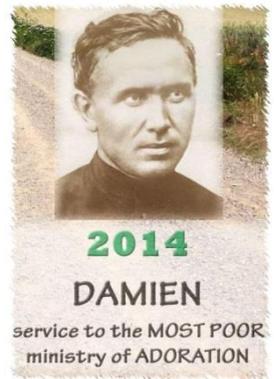


Poitiers - Picpus

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**When I finally left
the house of Maumain,
I knelt down at the foot
of an oak tree
not far from the house
and I surrendered
my whole life.**

The Good Father
speaking of what happened
on October 20, 1792



The Founders arrived at **Picpus** in 1805. To this very day in many parts of the world we are known as the "Picpus" Congregation.

As it settled into its new home, the new religious institute (the "work of God", as the Good Father would call it) took on greater organization and became more visible as an institution. In spite of the uncertainty of the times, the Congregation began a period of greater tranquility. The process to apply for the pontifical approval, which was achieved in 1817, was put in motion. They opened a school and a seminary. Candidates flocked to the community and their formation was seen to.

The house at Picpus was big, able to accommodate the sisters' community and the brothers'. The rhythm of each community and the relationships between them took shape. There was friction and conflict but the overall impression is of a group that was organized, having its own identity and a clear structure. The "Picpucians" were becoming identifiable both in the Church and society.

However, we all know that the Congregation did not begin in Picpus but in the area around **Poitiers**. Thirteen years before arriving in Picpus, the Good Father had his vision in the loft of La Motte d'Usseau, left his hiding place and set off on a risky and hidden ministry, conscious he was putting his life in danger. That was in October of 1792.

From October 1793 to November 1794 also in Poitiers, the Good Mother experienced transformation spending a year in prison. When she got out, she met the Good Father. It was in those years that the process of receiving the founding charism took form. It was there that the Congregation was born.

In Poitiers, the Founders and their first companions showed how daring they really were. They risked their lives in the face of threats coming from the forces of the revolution. The Good Father carried out a clandestine ministry moving from place to place, doing all he could to reach the suffering and most abandoned (just think of his pastoral ministry in Montbernage, his visits to the sick and imprisoned, his adventures as Marche-a-terre

etc.) It was at that time that adoration began (with the Blessed Sacrament hidden behind the paneling). It was the time of the Good Mother's visions and the Good Father's burning zeal. It was a time when the community had no security or a clear organization, but when the brothers and sisters were ready to suffer everything, even death, because of the passion that God's love aroused in them.

Poitiers is the beginning. Picpus is when it all comes together. Poitiers reveals the gift and the task that we have received. In Picpus we become organized so that the mission might be accomplished and reach as far as possible. The Congregation needs both Picpus and Poitiers. Picpus left us its name; but let us never forget Poitiers.

The **Good Father** often referred to the years in Poitiers, recalling them as the time of the first love when they experienced things that must never be lost. In his *Memo on the title Zealots* (December 6, 1816) he asks, "Now that it is calm why make us abandon a name that has been our consolation in the midst of the storm?" The storm here refers to "more than twenty years of persecution and trials," which include the years in Poitiers and even the first years in Picpus. The time of calm is the period in which they were then living in Picpus.

At the closing of the first General Chapter (October 10, 1819), "the Good Father recalled the early years of the Congregation when there was such fervor and so much suffering" (the account of Gabriel de la Barre). And so Poitiers meant fervor and suffering.

Years later, without doubt feeling the weight of his years and some disappointment, the Good Father opened his heart to Gabriel de la Barre and wrote (January 5, 1828), "We poor old folks, are so very different than all this youth who have come to us since our first sacrifices! I would feel well compensated I swear, my dearest daughter, if I could as back then, get together with people who think as we think, who live as we live and who die as we would die!" One senses in this complaint nostalgia for the difficult and exciting years in Poitiers.

The original charismatic experience of the Congregation began in Poitiers to continue later in Picpus. However, the process of incorporation in the Congregation usually follows the opposite path. First we enter an institution, an organized community, in a formation house, a group with a defined identity (that is, in Picpus). From there the brother tries to achieve the consistency needed to set off for Poitiers (in other words, a daring mission, the gift of self, passion for the Gospel, a ministry of surrender). Picpus is a means. Poitiers is the end.

Think of **Damien**: he entered the Congregation in Louvain (Louvain would be his Picpus), but he became a holy missionary in Molokai (Molokai would be his Poitiers).

At present, this duality **Picpus/Poitiers** can be seen in our structures and institutions. The young communities build large houses of formation; the communities with many older brothers set up good retirement houses; things that make us visible as ss.cc. are reinforced; we give attention to initial and ongoing formation; we work toward good economic solvency; we try to go more deeply into our historical and spiritual patrimony...That is all Picpus. It is all good, and very good, in the degree that the brothers move toward Poitiers. Many brothers serve with dedication in parishes and schools; there are brothers who give themselves to the ministry of preaching; some are with the very poor; some communities are taking steps toward greater commitment at the existential peripheries of our world...That is where we are drawing close to Poitiers.

Poitiers is demanding. It is always asking that we take another step towards the suffering, towards being dispossessed, toward abandonment into the hands of God.

The Picpus/Poitiers duality is felt also, and above all, in the heart of each one of us.

Picpus is an inner call to involve ourselves in the house that belongs to all of us, in the building of our institute and in all those tasks – often hidden or arduous – that strengthen the communion among us, the formation of our brothers, the government of the community and the viability of our plans.

Poitiers is a call to not settle peacefully in our Picpus, but to move toward a mission that is riskier, more generous, more clearly with the poor, a clearer proclamation of the Gospel.

In many communities when there is nothing we can do but cut back our presences for lack of personnel, we usually first suppress the missions that are harder or more difficult. The superiors are not able to find a sufficient number of brothers willing to go there joyfully and with a good spirit. Then we give up what most resembles Poitiers to remain in our "Picpus", which we find more comfortable and familiar.

Let us be careful that this temptation does not get the best of us. If we entered in Picpus, it was in order to go to Poitiers. Like the Good Father let us kneel down each day, not before an oak tree but before the Eucharist, asking the grace to surrender ourselves entirely to the adventure of God's love.

