

The Cenacle during the dispersal (1901-1914)

1) The historical context:

During the French Third Republic established in 1871, the anticlerical action is virulent and carries out a repressive policy towards the religious congregations, whose expansion has increased since the beginning of the Nineteenth century. In 1882, the Ferry law, named after the Minister of Education, imposes a non-religious teaching in public schools and is the first step towards the State's taking care of teaching at the expense of the congregations.

In July 1901, President of the Council Waldeck-Rousseau presents a law concerning the associations and makes sure it passes. The parliamentary argument on the subject increases the text's severe dispositions, which causes the Socialist Jean Jaurès to say that from now on there is "the beginning of a fight". The congregations are submitted to the third part of the law, have to ask to be legally acknowledged by the State and are under prefectural control. Many religious refuse to obey and choose to leave France. Between 1902 and 1905, the Combes government and his harshly anticlerical policy make the situation worse, because the government refuses to acknowledge the congregations and forbids their members to teach in a law from July 7, 1904. Moreover, eight drafts on the Separation between the State and the Church are presented at that time. The breaking-off of diplomatic relations between France and the Vatican in May 1904 after Pope Pius X's denunciation of President of the Republic Loubet's visit to King of Italy Vittorio Emanuele III precipitates the events, and the Separation law passes in December 1905.

Its implementation quickly leads to some violent incidents both inside and outside of Paris when the administration makes an inventory of the cultural goods and asks to open the tabernacles, which requires the forces of law and order to intervene. The Separation law is condemned by the Pope in his "Vehementer Nos" encyclical letter from February 11, 1906. He encourages the French Catholics to resist to the inventories and therefore increases the confusion. The next government tries to defuse the situation, and the Home Affairs Minister Clemenceau orders the prefects to suspend the inventories in spring 1906. In the same concern of conciliation, a law is passed in January 1907 which leaves the establishments necessary to the worship to the faithful and the ministers. A compromise is also found with the members of the clergy, and the law from April 13, 1908 allows the cities to look after the religious buildings they own.

2) The consequences of the 1901 law on the Cenacle:

Since the summer of 1900, the Cenacle general government is installed in the old town house of the family of Condé, rue Monsieur in Paris. The law passed on July 2, 1901 does not take superior general Marie-Aimée Lautier by surprise. She had already cautiously sent some of the archives to Brussels and burned the useless papers at the beginning of the year. But during the days following July 2 she can not make up her mind about the necessary authorization to ask to the civil authorities and she waits for instruction from the religious ones. The denunciation of the Cenacle in Parliament by President of the Council Waldeck-Rousseau himself after the wrangles of the house of Limoges with the administration increases the anxiety felt by every Sister. The Archbishop of Paris' vicar general, Abbot Thomas, soon comes to the house in his name to recommend submission by immediately asking for the authorization to be acknowledged by the State. However, neither a second visit from him nor one from August Rivet, jurisconsult in Lyon and devoted to congregations who

also advises the superior general to submit herself, can decide her to follow their advice. At the end of August, she decides to close all the French houses and to send the Sisters away. Most of them go overseas, blending in the 30 000 estimated departures, that is one religious out of five, or are sent to stay with friends of the congregation. A few of them stay in France wearing secular clothes to take care of the houses. The departures for England, Italy, Switzerland and Belgium take place in the second half of September, and Mother Lautier leaves herself for Brussels where the general government finds refuge. The arrival of the French Sisters in this house is somewhat difficult because there is hardly enough space to accommodate everyone. The Versailles noviciate also sent to Brussels, states in its journal that “almost thirty of them [arrived] in a house where a few weeks back we thought we could only accommodate two more religious”. But after some arrangements everything is settled.

3) The organization of a clandestine life:

For the Sisters who remain on the French soil, the task is not easy. By an official text from the Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Religious from January 28, 1902, they are exempted from the enclosure and from the religious costume. They enter into a new life, but fortunately they will be helped by members of the clergy and by laymen friends of the Cenacle. These friends do what they can to lodge them or to find them lodgings where then can hide.

First of all they must move. In Paris, a small group goes to Madame Casanave's house at rue de la Planche n°9 under the direction of Mother Louise Baudot. A few others are received by Monsieur Dognin, parent of Mother Marie Dognin, in his house in Auteuil rue du Docteur Blanche n°56 from the end of September 1901 to the end of January 1902. In the next years, the Sisters leave secretly in several places: rue d'Aguesseau, in the Abbaye au Bois, in Argenteuil, rue Caulaincourt, in Thiais and in Presles, rue de Sèvres in 1905 and finally rue du Cherche Midi from 1911. As it will be explained later, their settlement in a new place is often due to the development of apostolic work. These various addresses and the precautions the Sisters take in their letters at the request of Mother Lautier who knows all too well that the mail is opened by the Post, make the history of this period rather hard to write. In Lyon, the house of Fourvière is placed under the watch of Mather Isabelle de Montrémy under the pretence of a friend, Madame Berchoud, who claims to be the director of a family lodging house. Mother Marguerite de Vaines, author of a precious “Journal of the dispersal time”, lives with them to defend the house which belongs to her mother, before Mother Klein replaces Mother de Montrémy in August 1905. The house of La Louvesc is rented by a devoted friend of the congregation, Doctor Eugène Vincent, who installs a medical institute. The Versailles Sisters are firstly lodged in the marquise de Cherville's house, before they move to two other flats. The ones living in Bordeaux are also taken care of, since they are received in different families, in particular in Mother Christine de Hennezel's. But the Cenacle Sisters are sometimes also lodged among other religious congregations such as the Religious of the Sacred Heart and the Assumption ones. Mutual aid happens to be essential in their clandestine life.

The government agents quickly confiscate all the possessions of the different houses. In Marseille for instance, they take everything in spite of the title deeds and affix seals on the chapel. Well aware that the liquidators in charge of dressing the inventories of the houses can make a surprise visit, the Sisters hastily organize the removal of the furniture. It is stored in friends' houses, as the ones in Paris which are moved to the town house of the Jouvencel

family. The relics and other precious objects are sent to Brussels. In Lyon, a genuine game plan is necessary to take out the furniture from the house rue de Fouvrière n°3 to store them in the ones of the Montée of Fourvière. To allay the suspicions of a particularly careful police force, many removals take place to take out the possessions little by little, especially those who belonged to Mother Thérèse Couderc. In January 1902, Mother de Vaines writes that there are “many objects to hide”, which shows that after four months of work everything is not in a safe place yet. Thanks to their gardener Claude Roche, the Sisters manage to elude the administration’s plans. Thus, he cautiously walls up the existing passage between the two houses, which dispels the suspicions of the experts come to examine a possible passage. Moreover, in anticipation of a judiciary visit in December 1902, the chapel is locked with only a few prie-dieu inside it and a big flower vase over the altar to hide the fact that it is a place of worship. They can not be too cautious, because the agents of the liquidator Ménage do not hesitate to search the houses of those individuals who shelter religious, as anxiously writes Mother de Vaines in April 1902. The Sisters also play a trick on the civil servants during the selling of the house in 1907. The displays announcing it starting with the phrase “Selling by juridical authority”, Mother Revend does not hesitate to replace the first word by “theft” with some glue, to the great satisfaction of her fellow Sisters.

The hard living conditions also do not prevent them from following attentively the political debates in Parliament and the much feared arrival of the law on the Separation between the Church and the State. Marguerite de Vaines’ diary shows well the evolution of the events and the drop of the moral. On March 29, 1903, she writes that “during the next days the Parliament is going to deal with the way to get rid of the congregations” and adds “very serious topic”. In December, the situation is worse and she deplores that “the congregations are pursued, hunted like the worse enemies of the country”. She also notes the growing number of demonstrations from the defenders of the Church on one side and from the corteges of gangsters shouting “Down with the skullcap” on the other. This turmoil brings the government to forbid demonstrations of a religious nature on December 6, 7 and 8, 1903. Mother de Vaines is also outraged by the preparation of a law forbidding teaching to anyone having made celibacy and obedience vows, calling it “monstrous”. The issue of the opening of tabernacles, upon which the Senate agrees on after a debate, makes her say that “if people knew how to resist and to show [their anger] we would not be where we are now”.

To live, the Sisters have no choice but to work. The ones in Tours make pork butchers’ aprons and sell the garden’s irises to florists. In her “Journal if the dispersal time”, Mother Marie-Claire Quesnel also mentions the Sisters working on linen, ironing and teaching. These tasks occupy their days during which they try to go out as little as possible. Fortunately for all the Sisters who remained in France, these years have a positive element: the revival and the expansion of the apostolate.

4) The apostolate’s dynamism:

It is to continue the retreats and the teaching of catechism that the Vatican officially authorizes Sisters of the Cenacle to remain in France wearing a secular costume. This apostolate revives little by little in many places despite the difficulties but with the active support of the ecclesiastical authorities. In May 1902, the Cardinal-Archbishop of Paris Richard asks the Mother Superior of the house of Montmartre, Jeanne de Seyssel, to resume catechism in the working-class parish of Clignancourt. In Versailles, the bishop authorizes the opening of an institution for working-class retreats. The about forty Sisters of the Cenacle spread out in Paris having trouble to answer the needs, he also allows the formation of

auxiliaries in a Versailles noviciate in 1902. A small group also settles in Argenteuil at the local priest's request to teach catechism to children from the local council schools. He then asks Mothers d'Espardès and de Seyssel to also establish a group for the parish's widows. The working-class's baptisms, catechism and first communions are managed by the Sisters as well. In February 1902, a house is opened in Auteuil by a friend of the Cenacle to take care of various works. It becomes the heart of the dispersed community but has to close in December and its members have to be transferred to the Abbaye aux Bois because of the surveillance of the police. The apostolate also continues in Montpellier where the Sisters teach catechism and history of the Church. But they wish to have the Pope's support during these troubled times and Mother de Seyssel goes to Rome in Spring 1904 where she obtains Pope Pius X's blessing for the Cenacle's works as well as his authorization for the welcome of novices. This official encouragement touches the heart of the Sisters who are cut off from the General Government in Brussels but who despite the risks stay very active. Nevertheless they are cautious, as in Paris where the apostolic work taking place in the house n°2 rue de Sèvres is concealed from the police by the sign "At the 100 000 corsets"... Some isolated Sisters also participate in the apostolic work, like Mother Henriette Févez, who has taken refuge in Beaujeu and who conducts a retreat with 23 young girls and teaches a young man preparing his first communion.

The group retreats also resume. In Thiais and in Presles, at the castle of Courcelles, near Paris, they are organised from July 1902. The figures prove that the anticlerical laws do not cool the retreatants' zeal, since in 1905 1200 of them come of which 800 in Presles, 315 in Thiais and 85 in the house at the rue de Sèvres in Paris. This dynamism contributes to arouse vocations among the young women, and some of them are then sent to Yvoir to start their noviciate. Other summer retreats are also organized for several years at the castle of the Barollière, property of a Monsieur Meyrand in the Rhône department where the community retreats take place, and in Ecully, in a house owned by a Madame Perret in the same department.

5) The trials:

Like every congregation affected by the 1901 law, the French State brings suits for each Cenacle house to seal its fate. From February 1902, an escrow liquidator is appointed for the building in the rue Monsieur, in Paris. But the Sisters are prepared to fight and helped in this by Jules Lefevre, former notary and friend of the house of Lille who prepares the defence of the houses of Paris, in the name of Mademoiselle de Curzay the owner of the building, and Versailles, and also organizes one for the houses in Lille and Paray-le-Monial. A considerable work is also conducted by Auguste Rivet, great friend of the Cenacle who actively prepares the house of Lyon's defence et spends most of his time travelling to Brussels and back to deal with the different trials. He is a great friend of the Sisters who stayed in Lyon on whom he often calls, including with his wife after his wedding in 1905.

The situation is difficult because there are several houses to defend. The Sisters learn the loss of the Marseille trial in April 1903 and their victory at the Amiens one a month later. The trial concerning the house in Paris opens on December 12, 1904 and the hearings take place twice a week. The congregation wins its case in the Lyon trial against the liquidator who claims that Madame de Vaines acts through an intermediary of the Cenacle. The verdict returned by the court of the department of the Seine ascertains that the building is the uncontested property of the lady and her two daughters and that the Cenacle occupied it as their tenant. However, the judgement in appeal from November 1906 and January 1907 breaks the first one and the Sisters are forced to leave the house.

In all, the trials are won in Nancy, Amiens, Montmartre, Limoges and with a compromise in Paris, but lost in Versailles, Lille, Paray-le-Monial, Tours, La Louvesc and Bordeaux. These last five houses are sold. The Tours one for instance, sold in May 1908 is first occupied by the Crédit Foncier bank who sells it a few months later to a Hebrew teacher working for the Catholic University in Paris. He then installs the great seminar in October 1908. But the purchasers are often friends of the Cenacle. Thus, the house of La Louvesc is bought by Doctor Eugène Vincent who can keep his medical institute until 1920.

Despite the hard living conditions, the 1901 dispersal contributes to create new vocations, and far from collapsing the congregation holds on. The closing of French houses enables the congregation to found new ones in other countries, in Holland in 1905 but also in the United States, in England and in Italy where noviciates are established. With the First World War in 1914, living conditions are even harder and the Sisters are completely cut off from the generalate for four years. It is only in 1919 that they can go back to wearing to religious costume and to living in a cloister. Marie-Aimée Lautier, superior general since 1877, asks them to go back to the post they occupied before the declaration of war and religious life can slowly go back to the way it was before 1901. Moreover, the loss of several houses is quickly compensated for by new foundations in Voiron and Mulhouse.

Dr. Vincent 's Aerotherapy Institute in the house of La Louvesc.



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