

ST. JOHN FRANCIS REGIS

A short biography
by Fanch Morvannou



Congregation of the Sacred Hearts SSCC
(April 2020)

ST. JOHN FRANCIS REGIS

Patron of the Secular Branch of the Sacred Hearts.

(1597-1640)

John Francis Regis was born on 31st January, 1597 in Fontcouverte (Aude), a town halfway between Carcassonne and Narbonne. He was described by one of his biographers as being “on fire, having a friendly and humorous disposition, open, and someone who studied French and the local patois (dialect) at the same time. The latter would prove to be very useful in his popular apostolate”. (One thinks of the Good Father arriving at Mende and not understanding the local dialect that he justly called the “*languedociano*”, a word that is proper to the Occitan language of that area of Southern France.)

Regis studied at the Jesuit College of Béziers, and entered the novitiate of the Society of Jesus in Toulouse, on 8th December, 1616. After finishing his novitiate, he attended a year of rhetoric in Cahors and then taught grammar for three years in the College of the Jesuits of Billom (Puy-de-Dôme); later he studied philosophy (1622-1625) in Tournon, followed by more grammar in Puy and in Auch, arriving in Toulouse in 1628 for his studies in theology. He was ordained a priest in 1630 at 33 years of age. He had ten years left to live.

The ‘French Wars of Religion’ (1562-1598), between the papists and Huguenots, were neither more nor less than a civil war, resulting in great material, moral and religious misery among the people. Not to mention the fracture of the Church of the West that resulted from the success of the Protestant Reformation. At the end of the Council of Trent (1545-1563), the Catholic Reformation was launched: in France, the progress of Protestantism was stopped. However, the Edict of Nantes (1598) recognized the freedom of conscience and worship of Protestants: they could thus live their Christianity according to the doctrine of Calvin.

However, in no way did this mean that the time of ecumenism had arrived. There were, on the Catholic side, people of God who had great patience and who demonstrated charity and great respect for each other, despite the controversies: Saint Peter Canisius, Saint Ignatius of Loyola, Saint Francis de Sales, Saint Vincent de Paul, and also our John Francis Regis who remained determined to stop the Protestant advance and return to the Roman Catholic fold those who had become Protestants. For this reason, in the first months of his priesthood, Regis arrived at Montpellier, one of the citadels of Calvinism; unable to convert them on a grand scale, he organized charitable associations, and sought to reintegrate prostitutes back into society.

In Easter 1634, along with other Jesuit companions, he was asked by the Bishop of Viviers to re-Christianise Vivarais, where the spiritual ruins were considerable. After setting up and preparing a group for this work, Regis and his companions were called to the College of the Jesuits of Puy. Regis was attracted to the missions of Canada (where, after his own death, his holy Companions, the martyrs Isaac Jogues, Juan de Brébeuf and others would shine). But instead he had to listen to the response of his superiors: “*Your own Canada is Vivarais*”.

The same happened with Velay and the south of Forez. The Jesuits installed themselves in pairs in the “*provisional residences*”, from where they went out to mission in the surrounding fields. In fact, it was Regis, above all, who went out, while his companion remained in “*residence*” for more sedentary jobs. In the mountains, people had never seen a priest. Regis was a force of nature. He went from hut to hut, with his portable confessional on his back, facing rain and snow, without worrying about food or shelter ... He announced Jesus Christ in ‘*patois*’, and those mountain people, great specimens of physical courage, soon realized that they were loved by this priest who was so close to them. Making himself all for all, did not stop

Regis from reaping insulting reactions, enduring blows and receiving death threats; his response was always a greater sweetness, greater patience and greater happiness.

After Easter 1636, Fr. Regis organized his year in two periods: in the summer, catechism, preaching, and works of charity in Puy; in winter, his itinerant apostolate in the mountains. In Puy as in Montpellier, he worked to provide "*refuge for fallen women*" encouraging them to participate in the local industry of lacemaking. This practical help was threatened with the introduction of taxes to cover the use of lace and other finery and thereby depriving many people of an honest livelihood. Thus, many people went to Regis to seek his help. With supreme audacity, he assured them that manufacturing would soon start again and trade increase. Indeed, it came to pass that edict was soon withdrawn.

In October 1640, Regis again took the road to his beloved mountains of Velay and Vivarais. He stayed where he could, trying to find a tabernacle to prolong his adoration before sleeping a few hours. When the church was closed, adoration took place outside, under the north wind: it would seem that the internal fire that consumed him made him indifferent to the rigors of the season on those rough mountains. Going out to evangelize the poor, he was also evangelized by them: entering into relationship with these honest, upright and courageous mountain people - who were greatly ignorant in all aspects and materially very poor, rough and uneducated - offered Regis few satisfactions. The upshot of this for Regis turned out to be very rich spoils; personally enriched by a remarkable humanist culture, he left it aside to speak to these poor people using a simple and accessible language. Beloved by Regis, those people felt loved by God.

On 2nd December, 1640, Regis had promised to open a mission in the tiny town of La Louvesc (Ardèche), currently a town hall of 494 inhabitants. That night he and his companion got lost in a snowstorm. They arrived the next day, suffering from cold and fever. Regis preached and confessed without rest on 24th, 25th and 26th December. Then he began to fade. Coming to himself, he still heard confessions. On 31st December, 1640, a quarter of an hour before midnight, he said to his companion: "*I see Our Lord and Our Lady opening paradise for me*" and immediately gave his beautiful soul to God.

The inhabitants of La Louvesc prevented his body from being taken to Puy. The Jesuits did what they needed to do with due diligence. In 1716, John Francis Regis was beatified, and canonized on 16th June, 1737 which since then has been observed as his Feast Day. In 1871, a basilica to Saint Regis, with buildings to welcome pilgrims, was built in La Louvesc; a female congregation (the Cenacle Sisters) was founded to care of it. The founder was Saint Teresa Couderc, whose tomb is also in La Louvesc. Long before these constructions, in the summer of 1806, an anonymous twenty-year-old pilgrim had journeyed 100 kilometres on foot to ask Saint John Francis Regis for "*the grace to know enough Latin to study theology*". He was listened to carefully. The pilgrim's name was John Maria Vianney, the future parish priest of Ars.

The canonization of a Jesuit in 1737 appeared to be a grace, or a respite, at least in France. Indeed, for several decades, the Jesuits were the target of numerous attacks, mainly on the part of the Jansenists. The end of the Society of Jesus was already planned. Successively, three catholic powers suppressed the Order in their lands, including colonies: Portugal (1759), France (1764), Spain (1767). In 1773, Pope Clement XIV decreed the dissolution of the order of the Jesuits throughout the Catholic world (they were to remain in the Russian Orthodox Church). The Society of Jesus was restored in 1814 by Pope Pius VII.

Saint John Francis Regis, who had never gone beyond the limits of his native Ocitania, was the subject of great devotion in Poitiers. This was because there was a Jesuit establishment in Poitiers, the Santa Marta school. Between 1737 and 1764, the Jesuits had the opportunity and time to make known the resplendent sanctity of their companion. They were moved by this young man who had a passion for God and for souls, who died in the middle of winter at the young age of 43, in a remote region. Because of events like this, the

suppression of the Society of Jesus was felt much more: how could a tree that had given such fruits be bad? At the coming of the Revolution, the devotion to Saint John Francis Regis did not suffer any decline, quite the contrary. "At that time", Father Coudrin will later reveal, "I was all on fire." So, with the apostle to those who lived in the mountains. Had he not also been 'on fire' during his life? Was he not a living image of the "zealot" that the Good Father wished to replicate in himself and who wanted this zeal to continue in all of his children. During the time of the French Revolution, a clandestine society constituted by women and priests was created in Poitiers, the coded name of which was "Immensité ". This 'Society of the Sacred Heart' as it was properly known - a matrix of the future Congregation of the Sacred Hearts - received Saint John Francis Regis as its patron in its 1795 statutes (Art.10) Following successive redactions of the SSCC Constitutions of the Congregation, the Rule of 1826 was established, which expressly stated "The external Society, in all the places where it is established, will have as its patron Saint John Francis Regis". These provisions were taken up in the Constitutions of 1990.

A priest of Poitiers and a former teacher of the Good Father in the Faculty of Theology (located in the premises of the former Jesuit College), Bishop Charles François d'Aviau had been appointed before the Revolution as Archbishop of Vienna-in-France (a diocese that was abolished in 1790). Its jurisdiction included Vivarais in which La Louvesc is located. Already a very devoted admirer of Saint John Francis Regis having completed his formation in Poitiers, Bishop D'Aviau was particularly happy to have in his diocese such a famous spiritual place as La Louvesc. The Good Father knew nothing of all this when he himself went to the tomb of Saint Regis in July 1802. In May of that year, the Good Father had moved to Mende, where Bishop Jean-Baptiste de Chabot had just been appointed Bishop of Mende. He subsequently took on the Good Father as his assistant, the Vicar General. (Bishop Chabot was an uncle of the Good Mother). In the Concordat of 1801, Ardèche and the Lozère formed a single diocese: La Louvesc was thus the competence of the Bishop of Mende. The latter, always accompanied by the Good Father, presided over the translation of the relics of Saint Regis to La Louvesc (they had been hidden in a safe place during the Revolution). The Good Father carried the reliquary of the Saint on his shoulders "for more than half an hour".

May this saint, the Good Father wrote, "obtain for all of us a small portion of that zeal that made him want to convert the whole country, who is maybe so good that he is in heaven so that he can accompany us on earth".

One finds in this letter of the Good Father, dated 9th July, 1802, the word "zeal", which was the springboard for his own life, as it was for the truly admirable Saint John Francis Regis, Patron of the Secular Branch.

Francis Morvannou ssc
"Les Nouvelles", n° 88 y 89, June-July 2002

*O God, who sent Saint John Francis Regis
so that travelling through villages and cities
he might proclaim peace,
call workers who will also join in the works of your Son today.
Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.*