

ST JOHN FRANCIS REGIS

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Among the Boys

Jacques Guigon lay dying. Pale and wasted from the fever that had tortured him so long, he stared with unseeing eyes past his mother who knelt beside him clutching his arm. His father, a city councillor of Le Puy, stood with head bowed. The Last Sacraments had been given, and in silence all those present awaited the end.

Unnoticed, a tall figure in black appeared in the doorway. The newcomer spoke: "Have courage, my boy! You will not die." The watchers swung round in astonishment, and even as they did so, the dying boy moved, struggled to sit up in bed, and then gasped: "Père Regis! How glad I am to see you!" For a moment, those present did not realize what had happened. Then the mother turned, felt the boy's forehead, now cool. Her son was cured. She threw her arms around him as tears of happiness and gratitude filled her eyes. Father and mother then tried to speak to their young benefactor—Père Regis, Jacques' teacher at the Jesuit College in Le Puy—but so great was their emotion that no words would come. "Do not thank me, thank God." Thus Père Regis cut short their thanks, and after ordering them to tell no-one of his connection with the cure, left the house. But he had been observed entering the home, and this, together with the surprise occasioned by the boy's presence at Mass next morning, soon made the news of the cure public property.

The young Jesuit, not yet ordained, was the son of a nobleman who possessed land in a small village at the foot of the Pyrenees. He had come to the city in 1625, two years ago, and since then had been teaching in the college, preaching sometimes and visiting the sick. The boys in his class realized, as did those Jesuit scholastics who were Francis' contemporaries, that this young man with the happy and lovable disposition, was a man of unusual holiness. Some of the people of Le Puy and its neighbourhood had already come in contact with him. From time to time, on Sundays and feasts, he went to the villages to preach and give instructions. The effect on his hearers was such, that at one village all the people said no sermon had ever made such an impression on their souls as the one they had heard from him that day. At Le Puy, all his spare time was spent with his boys. His genuine interest and sympathy touched their hearts; particularly at that time when the boy of middle class parents was apt to be neglected. Any money that could be saved was put aside for the girls' dowries. The son of poorer parents had further reason to thank him. Many of them, who would have been forced to leave school because their only suit of clothes was worn out, were saved by Pere Regis's begging trips to the shopkeepers and richer people on their behalf. From this time on, he began to be noticed as he made his way about the city. His tall figure, his penetrating eyes, the half-smile that was always on his lips and the aspect of quiet determination made him easily recognizable.

Wild Oats

We appreciate more the work of Francis Regis with his boys when we remember the conditions of the times. After fifty years of the Religious Wars, morality was at a low ebb in many parts of France. Parental neglect was common. Duelling was an accepted fact. Murder was an ordinary event, and often the murderers went free. The police were powerless to check the licence that abounded. And conditions were worse at Le Puy than at most places! Some of the laws passed through the intervention of the Jesuits give an idea of these conditions. Students who boarded with private families or in lodging houses in the town, were not to carry arms or go out after nine at night. Cabaret owners were forbidden to exploit the boys. Women of evil life were prohibited from coming within ten blocks of the colleges. But since there were no means of enforcing them, laws meant little. Consequently quarrels, riots, drunkenness and duelling were common among the students. It is terrible to read of boys of fifteen guilty of the murder of their companions. The apathy of the town-people towards all this was incredible. They took it for granted—the more "sowing of wild oats" and something to be expected.

Francis continued to exercise his influence among the boys until the end of the school year of 1627, when he was sent to Toulouse for theology and ordination. A few months later he met with a keen disappointment. One of the teachers at the Jesuit College in Auch, Gascony, became ill and someone was needed to take his place. The situation was explained to Francis. He had already taught for over five years; more than the normal period—and he looked

forward eagerly to ordination. But someone had to go, so Francis went.

His Chance

It was a changed Toulouse to which he returned in September, 1628. The streets were practically deserted and an unnatural quietness hung over the city. What had happened? The red and white crosses on the doors of many of the houses that he passed gave him the answer. The city was plague-stricken! Here was an opportunity such as Francis had longed for. But to his disappointment, his superiors refused him permission to accompany those Jesuits tending the suffering. He was to continue his studies for ordination; as a priest he could go, but until then he could assist his companions by his prayers alone. Francis did not neglect this means of aiding the city. His life of prayer was intensified, and much of his day and night was spent in sending up petitions to God for the relief of the city. This particular visitation of the plague lasted for over two years and killed more than fifty thousand, including ninety-seven members of the Society of Jesus who had been working among the stricken. By the time of his ordination at Pentecost, 1630, however, it had waned to such an extent that his help was not needed. His chance was to come again.

Shortly after ordination, Father Regis was ordered by the Provincial to go to his native town, Fontcouverte, in Southern Languedoc, to arbitrate in a dispute which had arisen amongst the members of the Regis family. He had not been there for fourteen years, and he was delighted to learn that it had not suffered from the plague. While the dispute was being peacefully settled, he turned to help the townspeople, the neighbouring peasants and some soldiers quartered nearby. His remarkable success with them was a further indication of his power as a missionary.

On his return Francis continued his studies for a short time and then began the tertianship, or spiritual year which is given to Jesuits after ordination. After the tertianship he was sent to take the place of a missionary who had died of the plague. After being at Pamiers for about nine months, he was sent to Montpellier, the second city of Languedoc. That he was sent to the Protestant stronghold was in itself a great tribute to the young priest. The fierce and bitter conflict that had torn France apart since the late sixteenth century has already been mentioned. Churches, monasteries and convents had been destroyed ruthlessly by the Huguenots. Regis had already seen some of this at Pamiers, where, because of the destruction of Catholic buildings and homes, a stable had to be used for Mass and spiritual exercises. War would cease, then break out again. The year in which he arrived at Montpellier, the city had been involved in an uprising that had been sternly quelled by Richelieu, and an atmosphere of suspicion and hate towards everything Catholic existed. Conversion of large numbers of Huguenots could scarcely be hoped for, but Regis determined at least to persuade Catholics to change the evil lives that many of them were leading.

Though not long at Montpellier, Father Regis became loved by all. His sincere and unadorned talks made their way straight to the hearts of his listeners. They saw that he lived, as well as preached, the Gospel. Thousands came to him to receive absolution and made the radical changes in their lives that he had hoped for. The sick and poor were his special care. To help them, he begged money from the rich, free treatment and medicine from doctors and apothecaries, and old clothes, shoes and mattresses from anyone who could spare them. He got together a group to help those of the sick who had no relations or friends to help them. Even the Huguenots could not resist him. He visited a great many of them in their homes, and his anxiety for their souls, his charity towards them and his own holiness succeeded in converting many.

Montpellier did not receive all his attention. Throughout the diocese he conducted missions with great results. For example, Sommieres, a town twelve miles from Montpellier and almost wholly Calvinistic, became firmly Catholic. To this day the inhabitants venerate St. John Francis Regis as the cause of their town's conversion.

Of course, he often met with opposition and even went in danger of his life. A typical instance occurred at Saussines, a small village near Sommieres. The villagers had stored their treasures and grain in the church in which Francis was giving the mission. The looting soldiers were angered by this and raided the church. They were met at the door by Francis, who refused to budge. For a few minutes, it seemed that murder would be done, but the calm young priest won the day and the infuriated soldiers withdrew.

A Bishop Calls for Help

In 1634, Father Regis was recalled from Montpellier, and with another Jesuit, Father Leyssene, was sent to the

Bishop de Suze of Viviers, who had asked the Jesuit provincial for help. Help was badly needed. The previous year, the Bishop had visited eighty towns in the northern part of his diocese and found that priests had been driven out or put to death, churches destroyed, and church property taken over by the heretics. In one parish, where previously there had been ten priests, the people had been without priests or sacraments since the beginning of the wars. Almost three-quarters of the people in the diocese were without spiritual guidance. Nor was this all. Far too often those parishes that had priests were in a sorry spiritual condition. Thousands of the best priests of France had been slaughtered by the Huguenots, and so desperate had been the need for others to take their places that often men were accepted for ordination who had neither the character nor the ability to carry out their sacred duties. Their training was restricted to a few months before receiving each Major Order. The result was that many of them not only failed to help those under their care, but sorely needed help themselves.

The plan was that the two missionaries would set out a few days in advance to prepare the people for Confession, Holy Communion and Confirmation. A day or two after the Bishop's party had arrived the two would move on to the next place. The work was hard and dangerous. Father Regis had a close escape at one Calvinist centre, Villeneuve-en-Berg, where thirty priests had been butchered.

He noticed a troop of Huguenot soldiers galloping in his direction. Quickly he dived under one of the hayricks in the grounds of a nearby chateau. But the horsemen had seen him, and in a few seconds were at the hayricks. Dismounting amid shouts of triumph, they plunged their swords and halberds into the ricks from all sides. After some minutes they galloped away, satisfied that their victim could not have escaped. Father Regis then came out, unhurt. (See note.)

The visitation was a great success, and the Bishop admitted that it had been achieved mainly by the zeal and untiring labour of Father Regis.

Worse Than Indians

For a long time, Father Regis had desired to be sent to the Canadian missions where men like SS. John de Brebeuf and Isaac Jogues and their companions were carrying out feats of incredible heroism. His request was well received, and it seemed only a matter of time before he would set out for Canada. In the interim, he was sent on missionary work in the Boutieres, another region where the Huguenots flourished. This was a good pre-paration for Canada, because the unbelievable cruelty of the Protestant fanatics in this region rivalled any of the Iroquois' tortures. No one was spared, man or woman, young or old. Some of the victims were bound to stakes and their heads encircled with ropes, which were twisted until the eyes burst from the sockets. Others were buried to their necks in mud and left to rot to death. A particularly diabolical form of torture was to cook the victim's feet in grease and so induce gangrene or blood poisoning. Young children were roasted on spits. Women and girls were shockingly treated in front of their parents or husbands.*

It was December, 1634, when Father Regis and his companion, Father Broquin, set out for their mission in the mountain regions. Their first destination was Le Cheylard, notorious for its crime and lawlessness. Gun battles in the streets were common; in fact, it was nothing unusual for the local sportsmen to keep their eye in by taking pot-shots at mountaineers! The church had been destroyed and the present generation of Catholics there had received practically no instruction in their religion. The two priests formed classes and persuaded all those who were Catholic, either in name or sympathies, to attend them. Soon the religious life of the community was flourishing.

Once this work had been set afoot, Father Broquin took over the routine parish duties and Father Regis moved on. Using Le Cheylard as a base, he would disappear into the dark forests or the hills, often in the face of a raging snowstorm, and be absent for several days at a time. Everywhere, the hardy mountain people were amazed at the courage and powers of endurance of the missionary. They reasoned that, if he moved among them in such weather, when they never stirred outside, he must have something worth saying. Once he had set out for a steep mountainous

**Footnote.—The authenticity of this story is doubted by some writers on the grounds that it is not related by his earliest biographers, and seems at variance with his spirit.*

region 3500 feet above the Dome Valley. A violent snowstorm blew up and continued for a fortnight. His friends feared that Father Regis had been frozen to death. A week after it had stopped, he turned up, pale and haggard. His only answer to the protests of Father Broquin was: "In Canada, that would be a routine experience."

Hatred Turns to Love

The usual opposition and hatred were met with from certain quarters. At Saussines, he had been pelted with rotten onions. Near Le Cheylard, he received a barrage of stones, and the people considered it a miracle that he was not seriously hurt.

His reputation, which soon spread throughout the district, made many Huguenot villages all the more determined to resist him. At Girond, the obstinate villagers not only refused to allow him to speak, but would give him neither shelter nor guidance. This was the same as a death sentence, since a fog had arisen and made the dangerous mountain roads impassible, except for a native. At last one of the Girondese relented, and took in the freezing priest. In a few hours the missionary had won back to the Faith his host and all the other villagers.

After the conquest of Le Cheylard, the two were sent to the city of Privas. Father Broquin had tried to give a mission there some years before, but the only result was that the locals began to call their dogs "Broquin." Again the people were bitterly hostile. Father Regis began a campaign of kindness among the sick and the poor. Food was distributed by the two priests. They cared for the sick with their own hands. Next, the children were won over. Small gifts, stories and instructions soon had them gathering about the feet of the missionaries. Parents were enticed by their children, and soon the charm and holiness of Father Regis had them won. Even the abuse of the Calvinist ministers made no difference.

At St. Agreve, scores of priests had been killed and no priest had been there for forty years. The drunkenness and unchecked vice and lawlessness that reigned there were incredible. Into the very taverns and cabarets Francis went, and in no time had changed the dissolute lives of their customers.

Thirty towns were treated in the same way, and he left for Le Puy shortly after Easter, 1636. Though he had not given up all hope of working on the Canadian missions, he became more and more convinced that his work lay here in France among the poor, the sick and the unbelieving, and the words of his rector at Aubenas often came back to him: "Canada for you will be the Vivarais."

One of Cardinal Richelieu's attendants wrote in 1633: "In the diocese of Velay and in the domain of the seneschal of Le Puy there are few crimes of treason, but innumerable others, more inhuman, cruel and frequent than in all the rest of Languedoc together." Richelieu, unfortunately too often interested in the reform of morals from a political rather than from a religious point of view, had sought to change matters by violence, and by the time his attendants were finished, Le Puy was terror-stricken. Once they had gone, things were the same as ever. The methods of Father Regis were different.

Few attended his sermons and instructions when he began in April, 1636, but it was not long before the Jesuit College Church was unable to contain the crowds. He was requested by the Bishop to carry out his work in the much larger church of St. Pierre le-Monastier. People of all types and from all directions streamed in. This larger church became so packed that some had to find seats on the beams and crosspieces of the vaulted ceilings and arches.

As many as five thousand were counted in the church. His listeners heard no brilliant flights of oratory, the simplest peasant, was able to understand everything he said. Nor were any special methods used, though sometimes he had children sing hymns or recite devout poems and sometimes he asked questions of his hearers or allowed them to question him. What impressed all was the obvious fact that here was a man with the spirit of Christ, speaking in the straightforward language of the Gospels.

Yet there was much that the people did not see, though they sensed it, and soon came to know of its existence. For the sake of those people to whom he preached, Father Regis led a life of the greatest austerity. Three or four hours of sleep were enough for him. He was in the confessional before dawn and the people kept him there until about eleven o'clock. Mass and Holy Communion followed. His midday instructions were next, and the idea of anything to eat or drink scarcely even occurred to him. Then Confessions until five or six, when he had his meal, which consisted of some apples, bread and water. The result was a renewal of the spiritual life of the city. One witness described the change as "unbelievable." There were few of the 35,000 of Le Puy and district who were not affected by Father Regis.

Miracle of the Granary

At Le Puy, as elsewhere, the poor, of whom there were an enormous number, were the special object of Father Regis's love. He begged money, food and clothing for them. Wherever he went, a crowd of them could be seen following him. To help him in this work, he organized a group of charitable women, and the soup-kitchen, one of their works, was to continue for five centuries.

During the famine of 1637-38, they instinctively turned to him as their protector. He interviewed the dealers who had bought up all the wheat available and were preparing to sell it at their own prices. The result of the interview was that the dealers not only agreed to sell the wheat at reasonable prices, but also gave him donations of money for distribution among his poor.

When the city authorities saw how successful he was they were only too pleased to hand over to him the whole problem of poor relief. With donations, Father Regis bought large quantities of grain which he stored in the granary of the widow of a corn-dealer, Marguerite Baud. Daily the poor were to be seen lined up before her door. From time to time the supply would give out. Once there was neither money nor wheat left. Marguerite went to Father Regis. "Your poor have no more wheat!" He paused for a moment in prayer. "Don't worry, there's still some in the bin," was his reply. The good lady knew she had made no mistake, and proceeded to say so. Regis persisted and in the end she gave up and returned home. There she saw a long queue of starving poor waiting for their share. In desperation, she seized the granary door and cried: "See for yourselves! There is no grain . . ." But as she turned the knob her words were cut short by the flood of wheat, which poured out on the floor. The granary was so tightly packed that it could hold no more! At other times during the famine, the same miracle took place. Nearly two centuries later, the Cure d'Ars astounded his parishioners by doing exactly the same. He placed a relic of St. Francis Regis in the empty granary at his presbytery and prayed to the saint for his poor. In a few hours the granary was filled.

Close on the heels of the famine came the plague. Father Regis moved among the hospitals and the homes of the stricken. One of his fellow priests said that Francis seemed to have lost the power of smell, because he could remain for hours in filthy hovels tending the poor wretches whose diseased bodies stank appallingly. One poor fellow had been left to die on his own because no one could endure the horrible odour that came from his open wounds. Francis found the dying man in a hut that swarmed with vermin. Immediately he cleaned the hut, washed the patient and brought fresh linen and a mattress. After this, he fed and bathed the sick man every day. "Ah, Father," the patient whispered one day, "You have saved my life. How can I thank you enough?" "It is rather for me to thank you," was the reply. "I am sorry for having started so late to help you."

Nothing Worth Talking About

Many noticed the love and even reverence with which he carried out such work. It was impossible for him to do too much and nothing could tire him. Obviously he served Our Lord in his fellow-men, remembering that He had promised that even a cup of cold water given to another would be treated as given to Himself.

Though Francis laboured so strenuously among the poor and plague-stricken, his missionary work remained very dear to him. Whenever opportunity offered, he would set out across the hills or through the forests to some village that had asked for help. There he would preach, instruct, hear Confessions and bring about a wonderful change in the religious life of the people. All this cost him a great deal, because he was certain that without great prayer and penance on his part he could not expect such results. The curé at St. Bonnet-le-Froid, high up in the hills, was astounded one night to find him kneeling in the snow before the locked door of the church. The temperature was below freezing point and the legs of the missionary were half buried by the falling snow. The curé argued, but he could not convince Francis that his extreme penances were not required to obtain such great graces from God. The best the curé could do was to persuade him at least to enter the church and pray there. Despite such feats of endurance and the continuous fasting he imposed on himself, he seemed to be in good health and never appeared worn or fatigued. His light-heartedness and good spirits were the admiration of the other members of the Jesuit community. "No, I'm not tired at all," he would assure them, "Why, what's a little thing like that? It seems to me that I am doing nothing worth talking about."

Father Regis' prayer, penances and feats of endurance were perhaps light trials, compared to others which he had to

endure. It is not to be wondered at that in the cities of those times were to be found many women leading evil lives. Moral standards were low; war, plague and famine were having their effect, and there were few occupations available to girls who were orphans, poor, or unable to obtain a dowry for marriage or the religious life. Like St. Ignatius, who had established in Rome a refuge for such cases, Father Regis strove to help these women in their misery. His first biographer, La Broue, describes this highly dangerous work at Montpellier: "When he learned that someone had been taken into a certain house of ill-repute, he would go thither himself with the holy effrontery to demand her from the master or mistress of the house. He would not leave the house without taking the unfortunate girl away with him to lead her to a place of safety or to one of those holy retreats provided for them. Much vigour and persuasion were required to surmount the avarice of those who trafficked in such merchandise; but he needed much more patience still to change the hearts of these abandoned women themselves and make them resolve to follow him. Nevertheless, upon occasions, one or two words of his would suffice to effect this, without any other rhetoric than that of the Holy Spirit and of the interior grace which acted in their souls the moment he opened his mouth to speak to them." A great number of such converts at Montpellier testified to the efficacy of his methods, by their subsequent blameless lives.

This evil was even greater at Le Puy, and though at first Father Regis relied on charitable women each to take in a number of these unfortunates, he soon came to the conclusion that it was necessary to establish a refuge similar to that founded by St. Ignatius. Soon it was taken for granted that any time Father Regis was seen leaving the college in a hurry, it was in answer to a sick call or to rescue some oppressed girl and place her in the refuge.

His Life in Danger

Very soon Father Regis had aroused the hatred of the rakes and scoundrels whom he thus despoiled of their prey. His life was constantly in danger. Time and time again he was attacked with swords, daggers or clubs; he was kicked and beaten, but his life seemed to be miraculously preserved. On one occasion, he and a companion were set upon and beaten until they fell insensible. Another time he was ambushed on the way to a bogus sick call. The ambushers rained kicks and blows upon the priest until he dropped with blood streaming from his many wounds. After lying unconscious for some time, he picked himself up and staggered home. Leaving a house where he had been visiting a sick man, he was met at the door by a ring of swords. He eyed the cavaliers calmly and said: "Well, here I am! What is it you want to do with me?" Each swordsman waited for the others to make a move; finally, unable to bear the calm gaze of their victim, they sheathed their weapons and slunk away. One evening, whilst walking home with a companion, Brother Bensac, he saw one of these cavaliers dragging an unhappy girl along the streets. Regis had heard of her repeated attempts to escape from this ruffian. Leaping from the shadows, he dragged the girl from the grasp of her attacker and told her to run to the refuge. The infuriated cavalier hurled the priest to the ground and savagely began to kick him, until Brother Bensac rushed to the rescue. La Broue seems to have summed up the situation when he says that Father Regis "saved no girl from disgrace without bringing down upon himself the wrath and rage of a hundred cox-combs."

One of the most remarkable of these attacks occurred when a trio tried to carry into effect a carefully prepared plan. One of them was to ask for Father Regis at the college door, while the other two were to wait in the dark recesses near the door, and stab to death the priest as soon as he appeared. The first man rang the bell and asked the brother on the door for Father Regis. The brother reappeared and told the caller that Father Regis would see him in the church, a short distance away. The conspirators quickly decided that the two in hiding would attack him when the caller lured him to the front door of the church. The latter went into the church. He was astounded to hear the priest say: "I know your plot and the evil purpose which brings you here." Then in a tone of pleading: "Listen to me. Confess your sins and return to God immediately. He is waiting to pardon you. Here, enter the confessional. It will be easy and I promise you peace of soul." The man broke down, and Francis led him to the confessional. Then he sent him to fetch the other two. They came and their hearts were touched in the same way.

In a few striking cases the results were not so fortunate.. One such case occurred at Fay, a neighbouring village where Father Regis had either broken up or made regular a number of illicit unions. One couple seemed to be proof against all his prayers and pleadings. A few days after his final attempt one of them became engaged in an argument and was shot and killed instantly. He warned another woman who refused to listen to his persuasions and amend her

life: "In the name of God I warn you that, if you continue, you run the risk of being chastised by a sudden death in the midst of your sins!" The woman took no notice. A few days later, as she was speaking to one of her lovers, a jealous rival shot her dead.

Each year the apostolic work over the winter months continued, and his reputation as a saint became more and more widespread. Year by year the demands made on him increased. The crowds for Holy Communion became so great that he was at the rails until four in the afternoon, and on some days even "until after the lighting of the lanterns at five or six o'clock, for the sake of the penitents who remained fasting until night time."

The Last Struggle

Gradually the strain began to tell. On his missions in 1639, he often seemed to be at the point of collapse. The fasting, the confessions night and day, the prayer at every spare moment, and the terrible physical exertion of travelling through the hills in the depth of winter all had their effect on him. The local clergy sought authority from the superior of the Jesuits to command the missionary to take food, rest or recreation whenever necessary. When the permission was obtained, Father Regis obeyed without any protest, though his own inclinations were very different.

It would be a mistake to judge such seeming excesses of zeal by ordinary standards of prudence. It was not difficult to see that God had destined him for great things, and that what he did was in response to the direction of the Holy Spirit. He obeyed immediately and in full the commands of his superiors, even though it meant abandoning work very dear to his heart, which is a sure sign that a man is carrying out God's will. One of his friends took Regis to task for his recklessness. Regis explained why he considered it unfair to spare himself in the service of God and in support of his case, quoted an incident that occurred on a mission. Whilst travelling to a town, he had fallen into a ravine and broken his leg. With the help of his lay-brother companion he struggled on to his destination, where, in answer to the pleas of his penitents he immediately commenced hearing confessions. When he emerged some hours later, the leg was sound.

It was fitting that one who had laboured all his life as a priest with such untiring zeal to save others, should die whilst carrying out that work. During the winter of 1640, he received warning in some mysterious way, that he had but a short time to live. The few Jesuits at Cheyrac, near Le Puy, who knew that he was engaged on his usual winter missions, were surprised and delighted to see him arrive there. Francis took aside one of the priests that he knew well. "I have reserved the next three days for myself," he said, "I wish to make a confession of my whole life, very exactly, for I have the assurance that this will be the last. Be good enough to help me in this important matter. I wish to have you for my director." The astonished priest agreed, and three days later, his brief retreat over, he set out for Montregard. After ministering to huge crowds, he left there on December 23 for La Louvesc, a distance of about fourteen miles. It was late afternoon and a heavy snowstorm was raging. Before long, Francis and his lay-brother companion realized that they had lost their way. The blinding snow and the rapidly closing-in darkness made it impossible to find any of the familiar landmarks. For hours they wandered, until in the middle of the night they stumbled on a ruined shack. They collapsed on the floor and slept. When Francis awoke next morning, he was suffering from fever, but in his haste to push on he disregarded that.

When they reached La Louvesc, he hurried at once to the church. The curé was alarmed at his weakened condition and tried to persuade him to say Mass immediately so that he could take some nourishment. But the people wanted him to preach first and then hear their Confessions, so that they could receive Holy Communion at his Mass. Francis was unable to refuse them. Even after Mass there was no rest. The peasants came in increasing numbers and Confessions were interrupted only by sermons and instructions. Christmas Day came and still the crowds poured in. On the Feast of St. Stephen (December 26) it was two o'clock before he could say Mass. Scarcely had he finished unvesting before the people were again clamouring for him. Late that afternoon, whilst hearing Confessions, he collapsed before the amazed people, who had never dreamt such a thing to be possible. His pitifully light body was borne through the silent, awe-stricken crowd to the house of the parish priest. In a short time he had regained consciousness, and though his voice was faint and his breathing laboured, he insisted on hearing those who had not yet received absolution. For two hours he continued hearing Confession from his couch, until he again lost consciousness. For the next three days, he endured terrible pain. Then, as the last day of 1640 was ending, a change came. He smiled and whispered to the lay-brother beside him: "Ah, my brother, I see Our Lord and Our Lady opening the gates of Paradise for me." For a

few minutes he lingered, then whispering the last words of his dying Master: "Into Thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit," he went to meet Him Whom he had served so well.

He Still Works

Francis continued his labours among his beloved people even after his death. The vast numbers that thronged to his tomb at La Louvesc, seeking health of body or peace of mind were not disappointed. Within ten years of his death more than forty major miracles were performed at La Louvesc alone. But this was of little moment compared to the conversions that took place there, and the spiritual strength that was obtained. It is possible to mention only some of the more remarkable of these.

In 1806, a young seminarian made a pilgrimage to the tomb of his special patron at La Louvesc. He had done badly in his exams for the priesthood; indeed, he could not even master the small amount of Latin then needed, and it seemed that nothing short of a miracle could enable him to reach the cherished goal of ordination. St. John Francis Regis obtained the miracle for him, and Jean-Baptiste Vianney was duly ordained priest and is now revered throughout the Catholic world as the Cure d'Ars.

A few years previously a young French woman had made her way up these heights, to seek guidance through the intercession of the saint to whom she had a special devotion. Until all religious orders had been suppressed by order of the Revolutionists she had been a Visitandine nun, and now she wished to know and follow God's will. At La Louvesc she received the light she sought. The young woman, Rose Phillipine Duchesne, went to America and there founded many houses of the Religious of the Sacred Heart.

The love and devotion of his people, which at times became almost overwhelming, and even was in danger of hindering his canonization in 1737, spread rapidly throughout the country and then beyond its borders. The superior of the Jesuit missionary, Claude Allouez, who carried out such wonderful work among the Indians of North America, wrote: "This apostle of all the nations of the Ottawas . . . drew his first inspiration from the conversations he had with Father Francis Regis . . . taking part in the answers and recitations at the catechism classes of this very famous apostle." (August 29, 1690.) In this way did St. John Francis Regis share in the work for which he had so ardently longed during his life.

St. Regis and Australia

Though St. Regis resembles our own two great patron saints, St. Francis Xavier and St. Therese of the Child Jesus, in the wonderful influence he has exercised since his death, he is not well known in Australia.

By prayers, triduums or novenas for his feast day (June 16) or at any time of the year, all of us may appeal to him for help, and we can be sure that he will take a great interest in giving the same kind of help that he gave whilst on earth. The sick and diseased, the poor and oppressed, those struggling against temptations to impurity, those in difficulties about the faith and those striving to bring someone back to the practice of their religion will receive special attention from him. Do not forget his devotion to the young. Before his ordination he spent five years teaching boys, and so great was his desire to help them that all his spare time was given to them. No doubt his prayers for them were even more fervent (if that were possible!) at examination time! Many young girls, too, had cause to remember him with gratitude all their lives.

You may speak to him as a friend. There is no need for long drawn-out or high sounding phrases in your prayer. The following could be used:

"St. John Francis Regis, during your life you helped many like me. Now that you are with God in heaven, your power is even greater, and I am confident that you will obtain God's help for me in this matter. (Say what you want him to obtain for you.) I ask for this remembering that God sees and knows all things, and will act only for my good, and I want His will to be done."

Then say the Our Father, Hail Mary and Glory be to the Father.

"Pray for us, St. John Francis Regis, that we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ."

Let us pray: O Almighty God, You gave Your Confessor St. John Francis Regis, such wonderful charity and unconquerable patience that he was able to bear toil, hardship and pain for the salvation of souls. Mercifully grant that

*we may follow his example, and be constantly helped by his prayers, and so attain to the rewards of eternal happiness.
Through Christ Our Lord. Amen.*

Nihil Obstat:

D. P. MURPHY,
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