was broadcast far and wide and the newspapers were full of it. The following Sunday I was to preach at Notre Dame des Victoires, and Fr. Desgenettes told me that for the honour of Our Lady and the glory of God, I must give the same account to the Archconfraternity as I had given to the children at Providence. The church was packed and the effect of the story was the same. It was as if an electric current, starting in Rome, had set up vibrations in the hearts of this vast congregation; and there, as at Providence, they intoned the Magnificat. The awakening of Christian sentiments was not immediate, but from that day forward, the Church of Notre Dame des Victoires became the centre of a religious movement which spread in every direction a confident faith, the spirit of prayer and love for Mary.

What touched me most, however, was the bright light that this event cast on the great question of the conversion of the Jews. Mary's visible intervention seemed to me to be an omen of the approaching fulfillment of the promises of great mercy which God reserved for Israel, promises contained in the sacred books of both the Old and the New Testament.<sup>(10)</sup> This hope, which had dominated my thoughts since the beginning of my vocation, also took possession of my brother from the instant of his conversion. He wrote me a touching letter which was full of humility; in simple and enthusiastic language, he gave me his

own account of the appearance of the Blessed Virgin on the altar at Sant' Andrea delle Fratte and while he was prostrate at the feet of the Saviour, he tearfully deplored the religious degradation of the ancient people of God whose blindness seemed to him to be without human hope of cure; "but," he added, "it is fervent and persevering prayer which will attract grace from heaven and triumph over all resistance." Meantime, he begged me to procure Christian education for Jewish children confided to me by their parents, and he urged me to buy a house for this special work. This last request seemed odd to me; it seemed impractical and I was unwilling to begin a work which could compromise my ministry and which, in my opinion, had no chance of success. I thought my brother's ideas were getting ahead of God; they seemed so strange to me that I wondered whether the poor neophyte had lost his reason. Yet, his conversion was so extraordinary that I did not dare to reject completely an inspiration which could easily be from God. In my anguish, I turned to the Blessed Virgin of whom I had a statue in my room, and addressing myself to her, I prayed: "Beloved Mother, I shall do whatever you tell me. If therefore it is you who have inspired my brother with the idea of founding the delicate work which he is suggesting to me, show me a sign. Send me one Jewish child and this will be for me a sign of God's Will."

I said this prayer in the morning; before the end of the day I got the sign I had asked for. I was handed a letter from Fr. Aladel, superior of the Lazarists, which informed me in a few lines that a Jewish lady who was very ill had confided to him her wish to have her daughters brought up in Christian schools. He asked me whether I would be interested in this apostolic work. Reading this letter, it seemed to me that it was the Blessed Virgin herself who was answering my prayer. I thanked her, and I rushed off to find Fr. Aladel on Sevres Street, to explain to him the connection of his proposal with my brother's. The following day we went together to Mrs. Wurmser, the Jewish lady in question. The poor lady had undergone surgery and was suffering a great deal. The sight of two priests at her bedside moved her. She knew me by name only and she had an instinctive fear of my influence. Her first words were those spoken by every Jew when faced with those they

fear have come to proselytize them: "I respect Christianity but I have horror of people who change religions." I explained to her as briefly as possible that Jews who recognize Jesus Christ as the promised Messiah do not change their religion; far from abandoning the faith of Abraham they accept it in its plenitude. I added a few other words but she was tired. I pacified her with regard to her two daughters and assured her that I would take care of them. When I said good-bye, I apologized to her for having worn her out and I promised that I would never speak of religion to her again. The only favour I asked was that she would wear a small medal of the Blessed Virgin which I offered her. She accepted this precious ornament and asked me to come back the following day. I did so, and I said to her at once: "Don't worry, I won't even mention religion." But she said to me in a deeply moved tone: "Oh, yes, do talk to me about religion!" At that I continued the conversation where we had left off the previous day. She was a very intelligent woman; she herself quoted these magnificent words: "All the nations of the earth will be blessed in Abraham." Visibly inspired by the grace of God, she in a certain way made a profession of the Christian faith before she knew what it was. I showed her the necessity of baptism to unite her to Jesus Christ and make her a child of God. However, I thought she needed more preparation so I asked permission to send a pious and well-instructed Christian lady to help her. The greatest difficulty was her fear of taking such a significant step without her husband's knowledge. He was a rather disagreeable looking Hungarian Jew. If he saw me in his wife's room, he was capable of tearing me to pieces. However, his work kept him away during the day. He had a great deal of respect for his wife and submitted quite easily to her influence. He had already given his consent to my educating his daughters; but he was far from suspecting his wife's religious feelings.

Some days went by, and we fixed a time for conferring baptism. The godfather was the Marquis de Brignolles, at that time Ambassador from Sardinia in Paris. I invited other witnesses whose names I no longer remember. A surprise was waiting for us in the sickroom. I expected to find the patient in bed, but she was kneeling on the floor without any support, with her daughters on her left and right side.

It was a very moving scene. I had to shorten my visit in case the husband should come in. I did, however, take time to say a few words about Holy Communion which was to take place the following morning. I shall never forget that morning for I was in the presence of a miracle. After Communion which she received with extraordinary fervour, I was once more at her bedside. This bed was not against any wall; it had been moved out into the middle of the room to make the doctors' work easier. Still under the influence of the edification I had experienced during the ceremonies, I was standing by the bed when suddenly I saw the Hungarian Jew come in and go to the side of the bed opposite me. You can imagine my terror; I was resigned to being attacked. But, marvel of marvels! The poor man wept as he spoke to his wife. He did not see me although I was in front of him. Did his tears interfere with his sight? Or did God make me invisible for a moment? Everything in this conversion had been so miraculous that a miracle would not have surprised me. The scene closed in a touching fashion. The new Christian, full of fervour, maintained a calm and dignified silence. Then with a sudden movement she took my hand, put it into the hand of her stunned husband and said to him sorrowfully: "Here is our children's protector; I want him to keep them and bring them up as Christians; swear to me on my deathbed that you will always respect their mother's last wishes."

The poor Jew sobbed: "I swear it." A little later I had a short private talk with him and he promised to bring his children to me the following day. Shortly afterwards the happy mother died. Unfortunately she could not have a Christian burial; but I am sure that the Angels took care of such a precious soul and we shall all share the happiness of the Final Resurrection together. Nevertheless this tomb was the corner stone of an edifice which was to be built in honour of Our Lady of Sion.

Mrs. Wurmser's two little daughters were brought to me by their father. The elder was 15 or 14 years old and resembled her mother; the youngest was frail and deformed; she resembled her father who was hideously ugly. I entered them as boarders at Providence House, much against the father's will; it hurt his pride to think that his daughters were in an orphanage. I assured him that this was only a

temporary arrangement; in my view, the important thing was to prepare to open a catechumenate. Soon this small seed, blessed by God, began to grow. A Jewish lady, impressed by the conversion which had taken place at Rome, asked to see me. She was a very fine mother who was seeking light for herself and her children; at my request, she agreed to put her small daughters in Providence House. Several other Jewish children, brought by their parents, added to the growing number of catechumens. I do not know what spurred this movement which kept on growing.

Among these young Jewish girls, I should like to mention two here; the future Mother Marie Pierre of Sion, extremely intelligent and gifted with remarkable aptitude for study and teaching; and her young cousin, later Mother Marie Lucie of Sion, noted for her holiness.

Baptisms followed each other almost uninterruptedly in the Providence chapel which was too small to hold all the ladies of the group set up to help the growing catechumenate as the organization was then called. This work excited a great deal of interest among certain of the faithful who looked upon it as fulfilling the prophecies regarding the Jews. I also remember that several of the leaders of Saint-Germain Society tried to bring accusations against my ministry because they thought I was hastening the coming of the end of the world.

That did not prevent me from continuing the work so encouragingly begun. Several more catechumens brought by their parents increased the number of young boarders at Providence House; and after sufficient preparation, the first baptismal ceremony took place on May 1st, 1843. I think it was Bishop de Janson, of Nancy, who administered the Sacraments of baptism and confirmation to these first neophytes. The future Sister Alphonsine of Sion was among this first group, but during the ceremony, she was overcome by such emotion that the Sisters of St. Vincent de Paul had to carry her away fainting from the chapel. I think God allowed this to happen so that I would have the consolation of baptizing her myself, a week later. This beautiful soul was destined to become the foundation stone of Sion, God shaped her Himself so that one day she could be a model for future

Daughters of Sion; but He wanted me to be her father in every sense of the word so that the living link binding her to me should be in some sense the sign of the mission reserved for her and the pledge of her fidelity. Alphonsine absorbed Christianity; the transfiguration caused by baptism was evident even in her appearance; she radiated supernatural beauty. It seemed that God had given her what Saint Augustine calls "a naturally divine gift", and although she was only barely 14 years old, she was given as much respect as if she were already a religious. Her spirit of faith and her piety influenced all her conduct, and her natural ascendancy over her companions led to a spirit of order, promptness and love of work coupled with smiling kindness. This good spirit became known later as the spirit of Sion. Later I shall tell how this holy young neophyte became mistress of novices when she was hardly 20 years old. Let us continue the story of the beginnings of the catechumenate.

Several Jewish mothers, attracting each other, came to Providence House to give us charge of their children and they themselves became pious Christian mothers. Among the finest were Mrs. Franck, her sister and children, and Mrs. Olmer with her children and later her husband. I must also make special mention of Mrs. Suzanne Marc Samuel of Strasbourg. The latter, whom I had known as a child, had been secretly baptized at Strasbourg by Bishop Raess. However, with a strength of mind worthy of a true daughter of Abraham, she announced to her husband, a fanatical Jew, that she had become a Christian. He refused to allow her to stay in the house after this revelation so she wrote to me to ask shelter for herself and her children. I was glad to see on this occasion that the work would have a practical value. The fearless Mrs. Samuel left her husband, abandoning her fairly considerable fortune, and she came to Paris with her daughter and two sons. The latter were put in a boarding school, the older one in the college at Juilly, the other at Stanislas College, where they completed their studies. The younger called Alphonse Demarc left after second year university and joined the Pope's service at the time of the Italian wars; he remained six years with the Papal Zouaves. He then left the service of a temporal king to enter a spiritual army and he became a member of the Fathers

of Our Lady of Sion. As for his sister, she was admitted to Providence House and at her baptism she was given the name Madeleine.

It is not possible to recall the names of all those who at this time were baptized and who later joined the ranks of Our Lady of Sion. However, among them I must mention Mother Alphonsine, Mother Marie Lucie and Mother Marie Pierre. I should also name Mother Marie and her sister Noémi; Mother Barnabé and her sister who did not remain, and finally Sister Laetitia who sought her sanctification among the lay sisters.

While this was going on, my brother had left Rome to join me in Paris and he lived with me on Vaneau Street. My brother is 11 years younger than I. I scarcely knew him; he was a mere child when I left home. Once when I wanted to administer a baptism within the family circle, he launched against me a diatribe of Jewish anger and invective of which I did not think he was capable, so much so that I could no longer visit my older brother with whom I had been reconciled. Since that violent scene, I had heard nothing more of Alphonse except that he was travelling in Italy; before leaving, he wrote me a short note announcing his engagement to one of our nieces. I think that on this occasion, he even sent an offering for the poor. I sent him a few lines of thanks, never dreaming that soon I would see him a Christian and a transformed person. I shall not speak of the emotions of our first meeting. In truth the fervent neophyte was transfigured. His countenance shone with the joy of having seen Mary. His modest bearing, his serious and humble words, made a deep impression on me. I avoided asking him questions on the miracle of his conversion; I knew how much the mysteries of divine grace operate in silence, and I did not want to risk compromising this state by ill-considered words and gestures. At that time I did not know God's plans for my brother; I did not ask him his intentions and I took good care not to make him feel obliged to stay with me. I spent my time shielding him from the importunities of visitors and curiosity-seekers. He spent days in Providence House; and having in truth regained the simplicity of little children, he played with the orphans or helped the Sisters of Charity with the housework.



I found his childlikeness at once admirable and troubling; he seemed completely unaware of the dangers and temptations with which his path was strewn. Fashionable ladies came to him for advice as if he were an oracle; parish priests, thinking only of their zeal and the advantages to their parishes, invited him to ceremonies to show him off; and while he thought himself hidden in the crowd, some priests pointed him out and sent an usher to bring him to a seat of honour. To put an end to the abuses caused by so much "holy curiosity", I urged my brother to spend a few weeks at Juilly. I do not know whether he derived any benefit from this visit. College life, when one has no function there, is not very interesting; in no way could it fulfill the aspirations of the young convert. When he left Paris, he had no idea what he would do with his life. He was waiting for an answer from his fiancée; he had informed her that he would not marry anyone who was not a Christian. The answer took a long time coming.

Meantime, his only preoccupation was the conversion of the Jews. He dreamed incessantly of ways of attracting his co-religionists to Christianity, and he foresaw that the development of this work of mercy would come from the humble seed growing in the shadow of Providence. For my part, I only thought that my ministry would become more fruitful with the co-worker whom God had sent to me. I was counting on the collaboration of my brother. However, I had to give up this hope: when he came back from Juilly, he announced to me in the most off hand fashion that he was to enter the Jesuit novitiate. I accepted this decision unquestioningly as the Will of God. For a moment it stunned me, but it did not surprise me very much; my brother was under the direction of Father de Ravignan and I had complete confidence in his direction. My only consideration was for the good of a soul very dear to me, and I could only rejoice that he was entering the way of the saints. I knew that his superiors would not hinder him from helping me in some way or other.

**1842**

Alphonse entered the novitiate at Saint-Acheul near Amiens. But before his departure, his renunciation of a cherished project and the

sacrifices he had to make were accepted with such heroism that I still feel moved by it. He had generously renounced the joys of family life and he had already had a foretaste of the hundred-fold promised to those who leave all things to follow Jesus Christ. He had a warm love for the little family of converts who surrounded us with their happiness and who were my pride and joy. The bonds which unite souls are infinitely more intimate, more delicate and more delightful than those of nature. The future Jesuit novice did not hesitate to give these up, too. I can still see him, the evening before he left, hilariously distributing among the Sisters of Charity the few possessions he had; without keeping anything for himself, he went away poor and arrived poor at the novitiate.

His actions and attitude reminded me of the first Christians and made me blush with shame. I saw this younger brother striding along ahead of me in the ways of God; and I was embarrassed at receiving an example from one to whom I should have given it. I shall speak again of the attraction that this example had for me. First I must speak of my first visit to Rome.

That same year, about June 1842, Fr. Desgenettes, the distinguished pastor of Notre Dame des Victoires, asked me to accompany him to Rome, and he asked permission from Fr. Bautain. The latter did not want to hurt the priest by refusing.

Thank God, the trip went off quietly except for my own endless amusement at the eccentric antics of Fr. Desgenettes. This good priest, who came from Normandy, had an iron constitution. His chief food was apples and he could not understand why everyone else did not like them as much as he did. Although he was fairly advanced in years, he had excellent health; the only thing from which he suffered was sieges of sneezing which came on fairly regularly; then he always sneezed exactly fourteen times, and the sneezes were like cannon shots. His sleep was equally phenomenal. When he slept in the train, he was as immovable as an oak, he looked as if he were dead and nothing could budge him. Once when he had to change trains, travellers had to join the conductor in carrying him, still fast asleep, from one carriage to the

other. It was not an easy job, but he knew nothing about it. The only illness from which he ever suffered was seasickness; however, true to his eccentric nature, he began to suffer from it as soon as we reached Rome. We stayed at the Minerva Hotel not far from the Church of Saint-Louis des Français. For the first few days I was his nurse.

I forgot to say that, shortly before we left Paris, my brother wrote from Saint-Acheul to inform me that he intended to build a chapel in honour of the Blessed Virgin in Providence House, to thank the residents for the example of smiling holiness they had given him. He asked me to look after this task for him without specifying how much he meant to spend. I was wrong to undertake this mission. I do not understand and have never understood anything about business. There are three things which I have never been able to learn: architecture, astronomy and military strategy. If necessary I could get by without the last two since I have never had to carry a sword any more than I have had to struggle with the host of stars. But it would have helped, when I came to build a church, to know something about architecture. In any case, I thought I was doing the right thing by confiding this project to a young architect who had offered me his services. He had me sign a document giving him unlimited powers of attorney to guarantee all the expenses of the construction – something of which I could never be proud: instead of the 40 to 50,000 francs I had intended to spend, bills amounted to more than 100,000, and on top of that, no one liked the chapel; it wasn't a monument, it was a pious village church; and according to those who go to see it in the house on Oudinot Street, it has neither style nor character. Certainly God allowed this disappointment; it was to be the herald of another one which I shall mention later.

Meantime I was enjoying the happiness of being in Rome where my soul expanded in an atmosphere of edification. I had often heard people criticize the habits of Romans. At that time this criticism was a Gallican way of belittling the Roman clergy, so as to prove with monumental presumption that the French clergy was the finest clergy in the world. The truth is that in no other part of the world do the priests lead a life of discipline and obedience as they do in Rome. I will even add

that nowhere else are there as many saints among both diocesan and religious clergy. Certain superficial tourists speak with delighted horror of the scandal given by churchmen whom they claim to have seen in cafés. These “historians” have taken for clergy, employees and other functionaries who wear the soutane. Most of the other stories are no more well-founded than this one when they are examined closely. I was fortunate to visit many convents and most of the Cardinals; Fr. Desgenettes took me everywhere with him and I witnessed the warm welcome accorded to the renowned priest who had founded the Archconfraternity of Notre Dame des Victoires. Here I want to say a few words about the Cardinal who made the greatest impression on me. These princes of the Church are all great men and they do not need to put on airs. They are easier to reach in Rome than police captains are at home. Their palaces have no guards, no sentinels; the only person at the entrance is a porter; often when we expected to find an imposing personage, we found instead a father full of sympathetic kindness.

But the man who received us with the greatest warmth and openness was Cardinal Lambruschini, the Pope's Secretary of State, a tall and dignified old man whose appearance instinctively inspired respect. He was as well versed in science as in Christian perfection, but above all, he was a great devotee of Mary. He gifted me with several works which he had written on the Immaculate Conception and on the writings of Saint Teresa. I do not know why he showed such partiality to me so that at one point he told me to ask him for anything I wanted. I collected my thoughts for a moment, then falling on my knees I answered him: “Your Eminence, what I want more than anything else is your blessing.” Then he blessed me, adding: “I give you all I have.”

Another Cardinal, likewise a saint, was Cardinal Franzoni, prefect of the Propaganda. This gentle Bishop was very much interested in the work of the conversion of the Jews. He was kind enough to encourage me in public; and in this vein he gave me a letter of praise which was the beginning of many graces.

We also visited Cardinal Macira, Archbishop of Albano, called the Papal Cardinal because he was generally regarded as the one who

would succeed Gregory XVI on the throne of Peter. This visit made a deep impression on me. We were led into a kind of pavilion leading to the splendid palace of Albano; it was in this humble dwelling that this prelate lived; he had reserved for himself only this small house, so that the rest of the palace might be used as a home for the poor. It is difficult to give an adequate idea of what the Archbishop's room was like. It was really only a small cell, whose only furniture was some simple cane chairs which were so loaded down with books that we did not know where to sit down. The conversation of the kind old man was as impressive for his lively expression as for his sparkling wit and colourful language. However, I was sorry to discover a slight tinge of liberalism in several of his ideas.

I cannot forget our visit to the famous Cardinal Mezzofanti, so well known for his extraordinary gift for languages. He spoke to every foreigner, not only in the language of his country, but also in the dialect and with the accent of his province. When I met him for the first time, he addressed me in Hebrew. It really was Hebrew for me; I didn't understand a word of what he said. Then he spoke to me in the Alsatian dialect which I did not understand any better. "Your Eminence," I said to him, "I speak only French and that not very well." Everyone admired his learning and the breadth of his knowledge which was prodigious. Yet when one met him, what one found most stunning of all was the tremendous humility of this scholar and Roman. He was a true man of God. When I expressed astonishment at hearing him speak so many languages, he answered me that they were only words, and that if he lost his memory, he would no longer know anything. When we left, I asked for his blessing, but he answered: "I am not a bishop; I am just a simple priest like you, and I have an equal right to ask for your blessing."

There is not a more admirable group of men than those who compose the Sacred College of Cardinals. There one finds diversity of talent and virtue in the unity of charity.

The tireless Fr. Desgenettes wanted to visit all of them, and everywhere he told the story of the Archconfraternity of Prayer of Notre

Dame des Victoires. Finally, after having heard it so often, I knew the story by heart, and I must confess that this monotonous repetition of the same thing time after time tried my patience. I cannot remember the names of all the important people we met. But I must mention the unusual thing that happened to us at the home of Cardinal Castracane. We were travelling on foot at the time of the day when Rome has the siesta. The old Cardinal was sleeping in a room near the drawing room where we had been placed to await his awakening. The whole palace was plunged in silence when suddenly Fr. Desgenettes gave one of his thunderous sneezes. Alas! I knew that the first one would inevitably be followed by thirteen others, each one like a clap of thunder. But at the very first one, we heard the terrified cries of the old man who had been rudely awakened. He called upon God for help, and finally the door opened and he appeared like a dishevelled and terrified ghost. He looked at us with wonderment, while Fr. Desgenettes, sneezing with increasing vigour, tried in vain to give his name. As for me, my voice was strangled with laughter, and I kept silence because I was afraid of laughing out loud. This scene lasted for some time; it was becoming burlesque, but the kind Cardinal finally had compassion on our embarrassment; he took pity on us and uttered some fatherly words which calmed the storm. Poor human nature! how little it takes to upset the good manners with which it surrounds itself. Often it is when it is trying to be most solemn that the least incident betrays how ridiculous it really is.

I should devote some time to speaking about the man called the “black Pope,” the venerable Father Roothan, Superior General of the Jesuits. He heaped kindness upon kindness on me. The only explanation for this is the fervour that my brother’s conversion had just aroused in Rome. This saintly man deeply impressed me; I felt that I was in the presence of a holy man. I had several long talks with him; I consulted him about the little work of the catechumenate which had come into being after the conversion of the child of Mary who had just enter the Jesuit novitiate.

The Mother House of the Jesuits, the Gesu, has a profoundly

religious atmosphere. The church is magnificent, but the interior seems to be a church where the Presence of God is felt. The vigil lights which burn before the statues of the Madonna along the immense corridors lead to recollection and prayer. It is truly a heavenly dwelling. There I saw several men of God, among them Father de Villefort, Father Peronne, so famous for his theological writings, and Father Rosaven, who died while I was in Rome in 1851. These worthy sons of St. Ignatius gave me all kinds of proofs of Christian charity; they warmly encouraged the work undertaken for the conversion of the Jews; they promised me their help and blessed the special vocation which called me to this work. The venerable Father Roothan, foreseeing the fruits that it would bear, blessed it with all his heart.

What shall I say of the unforgettable audience granted us by Pope Gregory XVI? My heart was beating very fast as I crossed the huge rooms which lead to the office of the Holy Father. I went from one surprise to another. The first room which we entered in the Sovereign Pontiff's apartments was filled with Swiss Guards armed with lances and dressed in a costume from the Middle Ages; they looked like the jack of clubs. In the second were the servants in dazzling red silk uniforms. From there, we went into a third room where chamberlains of various ranks, attached to the Holy Father's service, had gathered. Finally a last room, less imposing than the others, was opened. Several bishops and superior officers of the Noble Guards in dress uniform were standing there, motionless, at the Pope's door. This walk bringing us ever higher to reach the feet of the Holy Father, gives one an idea of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. But all this imposing array disappears when the door opens and one sees the face of the Vicar of Christ. Then one is faced, not with a worldly power which is composed partly of fear and partly of respect, but rather with a father who represents the goodness of God even more than His power and authority.

Gregory XVI was an old man of average height who had kept all the attraction and enthusiasm of youth. For Fr. Desgenettes' sake he cut short the usual three genuflections; he saw that the old man was having difficulty kneeling and he took pity on him. He made him sit down and listened carefully to the story of the Archconfraternity of Notre Dame

des Victoires; then he was kind enough to listen attentively to the few words that I wanted to tell him about the Catechumenate; finally, seeing that this work was creating a great deal of interest, I felt inspired to ask him for a special mission for the conversion of the Children of Israel. At this the Pope rose with great solemnity; I knelt before him. He put his two hands on my head and blessed me enthusiastically. I had the favour of a second audience which I had not requested. Cardinal Lambruschini informed me that they would pick me up the following morning, Sunday, to take me to the Vatican. When I was about to meet the Pope, a prelate asked me to kneel down and swear that I would keep absolute silence on the subject of my conversation with the Pope, I swore and I have kept the secret in my heart; all I want to say here is that I keep an unforgettable memory of this audience; I shall add no further word.

It is impossible to describe the impression that I retained from the happy moments spent in the company of the Holy Father. I think I was even more profoundly Catholic after having been so close to the one who personifies the centre of the great Christian family. This contact had on me almost the effect of a sacrament; all my feelings of faith and piety were renewed; I prayed with the confidence of a child of God, on whose head were all the blessings of the father of the family. I was basking in joy and blessed consolations. And I owed all this happiness to the Blessed Virgin. Is not this beloved Mother the mediatrix of all graces? Was it not she who presented the fruit of the Tree of Life to all men of good will? She was divinely appointed Mother of the children of the Church to love them, help them, guide them in the way of eternal salvation. She carries out her mission with indescribable compassion, for after having given birth to the Author of life, she unceasingly continues her motherly mission; she gives life to our souls; and it is her need as well as her joy to contribute to people's happiness. My gratitude overflowed; and to pour it out into the heart of my heavenly Mother, I went to the church of Sant' Andrea delle Fratte. With emotion easy to understand I looked at the blessed altar where she had appeared to transmit light and grace to the poor child of Israel who henceforth would be consecrated to Jesus Christ.



Nevertheless I spoke to her especially of the small group of neophytes which had taken form in Paris under my direction. I was worried about the future of these young souls whom I could no longer leave in the house of the Sisters of Saint Vincent of Paul. On one hand the Sisters, although they were as good and devoted as one could find anywhere, had not a teaching vocation and could not instruct the catechumens; on the other hand, the Jewish families felt a certain reluctance at having their children educated in an orphanage. After all, it was not the catechumenate alone that was involved. A special work was necessary, one in conformity with the thoughts of the Church, to fulfill the promises of God concerning the conversion of the children of Israel.

Certainly their conversion seems at the moment to be an insoluble problem. Yet God's mercy is on a par with his omnipotence and nothing is impossible to Him. Therefore I drove out of my mind all thoughts of discouragement; I re-read the words of Saint Paul and the Prophets.

The Apostle, in his letter to the Romans, expresses himself as follows:

“Did God reject His people? Of course not. I am an Israelite descended from Abraham through the tribe of Benjamin. Let me put another question then: have the Jews fallen forever, or have they just stumbled? Obviously they have not fallen forever; their fall, however, has saved the pagans in a way the Jews may now well emulate. Think of the extent to which the pagan world has benefitted from their fall and defection – then think how much more it will benefit from the conversion of them all... Since their rejection meant the reconciliation of the world, do you know what their admission will mean? Nothing less than a resurrection from the dead!... A whole batch of bread is made holy if the first handful of dough is made holy; all the branches of a tree are holy if the root is holy... There is a hidden reason for all this, brothers, of which I do not want you to be ignorant, in case you think you know more than you do. One section of Israel has become blind, but this will last only until the whole pagan world has entered and then after this the rest of Israel will be saved as well. As scripture says: ‘The liberator will come from Zion, he will banish godlessness from

Jacob.’ The Jews are enemies of God only with regard to the Good News, and enemies only for your sake; but as the chosen people, they are still loved by God, loved for the sake of their ancestors. God never takes back his gifts or revokes his choice... How rich are the depths of God – how deep his wisdom and knowledge – and how impossible to penetrate his motives or understand his methods!” (Rom. 12)

The prophets are equally explicit. Here are some pages from the Old Testament:

The prophet Hosea says: “For the sons of Israel will be like the sand on the seashore, which cannot be measured or counted. In the place where they were told, ‘You are no people of mine,’ they will be called ‘The sons of the living God.’ The sons of Judah and Israel will be one again and choose themselves one single leader, and they will spread far beyond their country; so great will be the day of Jezreel.” “For the sons of Israel will be kept for many days without a king, without a leader, without sacrifice or sacred stone, without ephod or teraphim. Afterwards the sons of Israel will come back; they will seek Yahweh their God and David their king; they will come trembling to Yahweh, come for his good things in those days to come.” (Hosea 3)

The prophet Zechariah adds: "I shall not treat thus the remnant of this people as I treated them in former times, says the Lord of armies, for there will be a seed of peace. I will pour out a spirit of kindness and prayer. They will look on one whom they pierced; they will mourn for him as for an only son, and weep for him as people weep for a first-born child. Then they will ask the Lord: where do these wounds come from in the middle of your hands? and he will answer: I was pierced with this wound in the house of those who loved me... Just as once you were a curse among the nations, house of Juda and house of Israel, so I mean to save you for you to become a blessing." (Zechariah 8)

Meditating on these words at the feet of the Blessed Virgin, I saw clearly that this work could not be confided to any congregation already in existence. What then should be done for the instruction of the young neophytes whose numbers were constantly increasing? How could they

obtain a sound Christian education and safeguard their future? I placed all these cares in the heart of Mary; and encouraged by the blessings which I had already obtained through her, I came back to Paris determined to rent a place for my adopted children under the direction of some pious Christian women.

Before leaving the subject of Rome, I must mention a detail which must not be forgotten because it proves that the successor of Saint Peter showed me special kindness. I was in the drawing room of the Minerva hotel with Fr. Desgenettes when a prelate sent by the Pope was announced. This kindly messenger read me a brief giving resounding approbation to the history of Saint Bernard. Then he handed me the decoration of Saint Sylvester which the Holy Father was good enough to accord me. This completely unexpected favour amazed and stunned me. I was suspected of having asked for it, for in Rome, more than anywhere else, intrigue is rampant. But I swear that such a thought never entered my head. Thank God, at Rome and elsewhere, in some tempting circumstances, I never broke the resolution I had made from the moment that I began my priestly training, that I would not seek any honours or dignities. I have always been faithful to this resolution which I made at the suggestion of Miss Humann. The consolation from this decoration lay in the approbation given to a book which was criticized often and vehemently by adversaries of Fr. Bautain's school. More than once, I was even afraid that it would be put on the Index. In any case, I would never have dared to aspire to such an honour. As for the Roman decoration, people said I did not deserve it; they were right, and if I wore it, I think I did the right thing because I acted on the advice of my confessor. I confess that it embarrassed me to find myself singled out by this decoration from the rest of my confreres. I believe that a priest should seek other means of distinction than a little ribbon in his lapel. Yet the title of Roman knight was not without its usefulness, for in Rome it confers some precious prerogatives. Thus, on the feast of Saints Peter and Paul, it gave me the right to have a place in the sanctuary of Saint Peter's so that I had a close-up view of the splendid ceremonies which took place behind the high altar where the Sovereign Pontiff, in all the brilliance of his religious majesty, was seated on his throne, sur-

rounded by Cardinals, Bishops, Superiors of Religious Orders and representatives of all the church hierarchy. I shall not try here to picture the splendours of Catholic worship seen on these occasions. They are heavenly scenes to which no human tongue can do justice. I shall never forget the spectacle presented by Saint Peter's square when the Holy Father gives his blessing "urbi et orbi." When he appears on the balcony of the Basilica, at the head of a splendid procession, suddenly a moving silence succeeds the ringing of bells, the canon and trumpets, the electrified crowd falls to its knees; the onlooker can easily imagine that it is the scene of the last judgement when the Son of God, surrounded by legions of angels, comes to pass sentence. Then the things of earth seem petty and insignificant when compared to great religious manifestations. The splendours of the Church are usually hidden in mystery; they are contained in the eternal centre of light. But on certain great solemnities, these splendours are reproduced in visible symbols and they project across the world rays of beauty like reflections of Mount Thabor. The Christian who has taken part in these mysteries is happy and proud of being a Catholic and always is surrounded by grace. But it is only in heaven that these feelings will find adequate expression.

On my return I was eager to impart my impressions of the trip to Fr. Bautain, and above all to tell him my thoughts about the conversion of the Jews. Fr. Bautain did not relish my ideas; he had once disapproved of them at Strasbourg; in particular he disapproved of the little organization I had begun in Paris. The objection which he always raised was that it was not the time to begin a work which was to be accomplished only at the end of the world. Father de Salinis, who later became Bishop of Amiens, was present at this conversation; he did not share Fr. Bautain's feelings. On the contrary, he saw in the little neophytes gathered around me after the miracle of January 20th, the first-fruits of God's mercy announced to the people of Israel. I leave all questions concerning the end of the world to people who like discussions. I am satisfied, knowing that the remnant of Israel will be converted and that this conversion will mark an era of expansion for the Church. No one knows when this will be. All we know is that the end will come when

men least expect it. I doubt if there is a period in history when men thought less of it than they do now.

In any case, the history of centuries teaches us that Providence prepares well in advance the people and institutions who are to be His instruments in carrying out His plans. Noah began the construction of the mysterious Ark 100 years before the deluge. The coming of the Messiah was preceded by centuries of preparation. The evangelical path of the Saviour was itself prepared by the preaching of John the Baptist. Finally, we read that the Apostles themselves did not begin their apostolate until after a long period of waiting. We must also remember another truth, namely, that the works of God often start insignificantly, imperceptibly, and unrecognized. At their beginning, they are tiny seeds which germinate underground for a long time before lifting their branches, laden with flowers and fruit, to the sun.

Confident in these unshakable facts, I resolved to go ahead as if I were sure of the future. It seemed to me that the time had come to give a special form to the work which was coming into existence. I had come back from Rome with this idea. But what form would the house of catechumens take? I saw clearly that it would never reach its goal if it remained mixed up with an orphanage. In the Church I saw institutes consecrated to the easing of every human misery but I did not know of a single one devoted to working for the children of Israel and their salvation. On the other hand, the thought of founding a new congregation had never crossed my mind; and if I had been presumptuous enough to give any thought to the matter, I would have rejected it as impossible to realize, first because I knew absolutely nothing about the conditions of life in religious communities; besides, I must confess, I had lived in close quarters with some beginning congregations and I had been shocked at their lack of education, and I saw so many things that I could not accept that I wanted to have nothing to do with them.

**1843**

To get rid of my uncertainty, I made the simplest decision. I rented a small ground floor in a house opposite the Providence House. The

young children who lived in this apartment formed a small family which I confided to the care of some pious and devoted Christian women. One of them, Louise Weywada, showed the most praiseworthy self-forgetfulness on this occasion. I think the two others later became Sister Flore and Sister Victorine. Unfortunately they were still quite young, and they needed a mature hand to direct the house. It was then that I was inspired to appeal to a saintly widow of Strasbourg of whom I have already spoken, Mrs. Sophie Stouhlen who had continued to write to me, and who had often told me of her desire to come to Paris to work under my direction in some charitable undertakings. I wrote to her that I needed generous collaboration to develop a very delicate work. I did not dare to tell her that it involved working with Jews for fear of discouraging her. Indeed, nothing is more repulsive than the poor Jews of Alsace. I limited myself to telling her that the work that I was asking her to direct would probably demand that she sacrifice completely her own tastes and her sympathies; that in any case I would accept her only if she came personally and was willing to meet me in Paris.

As a matter of fact, she did arrive at the end of April, 1845, shortly after the opening of the new house. I did not introduce her to this house, and I told her that I would speak to her of the work only after the month of Mary during which I was to preach at Notre Dame des Victoires. She did not ask any questions, but she followed the services of the month with great exactitude.

When the services were over ... she told me that she was ready to enter the way of complete abandonment which God had designed for her. At that point I said to her: "And if I told you that the work involved working in hospitals with lepers, would you let yourself be stopped by your natural repugnance from undertaking it?" She answered simply: "I count on God's grace and the help of the Blessed Virgin to help me face every sacrifice." "Well," I said to her, "the work involves raising poor young Jewish girls and making Christians of them."

I was afraid that this statement would frighten her, but she seemed, on the contrary, to be relieved at what I had said. This fine Christian woman was rich and charitable. I told her at once that I had no interest

in her business affairs nor in her fortune. She asked her nephew, Mr. Mégard, to look after it for her; at the time he was President of the Royal Court at Caen. This excellent Christian magistrate sustained the courage of his elderly aunt in the course of the battles which she had to face with her family and society in general. She was fundamentally good, and when she came to assume the administration of the neophytes' house, people spontaneously began to call her: the Good Mother, a name which she had richly earned and by which she has always been known in the Congregation.

The first ladies of the institution lived together in perfect charity, forming only one heart and one soul. Then they wanted to wear a religious habit so that they would not be mistaken for society ladies. I think I have already mentioned how opposed I was to this whole idea. At any cost I wanted to steer clear of anything which might suggest a religious community. However, a religious spirit grew up almost spontaneously in this small group of chosen souls; and even if I were opposed to the external forms, I was more than happy to encourage the development of an interior life resembling the life of the Holy Family of Nazareth and of the primitive Church in Jerusalem.

The young converts – and at the head of this list I shall always be happy to name the dignified Alphonsine – found deep happiness in true holiness; the love of the Eucharist and of the Blessed Virgin filled these fervent souls; and because of the careful education of Mrs. Stouhlen, they learned to unite good manners and Christian dignity to their piety.

The small institution began to develop from one day to the next under the motherly care of the Blessed Virgin; then there came an incident which threatened its simple way of life. A young Russian widow, the Countess Alexandrine de Laferronnays, recommended by Fr. de Ravignan, came to tell me of her wish to dedicate her life to the institute of neophytes. I thought this unexpected help was being sent to me by God and I welcomed her very warmly. I soon regretted this advance. This pious lady was really sincere in her search for perfection. However, she failed to understand something usually forgotten in a

worldly life: perfection can be achieved only at the price of self-forgetfulness and of giving up worldly pursuits. If holiness is rare among Christians, it is only because people have forgotten their baptismal promises. How many worldly people want to be holy without destroying the edifice of human imperfection! The world canonizes them, and maybe they think they are holy women because they receive the Sacraments often and and they fuss around in church all the time. But in spite of their feverish activity in many church works, they remain at the same place in perfection and they never advance in the ways of God; they are like ships which move nervously in harbour but never go forward because they remain tied to their moorings. The great evil of our time is that people do not take their baptismal promises seriously. They want to go to heaven but they do not want to give up what is on earth. They look for spiritual consolations but without giving up the vanities of earth.

The noble lady who had come to live in our humble catechumenate had brought with her princely ways of living. She had many visitors who praised her self-denial and proclaimed her sanctity far and wide. The fact was that she felt cooped up in a small house. She became ill and soon returned to her family.

I had counted on this human help; her departure caused me a great deal of suffering. Another sorrow belongs to this period too. I received a letter from Msgr. Lacroix, Superior of Saint Louis des Français in Rome, asking me to preach the Lenten sermons in his church. I was delighted at the prospect of returning to Rome, and I quickly sent the letter to Fr. Bautain. He took a long time to answer me, and I finally heard that he himself had written to Bishop Lacroix, suggesting that Fr. de Bonnechose go to Rome in my place. This opposition hurt me deeply, but it was certainly willed by God; Fr. de Bonnechose was so highly thought of at Rome that when Bishop Lacroix died, Fr. de Bonnechose succeeded him and was named protonotary apostolic. He became superior of the church of Saint Louis des Français and later Bishop of Carcassonne, Archbishop of Rouen and finally a Cardinal. The priceless good done by the eminent Prince of the Church during his long career



proves how admirably God directs human affairs. I accepted that it would be Fr. de Bonnechose who would preach the Lenten sermons in Rome. God wanted to repay me for my sacrifice. I was invited to preach a retreat in honour of the Blessed Virgin at Tours. It was the first Mission of its kind that I had ever preached. It was fruitful and brought me much consolation. It brought me into close contact with Fr. Voisine, pastor of Saint Victorin, who bore a close resemblance to the Good Shepherd. He tendered me his friendship and we remained closely united until his death and, hopefully, throughout eternity. What greater blessing is there than the friendship of a holy priest! If I were to list the inspiring examples which he gave me in his ministry, instead of writing the colourless memories of my own priesthood, I would be able to fill a huge book.

The sufferings, the opposition, the tribulations which we meet in pursuing God's paths are always omens and preliminaries of precious grace. Divine blessings flow like a soothing balm from the wood of the Cross. Thus my disappointment over the question of going to Rome brought forth fruits of consolation for the Church; and the pain that I felt when the Countess de Laferronnays left helped in the development of the work of the catechumenate.

Mrs. Stouhlen and her devoted co-workers believed that if they constituted themselves as a religious community, they would be saved from the encroachment of the spirit of the world. For a long time I fought against this innovation; but finally, giving in to their repeated insistence, I consented to having them wear a semi-religious habit. It consisted of a black dress without veil or any symbol. To tell the truth, the community came into being in spite of me, but once it was in existence, we had to give it a name, and this question occupied much of my thinking. I did not want this small community to be called after a person or a street or some other ridiculous name as happened with other communities such as "Les Oiseaux" in Paris, "les Picpussiennes, les Dames du Roule," or other names of this kind which have absolutely nothing to do with religion. For a long time I could not make up my mind. I knew only one thing, and that was that the institution was the

work of the Blessed Virgin and must be consecrated to her. However Mary's list of names had already been exhausted by the existing religious congregations.

One day, going very early to the chapel of Providence House where I said Mass every morning, I saw on the prie-dieu where I made my thanksgiving a small book which aroused my curiosity. The first word which I saw was the name of Sion. I immediately understood that this biblical name, so often repeated in the Psalms, was the one that most closely epitomized a work whose aim was to restore to the Church the wandering sheep of the children of Israel. Sion is the real name of the Blessed Virgin's family. David ruled in Sion, and his Immaculate daughter is in every respect the Mother, the model and the protectress of the daughters of Sion called to walk in her footsteps. Happily I wrote on the doors of our house this word of the Psalmist: "The Lord loves the doors of Sion above all the tabernacles of Jacob." Therefore we consecrated to Our Lady of Sion this small new religious family, the teachers as well as the converts.

Nevertheless names do not make communities. Names must be justified and enlivened by the spirit of which they are the expression. In this respect, I had only one idea: that the life should be completely Christian, based on evangelical charity and totally separated from any worldly thoughts. A limited, simple rule decided the hours of work, prayer and religious exercises. It was as simple as that. This rule was followed by both the directresses and the converts. The children and the directresses led the same life. Both found their source of happiness in the practice of a holy life. The work which was visibly blessed by God continued to grow. Nevertheless critics were not wanting. However, while thoughtless or prejudiced people looked upon our work as an unfortunate undertaking, others, especially among the more holy priests, looked positively on the beginnings of a fruitful work. Among the first friends of Sion was Bishop Guibert, appointed Bishop of Viviers, and later to become Cardinal-Archbishop of Paris. He delighted in visiting the small group of young converts and he offered them great encouragement. Then there was Bishop Giraud, Cardinal-Archbishop of Cambrai, and Cardinal Donnet, Archbishop of Bordeaux. The former asked

me to give the Lenten sermons in his cathedral; the latter asked me for a similar favour and gave me the title of honorary canon of his cathedral. This kind prelate wanted to do even more for me; he gave me very encouraging offers to keep me with him and to give me a position which would put me at the head of the charitable works of his diocese. Certainly these proposals had a great deal of attraction for me and I would have gladly accepted them with complete confidence since the Cardinal had undertaken to establish the work of Our Lady of Sion at Bordeaux and to provide the necessary finances.

In spite of these offers, I did not think I should leave Paris. In any case, I was sure that Fr. Bautain would not consent to such a change. Already he was rather worried about me because of my frequent absences from Juilly. Nevertheless I had always obeyed him faithfully, and I scrupulously gave him all the stipends that I received for my preaching. I had never been tempted to break the bonds placed on me by Miss Humann. For his part, when Fr. Bautain saw me absorbed in a work which he himself had not founded, he treated me with icy politeness as if he could no longer count on my devotedness.

**1842**

One day when I arrived in Juilly, Fr. Bautain called me and bluntly said to me: "I have taken an important decision which has the assent of all the members of our society; we are going to pronounce perpetual vows and the ceremony will take place tomorrow morning; be ready." At this unexpected statement, I exclaimed in surprise. "Our society," I said to him, "has no constitution. It has no specific goal. It has neither rules nor organization. What would be the point of taking perpetual vows in such circumstances? In any case, I do not want to make such a decision hastily and without making a preparatory retreat."

Fr. Bautain answered: "The ceremony will take place tomorrow morning at my Mass; I cannot grant you any postponement."

I was stunned by this haste; and for the first time in my life, I dared to resist him. The next morning I did not attend the ceremony of vows in spite of the coaxing of my friends who begged me not to turn aside

from the road which we had travelled so long together. I assured them and Fr. Bautain that I would always be faithful to the act of union composed for us by Miss Humann and that vows would not increase this fidelity.

With God's help I found the strength to resist the pleas of my friends. I was terrified at the thought of being alone against them and of causing sorrow to the superior whom I deeply respected. But later on how glad I was that I had not taken part in the spur-of-the-moment ceremony!

As Fr. Bautain had put all the talents of his disciples into the college of Juilly, they later found that they had to appeal to Rome, one after the other, to be released from their vows pronounced with so little reflection; thus these beloved confreres after having criticized me, found themselves doing as I did so that they could accept the variety of apostolates that Providence offered them. For some reason I do not know, even Fr. Bautain eventually left Juilly.

Fr. Bautain went to live at Viroflay, near Versailles, in the home of a pious lady Mrs. Dailly, who offered him hospitality. Several times I visited him there, for I wanted to maintain my relations with him and with my other friends. Finally, I was invited to his funeral, and I was honored to be a pall-bearer.

As for my own situation, I must confess that when I was freed from the bonds of obedience, I was afraid of my freedom; I was like a child freed from his mother's apron-strings who did not know how to walk alone. My confessor administered the Sacraments in a very holy manner but he did not give any direction. I understood then that I was not made to be a diocesan priest. I wanted to enter a priestly community, persuaded as I was that this step would be of help to my undertakings since they would be protected by priests with experience and more capability than I of developing the work of Notre Dame de Sion. I shared these thoughts with Mrs. Stouhlen who always had the same thoughts as I. She promised to stay at her post, and I made up my mind to join my brother Alphonse in the Jesuit novitiate at St. Acheul. I

needed to be enlightened about God's will. The holy priest who at that time was master of novices, Fr. Rubillon, received me with a warm welcome, but he refused to discuss the question of vocation until I had made an eight-day retreat. He carefully examined all the circumstances which had brought into being the work which was my chief preoccupation. He saw that it was providentially inspired and had the marks of God's will on it, and he assured me with all the authority of a man of God that God's will was for me to remain at my post. This decision put an end to the scruples which had haunted me concerning the affair of the vows at Juilly. I came back to Paris to the great delight of the devoted women who thought I had abandoned them, and I was very happy to go back again to my flock of orphans at Providence House; I was as attached to them as a mother is to her children. But a painful event put an abrupt end to this attachment. I shall tell it very simply.

One morning, several outstanding Jesuits came to celebrate Mass in Providence House, in the chapel erected by one of their novices. To my great surprise, the superior of the Sisters of Charity refused permission and informed me that Fr. Etienne, Superior General of their congregation, would not allow the Jesuits to perform any service of the ministry in the houses of Saint Vincent de Paul. As chaplain, I had to inform them of this decision. I could not make up my mind to do it and I went to interview Fr. Etienne and said to him: "How can you refuse permission to my brother, who is a Jesuit, to celebrate Mass in our chapel?" He answered very gently: "I shall make an exception for your brother but I cannot change the general rule."

I told him that my brother would never agree to perform a service in our chapel if his brethren were excluded. I had no right to ask the reasons for a decision which seemed very odd to me. I learned later that he had had to take precautions against the indiscreet zeal of some members of the Company.

It is understandable that after this embarrassing incident, I could no longer remain as chaplain at Providence House. Only God knows what it cost me to leave. I resumed the direction of the little community of Sion; I was broken-hearted but still completely confident.

I was like a bird which does not know where to land. I went to say Mass in the chapel of Saint John of God in my neighbourhood; it was also there that I sent the neophytes whose numbers kept increasing. Soon the house on Oudinot Street was too small. I wanted to buy a house with the money which since my baptism I had confided to Fr. Bautain. He gave it to me without any difficulty; I forget how much it was. It was likely about 100,000 francs which, added to what my brother had bequeathed to me, was enough to buy a large house. But I did not want anything big or beautiful; I was afraid that I would be laughed at if I took a big house for a small community. I must confess that I did not think it would develop as rapidly as it did, and I had so often regretted the decisions taken presumptuously that above everything else, I wanted the institute of Our Lady of Sion to be founded on Christian humility, so I did not accept a property that the Marquis of Nicolai was willing to sell me at a bargain price. I consulted a lawyer who had the reputation of being a good Christian and in whom I had blind confidence. He offered me an old house, in a badly-rundown condition, and I concluded the sale with a great deal of stupid inexperience. The repairs and construction which had to be done before it was habitable for the neophytes, caused me more worries and more expenses than I would have had with a house in good condition. I am convinced that the price of a new house is always less than the expense of repairing an old one.

**1845**

This was only the beginning of a sorrowful way. It happened that I was doing business with a crooked lawyer. I handed him 150,000 francs which I had on hand, so that he could pay the owner of the house on the spot. You can imagine my surprise when I learned that the owner had not been paid! Twice he asked me for the price of the house with the interest. The lawyer had put everything in his pocket without even giving me a receipt. I was extremely embarrassed; I had never had experience with finances and I was ashamed at having acted with such thoughtlessness. The lawyer had involved many people in his bankruptcy; he was brought into court and I had to appear before the jury to give evidence. My part in this affair was absurd, since I had no

receipt nor any kind of document and the judges must have thought that I had no sense. The crowning misfortune for me was to find myself without any funds and without any means of providing for the upkeep of the children whom I had adopted. I was faced with the terrible necessity of giving up a work whose beginnings had been so promising and so edifying. Until then, I had never seen the values of the virtue of poverty and I had no knowledge of the divine impulse that the cross gives to God's works.

Not knowing what decision to take, I thought of consulting my brother, Father Mary, who at this time was in the Jesuit scholasticate at Laval. The time was Christmas, 1844. When I arrived at Laval, I was very upset, and I was worried about telling Father Mary who was as interested in the work of Our Lady of Sion as I was. But his unshakable confidence was greater than mine. I shall never forget the calm serenity with which he listened to my sad story. He led me to the crib, and pointing to the straw on which the statue of the Infant Jesus was lying, he said to me: "There's our treasure!" He seemed very happy as he assured me that the work of Sion was not to seek security in financial resources, and that since the Blessed Virgin had inspired and founded Sion, we were to leave its present and future in her motherly hands.

I came back to Paris as poor as when I left, and tormented with all kinds of contradictory preoccupations. On the one hand, temporal affairs kept me busy consulting lawyers whose talkativeness exhausted me and took up much of my time; on the other hand, I needed peace of mind to carry out the preaching engagements which I had undertaken. It must be remembered that in those days there were fewer preachers than there are now and engagements were made several years ahead of time. This meant that I had to make frequent trips outside Paris at the same time as my financial affairs required my presence there. However my ministry brought me enough funds to pay the interest on the capital of which I had been robbed; thanks also to some providential help, I was able to support the new Sionian work.

This work was growing visibly under God's providence. As the neophytes became more numerous, the divine Master also sent the

vocations to help in their education. Several fine women whom I had directed at Strasbourg or at Notre Dame des Victoires, felt called to devote themselves to this work; one after another there came Rose Valentin, Emilie Lagarmitte and later their sisters. After them came Céline de Layens and several other women from Notre Dame des Victoires, among them Hortense Foulon, Clémentine Desjardins, Antoinette Année, Florentine Doutrelepont. They joined Mother Sophie Stouhlen and Louise Weywada. They formed the first nucleus of the community which began to assume the regular aspect of a religious community. The religious spirit of these women made my task an easy one; and this spirit was communicated to the interesting group of students confided to the direction of young Alphonsine, the first neophyte. There was such a holy and happy spirit among these young people that many aristocratic ladies begged me to take their daughters to have them educated with our poor children. After having resisted for a long time, I finally judged it wise to grant their wish. The first boarder at Our Lady of Sion was little Charlotte de Leusse, daughter of the Count de Leusse, who soon stood out because of her piety. I name her because after having given us a great deal of consolation, she was to be the cause of much annoyance and suffering. Her parents withdrew her from Sion when she expressed an attraction for religious life. They wanted to test her vocation in the excitement of the world, where her social success soon awakened the instincts of feminine vanity. The test ended with a good marriage. She married Count de Missiessy, a true Christian gentleman, honorable and loyal. But the young woman soon forgot the family of Sion and its father. Divine goodness called three of her daughters to the religious life and they entered Sion.

Mme Le Grom of Strasbourg had likewise insisted on having her only daughter educated by Mrs. Stouhlen. She herself had been brought up in Miss Humann's school in Mayence. She died at Sion shortly after having enrolled her daughter Marie Aimée in the school. I shall count her as one of God's primary instruments in helping to establish the young community. This child and Charlotte de Leusse formed the nucleus of a boarding school – a type of institution to which I had never given any thought, although I understood the great importance of giving young



Christian women a sound Catholic training. There were already a great many religious orders doing this work and I did not think it was my place to add to the number.

However, several serious reasons persuaded me that a boarding school added to the neophytes' house of Our Lady of Sion, might conceivably be in the plans of God. I shall give some of the reasons which made us develop this work so providentially begun. I saw it as a means of avoiding one danger that I feared more than any other. Our young converts, in spite of their piety, were inclined to form a clique. Their little group was too separated from Christian society, and in these circumstances, their innate presumption was inclined to find a great deal of expression.

I felt that if we accepted some girls of good Christian families, we could overcome these dangers and other gaps in their early education; my greatest fear was that any trace of Judaism might be found in our house. This I wanted to avoid at all costs.

The chief difficulty in developing the two works at the same time was to avoid both the dangers of mingling and those of separation. At first, both groups were taught together, but this state of affairs could not last long. The same kind of education cannot be given to children of different classes and talents. Moral and intellectual growth demand the same care as growth in nature. Each tree in an orchard must be treated according to its individuality. It seems to me that the chief fault of modern educational institutions is to try to put everyone through the same mould. I desperately wanted to avoid this trap.

Our house of neophytes had been composed from the beginning of three classes, according to the age of the children. The youngest children's class was called Bethlehem. On leaving this, they went to an intermediate class called Emmaus. Finally they went to Nazareth class, that of the oldest girls.

The boarding school, where there was a more complete curriculum, lived in different quarters, completely distinct and separated from the house of neophytes. Converts of high intelligence and good moral

qualities were admitted to the boarding school. Thus the two works were mutually complementary, and in each one, the spirit of Catholic piety permeated all teaching. The boarders' fees helped to support the classes of the poor children, another reason in favor of developing the boarding school. A third reason dissolved my last doubts: the Sisters were increasing in numbers and we had to have a sufficiently large field of work to absorb their devotedness.

However, during the first years, the community itself was composed of a handful of co-workers, there were few vocations, and each time a new one came, it seemed that one of the others left; the latter were discouraged by the work's slowness in developing. As a result, it seemed that I could never reach the dozen Sisters which was the goal I had set for myself.

Yet in spite of the poverty of the situation, we had the sympathy and understanding of some important friends and this kept our hope alive. Archbishop Affre, the holy Archbishop of Paris, impressed by the conversions which were constantly taking place at Sion, allowed us to have a chapel in the house and several times he came himself to administer the Sacraments of baptism and confirmation. Archbishop (*Marie-Dominique-Auguste*) Sibour, his revered successor, added further encouragement to that of the martyred prelate. Many other prelates and dignitaries of the Church came to bless the community and see the house of the neophytes. Among them were Cardinal Fornari, Papal Nuncio; Cardinal Giraud, Archbishop of Cambrai; Bishop Valerga, Patriarch of Jerusalem; Bishop Chigi, Apostolic Nuncio; Cardinal de Bonnechose, Archbishop of Rouen. Thanks to the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, the chapel of Our Lady of Sion became a centre of life and fervor. Pious souls liked to share the Sisters' prayers and to hear the singing of the "Pater Dimitte Illis" three times at the Elevation of the Mass. At this same time, more important favours were granted to the work of Sion. Pope Pius IX, opening the Church's spiritual treasures, was kind enough to grant many indulgences to the first daughters of Sion and even to include in them the faithful who helped to support the catechumenate.

The blessing of Christ's Vicar was "like a gentle rain on the moun-

tain of Sion; it brought increasing harvest with it." Several Jewish families, impressed by the change wrought among some of them by their conversion to Christianity, came to seek instruction and baptism; and Christian life, spreading through the branches of these numerous families, went from grand-children to aged grand-parents. One of the latter served my Mass for several years. These graces were not confined to the Jews. They were also given to schismatics and heretics. Several Protestants, among whom I am happy to mention Lady Campden, returned to Catholicism in the chapel of Our Lady of Sion.

1847

In proportion as these exterior fruits were growing, the interior spirit was also flourishing. We then began to write down the details of religious practices and to work out the kind of habit the Sisters would wear. In the chapel they received it with a cross and rosary, after having pronounced an act of consecration to the Blessed Virgin. They did not pronounce any other vow.

We had to introduce a novitiate to train the two young aspirants to the religious life. These were the two young converts whom I have already mentioned: Alphonsine and Madeleine. They were 16 or 17 years old. But the former had a mature virtue and an intelligence which made us confide to her the direction of the other young converts; the Spirit of God was preparing her to become one day mistress of novices. In the meantime, the small group of postulants were put in the charge of Sister Céline, a truly angelic soul.

I must say that all this progress went on in spite of me. I was constantly stopped by the fear that I might be embarking on a path whose end I could not see and which seemed to me to be beyond my aptitude and experience.

While moderating the enthusiasm of my devoted co-workers, I followed rather than directed this movement. I had to admit that the inspiration came from heaven; it was quite obviously the Blessed Virgin who helped the Sionian family to grow, and more than once I was aware

that the less of my own personal activity I put into the work, the better it progressed. The boarding school in particular flourished. People were coming to appreciate a system of education distinguished by its simplicity and by a spirit of piety in which the spirit of the world had no part. Soon the buildings on Rue du Regard were too small for the growing works. We had to think of building elsewhere. I was terrified at this necessity in view of the blunders I had already committed. I felt that I had neither the courage nor the resources to begin again.

**1855**

About this time, Father Mary ended his novitiate and his scholasticate. He came to Paris; he was just as poor as I was; but he had enough confidence to make up for my deficiencies; and this confidence could move mountains. Thanks to providential help which always came at the crucial moment, we were able to consider buying a building. The Oratorians bought our house on Rue du Regard for 150,000 francs. This enabled us to buy in our turn. Father Mary, who always went right ahead, found three neighbouring houses with a fairly large property on Notre Dame des Champs Street. We bought it and we were able to live much more easily a community life while the novitiate, the converts' workrooms and boarding school were well established, especially since we had a temporary chapel. My brother looked after the business of taking possession. I was very happy to have something to give him to do for at this time he was no longer a Jesuit. Here I must give an account of one of the most delicate events of my life. My brother's Superiors had sent him to Vaugirard College; his heart was at Sion. He hated the idea of teaching Latin rules to a class of small children, and from that time on, he was haunted by the idea that he should leave the Jesuits. On the other hand, he felt truly called to be associated with me in my ministry, persuaded that the Lord had called him in a special way to work for the conversion of the Jews. Perhaps I should have opposed this idea about which he spoke to me every day, but this was difficult for me since I secretly shared it. Like him, I believed that his conversion and vocation were for a special end, and that he could not follow his vocation if he remained a Jesuit. I am sure that he had only a temporary

vocation to the Jesuits so that his studies would be well-founded and that he would be well prepared for his ministry at Our Lady of Sion. In any case the community needed priestly direction and it was our duty to provide it. I had already admitted as my helpers several priests who seemed to me well disposed to work with me, but one after the other they left for reasons which seemed to me to be inadmissible. Faced with these inconstant people, I often found myself in an embarrassing situation. With all my heart I was working to found a modest priestly community which seemed to me to have indisputable advantages. But as the level of the community grew, the whole building seemed to crumble. Fortunately I did not become discouraged; I set to work again with new materials, followed by new disappointments. I placed all my hope in Father Mary. I believed that God destined him for the formation of the small community of the Priests of Sion. Every event seemed to consolidate this opinion; and yet I dared not give in to it, because I was afraid that if Father Mary left the Jesuits, he would be abandoning God's will for him. This question was so serious in my view that I did not want to resolve it alone. I submitted it to examination by several knowledgeable clergymen, first of all to Archbishop Sibour, Archbishop of Paris. All approved Father Mary's decision. However, even their ideas did not bring me peace; I knew that each of these prelates had a grudge against the Jesuits. Then, urged by my brother, I went to Rome to present the case. I left with a heart filled with anxiety, begging the Lord to cause me to drown rather than to allow a procedure which would be against His will. I could feel in advance what a painful surprise my news would be for the Jesuits who loved Father Mary with such a generous love. In reality, they were more upset than surprised. Father Rubillon, Assistant General, whom I first saw, could not deny that Father Mary's special vocation was a valid reason for him to leave the Company of Jesus. He told me to talk to the Superior General. The latter was deeply moved by my news because of the adverse effect that this might have in the Church. Then I was introduced into the presence of Pius IX who listened to me with indulgent kindness as I exposed my ideas. He said to me: "If it is God's will, let it be done!" For me this word was the definite answer; delivered from all my scruples, I wrote to Father Mary that his

freedom had been restored. This decision was received far less warmly in Paris than in Rome. They accused me of having initiated the move, whereas the truth is that if I could have prevented it, I would have done so. God knows that I would willingly have sacrificed my own advantage and my personal consolation to spare the Jesuits a sorrow for which they were so ill-prepared. I have never stopped loving and admiring the Jesuits since I have known them. How can one not love them when they love the Church so much! They have always been the butt of the animosity and persecution of the spirit of the world, for they are always among those to whom the Lord said: "You will be hated on my account." The Company bears the name of Jesus. This explains the hatred of which they are the object. I know that among some of its members, community solidarity can be carried too far and that sometimes they make the good of their order more important than the general good; at least this is what they are reproached with. But what community of human beings does not have some fault?

Whatever the case may be, I have always maintained good relations with them. But how I suffered when I had to let them believe that I had acted in an underhanded manner with them! Thank God, the event was cleared up and charity won the day.

But then there began for me a time of tribulation which lasted for several years.

**1852**

My brother came to live with me and put himself under my direction. But whether it was that my direction seemed less enlightened, less authoritarian than the one he had left, whether he was undergoing the shock of too sudden a change, he rarely asked my advice and he would not accept my remarks. How heavily my responsibility weighed on me at the view of the temptations facing a young priest who had no idea of the dangers which surrounded him! He did not know what precautions are recommended to priests who are engaged in the day-to-day ministry, and he seemed to me to be like a bird released from its cage which does not know how to use its wings and which, in its jerky

flight, bangs against every obstacle. His zeal was equal to every function, to every defeat, and like a river which has overflowed its banks, he put no limit on his activities. Fortunately he did not have the gift of eloquence which might have increased his presumption. But his burning words awoke passions and sometimes brought about humiliations. Certainly God permitted these failures to keep him on the watch and in humility.

Whatever the case may be, I saw that my brother would not provide the necessary element which I needed to discipline the Fathers of Our Lady of Sion. He himself seemed to see how awkward the situation was. He proposed that he should make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and I accepted this idea as an inspiration from heaven. Indeed it was an inspiration of the Blessed Virgin as the future would show.

However God's work continued to develop in the middle of all these crucifying experiences; religious vocations became more numerous when the Sionian tree was ready to be separated from its roots and branches.

It was Father Mary's preaching which gave birth to some of these vocations, including very precious ones. I only want to mention one, and this because of her happy influence on the community of Sion and on myself, and even then I will say little because it is to her that I am dictating these words and that there are favors which will be revealed only in heaven.

Yet I cannot be silent about the dear soul who bears so well the name of Marie Benedicta. I regard her as a priceless gift that the Blessed Virgin gave me; in her I have found the support of a fine intelligence and a heart filled with holiness. I dare say that her soul was united to mine to the point that the vow of Christ might be realized: that they may be one.

Thanks to this perfect harmony of our thoughts and feelings, I found in my daughter the co-operator that the Blessed Virgin had given me to carry out my functions. It was she who co-ordinated the materials of the Directory, and who placed the subjects of meditation in a form

that might be published under the title: "Gleanings from the Gospel." Heaven alone will tell us how much the Congregation owed to this beautiful soul.

I said that other beautiful souls came at this time to consecrate themselves to Our Lady of Sion. It would take too long to talk about each of them, but I cannot fail to mention my daughter Marie-Paul who, in God's view, was to become the right hand of the Superior General. She had been introduced to me by Mrs. Josson, wife of the president of the tribunal of Lille, about whom I shall give some details. Mrs. Josson and her husband had come looking for me at Boulogne-on-the-Sea where I was preaching a novena in preparation for the Assumption. She asked me to preach a sermon at Lille in favor of charity, and this gave me the opportunity to see her frequently and to come to appreciate the fervent desire of her soul. She was the president of several good works, among them a small group of mothers of families who prayed together for their families and children. This union of prayer aroused my sympathy and I could see in it the possibility of fruitful development. In fact, when a few years later, Mr. and Mrs. Josson came to live in Paris, the small society of Christian Mothers met periodically in the chapel of Our Lady of Sion. It was composed of many pious mothers and produced many fruits of consolation. I introduced it to Rome where it was very popular, so much so that Pius IX, always aware of what might be of advantage to the Church, was kind enough to raise the Association of Christian Mothers to the rank of Archconfraternity, fixing its headquarters in Paris in the chapel of Our Lady of Sion.

Since then the filiations with this Mother confraternity have spread throughout almost all the countries of the world; they help to re-awaken the piety of Christian families and at the same time to propagate the name of Our Lady of Sion.

Mrs. Josson became a widow, and she felt irresistibly drawn to the religious life; she generously entered the novitiate in spite of her advanced age. After making profession, she was to become President of the Archconfraternity of Christian Mothers, a function which she fulfilled with a great deal of skill.



While Providence increased the personnel and the resources of the community, it worked at increasing the works of Sion. It is impossible not to admire the work of God in the founding of Grandbourg. One day I had a visit from Mr. Alexis Revenaz, one of the functionaries of the Imperial Marines. I had never seen him and I did not know him at all. He was a respectable man of the world, whose language showed little knowledge of religion, but one could see behind this language an upright heart, honest and loyal. He inspired me with confidence immediately. On my table he opened out a huge paper showing the plan of one of his huge estates. On seeing this, I thought he was coming to propose that I buy it and I told him that the Congregation of Our Lady of Sion was not rich enough to buy a country house. "I'm not offering you a sale but a gift," he answered me. Good fortune of this kind seemed so rare to me, especially today, that I dared to ask for explanations from this mysterious benefactor. He answered me quite simply that he felt driven to found a charitable work on one of his properties, in memory of his worthy wife who had just died, and for this purpose, he intended to give his Grandbourg property to a teaching community which seemed to offer signs of stability. He knew no Congregation of this kind, and after having sought information at the Chancery Office, he was coming to face Our Lady of Sion in all simplicity. We went to visit the Grandbourg estate, and I confess that I was overwhelmed at the sight of the huge orchard and the immense country park. Mr. Revenaz gave us the keys and later regularized the whole process of this fine gift. We soon took possession of it, establishing there the beginnings of a boarding school and a workshop. These were the admirable beginnings of a new colony of Sion which since that time has continued to grow.

## NOTES

- 1— Some sentences and expressions in the *Memoirs* which convey a kind of instinctive and hereditary repudiation of Jewish and Protestant values have been suppressed. They reflect the Catholic thinking of the last century and might be unnecessarily offensive to readers of today. The complete unaltered text in the Archives is at the disposal of the Congregation.
- 2— Neither the dates given in the headings nor the division into sections appear in the original text.
- 3— Father Theodore's statements about his studies are not to be taken seriously. In reality he was highly gifted. He quickly acquired and assimilated knowledge which ordinarily involved more prolonged and intensive study for most people.
- 4— The aversion was not to Judaism as such, but to what Theodore knew about it. The entire context indicates that he belonged to an assimilated environment, and that his lack of knowledge prevented him from determining the religious value of rabbinical Judaism (cf. *Introd.*).
- 5— "wretched people"... According to the context, Father Theodore has in mind misery and ignorance, not moral corruption. The equality of rights obtained during the Revolution and for which Naftali Cerfbeer had worked effectively, had made it possible for some families to acquire culture, wealth and important positions. They constituted, however, a very tiny minority. The poor Jews continued to live in a type of crowded ghetto where they suffered the consequences of extreme poverty: crowded unsanitary lodgings and ignorance.
- 6— Father Theodore was baptized in 1827; he sought advice from Miss Humann about this marriage in 1825 (or the beginning of 1826 at the latest) and could not therefore have been more than 23 years old.
- 7— Father Theodore, happy that he had escaped from these "snares", pejoratively describes the "matchmaker" or "shadken", who was often a colourful character, but very useful to the Jews in making it possible for them to marry among their own.
- 8— "literal" — it seems this word should be understood in the sense of "teaching from a text".

- 9— Father Theodore shared the concise views of Catholic thinking of his time when there was no question of earmenism and when the teaching of history was too often characterized by an apologetic concern rather than by scientific precision.
- 10— It is upon these promises – upon the Word of God, consequently – that Father Theodore's vocation rests; he felt himself called “to work for the fulfillment of the Promises”. But how? First of all by prayer: “it is fervent and persevering prayer which will attract grace from heaven”. These are Father Marie’s (Mary’s) words (page 182 in the original French text); but Father Theodore was to repeat them in one form or another throughout his life. Father Marie recommended that his brother provide a Christian education to Israelite children brought to him by their parents. The great poverty of some Jewish families and the wave of dejudaization which followed in the wake of emancipation explains why this work was undertaken. Soon, however, its justification ceased to exist. It then took another form and children from all countries and all religions, were readily accepted (cf. Introd. p. 72 in the original French text).

As far as adult baptism was concerned, Father Theodore instructed and introduced into the Church – whether they were Jews, Protestants or unbelievers – only those who came to him. He did not “proselytize” and always taught respect for people's conscience. When the movement into the Church, which accompanied his and Father Marie's conversion, slackened, he insisted more than ever that it is only prayer with “love which wins souls”.

On the left side as one approaches:

IN THE YEAR OF GRACE 1797 FATHER COLMAR, MISS HUMANN AND MRS. BRECK SEALED A COVENANT OF PRAYER IN THIS PLACE;  
THE CONGREGATION OF OUR LADY OF SION, FOUNDED FIFTY YEARS LATER AND DEDICATED TO THE SANCTIFICATION OF ISRAEL, WAS THE FRUIT OF THIS PACT.

At least once a year, Sisters and students from Strasbourg Sion visit Turquenstein. They celebrate the Eucharist on this spot, so ideal for reflection, prayer and contemplation of the “mirabilia Dei”: marvels of God in nature, marvels of God throughout human history. Turquenstein is truly a shrine for Sion because of its associations.

## I. THE FAMILY

### Document 2

#### FAMILY CORRESPONDENCE (*a*)

##### I. LETTER FROM FATHER THEODORE TO HIS BROTHER ADOLPHE RATISBONNE

Paris, April 1s, 1841

My dear Adolphe,

You took excellent care of the errand that I confided to you; and thanks to your kindness and good taste, I was able to repay, in a fitting and generous manner, the hospitality shown to me. I thank you, my dear Adolphe, and hope that you in your turn will test my willingness to do something to give you pleasure. Moreover, your letter itself is a consolation to me, for it proves that you are bearing up well and are even growing stronger amidst your sufferings. Your children's prayers help to sustain your moral strength, and this moral strength offsets your physical suffering.

I know a man here of your age who, like you, has many charming children. He suffers from the same illness as you and is courageously bearing it. He, however, is even sicker than you usually are, but he has the happiness of being a Christian and enjoying consolations of which you have no knowledge. I haven't seen your children for a long time. I was unable to do any visiting during Lent because of the heavy and numerous tasks of my position. At present I have more leisure and can occasionally go out to Juilly to enjoy the balmy air. However, beginning on May 1, I shall have to resume my horse-back riding to preach at Our Lady of Victories every Sunday and every Monday evening. It is a new field of work for me, and I must do it with God's help.

I rejoice at your being here and the opportunity it gives me to have a few good talks with you. I shall probably find it difficult to avoid discussing religion, because in spite of all I do, the topic continues to crop up. Who knows? Perhaps when I least expect it, I shall see the veil fall from your eyes and hear you utter those blessed words: "O Truth! O Light divine! Why have I remained so long without knowing You?" You must pray with all your heart, my dear Adolphe, and implore the God of our fathers. He reveals Himself to those who seek Him and answers those who invoke Him with sincerity and confidence. If you could grasp the wealth of heavenly peace and the unutterable delights of religion, you would more easily understand the concern which prompts me to return to this topic so often and which makes me bemoan your blindness.

Tell me, my dear Adolphe, how is our dear fiancée?*(b)* Why didn't she announce the joyful news to me herself? Does she question my interest and affection? Must I not love her doubly now, since she is not only my niece but also my sister? I hope she will come here after her marriage. My God, how I should love to bless this marriage and consecrate this bond myself! What uninterested individual will perform this task and take God's place on this occasion? Once again, I repeat, I should like to be entrusted with this ceremony. Nobody could perform it more willingly or more gladly.

I get no more news from Achille and beautiful Anna *(c)*. Could it be coldness on their part? If so, I would like you to warm up the relationships a little. Pauline *(d)* is the only one who has never deviated from her former affection. You know that our fondness for each other dates from a long time. I was attracted to her from my earliest childhood. Please embrace your children and the other children of the family for me. Adelaide *(e)* wrote me an interesting letter which I shall answer sooner or later. Give her and her cousins Adele, Léonie and Léontine my affectionate regards.

Today I am having lunch with my sisters whom I have not seen for a long time.

Farewell and good-bye, dear Adophe. My feelings for you remain unchanged.

Your faithful Theodore.

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- (a) Archives of Our Lady of Sion.
  - (b) This refers to Flore Ratisbonne, Adolphe's daughter, who was engaged to her uncle, Alphonse Ratisbonne, the future Father Mary.
  - (c) Achille was the eleventh child of Auguste and Adelaide Ratisbonne. He had married Anna Beyfuss, "beautiful Anna".
  - (d) Pauline, Auguste Ratisbonne's eighth child, became Mrs. Lippman.
  - (e) Adelaide was Pauline's daughter; Adele and Léonie were the daughters of Gustave, Auguste Ratisbonne's third child; Léontine was Achille Ratisbonne's daughter.

## II. LETTER FROM FATHER THEODORE TO HIS NIECE HELENA RATISBONNE

*Note:* Adolphe Ratisbonne had six children: two sons Edmond and Louis, and four daughters, Flore, Helena, Zélie and Elisa. The last two were adopted by their aunt, Mrs. Benoit Fould. The correspondence between Father Theodore and Helena testifies to the warm affection they had for each other. Helena, like her grandmother Adelaide Ratisbonne, was known for her charity; that is why, no doubt, Father Theodore invited her to join Mrs. Stouhlen's associates in the work begun the previous year, in 1843. There was no question of religious life at that time; this question was not raised until 1847. Consequently, he did not hesitate to encourage his niece who had apparently led him to hope for an affirmative answer.

Paris, July 28, 1844

My dear Helena,

I reached Paris just in time to receive your welcome letter and to reply by return mail, for I just got back last night from a delightful trip and was almost hoping to find you settled in at my place upon my return; that is how I was interpreting your silence towards me; and rather than reproach your kind heart, I imagined that, after consultation with the whole family, you would arrive unannounced and say: "Dear uncle, here I am!" But instead of that, you write me a letter perfect in style and

reasoning but devoid of comfort. You ask for a prompt reply; and more eager than you, I put aside everything else to comply with your wishes. It is true that I have little hope of shaking your resolution, but at least, dear Helena, leave me a little bit of illusion by permitting me to hope that if you do not join me now, there is at least a possibility that you will do so later on. I have, of course, no rebuttal to the arguments which you base on filial love and on the good which you can in your present position. I understand filial love; I understand and agree with everything you say about practising charity and all the household virtues within the family. I am only saying that if, in spite of the fairness of these arguments, there was question of a brilliant marriage desired by your father, you would consent to the conditions of the marriage. You would give up your present position, your present duties, your family and all former attachments, to enter into a new way of life, even if it were two hundred leagues from your homeland. This is how, my dear Helena, I had pictured the possibility of a separation; besides, I had not given up hope of one day seeing your father coming to reside with his brother who dearly loves him. But still, since your father willingly consented to separation from two other daughters now living in Paris with an aunt who has thousands of ways of making life joyful, I thought I had the same rights! and I still think that all the reasons you give me to justify your refusal could apply equally well to the claims of your Aunt Fould. You can't even take refuge behind the question of religion because I can tell you that your sisters are not being initiated into the Jewish faith; as far as you are concerned, it is not a question of raising you in this or that religion, since your education is complete, and you are mature enough not to fear being led astray, for man's will is an impregnable stronghold which safeguards his conscience. Nobody will ever be able to compel you to believe or to do what you do not want to believe or do. Thus, at your age, with your talents, you must be well armed against any religious influence. You will never do anything contrary to the dictates of your conscience; and even though you may consider me capable of attacking them, you would certainly be strong enough to resist the impact and to maintain your convictions. Moreover, my dear Helena, I have a great respect for people's conscience, and since, according to your statement, you want to remain an *excellent Jewess*, I shall leave you



complete liberty to follow the Law of Moses such as it was practised by our fathers in the Holy Land. Over and above all that, I shall personally escort you to the synagogue every Saturday. You will abstain from forbidden meats and wash your hands as often as you wish; you will even cut your hair if that gives you pleasure. On feast days we shall pay a poor Christian woman to blow out the fire and snuff the candles: I observed these things at grandmother's house in my youth; your father witnessed them, too, and we know them better than you do. Consequently, I shall be able to remind you of the old tradition, so sadly neglected in our family, and thanks to these recollections you will be able to become an excellent Jewess. I say you can "become" one because you are certainly excellent in many respects; and if I did not have this opinion of my niece Helena, I would not try to bring her close to me. However, until now, you have not attained excellence in the customs of Judaism. With my own eyes I saw you commit several sins against the faith of our fathers; for this entire faith is built upon the Law and the Prophets, and you don't seem to care very much about them. Now the purpose of this Law and these prophets is to prepare the nations for the coming of a Messiah whose sufferings and blood will wipe out the first sin which is the cause of every evil. The ancient ceremonies were only a symbol of this mystery. Consequently I believe that you will be an excellent Jewess only when your faith is complete and when your works are in conformity with your faith. It seems to me that a Turk who has ceased to practise the precepts of the Koran would be in error if he considered himself an excellent Turk; a Christian who didn't observe the rules of Christianity could not rightly consider himself an excellent Christian. By the same token, a Jewess who does not observe the Law of Moses does not strike me as being an excellent Jewess. This, my dear Helena, seemed to me to be the only indefensible point in your letter. In the matter of religion, one must be truly what one claims to be because religion either comes from God or it comes from man. If it comes from man, it would be absurd for us to cling to it more than to any other human institution; if it comes from God, we have no right to accept or reject its precepts at will. You will therefore be an excellent Jewess only when your faith lovingly and respectfully embraces all the human dogmas, precepts and sacred prophecies of the Bible; and then, Helena my dear, we shall not be very far

apart, and we shall find ourselves agreeing with much more than you think because a Christian is really an excellent Jew, for the Gospel calls the Saints true Israelites.

And so, dear Helena, I fervently beseech the God of our fathers, the one and thrice holy God, to make a true Israelite and an excellent Jewess of you. I wish nothing more ardently than this grace, not only for you, but also for your father, for Flore and for all the members of our dear and beloved family. This is my prayer, and you cannot hold it against me if I express it so simply in answering your letter. I like your naive sincerity and you will not find fault with mine. Besides, I am not speaking to you as to a child but as to an intelligent adult with mature judgment. As long as you were small I refrained from giving explanatory details; but I need not fear any more that I'll be accused of misleading or dazzling you. Nor do I think that the word Christianity (the only one I mentioned in this letter) terrifies you. This word is found in all the books you will be reading. It can be discussed as a fact of history, and since you were not afraid to study mythology and history, why should you fear a word that has at least historical value and is of interest even when it is not considered in a religious sense? However, my dear Helena, if I have hurt you with this word or any other, please forgive me, because honestly, I love you too much to want to cause you the least pain, and I promise you that in my next letter, I shall not mention it again. Besides, one must not become imprudent with a Helena! It is a formidable name! In the remote past, another Helena was the cause of a terrible war between the Greeks and the Trojans. Why? Because someone had exactly the same idea as I: he wanted to abduct the poor girl! The result was endless wars and hostility. This was not the saintly Helena of whom I spoke to you last time; she was a true Israelite, the former was a pagan. I do not want to set off new troubles by my claims: the new Helena must not be a cause of annoyance; on the contrary, I consider her an angel of peace, and I respect her pious scruples. I only ask permission to hope that in the future, when my hair is white, when my walk is stooped and slow, and the pastoral staff falls from my hands, when I can no longer lift a glass of water to my lips and my feeble watery eyes can scarcely turn in their sockets, when my lungs are oppressed

and the words tremble on my lips, when I need a footwarmer to thaw me out in July 1860, then, I hope, I say, that my holy Helena will be so kind as to come, if not to make life more pleasant, then to grant me a few joys at my death. I am sorry that lack of space obliges me to stop. You will assure me that you are not angry if you answer my letter, for your silence will tell me that I must neither hope nor write. I beg you to embrace your father and dear Flore tenderly for me. I hope to get news from them soon. I count on you to remember me to them.

## II. CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE: 1802-1823 THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH

### III. LETTER FROM HELENA RATISBONNE WORMS DE ROMILLY TO FATHER RATISBONNE

*Note:* Helena became Mrs. Worms de Romilly and had three daughters; Charlotte, Laure and Anna, all of whom became Catholics. Helena herself remained in the Jewish faith. When, on August 13, 1872, Anna became seriously ill with typhoid fever, she sent a telegram from Tours, where she was living, asking Father Theodore to come at once. He set out immediately. Helena's letter given here is not dated, but since she refers to Anna's cure as having occurred "a year ago", she must have written it in 1873.

Tuesday

A thousand thanks, my dear uncle, for your kind letter and for agreeing to our wishes. We, in turn, have no objection to your desire to keep Laure for a week after her First Holy Communion.

My husband will write to you to find out which day you prefer; he will fetch his daughter on the day most convenient for you. He is looking forward to meeting you and talking to you.

My dear uncle, my thoughts go back to a year ago, and I see you as I shall always see you, bringing life to my poor child by your holy presence. My mother's heart blesses you and always will for the devotedness and tender concern that you showed under those painful circumstances. On the anniversary of that occasion,