

FATHER AUGUSTE ETCHECOPAR A MODEL FOR TODAY

INTRODUCTION

I will introduce Father Etchecopar not with an abundance of biographical data; rather I will try to show how he may become a model for the believer “of today”. To do this, we should perceive the vigour of the incarnated values of a man of faith, within the concrete historical situation he had to cope with, in order to feel stimulated to respond to the challenges present on our path in the following of Christ. We want to discover “a saint for our times” in Auguste Etchecopar.

I *“RICH NATURE” (1830-1847)*

In the first paragraph, I will point out the influence exerted in the development of Father Etchecopar’s life by the place of origin and by his family.

He was born in 1830. Biographers and his contemporaries agree on affirming that, as a child, he had an enterprising, fiery, very adventurous, and almost “indomitable” temper. He was the sixth of a family of ten children. His family was an economically wealthy one. His father, Jean Pierre, and his mother, Ninette, took care in giving him a good human and religious education.

His brother Evariste moves to America and his sisters, especially Suzanne, begin exerting great influence on his life. He will acquire greater delicacy and self-control putting aside the rough games to which he had devoted time with his elder brother. He starts to concentrate this force on moral and intellectual efforts: he becomes the best student in his class, in his native village, with Fr. Castel. At the age of eleven he receives his first Communion.

During adolescence, he shows an equilibrium uncommon for a youth of his age. He himself considers inestimable the influence exerted by Fr. Segalas on his life during those years of formation to the diploma; he describes him as: “the most complete priest I have ever known”. In this phase of his life, he distinguishes himself for his pleasant character, his bent and aptitude for music, for his well-balanced body; the whole, without a hint of vanity appearing in his personality: “Rich nature: tall, harmonious proportions, regular and delicate traits, frank and honest manners, golden voice, heart full of sensitive, and deep feelings”.

In consideration of what has been said in the first paragraph, we perceive that both his family and his nature, but also his rural origins, enabled Fr. Etchecopar to enjoy great human equilibrium already at the beginning of his youth.

II

PRIESTLY VOCATION AND BEGINNING OF HIS MINISTRY

(1847-1855)

In this second paragraph I would like to underline how, on the basis of human equilibrium, a priest with the same characteristics could be formed.

Fr. Salaberry was a friend of the Etchecopar family. During a visit, he had said to Auguste's parents, referring to him, "he will be a priest". Yet, Auguste is not satisfied with this: he wants to be sure of his vocation, he doesn't want to do anything but what God requests of him; he insistently seeks for Him to show what he must do with his life.

At the Saint Louis de Gonzague College, Fr. Segalas is his spiritual director, "the most tender father, the most expert guide, the most reliable support of my youth". This father used to state that "the priest's science is necessary to respect his ministry and to make it fruitful for the souls". During this period in Saint Palais, Auguste was student and teacher, as well as being charged with some surveillance duties. He was also a model of life of prayer.

In 1853 (on the occasion of his family's transfer for professional reasons), he goes to Oloron, where he finds the perfect environment for his immediate preparation to the priestly ministry. At the noviciate of the Auxiliary Priests of the Holy Cross he finds an atmosphere of study and prayer. The person responsible for this house of study was Fr. Menjoulet, "impassive man, whose heart had been invaded by his brain". He carried out the formation of elite priests with the backing of Mgr. Lacroix.

In 1854 he is ordained a priest and from the very beginning he surprises for his preaching which reveals a profound life of faith.

On this second phase of his life we recall his wish to take on, through vocation, what God reserved for him ("God's project") and not simply what he liked ("inclinations"); we also recall the importance in his life of being able to rely on a good spiritual director and his effort in intellectual formation. All this makes of Fr. Etchecopar a "capable" (idoneus) priest.

III
DISCIPLE OF SAINT MICHAEL IN BETHARRAM
(1855-1863)

In this paragraph we will try to see how, progressively, Fr. Etchecopar will assimilate the “spirit” of St. Michael, thus following the school of a Saint.

In 1855 the Society of the Holy Cross is suppressed. Fr. Etchecopar, among others, is accepted by Saint Michael in the newly-born community of Betharram. St. Michael sends him, for two years, to the Seminary-college of Saint Mary (Oloron), with Fr. Rossigneux. He becomes director of the Congregation of the Most Holy Virgin and of the Conference of St Vincent de Paoli: mercy and charity go together.

In 1857 he is appointed, by Saint Michael, Master of Novices, although he himself considers his formation insufficient for such a task. He asks for a one-month permission, in order to learn the new task, and starts listening to the conferences for the novices held by Saint Michael. Later on, he will continue - hidden -, to take notes on the weekly conferences held by our founder to the entire community (teachers, missionaries, students...). Then having taken on the position of Master of Novices, he will always consult Saint Michael on how to run the noviciate: almost every morning he visited him in his room. The novices ended up admiring him and, on some occasions, they found him in ecstasy and in mystical rapture.

Progressively, Fr. Etchecopar will become a “spiritual mirror” of Saint Michael. He will continue to receive and to elaborate the charisma around the key-ideas of his Master, nuancing it with personal perceptions. He follows the steps of St Michael in the cult of God’s Will, of the “Ecce Venio” and of obedience; he speaks more clearly and more frequently of the Sacred Heart (the “Heart of Christ”) and integrates in Him a vast range of human and Christian virtues. He refers more and more to the Most Holy Virgin and dwells, in particular, upon the “humble and devoted” proclaimed by Saint Michael. Life itself will give him two images of these two attitudes: the Crib of Bethlehem and the Calvary of Betharram.

IV
HE CONTINUES AND CONSOLIDATES SAINT MICHAEL’S WORK
(1863-1897)

In this last paragraph I wish to show how Fr. Etchecopar, with his human gifts and rich human formation (par. I), careful spiritual and intellectual formation in view of the priestly ministry (par. II) and having progressively assimilated the foundation charisma of Saint Michael (par. III), becomes the “Alma Mater” of the new Congregation, by putting the best of himself at the service of God as “chief and shepherd, father and doctor of souls”.

In 1863, the Founder of the Congregation of the Priests of the Sacred Heart of Jesus of Betharram dies. Mgr. Lacroix, who did not agree with the idea of an Institute of pontifical law but only with the idea of a group of diocesan missionary priests, acknowledges that Saint Michael “was a saint”, yet affirming immediately after that “he was wrong”. He appoints as successor Fr. Chirou. Fr. Etchecopar, with his fellows, obeys: for fifteen years he will be Master of Novices and will keep alive the “spirit” (“the charisma”) of the Founder.

His letters reflect his constant preoccupation to keep Saint Michael (“Our Father”) as the reference-point, and he will take care to make him known. In 1863, just after St. Michael’s death, he draws up a biographical ‘portrait’; in 1878, on his request, “The Life and Work of Fr. Michael Garicoits”, by Fr. Bourdenne, is published; in 1890 he personally writes “Thoughts”; and in 1894 he writes a “Report on the Life and Virtues of the Founder”.

He also commits himself to the consolidation of the work of Saint Michael. First of all, the approval of the Constitutions. In 1869 he prepares the rules for Mgr. Lacroix to bring to Rome; in 1870 he is member of the team preparing the Constitutions. In 1874 he is elected Superior General (a position he will occupy until his death) and decides to accept the Saint Louis de Gonzague College in order to be closer to Bayonne and facilitate the contact with bishop, judge of first instance for the approval of the Institute. He consecrated himself constantly and permanently to this goal, at the same time being respectful of the authority but firm. In 1875, finally, thanks to the complementary intervention of the Blessed Mary of Jesus Crucified and of Miss Dartigaux, Fathers Estrate and Bordachar go to Rome and, with the providential aid of Fr. Bianchi, quickly carry out certain steps that, normally, would have taken longer. The work of Saint Michael was officially acknowledged by the Church.

Fr. Etchecopar, moreover, personally follows the growth of Saint Michael’s work, especially as Superior General. In 1878 he founds the Scholasticate of Bethlehem, despite the little enthusiasm shown by the General Council. He personally organises it during two visits, the latter occurred after having met every community of the Congregation (1892). In 1889 he makes the canonical visit to the seven communities of France and goes, later, to America (Argentina and Uruguay) for a stay of four months.

Fr. Etchecopar also wants the Church to recognise the Founder as model of Christian holiness. In 1891 he pleads the canonisation at diocesan level (the bishop was Mgr. Ducellier); in 1893 he has already collected a large number of witnesses and manuscripts of people who had known Saint Michael.

Through the publication of the life of the Founder and the promotion of the juridical recognition of his work; through watching and making the various communities grow, by presenting the canonisation of Saint Michael, we can perceive the stature of Fr. Etchecopar who, throughout all of this, wished to remain “humble”.

CONCLUSION

In our studies on Fr. Etchecopar's life, we were able to perceive a progressive development of his gifts and talents related to a mission. He integrated his rich human gifts, finely elaborated, first of in his family and then in the various places of his formation (St Palais, Oloron), with the gifts of the Spirit received during his preparation to the priestly ministry. He knew how to link a strong temperament to extreme delicacy, a solid life of faith to intellectual rigour, the capacity for friendship to long moments of prayer. He knew to step back when it was opportune and then to transform himself into a brilliant "chief and shepherd" when asked to by God. He could grow in the light of a spirituality and of a charisma never received directly, but discovered in the person of St Michael Garicoits. He never worked for himself, always for God. He had clear objectives to face the concrete challenges placed before him.

I think that Fr. Etchecopar is, for our times, a model in the sense that he wisely linked the human with the spiritual, (a true Christian humanism), in which the most tender feelings expressed a love coming from above. The same can be said for his humility: to grow and realise himself it was not necessary for him to be the "inventor" of the work, but simply to consecrate himself to it. He knew how to learn from others and esteem his masters. To conclude, I think that he is a model for today in the sense that he shows us that the best in ourselves blossoms and grows proportionally, - in obedience to the Lord - we consecrate ourselves totally to seek growth and the good for others.

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