



VATICAN - Catholic Prayers in the Languages of the World: FRENCH - The Christian Roots of the Peoples of Europe

Vatican City (Agenzia Fides) - The profound changes which occur in the spiritual life of a nation are nearly always enveloped in mystery. The disappearance of the Gaulish language replaced by popular Latin is one example; the evangelisation of Gaul is another example of still deeper change, since conversion to Christianity was to affect the whole religious future of France.

A document, which is also an indisputable testimony, inaugurates this history magnificently: a letter addressed by the followers of Christ in the Gaulish towns of Vienne and Lyons, to their brothers and sisters in Asia and Phrygia, a letter mentioned by Eusebius in his History of the Church. The letter tells of persecution and martyrdom of Christians in those towns in 177, in the time of Emperor Marcus Aurelius: Pothin first Bishop of Lyons, at least 90 years old; deacon Santus of the church in Vienne; Marturus a neophyte; Attale originally from Pergame; a year old boy Pontius aged; and Blandine, a slave girl. In their fury her torturers had no pity for the latter, whose outstanding courage and fidelity stirred admiration even among the pagans as the author of the letter describes in unforgettable terms.

« In her Christ showed that what may appear to be commonplace, without beauty and despicable in human eyes is judged by God to be worthy of great glory, thanks to the love we have for Him, love manifested in strength, not content with mere appearance. We all feared in fact ... that because of her frail body Blandine would fail to remain faithful. However she was filled with such strength that she exhausted the torturers who alternated subjecting her to all manner of torture from morning to evening; admitting defeat they said there was nothing more they could inflict on her; they were astonished to see she was still breathing, although her body was lacerated and broken...but the blessed woman like a generous athlete, rejuvenated by the profession of faith, for her a source of new strength, rest and the end of sufferings she had borne as she said: 'I am a Christian and in us there is no evil »

After this admirable story, for over a hundred years little is known of the progress made by the new religion. It is said that the elderly bishop martyr of Lyons, Pothin, found a worthy successor in Saint Ireneus (178-202), eminent theologian and apologist, feared by Gnostics.

Gregory of Tours (Bishop of Tours 573-594) left an important document on the evangelisation of Gaul even though he wrote three hundred years after those events. He writes of seven men sent in the time of Consuls Decius and Grat (250) to preach the Gospel: Gatien to Tours, Trophime to Arles, Paul to Narbonne, Saturnin to Toulouse, Denis to Paris, Austremonne to Clermont, Martial to Limoges. This shows that Gregory de Tours, confirmed the affirmation of Sulpice Severe, historian of Saint Martin: the religion of God was adopted late on the other side of the Alps.

Despite the scarcity of testimony it is plausible to assume that Christianity was introduced in Gaul by Christians from Asia Minor or Greece who landed in southern France on the Mediterranean coast. The Good News travelled up the River Rhone. For more than a century Lyons was the main centre of Christianity in France and the Bishop of Lyons was the Shepherd of the young church. Certain bishoprics may have been established as early as the late 3rd century, Gregory of Tours mentions Reims and Trèves. Hostile public authorities, the Greek language spoken by the first proselytes regarded as foreigners, hampered the spread of Christianity in Gaul which only accelerated towards the end of the 4th century after the Edict of Milan in 312.

However popular traditions and piety compensate for the absence of documentation with stories about the religious past of France. One of the most touching is the story of how Martha, Mary-Magdalene and Lazarus landed on the coasts of Provence. Chased away from Palestine, they are said to have landed at a place in the south of France today known as « Saintes Maries de la Mer », with Blessed Virgin Mary's sister, a certain James and their black maid Sara. The story was adopted by popular piety and a little church « Saintes Maries de la Mer »

stands on the site to this day.

The great evangeliser of Gaul was without a doubt Saint Martin born in 316 in Upper Pannonia, today Hungary. The son of a Roman officer, at the age of 15 he enlisted in the Roman Imperial Cavalry. He is famous for the act of sharing his cloak with a poor beggar and the heavenly vision which led him to be baptised. Martin left the army and placed himself under the spiritual direction of Saint Hilaire, Bishop of Poitiers. After living as a hermit for 10 years he founded France's first monastery at Ligugé, near Tours. Appointed Bishop of Tours in 372, he founded a monastic centre at Marmoutier where he himself withdrew while tending with zeal to his diocese. He was the first Bishop to evangelise people in rural communities building churches everywhere. He died on 8 November 397. Many churches in France are dedicated to Saint Martin.

France became officially a Christian nation with the baptism of Clovis, King of the Franks, married to princess Clotilde. Clovis and his army converted to the Faith of Nicea in thanksgiving for a victory won at Tolbiac in 496. Clovis had in fact vowed he would convert to Christianity, the religion of his wife, if Jésus, who, his wife claimed, was the Son of the living God, would grant him a victory : « God of Clotilde, if you grant me a victory I will become a Christian ». God granted him the victory. Clovis was baptised on Christmas Day 496 by (Saint) Denis Bishop of Reims, who said : « bow your head, proud Sicambre, adore what you have burned and burn what you have adored».

With regard to the missionary activity of the Catholic Church, France was the cradle of numerous missionary congregations and institutes of religious men and women, too many to list here. Moreover it was in France that three of the four Pontifical Mission Societies were founded: Propagation of the Faith founded by Pauline Jaricot in Lyons in 1822, Saint Peter Apostle founded by Mrs Bigard and her daughter in Caen in 1889, and Holy Childhood founded in 1843 by Bishop Forbin Janson, Bishop of Nancy. (J.M.) (Agence Fides 25/10/2006, lignes 76, mots 1.126)

> *LINKS*

See principal Catholic prayers in French: http://www.fides.org/ita/approfondire/preghiere/prayer_251006_fra.doc: