

## Do you know Paul Lamache?

*A distinguished Professor of Law, and above all, one of the seven founders of the first Conference of Charity in 1833, close friend of Blessed Frédéric Ozanam, he was one of the first people to denounce slavery. Council General has found an important document, providing a portrait of him. It is an article from 1933 (the centenary year of our association) published in a weekly magazine from Grenoble entitled "La Croix de l'Isère". Through many anecdotes, we discover this good man, brilliant but also deeply pious and humble, whose simple life continues to astonish and inspire us.*

### Some memories

At this time of celebration for the centenary of the Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul, it is of interest to us to read something of the character of Paul Lamache, who lived in Grenoble for seventeen years, and who was one of the promoters of this fine institution.

He was born in Saint-Pierre-Eglise, in Normandy, in 1810. His family was Christian to the core, as indicated by the simple though unusual fact that for more than a century, without a break, a member of the Lamache family had served as the parish priest of Pernelle.

The family was almost totally ruined by the revolution. Yet at the same time, it offered Paul's ancestors the opportunity to serve the banned religion. Priests were hidden in the small family home of Saint-Pierre-Eglise; the reliquary which adorned the altar where Mass was said has survived.

Paul Lamache had to leave his birthplace early in life, as his studies took him first to Rouen, then to Paris.

It was in Paris he first came to know Ozanam. Although they came from different parts of the country, many circumstances brought them close together: both were sons of doctors, and had a brother who was a priest.

They observed the influence of Voltaire among their fellow students, and there were many stormy discussions. One day in 1833, as they were leaving a meeting, Ozanam turned to his friends, *especially Lamache*, and said: "Don't you think it's time we turned our talk into action, and demonstrated the strength of our faith through what we do?"

They all received this idea enthusiastically, and a few days later, in Paul Lamache's small room in the Corneille boarding house, the first seven Conference members met together.

Paris is indebted to the same initiative for another notable institution. It was this group of inseparable friends, Ozanam, Lallier and Lamache, who visited Archbishop de Quelen on 13 January 1834, to ask for some religious instruction from the episcopal pulpit, addressed particularly to the young people in the universities and schools. The conferences of Notre Dame shortly after responded to this wish, with so many well-known speakers who went on to save so many souls.

We might now set aside, if it were possible, the great things in which he was involved during his youth, and follow the more modest path of his life, addressing its principal stages.

After finishing his studies, and gaining his doctorate in law, Paul Lamache first attempted to find a direction in life. He started practising at the Paris bar, contributed to various legal and literary reviews, in particular helping to found the *Correspondant*, and made some impression through several minor published works. He holds the honour of being the very *first* person, in 1842, to call for the emancipation of slaves. His brother, Abbé Jérôme Lamache, who became parish priest of Saint Pierre (Basse-Terre) in Guadeloupe, documented his life; this priest had a major influence on the Blacks, who saw him as a saviour.

As a modest and unknown pioneer, Paul Lamache led the way for some of the most famous of the campaigners against slavery, such as Cardinal Lavigerie, who continued in his footsteps during the rest of the century.

At the time he was beginning to gather the documents which his already mature talent would put to good use in his writings on slavery, Paul Lamache had some concerns about his own future: not only was he trying to become a magistrate, but he was even more anxious to establish a household for himself. Uncertainty about the future, the lack of a permanent job or paid employment meant that he feared his most legitimate wishes would be indefinitely postponed. Writing to a friend about to marry, and commenting on his own position, he adds: "As for your poor friend Lamache, he has every reason to fear that he will need to resign himself to spending the rest of his life on the a tough, difficult path of virtue."

Divine goodness came to the rescue of his wishes, and shortly after, in February 1843, he married Henriette d'Humbersin, daughter of a lieutenant-colonel in the artillery, and granddaughter of Philippe Lebon d'Humbersin, the inventor of gas-lighting; she would be his companion for half a century.

Throughout his life he kept his love for people living in poverty and for the Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul, as this somewhat amusing point indicates: In an attic room in Saint-Bruno parish in Grenoble, there lived a fine old lady, much burdened by her years. She was Lamache's favourite person to visit. He was no longer very young, and the staircase was steep, but nonetheless he visited her regularly. Whenever he had seen her, whenever he spoke about her, his face lit up with such happiness, that one day, Mme Lamache said, laughing: "Paul, you know I will soon be growing jealous of your old lady!". He was always sensitive to poverty, but unfortunately, he did not have the wealth of Croesus! However, he did everything he could to help people who were suffering, as this anecdote shows:

When visiting a needy family, he noticed a poor young girl, a worker, who seemed as if she might become humpbacked. On his second visit, he saw her condition had worsened. But where could he find the resources needed to pay for the sick girl to be treated? He immediately thought of his main source of help, namely the Carthusians. But only a few days earlier he had been to the Grande-Chartreuse monastery, to hold out his hand for alms for the poor! Without further ado, he took up his pen to write to the Father Prior, but said to his wife that he was afraid of being turned down this time.

By return of post, the blessed envelope arrived, with the grant requested. The good monks never refused to assist him in his work.

It seems right to mention here that Lamache lived surrounded by his family. Only a few years ago, Adrienne and Marie Lamache, his daughters, died within a short time of each other.

Doctor Lamache, of St-Marcellin, preceded them to the grave. Throughout his career, even more than the others, this man continued his father's apostolate in the area. Feeling his end near, he spoke to me as follows, summing up his life: "I trust the gates of Heaven will be open to me, by the efforts of the little children I baptised after they were born, and those of the people to whom I ministered as they were dying". Indeed, without his vigils, how many would have died without the sacraments!

Many of Paul Lamache's grandchildren heard God's call. One of them, Maurice Lamache, son of M. Lamache, established in Lyon, became a priest; his sister Elisabeth, became a Good Shepherd nun, and finally, the doctor's daughter, Marie Lamache, superior of the Visitation convent in Vif, died just a few months ago.

I recall the story that, when Paul Lamache was close to death, a member of the Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul devotedly accepted the task of caring for his benefactor. This member, a carpenter, had arrived in Grenoble in poverty, with a family to look after, and remembered the kindness shown to him at that time by M. Lamache.

This was not the end of his gratitude; several years later, when Mme Lamache, very elderly, could no longer go out, he visited her often, and when, just shortly before her death, when she was still fully conscious but losing her sight, she asked for someone to read her some pious work, he once more took on his caring role and read to her.

I will end with one more story concerning Paul Lamache and Dom Bosco. The imminent canonisation of the holy Father makes this pious memory more topical.

M. Lamache had been in Grenoble for a few years, when his wife became seriously ill: she could no longer eat, and the doctors had given her up. In human terms, there was nothing more could be done. But in his deep faith, Paul Lamache, learning that Dom Bosco was visiting Grenoble, tried one last hope. Passing through the crowd could be seen an elderly, white-haired man. He knelt before the saintly priest, asked for his blessing and begged him to pray for his wife to be cured.

Dom Bosco seemed to reflect:

- Do something for the poor which costs you a great deal! Are your daughters holding onto any family jewels?
- Yes!
- Well, let them send them for the work of my parish of Mary Help of Christians.

As might be imagined, the sacrifice was a hard one. But nonetheless, a few days later, the family's little treasures were offered. And a dispatch arrived from Dom Bosco, saying: "The cure will be obtained if it is necessary for salvation". Mme Lamache lived another twenty years!

When recalling the past in this way, and the good which was done then, through Paul Lamache's generosity, it is as if we are taking part in a pilgrimage to St Roch, to kneel at the tomb of someone who contained in himself and practised Christ's good works, in such a supernatural way.

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