

Section I

Most of those who hear this theme will not be able to imagine its meaning. They are able to translate the French language, but do not yet know what is meant by the "French School."

Now, I was in a similar situation; therefore, I shall explain how I became acquainted with the French School and especially how I came to the theme, "Father Dehon and the French School."

For a long time I had observed that there are prayers in our *Thesaurus* which betray a very peculiar piety. I give as a well-known example the prayer which we say every day after the meditation. "*O Jesus who dost live in Mary come and live in Thy servants...*"

Here we address Jesus not as our Lord and Savior, according to our custom and feeling of piety, but Jesus living in Mary, and we ask Him to live in His servants as He lives in Mary.

The most peculiar example of this found in our *Thesaurus* is the prayer to Saint Joseph in the morning:

O God who didst deign to elect Blessed Joseph Spouse of Thy most holy Mother and didst grant him the grace to adore Jesus in the arms of Mary before all others,

grant that through his example and intercession we may ever remain in the heart of the Immaculate Virgin and therein adore the Heart of the Word made Flesh.

It is best to read this prayer slowly and thoughtfully, and then it will be clear that it extends to religious conceptions and theological ideas which are foreign to our mediocre piety. The message of one of the older priests is strong but significant, “Every morning when we say this prayer I am inclined to close my ears -- it is too mystical for me.”

Another Father said — and this is also significant — “Every time when I have no meditation book, I say the prayer ‘O Jesus living in Mary’ as the object of my meditation; it is so beautiful.” There are still other community prayers which are said in this spirit.

Among these I place the greeting to which we are accustomed, “*Vivat Cor Jesu; per Cor Mariae.*”

I often wondered how these prayers should be understood but I never found a satisfying solution. Then one day I read the third volume of the large work of the *History of Religion*, comprising eleven large tomes, by Henri Bremond, a member of the Académie Française. This volume has a subtitle, *The French School*.

Now, I must speak more at length about this excellent volume of almost seven hundred pages. Please do not lose patience; it will be worth your while to follow. The great work of Bremond (1855–1933) is a representation of the life of piety in France as it developed after the Religious Wars. He calls the first volume *The Pious Humanism*. Saint Francis de Sales is especially mentioned. The second volume discusses the origin of mysticism which was so strong and stormy that Bremond has called this volume *The Mystic*

Invasion. The third volume is focused on a development of this awakened mysticism which Bremond calls *The French School*. The expression originates with Bremond. Up to his time, according to Bremond himself, this school was called the "School of the Oratorian"s wherever it was formally referred to. What then is the teaching of this French School? Let us stick to the main divisions of Bremond.

The special character of this School is a strongly stressed theocentrism. The example which Bremond uses again and again for explaining its fundamental ideas is the basic meditation from the *Exercises of Saint Ignatius*. It begins with the Latin sentence: *Homo creatus est, ut Dominum Deum suum laudet ac reveratur eique serviens tandem salvus fiat*. (Man has been created to praise and revere his God and thus serving Him man will finally be saved.)

In this sentence I can choose to lay the stress either on the “*laudet*” or on the “*salvus fiat*.” Most men do the latter and thereby make their own salvation the center of their religious lives, not God and His honor. The first form of piety (*laudet*) is theocentric, the second (*salvus fiat*) anthropocentric. Everyone readily sees that this is a difference of utmost importance. Its practical consequences are seen everywhere. Again, Bremond successfully demonstrates this in the method of Saint Ignatius. Everything about this method is well thought out. It is a wonderfully elaborated system of exercises and precepts all for the one purpose, as is mentioned in the *Spiritual Exercises*, that man learn to conquer himself, to order his life, and to free himself from every excessive tendency. It is different with the French School. Its main merit lies in the fact that it is theocentric.

That means that it places God in the center of religious life. It first explains dogmatically and thereby arrives at a deep conception of the inner life of Jesus.

This does not mean that it offers a psychology of Jesus as people psychologically try to understand the life of a great man. Its attention is focused upon the human nature of Jesus Christ marvelously united with the divinity. For this reason, in the soul of Jesus Christ there is found an interior life which is unique, and which orders all relations of human nature in a perfect manner towards God, not only temporarily but permanently. This status is more important than the actions in the life of Jesus and therefore plays a special role in the piety of the French School.

Exterior actions pass, but a status remains. For instance, the sacrificial actions of Christ were limited by time but His attitude toward sacrifice and His oblation to the Father are permanent. It was like this in the bosom of the Triune God for all eternity, i.e., an eternal loving, praising, and glorifying of God. By the Incarnation this has entered into the human nature of Christ, therefore the French School especially venerates the Incarnate Word of God, and next those persons who are in close relation with the mystery of the Incarnation or those who were very intimate or closely connected with the person of Christ. Naturally Mary takes the first place. She is the Mother in whom Jesus lives. Secondly, there is the archangel Gabriel, and specifically Saint Mary Magdalen as well.

According to these views and trends of thought, the practical conduct of religious life is formed. In the French School that ascetical drill which is practiced in the spiritual

exercises of Saint Ignatius is not found; not because this asceticism is condemned or minimized, but solely because one does not see man or himself, but God. The stress is put upon the “*Deum laudet*”. However, our entire religious life is not only limited to adoration, honoring God, etc., though this remains the main element, but man must sanctify himself in order to become fit for this task. This sanctification must come from God. We must open our interior to God, and we must unite ourselves with the holy state in Christ of which we have spoken; we must put it into practice. To unite oneself, to surrender oneself, to offer oneself, to open oneself, to apply oneself — these are the technical terms of French asceticism.

Of course, that is not possible without self-mastery and mortification. God can grow in us only if we give ourselves up completely. But we see here that there is a great difference between this theocentric asceticism and anthropocentric asceticism. “In the latter,” says Bremond, “the ego is emphasized; in the former it is excluded. The latter is personal and, in some sense, separative asceticism; the former is unitive asceticism.”¹

These few lines in which I have tried to characterize the doctrine and practices of the French School may suffice. Later on, I shall have ample opportunity to enter into details. And now I ask the question, “Did we find something in this characterization which also

¹ Henri Bremond, *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France III* (Literary History of Religious Sentiment in France III...) (Paris: Bloud et Gay, 1925).

occurs in the pious exercises of our Society?" I did, at least. At first, I observed mere external similarities, as, for example, the veneration of Saint Magdalen who takes an outstanding position in the French School. Or the prayer already mentioned, "O Jesus who dost live in Mary" which, according to Bremond, can most probably be traced back to the founder of the French School, Cardinal Berulle (1575-1629) and is known as a "tessera," a classical example of this form of piety.² The more I occupied myself with it, the more firmly my convictions grew that Father Dehon, without doubt, had close relations with this school. Therefore, I tried to find proof for my belief. And behold, in a short time I had so much proof that doubt was impossible. Here is one of the strongest proofs: As far as I can find out, Father Dehon published a *Directory* three times, known as *Directory Nos. 1, 2, and 3*. In the second *Directory* a list of books is found, which he recommends to the libraries of our houses. This list contains, besides the usual meditation books and works of the Church Fathers and ascetical writers, almost all the important works of the French School. I will enumerate them in order to also complete the short outline concerning the French School which I have offered above.

Cardinal de Berulle, the founder of this school whom Father Dehon surely knew, is not mentioned in this list. However, one of the great disciples of Berulle, whom Bremond liked to call more Berullian than Berulle, follows immediately: Charles de Condren (1588–1641) with his work *The Ideas of the Priesthood and the Sacrifice of Jesus Christ* published for the first time in 1677. In his history, Bremond dedicates 120 pages to him³

² Bremond, *Histoire littéraire du sentiment*, 98.

³ Bremond, *Histoire littéraire du sentiment*, 282-418

and calls the book of Charles de Condren *True Capital*.⁴ Jacques Olier (1608–1657) follows next. He is the founder of the seminary of St. Sulpice. The above-mentioned Charles de Condren was his spiritual director from 1635 on. Bremond says that Olier has made Berullism accessible and attractive to the average reader. If somebody asks for a Summa of the French School I would not say he should read Saint Jure, P. Eudes, or Montfort who all illustrate certain aspects of Berullism, but read *The Christian Journey of M. Olier*; especially his little *Christian Catechism* and the two volumes of his letters.⁵

The list continues with two works of Saint Jure (1588-1657). Jure is also mentioned at length by Bremond in the volume about the French School and this chapter is especially interesting. Saint Jure was a Jesuit and remained a Jesuit throughout his life. In the second half of his life, however, he was a Berullian Jesuit who had accepted the views of Berulle, the founder of the French School. Bremond shows this admirably by printing the sections of the Ignatian Exercises concerning indifference and a section of one of the writings of St. Jure in parallel columns. The peculiarity of the French School is well seen. The little book of the *Exercises* says, “We ought to use things only in as far as they lead us to our goal. We ought to show ourselves perfectly indifferent to them,” writes Saint Jure. He continues:

We ought to be indifferent concerning the use which God will make of us so that He can dispose of us without any resistance on our part. We ought not to become attached to anything in order that God may have full power to make use of us. We must be indifferent to all the uses that Our Lord wants to make of us ..., so that, without any resistance on our part, He may dispose of us as He pleases. ... We

⁴ Bremond, *Histoire littéraire du sentiment*, 426 - 427.

⁵ Bremond, *Histoire littéraire du sentiment*, 460.

must hold on to nothing, so that Our Lord may have every power to make use of us.”⁶

Another name on the list is that of Pere Louis Lallemant (1576-1635). Lallemant, also a Jesuit, does not belong to the French School but is a founder of a school of his own which Bremond calls “closely related to the French School.” To him, Bremond dedicates the entire fifth volume of his great work.⁷

In his *Directory*, it is rather strange that Father Dehon does not speak of the work of Father Eudes who, with de Condren and Olier, belongs to the great men of the French School. To him, especially, our blessed Founder is greatly indebted, a fact which I shall prove point by point later on. However, I would like to mention something right here. The present *Thesaurus* mentions Father Eudes only once and ascribes to him the hymn of the morning prayer, “O Sacred Heart We Offer Thee,” etc. While there are more prayers of Father Eudes in our *Thesaurus*, this particular one is most probably not his.

What we find in the morning prayer is the beginning of a hymn, the stanzas of which are related to the particular petitions of the Our Father (*Compare Nomen, sanctificetur. Adveniat Regnum tuum. Fiat...ut in caelis*, etc.). The complete text of this hymn with all petitions of the Our Father has been printed by Nillese, *De Rationibus Festorum II*, p. 766. The author is not mentioned. In the complete works of Father Eudes the hymn cannot be found and the reference of our *Thesaurus* must be an error. It is striking that we

⁶ Bremond, *Histoire littéraire du sentiment*, 267. This is at least the opinion of Bremond. A different opinion is found in Pottier: P. Lallemant et les grands spirituels de son temps III.1929, 48–82.

⁷ Bremond, *Histoire littéraire du sentiment*, 658.

say only the first half of the recent Pater Noster Hymn. Why is it that the other stanzas are not added? Did Father Dehon not know them? Or was the entire Hymn too long for the morning prayer? Neither idea can be accepted. The reason for this, in my opinion, is as follows: Many writers of the French School list the first half of the Pater Noster as a unique example of the pure theocentric prayer.⁸ Father Dehon also speaks quite often of the Our Father at special length in his *Extracts*, pages 166-167, where he speaks of pure love. Our Lord has taught us to first offer to God the honor of pure love and then to ask him for our own necessities. That is the whole Our Father. The first part is merely pure love, "...hallowed be Thy name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done." The second is the petition for our needs. Common souls think little of the honor of God and much of their own necessities and interests. The souls in whom pure love dwells are touched more by the first purpose of the sacrifice than by the latter. They cling more to the first petitions of the Our Father than to the thought of daily bread. Therefore, only the first half is used. In particular, Father Dehon wishes to keep the morning prayer on the level of Theocentrism, i.e., pure love.

Besides these founders and main representatives of the French School, Father Dehon enumerates still other spiritual writers who were his contemporaries but walked in the steps of the French School. I mention Msgr. Gay, Father Giraud, Father Grou, Sauve, Father Liebermann. Almost all these names can be found in the footnotes of the third volume by Bremond concerning the French School. Father Leo Dehon had correspondence with some of these authors, but especially with Bishop Gay and Father

⁸ Bremond, *Histoire littéraire du sentiment*, 14.

Giraud. It is evident from all these names that Father Dehon was well acquainted with the French School. He does not only enumerate these names in the list; he also cites them continuously in his works. I should like to call attention especially to the book of our venerated Father, *The Interior Life - Its Principles*. According to the best ascetical writers, it is an introduction to the interior life. Of all the authors whom Father Dehon enumerates in this book, the greatest majority - and that is very significant - belong to the French School.

The *Directory* gives us still more valuable proof. It contains two more appendices, one of which discusses the methods of meditation, the other of direction or the guiding of souls. To both, Father Dehon adds this remark, "According to the method of Saint Sulpice." By Saint Sulpice this means the Society of the Sulpicians whose founder is nobody else but the aforementioned John Jacques Olier.

It is evident that Father Dehon has occupied himself greatly with Olier from the time of his seminary days on. As preparation for Holy Orders, minor as well as major, Father Dehon made use of the works of Olier. He meditated on them up to the point of relishing them.⁹ He recommends the complete biography by Faillon, *The Life of M. Olier*, a work of which Bremond says, "A great work and prolifically rich in information about the entire character of the history of religion of the seventeenth century."¹⁰ He also

⁹ A. Ducamp, *Le Père Dehon et son oeuvre* (Father Dehon and His Work) (Paris, 1936), 78, 79, 82.

¹⁰ Bremond, *Histoire littéraire du sentiment*, 420.

recommends the autobiography by Lacordaire. In his *Priestly Heart* he speaks of the pleasant time of the Oratorium, of M. Olier, and his *Office of the Priesthood* and the *Interior Life of Jesus*.¹¹ Lastly, he includes the two beautiful Vesper Hymns of this Officium in our ceremonial.

In this Directory he speaks at length of the method of meditation by St. Sulpice which also goes back to Olier. Olier is the only one among the leaders of the French School who expressly speaks of a method of meditation. From him originated the three main points which, according to this method, make up meditation: adoration, communion, and cooperation. These three words alone very clearly show the stamp of the French School which is so strong that Bremond says that there really is no strict Sulpician method because there is only the combined, and very skillfully combined, method that Condren and Berulle had taught.¹²

It would be very interesting to know what Father Dehon really thought about these questions and whether he preferred the Sulpician method of which he speaks at length in his *Directory II* to the Ignatian method. But I am afraid I have already spoken at too great a length. I intended first only to give a sketch of that which we call the French School and then to prove shortly after that Father Dehon was closely related to it. Let us see now what importance this has for the understanding of our Society, its spirit, and its piety.

¹¹ Léon Dehon, *Le Coeur Sacerdotal de Jésus* (The Priestly Heart of Jesus) (Paris: Casterman), 1907, VII.

¹² Bremond, *Histoire littéraire du sentiment*, 116.

