



OPEN LETTER (N° 2)

**to the
Brothers of the Sacred Heart,
their partners in mission and ministry
and to the friends of Father Coindre and
of Venerable Brother Polycarp**

Rome, May 30, 2008

FATHER COINDRE and/or BROTHER POLYCARP

One of the responsibilities given by the superior general in council to the new postulator and to the committee for the cause of Venerable Brother Polycarp is “to underscore his fidelity to the charism of the founder.” This “open letter” to the brothers, to our partners in mission and ministry, and to the friends of Father Coindre and Venerable Brother Polycarp is intended quite simply as a reflection on this theme.

CONTRASTING PERSONALITIES

All the evidence would seem to indicate that our founder, Father André Coindre and Venerable Brother Polycarp, the Brother upon whom our predecessors conferred the title of “Second Founder,” were not at all alike in personality, each having been influenced or shaped by the respective social contexts in which each grew up and ministered.

Father Coindre appears to me to have been a firebrand and a rebel. He was a city-boy who grew up and was shaped by the climate of the Revolution, he had to fight for his faith and his place in life. He was a very dynamic character, able to think on his feet and come up quickly with stratagems for survival.

Brother Polycarp on the other hand, grew up in the foothills of the Alps, amid the peaceful mountain freshness; along with his companions he tended sheep on the mountain slopes.

Contrasting figures

In comparing our two “founders”, these two men whom I would call “saints,” though in no way wishing to forestall the Church’s judgment on the matter, it seems to me that on the one hand, Father Coindre conjures up the image of a spirited stallion ready for a sudden burst of speed, while Brother Polycarp tends to offer the image of a steady and reliable cart horse, never rearing up, but able to pull passengers along for great distances.

Father André Coindre

Bearing in mind these differences it is not surprising that Father Coindre’s fiery character and even bouts of justified anger – especially where it was a matter of coming to the defense of the Faith – are often at the heart of the stories about him that have come down to us. He was known to have angrily slammed his fist on a table between himself and a hardened sinner. He let annoyance get the better of him in one letter to Brother Borgia when he says, “Madame Pallière [his sister] is a silly goose not to have spared even two words in reply to my brother who has written her twice...”

That same firebrand Coindre was said to have placed a hangman’s noose round his neck during a sermon in a local prison, a bit of theatrics contrived to convince his audience that they would all have been deserving of a similar fate had not God shown them such infinite mercy. And according to a witness, whose testimony may be found in the local public archives in Lyon, “at the sight many of the inmates wept and a goodly number were converted...”

All of which does not at all suggest that Father Coindre was incapable of tenderness, as in a letter to his “dear mother,” to whom he expresses his regret at not

having written “to ask news of her little radishes, or her lettuces, her flowers, her hens, or of not telling her that he loves her dearly, as well she knows...” We may glean similar evidence of affection for his Brothers and for the Director General, Brother Borgia, who was often a prey to discouragement; he calls him “my very dear and cherished Brother Director...” and elsewhere, “my very gentle friend. With all my heart I embrace you with all my very dear friends and brother.”

But André Coindre was most especially a man of action, the kind of man prepared to cover several kilometers on foot in order to bolster the courage of a brother who was discouraged and tempted to abandon his vocation. And it was this “apostolic compassion” that he wanted to instill into his Brothers for the sake of neglected young people. That same sense of compassion also led him to gather together business people, professionals and notables of Lyon, so as to convince them to support his initiatives on behalf of young people.

His concern for those he had called together to live the religious life also motivated the concise rule that he gave to the Religious of Jesus and Mary. And when his Brothers pleaded with him for a rule, the man of action replied from Blois where he was Senior Vicar, “Rules and regulations are not perfect until and unless experience has revealed what must be done and what must be avoided. For now, make do with something provisional and one day we will see to the rest.” (Positio of Venerable Brother Polycarp, p. 341)

Venerable Brother Polycarp

Brother Polycarp, on the other hand may be said to have been a more interior man, more concerned with the spiritual and community life of the Brothers. His form of reprimand, for example, was as subtle as it was terse. To some of the Brothers who had recently established themselves in America, and who appear to have failed in giving an example of Christian charity he wrote: “And to say that these good brothers who having bound themselves together with the most sacred of bonds, are now tearing one another to pieces...” “Their actions show that they are still far from possessing the merest grain of virtue....” (Positio, p. 172)

Brother Polycarp usually favored methods and words which were gentle and appealed to the heart, such as “My dear child,” “my well-beloved brother,” or “you know you mean the world to me” to motivate them to a better attitude. On one occasion he appealed to one Brother’s sense of nostalgia, reminding him to dwell upon the fond memories of his days of fervor: “Just recall the untroubled, joyful days of your novitiate, and remember how happy you were then....”

When confronted with the death of Father Coindre – a death which seemed to have all the hallmarks of a suicide – it is not difficult to understand why Venerable Brother Polycarp appears to have referred only sparingly to our Founder whether in his personal correspondence or in his circulars to the Brothers. Given the circumstances of the demise of Father Coindre, and considering the prevailing mentality at the beginning of the 19th century (a mentality which continued even until recent decades) his death might well have been seen as an apparent suicide. This would have been especially so to one unaware of the wave of acute meningitis ravaging Blois at the time and which had carried off several other priests in Blois as well as the founder. This fact goes some way to explaining the fact that Venerable Brother Polycarp made only infrequent references to our founder either in his personal letters or in his circulars to the Brothers. Even these days, when there is a more enlightened view and understanding of suicide, there is a reluctance to bring up the memory of this painful event.

Nevertheless when Brother Polycarp does speak of Father Coindre he always does so with veneration and affection. The most eloquent of these passages are drawn from his keynote speech to the brothers at the opening of the chapter of 1846 when Venerable Brother Polycarp presents the new Rule to his brothers: “You all know that our founder was taken from us at the very moment when our congregation had the greatest need of him. After the irreparable loss of its founder, or rather of its Father, the Institute was tossed about...Our gathering (=chapter) is all the more urgent because our venerable Founder was not able to live among us very long...It was, it seems, not the will of our gentle God that this Father have left his Sons the precious legacy (=the Rule) which he had begun to draw up for us, as much in his tremendous heart as in his mind...” (Positio, p. 341)

When Brother Polycarp wanted to draw up a rule of life for the Institute, he took care to consult all the Brothers, asking them to send him “any documents which might have been entrusted to you by our venerable Founder, or without actually having been given by him, might have been handed down to you by reliable sources.” (Positio p. 46) If there are no recognizable expressions from Father Coindre in Brother Polycarp’s rule, it seems to me that is due to the fact that the Founder never actually provided any legislation, with the exception of the pointers he gave to Brother Borgia, or a few general directives concerning the good running of the schools or the conduct of the Brothers and/or their pupils.

GUIDED BY THE SAME SPIRIT

Father Coindre and Brother Polycarp may have had different personalities, but they were both guided by the same Spirit. It is not by their exterior that “Our two Founders” must be compared by something much deeper.

Without exhausting the possibilities on the matter, it seems to me that both men were on the same spiritual wavelength; they shared the same concern for and love of young people, the Institute and the Brothers, but each expressed them within his own personality.

For the young and especially for the young poor

Everything that Father Coindre did was out of love for young people. He founded and maintained Providences; he worked diligently to find benefactors and funds to sustain his institutions; his love for the young led him to view them in the most positive light: “they were more foolish than wicked;” he wanted to “admit free of charge as many youngsters as possible, but within the financial means of the institution.” He pleaded with the Brothers to be good and patient in their dealings with the young: “Never punish a pupil without feeling regret for having done so.”

It was the same with Brother Polycarp. In the rule he gave to the Brothers in September 1846 he opens his chapter XV on schools with these words: “All our schools will be free ... [that is] we will always take in as many poor children as possible without putting the work in peril.” (Positio, p. 88) And when he was himself a young teacher he had resolved to have for all his pupils “a paternal kindness.” And he did not just pay lip service to these exhortations, he upbraided a director and had him transferred from a school because of his severity with the pupils: “You have struck a few of the children....you are very well aware that I have expressly forbidden this sort of correction.” (Positio, p. 157)

For the Institute

Father Coindre wrote that he “would sell the last of his shirts rather than allowing the brothers to disband.” He stoutly defended his Institute against all attempts at merger by

the Senior Vicar of Lyon: “Let us be on our guard against such an approach, it would be like trying to merger all families into one.” He showed his love of the brothers concretely: over the course of the parish missions he directed new members to the community.

Nor is Brother Polycarp in any way outdone in this domain. For it can be said, without fear of exaggeration, that he worked tirelessly for the sake of the institute, giving his very life for it, as he wrote in 1856: “My dear Brothers, nothing dearer to me than the interests of the congregation to which I have dedicated myself completely.” (Positio, p. 339) He manifested his love for the Institute not only at the risk of his own health, but equally when he made his way to Vals in 1830 to take over the novitiate which Fr. Francois Coindre had closed in his fear for the safety of the novices having realized that Lyon was on the threshold of a civil war (cf. Positio, p. 261). He it was who breathed new life into a dying congregation, a breath of life and a new dynamism. Until his dying day Brother Polycarp encouraged the Brothers to live together in community with the utmost charity and fervor.

Love of the Brothers

Father Coindre very much regretted not having been able to spend more time with his Brothers. He was very fond of them and they meant a great deal to him: “I would rather sell the last of my shirts rather than to see them (= the brothers) disbanded.” His letters are steeped in terms of affection and concern: “My very best wishes ...to all our dear Brothers,” “With all my heart I embrace you (Brother Borgia) along with my very dear friends and brothers.” He tries to bolster their spirits with his “Courage and trust! That’s my motto!” He wants the very best for them: “Be saints!” Duty may have obliged him to continue to give his parish missions, but his loving concern would not allow him to forsake his brothers.

Earlier on we referred to affection that Brother Polycarp instilled into the personal letters or circulars that he wrote to the brothers, but his love was also manifested more concretely by his concern to see them happy, in good health and appropriately housed. More than once he intervened on their behalf: “Reverend Pastor, I beseech you to find the means to provide as soon as possible, more appropriate accommodations [for the brothers], which is what you explicitly promised to do...Had I known then what I know now, I would never have sent brothers to Massiac to live in such conditions...” (Positio, p. 178)

Much as our Founder, Brother Polycarp’s wish was that his brothers be as happy as possible, that they share the happiness of the saints. It was just such a wish that he reiterated to them at the end of his letters or on the occasion of New Year’s. And, his good wishes are occasionally expressed with a suggestion of humor, as he wrote the brothers who had been sent to open the new mission in the USA: “In the wide open spaces of your isolation...you can always vie with one another as to who will be the greatest saint.” (Positio, p. 163) And to another brother who had written that, “On the road to virtue I limit myself to baby-steps,” he replies: Well, “that way you won’t strain yourself...but on the other hand, life is short! No, you’ll need to go a bit faster; I mean begin by walking, then get into a jog, and then, when your surer of where you want to go, break out into a real run.” (Positio, p. 455) He takes on as his own Father Coindre’s motto: “Courage and trust!” as he writes in 1853 to the brothers whom he sent as missionaries to the USA. (Positio, p. 313)

CONCLUSION

I would be tempted not to offer a conclusion and leave readers the pleasure of continuing for themselves these parallel lines of our “two founders.” But I consider that

setting them in contrast to one another would be to miss the point that each in his own way, collaborated in the fulfillment of God's plan for the Institute "on behalf of neglected and de-Christianized youth." (Preamble to the Rule of Life). The same Spirit that inspired in Father Coindre the charism of a founder also inspired Venerable Brother Polycarp to give shape and substance to this initial plan.

Had there not been a Father André Coindre and his founding charism, there would not have been in the Church and in society an Institute of the Brothers of the Sacred Heart to come to the aid of youth.

But to quote the minutes of the chapter of 1856, "after the irreparable loss of its Founder or rather of its Father...our Congregation was subjected to such great trials that it would have several times over ceased to exist had it not been sustained by the watchful eyes of Providence." (Positio, p. 340) Venerable Brother Polycarp was for the institute "that providential man" wrote Brothers Eugene and Daniel; (Positio, p. 246) He it was who rekindled the torch first ignited by Father Coindre, and gave organization to the Institute its rules and constitutions, thus restoring to it new life.

I am convinced, as are we all, that we are on the threshold of seeing Venerable Brother Polycarp beatified. In the words of the superior general of the Religious of Jesus and Mary, at our meeting at Christmas time, "Get him beatified as soon as possible, and then we'll join forces for the beatification of Father André Coindre."

*Lord, it was your will
that the Institute of the Brothers of the Sacred Heart,
be founded by Father André Coindre
to respond to the needs of young boys of his day and that
it be re-founded by Venerable Brother Polycarp.
Grant that through the intercession of that same servant,
and following his example, we may believe in your love,
and that it may strengthen us daily as we seek new ways to spread it
according to the needs and mentalities of our contemporaries.
Then, Beloved Heart of Jesus, we will be able to praise you
for the holiness of our Brother Polycarp and through him
kindle a fire of love which will spread throughout the world.
Amen.*

Bro. Conrad Pelletier, s.c.,
Postulator

and team for the Cause,
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