

+

F V D

Garicoits, Priest

This is how St Michael Garicoits used to sign his letters, expressing by this his priestly identity. He has given a definition of this identity in a letter: “*To be a man, to be a Christian, to be a priest, a priest of Betharram, superior of this community. To be all that, to be really all that, you understand that for me it’s everything... Anything else is vanity, misfortune*” (Correspondence T. II, letter nr. 194). Let us make the most of this Year of the Priesthood, so that the life and the spirituality of this priest who was born, lived and ministered as priest in the diocese of Bayonne, be a stimulus for us so as to be faithful to Jesus’ priesthood, in which we take part thanks to the grace received of the priestly ordination.

1. A clear vocation and a arduous vocation pathway.

Michael Garicoits was a child and a young boy like any other. His lonely occupations as a shepherd and servant of the Anghelus family in Oneix, left him some time to think over the events he had himself attended or that his family had told him about: he would remember the priests who had to hide themselves in the barn Garacoetxea and whom his father used to help smuggle after a few days, at night, by secret mountain passes, into Spain where they could take refuge. He would remember his mother telling him many times how she had to get married in Spain so that her marriage would be celebrated by a priest faithful to the Pope.

He would think over these occurrences, combined with the pain of not being admitted to make his first communion before the age of 14, because of Jansenistic prejudices.

He expressed all this inner reflexion, together with the mystical experience in which the Lord revealed his love shortly before his first communion, as follows: “*This is what happened one day to a man... confided Fr. Garicoits. For the fire which was consuming him, he found himself wrapped in such a brightness that it seemed he would be burnt out and reduced to nothing. God had to calm down this fire in him, so that he could cope with this brightness.* (Écrits, nr. 805 in MIÉYAA P., *La vie de Saint Michel*, op. cit.).

Little by little he grew certain of his vocation. He talked about it with determination to his parents and proved to be able to protect it amidst all difficulties. *Mother*, he said one day, *I would like to be a priest.* But her answer was: *We are too poor for this. How could we manage to provide you with the necessary clothes and linen?* And his father said: *How could we pay so much money?* It is his grand-mother who will sort out this hopeless situation. He will have to combine his studies with his work in order to go forward on this pathway; first in Saint-Palais with the parish priest Borda, then in the curia of Bayonne with the canon Mr Honnert. He will study philosophy at the seminary of Aire-sur-Adour, and theology in Larressore and Dax.

2. A young priest of the Diocese of Bayonne.

He was ordained a Priest by Mgr d'Astros in the cathedral of Bayonne on December 20th 1823. Appointed to the parish of Cambo as assistant of the very sick parish priest M. Hardoy, he had to shoulder the pastoral burden of the parish. He dedicated himself totally to preaching, hearing confessions, visiting the sick and the excluded.

In 1825 the Bishop appointed him lecturer in philosophy at the Seminary of Betharram, of which he became Superior at the death of Mr Claverie in 1831. That same year the Bishop began directing the philosophy students towards Bayonne. In 1833 the students in theology were also directed to Bayonne. St Michael Garicoits remained all alone with Father Guimon in Betharram at the service of the Sanctuary and as chaplain to the Daughters of the Cross in Igon. (Correspondence T.I, letter 10)

3. The grace of solitude in Betharram.

From 1825 onwards, when he arrived in the seminary of Betharram as lecturer in philosophy, to 1835 when he pronounced the vows with his first companions and was elected by them as superior of the community, St Michael Garicoits lived a spiritual experience, a gift of the Holy Spirit, which was to mature through the events he would have to live along these years.

In these years he was internally moved by the exterior occurrences, the environment, the people he met, his readings, his prayer and other spiritual experiences..., which brought him to revalue the great experience he had made of God's love in Oneix, when he was a young boy, before his first communion. All this interior and exterior process culminated both in a significant theologian experience, and in fundamental decisions for his life and for the foundation of the Congregation.

1. In 1825 he was appointed lecturer in philosophy of the seminary of Betharram. This mansion included that of bursar of the seminary. Then he had soon to teach also Theology and Holy Scripture. But the climate of the seminary was so bad that he had also to put some order and bring back discipline. Thanks to his seriousness and his demanding attitude, he became a figure of moral authority and won the respect of the students. In 1831 he was appointed Superior of the Seminary.
2. In 1830 took place the so-called 'Revolution of July'. While the French Revolution had already provoked a division among the clergy, the popular upheaval in 1830 brought about claims for independence, acts of rebellion and revolt against hierarchy, even among the clergy.
3. St Michael was a witness of such situation: *If like me you had seen bishops weeping! (Aquí estoy, 29)* Father Etchecopar who was one of his confidants wrote: *He made once this confession: "the tears I have seen falling from the eyes of the bishops inspired to me the project of founding our institute. But how long and painful this delivery was! The obstacles were sometimes unbearable. To me the existence of our Society is a miracle" (Circular, 15/5).* Father Etchecopar wrote also: *Father Garicoits thought that the God of the little ones and of the poor had elected him... and said to him: "Found in my Church a new institute. It has its reason of being in these troubled times in which the great orders have been scattered and the spirit of revolutionary independence is penetrating into the Sanctuary from everywhere." (Circular dated 10/1/1888)*
4. In 1828, in a letter to the Rector of the seminary, Mgr d'Astros, Bishop of Bayonne, expressed his desire to establish in Betharram a group of missionaries who would offer a pastoral service to the pilgrims directed to the Sanctuary, and who would dedicate themselves to preaching and missions among the parishioners of the diocese: *I have been thinking for a long time of what we could do with the house of Betharram, as soon as I will have displaced the seminary. After much reflexion, I have*

come to the conclusion that the better thing to do is to establish there a missionary centre. The missionaries would foster the devotion to this holy place; Since there would always be someone present there, the bad sinners, coming from far away, could always meet up with a charitable minister who would immerge them into the pool. The stations of the Calvary would be preached with fire by these gentlemen. They could give retreats to people from the high society who would be immersed there, in a meditative silence, in a spirit of faith and devotion... These are, I think, the great benefits resulting from the presence of missionaries in Betharram. (Bourdenne)

Saint Michael did certainly know about the Bishop's plan. Shortly before the bishop was appointed Archbishop in Toulouse in 1830, St Michael confided to him the project he was maturing within him, in order to be enlightened and to seek advice. Mgr d'Astros answered: "*Begin your work and, without preceding Providence, continue and follow all the indications you have with generosity and perseverance.* It is how St Michael would tell his experience to the missionaries at a start in Buenos Aires in 1859.

5. Making acquaintance with the Sisters of the Cross, getting to know the consecrated life.

In 1825, still assistant in Cambo, St Michael wished to make acquaintance with the community of the sisters of Igon whom Mgr d'Astros constantly praised. *Our poverty*, told a sister, *was at first quite amazing to him. He found it strange that we could be so happy among privation. He was much surprised by the preference showed by our superior for the members of the working class instead of those from a higher social rank.* (Bourdenne, 60)

St Michael Garicoits himself confessed: *The first proposal to establish a Congregation at Betharram was made at Arudy, in a parlour, by Sr. Perpetua, a Sister of the Cross, a cousin of Sr. Elizabeth Bichier des Ages, the foundress; the idea was rejected.* (DS 271)

In 1828, Mgr d'Astros proposed St Michael Garicoits as confessor for the Sisters of Igon. In 1831, Mgr d'Arbou officially appointed Fr. Garicoits chaplain to the community of the Sisters of the Cross in Igon. There he met the foundress, Mrs Elisabeth Bichier des Ages, and said about her: *It is the good Sister who did everything, I did nothing but carry out her plans.*

The first contact with the poverty of the sisters made quite a strong impression on him. But this first impression matured in him. As he progressively came to know the sisters as confessor and chaplain, he discovered the beauty of the consecrated life. And something started then to haunt him interiorly: *How good it would be to gather a group of men who, with others means and in another field, would work like the Sisters of the Cross for the evangelization of the popular classes!*" (Bourdenne, 61).

6. Another important occurrence is the decision of Mgr d'Astros who directed the Seminary of Betharram towards Bayonne. In 1831, Mgr d'Arbou convoked the students in Philosophy in Bayonne. The students in Theology remained at Betharram, but they diminished in number as they were ordained. The same thing happened with the priests in charge, they left and joined the new location of their pastoral service. St Michael remained all alone with Fr. Guimon at the service of the Sanctuary and the community of the Sisters of the Cross of Igon. St Michael told about this experience of solitude as follows: *They have decided to make me into a creature without a name as yet, unless they call me, guardian of the ex-seminary of Betharram. There have been some very strange titles on my letters. Someone wrote hermit, another chaplain, another Assistant Priest, another Resident Priest, the Bishop writes Superior of the Seminary; it would be more exact to put Superior of four walls of a vast building. You see that I have no shortage of title. This new position which one would imagine, would afford me a little rest, requires even more activity from me until people of good will come to share my loneliness, my poverty and my work. MM Chirou and Carrerot will probably be the first two to come.* (C. T. I, letter nr 10, 1834).
7. This solitude, among poverty and apostolic activities, favour a time of reading and praying the Word of God. The external events lived with passion met with the experience of Jesus annihilated and obedient, who offered himself to the Father by his *Here I am*, from the Conception to the death on

the Cross. To imitate Jesus annihilated and obedient is what he proposed to those who wanted to live his project of consecrated life.

8. In 1830 he happened to read the work of St Alphonse Mary of Liguori. It is important for the lecturer in Moral since these writings were to free him from the Jansenist influence on his education and his training, and they made him focus on the experience of God's love he had already lived during his ecstasy in Oneix, before his first communion.
9. That year, he discovered also Bossuet's writings. We may say that he found written in Bossuet what he had always felt and what he needed. Bossuet's writings are the most important inspiring source he used to read, study, pray and assume since it helped him to go deeper into the Word of God and to approach a true experience of faith.
10. We could see which impact the exterior events had on his inner life, and which interior motions they provoked. He was feeling more and more passionately about the project of an apostolic group: *Oh, if only it were possible to bring together a group of priests whose programme would be the same programme as that of the Sacred Heart, the eternal priest, the servant of the Heavenly Father... devotion, absolute obedience, perfect simplicity, unfailing meekness. Such priests would make a true flying squad of specialised soldiers, ready to go at the first sign from their chiefs wherever they were sent, even and above all, to those most difficult ministries that others do not want*".

This project worried him. It was necessary to discern whether it was an illusion or whether it belonged to God's plan on him. We know already Mgr d'Astros' opinion. When St Michael came to seek advice with the new Bishop of Bayonne, Mgr d'Arbou, he didn't dare say a word. Therefore in 1832 he decided to make 30-day Spiritual Exercises. Fr. Leblanc sj who guided the retreat in Toulouse, confirmed his Project of foundation: *God wants you to be more than a Jesuit, you will follow your first aspiration, which – I think – is from heaven, and you will be the father of a family who will a sister to our own.*

Fr Leblanc offered him the *Tesaurus spiritualis*, a small anthology of Saint Ignatius's writings. That's how St Michael Garicoits became acquainted with the doctrine of his fellow countryman (both are Basque), whom right from that moment he considered as a great master, who was to help him to express his own spirituality and to give a charismatic shape to his group.

11. Another confirmation of the foundation project is the consolations felt by St Michael Garicoits in the sanctuary of Betharram when coming back from the Spiritual Exercises. *Back to Betharram, the first thing Father Garicoits did was to throw himself at the feet of our Lady, to put himself again and definitively at the service of God and the Holy Virgin. He prayed for a long while, asking whether his plan would please. In that very moment he felt upon him, as he himself told several times, an extraordinary light combined with a powerful attraction, that penetrated into his inmost spirit, confirming his decision and giving him courage for its implementation.* (Bourdenne, 67)
12. We have said that in 1834 St Michael was waiting for his first companions. These arrived in 1835: Fr. Guimon, Fr. Chirou, Fr. Larrouy, Fr. Fondeville, Fr. Perguilhem. In October was formed the first community, the Fathers pronounced the vows, they gave up their goods and elected Fr. Garicoits as Superior.
13. St Michael Garicoits expressed his spiritual experience, matured along the years, in what we are used to calling the *Manifesto of the Founder*, of 1838. It was written by hand in a notebook of one of his first disciples, Fr. Cassou. Here below is the text :

4. The founding experience of St Michael Garicoits.

*It has pleased God to make Himself loved, and while we were still his enemies. He loved us so much that he sent his only son: He gave Him to us to be the magnet which draws us to divine love, to be the model which shows us the laws of love, and to be the means of attaining divine love: **the Son of God became man.***

*At the moment He entered the world animated by the Spirit of God His Father, He gave Himself up to all God's designs for Him; He took the place of all victims; He said: "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure". Then I said: "**Here I am, I have come to do your will, O my God**".*

*Jesus began His life's work by this great act which he never discontinued. From this moment onward he remained always in a state of victim, annihilated before God. He did nothing on His own; His actions were always directed by the Spirit of God; His disposition was one of constant abandonment to the orders of God, to suffer and do whatever He wanted: **He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross**".*

*This is how God loved us... This is how Jesus Christ, our Lord and Creator, became an ineffable attraction for the heart, a perfect model and a most powerful help; Mankind, in turn, remains unmoved before God! And among the priests, just a few of them are ready to say, following the divine Master's example, "**Here we are ... Yes, Father...**"!*

At the sight of this marvellous spectacle, the priests of Betharram felt drawn to dedicate themselves to imitating Jesus, humble and obedient, and to working wholeheartedly to bring the same happiness to others, under the protection of Mary; she was always disposed to do what God wanted and was always submissive to what God did.

They have chosen as patrons St Michael and St Ignatius of Loyola

(Preface to the Constitutions of 1838)

5. Bearing witness to the charism of obedience received from the Spirit.

a. The impact of the spirit of insubordination.

If, like me, you had seen bishops weeping!

Like the Church of his time, St Michael had to live through the consequences of the French Revolution. He believed that the liberal ideas of the French Revolution had had a negative influence on people, leading to the whole process of deschristianization: *mankind, in turn, remains unmoved before God!* Yet, the worst consequence was the spirit of autonomy of the priests: *And among the priests, just a few of them are ready to say, following the divine Master's example, "Here we are ... Yes, Father..."!* St Michael did not express himself a lot about this situation, but Father Etchecopar was much more explicit:

*** Father Etchecopar's voice regarding the social context of that time:**

- + *These remarks seemed to me quite fair and proper to please you. They suit so well the spirit of the Institute, they can help us to sweep away prejudices and strengthen us, **in the liberal atmosphere of this century**, to arm ourselves against this universal evil, "great, as Fr. Garicoits would say, or at least a **great misfortune of the present time, source and fatal origin of catastrophes everywhere.**" (letter nr. 1629).*
- + *Above all **the spirit of independence and egoism which blows and penetrates from anywhere.*** (letter nr. 1111)
- + *Here I am, following the words of the Founder, at the service of humility and charity, **fighting against the hate and the egoism of the century.*** (letter nr. 826)
- + ***Fighting against the spirit of insubordination and egoism which is the plague of our time.*** (letter nr. 862)
- + ***It is the remedy for the evil of the time... of the century which has turned to be Pelagian,*** cancelling the reign of Jesus and of his grace. (letter nr. 244)
- + *Refer to whom it may concern the little good we may achieve and keep the merits away **from the influences of vanity and pride.*** (letter nr. 776)
- + *I am not telling you about the persecutions that are being hatched as much in secret as in broad daylight, the plague that stalks in darkness (*Sal.90,6*); they come forward cleverly and slowly to win the opinion and seduce vanity. They sap the building; the big explosions are postponed for some time, if God does not want it differently. In the meantime, they denounce us, they threaten us. Father Berdoulet is exposed in the columns of *The Independant*, a radical newspaper of Pau. They accuse him of having pressed the women of Coarraze - where he has spent a few days while the eldest Father was ill - into convincing their husbands to vote appropriately, and they accuse him of having himself influenced the people on this subject from the pulpit. The truth is that he stayed within the limits; but nowadays the calumny about the clergy is on the schedule. (letter nr. 1434)*
- + *These troubled times, in which the great Orders have been scattered and the **spirit of revolutionary independency penetrates from everywhere into the Sanctuary...*** (letter nr. 995)

* **The experience of the one who saw the bishops weeping.**

Father Etchecopar tells the significant experience made by St Michael Garicoits when he saw the bishops weeping because of the spirit of disobedience of many priests. It is a key fact in St Michael Garicoits' life.

- + *Fr. Garicoits has told many times that in front of the spirit of independency which was penetrating into the sanctuary, and by seeing the bishops weeping over the devastation caused by this evil spirit, he had said to himself: There would a good thing to do, a remedy for the present evil, and it would be to create a society of priests really obedient and devoted, willing to go at the first sign of the bishop to the places and ministers that the others refuse.” (Le P. Etchecopar témoin du fondateur, [Father Etchecopar, witness of the founder], Vol. II, p. 37).*
- + *The servant of God told me himself that in front of the difficulties and even the tears of the Bishops, caused by the spirit of independence which was apparently overwhelming the clergy, he had thought that it would very useful to form an Association of Priests, ready to go, at the first sign, wherever the Bishop would ask them to go, especially to the most difficult ministries still to be filled. (Le P. Etchecopar témoin du fondateur, T.II, [Father Etchecopar, witness of the founder], Vol. II p. 135).*
- + *Holiest Father, I have listened several times to the Servant of God telling the origin of this considerable project. He would point the bridge on the river that flows next to the Mother House: “**On this bridge** - he would tell – **I have seen the Bishops weeping for the spirit of independence invading the sanctuary: this is what has inspired me the idea of forming our Institute**”. Thus, the tears of the Church, falling down on his noble heart, have led to a generous resolution: she was suffering from a great evil, she was calling for a powerful remedy; if not a religious order - the resort in all situations of crisis -, it would be useful to found a little Society of auxiliary priests, devoted by their state to the most humble and loving obedience, having the *Ecce Venio* of our Lord, the *Ecce Ancilla* of his divine Mother as a motto. (Letter 1877, to His Sanctity Pope Leon XIII)*
- + *A further argument saving the prestige of the Clergy of Bayonne: On a special question put by the Tax Promoter, the witness answered: Father Garicoits, in his remark, did not refer to the state of the Diocesan clergy, but to the general state of the present clergy. At the sanctuary of Betharram, he had even met the Bishops of various dioceses, and heard them confiding. (Etchecopar, témoin du fondateur, Vol. II, p. 135)*

b. The contemplation of Jesus humbled and obedient.

Being alone in Betharram, he had time enough to dedicate to prayer and reflection on his inner life. Thus he could relate the motions caused by the exterior occurrences to the motions caused by the meditation and the contemplation of the Word of God. The relationship between them revealed to him the *prodigious spectacle of Jesus, eternal Priest and Servant of the Father, humbled and obedient.*

- *Jesus, the Unique Son of God made flesh.*
- *Jesus, eternal Priest and Servant of God.*
- *Jesus who offers himself to the Father in order to save mankind, from the very first moment of his conception, by saying : **Here I am.***
- *Jesus obedient to the Father: his nourishment is to do His will, from his virginal Conception to the death on the cross.*

- *Jesus, a victim: he takes the place of all victims, and remains in the state of victim. By solidarity with all the victims, with all who suffer from injustice or because of the sin, would we say today.*
- *Jesus obedient who does nothing for himself but for the Spirit of God, who constantly dedicates himself to the plans of God, to suffer and to do what He disposes.*
- *Jesus Christ, our Lord and Creator, ineffable attraction for our heart, a perfect model and a most powerful help;*

I have just used for my annual retreat the book from the retreat preached by Cardinal Vanhoye sj to the Pope in 2008. The topic is the Priesthood in the Letter to the Hebrews. By reading this book I have been thinking that St Michael had most likely made himself a meditative reading of this Letter. The Cardinal's meditation has reminded me many elements of the spirituality of St Michael Garicoits: the reference of the priesthood to the Heart of Christ, the priestly mediation which is not external, like in the Old Testament, but internal, and consists in loving His heart; the relationship to God through Obedience, the relationship to the brothers through solidarity, humility, piety and meekness. Besides, in his quest of a more genuine priestly figure, St Michael Garicoits found in Jesus the Highest Priest of the Letter to the Hebrews, the model of the catholic priest.

c. St Michael Garicoits felt driven to imitate Jesus humbled and obedient.

In 1832 he made the Spiritual Exercises in Toulouse with Fr. Leblanc, who confirmed his aspiration by saying: *You will be more than a Jesuit, you will be the founder of a family which will be a sister to our own.* Back to Betharram he threw himself at the feet of the Virgin of Betharram to offer her his election, and he felt that his choice was confirmed by spiritual consolations. Right from that moment he endeavoured to be faithful to this project and to gather priests willing to be part of this Association and live out this spirituality.

d. St Michael Garicoits died on the cross of obedience.

When the Lord grants a grace, he asks for the whole life to show to mankind this aspect of Jesus' ministry which he grants to be contemplated and imitated. St Michael Garicoits insisted on showing through his life the configuration to Christ humbled and obedient whom he had had the grace to contemplate.

But he had to live through a painful contradiction. He was convinced that God was calling him to imitate Jesus humbled and obedient and to *gather a group of priests whose programme would be the very programme of the heart of Jesus, the eternal Priest, the Servant of the Heavenly Father.*

He was also convinced that the members of this group had to live in community, to obey a Superior and be bound by the three vows. Nevertheless, the Bishop, Mgr Lacroix, wanted it to be a mere Association of apostolic life without compulsory vows, without community life and whose unique Superior would be the Bishop himself. They would be at the service of the Diocesan mission.

St Michael Garicoits who wanted to be faithful both to his charismatic intuition and to his Bishop suffered a lot from this contradiction. This contradictory situation caused also division among the members of the society, divided into the two options, depending on their own interests. Discouraged by such a troubled situation some of them decided to leave the society. St Michael Garicoits died in this context on the 14th May 1863. He died by living the "death of the child", while the Society he had founded was about to break up. He died also by trusting that God would see in the future how to protect, save and develop what He

Himself had willed. The institute was recognised only in 1875 by the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars of the Holy See.

Conclusion.

St Michael Garicoits is the Founder of the Congregation of the Priests of the Sacred Heart of Jesus of Betharram. But as we could see, he died a priest of the Diocese of Bayonne. He was assistant of the parish priest in Cambo, lecturer, formator and Superior of the Seminary of Betharram, Rector of the Sanctuary of Betharram and chaplain to the Sisters of the Cross in Igon. The ministers to which he had dedicated most of his time were the confessions and the initial and permanent formation of the Sisters of the Cross and of the members of the Society he had founded: the missionaries, the teachers, the students, the coadjutor brothers, etc.

I believe that his intense spiritual life, experience of the love of God, manifested in Jesus humbled and obedient on whom he wanted to model his life is a stimulus for us, so that we too may cultivate our inner life of union with Christ, and better practise the pastoral charity in our various ministers.

Fr. Gaspar Fernandez,SCJ
Betharram, 14th May 2010
Year of the Priesthood