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MONSIEUR OLIER

(1608-1657)

BY THE

Rev. JAMES BELLORD



LONDON

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I.

INTRODUCTORY.

THE Church of Jesus Christ has received from Him a life that can never fail, but not by any means a life that is absolutely invulnerable. There is an ebb and flow in her affairs; she has seasons of progress and seasons of decline. In her field there are tares as well as wheat, subjects of scandal as well as of edification. She has an immensity to glory in, but not a little to be ashamed of, in the human element that is combined in her with the divine. Persecution, heresy, atheism, moral corruption, have by turns raged against her and wrought havoc in her ranks; but when the crisis of her fate has arrived, the hand of the Almighty has been stretched forth, and she has renewed her youth like the eagle: "She has come forth bearing the marks of cruel wounds, but with the principle of life still strong within her"—(Macaulay). There are times when hope itself seems dead. Then it is that God raises up the providential man, prepares him in humility and suffering, fills him with the Divine Spirit, and makes of him a great founder or reformer, whose influence will work for generations through his disciples. Such were St. Gregory the Great and St. Gregory VII., SS. Basil and Benedict, SS. Francis and Dominic, St. Ignatius, St. Theresa, St. Vincent de Paul, and Don Bosco. Even among names so great may be written the

name of one, untitled in the hierarchy of heaven as in the hierarchy of the Church militant, Monsieur Jean Jacques Olier, a parish priest, the founder of ecclesiastical education, and the regenerator of the secular clergy.

The Council of Trent was a great culminating point in the life of the Church. One epoch was ending, and the modern period was opening. The Church had to adjust her action to totally new conditions, and to devise new methods of procedure. Reform and reorganization alike were necessary. The incessant turmoil of the middle ages, foreign wars and internal dissensions, a revival of the old spirit of paganism, and the insurgence of new heresies, scandals in high places, unbridled luxury and unfathomable misery, had resulted in relaxing the bonds of discipline, extinguishing the earlier enthusiasm, and disorganising the system of the Church. The people were plunged in ignorance, the clergy to a great extent in indolence and incapacity. The priesthood was often a mere means of livelihood, monasteries sometimes kept up only the external forms of the religious life, abbasies and bishoprics had become family livings for the younger sons of the nobility. As in the Anglican Establishment of the present day there are lay-rectors of parishes and lay-impropriators of tithes belonging to the Church, so was it formerly in France. The Abbots and Priors of great monasteries were often mere boys, tonsured in order that they might be in some sense ecclesiastics, distinguished from laymen only by the prelatical purple of their silken doublet and cloak, who disported themselves at Court, fought duels, and gambled away the patrimony of the poor in the royal antechambers. Of anything like professional training for the priestly state there was almost none. The candidate simply presented himself and was ordained; a Bishop of rigid views might perhaps send him to a religious house to be trained to priestly virtues and priestly duties during a week's retreat. This calamitous state of things had come about by degrees; it was guarded by the passions and personal interests of King, and Aristocracy, and

Churchmen themselves; it had woven itself into the life and habits of the French nation. At the same time the central authority of the Church was distant, communication was restricted, and Governments were jealous of interference. When there was thus no control of the Holy See over the Episcopate, of Bishops over the clergy, of clergy over their flocks, of Abbots over monasteries, there could be no other result but the gradual dissolution of religious and moral bonds.

The Council of Trent had recognised the only adequate remedy, and ordered its adoption. Every Bishop was to establish an Ecclesiastical College for the fostering of vocations, and the segregation of students from the dangers of the world, and their training in virtue and science. Nothing could have seemed easier of accomplishment, granting a serious and united effort on the part of the Bishops, and a sufficiency of funds. Yet eighty years had elapsed, and except for the seminaries of Rome, and that of Milan established by St. Charles, all the efforts of Bishops and Governments, of religious congregations, and even of Saints, had ended in failure. St. Francis of Sales desired to form three men so that they might inaugurate a seminary system: after seventeen years of efforts he confessed that he had trained only one and a half. A holy priest, M. Bourdoise, tried during thirty years, and only succeeded in getting together a society of parish rectors, who gave some pastoral instruction to young priests. The chief object of Cardinal de Berulle in founding the French Oratory was to provide seminaries for the kingdom and a congregation of capable directors: but the three establishments which were started soon degenerated into ordinary schools, and came to an end. St. Vincent de Paul wished his missionary priests to prepare students for the priesthood, but they never got further than giving ordination retreats. A seminary at Limoges struggled on for twenty years without producing a single priest. Bordeaux, Rouen, Rheims, Agen opened seminaries that came to nothing. In 1625 the Bishops proposed to establish four large seminaries for the whole country, but

they could not agree on any system, or find priests of their own capable of organizing one; and they hesitated at employing the regular congregations, since these would not be completely subject to their control. Thus all the efforts of the best men had failed; the command of the Tridentine Council was considered to be an impracticable ideal; and evidently it could be carried out only by the direct motion of God.

II.

THE PERIOD OF PREPARATION: 1608-1642.

JEAN Jacques Olier, the third son of James and Mary Olier de Verneuil, was born in Paris on September 20, 1608. The families of his parents belonged to the highest official class, and filled distinguished positions under Henry IV., Louis XIII., and Louis XIV. M. and Mme. de Verneuil were excellent Catholics in that corrupt age, but at the same time they were worldly-minded, and very ambitious for their children. The infant was put out to nurse in the Rue St. Sulpice, and even then he instinctively recognised the Sacred Presence on the altar of the parish with which he is evermore associated. However fractious he might be, it was sufficient to take him inside the Church, and at once he was pacified. One of his earliest impressions, and a predominant one in his life, was of the exceeding holiness that befits a priest standing in silence and alone in the presence of God: he was then about seven years old. The child learned from his father a most vivid devotion to the Blessed Virgin, which ever grew with his years. He could do nothing without first saying a Hail Mary, and would confide all his troubles and joys to his holy patroness.

At eight years of age Jean Jacques was tonsured, and



presented to a benefice, of which thenceforth he drew the revenues. He was destined for the Church, and gave early promise of a distinguished career by his quickness in learning and retentive memory; but, on the other hand, he was impetuous and unmanageable, was for ever getting into dangerous scrapes, and risking his life by his utter recklessness. Mme. de Verneuil, who never understood her son as child or as man, aggravated him by incessant scoldings and beatings, till she made his life a burthen to him. Meeting St. Francis de Sales at Lyons, she expressed a fear that so wicked a child would never be fit for the ecclesiastical state. The holy Bishop, after praying to God for light, declared that the wickedness was no more than the exuberance of a strong nature, and that the boy was destined to become a renowned servant of God. Divine Providence in a manner compelled him to keep himself in a state of grace; for whenever he had fallen into sin, he found himself completely incapacitated for his studies. In 1626, having finished his course at the Sorbonne with great distinction, he was nominated Commendatory Abbot of Pebrac, Prior of Bazainville and of the Benedictines of Clisson, and Count-Canon of St. Julien. He now set up an establishment of his own in Paris, with horses and two carriages, several servants, and a retinue to accompany him. He had the entry into the best society, and was received with universal favour, on account of his family connections, his handsome person, his wealth and wit and charm of manner. Although not in even minor orders, he was possessed, as Abbot, of jurisdiction and the right to preach. His sermons, most carefully composed, drew fashionable audiences, and Mme. Olier de Verneuil was delighted with their popularity, their ingenious conceits, their elegant delivery, and their complete lack of the unction of the Holy Spirit. Monsieur the Abbot of Pebrac was intoxicated with his successes, and threw himself with characteristic ardour into a life of worldliness, frivolity, and extravagance. He was assured now of high position in the Church, but his parents were sufficiently religious

not to desire it on such terms. They were as much averse to a life of scandal as to a life of sanctity, and they now sought, by prayers to God and remonstrances with their son, to bring about his conversion. They were more successful than they wished.

There was a person whose special vocation in life was, by means of prayer, to obtain the sanctification of Olier, and to guide him throughout his course in the path appointed to him by God. In his twenty-first year, returning one day with a party of gay young Abbots from the Fair of St. Germain, he passed by the shop of a humble widow, who stood at her door, and, looking sadly at them, exclaimed: "Oh, gentlemen, I have long prayed for your conversion." This was Marie Rousseau, a woman of extraordinary sanctity and humility, who, while yet a child, had the inspiration to pray that she might help to form holy men to labour in God's service. Her constant petitions were for the conversion of her own district of St. Sulpice, and the reform of the secular clergy. Earlier than any of the holy men who guided M. Olier, she seems to have recognised him as God's instrument for those purposes. She was supernaturally enlightened by God; her words, though simple, possessed great power, and she was consulted by the highest in Church and State. From the moment that she spoke, a change began to take place in M. Olier. Some time later he went to Rome to prosecute his studies, and while there he went in pilgrimage to Loreto. As he entered the basilica, attired as a layman, an unknown woman addressed him: "French Abbot, be converted and live to God, or woe betide you." Here he received health of soul and body; he was suddenly cured of fever and a painful affection of the eyes; and he first felt the hand of God drawing him to a life of perfection.

The death of his father soon recalled M. Olier to Paris. His mother was negotiating for his appointment to a Court Chaplaincy; but he refused it, and after spending almost a year in retirement and prayer, he came forth to active life; and, to his mother's unutterable disgust, gave himself to the service of the most

miserable and degraded among the poor of Paris. He would gather them in the streets, or at Church doors, or in his own apartments, to instruct them in the faith and relieve their distress, and often he would prostrate himself and kiss their feet. As a matter of course, he was accounted to be mad.

M. Olier now placed himself under the direction of St. Vincent de Paul, and devoted himself to helping his priests in their missions throughout the country, and especially in the districts where his benefices or the family estates were situated. Guided by the Saint, he concluded that his vocation was to the secular clergy and not to a religious order, and accordingly he was ordained priest in May 1633.

The next nine years are a record of zealous work for souls, of gradual sanctification, of the manifestation of God's will, and of experience, gathered in every part of France, of the needs of the people and of the clergy. At that time God had raised up holy men to undertake a new form of apostolic labour, as missionaries not connected with any diocese, but going hither and thither to instruct the ignorant populations and revive the practice of religion. M. Olier joined with some other zealous young priests, Commendatory Abbots and Priors like himself, and began a series of missions, some of which lasted for months. The poor people thronged to hear the word of God, which they had seldom heard before; the Sacraments began to be frequented, abuses were corrected, associations were formed for various good works, the face of the country was renewed. St. Vincent de Paul remarked: "I know not how it is, but a benediction seems to follow you everywhere." It was not the lay-folk only, but the clergy as well, who were like sheep without a shepherd. They were ignorant, untrained in priestly functions, and there was none to teach them better. But the example of a few men of energy and self-sacrifice was a revelation to them, and revived their dormant zeal. Canons and parish priests began to preach and catechise, to visit the poor, the sick, the galley-slaves; they beautified

their Churches, gave missions, took measures for properly recruiting their ranks, and thus perpetuated the good which had been done transiently by the missionaries.

One very important means devised by St. Vincent de Paul for the development of the apostolic spirit, for mutual edification, and for stimulating works of zeal, was the Clerical Conference. Among the parish clergy this had much the same utility as General Councils in the Church, or as National, Provincial, and Diocesan Synods, each in its own sphere. It was, in fact, an almost necessary supplement to them; it brought individual priests into a union of combined action with others; and although this assembly was deliberative only and not legislative, it was the means of discovering what legislation was needed, and suggesting it to the chief authority in the diocese. The use of professional congresses was known in the Church long before the idea had been adopted by any other body of men; but the lapse of time and the prevalence of civil disorder had either put an end to these assemblies, or had reduced them to an empty form, without any of the reality or the utility of deliberative councils. M. Olier and his priests took every opportunity of introducing these conferences, with the result that the clergy ceased to be isolated and inarticulate atoms, and were enabled to ventilate new ideas, and profit by one another's experience.

Many of the Religious Houses of France had fallen into a state of relaxation that was lamentable and even scandalous. The difficulties of reforming them were very great. The members had a vested interest in their monasteries, and could not be dispossessed; their contract with the Order was to observe a relaxed rule, and they had a legal right to refuse any further obligations. The task of monastic reform fell to the lot of these secular priests. M. Olier's zeal had no result as to his own Abbey of Pebrac, but had remarkable success in several other cases.

A man possessed of such qualifications as M. Olier

seemed designed by Providence to be a great Bishop of the Church. Few men have escaped that burthen so many times as he. But he was reserved by God for a position, which, though far less dignified, proved in his case to be one of much greater importance and more enduring influence. Two years after his ordination, he was asked for by some Bishop, probably of Puy or Rodez, as his coadjutor; and in 1639 he was actually nominated as Coadjutor of Chalons. Even St. Vincent de Paul, man of God as he was, was mistaken about M. Olier's vocation, and strongly urged him to accept. Just before this time, however, he had by a kind of inspiration taken Father de Condren as his director; and this holy man was enlightened by God to declare to him that he was reserved for some other function in the Church. Father Charles de Condren, Superior of the French Oratory, was one of the many great but uncanonized saints who flourished then. His particular calling was direction, especially of the clergy; he never wrote; his gift was exercised in conversation. He had long known the designs of Providence as to M. Olier, and his own duty in preparing the way; but he kept "the secret of the King" rigidly till the day before his death.

Another divine intimation as to his future had already been conveyed to M. Olier, again by means of a holy woman, this time a nun. While in his room at the Monastery of St. Lazare, shortly after his ordination, he twice had a vision of a venerable religious weeping and praying for him. At first he thought it was the Blessed Virgin, but soon concluded that it must be some living person. A few months later, while engaged in missions, he heard a great deal about the high sanctity of Mother Agnes of Jesus, Superior of the Convent of Langeac. Proceeding there, he recognised in her his preternatural visitant. She told him that the Blessed Virgin had ordered her to pray for him, and that he was chosen to found a seminary, which should be the model of all others in France. The work of her life was to promote that object by her prayers and mortifications. Having delivered her message, she pronounced her

Nunc dimittis, and died on October 19, 1634. She had promised to bequeath to M. Olier her Guardian Angel, one of the highest in that Celestial Choir, to be a special additional protector to him in doing the work of God. At the moment of her death, M. Olier saw the Angel descending on him from heaven to take up his new charge.

Suffering is a necessary element in the training of God's greatest servants. M. Olier was seldom free from pain; he had several grievous illnesses, and some of these were cured suddenly on his making a pilgrimage to some shrine of Our Lady, or invoking her assistance. In addition to all this, he suffered the agonies of spiritual desolation. He lived in constant dread of proving to be a second Judas, and losing his soul. His nerves were shattered, all his faculties were impaired, he became almost incapable of priestly duty, he found no consolation in prayer. To his companions he became an object of pity and contempt, as one fallen from high estate and abandoned by God. Thus did God humble before exalting him, and show him his own insufficiency, that he might have no temptation to glory in his subsequent success. It was, no doubt, necessary for the formation of his character. He was naturally liable to temptations of vanity, his manner was unconsciously somewhat domineering, and he showed a precipitancy which needed to be controlled. This state of humiliation began about 1638, and culminated in 1640. He was still enduring this trial when Father de Condren died in January 1641.

Marie Rousseau knew that the desire of her life was on the point of accomplishment; and she was urged by the Holy Spirit to co-operate, by encouraging the priests who were the chief agents in it. Like Moses, she hesitated, but at last consented. Father de Condren now sought an interview with her: she told him his days were numbered, and begged him to speak out what was in his mind. Two days before his death, he met M. du Ferrier, one of M. Olier's principal associates, and at great length set before him the method to be followed as to the proposed seminary. A few days after his death,

he appeared in glory to M. Olier, and declared that he left him, with two other priests, the heirs of his spirit, and bade him give up mission work in order to start a community of secular priests to organise the seminary. From this moment M. Olier recovered his balance of mind, and resumed his old position among his companions.

The society of priests, numbering eight, now betook themselves to Chartres, bought a house, expended large sums upon it, and invited candidates for ordination to make their retreats there. By this means they had hoped to attract both priests and students as the nucleus of a seminary. For eight months they continued: nothing came of it; opposition and troubles arose; their faith was tempted by the thought that God had abandoned His own work, and finally the society broke up and was dispersed. A new opening now offered at Vaugirard, immediately outside Paris. At first opposed to it, finally M. Olier and two other priests accepted the proposal. The general opinion in Paris was very unfavourable; so many previous failures on the part of great communities made everyone think it impossible that three secular priests could do any better. God made known to them, however, through Marie Rousseau, that this attempt would succeed. She sought out several priests who had strong prejudices against the scheme, convinced them, and even gained them as members for the new community. The priest-directors soon numbered twenty; young men who had finished their preliminary studies presented themselves in quick succession; a community was formed, and a rule of life was drawn up, which remains substantially the same to this day.

Following in the footsteps of M. Faillon, the biographer of Abbot Olier, we must treat the next period of ten years in two parts, according to the double position filled by this great priest, as Rector of the parish of St. Sulpice, and as President of the Seminary.

III.

THE PARISH OF ST. SULPICE: 1642-1652.

On the southern side of the Seine lay a great suburb, extending from the Palace of the Luxembourg to beyond the Hôtel des Invalides, known as the City of St. Germain. It depended for its civil and ecclesiastical administration on the head of the royal Abbey of St. Germain-des-Prés, and was not considered as part of Paris. Then, as now, the "Faubourg" was the chosen residence of the French nobility, and, with its 450,000 inhabitants, it ranked as the second city of the kingdom. The ruler of this independent quasi-principality was Henry de Bourbon, a natural son of King Henry IV., possibly tonsured, certainly married; he was Abbot of St. Germain and Bishop of Metz, and did his duty to the Church by receiving the revenues and spending them on himself. The Rector of St. Sulpice was parish priest of the whole of the vast suburb, which is now divided into at least seven parishes, and he had as his chief churchwardens the Duke of Orleans and his sons. St. Germain in 1640 was a very sink of all abominations, the plague-spot of Paris and the kingdom, the refuge of every criminal, the home of immorality, heresy, atheism, violence, and devil-worship even. In 1641 a great mission had been given by St. Vincent's priests, but its very success in one quarter only served to make the general prospect seem more desperate. The Parish Church was small and dilapidated, and very sparsely attended. The services were few, slovenly, unpunctual; the accessories of divine worship were disgraceful when they were not deficient. The clergy limited their zeal to the duties of necessary routine. Of the hangers-on in sacristy and choir, it is enough to say that their conduct was such as to give disedification.

The Rector of the parish, M. de Fiesque, moved by the dread of his great responsibility and his incapacity, and by the wish to retire to the peaceful enjoyment of some fat benefice in the country, took the opportunity of the annual pilgrimage of his parish to Vaugirard, to offer his living to the new community, in exchange for M. Olier's Priory of Clisson and an annuity in addition. As was most natural, such a proposal was promptly rejected by all; the conduct of a seminary was difficult enough in a decent locality, without adding to it the incongruous duties of such a parish. But the obscure widow, whom God had made His mouthpiece, received supernatural knowledge of the proposition, and declared to M. Olier that it was in accordance with the will of God, and that it was, moreover, necessary for the success of the seminary that he himself should take charge of the parish. He hesitated no longer at a step condemned by human prudence, and opposed by all except two of his community; he concluded the business arrangements, took possession of the Church on August 9, 1642, and transferred his seminary on the Feast of Our Lady's Assumption. Madame de Verneuil was furious that her son, who might have been Bishop, Peer of France, and Cardinal even, should disgrace his family by becoming a common curé, and wasting his life in saving the souls of people who had never been presented at Court.

The chief administrative measure of the new Rector was prayer. He spent hours before the Tabernacle, often the whole night; there he found the energy, the wisdom, the courage, the patience, which he needed in such abundance during his ten years of struggle. The next thing was to organise the parochial clergy by bringing them to live in common under a rule. The former curates objected to this change in their habits of life, and also to the abolition of certain fees which they had enjoyed. The Rector compensated some, pensioned others, brought forward some of his own priests, and soon formed a community of fifty for parish work. He also made arrangements with the numerous religious orders in the parish for joint action in the one great cause.

His next care was for the house of God. Every altar had to be destroyed and replaced, a sacristy was built, all the appointments were renewed on a magnificent scale, the attendance of the students added dignity to the services. The ministry of the Word had fallen into profound neglect, and consequently the faithful, even in the upper classes, were plunged in an ignorance which led to an utter indifference to religion. M. Olier arranged for frequent sermons: they were not to be rhetorical compositions on abstract subjects, but were simply to make known Christ Incarnate, His life, His virtues, His sufferings, devotion to Him in the Blessed Sacrament, and devotion to His holy Mother. There was a short discourse at daybreak for those who were going to work, and at night a spiritual reading and instruction. Three times a week in Lent he assembled the servants from the mansions of the Faubourg for practical instructions, and thrice again the beggars and cripples, to whom he also distributed alms. Controversial lectures were delivered for the benefit of Protestants.

Devotion to Our Lord in the Holy Eucharist, long forgotten, now rapidly revived. Daily Mass was well attended, communions became frequent, general monthly communions were established and the practice of visiting the Blessed Sacrament. The Holy Viaticum was carried with due honours to the sick. Benediction was given twice in the month. A lady wished to give an endowment for High Mass and Benediction every Thursday. But M. Olier's fervour was not the less prudent for being intense. He knew that a good thing can be overdone, and that solemnity is destroyed when it is made too common. By degrees a circle of faithful souls began the Perpetual Adoration, at first for the day hours, and afterwards for all the twenty-four. There was Exposition on two days in the year, and the Forty Hours before Lent. Love of the Mother cannot be separated from love of the Son. This was made the second great devotion. M. Olier dedicated his parish from the first to the Blessed Virgin, and had a procession in her honour once a month for the young people.

In order to secure the religious training of the children, the Rector appointed fourteen centres, to each of which several of the students were sent every day to teach some thousands of children who there assembled. He drew up a Catechism for their use, which was not too full or too technical to be understood by them; and he was careful that they should be educated in the practice of their religion, as well as in the repetition of its formulas. This care for the children led to the conversion of many of their parents.

The Church soon proved too small for the increasing attendance. M. Olier proposed to replace it with another of about four times the size. The first stone of the present magnificent edifice was laid in 1646, and the walls were raised to their full height before his death; then interruptions occurred, and the works, resumed in 1718, were only completed in 1745.

This holy priest's love for the poor of Jesus Christ made him most prodigal in almsgiving. The wretched and destitute always had free access to him. Twice a week there was a distribution of food, sometimes to as many as nine hundred persons. A census was made of the parish, and from this was compiled a list of fifteen hundred respectable poor, who were to be relieved secretly. His charity extended also to the fallen creatures who abounded in that city of vice; trustworthy women were appointed to seek them out and offer them an asylum and a livelihood. Failures and relapses were numerous; but when anyone raised this objection the holy man replied, "No labour done for Jesus Christ can be called lost. Life would be profitably spent in saving only one soul." When gentler means had failed, he appealed to the civil power to enforce the laws against disorderly houses. The trade-guilds were an old-established source of debauchery and superstitious practices. The vigilant pastor, after much trouble, reformed them into devotional and charitable confraternities.

The incessant activity of three years was making its mark, when a storm arose which threatened to undo all. It was the necessary tribulation which must test

every great work of God. M. de Fiesque led the way by putting forward exorbitant demands, either for a larger income or for the restoration of the parish to him. The Duke of Orleans and other churchwardens combined with some of the discontented curates of the earlier time, and all the profligates and bravos made ready to take their revenge. The excitement spread, insults and threats prepared the way for violence, and it was resolved to expel M. Olier. On June 8, 1645, a mob forced the Presbytery door, dragged the Rector forth, overwhelmed him with blows, as well as St. Vincent de Paul who had hastened to his assistance, and left him half dead, while they returned to sack his house. For three days the mob remained in possession, the seminary stood empty, the offices ceased in the Church, all men thought that the end had come; none but Marie Rousseau and a few pious souls shared M. Olier's confidence in the protection of God. After a few days he was reinstated by order of the King; but this was the signal for a further outbreak. Three hundred women of evil life, decked in all their finery, approached the Duke of Orleans to ask his good offices against the turbulent priest who was ruining St. Germain. A detachment of the Royal Guards now appeared to maintain order during the solemnities of Corpus Christi. Some of the ringleaders were imprisoned; M. de Fiesque was arrested. Now, for the first time, M. Olier, who had maintained his calmness unruffled throughout, was disturbed. He did not rest until he had secured from the Queen the release of the malefactors. His subsequent kindness to all of them, and especially in attending some who died prematurely within a short time, caused it to be currently said that the surest way to the favour of M. le Curé was to do him some serious injury.

The Queen and M. Olier's friends now wished him to retire from a position so arduous and so dangerous, and to accept the Bishopric of Rodez, where he would find peace, and at the same time a wider field of action. Again Marie Rousseau determined him to remain at the post where God had placed him. M. de Fiesque was

now bought off by the sacrifice of other benefices belonging to members of the community. Things resumed their ordinary course, hostility was soon replaced by an unbounded veneration for M. Olier and his priests, and the grace of God was poured forth most abundantly on their undertakings. An immense revival of religion took place in every class. Communions ran up to 200,000 a year in the Parish Church alone. Many persons began to lead lives of Christian perfection, regulating their day by rule, and practising mental prayer and mortification. The heads of households awoke to their responsibility for the instruction and the morals of their dependents. Whatever good work was proposed by M. Olier, he found men and women ready to second him with their purses and their services. The charity bestowed by them must have been enormous to meet all his wants. Associations of ladies were formed to visit the poor and wait upon them. Schools of instruction in needlework and domestic duties were opened for grown-up girls; these afterwards developed into a Sisterhood, under the direction of Marie Rousseau, which she carried on till her death in 1680. There were some who took charge of orphans, others instructed converts from Protestantism and provided for them, others made vestments for the Church. Each association had a day for its meeting, and monthly devotions at St. Sulpice. The most extraordinary of M. Olier's helpers were two working tradesmen of no particular education—a cutler named Clement, and a draper named Beaumais. An eminent controversialist, Father Veron, had been invited to hold discussions with the Protestants of the parish. He was a man of acute intelligence and caustic wit, and never failed to silence and humiliate his opponents, but he made no conversions. The two tradesmen had received powers which no learned doctor of the Sorbonne could rival—a gift of explaining controverted doctrines, and a persuasiveness that went to the heart. They engaged in conversation with Protestants, and then in informal discussions; and at a later date Beaumais went on a controversial mission through the districts infected with heresy. The conversions due to

these humble apostles were to be numbered by thousands.

M. Olier's extraordinary influence is shown by two great triumphs which he won over the tyranny of fashion and human respect among the nobility, a tyranny which generally is irresistible. In an age when the slaughter of men in public or private warfare was one of the few occupations considered worthy of a gentleman, duelling was a most important and valued institution. The duel was not the pompous farce that it is in France at the present day. Life was then the stake; and high physical courage and address were needed in the presence of a real danger. During one week, in the parish of St. Sulpice alone, seventeen men met their death in single combat; and throughout the kingdom it is estimated that thousands perished annually. The custom, viewed in its merely natural aspect, was perhaps beneficial to the country, as being a check on the multiplication of a turbulent and unproductive class that preyed upon the industry of others; but it was an uncivilized and unchristian fashion, and doubtless brought many souls to perdition, who otherwise might possibly have escaped it. M. Olier founded the Company of the Passion, and managed to enlist as its first members some distinguished officers and noblemen of proved valour, men who dared to face ridicule, and who could venture to refuse a challenge without suspicion as to their motives. After one or two exhibitions by them of Christian courage, the conscience of Court society awoke, and stamped the new movement with its approval. One of the great obstacles to Christian living was removed, and many followed the few. Courtiers, officers, a hundred or so in the year, were now to be found making retreats at the seminary; and at a later date a number of the Companions formed themselves into a quasi-religious community, without vows, and gave themselves to a life of prayer and beneficence.

A second tyranny of fashion, equally hard to overthrow, was that exercised over the ladies of the Court by their milliners. M. Olier first inculcated great reverence for the presence of God and the Guardian Angels.

He required those who attended the worship of God to clothe themselves with decency, and he did not hesitate to humiliate in public some great ladies who deserved it. It came about that, even at Court, the fashions of dress were accommodated to the requirements of the Sixth Commandment.

The decay of religious feeling and the moral anarchy of the times had directed the aspirations of the surviving good Christians towards reform. The spirit of wickedness took advantage of this wholesome impulse to make it the vehicle of another form of evil. A specious and insidious heresy, which sapped the moral life under the pretence of austerity, now sprang into being, and diffused itself widely. It enjoined a severity which made Christian living seem unattainable; it alienated souls from Holy Communion, and left them a prey to temptation; resting on some refined distinctions concerning the recondite operations of grace, it cast the responsibility for men's sins on God, and dispensed them from all efforts after virtue and holiness. Some most estimable persons remained long in suspense as to the true character of Jansenism; many Bishops were more or less infected by it; the oratory of Cardinal de Berulle and Father de Condren lapsed completely; one or two of the Sulpicians, including M. de Foix, Bishop of Pamiers, fell away. It is one of the great glories of M. Olier, and a testimony to the divine source of his spiritual insight, that he was never for a moment hoodwinked, and that he kept his seminary, and, on the whole, his parish, free from the taint of this heresy, and loyal to the Church in its hierarchical centre. The saintly Fénelon was able to write in 1705 that the Jesuits and the Sulpicians were the only communities in France that had remained absolutely sound.

In 1648 began the civil wars of the Fronde, a period of trial that tested to the utmost the vigour and charity of the heroic priest. The mixed tyranny and imbecility of Mazarin's administration divided the royal house against itself, drove the people to revolt, and led the way to social anarchy throughout the realm. The

various heresies, including Jansenism, did their best to embitter the strife. The country was devastated, food ran short, prices rose, extensive inundations followed, tens of thousands were ruined and brought to a state of starvation. The Rector of St. Sulpice was more than equal to the occasion. He first united his parishioners in prayer and penance, with as much fervour as if supernatural remedies were the only ones; and then employed all the resources of natural energy, as if they alone were of any use. He formed a "Council of Charity" from the leading people among his acquaintance to collect and distribute funds. Fifteen hundred families in his own immediate neighbourhood were absolutely destitute; many orphans had to be provided for; a number of religious women from convents near Paris fled to the capital for safety from the savagery of the contending armies. M. Olier took on himself to support all these, and afterwards to give them a new start in life. When he had exhausted all his own resources, he sold his private property, parted with his benefices, solicited aid from his wealthy friends in Paris; and when all this proved insufficient, he left Paris by night, crossed the lines of the besiegers through deep snow, sought out the Queen, and obtained from her a large subsidy, with which he returned safely through a thousand imminent perils, protected by a special providence of God. Peace being restored, he prevailed on the Queen to prevent a recurrence of disorder by dismissing her Prime Minister, the evil genius of State and Church alike, Cardinal Mazarin.

It happened once during this time of stress that for two or three days M. Olier could find no time for the additional devotions which he had imposed on himself. The Blessed Virgin appeared and rebuked him for his negligence. It was evident that the success of his undertakings was due rather to his prayers than to his physical and mental exertions. As a further effect of his prayers, he had the satisfaction of converting many who had been leaders in the troubles; some turned to lives of holiness; others he assisted to die as true penitents.

Like a candle set in the midst of the house, the light of M. Olier's sanctity, as parish priest, illumined the whole of France. The organisations, and institutions, and devotions of St. Sulpice were copied first in neighbouring parishes, and then in other dioceses. Many Bishops asked for the services of priests trained as his curates, to reform distant parishes, and make them a standard for others. The despised office of pastor of souls came to be held in honour, and many men of high birth and distinguished talents were contented to serve God as simple rectors of parishes. Even the illnesses and enforced rests of the holy man from his labour were new means of extending his beneficial influence. His holidays were seasons of devotion, prayer, and charity. In 1647 he had so broken down that he had no alternative but to resign his parish or take three months' leave of absence. He took the opportunity to make a long-contemplated pilgrimage to the tomb of St. Francis de Sales at Annecy. Instead of recreating himself with scenery and sights, he spent the days in meditation, and paid long visits to the Churches at the stopping-places; he would stop the carriage to talk to beggars by the way, to give them alms, and to instruct them if they were ignorant of their religion. Whenever occasion offered he addressed assemblies of priests, urging them to sanctify themselves and their people. He visited the convents, and made the acquaintance of many holy recluses; he renewed their fervour, and continued to direct some of them by letter. A contemporary wrote: "God brought him among us to make innumerable conquests of souls." In this way was the sweet odour of his virtues diffused throughout almost every province of France.

Such was the life of M. Olier as Rector of the parish of St. Sulpice. In ten years he had wrought an incredible change in it. From a very Sodom of iniquity it had become a Promised Land, filled with holy and fervent souls, the centre of every good work, a model of organisation, regularity, and Christian living.

IV.

THE SEMINARY OF ST. SULPICE: 1642-1652.

WONDERFUL as was the work of Jean Jacques Olier in the parish of St. Sulpice, his chief title to renown is that he was the originator of the seminary system, which, beginning in St. Sulpice, spread to the rest of France, and has moulded the education of ecclesiastics, and raised the status of the clergy throughout the world. On this account, he, though a simple secular priest, takes his place in the ranks of a select few, the great founders and reformers. The rector of a parish is an individual; the mark that he makes fades away in the course of time: but a founder's spirit lives in all the members of his community; he sees a long-lived progeny; "he leaves many disciples as successors of his priesthood"—(St. Maximus). M. Olier was endowed by God with both characters. It was most fitting that he who founded the educational system of secular priests should have experience of their special duties, and be himself the model of their active life.

After the transference of the seminary from Vaugirard to St. Sulpice, the community lived for some years in temporary quarters, occupying the Presbytery and some adjacent houses which they hired. For a long time their circumstances were very straitened. They had no fixed income beyond the private fortunes of the wealthier members, and the pensions paid by the others. Their revenues had been seriously reduced by the earlier expenses of conducting missions, by their previous attempts to establish colleges, and by the sacrifices required to satisfy the demands of M. de Fiesque. The community lived simply from hand to mouth, and were

sometimes in absolute want. M. Olier, nevertheless, would allow none of his companions to solicit external assistance; for he knew that God would provide for His own work in proper measure, and he was ready to limit the extension of the seminary accordingly.

After three years a site was purchased adjoining the Church, and temporary buildings were put up to accommodate the rapidly increasing numbers. At this time the two communities, the seminary and the parish staff, which had hitherto had a common lodging and a common table, were separated. It was not long before the new buildings proved to be insufficient, and M. Olier had to take thought for the erection of a permanent edifice. He was, however, utterly destitute of means, and could not determine what kind of building would best suit the special requirements of his institute. One day in 1649, while he was praying fervently in Notre Dame, the Most Holy Virgin appeared, and showed him the plan of a college, with a character of its own, unlike any existing schools or monasteries or asylums. Just at this time, several large legacies fell to one of his principal disciples. The seminary was at once begun, and was ready for occupation at the end of 1651.

The attention of the French Bishops had been drawn from the first to the new venture at St. Sulpice, and they recognised that now a solution might be expected of the important question of the education of the clergy. Some Bishops applied to M. Olier for information as to his methods, and opened seminaries in imitation of his. Still their attempts were not successful; besides the method, they needed properly trained priests to carry it out, and these were not to be created by an Episcopal decree. Applications then began to pour in, asking M. Olier to take over the diocesan seminaries, and unite them to St. Sulpice; or to lend some of his seminary directors to remain for a term of years, and raise up a body of diocesan priests who should ultimately succeed to their place. The requests of the Bishops were so numerous and pressing, that M. Olier was quite unable to comply with them; he often had to refrain from

calling on Bishops when travelling, for fear of their importunities and his own shorthandedness. The most necessitous dioceses were first attended to, and the others by degrees. The earliest records now remaining speak of seminaries established by the aid of the Sulpicians at St. Flour, Amiens, Nantes, Aix, Avignon, Viviers, Puy, Clermont; but there were certainly many others of which no records survive. During a century and a half, no less than one hundred and thirty applications for the foundation of seminaries were received from various dioceses. When the Sulpicians found themselves unable to fulfil all the demands made on them, the Bishops resorted to other means. They tried to establish a few seminaries at great centres to supply the wants of a number of dioceses; but this plan failed on account of difficulties about joint control, and the necessary limitation of each Bishop's authority to his own subjects. Different religious congregations were again called in, St. Vincent de Paul's missionary priests, the Eudists, and, in one or two cases, the Jesuits. Now that the true method of management had been exhibited at St. Sulpice, these new enterprises succeeded much better than the earlier ones.

Evil followed close upon the steps of good. The Jansenists had failed at an earlier date to found a centre in the parish of St. Sulpice. They now endeavoured to introduce their doctrines into the seminary; but here, too, they failed. This singular immunity was probably due to the intense devotion to the Blessed Virgin always cultivated by M. Olier's disciples. "Thou alone hast slain all heresies in the whole world." The sectarians next proceeded to establish a seminary of their own, where they gave a free education to poorer students. These were known as Gillotins, from their first superior, M. Gillot, during whose tenure of office five or six hundred were ordained priests. "It is incredible what harm they have done," says Fénelon. They were to be found everywhere throughout France—as Canons, Professors of the Sorbonne, and even on Episcopal thrones. The Sulpicians were their providential adversaries every-

where; they held Jansenism in check, extirpated it in some dioceses, and finally outlived it.

The effect of the new education was immediate and marvellous. The next generation of priests were all pupils of the seminaries. It was no longer possible to secure ordination after a training of one week in a Lazarist community. Many older priests retired for a while from their incumbencies to go through a course of instruction in the spirit and duties of their state. The Queen resolved to nominate none as Bishops but those who had passed through a seminary. There was a revival of religion, and the whole face of the country was changed. The former irreverence, insubordination, incapacity, idleness, became things of the past; and a body of well-educated, earnest, and often saintly priests renewed religion, faith, and virtue throughout the land.

One thing that is distinctive in the Sulpician reform in France is that a religious congregation was not created by God for the purpose, as were on similar occasions the Franciscans, Dominicans, or Jesuits; and that the light of the secular priesthood was not removed for a while from their candlestick, as once before by the Benedictines; but that the rehabilitation of the clergy first, and then of the people, was carried out by the secular clergy themselves. According to their founder's idea, the Sulpicians remain always a voluntary association of secular priests—without vows, without the title of Father, without any distinctive name but that of the parish of their origin. Their object, as laid down for them by God through His servants Father de Condren, Mother Agnes of Jesus, and Marie Rousseau, was not to control the education of the clergy by acquiring numerous colleges of their own, but to trace the lines on which ecclesiastical education was to be conducted, and aid the Bishops in the formation of their own seminaries. M. Olier, therefore, did not desire any very great extension of his community or of their work. He wished only to have a select body of twelve men, like to the Apostles, not the subjects of any particular diocese, and liable to be transferred to other duties, but devoted exclusively to the training of a

number of priest-coadjutors, who should remain subject to their own Bishops, and who might ultimately take charge of the diocesan seminaries, and perpetuate in them the traditional spirit of the Sulpicians.

The first principle of M. Olier's teaching to his seminarists was that the secular priesthood is an order instituted directly by Jesus Christ Himself to be the great element of activity in saving souls, and the model of the perfect life. He could not endure to hear a secular priest commended as being almost the equal of a religious; if things were as they should be, he said, the seminary would be a place of more fervour than any novitiate, and the regulars would rejoice to be esteemed like to the secular clergy. He would have the priest to be a man of cultivation, so as not to be in any way inferior to the souls he might have to guide, or to the enemies with whom he might measure swords. Without knowledge, he said, a priest cannot do much good in the Church. Science, however, should be subsidiary to spirituality. Without holiness learning was useless, or even dangerous, for it led men to act by human prudence rather than by faith, and engendered pride of intellect, the most incurable of all vices.

Self-abnegation, according to M. Olier, was to be the foundation of the priestly spirit; all that was of the human and worldly spirit was to be eradicated by humility and mortification. Upon this was to be built up an interior life, formed according to the dispositions, ideas, sentiments, and affections of Jesus Christ. Thus should our Lord live in His faithful, according to the Apostle. In His Blessed Mother, more than in all others, Jesus lived, and energized, and was manifested. She must be the model of priests in their imitation of Christ, and their guide in approaching Him. All is from Jesus through Mary, all therefore must be offered to Him through her.

M. Olier dwelt very strongly on the subordination of the clergy to their Bishops as appointed by God to rule His Church. It was a most necessary thing, in order that their action might have the efficiency that springs

from unity. He practised his students constantly in the catechizing of children, as being one of the most important duties and the most fruitful of results. The rule obliged them to make a daily meditation of an hour; and also to read a chapter of the New Testament on their knees, and then to examine themselves upon its chief lessons.

In choosing aspirants to the priesthood, the holy man was cautious in the extreme. He never sought out or persuaded anyone, but waited for the grace of God to indicate their vocation and guide them to it. He carefully inquired into their motives, and rejected any who seemed to be anxious for position or comfort rather than the glory of God. They commenced their course by spending a year in a kind of novitiate at the "Solitude" of Vaugirard or Avron. The influence of this training showed itself in the extraordinary fervour of the seminarists and the edification given by them, and the abundant fruits of their subsequent labours.

The attitude of M. Olier towards those who were associated with him in the government of the seminary is particularly deserving of notice. Although he had been promised special guidance from heaven, and had been constantly favoured with supernatural communications, he was far from arrogating to himself a higher decree of authority on that account. On the contrary, he consulted his colleagues even on such matters as, in accordance with the rule, fell within his competence as president; and in cases of divergency of opinion, he was always ready to waive his own. He was persuaded that God was present rather with a number assembled in His name than with any one of them separately, however eminent might be his gifts; and he looked for the revelation of the divine will through the natural channel of human counsel rather than through any more extraordinary means.

Early in the year 1652 the health of M. Olier showed signs of failing. In June he spent a whole night in prayer before the relics of St. Genevieve, and immediately after he was attacked by fever, which soon

reduced him to extremities. His physicians bade him prepare for death. Although he knew by divine inspiration that his end was not yet, still, according to his wont, he would not allow supernatural influences of a private character to interfere with the ordinary course of the natural order. He received the last Sacraments, made his will, and arranged about his funeral. This done, a partial recovery took place; but he recognised that his task was finished, and retired from his parish. Not long after he was overheard in the confessional of a Lyons church accusing himself, in a loud voice and with many tears, of having rashly undertaken a charge for which he was not qualified, and of having failed to do it justice.

V.

CLOSING YEARS: 1652-1657.

FOR five years longer the servant of God remained on earth, to be purified still more by infirmities, and to give additional glory to God. Recovering from his fever, he began to suffer the torments of the stone, and before long he had a paralytic stroke, which deprived him of the use of his left side, and rendered him completely helpless. His cheerfulness and sweetness of disposition remained unaltered, nevertheless, as well as his desire to suffer for God. He submitted with pleasure to the horrible tortures which in those days were dignified with the name of surgery, and he sought permission to supplement them by taking the discipline. After a while he was enabled again to celebrate the Holy Sacrifice, and to move about a little from place to place, scattering benedictions wherever he appeared. During his convalescence in 1652, while in the South of France, he seized the opportunity to give effect to a design he had

long contemplated, by arranging a great mission to the Protestant populations of Auvergne, Velay, the Vivarais, and the Cevennes. Louis XIII., unmindful of Christian methods, and imitating the usual procedure of the Protestants themselves, had, years before, sought by force of arms to reduce them to obedience at once to the divine and the civil authority. M. Olier now proposed an apostolic campaign to the clergy of the Dioceses of Viviers and Puy; the Conferences discussed the idea and adopted it; two of M. Olier's ecclesiastics offered to finance the undertaking; one of them, M. de Queylus, was established at Privas, the stronghold of the Huguenots, in charge of the forty Catholics of the town. The local missionaries, reinforced by eight Sulpicians and some members of various congregations, commenced preaching systematically throughout the districts, encountering the ministers in public disputations, and gathering the children into schools. The Protestants repelled the attacks with the usual Protestant weapons, not fasting and prayer and the example of meekness and charity, but with insults, threats, tumults, and bodily violence. From the first, the virtues of the priests gained respect from multitudes of the benighted people, and many thousands returned to their true shepherd before the death of M. Olier. In Privas itself all the population, except a minute section, were restored to the faith, and became eminent for their fervent Catholicity. M. Olier could do no more than encourage and direct this movement. So great confidence was felt in the effects of his mere presence that the Bishop of Grenoble sought to have him appointed as his coadjutor, and the Bishop of Puy wished to resign the See in his favour.

The conversion of England was also near to M. Olier's heart. Unable to satisfy his desire of preaching the faith there and suffering martyrdom, he sought the acquaintance of Charles II., then an exile in France. He made a strong impression on that very dissolute person, and had sufficient confidence in his sincerity to receive him into the Church (as there is much reason to

believe), and to expect that he would have risked a little for the sake of carrying out his convictions when restored to the throne.

No mention has yet been made of M. Olier's interest in foreign missions to the heathen. Here, too, his zeal achieved results that have lasted to this present day. This object shared his devotion equally with the labours that have already been described; to this were devoted the latest efforts of his life; for this he was ready to accept that which he had so many times refused—the Episcopal dignity. Early in his career (the date is not given), the Shah of Persia had requested the Sovereign Pontiff to appoint a French Bishop to Ispahan, transferring the See from Babylon, which had fallen into the hands of the Turks. The Papal Nuncio having mentioned this, M. Olier offered at once to give up the parish and seminary, and accept the post; he was turned from his purpose only by the vigorous representations of his united clergy. Again, probably just after he had resigned the parish, he met Father de Rhodes, a missionary of wonderful success, who had returned to France to seek for additional priests to labour among the 200,000 converts in Tonquin. M. Olier entreated to be allowed to go, but Father de Rhodes found it impossible to accept him, on account of his shattered health. He consoled himself by sending some young priests from his seminary, and they were succeeded by other Sulpicians during forty years.

There is another mission which has met with remarkable success, which flourishes at this date, and which may be called the creation of M. Olier and the Sulpicians. As early as 1635, he became associated with M. Dauversière, a wealthy layman, who had been inspired with a great zeal for the newly established Colony of Canada, and with Brother Claud, a humble man of saintly life, whose prayers and efforts conducted greatly to the success of that mission. M. Olier drew up a plan for a Christian settlement, to be called Villa Maria, on the island of Montreal. To promote this, he formed the Association of Our Lady of Montreal, of

which Marie Rousseau was an energetic member. An expedition of forty men was sent out to begin operations. In 1640, the Mercantile Company of Canada transferred the island of Montreal to the religious association, which dispatched a colony of thirty families in the following year. Father de Condren, whose providential duty was to point out M. Olier's vocation and keep him to it, would not allow his penitent to accompany these expeditions. He obeyed, but he always hoped to end his days in Canada, and by martyrdom, if God would so permit. In 1646 the time seemed to be ripe for the establishment of a Bishop's See and a seminary in Montreal. M. Olier appointed M. de Queylus and several priests for that task, but he did not live to see their departure. One of his last acts on his death-bed was to commend the Canadian mission to the special care of his Sulpicians, and to assure them that it was the work of God, and would enjoy His blessing. Those words have been amply verified. Montreal has been a city of divine predilection, and, with the aid of Our Lady, has preserved intact the faith and the virtues of ancient France, under the ægis of British liberty and justice.

At length the end of this energetic and saintly life approached. The holy man became more and more detached from this world and absorbed in God. He deprived himself of the companionship of certain of his priests with whom he was used to converse on divine things, and secluded himself with God alone. He appointed his successor at the seminary, instructed him about its spirit and its management, and made known to him some of the secrets of its future. His chief injunction was that his followers should never act in accordance with worldly prudence, but always with simple trust in the good Providence of God. He announced to several of his priests that they would speedily follow him, and died, as he had predicted, on Easter Sunday, 1657, in his forty-ninth year. A few days later he was seen in vision by one of his friends, clothed in purple and brilliant with glory, and a voice was heard saying, "This was a martyr, and more than a martyr."

For two centuries and a half Jean Jacques Olier has remained uncanonized. Lowly and hidden during life, he has so far been the same in death. Very little indeed of him was known till M. Faillon, of St. Sulpice, examined the archives of the French Capital, and compiled a masterly history of his life and times in three octavo volumes. Mr Healy Thompson pruned this down, and has published a very complete life of Olier in one volume. After so many years that which was hidden has now come to light, and God is exalting the lowly. Petitions for the canonization of M. Olier have been sent to Rome by the Provincial Council of Baltimore and the Episcopate of Canada; and reports upon the cause were forwarded to Rome in 1866. It is to be hoped that the saintly man who did so much for the faithful, the clergy, and the Church, will one day be raised to the honours of the altar, and that he will be numbered amongst the brilliant group of canonized Saints who illustrated the once glorious, but now decadent, because unchristian, land of France.

ONE PENNY EACH.

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