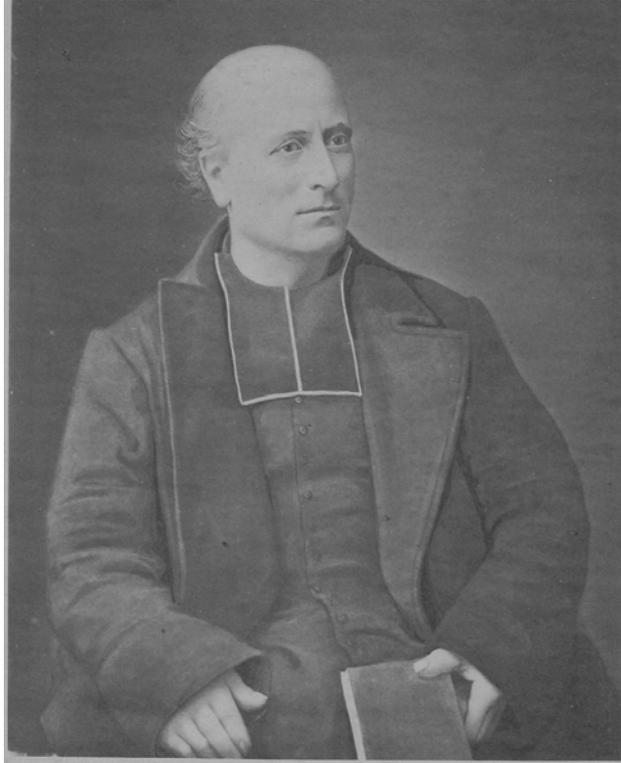


Sketch of the life of Father Henri Planchat



Marie-Mathieu Henri Planchat was born at Bourbon-Vendée (La Roche-sur Yon, France) on November 8th 1823. His father was François Planchat and his mother Virginia Garanger de la Roche. He had one brother, Eugene, and two sisters, Virginia, a *Sister of Charity* and Maria, *Sister of Notre-Dame*.

It was for his charity to the poor above all else that Henri was distinguished from the earliest childhood. He was fourteen years old, when his parents placed him at St. Stanislaus' College (Paris). His quick intelligence, untiring application, and excellent memory, secured him success in his class. Obedience, piety, and kindness of heart won for him universal esteem. Nevertheless he was not a favorite with his comrades, on account of some oddities of manner and a certain irritability of temper, which, although he was ever ready to apologize and acknowledge himself in the wrong. Henri was only three years at this College. He was removed to a College at Vaugirard (Paris) then under the direction of M. l'abbé Poiloup. There he, after having attempted the ordinary course of lectures, began his legal studies. He struggled unceasingly against faults which were rather physical weaknesses than moral defects, the failings inseparable from a feeble constitution and somewhat morbid temperament.

It was while at the College of Vaugirard that Henri first joined the *Society of St. Vincent de Paul*. All the time which his own legal studies and the duties of superintendence which he had accepted, left at his own disposal, was devoted to the poor of the neighbourhood. He undertook the management of the popular library, established under the auspices of the Society, and took a practical interest in the school children.

He used moreover to superintend the apprentices in the Maison de Patronage established in the Rue du Regard, where he always spent his Sundays, finishing the day by assisting at the devotions of the Arch confraternity in the Church of Notre-Dame des Victoires. It was in this house in the Rue du Regard that he first came in contact with the *Brothers of St. Vincent de Paul*, a community then in his infancy, and consisting of but few members.

His vocation to priesthood

His father's name (a Magistrate) would have easily procured for him a seat on the magisterial bench, or a call to legal career, when (from 1844 to 1847) he gave up all the prospects for this world in order to enter the Seminary after taking his legal diploma. It was in October 1847, that Henri entered the Seminary St. Sulpice at Issy.

Minors orders, December in 1848

Sub diaconate, June 2 1849

Diaconate, December 23, 1849

He wrote in personal papers: "Perhaps I have been fancying myself charitable, because I like the external activity of good works. They are far from constituting real charity. True charity is interior... natural activity acts like a poison and destroys the life of charity".

In order to become a priest, Abbé Planchat renounced all the advantages which this world held out to him, he did this only from love to the lowest class of the people, and it was pre-eminently in his character of a priest that he did so much for them and loved them so well.

His vocation to religious life

"When I last went to confession, the good Curé of *La Gare* [Fr. Parguel, formerly at St. Lambert of Vaugirard] told me he saw no doubt at all about my vocation, reminding me, however, at the same time, that there is such a thing as want of correspondence to the call of grace. This is, in other

words, precisely what my director said to me with respect to my vocation to join the little *community of St. Vincent de Paul*. It remains to be seen whether natural liking, either to persons or employments, may not have something to do with my wish to become a member of that Society, whereas, suffering, poverty, and humiliations are what I ought exclusively to seek”.

The works of charity, in which, as a member of the *Society of St. Vincent de Paul*, he had formerly taken part, had implanted within his breast the germs of his special vocation, by bringing him face to face with the misery and destitution of the lowest orders.

His sister Virginia, the *Sister of Charity*, wrote many years after: “in one of my confidential talks with him, while he was at the Seminary, I said to him: “How delighted I should be to have a brother a Jesuit” He replied: “I am not worthy to enter such an Order”, “then, a Lazarist?”; he replied again:”Nor that either, all those are out of my reach... Had you explored the suburbs of Paris, as I have done, and seen in what profound ignorance and moral destitution their wretched inhabitants are sunk, you would agree with me as to this being quite as good a field for missionary effort as China, and one where it would be nonetheless meritorious in the sight of God, because more obscure and unknown to the world... The martyrdom God requires of me is perfect abnegation of self; to give up my own will and only seek His good pleasure, be the cost of what it may; to yield a blind and habitual obedience to all the wishes of my superiors, never uttering a word, even though it should apparently be in my power to do great things, but giving up all rather than act from my own will... Let ours be the martyrdom of the will and of the desires”

Priesthood, December 22, 1850

First Mass, December 23, 1850

On December 24, 1850, by consent of his director and permission of his ecclesiastical superiors, Abbé Planchat left the Seminary for Grenelle, where he met the young Community, *the Brothers of St. Vincent de Paul*. That community consisted of but four individuals, Jean-Léon Le Prevost, Clément Myionnet, Maurice Maignen and Louis Paillé. He was the first priest who had joined the lay Brothers, and may indeed be considered as one of its principal founders.

The working population, which had been led to settle in the plain of Grenelle by the large factories erected there, and the comparative lowness of rents, offered a vast field of exercise to the zeal of the Abbé Planchat. These working classes could not, they alleged, find time to go to their priest

in the church; the Abbé undertook to seek them out in their homes. The medals, pictures, and little books succeeded ere long in gaining admittance for him everywhere. He continually had more than a hundred civil marriages to prepare before the *Society of St. Regis* for the Sacrament, and long-deferred First Communion or Confession, and so on...



The Brothers of St. Vincent de Paul saw plainly that if the evangelization of working classes was to make real advancement, the initiative work of the layman must no longer be carried on independent of the graces attaching to the sacred ministry of the priest; the united action of the two appearing indispensable, and manifestly in accordance with the designs of Providence.

Just when these good works were progressing the Abbé Planchat's health gave way; urged on by his zeal, he had undertaken more than his strength, already weakened by the sedentary life of the Seminary, could bear; at last he was obliged to break off his work and seek rest and renewed vigor under the cloudless skies of Italy. In April 1853 he returned to Grenelle and resumed his ministerial functions, giving a fresh impetus to the work by

establishing the *Confraternity of the Holy Family*. Shortly after the parish priest placed the *Patronage* for young workwomen under his charge. These responsibilities increased his influence in families. He was essentially the apostle of the fireside: his mission was exclusively directed to those who were seen no longer within the sacred edifice, and the aim of all his exertions was to bring them there once more.

In 1861 M. Plachat was sent by his superiors to Arras, to help a charitable priest, M. l'Abbé Halluin, the founder of a large orphanage for young workmen and apprentices who went to their work in town every day. "He united all the qualifications requisite to make the priest useful to the people and was an apostle ready at any moment to renounce country, worldly possessions, and even life itself", said Fr Halluin.

In 1863, M. Plachat was recalled to Paris, and appointed Chaplain for the institution for apprentices and young workmen lately established under the name of the *Patronage of St. Anne*, at Charonne, Paris, at the extreme end of the *Faubourg St. Antoine*. At that time the Patronage was without a chapel. The *Confraternity of St. Vincent de Paul* gave the altar and benches, M. Plachat, aided by some charitable persons provided the rest, and what he could not obtain as a gift, he bought on credit. He knew how to attract the fathers of the boys to his chapel and invited them to take some refreshment, or even to have breakfast with him, giving these needy artisans a better meal than they could have had at home. He began by visiting the homes of all the young men under his charge, and a vast amount of moral destitution was revealed to him by these visits. He discovered in many instances, that the parents of his children were only united by a civil marriage; others he found to be living in extreme poverty in consequence of the great number of children with which they were burdened; to the former he applied the spiritual remedies demanded by their case, whilst to the latter he distributed such material relief as his own efforts, aided by the Providence, enabled him to bestow. These out-door occupations did not prevent him from keeping always in view the great work laid upon him, to be a father to the four hundred young men under his direction.

In 1867 his sister reproached Fr Henri for giving no details of his work. He replied: "Would you have me take the time when I ought to be catechizing, or hearing confessions, or would you have me send away some poor woman without an answer, just to give you the pleasure of reading letters written at such a cost? Let us gather in the harvest while life lasts, nor lose a single instant of our precious time, only given us that we may win heaven..."

Having observed the great influx of Italian workmen into the *Quartier Charonne*, all of whom were as sheep without a shepherd, Fr Plachat conceived the plan of a mission to be preached to them preparatory to the Easter Communion. The success attendant on his efforts the first time encouraged him to do the same on the following year, and the results were happier still. In order to place this good work at once on a firm footing, an association was formed, called the *Sainte Famille Italienne*. He was a true friend and protector to the Italian poor in that quarter, always ready to procure them assistance.

“What a man this Abbé Plachat is, said a Jesuit Father; he is all energy, all zeal; a typical son of St. Vincent of Paul. We want a few more like him to work a thorough reform among the artisans of the faubourgs”.

And the recent converts chimed in: “It is all his doing that we are no longer Protestants. What a struggle it cost us before we could resolve on the step”.

M. l’Abbé Le Rebours could declare one year after his death: “I know no other priest in Paris who has done as much good and worked as hard for the salvation of souls as the Abbé Plachat”.

Fr Plachat was a zealous apostle and friend of the poor, a devout religious, living in complete self-detachment and the closest union with God, having arrived at a high degree of perfection whilst surrounded by the distractions of the world, and engaged in a ceaseless round of such labors as would appear almost beyond the power of man to accomplish.

The amount of hard work he performed would have been enough, and more than enough, to fulfill the obligation to do penance binding on every Christian, but his love would not be content with this.

The excessive fatigue rendered inevitable by the circumstances in which he was placed, and by the requirements of obedience, were as nothing to him compared with the grief he felt at not being able to do all the good he would fain have done.

M. Plachat never allowed the warmth of his zeal to dry up the source of real and heartfelt devotion within his own soul. Although his exterior life was one of distraction and unrest, and the claims on his attention multifarious, he had but to kneel for a moment before the Blessed Sacrament, in order to regain that interior union with our Lord and the Blessed Virgin which in fact he never lost.

During the outbreak of the war with Germany, whole regiments of Mobiles (soldiers) were encamped on the Boulevards in wooden barracks, which merely served to shelter them at night. All day, in the interval of their military exercises, they wandered idly about, or took up their quarters in beer shops. The zeal of the Abbé Planchat was speedily aflame with the desire to provide a refuge for these young men within the walls of St. Anne, to attract them by the recreation rooms to his chapel, and induce them to make use of his ministerial services during the brief intervals of rest.

Fr. Planchat succeeded in collecting alms and kept open house at St. Anne for the benefit of all comers. He did not trouble himself about the growing hatred to the clergy, increasing day by day everywhere showing signs of its existence, in the popular journals and at public meetings.

The persecution

On the boulevard de Charonne existed a club. The atmosphere of this club reeked with hatred, rage, lies, and blasphemy; and its leaders. Instead of marching to confront the Prussian and drive them out of France, only thought how they could drive the Brothers out of their schools, the Sisters of Charity out of their hospitals; and only used their guns if they had any guns at all, to fire upon the priests.

On March 18, when the insurgents had made themselves masters of the city and had assumed the reins of government, the members of this club, triumphant at last, did not think it beneath them to begin reprisals by an attack on the humble establishment in the rue *des Bois* (the House of St. Anne). On March 21, a delegate demanded to see the chaplain's correspondence, in order to confiscate a letter from Versailles (the Army). He was obliged to go away without having found what he sought.

His captivity

On the eve of Palm Sunday several arrests had been made amongst the clergy; the Archbishop and his Vicar-General, with several parish priests, having been put in prison. On Holy Thursday, April 6, an official notice was sent to the House of St. Anne, apprising M. Planchat that an arrest was about to be made there. About two in the afternoon a commissary from the "Commune" made his appearance, pistol in hand, and accompanied by his secretary. The house was surrounded, and the Abbé Planchat, having been arrested, was marched away by the secretary. The lay-director of the Patronage, Brother Derny, was also arrested and conducted to the guard-house in the rue des Amandiers, then to the Bureau du Commissaire in rue *des Cendriers*, and conducted to mayoralty of the

twentieth Arrondissement. M. Planchat had fresh insults to endure from the populace on his way; one woman cried out: “ He ought to be shot. Those are the people who sell us and betray us”. And a child threw mud at him. They arrived at the depot of the Prefecture, in which twenty-five priests were already confined. Later the hostages received notice that they were to be removed to the Mazas Prison. The eleventh cell of the third ward was the one allotted to M. Planchat, and there he was confined for thirty-eight days.

He wrote: “If anything could make the hours seem long, it is the consciousness that my friends are anxious about me, that the sick long to see me again, that my dear apprentice boys have not made their First Communion.”

All the wearisome hours of the confinement were spent in prayer, spiritual reading, and all the pious exercises belonging to a retreat, and thus he tranquilly prepared himself for the tragic end he knew to be most probably awaiting him.

By dint of prayers, importunate entreaties, and courage almost skin audacity, Madame Planchat succeeded in obtaining a hearing from the autocrats of the Commune, hoping to have his son out of prison walls: “Have you ever chanced , she said, to meet a insignificant-looking priest in the streets of Paris, wearing a rusty hat and threadbare cassock, with his shoes full of holes and his girdle knotted up round his waist, carrying under his arm a packet of books and medals to be distributed to all comers; poor himself because all he has he gives to the poor, and only presents himself before the rich in order to beg alms of them; who trudges through remote suburbs in all weathers climbing the stairs of wretched garrets, visiting the sick, relieving the friendless and forlorn? If you have ever chanced to meet that priest, citizen, let me tell you it was my son”.

In an incredibly short of time three hundred signatures were appended to a petition for the release which was presented to the Commune; it is needless to say that this petition was utterly fruitless.

On May 13 Fr. Henri wrote: “What I really need is air and exercise, power to talk, the life of the affections, my accustomed ministrations amongst my dear poor, my sick and my children”.

On May 19 he send a letter to a lady: “I need your prayers now in a threefold sense, in order that I may hold myself in constant readiness to receive the fatal blow, Which may fall at any time without previous warning and without opportunity for confession, and that I may maintain myself in unbroken union with God whilst I am dependent solely on the direct help of

His grace; finally that I may not lose, through the off-recurring infirmity of my unmortified will, the merits of that saving cross now laid upon me by God for the good of my own soul and the welfare of my flock”.

The Versailles troops entered in the city and reached the Hôtel-de-Ville. On Monday, May 22, an order was issued to the effect that all the hostages confined in the Mazas were to be executed without delay. The Governor, either from humanity or motives of prudence, objected to the measure. He was in consequence ordered to suspend the execution, and meanwhile to transfer all the accused from Mazas to the condemned prison of La Roquette.

On May 23 Fr. Plachat wrote to Brother Dery: “It would give me great pleasure to have a word of remembrance from my old M. Le Prevost [the superior of his Congregation; mention is made of him in this guarded manner, for fear of betraying him] if it would not be too difficult a task for you to contrive to convey it to me. We have all been able to go to confession. Farewell, my dear friend The reward laid up in heaven is infinite. Forgive all my offenses toward you and all our brethren. This may be my last farewell”.

On May 26 the bombardment which was going on from the batteries in the cemetery of Père Lachaise caused a certain amount of confusion. Each one of the prisoners felt that at any minute he might be led forth to execution.

François, who was Governor of La Roquette, on delivering up the hostages to their murderers, was heard to exclaim: “These priests have stood in our way for 1900 years; let us get rid of them all”. Federals said to the priests: “We can ever repay you for all the harm you have done to us”. Journalists wrote: “Away, with religion, away with the priests”.

The prison gates were unclosed, and the funeral band passed through. A detachment of troops marched first, then came the gendarmes, the priests followed, and a second detachment of troops brought up the rear.

With the time vast crowd of women and children followed, demanding with vociferous cries that the prisoner should be put to death. At last the Rue *Haxo* was reached. The decisive moment had come; now or ever the crime must be perpetrated. There was a moment’s hesitation. “It seems, says an account, that the gentle and dignified bearing of the hostages, and the calm expression of their countenances, alike devoid of resentment and fear, produced a momentary impression even on their murderers”. First of all the gendarmes were struck down by shots fired at them, the other hostages were made to follow, one close upon another. At the end their corpses lay heaped

on one another, a fresh volley was fired on them.

Someone could not refrain from exclaiming: “These men did die most bravely, most nobly, most gloriously. They must be something more than human to meet death in such a manner”.

On the following Monday, May 29, the relatives and friends of the murdered victims assembled round the horrible grave in the Rue Haxo;

M. L’Abbé Raymond, one of the Belleville priests, presided over the disinterment of the bodies. A good many persons were standing about in groups. Some Brothers of St. Vincent of Paul, several boys from the Patronage, together with some poor women from Charonne, had come to search for M. Planchat’s corpse. As soon as it was dragged out of its unhallowed tomb, before his brethren in religion could identify the body, the poor women and children recognized it, at once, and burst into tears, exclaiming: “There is M. Planchat !”.

The obsequies took place on Wednesday, May 31, at the parish church of Vaugirard. When gathered in the sacristy, awaiting for the departure for the cemetery (Vaugirard, rue *Lecourbe*) the priests were unanimous in requiring that the remains of M. Planchat should not be interred there, but buried separately in the chapel of *Notre-Dame de la Salette* (rue de Dantzig, Paris).



The following epitaph was at a subsequent period engraved upon the martyr's tomb:

Here lies the body of **Henri Marie Mathieu Plachat**,
 priest of the Congregation of *Brothers of St. Vincent of Paul*;
 a man remarkable for great charity to the poor;
 a model of perfect humility;
 who for upwards of 20 years devoted himself unreservedly
 to the service of the needy,
 and after having recalled great numbers
 from the paths of vice to those of virtue,
 was seized, cast into prison,
 and shortly afterwards put to death by wicked men,
 in the 48th year of his age,
 and the 17th of his religious profession,
 he fell at Paris in the massacre of the rue Haxo
 on the 26th day of May, anno Domini 1871.

“O my people, what have I done to thee? ...
 I fed thee with manna in the desert,
 And thou didst strike me, thou didst scourge me,
 And deliver me up”

Sister **Virginia Plachat** wrote:

“*The best thing for me was silently to strive to imitate him, and I resolved to follow his example. Now that he is in heaven, I turn to him in all my difficulties; my confidence has not been deceived... I do feel and I have felt on many occasions that my brother is able to do more for me in heaven than he could when on earth.*”

A word by Maurice Maignen (1877)

The Church of Paris has in recent times borne renewed witness to the faith. Paris, the chief hot-bed of revolution for the whole world, the apostle of toleration and free thought, the furious champion of liberty of conscience and freedom of worship, has, during the last hundred years, rivalled Japan and the Corea in the number of martyrs, wherewith she has enriched the Church; martyrs whose heroism is not unworthy of comparison with that which shed on the early ages of Christianity. Since 1789, two of her Archbishops have suffered persecution and exile, and the throne of St. Denis has been dyed with the blood of three others; the last victim put to death out of hatred to religion did not perish alone, for twenty-two priests were offered in sacrifice at the same time. Scarcely had Mgr Darboy succeeded in collecting the sacred relics of the bishops

and priests who fell in the massacres of September 1792, and depositing them in the crypt of the Carmelite Church, than he in turn fell a victim, not to the blind fury of a maddened populace, but to the cold blooded hatred of atheists, who logically carried out the maxims of social revolution. The episcopate, the secular clergy, religious orders, teachers, missionaries, those engaged in parochial work, and those whose sphere of labour lay principally in the pulpit and confessional, all grades and offices in the Church, in a word, were represented in this scene of slaughter and bloodshed; and that nothing might be wanting to complete the hecatomb, the charitable institutions of Paris, so numerous in the present day, had their representative too amongst the slain, in the person of M. l'Abbé Planchat, the Chaplain of the *Patronage of St. Anne* for apprentices and young workmen, founded by the Society of St. Vincent of Paul for the Faubourgs, St. Antoine, Charonne, Ménilmontant, Belleville, &c. There was nothing remarkable about this poor religious, one of a small community, not long founded and as yet but little known, to account for his being selected as one of the hostages; the only crime *of* which he could be accused was that he was a priest, and had devoted his life to the workmen of Paris, to the poor, and the children of the poor. It was on account of his apostolic labours alone that he was put to death; and put to death too on the very spot where he had worked indefatigably for nearly ten years. In fact on his way to execution, he was led through the midst of the very people who had been the witnesses of a zeal and devotion almost unparalleled in Paris since the days of that humble priest and illustrious Saint Vincent of Paul. Thus he had to endure one especial and poignant pang which his companions in martyrdom were spared, namely, that of being put to death by those whom he most dearly loved and to whose welfare his life had been devoted, like our Lord, he might have said to his executioners: "Many good works I have showed you from my Father, for which of those works do you stone me?"

It is not for us to anticipate a decision which belongs to the Church alone, but if the priests lately put to death can claim the palm of martyrdom, surely this humble priest, although the last of the victims, if judged according to the place he held in the ranks of the clergy, must have been among the first admitted into glory by Him Who came on earth to preach the Gospel to the poor, and Who has promised the kingdom of heaven as the recompense of a cup of cold water given in His name.

A word by Rev. W. H. Anderson S. J. (1877)

The life of Fr Henri Plachat was one of a devotion, a self-abandonment and detachment, that paved the way for the martyrdom which consummated all its previous sacrifices. "Greater love than this no man has, that a man lay down his life for his friends". When the friend to whom and for whose sake a human life is offered is He Who has shown the way, and given grace and invitation to follow, then the death offered up to Him is invested, not with the stirring features of heroism only, or a meek and noble endurance of wrong: it is elevated into a likeness, supernatural and even awful in its sublimity, to His own life-giving Passion. As we follow the Abbey Plachat, and his companions in suffering, along that death-march which his biographer has well called their *Via dolorosa*, tracking their exhausted yet resolute steps from La Roquette to the glorious termination in the Rue Haxo, we seem to recall passages of the everlasting Gospel re-enacted before our eyes. Those priestly martyrs, uniting the oblation of their heart's blood with that of the altar on Calvary, have more of the drama of the Passion than ever was presented at Ammergau. They reproduce, in the letter, the circumstances of their Master's suffering. Pilate too, and the other agents in His condemnation, rise again to our minds when, arrived at the *secteur*, or head-quarters of that department of the city, a chief executioner cries out to the surging, frantic multitude, "what is to be done with the hostages?" and there is one universal cry in answer "Put them to death" Again, how truly, in the very words of his Lord, might the meek, laborious priest, traversing for the last time on his dolorous way those squalid and vicious quarters of Paris that had witnessed his errands of charitable zeal, have addressed the pitiless multitudes, now clamoring for his blood: "When I was daily with you ... you did not stretch your hands against me: ... but this is your hour, and the power of darkness".

It conveys an important lesson to mark the steps by which the prayerful, self-denying life of Abbé Plachat prepared him for martyrdom. This good shepherd had given his cares and labours without stint for the flock purchased by the Precious Blood of the Chief shepherd and Bishop of souls. At length, as a consequence, he was called to give his Blood also.

[...] We wish that the spiritual sons of St. Vincent de Paul [the *Brothers of St. Vincent de Paul*, now called *Religious of St. Vincent de Paul*] in what may almost be called the Third Order of his Congregation, may find a place and a work among us and that many priests, of the zeal and interior life which distinguished the martyred Henri Plachat, may be sent by the Lord of the vineyard to cultivate the waste places, till "the wilderness shall rejoice, and shall flourish like the lily".

The Cause of canonization of Father Henri Plachat is being studied in the Vatican Congregation.
