

The Heritage of Port Royal

To trace the origin of Port Royal, around which the storms of Church and State revolved in the 17th century in the controversy touching on the growth of Papal power, it is necessary to go back to the year 1204. At that date an Abbey was founded at the head of the Valley of the Rhodon near Chevreuse (about 18 miles southwest of Paris) by Eudes de Sully, Bishop of Paris, and Mathilde de Garlande, to ensure prayers for the safe return of Mathilde's husband, Mathieu De Marly De Montmorenci, who had gone to take part in the Fourth Crusade. The site of the Abbey was known as Port Royal, and it is said its name derived from a corruption of the low Latin "porra" which described the ponds and "mares" which abounded in the neighborhood.

The community of nuns of Port Royal flourished during the 14th and 15th centuries and attained certain fame, but in the 16th century the religious wars and the war with England tended to relax the discipline of all religious houses--and Port Royal did not escape from this infection of its religious life. As everywhere, in the religious houses of the time, the nuns of Port Royal became worldly and the rule of S. Benedict was forgotten, while for more than thirty years, no sermon had been preached save at seven or eight professions.

The regeneration of Port Royal came about under the guidance of Angelique Arnauld, appointed by a Papal Bull at the age of 11, in the year 1602, to be Abbess of Port Royal. Taking over the community which at that time consisted of 10 sisters, Mere Angelique proceeded to reform it after having been "completely converted" nine years after her appointment. She succeeded in introducing vows of poverty and seclusion and re-introduced the teaching work of her Abbey after it had long lain idle. Though at first these increased austerities caused a rupture with the Arnauld family and no little trouble with the formerly ease-loving nuns, she was able to successfully heal all difficulties. Her energy and steadfastness of purpose overcame all obstacles: she not only won her family to Port Royal, but her influence made itself felt in other houses and a widespread revival of the spiritual ideal for which the primitive Cistercians were renowned took place. By the year 1626 Port Royal had increased the number of its inhabitants to more than 80.

To escape the unhealthy conditions engendered by the swamp land surrounding the Abbey, the community was required to take a house in Paris to which a body of nuns removed. The two sections of the convent were thereafter known as Port-Royal de Paris.

About 1636 A.D. a remarkable group of men--physicians, men of letters, soldiers, scholars and ecclesiasts, influenced by a friend of Port Royal, the Abbe de S. Cyran, took up their residence at Les Grange, near Port Royal des Champs, where they resolved to lead a life of self-renunciation and consecration and took for their rallying cry "Thought allied with faith", making redemption of souls their mission. These men were the Solitaires. They took no vows, but systematically divided their time between religious exercises, literary pursuits, teaching and manual labour.

The Solitaires were regarded as forming a joint community with the nuns of Port Royal, among whom many had relatives. Among these men were Antoine Arnauld, Lemaistre de Sacy, Arnauld d'Andilly, Nicole and subsequently, Blaise Pascal, Lancelot and others. These men conducted schools called "Les Petites escoles de Port Royal" which soon acquired a great and undying reputation for anticipating in many ways modern ideas of education. In the hands of these men lay the spiritual destiny of "Old" Catholicism in France. Of them, the saintly princess, Madame Elizabeth, a sister of Louis XVI, wrote, "Their theology apart, that I do not understand, these gentlemen of Port Royal were holy persons. What a life they led, compared to ours!"

The Abbey of Port Royal was more than a convent of reformed nuns and the community of "Solitaires" more than a band of holy men gathered together from every walk of life to give themselves wholly to God. They had ideas which, supported by brilliant minds and holy lives, were

considered dangerous to the pretensions of ultra-montanists, scholastics and ecclesiastical politicians. Saint Cyran had worked with Cornelius Jansen, Bishop of Ypres, in a study of the early Fathers in an attempt to restore vitality to the lifeless theology of the time and restore the Church to the simplicity and purity of primitive times. Jansen's work culminated in the publication of "Petrus Augustinus" in which their theories, based on the writings of St. Augustine, were expounded. Saint Cyran, however, continued to apply these theories to practice in life and the Port Royal Solitaires supported him. The Jesuits, having been severely censured in the "Augustinus" as fostering the ancient heresy of Pelagianism in the Church, exerted all their efforts to have it condemned. Five propositions were presented to the Pope as having been contained in the writings of Jansen and the request that they be condemned heretical. Though the Jesuits' plea was heeded, historians still doubt the likelihood that the propositions were ever contained in Jansen's works. The Jesuits also coined the word "Jansenist" as a term of reproach to the Port Royalists. A formulary was drawn up in which the five propositions were condemned and the Port Royalists were requested to sign it under pain of expulsion and suppression.

Richelieu, who had not been able to win Saint Cyran, whom he considered the "most learned man in Europe," to his political aims by offers of ecclesiastical preferments--in all five Sees which Saint Cyran refused--determined to use the situation to put him out of the way. Through the joint attacks of her adversaries Port Royal suffered. Saint Cyran was imprisoned on a vague charge of heresy. The nuns and Solitaires, refusing to sign the formulary that they were convinced was a false statement were several times dispersed, but their powerful defense in the brilliant language of Arnauld, the stirring writings of Pascal, and the saintly lives of the nuns and recluses held off the fatal day of the Abbey's complete destruction and earned them undying fame. To the doors of Port Royal flocked people hungry for spiritual nourishment in a desert of theological bickerings and dead scholasticism to find the peace of God even in the midst of these struggles. Marie de Gonsagne, later Queen of Poland, had a lodging at Port Royal and subsequently offered the community a refuge from their persecutors in her kingdom.

But the Port Royalists did not flee from the ordeal. Saint Cyran, upon the death of Richelieu, was released from prison only to die shortly afterwards from the effects of the confinement. Mere Angélique died in 1661 in the midst of the battle. Jacqueline Pascal, her successor remained steadfast in vindicating Port Royal of an unjust calumination. Writing of conditions to a friend at that time, she says, "I know that it is not for women to defend the Faith, but when Bishops are as timorous as women, it befits women to be as brave as Bishops." Antoine Arnauld was stripped of his scholarly honours and died, an exile, in Holland. The combined strength of the enemy prevailed in time and the little schools were suppressed, the Solitaires dispersed, the nuns imprisoned, and finally in 1709, the Abbey was completely destroyed even to the desecration of the graves. It was said of the Port-Royalists that they led the lives of strict puritans yet were nonetheless Catholics who bowed neither before King nor Prelate in the defense of their Catholic faith. When a worldly prelate, friendly to Port Royal was described as a Jansenist, it was said of him, "What, he a Jansenist? That is impossible. To be a Jansenist one must first be a Christian."