

# The “Beguins” of Forez, and the Founding of the Marist Brothers

## A Jansenist<sup>1</sup> Sect and an Infant Congregation

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In Chapter 11 of the *Life* of Marcellin Brother Jean-Baptiste recalls that the founding of the Institute at La Valla aroused much criticism and that, “It was even asserted that he intended to form a sect of Béguins.”<sup>2</sup> There were in existence from before the Revolution small groups of Jansenists in the region of St Etienne and particularly in the area of St Jean-Bonnefonds, a large, fairly rural parish to the west of the town. Public opinion designated them as “the Blue Ones” then as “Béguins”. They would make headlines during the Revolution and Brother Avit retained in the Annals of La Valla and of Saint Jean-Bonnefonds two stories about a branch of the sect in the Forez Mountains in 1794. I am going to compare Brother Avit’s stories with the historical sources to try to understand why public gossip mentioned the Béguins in reference to the community of La Valla.

### Extracts from the Annals of La Valla (1885)

“Let us say a word in passing about the outrageous and scandalous scene which we were offered on the isolated mountain (the Pilat Massif) by the Jansenists blinded by their learned men and their prophetesses. After every external practice of the cult had been suppressed and the cult of Reason had been substituted, these poor, foolish people imagined that they had arrived at this epoch, promoted so much among them, of a state of pure nature where they could shamelessly devote themselves to all their inclinations, purified through reason alone, an epoch which, in their thinking, had been brought to perfection, but in the sense meant by the ancient Gnostics. As a consequence, around three or four hundred of them gathered on the beautiful, welcoming meadows at the top of Pilat to celebrate the arrival of this golden age, so long anticipated. Indiscriminately mixed, men and women discarded their sinful clothing to retain only that of our first parents in their state of innocence and they devoted themselves to joy and the pleasures of this new life. However, that did not last long. Informed of this disturbance, the authorities<sup>3</sup> forcibly made them disperse them and obliged them to return to their own homes.

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<sup>1</sup> [Translator’s Note] Jansenism was a movement originating in seventeenth-century France which took a particularly rigorous view on the theology and practice of the Catholic faith.

<sup>2</sup> [Translator’s Note] Quotes are taken from the standard English translation of Brother Jean-Baptiste’s *Life*.

<sup>3</sup> Brother Avit was wary of saying that it was the Republican authorities.

It is at the very least possible that there were people from La Valla among these poor deluded souls, although this would be unusual, and that the majority of them came from neighbouring towns and parishes on the eastern slope of Pilat. However that may be, this sad scene proved to what degree of stupidity our poor humanity can fall when it distances itself from God.”

### **A fairly well-known historical fact**

The purpose of this story was to show how far the moral and religious situations of the rural populations of Pilat had fallen and to justify Marcellin’s action in founding the Brothers at La Valla. Avit interpreted in a highly slanted way a well-known historical incident: the arrest in the Trappe woods (or La Trappe or Les Trappes) of a small group of Jansenists near St Genest-Malifaux, a neighbouring commune to Marlhes, by the National Guard of St Genest on 12 Brumaire Year 3 (2nd November 1794).

The Minutes of the municipality tell of the capture in a dense forest of fir-trees of 43 people, freezing and hungry men, women and children. The report is dated 12 Brumaire Year 3 (2nd November 1794), but was possibly drawn up the day after the arrest. A little later on the same day, a group of 8 people, 4 of whom were children, were taken in the hamlet of La Scie de la roue. On 13th Brumaire a report from the district of St Etienne noted that around forty people had again been taken in the hamlet of Praoré in the commune of Tarentaise, above La Valla. In total, just under a hundred people were arrested, the majority being from the commune of St Jean Bonnefonds, close to St Etienne, primarily women and children.

The Minutes of the Inquiry of 16th Brumaire note that, after interrogation:

“We have learned from these individuals that they were going into the desert to do penance for their sins and were then going to Jerusalem. They were led by someone called Moses... Almost all of them were named Bonjour and had a first name which was taken from the Old Law such as Aaron, Isaac, Jacob, Judas, Jephtha... The name Bonjour came to them from a certain priest of that name, the Parish Priest of Fareins, known to have crucified a girl and to have given birth to the Holy Spirit.” The report then goes on to name the leaders: Fialin, Parish Priest of Montilly in the district of Montbrison and an agent of Bonjour; Drevet and Lafay, former Parish Priest and curate of St Jean Bonnefonds. As for Moses, reports are somewhat hesitant about identity: a girl, of previous bad life, converted by Drevet and become a priest; or even a simple farmer: both of these having been arrested.

Even if the report leaves many questions unanswered, it rests on solid fact. The principal leader of the exalted sect of St Jean Bonnefonds was Jean-Jacques Drevet, who had become in 1784 the curate of his uncle, Claude Drevet, Parish Priest since 1759<sup>4</sup>. The latter resigned in his nephew’s favour in 1786, but stayed on. Father Lafay came to join them in 1791. Up to that time curate in

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<sup>4</sup> It is not known what role this elderly priest played in this affair.

the parish of La Valla<sup>5</sup>, he was full of the same advanced Jansenist notions as Jean-Jacques Drevet. Both were linked with the sect of the Bonjour brothers, established at Fareins, which had a hellish reputation.

## **The Jansenism from Fareins**

There were numerous turbulent Jansenist sects in the 18th century, born in Paris on the tomb of the deacon, Pâris, between 1728 and 1732. They built up an active network in the region of Lyon and especially in Loire. In many places in the France of the 18th century, small groups organised in networks devoted themselves to prophecies and particularly to mystico-therapeutic experiences which consisted in “small aids” (insults and blows) and “great aids” (beatings... and even at times crucifixion) for people in a trance or who wished to recall in their own bodies the passion of Christ. In the Lyon region, the leaders, the Bonjour brothers, had been trained for the priesthood in the Oratorian seminary in Lyon, at that time a hotbed of Jansenism. The elder, Claude, became Parish Priest of St Just-Malmont, not far from St Genest-Malifaux, in 1772, after some years as a professor in that seminary. In 1775, he was appointed Parish Priest of Fareins in the parish of Les Dombes, a short distance from the village of Ars.<sup>6</sup> After ordination, his brother, François, joined him in 1776, first as curate then as Parish Priest. In 1785, a second curate, named Farlay, joined them and the trio formed the intention of reviving the convulsionary form of Jansenism<sup>7</sup> in Fareins.

In the pulpit, François Bonjour began to preach about the coming of Elijah, the soon-to-be-expected conversion of the Jews and the new reign of Jesus Christ. Very soon, this impassioned fervour brought about convulsion-inducing practices and, in October 1787, the Bonjour brothers crucified a woman in the church in the presence of a dozen or so highly-edified witnesses. Although he was a Jansenist, the Archbishop, de Montazet, was outraged by this and he dispersed the three priests. However, they had the benefit of help from the Jansenist network in Lyon and Forez. Eventually, the outbreak of the Revolution transformed this upsetting business into a politico-religious affair. The Bonjour brothers returned for a time to Fareins as Constitutional<sup>8</sup> Priests and the local administration would be held by the Fareins Jansenists until 1801. For them, the Revolution was the bringing about of the Apocalypse and they became ardent republicans.

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<sup>5</sup> There are two La Vallas in Loire. In 1789 the curate in La Valla-en-Gier was called Chapuy. Lafay came perhaps from the other La Valla.

<sup>6</sup> Les Dombes was something of the Siberia of the diocese, where priests who were fairly useless or who had problems were relegated.

<sup>7</sup> [Translator’s Note] “Convulsionary” Jansenism was a movement within the broader Jansenist movement. Members of this movement were known for their convulsions (similar to epileptic fits), often brought about by their ascetic practices.

<sup>8</sup> [Translator’s Note] During the Revolution the Church in France had two types of priest: the Constitutional Clergy who had sworn an oath to uphold the principles and practices of the Revolutionary government, and the Refractory Clergy who had refused to take the oath and were, in the eyes of the law, traitors and had to practise their priesthood in secret.

The Fareins Jansenists were linked with François Bonjour who had taken refuge in Paris with two women from the Lyon network who were pregnant by him. On 29th January 1792 a boy was born of Françoise Monnier and he was considered by the people of Fareins to be John the Precursor<sup>9</sup>. On 18th August 1792, Claudine Dauphan gave birth to Israel-Elijah, who François Bonjour presented as being the Holy Spirit, born from his own most pure womb. Here we are in the heart of end-time territory<sup>10</sup>: the era of the Son becomes that of the Holy Spirit. Even if certain Jansenist circles were shocked by the way things were going, the Jansenists arrested in Le Forez in 1794 all stated that their name was “Bonjour”. They might not have practised the moral laxity, but they accepted the Fareinist teaching.

### **The birth of beguinitism in St Jean-Bonnefonds**

In 1791, Jean-Jacques Drevet, profiting from the troubles at the start of the Revolution, began to preach his “religious reform”. He succeeded in winning over 9 Sisters of St Joseph out of the 11 in the community, and he held meetings in the sacristy. He worked in particular outside the town, in the hamlets of Le Fay and Gabet, being particularly successful with the women.

On Trinity Sunday, 3rd June 1792, perhaps under the influence of the curate Lafay, he announced from the pulpit “the second-coming of the Messiah, preached a return to nature and the rules of the primitive Church, and attacked the Church of Rome.” Beguinitism was born. As his teaching seemed to be akin to that of the mediaeval heretics (a return to origins, the Church as the Whore of Babylon) the name “Beguins” would later be given to his followers, while the name “the Blue Ones” of popular origin was older<sup>11</sup>. It is possible that the teaching proclaimed by Drevet could have come from Lafay, a disciple of the Bonjour brothers from Fareins, with whom he had studied in Lyon. Whatever the case, the choice of Trinity Sunday was not an accident; on 20th April France had declared war against Austria and, faced with its first defeats, the National Assembly had decreed the deportation of Refractory priests<sup>12</sup>, whom they accused of being traitors. Drevet’s sermon subsequently announced the end of the Church of Rome and the coming of the new age of Christianity.

However, this attitude clearly gave rise to suspicions which Brother Avit later echoed, “It was claimed that he gathered men and women together in a darkened room and said to them, ‘Increase and multiply.’” Word went round that, at nightfall, the Beguins dressed in a simple shift and went off into the woods where they gave themselves up to shameful orgies.” Drevet and Lafay were thrown out of the commune as troublemakers. The former went off to Lyon, where he continued

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<sup>9</sup> [Translator’s Note] That is, John the Baptist.

<sup>10</sup> [Translator’s Note] In the Church at that time there was the theory that history was divided into three eras: that of God the Father, then of Jesus Christ, and the last era of history (the end-time) would be that of the Holy Spirit.

<sup>11</sup> [Translator’s Note] Brother André notes that the word Beguinit might be connected to an old French adjective meaning “stubborn”

<sup>12</sup> [Translator’s Note] For Refractory, see Footnote 7 above.

to proselytise, and set himself up in business. He held onto several disciples in St Jean Bonnefonds. In 1802, the Vicar General, Courbon, described him thus, “the former curate of St Jean Bonnefonds, a Constitutional priest, a schismatic, an apostate, a convulsionary Jansenist, a flagellant<sup>13</sup>, leader of the Beguins, author of abominations carried out at St Jean Bonnefonds, ran off to Paris in 1793.” As for Antoine Lafay, he went off to Switzerland. The Courbon Register of the Archdiocese (1802) for this person stated, “former curate of St Jean Bonnefonds, Constitutional priest, schismatic, convulsionary Jansenist, went off to Paris, where he is believed to have married.”

### **A retreat in the desert rather than a departure for the Holy Land**

It is thought that the groups arrested in St Genest were hoping to move towards the Rhône Valley to embark for Jerusalem in order to found the Republic of Jesus Christ. However the interrogation report speaks only of a retreat in a deserted place to do penance in preparation for a later departure for Jerusalem. Moreover, the sudden withdrawal to a mountainous area of around one hundred people, many of whom were women and children, during a season which was already cold, corresponded with a penitential goal. In particular, it was the feast of All Saints. The choice of this date - a traditional feast-day - was undoubtedly not accidental. It was a time of family gatherings and allowed the members of the sect to move about unnoticed. The symbolic sense of the feast was not without importance for the Beguins themselves.<sup>14</sup> Above all, the politico-religious circumstances partially explain the issue.

On 27th July, Robespierre<sup>15</sup>, a supporter of the Reign of Terror<sup>16</sup> and of the cult of the Supreme Being, was defeated and on 18th September, the Republic declared that it would not favour any cult. The policy of terror was eased little by little. For sects which were very attentive to the signs of the times, these events might have appeared as something of an imitation of the Flight into Egypt, with Pilat becoming a temporary image of the desert. And then, little Elijah, born in August 1792, was two years old a few weeks after the fall of Robespierre.

It is highly improbable that the expedition was a popular movement due to some unknown Moses taking the initiative in the absence of leaders. Rather, it was a meeting arranged by the Jansenist leaders in the Loire. It is possible that Drevet and Lafay might have led the expedition, if they had

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<sup>13</sup> [Translator’s Note] A common ascetical practice up until the middle of the 20th century, particularly in Religious Life (although never in the Institute), was whipping oneself in imitation of Our Lord’s scourging during his passion. By calling Drevet a “flagellant” it is possible that the Vicar General was implying that Drevet did this to excess and that he also whipped members of his group.

<sup>14</sup> Some reports accuse Refractory priests of having organised this expedition.

<sup>15</sup> [Translator’s Note] Maximilien Robespierre (1758 - 1794) was a lawyer and statesman during the revolutionary period. His policies were so extreme that many of his supporters eventually turned against him and he was executed on the same guillotine to which he had sent so many other people.

<sup>16</sup> [Translator’s Note] A particularly horrific period of the Revolution (September 1793 - July 1794) when it is reckoned that some 39,000 people were executed or died in prison in France.

not run off. In any case, this gathering, in a place named “The Republic” for the occasion, appears to have been a success.

## **The Annals of St Jean Bonnefonds and the Beguins**

Brother Avit has some interesting details on this point and on a few others as, in 1844, the Marist Brothers opened a school in St Jean Bonnefonds, which was only 10 kilometres from L’Hermitage. In the house-annals for March 1886 Brother Avit tells us the story of the Beguins.

“The sect of the White Ones, the Blue Ones, or Beguins since they were given three names obtained a certain amount of celebrity in the Parish of St Jean from the time of the Revolution. Directed by Citizen Drevet, the interloper Parish Priest, the sect-members announced that the reign of the Eternal Father was ended, that the merits of the divine Redeemer had run out, and that the reign of the Holy Spirit was beginning. Some authors claim that the Beguins were descended from the Albigensians<sup>17</sup>; others, with greater reason, say that the Jansenists gave birth to them. In reality, the Parish Priests of several neighbouring parishes were infected with this heresy before the Revolution.

What appears certain is that the Beguins formed the majority of the population of St Jean before the Reign of Terror. The interloper Drevet announced to them that the prophet Elijah was coming to visit them as a forerunner of the Holy Spirit. So that they would be better disposed to receive him well, he arranged a meeting-place in the forests of Mont Pilat, recommending that they bring something for shelter and as much money as they could and that they would go there as a group. On their arrival on the mountain, he made them lie face down on the ground and ordered them to remain still, looking to neither one side nor the other while he went to converse with the spirit who was guiding him. During this time, he relieved them of their money. Drevet went off to Paris, where he got married; the poor deluded souls returned to St Jean, where they brushed off the sarcastic remarks and the mocking of the unbelievers.

This wicked turn of events did not disenchant them in any way. After the Concordat<sup>18</sup> they rejected all contact with the faithful priests, calling them Ministers of the Beast. They held their own baptisms, marriages and funerals. They held meetings here and there, ordinarily in barns, but no outsider could penetrate them. It was claimed that they devoted themselves to orgies in these meetings; that was never proved. They had a sign to recognise each other. The men had their hair tied with a black ribbon and the women’s bonnets were decorated with red and white ribbons. At

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<sup>17</sup> [Translator’s Note] “Albigensians” is the name given to heretical groups which flourished in the Languedoc area of France between the mid-12th and late 14th centuries. The Dominican Order was founded to combat the heresy.

<sup>18</sup> [Translator’s Note] In July 1801, Napoleon signed an agreement (Concordat) with Pope Pius VII which sought reconciliation between the Church and the revolutionary government. Many of the Church’s pre-revolutionary rights and privileges were returned to it.

the time of writing (1885) it is not rare to still come across these signs. For the rest, they were peaceful and communicated very little with those who did not share their ideas.”

### **Not a departure, but a successful gathering**

Brother Avit was therefore quite familiar with the story of the Beguins, even if he did not link it to Fareins, although he himself, a native of St Didier-sur-Chalaronne, a nearby village, could have known about the history of the sect. For him, the gathering on Pilat was not only a meeting with Drevet and the prophet Elijah, the child born of François Bonjour and Claudine Dauphan in Paris in 1792. Did this twofold meeting take place? Rather than imagining some bizarre financial scam, it must be considered that this meeting had been carefully prepared: people were invited to bring bedding for an inhospitable place, but undoubtedly not under the stars; there was no lack of scattered hamlets and barns in the area. As for the idea of a ritual which includes prostration, we meet that at Fareins. It can moreover be supposed that the accusation made at St Genest came from somewhere close to the meeting. The Beguins must have gathered together a voluntary offering in favour of the work and to support the Chosen Child and the sect-leaders.

If we take Brother Avit’s story into account, when the National Guard arrested several groups of people, the gathering had already taken place on the previous day, the Feast of All Saints. On 2nd November 1794, the National Guard came across a group, chilled and hungry, with only packs (of bedding) and haversacks. It is unlikely that they had spent the night where they were found; the report mentions no trace of a camp. It might also be imagined that, warned that they were being pursued (by the tolling of bells, drums etc) the group hid itself. It was only a rearguard of women and children. Four men armed with swords were there only to defend the weakest in such a savage locale. The majority of the gathering, in particular the men, had been able to slip away. Although sorely tried, those arrested were in no way discouraged; the St Genest report mentions that, once they were arrested, “on the road, they did not stop singing patriotic songs and hymns.”

There is good reason to believe that, after the Terror, Drevet had succeeded in strengthening his followers; he was certainly there. The physical presence of little Elijah is unthinkable; it was impossible to consider such a long and dangerous journey for him. However, the St Genest authorities found on those arrested “some locks of hair” along with labels with superstitious marks in the corner which were “piously kept”. This was certainly hair from little Elijah; in sum, relics surely obtained in exchange for a significant offering.

Let us therefore reconstruct a possible scenario: after the fall of Robespierre and the decision not to favour any particular cult (18th September), a decision was made in Paris by Drevet, Lafay and the Bonjours...to gather together their followers and have them join the cult of the Child Elijah-Holy Spirit. Secret letters were sent off and the police of St Jean Bonnefonds and other places suspected nothing. The climb had to be made by small groups on different routes, notably through St Chamond, La Valla and Tarentaise, perhaps on the Eve of All Saints. The gathering took place on All Saints and dispersal began quite soon after, that evening. However, the groups were taken

by surprise by nightfall, or decided to wait until the following day for their departure and were arrested on the road back by the National Guard which had been notified after some delay.

Two supplementary interpretations of the events of 1794:

In the Annals of La Valla, Brother Avit emphasised the immoral practices, something which had rather come from malicious rumour than reality. Rumour came in good part from the fact that the Beguins, by meeting in barns and private houses, gave rise to tenacious suspicion. However, he did not bring this up in his story of St Jean Bonnefonds.

Nevertheless, he was not entirely wrong. The sect's doctrine gave rise to accusations of moral laxity because of the "Possibilism" of the Bonjour brothers, inspired by the Jansenist environment in Paris: "everything is possible and permitted, that is to say, we can and must do even the things most contrary to God's law when the Work (Jansenism) orders. [...] In other words, the principles of the law and moral rules no longer have any value for one who has attained a sufficient degree of perfection." We have seen that François Bonjour put these principles into practice.

### **Brother Avit brings together two eras**

In the Annals of St Jean Bonnefonds, if he highlights a system of belief which was very anti-Catholic, Brother Avit does not emphasise that these people were supporters of the Republic "while the blows rained down on the social order and on the Church were welcomed" by them. Their name "Blue Ones"<sup>19</sup> became, in 1793, a synonym for supporters of the Republic<sup>20</sup>. Moreover, when they were arrested in 1794, the report of the authorities in St Genest noted that those arrested sang "patriotic songs (and) hymns." This was not a sign of confusion, as the report believed it had seen, but of the same logic as their doctrine aiming to found "the Republic of Jesus Christ". Brother Avit did not appear to have clearly understood this amalgamation of religious and revolutionary spirit. This is why, in the Annals of Lavalla, if he indeed recognised the responsibility of Jansenism, he concluded, "Whatever the case, this sad scene proves to what degree of stupidity our poor humanity can fall when it distances itself from God." The Jansenists of Forez themselves thought, on the contrary, that they were moving closer to God.

### **Brother Avit disregarded the resurgence of the sect**

Brother Avit had nothing to say about the resurgence of the sect from 1846 under the influence of a certain Jean-Baptist Dignonnet, a native of Haute-Loire. Having abandoned his large family and after having spent a long time wandering as a beggar, he began to proclaim in St Jean Bonnefonds

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<sup>19</sup> In 1804 the parish priest of St Etienne-le-Molard said that the women of the sect wore around their neck a blue ribbon from which hung a small purse enclosing hosts with which they gave themselves communion: "that is how they got the name "Blue Ones".

<sup>20</sup> The soldiers of the Revolutionary forces wore a blue uniform.



that he was the new Elijah, inspired by God. The St Jean Bonnefonds sect proceeded to recognise him as the awaited prophet and displayed an astonishing fidelity in his regard. He would be “the little God of the Beguins”. His preaching and prophecies led him to being considered mad and a disturber of public order (meetings in barns and private houses) and he was imprisoned on several occasions. At the beginning of 1849 he was interned, first in Aurillac, very far away from St Jean Bonnefonds, then further away still, in Le Puy. However, his faithful did not abandon him, but procured money and displayed their veneration for him. He died in 1857 at 77 years of age. Having restored their pride to the Beguins, he was the origin of the custom described by Brother Avit, “The men had to wear on their hats a short length of black lace ending with acorns and the women added two black and red ribbons to their hair entwined to form a turban.”

This failure of Brother Avit to remember Digonnet is a little strange. It gives the impression that his information did not come from published material on the sect, but from the oral tradition collected by the Brothers. Nevertheless, the school had been founded in 1844 and the Brothers were well-placed to know what had happened in the time of Digonnet before and after the 1848 Revolution. It is, however, true that, around 1885, the sect had gone quiet and was in slow decline, with the memory of the French Revolution which had given birth to it fast-fading.

### **The basis of the Revolution: the Enlightenment<sup>21</sup> but also Jansenism**

In any case, the French Revolution cannot be really understood if it is not realised that Jansenism was just as important a cause as the Enlightenment. It was frequently popular Jansenism which furnished the Revolution with numerous militants and those bitterly opposed to Catholicism, for example at Fareins. Environments such as the Oratory<sup>22</sup> provided the revolutionary elites, notably in the organisation of education and the police. Fouché, initially a member of the Oratorian lay confraternity, then a frenetic “deschristianiser” under the Revolution, and ultimately Napoleon’s Minister of Police, who employed numerous ex-Oratorian laymen in his services, is a good example of this Jansenism which rested on a definite, albeit complex, alliance between the spirit of the Enlightenment and an essentially religious anti-Catholicism<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> [Translator’s Note] In contrast to the Enlightenment in the rest of Europe, the French Enlightenment was a philosophical movement originating in France in the second half of the 16th century which saw enlightenment coming from within oneself and leading to an obligation to reject all forms of imposed ideas.

<sup>22</sup> [Translator’s Note] The French Oratory, communities of secular priests, had been founded by Cardinal de Bérulle. By the time of the Revolution its members ran a number of prestigious schools and chaplaincies. Each community had a confraternity of laymen.

<sup>23</sup> French historians, most often ignorant in matters of theology, are rarely able to perceive the religious origins of the Revolution. At best they politicise Jansenism.

## **The mountain as a wilderness**

For the people of the plains and towns (as was the case for Brother Avit) the mountain was a troubling wilderness where law and civilisation scarcely applied. Also when people from the plains and towns wanted to go to the mountain, they were suspected of wanting to return to a primitive savagery or (and) of supporting conspiracies. It is not, therefore, surprising that the revolutionary authorities thought of the movement of a few hundred people as likely subversion nor that Brother Avit suspected meetings in the mountains of having scandalous practices. Marcellin would have spent part of his time chasing up clandestine meetings in the hamlets of La Valla. His preoccupation was clearly moral, but not only linked to dancing<sup>24</sup>. There was also a dread of subversive talk, attacks on people, brawls, or sectarian practices such as at St Jean Bonnefonds. Basically, the civil and religious authorities agreed to consider the mountain, far from being a place of innocent, virgin nature, as a space beyond the law which needed to be watched and, if possible, conquered.

Moreover, the forests, valleys and rocks of Pilat, but also its houses, its barns of distant hamlets had been, particularly during the entire Revolution and Empire, places of impregnable refuge for Refractory priests<sup>25</sup> and men avoiding conscription, for political opponents, for bandits and looters. The Memoirs on La Valla by Jean-Louis Barge are eloquent on this topic.

It is true that, particularly during the summer, the mountain could be a place of celebration, of relaxation and of gathering the plentiful resources such as blueberries or primary material such as wood or coal. But then the relationship is reversed and the inhabitants of the mountain are ready to fight off those who come to threaten their traditions, their patrimony or their security. The action of the National Guard at St Genest against fifty women and children arose more from the concern to defend the local area than to ensure the security of the Republic.

## **The Marist Brothers and the parish territory of La Valla**

It is not therefore so strange that rumour attributed to Marcellin the intention of founding in La Valla a sect of Beguins. Fundamentally, what was closer to a sect than an infant-Congregation? In effect, the group of early Brothers presented traits which resembled those of the St Jean Bonnefonds Beguins described for us by Brother Avit: a closed community, specific clothes for a habit, austere customs, and without doubt some liveliness. Then, there was an habitual zeal: the collecting of poor and homeless children, the teaching of catechism in the hamlets; helping Marcellin to stop the dances. Was this not upsetting public order and a resurgence of beguinitism? A certain number of more or less knowledgeable people must have thought this, perhaps in La Valla and certainly in St Chamond. Of course, it was a delicate socio-political time: up to the end of the Empire the territory of La Valla had served as a refuge for those avoiding military service.

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<sup>24</sup> [Translator's Note] See Brother André's Paper "Champagnat, Dancing and Young People".

<sup>25</sup> [Translator's Note] See Footnote 8 above.

The Restoration<sup>26</sup> was a precarious regime which tended to see conspiracies everywhere. The Diocese of Lyon was in a delicate situation: Cardinal Fesch was in exile in Rome and Vicars General governed in his name, something which displeased many ecclesiastics and the French government...

The urban and ecclesiastical sets did not immediately understand that, if Marcellin wanted to found Brothers, it was because he was aiming at “civilising” and christianising a mountainous area which was coming out of roughly twenty-five years of trouble and that such an objective could not be taken on by just one or two priests. He knew, moreover, that young people, even if they were not holding sectarian meetings, were frequently getting together for dances in isolated barns and hamlets. He had to fight against these clandestine gatherings which were injurious to public morality and Christian morals and catechise the children of a population for too long abandoned to itself. This missionary apostolate might have appeared strange to ecclesiastics and to people who had a more conventional view of religion.

Clearly, Marcellin was not for one minute thinking, like Drevet or the Bonjour brothers, about the irruption of a new era of Christianity marked by the breaking-through of the Spirit. In the end, however, the Marist project of July 1816 was itself aspiring to a Marian Church, with reference to the primitive Church and as a herald of the End Time. The group at La Valla functioned on a utopian mode, even if it was firmly based on strict orthodoxy. A reading of the *Life's* telling of the behaviour of the first Brothers in La Valla, St Sauveur and Bourg-Argental is sufficient to realise that they aroused in their environments, at one and the same time, admiration and suspicion.

It was not, therefore, by chance that Father Bochard, the Vicar General, sent, probably in 1819, to the Parish Priest of La Valla, Marcellin's ecclesiastical Superior, a letter complaining of “unauthorised meetings” and demanding explanations from the curate.

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<sup>26</sup> [Translator's Note] In 1814, Napoleon was defeated and Louis XVIII, brother of the executed king, became King of France. One of the effects of the Restoration was that the Church once again became a major force in the political life of the country.