

With the appointment of Archbishop de La Tour d'Auvergne to Bourges as Coadjutor, and then his taking over the Archdiocese on December 10th, 1861, Fr. Chevalier knew that he had a staunch friend and supporter at home. With new hope, he devoted himself to carrying on his work. He mounted the pulpit that Fr. Maugenest had left vacant, even if he could not preach as well. Fr. Piperon, who has a delightful way of saying things in a way he does not quite mean, wrote: « Often, ...he was truly eloquent ». And even at the times when he was not so eloquent, he had a strong and pleasant voice and carried his audience along with him because of his zeal and sincerity, especially when he spoke of « the infinite mercy of the Heart of Jesus, and the greatness of Mary »<sup>8</sup>.

Of his own preaching, Fr. Piperon does not give an account, although he, too, preached far and wide, appealing for money for the new Church of the Sacred Heart and spreading devotion to Our Lady.

## 2. OUR LADY OF THE SACRED HEART.

Looking back over more than a century one might be tempted to judge that Fr. Chevalier and his missionaries spent a disproportionate amount of time on propagating devotion to Our Lady. One might also be inclined to think that much effort was diverted from « missionary work » into building up the Archconfraternity of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart. Before drawing these conclusions and in order to understand the growth of Fr. Chevalier's work, we need to see things in the perspective of 19th century Catholic piety. It was in this perspective that his own spiritual life developed and that his work was done. It was an age of Marian piety. « To Jesus through Mary » was an old Christian adage that had entered into the life of the people, who responded more readily to popular devotions in honour of the Madonna than they would have done to practices which today might be considered more « theological and more liturgical ». Jesus and Mary were closely associated in any prayer - and in many a christian practice of piety.

« Shortly after I was baptized, she (my mother) took me to the Church and consecrated me to the Blessed Virgin and to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Often, especially in later years, she loved to recount this touching scene to which her mind and heart gave a very poetic colouring. » Jules Chevalier wrote this memory of a consecration which he considered very real. When he formed his special group in the seminary it was called the association of « the knights of the Sacred Heart and of Mary ».

Later when at Issoudun he sought a sign that it was God's will that he should begin his group of missionaries, he and Fr. Maugeness decided to make a Novena to Our Lady. They promised, that should their prayer be heard they would spread devotion to the Heart of Christ, and would « make Mary loved and known in a special way, by all possible means ». We have already seen how, on two occasions, just as the two young priests concluded a Novena to Mary, they received two different and generous promises of assistance which made their work possible. It was natural that he should say in later years: « Our Lady has done everything in our Congregation ».

It was natural, too, that against the general background of the times and with his own particular experiences, he should look to Mary for continued help in his work of bringing the love of the Heart of Christ to men and of bringing men to believe in and respond to that love. A further natural development was that he and his companions should begin to think and speak of Mary as « Our Lady of the Sacred Heart ». At that time new titles and special devotions played a more significant part in popular religious practice than they do today. There is a certain note of excitement running through the stories of « the discovery » of the new title and the establishment of the new devotion. Any new devotion had to have the approval of the Holy See, and wary eyes were watching for suspect innovations in doctrine and practice - as Fr. Chevalier was to learn by experience later. Therefore he seems to have given a good deal of thought and prayer to the whole idea before « launching » it.

Once during the summer of 1857, while he was relaxing with his fellow-priests, they were discussing plans and ideas for the new church they were building. Fr. Chevalier asked what were their thoughts about the title under which Mary should be honoured in the new church. Various suggestions were made - but of course he was leading up to the proposal he had had in mind for some time: that of honouring Mary under the title of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart. In explaining what he meant he said that the title Our Lady of the Sacred Heart indicates Her who was blessed among all women by the Heart of a loving God. At the same time it points to her as the Mother of men whose only desire is to lead all men to the Heart of her Son. Finally this name makes us understand that our heavenly Mother, sharing in Christ's triumph in eternal glory, is forever our powerful advocate with the Heart of her loving Son<sup>10</sup>.

The idea was simple and clear - everyone was enthusiastic about it. At the beginning of 1861, when preparations were being made for the inauguration of the first part of the church, Fr. Chevalier wanted it to include a stained-glass window of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart. The first image was (like the idea itself) the result of a simple juxtaposition of an image of Mary and an image of Christ. First he took a well-known image of Mary Immaculate, standing with her hands extended towards the earth, signifying that she makes grace rain upon the earth. In front of this statue he placed the figure of the Christ child, indicating his Heart with his left hand and pointing to his Mother with his right - as if to say: « It is through my Mother that the treasures of my Heart are poured out on earth ».

The devotion took on immediately. Certainly not all would have appreciated the full theological content which Fr. Chevalier had in mind. Many were chiefly interested in her « power of intercession ». But even this could be the beginnings of growth to a more selfless devotion and to a discovery of the unfathomable riches of the Heart of Christ. In his concern to dissipate the religious indifference of the Berry, Fr. Chevalier would of course have considered all

the possible ways and means of succeeding. Now the « Confraternity » was an old and efficacious means of nourishing the spiritual life of the laity - if one could get the laity interested in becoming members of a confraternity.

These « brotherhoods », or spiritual associations go back a long way. St. Boniface really got them going as spiritual and charitable unions. They were a way of having christian values permeate the whole life of the laity. By the acceptance of a certain 'rule of life' the members found a practical way of seeing that they prayed and kept the eternal truths in mind. In the earlier centuries much stress was put on works of charity - as in later « Catholic action ». Later the accent was put more strongly on the prayer and piety side of the spiritual life.

Marian confraternities were rare before the 13th century, when they really blossomed in Italy and then spread to other countries in Europe. All confraternities flourished insofar as they could nourish popular spiritual piety.

Obviously there was a number of things pointing towards the establishment of a « Confraternity of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart ». They pointed towards it, not as something apart from Fr. Chevalier's main work, but as an extremely efficacious means of achieving all that he wanted to do. This was an age when people came « to Jesus through Mary »; it was a time when confraternities expressed and nourished the spirituality of the laity. People showed signs of responding enthusiastically to this « new » devotion which, in a way they had not thought of before, linked Christ, Mary and men in the bonds of a love that was tender and compassionate. Even the fearful and the indifferent could be led to confidence and friendship with Christ, where they had not responded to the call to religious duties presented in other ways.

The missionaries of the Sacred Heart drew the obvious conclusions. They worked at spreading devotion to Our Lady of the Sacred Heart and at establishing a « Confraternity »

with the same title. It soon became clear that they found a most effective way of carrying out their mission of bringing men to the Heart of Christ in faith and love.

Fr. Charles Pipéron played a large part in the early publicising of the devotion. In 1862 and 1863 he travelled a lot to preach appeals for the new church at Issoudun. To priests whom he met on his trips he spoke of the new devotion, explaining it with the help of images which he gave out. One of the priests he met was a famous Jesuit, Fr. Ramière, editor of the review « The Messenger of the Sacred Heart ». A short article on the devotion — given him by Fr. Pipéron — was published as a study in his review. In this way it became known throughout France and beyond.

The spread of the devotion was really extraordinary. In almost every place that the MSC were to go in subsequent years they found that the devotion had preceded them. To some extent this was due to Fr. Ramière's publications and to the fact that the Jesuits made the devotion known in many places where they had missions.

The local Archbishop, de La Tour d'Auvergne, was also keenly interested in the devotion and was anxious to see an association or confraternity established, asking Fr. Chevalier to write statutes for such an association. These Statutes were approved by the Archbishop on January 29th 1864, and on April 6th, 1864 the Confraternity was solemnly proclaimed in the church of the Sacred Heart. The Archbishop had his own name inscribed as the first member of the Confraternity. There were thousands of others even in the first few weeks. So many were the demands to admit new members and to set up filial branches, that a request was made to Rome to have the association made an Archconfraternity. Among the filial branches was one at Sittard in Holland, a number in Belgium (e.g. at Antwerp), others in Italy. This spread of the devotion to Our Lady of the Sacred Heart was one of the factors which led to a number of young people from outside France asking later to be admitted to the MSC Society.