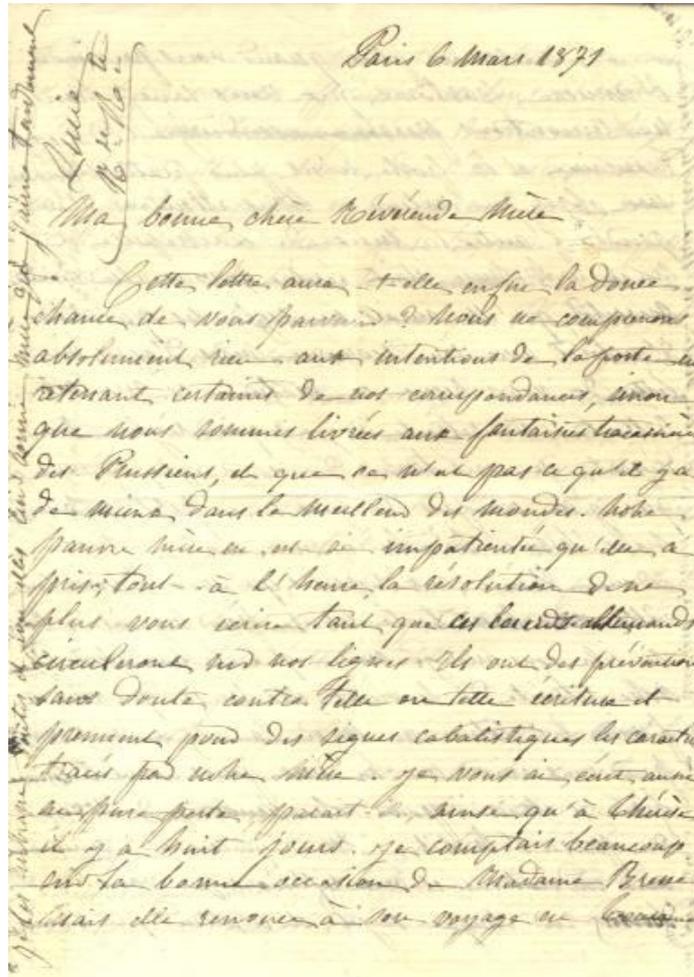


The Cenacle during the Franco-Prussian war and the Commune (1870-1871)



Letter from Mother Lucie de Beaupré during Paris Commune

1) The events:

On July 19, 1870, the Emperor of the French Napoleon III declares war to the King of Prussia William I. The latter's chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, needs this war to complete the unity of the German states around Prussia, and is profiting from the diplomatic coolings and humiliations towards France since the beginning of his ministry in 1862. The Parisians, exasperated by their Emperor's continuous humiliations, go down in the streets to press for war. Napoleon III thinks that the war will quickly make him victorious, and he neglects to make allies of the many states which are Prussia's enemies. He also neglects to check if the French army is in a fit state to fight, which is a big mistake because the unevenness between the two armies is striking : France manages to mobilise only 250 000 men whereas her foe can count on 600 000 soldiers.

This unevenness causes many French defeats, notably in the two Alsatian towns of Wissembourg and Froeschwiller. On August 2, 1870, after the fight of Sedan, Napoleon is taken prisoner by the Prussians. Two days later, the decline of the Empire is declared in Paris,

and the Republic is proclaimed with a national defence government who decides to continue to fight the Prussians. Three armies are re-formed in the North, on the Loire and in the East, and Paris is besieged by the Prussians. After facing a great famine during the 1870-1871 winter, an armistice is signed on January 28, 1871 that plans among other things to elect a new national assembly. But some of the Parisians take up arms against the government elected after this election, and install an insurrectionary organization close to self-management called the Commune. Such organizations are also installed in several other cities such as Lyon and Marseille. The Paris one is crushed by the government in Versailles after a very violent week of repression known as the “bloody week”. Between May 22 and 28, 1871, around 30 000 people are killed and many monuments are burned down by the rebels, in particular the Tuileries palace which was a symbol of the imperial regime, and the Town Hall. Some great cultural riches are also destroyed, like the whole of the Parisian archives and most of the Police ones.

2) The ambulances of Versailles-Montreuil and Tours:

From the declaration of war, the religious of the Cenacle are caught in the whirl of the events. Intent on helping the many wounded soldiers who flock in very soon after the first days of combat, the Sisters of the Paris and Versailles communities take an active part in the civil ambulances.

Indeed, from July 1870 are installed in Paris civil ambulances under the Red Cross emblem. The Red Cross is set up by Henry Dunant who creates The Society of Help to the Wounded Militaries in 1864. During the Franco-Prussian conflict, it is composed of 400 comities and receives some funds to create ambulances, each of them directed by a chief surgeon. The Count de Flavigny, whom the Sisters are contacting, presides over a comity with wealthy and titled men whose mission is to collect funds in society and who meet in the Palace of Industry where equipment, linen, carriages and horses are being stocked. An ambulance such as this one doesn't have very extended medical means, and therefore the cares are simple and quick and there are very few amputations. The Sisters also begin to write to the Countess de Flavigny who is head of the Ladies Comity of the Society of Help to the Military Wounded.

At the house in Versailles, a pavilion containing 14 beds is set up to accommodate wounded men as soon as August 1870. At the Rue du Regard in Paris, where the Paris Cenacle was at the time, 6 beds are installed for the use of the ambulances commission of the city of Paris. The first wounded soldier, who is mentioned in the house Journal, arrives on September 12. Many more wounded arrive at the beginning of December. In all, the ambulance caters for 25 wounded, of whom 7 are Prussians, until February 4, 1871 under Mother de Grandry's supervision. Several of them are evacuated to the civil hospitals of Versailles and Jouy. Some of those who leave the ambulance once they're healed write to the Sisters to thank them for their devoted care and to give them news of the combat.

But this organization isn't confined to the capital city, because the fights that continue after September 1870 take place in different places and in particular on the Loire. The ambulances' general direction puts up in Tours, and the Cenacle community there also participates in the care of the wounded, with the help of Mr de Romane, chief of the ambulance, and in spite of the difficulties to get supplies. The Sisters continue to write to the Countess de Flavigny, who has also come to Tours, and also to Jules Bourdillat, chief of the

“flying ambulance” (so called because they were drawn by horses) and member of the Comity of the International Society of Help to the Wounded. The archives don’t enable us to know how many soldiers were cared for in the ambulance, but the Journal of the Tours noviciate, which has fled Paris in the last days of August 1870, mentions some sick soldiers on August 31. In Nancy, the community doesn’t accommodate wounded for fear of the illnesses the injuries could spread, but the Sisters are “cobblers, knitting [and] laundry women” (letter from Mother Pauline Ringard to Sister de Vibraye in December 1870).

The Cenacle’s devotion during the conflict is acknowledged by the civil authorities, since the Versailles ambulance gets a certificate from the International Work of Voluntary Help in Battle Fields, ambulances and hospitals, and the one in Tours is rewarded with the same document from the British Society for the Help to the Sick and Wounded Militaries.

3) The Sisters at the hands of the Prussians:

The war and the Prussian occupation mainly affect the houses of Nancy and Paris. The many letters exchanged between the Sisters present the hard living conditions they experienced during this time.

The post underlines the lack or the absence of news from the communities due to the disorganization of the communications medium. The Sisters, like the rest of the French, are hung up to the newspapers because the sending of letters is becoming difficult: some services using balloons or carrier pigeons are put together, but they’re not very safe, especially since the letters are opened in the Prussian occupied regions in the East of France. To prevent this inconvenience, the Sisters in Nancy use a subterfuge, by sending the letters to a cousin of one of them living in Frankfurt who then sends them to their addresses. A letter also mentions the same subterfuge employed with England. Since they lack news, the Sisters are very worried. Here is what writes Mother Stéphanie Dambuent on September 30, 1870: “The only sacrifice that we deeply feel is the silence of the other members of our family, the uncertainty about La Louvesc and the fear that Versailles might be too dangerously occupied by our enemies. It is impossible to find any information except [...] in the newspapers”. In Nancy, the news is given by the Prussians “in terms that painfully feel and remind us of the enemy”, and it saddens the population. In Paris, the news are given by the visitors who come to see the wounded, especially by doctor Bourret, and by militaries like General Boissonnet who comes to call on the general superior on November 24, 1870.

This correspondence also enables us to discover the Sisters’ attitude towards the political events. In a letter to Mother Gabrielle de La Chapelle from January 31, 1871, the general superior, Françoise de Larothenégly, claims to be happy that “the empire is in the grave”, but the Nancy Sisters are distressed about Marshal Bazaine’s surrender in Metz, writing that “the shame and disgrace are more and more tied up in [their] weapons”. and asking themselves “where this chain of faults and betrayal will cease” (letter from October 2, 1870). They may judge the French army severely, but they are patriotic. In Nancy, under the Prussians’ military occupation, the situation is very hard to bear, as states a Sister in a letter to the house of Lyon at the beginning at September 1870: “The Lorraine and Alsace regions are devastated. Nancy [...] is crushed under every kind of requisitioning that is being made, and by the shameful presence of these foreigners that lay down the law”. The lack of news concerning the state of the rest of the country heightens the population’s despair. Even in the last days before the signature of the armistice, the Prussians do not seem to change their

attitude, according to Mother de Hennezel, since “the regime in which [they live] is harder than ever: The Prussians are in greater numbers than at the beginning of the invasion and more wicked; they pick a quarrel with everyone”. Fortunately, unlike other congregations, they are not obliged to lodge them. Twelve Prussians content themselves with “weighing on [their] purse” as writes Mother Ringard in November 1870, but lodge in a hotel paid by the congregation, which allows the Sisters to avoid a “despicable [...] cohabitation”. In Paris as well, the Prussians live in a hotel paid by the community, which infuriates Mother Chartier who speaks of it as “the rudest frauds”. Moreover, oxen, horses, carriages and hay, oats and flour are requisitioned by the occupiers.

Rue du Regard, the conflict is severely felt during the siege of Paris and then under the regime of the Commune. The *Small diary of the siege* written by Mother Déroudihle is a very important document which helps us realize the life conditions the religious live in as well as those of the rest of the population. The noise of the guns’ fire rings out almost without intermission, even though the house remains intact in spite of the bombing. According to Mother de Beaupré, Paris becomes a military city where “the military movements, the drums, the clarions, the military exercises come together again and again from dawn to dusk, from one side of the city [...] to the other and in every street, we do not see a single man without his uniform, his sword and his rifle on his shoulder”. During the siege, most of the religious are housed with a friend of the congregation living on the Haussmann Boulevard, and only a few of them spend the night in the Cenacle. During the day, the community gathers in the rue du Regard for lunch.

But the supply difficulties and the famine are even more cruelly felt than the noise of the cannon. At the end of September 1870, even if the people are calm, the high cost of the foodstuffs is worrying the Parisians. This concern is mentioned every day in Mother Déroudihle’s *Small diary*. On September 28, the Sisters are concerned about the lack of meat, and on October 10 about the lack of cheese, even if they are well supplied in bread, wine, coffee and chocolate. Three days later, Mother Déroudihle eats horse meat for the first time. This experience is repeated several times, but soon this meat also runs out and the Sisters have to content themselves with other types of food. “It is long past since we only live on rice. Bread is a mixture of bran, rice, oats etc [...]. Horse meat was a delicacy when we could have some” writes Mother Déroudihle to Mother de La Chapelle on January 31, 1871.

In such conditions, people are helping one another and giving what they can. On September 28, 1870, the Sisters send some milk to the Oratories and receive 50 pounds of cod from an aristocrat lady. They are also concerned about the fate of the poorest Parisians, since Mother de Larothenégly, the general superior at the time, writes that “one of the sufferings [...] is to witness the misery of the workers without jobs and especially of the great quantity of people from the suburbs” (letter from October 12, 1870 to a Sister in La Louvesc). Therefore she decides to shelter about twenty girls from the suburbs to feed them and teach them catechism.

Despite the deprivations, the armistice is painfully felt. The idea of defeat against Prussia is hard to accept. On January 28, 1871, the day before the victors’ entrance in the capital city, Mother Zoé de Chamon writes to Mother Ursule Payan that “we have to wish that the Parisians bear nobly this humiliating piece of boasting”. She then goes on to sadly summing up the Parisian atmosphere: “no more newspapers, plays or stock exchange, no more restaurants working. The city [is] in the deepest mourning during the whole of the occupation”.

The next events do not affect the Parisian community too much, even if the phases of the repression of the Commune are mentioned in the Sisters’ letters, including in those from

the ones living outside Paris. For instance, Mother Payan writes from Tours on the eve of the Pentecost that “the rebels are pushed back and are still occupying the Father La Chaise graveyard” and that “the system is the same everywhere, they set everything on fire as they are forced to retreat”. Sister Louise Coquit, one of the four Sisters to have remained at the rue du Regard with Mother Lucie de la Blanchardière, left some very precious souvenirs from these few months which were so hard for religious who were persecuted by the Communards. The Sisters only go out to go to Mass or to buy a few essential goods, and only wearing secular clothes. Mother de la Blanchardière is fiercely against the suspension of a red flag, the symbol of the Commune, at the house door, and in the end she wins the argument. Together with the three others Sisters she hides the most precious objects in the cellar lest the house is inspected by the rebels. The community also tries to help the religious who are imprisoned. In particular, they bring some food to the Archbishop of Paris, Monseigneur Darbois, who is executed by the Communards on May 24, 1871. However, in spite of great fears during the explosion of the powder magazine situated in Faubourg St Germain and set off by the rebels, the house of the Cenacle is spared.

The whole congregation is relieved to go back to a normal life after months of suffering, even if the population paid a heavy price to go back to peace both inside and outside the country. The Cenacle Sisters took a great part in the conflict, working as nurses but also living as powerless witnesses of the deeply felt sacrifices that have nevertheless enabled the Republic to settle in for good. For the congregation, the years following are successful, since it expands outside the French borders with the Rome foundation in 1879.