

Into All Lands

The ruin of Port Royal was a tragic and inhuman episode in the history of the ascendancy of the ultramontane party in the Catholic Church. The destruction of the abbey had been the avowed purpose of its detractors, the Jesuits, who, with the consent of King Louis XIV, thought thereby to put an end to what they contemptuously termed "Jansenism." They failed in this object. The celebrated hymnographer and historian of the Church of England, John Mason Neale in his book, "The So-Called Jansenists," could say almost 200 years later, "The spirit of Port Royal lived on, and still lives."

Pasquer Quesnel, the last of the so-called "Jansenists" connected with Port Royal, shouldered the mantle of Antoine Arnauld. Quesnel, elevated to the post of Director of the Oratorian School in Paris early in his career, was forced to flee France in 1684 with several others. They preferred exile rather than signing an anti-Jansenist formula which they regarded as a "senseless and despotic" document and which all members of the Congregation of the Oratory were required by Rome to sign.

In Brussels he joined Antoine Arnauld and remained with him until his friend's death in 1694 and from then on he became the "oracle" of the Port Royalists. In May 1703 Quesnel was suddenly arrested in Brussels and thrown into the prison of the Archbishop of Malines who had obtained an order for his arrest from King Philip V of Spain. With the help of a Spaniard, who contrived to make a hole in the prison wall sufficiently large to admit the egress, Quesnel escaped.

Quesnel fled to Amsterdam where, after the fall of Port Royal, he continued with friends to fulfill the mission of conscientious Catholics. He died at Amsterdam in 1709 in time to witness the seeds of his mission bearing fruit. For in Holland, the means whereby Catholics cut off from the Church of Rome could cling to the Catholic Faith and maintain its primitive doctrine was at hand.

The French cause upheld by the Gallican Bishops against the growing claims of the Bishop of Rome, the Pope, was to be crushed under the heel of Napoleon, who proved an unwitting ally of ultra-montanists. However, the Tradition and Episcopate of the Catholic Church was to be carried on through the Church of Holland and preserved until the day when the ultimate goal of ultra-montanism, the Declaration of Papal Infallibility, was to enslave all Roman Catholics to the will of a few and leave a portion of the Catholic flock, that adhered to the old and unchangeable faith of the Christian Church, without shepherds.

Here the intervention of the Hand of God, through the agency of Dominique Mary Varlet, Roman Catholic Bishop of Ascalon, forged the link by which Old Catholics the world over were to receive an Episcopate of undeniable Catholic authority and Apostolic succession.

The Church of Holland, which had provided shelter for many of the clergy of France from the persecution of the Jesuits, was itself to be the scene of the next stage of the struggle. With the rise of ultra-montanism the traditional right of the Church of Holland to elect its own Archbishop was in jeopardy. The Metropolitan Chapter of the Cathedral Church at Utrecht had, from the beginning, possessed the right of electing its own Archbishop who exercised all ecclesiastical authority over the affairs of the Roman Catholic Church in Holland.

In 1697, exercising this customary privilege, the Chapter elected Peter Codde, their Vicar General and already Bishop of Sebaste, as their Archbishop. The Pope would not recognize this election and substituted a person of his own appointment, Theodore de Cock, who was expelled by the Chapter. But with the death of Archbishop Codde the See of Utrecht became vacant and Rome, refusing to accept Bishops elected by the Metropolitan Chapter, adopted a policy of withholding the Episcopate from the Church of Holland in the hope that the independent Church of Holland would submit to the will of the papacy or die a natural death.

Bishop Varlet, a French refugee in Holland, at the request of the Chapter, braved Papal censure by successively consecrating Cornelius Steenoven (1724) and Cornelius Jan Burchman (1725) as Archbishops of Utrecht. The celebrated canonist, Van Espen, defended the rights of the Chapter to elect its own Archbishop. The Church of Utrecht continues to this day in preserving an independent Catholic Episcopate in Holland whose validity has never been questioned by Roman Catholic authorities.