

Paul Lamache, testimony of a relative

In 1933, a reader responded to the piece devoted to Paul Lamache in the local newspaper, "la Croix de l'Isère" with his own testimony. This valuable document helps us to get to know this founder member of the first Conference of Charity even better. Closely united to God, this man's whole life was directed towards the practice of Charity. He is still a source of inspiration for all Vincentians today.

"To the Director of "La Croix de l'Isère":

Dear Sir,

You were truly inspired to include in your paper the interesting account of recollections of M. P. Lamache. Will you allow a Grenoblois who knew him, to describe some features of his appearance, and to recall some typical facts from this life which had no other aim but the glory of God and the salvation of souls.

Paul Lamache had a fine, generous nature. Tall, skilled in all physical exercise, particularly fencing, with a positive but also nervous temperament, his frank and open countenance was pleasing at first sight, and this impression always persisted, soon winning sympathy and respect.

To see this handsome old man, coming from true Norman stock, even towards the end of his life one could not help thinking about the bold adventurers who, from the tenth century on, risked wind and tide to sail the oceans, and conquer kingdoms all around the Mediterranean. Was it this heritage which took over, in his early youth, in Paul Lamache's admiration for a fine warship anchored off Cherbourg, and determined his application for admission to the Naval College? Having gained first prize for Excellence at the royal college in Rouen, he entered the examination and passed. But this success was not enough for entry to the Naval College. He needed a popularity reference, and Lamache could not obtain this. The liberal mayor of Saint-Pierre-Eglise refused to back him, rejecting the suitability of the son of his predecessor, a man who had been decorated at the time of the Restoration with the Cross of Saint-Louis. This shows that General André and his partisans had their antecedents in promoting a system of giving information against those they despised, in an intolerant régime. Paul Lamache was indignant at this unfair exclusion, and was resolved to punish the mayor for informing on him: "I often thank God for having turned me from the maritime career, which would have deprived me of the opportunity of doing some good." This something good, was simply the part he played in the foundation of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. Let us not forget that he also had the distinguished honour of helping to establish the course of Lenten sermons at Notre Dame Cathedral. A deputation of the three longest-serving members of the Saint Vincent de Paul Conference, Ozanam, Lallier and Lamache, were chosen to express the wishes and hopes of Catholic youth to the Archbishop of Paris. We may picture Lamache walking between Ozanam and Lallier, taller than both by a head, with elegance and grace. "What was striking in him," said M. de la Villermarqué, was precisely this graceful air, while Ozanam was serious, with an inspired air, and Lallier very affable. Paul Lamache was attractive. The reception took place on the historic date of 13 January 1834. It was followed by much discussion, some unsuccessful trials, and finally, in January 1835, when Lacordaire agreed to Mgr de Quélen's proposal, the path taken by higher Christian education was established for almost the next fifty years. Lamache first studied law, then became a lawyer in the Courts, forming strong relationships in Paris, which his modesty caused him to neglect later. He wrote two pamphlets calling for freedom in teaching, and fought the good fight alongside the followers of Montalembert and Dupanloup. He was pleased to see the latter again at the château de la Combe, a meeting-place for over half a century for so many distinguished Catholics, and where the renowned bishop of Orleans (Dupanloup) breathed his last in 1878. I heard him tell of his interview with Montalembert, whom he asked to speak to his beloved workers one Sunday morning. Montalembert, busy preparing a speech, refused with some humour. Lamache, cut to the quick,

could not help answering: "I understand, Monsieur le Comte, that such an audience seems beneath you". And he withdrew abruptly. Hardly had he taken a few steps, when he was joined by Montalembert, who, with tears in his eyes, exclaimed: "How could you think, M. Lamache, that my refusal indicated scorn for these young Christians. The truth is, I felt myself unworthy to teach them the path to salvation. I am not good, alas! I have taken up cudgels with the miscreants of the Constitutional Assembly." On the death of Montalembert, Lamache, who had sent his sincere condolences to his widow, received a very touching letter from his son-in-law, M. de Meaux, which finished: "As for you, Monsieur, the companion of M. de Montalembert in his early struggles, let me shake you by the hand, as a friend, whose memory and prayers will not be lacking to him before God".

Mentioning this great Catholic orator recalls this wonderful book: Le récit d'une Sœur, which had much success over half a century ago. Lamache loved to tell how one day in his student's attic room in Paris, he received a visit enquiring about some work from Countess Albert de la Perronnays, née Alexandrine d'Alophen, the widow of Montalembert's close friend. Lamache offer the great lady his only chair, and himself sat on the edge of the bed. The manners of a period very different from our own! Another feature of student life: one of his comrades from his youth, belonging to a very distinguished Normandy family, but all rogues, climbed to his fifth-floor room to put a dishonest proposal to him. Lamache, who had often reproached him for his misbehaviour, considered this the last straw. His only reply was to seize him bodily and throw him downstairs. He did not do the same with another friend, one with a good heart but a weak head, leading a very dissipated life, who had lost a large sum gambling. His behaviour, his speech showed his despair. Lamache, understanding that it was a matter of saving him from dishonour, simply opened his desk and gave him all his savings, a thousand francs earned from his literary work and law copying.

Paul Lamache carried through the world his natural simplicity and spontaneity, which no convention ever distorted. He was never afraid of a fight, at any time in his life. That unity endured throughout his public and private life, his actions and behaviour; from the age of only ten, as a pupil in the Rouen college, when he stood up to the threats of his companions who wanted to prevent him going to Mass, and responding to their circular by the following words, written in bold characters: **I will go**; up to the teacher at Grenoble, who, from his podium, to the applause of the students in the hall, made an energetic protest against the decrees of 29 March 1880, considering that "it was an imperial duty for him, as a professor of law, to teach the law and to maintain respect for the principles of equity consecrated in our legislation".

Such a bold public statement truly deserved punishment. Shortly after, an inspector general of the Faculties of law arrived in Grenoble, whose mission from the Minister was to relieve the Grenoble Faculty of a burdensome teacher. Happily, this exalted person, himself born in Grenoble, entirely unknown to Lamache, although not of the clerical party, found him to be a good man and a remarkable lawyer. He sneaked in among the students on the courses of the suspected teacher, incognito, and afterwards going to find him, said: "Sir, I will not conceal from you the fact that I came to bring about your removal, and I have attended your courses. I was so pleased, that I am going to recommend you are promoted to the first class". This is what indeed happened. Lamache could only be pleasantly surprised by this promotion which was very rarely granted at this period in the Faculties of the province, even to Deans. But he, who had no fortune, naively said to me, when telling this story: "it is really too much, twelve thousand francs for a professor of law". He was not to enjoy it for long.

When, in 1886, the demands of the recent decree on the age limit finally required him to leave his post: neither his doctrine nor his speech had aged. "I will continue on my path," he had written in 1883, "criticising their iniquities when the legal opportunity is offered to me". And he was like that until the end. The 76-year-old jurisconsult could still have served a long career. His colleagues, the Rector of the Academy and the Inspector General vainly asked the Minister to keep him in his post

“in the interests of teaching”. But such a complete exemption from the law could not be won. For him, retirement was simply a reason to devote himself to his good works, especially to the Conference of Saint Vincent de Paul which he had founded in his parish of Saint-Bruno, to the sponsorships and circles of young people. His speech, always moving and vibrant, touched hearts deeply. I remember the satisfaction he expressed after one of these meetings at which he took the floor. “I succeeded in cheering up my listeners,” he said to me, “bringing a big smile to their lips, and I knew I had won them to my cause”. He went on in this way, always full of enthusiasm, and trusting in Divine Providence. Like the men of his generation, he knew how to laugh. His deep piety combined with a gentle, amiable gaiety, very French and very genuine, sometimes even making rather risqué jokes. Leaving one day for Lyon, he was looking forward to seeing his former confessor, Father J. “We will say daft things to each other, as we always do,” he admitted. This amiable old man was full of energy and action to the end. He tended his garden, supplying vegetables for the family table, “without forgetting the flowers, for which there should always be a place kept somewhere in life”. A charming word, a happy philosophy. He used to tell, with amusement, that acting as interim Rector of the Academy, before the vacation, he had to remove his gardening clothes, in order to dress suitably as the temporary rector to receive an official messenger and sign some documents. Trips to the mountains, which Lamache had always loved, both in Alsace and in Dauphiné, were not abandoned after he retired. He was a sight to see, returning from a long trek, as on arriving on the plain, he climbed nimbly to the front of the coach, beside the driver.

M. Lamache’s interior life became more and more intense. It was founded on a deep humility, and maintained by frequent reception of the Sacraments. “The main thing is,” he wrote to a friend, “to become humble, to stand before Our Lord Jesus Christ as a poor beggar, full of trust in his goodness, and to be guided mainly by the desire to please him, by fulfilling the modest duties of each day”. No-one was happier than he at the growth of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. But his joy remained humble, with no thought for his own benefit. As the last survivor of the seven founders, in 1883 he provided all the information about the creation of the great work, but refused to go to Paris to attend the Society’s Golden Jubilee.

Seeing him always youthful by nature, full of life, without a shadow of infirmity, his family and friends were pleased to hope they would keep him a long time. But as happens in healthy and vigorous old age, sickness struck him down all of a sudden. In July 1892, in a long-standing custom, he took part in some vigorous swimming games in the pool of the Petit Séminaire, in Rondeau, followed by a taste of fresh milk in the neighbouring farm. On his return home, he became unwell. Pneumonia was diagnosed. He could not believe it was a serious illness, caused by this icy bath, something he had done so often, and which he said did him so much good. Nor did he go to bed until the very end. Always submitting to the will of God, he repeated unceasingly his pious prayers, particularly “My Jesus, mercy”, which was engraved on his tomb. He had just completed his 82nd year. He deserved this praise spoken one day by Pius IX, on learning of the death of Montalembert. “Era un vero campione” [He was a true champion].

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