



Fr. Charles Nivelteau SM

Missionary in Oceania

by R. P. Grenot

Translated by F. Tavo

FR. CHARLES NIVELLEAU SM

FATHER
CHARLES-MARY-JOSEPH
NIVELLEAU

OF THE SOCIETY DE MARY
MISSIONARY IN OCEANIA

(1823-1852)

BY

A PRIEST OF THE SAME SOCIETY

REV. FR. GRENOT

TRANSLATED FROM FRENCH BY F. TAVO

H & L CASTERMAN

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Fr. Charles Nivelteau SM: Missionary in Oceania

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

The French Marist missionary Fr. Charles Nivelteau, known in Tonga as Pātele Kalolo, died in Oceania at the tender age of just 29 in 1852. But it is the mere fact that he died aboard a French man-of-war somewhere at sea between Tonga and Sydney, and thus had to be literally buried within the depths of the storied South Seas that makes us grateful to have come across this biography by his fellow Marist, the Rev. Fr. Grenot, who also included a note on Fr. Louis Alfred Piéplu, Fr. Nivelteau's young missionary companion in Tonga. This book is an English translation of Fr. Grenot's French biography that was published at Tournai, Belgium in 1890.

Very little is known in Tonga about the two young French Marist priests who were holed up inside the Fort of Pea during those tense months from March to August 1852 when Taufa'ahau laid siege to the fort, and who refused the king's order to leave the fort for their safety, as the recently installed Tu'ikanokupolu was intent on taking the fort by force if necessary. Having only arrived in Tonga two years earlier, the two priests, Fr. Nivelteau aged 27 and Fr. Piéplu at age 32 upon arrival, took turns to stay with Fr. Calinon inside the Fort of Pea during those trying months when the drums of war were beating louder by the day. And growing up in Tonga, I can also recall being taught at my local Government Primary School that those French Catholic priests inside the Fort of Pea were the instigators of Pea's 'rebellion' against Taufa'ahau in 1852. None of that is true. Or at least, that version of events is clearly one-sided, in need of redressal.

Thankfully, we have accounts like the one presented in this book where you get to hear the French Marist priests' side of the story. Obviously, to have accused Marist missionary priests of instigating violence is quite simply preposterous, as it goes against all that Marists stood/stand for. A more credible and far more likely explanation for their refusal to leave the fort was something even their detractors could agree with: shepherds don't abandon their sheep in times of danger, which was indeed Fr. Calinon's rebuttal to Taufa'ahau when ordered to leave. Thanks to this biography, you and I will now get to hear Frs. Nivelteau and Piéplu's side of the story.

Happy Reading!

F. Tavo / 21 August 2026

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PREAMBLE

A distinguished priest of the Diocese of Luçon¹ and a former fellow student of Fr. Nivellean, wrote to us on November 29, 1888: “I knew the seminaries as a student for twelve years; as a professor and superior for twenty years; never have I encountered there a more perfect model of upright and amiable virtue than that of Charles Nivellean.” When Fr. Nivellean’s director at the Major Seminary of Luçon received the news of this young missionary’s death, he said to those around him: “No, it is not possible that a soul so pure, which never lost its baptismal innocence, or a heart so generous and so devoted to the Blessed Virgin, should not have been favoured, at its final moment, with those extraordinary and tangible graces so common in the lives of the saints.”

Around the same time, a religious said to some twenty students preparing for mission under his care: “I have just learnt of the death of a young Marist missionary in Oceania named Charles Nivellean. I taught him for several years at the Minor Seminary in Les Sables. I dare say, having known him well, that this dear student seemed to me, as he did to everyone, to be a model of virtue combined with perfect innocence.” The man who spoke thus was the Reverend Father Trotin, of the Community of the Holy Spirit, at Saint-Laurent-sur-Sèvre. Among the students listening to him were, alongside the author of this account, future apostles for China, the West Indies, and Oceania. Among them were two Marist missionaries, already known to our readers. One was Armand Camu, who died in New Caledonia in 1867, and the other, Jules Delahaye, who died in Samoa on March 25, 1883, a victim of his zeal and his love for the Holy Eucharist.

Finally, to corroborate these accounts, we shall add here the words of the Reverend Father Chevron. This venerable religious, superior to Father Nivellean at Mu’a (in the Tonga Islands), had been one of Blessed Pierre Chanel’s first companions at Futuna, and had been able to appreciate for himself the virtues of these two missionaries. However, when the question arose of introducing the cause of the martyr of Futuna to Rome, he did not hesitate to state that, “if

¹ Father Jeannet, Vicar-General of Bishop Catteau of Luçon.

he were given the choice between beatifying Father Chanel or Father Nivellean, he would cast his vote for the latter.” In light of these testimonies, supported by many others which may be read in this account, it was thought appropriate to publish, for the edification of others, all the recollections that have been preserved concerning the virtues and apostolate of this holy religious. We declare in advance that we do not wish in any way to prejudge the decisions of the Church regarding the honours to be bestowed upon our virtuous missionary.

25 August 1889: Feast of the Most Pure Heart of Mary.

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

La Pommeraye – Childhood Years

(1823–1833)

La Pommeraye-sur-Sèvre, in the Vendée [department], is a parish of about twelve hundred souls, a few kilometres north of the small town of Pouzauges, the administrative centre of its canton. The Sèvre Nantaise River, which gave it its name, forms the departmental boundary at this point. Its capricious course winds through the folds of the landscape where the final foothills of the Gatine mountains and the Poitou hills come to an end, before heading, at short intervals, towards Châtillon, Saint-Laurent, and Mortagne. The village of La Pommeraye lies so deep in a valley that one cannot even see the hills that rise up in the surrounding area; so much so that the Sèvre, when in flood, sometimes reaches as far as its gardens. But, the account from which we draw these details, here adds that what is better than a beautiful horizon is that its inhabitants possess the lively faith of the ancient Vendéans; despite everything, they have remained good and faithful Christians.

The Nivellean family lived not far from there, in the same parish, in the small manor house of *La Brunière*, which bore all the hallmarks of a seventeenth-century building. It was there that, on February 13, 1823, Charles-Marie-Joseph was born, the youngest of the five children of Louis-Charles Nivellean and his wife, Désirée-Adelaïde Dehargues. Charles's father died in 1849, just as his son, a missionary, was crossing the ocean to the Tonga Islands, and in 1863 his mother died, having set an example of all the virtues of a perfect Christian. Of their other children—Clarice, the eldest, Félix, Jules, and Léon—only the latter and his sister, Mademoiselle

Clarice, remain, and they cherish in their hearts the memory of their missionary brother with affectionate reverence for his virtues.²

This house at La Brunière, writes a correspondent, lost amidst the tall trees that surround it, shrouded in shade and silence, cannot have failed to influence the early thoughts of the man who was later to become such a contemplative and modest religious. Moreover, situated some distance from the village and built on a hilltop, it offered his sensitive and contemplative soul rich and varied sceneries, well suited to stirring and broadening his imagination. On one side lay the hillsides of Pouzauges, from the midst of which emerged, like a bouquet of greenery, the legendary Wood of the Follets or of La Folie, commanding a view over the whole of the Vendée as far as the sea; to the north, the tranquil waters of the Tesserie pond, glistening in the sun; further afield, the River Sèvre, meandering its way through vast meadows.

Those pursued by poverty or misfortune often came to seek shelter beneath this hospitable roof. It was particularly during the Wars of the Vendée, in the wake of the French Revolution, that the family took pleasure in welcoming the heroic defenders of the faith, amongst whom La Pommeraye counted a good number of its most illustrious sons and daughters.³ One can still see, in the family home, rifles and other weapons of the period, preserved as trophies of victory, as well as the old chapel where glorious outlaws came secretly to celebrate Holy Mass, under the protection of valiant Christians armed to defend them.

Holy Scripture tells us, according to the interpretation given by the illustrious Cardinal Pius, that when God looks down from His holy dwelling, His eyes rest with particular favour upon

² Mr. Léon Nivellean, who lives on his beautiful estate at Puy-Trumeau, in Pouzauges, and his sister, Miss Clarice, were delighted to welcome, in 1858, Bishop Bataillon, the first Bishop of Central Oceania, and in 1880, Bishop Lamaze, his worthy successor, accompanied by the Reverend Father Poupinel, Visitor General of these missions. They conveyed to this honourable family the profound impression left by the memory of Father Nivellean and expressed their gratitude for all the donations made to the mission through the good offices of Miss Clarice, whose generosity is truly boundless.

³ We shall mention in particular Forestier, a young hero of eighteen year old, associated with the first leaders of the uprising; then a man named Martin, a brilliant officer in Stofflet's army. Accompanied by twelve determined men, the latter seized a Republican battery belonging to the inept and legendary General Léchelle, who, whilst constantly talking of attacking the Vendéans majestically and en masse, was defeated at the first clash in every engagement. He was soon dismissed on account of his incompetence, which brought the Convention's armies into disrepute.

the children of those who were chained or massacred for His cause, and that when He stretches out His arm, it is to bless and protect the sons of those who were killed for Him: — *Dominus prospexit de Excelso sancto suo, ut audiret gemitus compeditorum et solveret filios interemptorum...* [The Lord looked down from His holy place, to hear the groans of the captives and to set free the children of those who were slain] (Ps. 101), and the royal prophet adds: “so that they may go forth to preach the name of the Lord and bring the peoples back to the unity of the faith” (vv. 21–22).

Such appeared to be God’s designs for this Christian family and for the young Charles in particular. A child of the Vendée, which had just borne witness to God of its faith, sealed with the blood of its martyrs, this angelic young man was to see these divine promises fulfilled in himself, through the fervour of his zeal and the ardent outpourings of his charity.

The child was presented for baptism by a godmother whom a friend of Charles described as one of the most pious and intelligent people in the parish.⁴ “One might well believe,” he adds, “that such a godmother was no stranger to the vocation of her young godson, for whom she showed constant and devout care. Many times she would say to me, as if obeying a secret premonition: “How devout our dear little Charles is! I’m quite sure he’ll be a priest one day!” This good young lady possessed, moreover, a remarkable zeal, not for promoting vocations (for that is God’s work), but for fostering vocations to the priesthood.

She very quickly sensed her young protégé’s vocation. For her part, Madame Nivellean’s motherly eye had already discerned it in the soul of her dear son. In keeping with this child’s wishes, and to encourage these happy inclinations in him, she had made him a cassock and an alb. When the child donned his white alb for the first time, his face lit up with a smile of joy and exclaimed: “Oh, Mother, I want to be good and grow up quickly, so that one day I may be a missionary and preach to others about loving the good Lord.”

Father P. Guérin, the venerable parish priest, moved by the child’s excellent disposition, soon made him his little altar boy. Nothing can describe, says Clarice, his sister, the piety and spirit of faith with which my little brother performed this duty. His young friends were particularly edified by this; as they were constant witnesses not only to his fervour in church,

⁴ Mademoiselle Daufresne. One of her sisters, Marie Daufresne, married Mr. Félix Nivellean.

but also to his hard work and good character; whenever he was mentioned they would say: “Mr. Charles will be a priest one day, or we are very much mistaken, for he is so pious and so kind.”⁵

These accounts from the children of the parish show us the influence Charles exerted over them. Paying no heed to differences in social standing, he did not hesitate to join in their games, so as to exert his gentle influence upon them. All the children of this devout community sought his company and would have felt guilty at the thought of causing him the slightest distress.

Charles’s brothers, in turn, attest to the patience with which he endured their little teasing. “If at times,” recounts Clarice, “tears betrayed his hurt or if his features, tightening, showed his temper, he hastened to erase it all with his usual air of candour and kindness. If anyone ventured to offer him a few words of consolation, ‘It’s nothing,’ he would say, ‘it’s nothing,’ and he would embrace his brothers with the same affection as before, thus showing that, whilst his heart remained affectionate, it was not without having mastered a very natural emotion.”

The family atmosphere was well suited to strengthening these precious gifts of grace. The family home was a true sanctuary, where father, mother and children lived constantly under the influence of good examples and engaged in all the practices of steadfast piety. Prayers said together and edifying readings, during which the whole family gathered, strengthened in every heart a love of God and a sense of duty.

His young soul opened up, from an early age, to the promptings of charity. “He loved to spend time with the poor who frequently came to La Brunière, and took pleasure in helping them as best he could.” When harvest time came, he would go, without telling anyone, to glean a few ears of corn in our fields, and would take his sheaf to a poor woman in the neighbourhood who lived on public charity. “Take this,” he would say to her, “I’ve gathered it from our fields for you.”⁶

As he grew older, Charles was no longer content with these humble gifts; he also gave alms in the form of kind words, as the following incident illustrates. A deeply distressed woman once said to Charles’s mother: “Madam, a few days ago I was approached by your youngest son.

⁵ Testimonies from the brothers Célestin (Gouffler) and Raymond (Olivier), the missionaries’ lay assistants, at Saint-Laurent-sur-Sèvre.

⁶ Account by Mademoiselle Clarice.

Seeing me weeping, he approached me out of compassion, and throughout the time we walked together, he never ceased to urge me to be patient, to console me, and to remind me of the Lord. Ah! If the Lord deigns to hear my prayer, this blessed child will be your honour and your consolation.”

Charles had a tutor from an early age. He made such good use of his lessons that, later on, at the school in Bressuire, he was awarded the cross every week. As his inclination towards the priesthood became increasingly pronounced, as soon as he had acquired a sufficient education, he was admitted to the minor seminary at Les Sables, where he entered Year 7 in October 1833. He was still only ten years old, but to ease the pain of separation, he was to find at that school one of his brothers, named Léon, who was a year or two ahead of him. There, the two of them were to forge the bonds of a deep affection that neither time nor distance has ever been able to diminish.

CHAPTER II

Les Sables Minor Seminary – Years of Study

(1833–1840)

In all honesty, we must admit that, despite the sound principles instilled in him at home and the acts of piety and obedience we saw him practise there, Charles allowed several faults, natural to his young age, to become apparent at the minor seminary. His reports, which we have before us, certainly show him, in the early days, to be an open and considerate child, of good character, with generally satisfactory diligence and well-suited to succeed in his studies. However, there are also records of certain weeks when Charles would occasionally give in to laziness, frivolity and vanity. However, it should here be added that every reprimand was well received, that an improvement was evident, and, at the end of the year, his conduct was summarised as follows: ‘Good in all respects’.

As we can already see—and we were keen to point this out—Charles did not belong to that class of heroes whom certain books portray, even from childhood, as having never committed the slightest imperfection, and whose depiction causes even the most well-meaning to despair. No, this child was ‘of human nature’ like all his young companions. His reason needed to be developed, and his virtue needed growth. His merit, therefore, lay entirely in having fought against his faults and triumphed over them to the point of becoming the model for good students and seminarians. This is the common path, open to everyone.

That school year was to culminate in the momentous event of his First Communion. He drew from this a powerful incentive to correct within himself everything for which he might have been criticised. “I cannot recall without emotion,” wrote his form tutor, “the holy zeal with which Charles prepared himself for this great occasion. One could see him paying close attention to all the instructions and ready to embrace all the small practices recommended to purify and adorn the heart in which the God of the Eucharist was soon to take up residence. I felt that he understood, that he savoured every word I spoke, and that he went out of his way to fulfil all my wishes.”

It was on August 15, 1834, the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, that this devout child, in the presence of his whole family and in the company of a good number of his fellow pupils, had the joy of receiving his Lord for the first time. The following day marked the start of the minor seminary's summer holidays. He set off, his heart filled with these sweet memories and strengthened in his devotion to his duties. "It was a real celebration for the whole family and for all our friends," exclaims Clarice here, "to have Charles amongst us during the holidays. His growing virtues made us appreciate this happiness more and more. The thought of the great deed he had just accomplished left him with a deep impression that often moved him to tears of gratitude."

Apart from his father, mother and brothers, he had no other company than that of two priests from the neighbourhood, including Father Herbreteau, his confessor, with whom he would stay for as long as possible, either to study or to discuss matters relating to his vocation. He also maintained in regular contact with two of his fellow students from the seminary at Les Sables, Frs. Perreau and Bouin. We, who are writing these lines, met these good priests in 1852, and even at that time, they spoke to us of Father Nivellean as a most virtuous student, cherished and revered by all who lived in his company.

When Charles returned to the minor seminary in October 1834, he resumed his studies, his games and all the devotional practices customary in that house with all the enthusiasm of a pure heart. His marks continued to be good, as they had been the previous year. This was not, however, without having to struggle once more against the frivolity of his age and the influence of bad examples. "His character," reports one of his teachers, "seemed to me, in that year 1835, somewhat rough and careless. From his records, I see that he was also reproached for a few lapses in prayer, not enough diligence in his studies, and a touch of vanity—perhaps due to an awareness of his higher rank. All in all, however, we were satisfied with him."

We are pleased to note here, in agreement with this wise headmaster, that in these struggles between nature and grace, the latter only triumphs through persistent effort. The school is like an arena where God intends that, alongside moral innocence, the Christian and social virtues which make our relationships with others possible and pleasant should also be nurtured. This is what a master consummate in the art of education expressed with great truth: "The child," he

said, “finds at school a community which, by tailoring its challenges to his age, introduces him through experience to the first struggles and the first sacrifices of social duties. He gradually learns, whilst always living amongst his peers, the restraint in behaviour, the discretion in speech, and the mutual consideration which are the prerequisites for virtue and happiness.”⁷

No pupil ever showed such a receptive attitude to his teachers’ comments, and none applied himself more diligently to working under God’s watchful eye, striving to correct the mistakes that were pointed out to him. “In Year 4,” said his teacher, “he continued to stand out for his excellence, although he still quite often showed signs of vanity, and he was to be commended for the willingness he showed in correcting his minor faults.”

These persistent efforts, aided by grace, yielded the most gratifying results. “In Year 3,” said his teacher, “Charles began to show himself as he has remained ever since. This was the time of a genuine change. If we look at his marks, they are consistently marked ‘Very good’; and under the heading ‘Observations’, we read: ‘We are increasingly pleased; his diligence is constant; his conduct, exemplary. He enjoys, more than ever, the affection of his teachers and the esteem of his classmates.’”

To these general accounts, we would like to add here those that have since been given to us personally. One of his younger fellow pupils wrote to us many years later: “When I arrived at the minor seminary in Les Sables in 1837, I found Charles Nivellean there, a pupil in the third year. I knew him for three years, that is to say, until the end of his final year of secondary school in 1840. From that time onwards, he was the model pupil of the minor seminary; he was a saint.”⁸

One of his former teachers, in turn, told us: “Charles Nivellean was a model pupil in every respect, at least as far as I could observe during the years I spent teaching at the minor seminary.”⁹

These impressions, retained fifty years later, demonstrate just how rapidly this young man’s virtue had developed, such that it was able to capture the attention of both teachers and pupils.

⁷ *Les vrais Principes de l’Education chrétienne* by Fr. Monfat, S.M.

⁸ The Reverend Father Chassériau.

⁹ The Reverend Father Fonteneau, missionary at Saint-Laurent-sur-Sèvre.

“These gradual improvements reached such a point,” adds a correspondent, “that in that very same year, 1837, around Easter, the Superior felt compelled to publicly utter this praise which I have never forgotten and which I have since taken great pleasure in repeating to the pupils of the house, to encourage them to earn it just as much as he did: *‘Mr. Charles Nivellean loves the rules; from the way he asks for permission, and from his ever-cheerful and contented demeanour, one can see that he finds his greatest happiness in observing even the smallest details of the rule.’*”

The Superior of the minor seminary at Les Sables was at that time the venerable Fr. Dalin. Appointed to this important post at the very dawn of his priesthood, around 1825, he was able, through his rare intelligence and tireless energy, to meet all the demands of his new position. Practical organisation, finances, relations with the public, the building of a chapel, and the pupils’ progress in both piety and their studies—everything proceeded smoothly under his skilful guidance. But what above all contributed to making the memory of this excellent Superior enduring was the event we are about to recount, which is linked to the great devotion he inspired in the pupils towards the august Mother of God, and in which Charles Nivellean received the first seeds of his vocation.

On the night of December 27, 1835, at around two o’clock in the morning, a violent fire suddenly broke out in a wing adjoining the main building of the minor seminary. A fierce wind fanned the flames along the entire length of the building. The fire, spreading rapidly, threatened to reduce everything to ashes. Everyone rose in haste; all rushed out of the building. Cries of distress and supplicant prayers escaped from the lips and hearts of both pupils and teachers alike. Alas! Any material assistance seemed impossible; there were no fire engines, hardly any water, and already the entire roof structure of the wing was ablaze.

It was then that the worthy Superior—known to all, as the chronicle relates, for his devotion to the Mother of God—conceived a plan which he immediately put into action. He ran to fetch a small silver sceptre which the whole seminary had offered to the Blessed Virgin on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, to acknowledge her as their Queen. He fell to his knees, then rose again shortly afterwards and threw the sceptre into the very spot where the fire was raging most fiercely. At that very moment, the wind changed direction, ceasing to fan the flames, and the fire gradually died down of its own accord, before the eyes of all those watching. The

following day, amidst the rubble and charred debris, the Madonna's sceptre was found, barely blackened by the fire.

It is impossible to express the joy of these children at this act of maternal protection. The recovered sceptre, a thousand times more precious with its traces of the fire than if it had been made of gold or diamonds, was carried in procession. All the pupils came to kiss it, and the same honour had to be granted to the enthusiastic townspeople.

The gratitude of the minor seminary was not confined to this first demonstration of love for Mary; a vow was made for three years to celebrate this anniversary with a solemn procession, on the very day and at the very place of the disaster, and the memory of this happy event was perpetuated by a lithograph depicting the disaster and Mary's sceptre extending from on high to halt the fury of the fire. Charles Nivellean, filled with wonder, wrote to his family and recounted this 'miraculous' event, adding that the minor seminary was clearly being richly rewarded for its devotion to Mary:

"Please bear in mind that Mary is truly regarded by the minor seminary of Les Sables as its Queen and Sovereign. The Feast of the Immaculate Conception, which is the patronal feast, is celebrated with all possible pomp and genuine enthusiasm on the part of both teachers and students. Preparations for it include a public novena, and so as not to share with anyone else the task of expressing our feelings of love and veneration to the Queen, on that day we sing only hymns composed especially for the occasion each year by the students themselves. It was during one of these celebrations that Mary was elected as our Sovereign, and that the sceptre of which I have spoken to you was presented to her, after having been blessed" (January 1836).

Another pious custom also became established, of which Charles makes no mention, no doubt out of a sense of reserve. On the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, a small tribute was paid to the Blessed Virgin, in her capacity as Queen: a voluntary offering of acts of virtue which a representative from each class would lay at her feet with the inscription: 'A tribute of love from the class of ___ to their Queen.' Then each would go to kiss the sceptre, to bear public witness that they found her yoke pleasant and that they considered themselves fortunate to live under her rule.

Charles's excellent marks and exemplary conduct often saw him nominated to fulfil this role as 'representative of Mary', and our readers will already have sensed the joy and sweet devotion with which he would carry out his duty. Another custom was established in honour of the Blessed Virgin. This involved holding, every Saturday a procession around the building, during which the litanies, the *Salve Regina* and the *Ave maris stella* were sung, as if to envelop the walls of the minor seminary in Mary's protection, and thereby ward off all attacks from hell. Even today, in the centre of the cloister of this former monastery, one can see the regal statue of the Blessed Virgin, extending her sceptre of peace as if to govern and bless. The inscription on the pedestal of this statue once read: *In electis tuis mitte radices...* — O Mother! Plant deep roots of love in the hearts of your chosen ones.

God alone knows how many times Charles paid homage to this holy image each day and how many prayers he repeated at her feet. But what is common knowledge is that these pious traditions instil in the hearts of all the students who have passed through this house a truly filial devotion to Mary, which is their consolation in life and their supreme hope in death.¹⁰

The public praise that Fr. Dalin had bestowed upon the young Nivellean confirmed the teachers in the high regard they had come to hold for their pupil. One of them, edified by his piety and delighted to show him his personal approval for conduct worthy of serving as a model to all, took him on as his altar boy.

"One cannot imagine the depth of Charles's devotion during that Mass," wrote this teacher. "All who witnessed it were struck with admiration. His faith, full of love and respect for the God of goodness who descended upon the altar, was evident in his modestly downcast eyes and in the touchingly devout tone with which he responded. Seeing him so deeply imbued with

¹⁰ Father Dalin, author of these religious practices, resigned from the leadership of the seminary in 1837 to retire to Saint-Laurent-sur-Sèvre, within the Congregation of Blessed Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort. Appointed Superior in 1841 of the Daughters of Wisdom and the Missionaries of the Holy Spirit, he successfully brought to a conclusion, through the examination of his writings and virtues, the cause of Father de Montfort, who had already been proclaimed Venerable in 1838. He governed these two communities with great wisdom until 1856. The community of the Missionaries, hitherto regarded as a mere diocesan congregation, experienced a new surge of growth under his leadership, which continued to flourish under his successors. He died on May 20, 1884, aged over eighty, leaving behind a memory held in high esteem and respect by all who knew him.

reverence at the foot of the altar, one felt as though one were in the presence of one of those heavenly spirits depicted as bowing low before the divine Majesty.”

Charles had been entrusted with the duties of treasurer during his final year of secondary school. This role involved keeping in safekeeping all the items required for the games and any lost property that people came to claim; such claims were sometimes made at rather inopportune moments. He often had to remain silent, show patience and be extremely accommodating towards everyone. All agree that he never failed to fulfil this threefold duty. It had been a long time since his virtue had overcome the roughness that had sometimes been noted in his character during his early years of study.

However, the humble young man had a completely different view of himself. “I am growing older,” he wrote in February 1839, “I am about to turn seventeen, but, alas! I am scarcely growing in virtue... You would do well, my dear Léon, to share some of your wisdom with me. At the very least, pray for me; you know how much I need it. Do not withhold the fragrance of your prayers from your Charles. For my part, I shall not forget this friend, this dear Léon, to whom I am, in life and in death, the most loving and devoted brother...”

All his correspondence exudes the same tenderness, whilst also always containing some reflections on faith. He wrote to his brother Félix: “Our childhood was a wonderful time for us all, but it is past, and now we must concern ourselves with serious matters, and above all with *those that do not pass away*.”

“How pleased I was,” he wrote to another, “to hear that you are working with such enthusiasm and vigour. Oh, if only I could be by your side to encourage you to persevere courageously! But I do not think there is any need; you will always be full of zeal for study and piety; any other way of life would be unworthy of a Christian child such as yourself.”

When he wrote to his parents, after a cheerful and pleasant chat, Charles always concluded by saying to them: “God be with you, O my dear parents... happiness, God’s love and perfect health. May piety show you the path to peace.”

“May God preserve your white hair, my dear father—that is to say, may He keep you in the love of your children and let days of peace and happiness shine upon you. And you, my beloved

mother, may He console you and give you the courage you need to sustain you in your sorrows. He will reward you for this; be sure of that. And to all of you, my dear and good brothers, what shall I wish for you? A love of work and virtue—that is the sum of my wishes; strive for your sanctification, the most important thing, the only desirable thing, and, to put it more accurately, the only thing we have to do.”

Charles did not confine himself to advice on piety; when necessary, he would act as a kind and obliging critic of his brothers’ literary attempts, and through ingenious comparisons, would show one of them how to correct his faults just as one corrects one’s speech.

He encouraged another to tend flowers, to analyse them with the help of his Flora, and added: “Savour, my dear Léon, this happiness so pure and so charming; then your books of nature—or rather, the feelings of your heart—will teach you to turn your thoughts to the Creator of so many wonders. The brilliant splendour of these flowers will tell you how much more magnificent, how much greater, is He who has sown them beneath our feet.”

In 1840, Charles was about to take his sixth-form exams and thus complete his secondary education. He watched with sadness as the happy years he had spent at the minor seminary slipped away, and he spoke of the sweet Madonna to whom he would go every day to confide his devout thoughts, his plans for the future, and his vocation. Ah! That dear vocation—he reached out to it; every day he dreamt of the major seminary where he longed to go to prepare himself for the sublime duties of the priesthood.

Although his conduct was held in high regard, he considered himself unworthy of the ecclesiastical life: “Ah!” he would exclaim, “one must be so pure to be a priest; may I have the good fortune to be admitted to the Major Seminary at Luçon... Pray for me, that I may get through this humble end of the year well and make myself less unworthy, if that were possible, of this distinguished favour!...” (July 26, 1840).

Such, as we have said, were not the fears of his teachers, to whom he had, through his angelic piety and progress in both learning and virtue, given such satisfaction that, in the years that followed, students rightly regarded as exemplary were told: “When will you work as well as

Charles Nivellean?... You are not yet as virtuous as he is... May you become as gentle as Mr. Charles Nivellean was.”¹¹

Fifty years have passed since the departure of this fervent young man, and his memory still lives on, surrounded by respect and veneration. In September 1888, a Marist priest, passing through the minor seminary at Les Sables, saw hanging on the walls of one of the study rooms a painting that had become somewhat faded with the passage of time, depicting a young missionary with a cross on his chest. The priest was told that it was the portrait of a former student of the minor seminary who had died in Oceania, and it was added that time had in no way erased the memory of his virtues. This portrait was that of Charles Nivellean.

¹¹ Words reported by the Reverend Suaudeau, parish priest and dean of Montaigu, former parish priest of Sallertaine (Vendée).

CHAPTER III

Luçon Major Seminary, Saint-Sulpice in Paris

(1840–1845)

In October 1840, Charles Nivellean entered the Major Seminary of Luçon. Father Bourbon, his philosophy tutor, retained a memory of this student which he described as follows: “He was a model seminarian. His punctuality, his diligence in all his duties, his gentleness and his modesty were truly exemplary. If all the residents of the house had been like him, the Luçon seminary would have been a little paradise on earth.”

These fine examples could not fail to spread their pleasant influence around him and to bear fruit of edification in the souls of his fellow students. “He had won their trust and affection to such an extent,” wrote one of them, “that a great many of them chose him as their monitor. I, too, had done the same as them, and I can say from experience that, for three years, he gave me the best advice... He had even entrusted me with the task of scrutinising his conduct, noting his faults and pointing them out to him bluntly, so that he might correct them. Alas! I was often at a loss when he came to see me, for I did not know what to say to him, since I had discovered absolutely nothing in his character or in his person that was reprehensible or in need of correction. How often, then, did I blush inwardly at having to keep watch over the conduct of this young man, whom I knew to be a thousand times more upright and perfect than I was. It seemed to me that the Lord had allowed this more for my own good than for that of my friend. It is, I told myself, so that I might continually have before my eyes and in my mind the moving examples and excellent virtues of the most fervent of all the seminarians.”

But we are eager to study the young Levite’s character through what his correspondence has revealed. Where can we better see his soul reflected than in these pious outpourings? “In the lives of the saints,” says a judicious biographer, “the story of their deeds delights us, whilst that of their souls captivates us. Deeds are in the public domain; contemporaries may record their sequence; but the soul is a private domain, the entrances to which it alone guards. If it has not opened them, if it has not left these impressions in the heart of a friend or on a piece of

paper, a silent confidant of its feelings and thoughts, who can reveal what death has shrouded in its silence and covered with its shadows?”

We shall follow our young seminarian through his correspondence, and it is this that will form the main fabric of this account. It will show us his perfect docility to grace, his extreme vigilance over himself, his ardent zeal for souls, his obedience and affectionate respect for his superiors, and his holy sorrow for all that he calls his infidelities in the service of God. All the saints are alike: they have no accusers other than themselves, and the height of their perfection is measured by the depth of the contempt they profess for their own persons.

Father Nivellean had just received the holy tonsure. He hastened to inform his family of this and announced to them, in these words, the first commitments he had made to God:

“June 21, 1841. — Here I am, my dear parents, here I am, in a special way, a child of the Lord. Oh! How beautiful is the day when a child consecrates himself to his God! His soul is flooded with a wholly heavenly joy; his heart—that heart which he offers to his good Master—is filled with love, a love that cannot be described here on earth. To give oneself to a God who gives Himself entirely to us—what bliss! To surrender one’s life and all that one is to Him, to entrust oneself to His fatherly care, to swear eternal fidelity to Him—is this not the most enviable fate for a Christian? To belong to God, to love Him and to love Him always—that is the greatest of all joys!...”

These sentiments of love for God, this complete self-giving, sometimes lead certain parents to believe that the affection due to them is diminishing in their children’s hearts. Charles anticipates these false fears: “Ah! Do not believe,” he exclaims, “my dear father, and you, my dear mother, and you, my beloved brothers, that love for the Lord will diminish the love I have for you. No, on the contrary, it will only increase it, since this good Master wants me to cherish you, and that is his great commandment. We shall all love one another by loving God, and this God of mercy will bless us. Then, what happiness could equal ours?”

Every ordination reminded him of these thoughts of love for God and devotion to His service. On December 18, 1841, on the occasion of the ordination to the priesthood of one of his family’s friends: “Oh!” he exclaimed, “how moved my soul is when it sees these dear fellow students giving themselves entirely to the Lord and strengthening the bonds that already bind

them to Him. It is then that religion appears great and should inspire in people respect and veneration for its ministers, since it confers so much powers upon them!”

Thus, the love for his priestly vocation grew ever stronger in the heart of the fervent seminarian, and it would take us too long to set out here all the sentiments he expressed in his correspondence to all his former teachers at the minor seminary in Les Sables. Amongst them, there was one in particular for whom he had retained a respectful and filial affection: Father Dalin, who, as we have said, had become Superior of the Congregations of Saint-Laurent-sur-Sèvre. Nor had this venerable priest forgotten his former pupil, and he took every opportunity to show him special esteem. An opportunity arose at the time we are discussing.

The works of Father de Montfort, who had been declared Venerable on September 7, 1838, had recently been discovered. Among these writings were *Treatise on True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, *The Admirable Secret of the Most Holy Rosary*, etc., as well as a large number of sermons and spiritual hymns. The Sacred Congregation of Rites requested that a commission be set up to study the process concerning the writings of the Servant of God. The task was to collate all these documents, make copies of them, and submit them for an initial examination.

Reverend Father Dalin turned his attention to his former pupil, Father Nivellean, and had him appointed as one of the apostolic notaries of the Commission established in Luçon.¹² He knew he could count on the prudence, discretion and pious reserve of his young collaborator. The latter must surely have felt the seeds of a new vocation sprouting within him as he read in these writings the prophetic announcement of Blessed de Montfort,¹³ predicting that a peaceful army of apostles would go, under the banner of Mary, to carry the torch of the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

¹² This Commission, chaired by the Ordinary, was composed of: “Mgr Villecourt, Bishop of La Rochelle; Frs. du Parc and Cousseau, who later became Bishops of Blois and Angoulême, respectively; Frs. de Vézins, de Terves, the Count of Cornulier, Colonel de Baudu, etc.”

¹³ On May 12, 1853, the Congregation for Rites approved the writings of the Venerable de Montfort, and, around the same time, the two Houses of Wisdom, out of a sense of gratitude, recorded the names of all those who had worked in any way towards the cause for the beatification of the Venerable Father de Montfort. At the solemn service held annually in their honour, the name of the young Marist Charles Nivellean, who departed for Heaven on December 10, 1852, is proclaimed.

How much must his love for the Blessed Virgin have been kindled, too, as he perused the pages in which this great servant of Mary so eloquently proclaimed the extraordinary power of the Mother of God. Just as he was reading these stirring lines, the blood of a martyr, a missionary of Mary, had marked the soil of Futuna on April 28, 1841, in the heart of Oceania, at the very ends of the earth. This martyr, recently raised to the honours of beatification,¹⁴ is today known as Blessed Peter Chanel, a priest of the Society of Mary. Who would have thought then that the humble secretary, whose name appears at the foot of these documents, would himself, a few years later, join these new ranks of apostles and pour out his heart for the sake of the Christians in the Tonga archipelago!

After these arduous sessions, Father Nivellean returned to the tranquillity of his beloved cell at the major seminary, devoting himself to his work with renewed zeal and to all the practices of fervent piety. His attraction to holy matters and his skill in serving at the altars led his superiors to appoint him as sacristan. Nothing could have given him greater pleasure than being entrusted with the care of the house of God. His zeal knew no bounds when it came to maintaining decorum in the holy place, and he devoted all his spare time to keeping it in order. He was given an assistant in the person of the seminarian he had chosen as his monitor.

“Meanwhile,” the latter recounts, “Charles’s health deteriorated to such an extent that there were fears of a chest infection. Unable to show the slightest consideration for his body or his health, he continued to come to the sacristy every day to carry out his duties. He would rather exhaust himself and even risk falling seriously ill than leave me alone to bear the full burden of the work. At times, his courage outstripped his strength. I saw him cough up blood, succumb to exhaustion, and be forced to sit down and rest his head on a piece of furniture in the sacristy. I urged him to retire to his room: ‘No, no,’ he would say, ‘it’s nothing! It’s just a headache that will pass.’ And he would set to work again.”

His respect for the holy place bordered on being scrupulous. He would not have wished to utter a single word, even in the sacristy, and when he spoke out of necessity, his conscience was tormented by it. Therefore, so as to have nothing to reproach himself for and to keep the peace in his heart, he consulted his spiritual director, who granted him all the necessary permissions.

¹⁴ By decree of November 17, 1889.

In short, Father Nivellean, as the same account relates, was—in every respect—a model to his fellow students during the four years he spent at the major seminary in Luçon. Such a high opinion was held of his virtue that people took pleasure in calling him *‘the saint’*.

One of his fellow students, both at the major and minor seminaries, Father Jeannet—who is now Vicar General of Bishop Catteau of Luçon—wrote to us on November 29, 1888: “I have known the seminaries—as a student for twelve years, and as a professor and superior for twenty years—and never have I encountered a more perfect model of upright and amiable virtue. Let me quote, in particular, one example of his piety after receiving Communion. This was at a time when Charles received Communion every day. Those standing opposite him—and I was among them—could simply say to Our Lord: ‘My God! I would so much like to thank You and love You as that good Father Nivellean does!...’”

“Ever since then, whenever I happen to think of the great duty of giving thanks, immediately there arises within me, in my mind and as if before my very eyes, a sort of instant ‘photograph’ of my holy fellow student, just as he was then, kneeling, motionless, absorbed in the loving and tranquil contemplation of an adored object which he seemed to see and press to his heart.”

The holidays did nothing to alter Father Nivellean’s pious and regular habits. Any time he did not devote to his fellow priests and to observing every point of his rule, he was happy to spend it with his family—with his revered father, his beloved mother, his brothers and his devout sister. “When he was alone with me,” recounts Clarice, “Charles would speak of holy matters, of thoughts of zeal and charity. He would read me edifying stories or recite hymns to the Blessed Virgin. His room was his favourite place; he would stay there as long as possible, working or praying, though this did not prevent him from welcoming with evident joy all those friends or fellow students who came to visit him.”

Outside La Brunière, he always displayed the same contemplative demeanour, the same pious and modest attitude. “Every morning,” recounts one of his friends, “one would see Charles arriving in the village of La Pommeraye, reciting his little office to the Blessed Virgin or his rosary, making his way straight to the church to celebrate Holy Mass with a respect and modesty that were edifying to all those present. Nor was it uncommon, on leaving the church,

to hear such exclamations as: ‘Oh! How pious that good priest is! What modesty in his demeanour, what devotion in celebrating Mass!’ In reality,” the same account adds, “these remarks were entirely accurate, for, from all I have read and heard, even the greatest saints could not have behaved in a more angelic manner. I am left with an indelible memory of this, which deepens my devotion and love for the things of God.”

In the same parish, there was a young student who had the good fortune to live in close company with Father Nivellean. This friendship, founded on virtue, benefited both men, for both have left an enduring memory in the hearts of everyone in the region. Whenever Father Nivellean finished celebrating Mass and left the church, he was sure to see this pious young man coming to meet him, to then accompany him along the road leading to the little ‘castle’ at La Brunière. Nothing was more edifying than the conversations exchanged between these two friends—on God, the Blessed Virgin, the joy found in serving them, and the great honour that God bestows upon all those He calls to the priesthood.

As they walked, Father Nivellean would invite his companion to recite the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin together, and according to what this friend told us, our young Levite would recite the whole of it with truly extraordinary devotion, which must surely have drawn down heavenly blessings upon him. As he took his leave of us, he thanked me for having accompanied him, then he would often add, as if deeply moved by a fervent love: “Ah! dear friend, let us love this God, this good Master; let us love his divine Mother! Let us work earnestly for our sanctification: that is all there is, nothing but that; all the rest is nothing.”

Later, at the Major Seminary, Father Gelot said to this young man: “Ah! May you be like dear Father Nivellean! Never, no, never did one need to make the same remark to him twice; his obedience was perfect.”

The year 1844 was drawing to a close and, with it, seminarian Nivellean’s regular course of ecclesiastical studies was coming to an end. He was then twenty-one years old. Being too young to be ordained, he had to consider what sort of life he would have to lead whilst awaiting that moment. In a letter dated April 25, 1844, he asked his family to agree to let him go to Saint-Sulpice in Paris, “for,” he said, “there, at least, I shall acquire new knowledge and can only grow

in learning and virtue, so as to make myself less unworthy of the ministry which the Lord is pleased to entrust to me.”

He then went on to set out everything he would need for his board and travel expenses, and recommended above all that a cassock be made for him which was *neither tight-fitting nor made of fabric that was too elaborate*. Permission was granted. This step, however insignificant it might have seemed, had a specific purpose in Charles’s mind, as the following events will show. It was merely a first step towards detaching himself from the world and making a smooth transition towards distant missions. He was about to leave La Brunière, never to see it again.

At the end of his last holiday spent at La Pommeraye in 1844 and before setting off for Paris, as he was about to leave his family and his beloved Vendée, he said to one of his old schoolmates: “Come now! my dear friend, let us serve the Lord well and always be ready to make every possible sacrifice for Him, even to cross the seas to save souls and extend the reign of Our Lord Jesus Christ!”

He had therefore already made up his mind to devote himself to missionary work amongst the unbelievers, but only his spiritual director at the Major Seminary, Father Gelot, had been entrusted with his initial confidences on this subject. To all the objections inspired by prudence, the humble seminarian initially responded only with silence. But when it was pointed out to him that, by going on these perilous missions amongst savage or barbarous tribes—not to mention the hardships which his health would struggle to endure—he would run a great risk of being captured, beaten, massacred, and ultimately dying without having been able to fulfil the dreams inspired by holy zeal, he replied: “I know that,” he said, “I know that, but none of it frightens me. Since we must die, the manner of death concerns me little, provided it is in accordance with God’s will. If He calls me, He will surely sustain my weakness and strengthen my health. What a blessing it would be for me if I could die out of love for God! Moreover,” he added, “I shall reflect on this further, Father, whilst attending my course in Paris; I shall pray and draw inspiration from your wisdom, and shall act only in accordance with the advice of those entrusted with my guidance.”

Seminarian Nivellean’s stay at Saint-Sulpice was short-lived; it was merely a stage intended to bring him closer to the fulfilment of his desires and to prepare him for a final parting, for

which he wished to steel his heart. In this holy house, which a Pope once called ‘the apple of his eye’, he found himself among numerous students from all corners of France, many of whom have brought honour to the Church through their talents, their holiness and their writings. Among them was Father Gaston de Ségur, who later became the holy and illustrious prelate whose memory has left such a sweet fragrance of virtue.

He also often had the opportunity to meet there those venerable prelates who had come from the most distant lands and who called upon everyone to offer their dedication. The annals of *The Propagation of the Faith*, in turn, recounted the early labours of the missionaries and related that the “*natives of Oceania had seen, in a dream, a white woman with a radiant face, guiding a canoe manned by white men*; new lands, a new religious family coming, under the banner of Mary, to take its place in the field of the Father of the family.”

Was this not the beginning of the fulfilment of the hopes of the Blessed de Montfort, as he had believed he had read them, when, in various passages of his works, the great apostle of Mary proclaimed that “the reign of Jesus, towards the end of time, was to spread throughout the world, through Mary and through evangelical workers consecrated to Mary”?¹⁵

Seminarian Nivellean’s generous soul thus opened effortlessly to this sweet hope, and his zeal for the salvation of unbelievers, meeting in his heart with a tender and filial devotion to the Blessed Virgin, gradually led him to set his sights on the nascent Society of Mary. Ever since his departure from Luçon, the thought of the missions had pursued him unceasingly. Like that humble Christian woman of whom Fr. Faber speaks—who, taking a map of the world in her hands, would trace with tears all the shores where Jesus Christ is not worshipped—our virtuous Levite too would scan with his eyes those vast expanses which the sea has separated from our

¹⁵ The devout author of the book entitled *The Providential Mission of the Venerable de Montfort* has no hesitation in believing that we are living in the times foretold by this Blessed, and that, in addition to the dear little Society of Missionaries which he founded, “the Marists, the Oblates of Mary and other modern institutes seem to confirm, in part, the predictions of the Apostle of Mary, and appear prepared to follow in his footsteps to work towards the establishment of the great reign of Jesus and Mary in the world, through the teaching and practice of perfect devotion. The Month of Mary and the Month of the Rosary also appear to correspond to Montfort’s views and aspirations...” (See page 375 of the work cited.) Lourdes, La Salette, and Pontmain are a fresh confirmation of these hopes.

continents, and weep at seeing no apostles there. He could not bear this sight any longer, and on March 5, 1845, he wrote to his former spiritual director, Fr. Gelot:

Saint-Sulpice, 5 March 1845.

My dearest Director,

“You will no doubt recall that on more than one occasion, as I poured out my heart to you, I spoke of my desire to go to the Foreign Missions. I have also expressed this on several occasions to Fr. Carbon, my director at Saint-Sulpice, and yesterday he authorised me to seek permission from His Grace to follow the path along which God seemed to be calling me to walk... Now, then, my dearest Director, it is to you that I turn. Please be so kind as to decide yourself this matter—so important and so serious—for me; for may the Lord preserve me from acting on my own initiative, without knowing His will! Your voice will be to me the voice of Heaven!”

Here the devout young man gives a full account of his course of action and adds: “At first, I had no idea which missions the Lord intended for me; but later I found myself drawn towards those in Oceania. It seemed to me that they were more in keeping with my character and my physical constitution.”

A few lines later, he implores Father Gelot to obtain permission from his bishop for him to join the Marists. He confesses that this blessed name had drawn his heart to them, and the hope of obtaining the desired consent makes him exclaim with rapture: “I have blessed Heaven a thousand times for having inspired in me the desire to join them! What joy it will be for me to go, under the banner of Mary, cross in hand, to wage war against the enemy of Our Lord and to rescue these poor pagans from the adversary’s harsh bondage. Blessed, a thousand times blessed, will be the day when I set foot on that foreign and beloved land!”

To better overcome any resistance he might encounter, he assures us that he acted with calm and maturity. “It was not,” he says, “the seminarians who put this idea into my head; I have spoken to no one about it; on the other hand, it seems to me that I am under no illusions, for it was not in a moment of passing fervour that I felt this desire; this thought comes to me

quite naturally, in the calmest moments, whilst engaged in the most mundane tasks, during breaks, during meals, indeed everywhere...”

“However, if it were not God’s will, it would not take a second telling for me to stop thinking about it, and then I would simply contribute to this fine work through alms and prayer. Guided by you, my dear Director, I shall take no wrong steps. Therefore, without the slightest anxiety, I entrust my most cherished interests to you. For my part, I shall never cease to pray; but I must confess to you that I do not pray as one who is uncertain, but with a certain assurance. I shall commend the matter to the Archconfraternity of Our Lady of Victories.”

Seminarian Nivellean therefore went to this famous shrine to commend his vocation and the letter that would decide its fate to his heavenly Mother. We shall not recount the visits and Communion he made for this intention; the desired result was not long in coming. Later that same month, Father Gelot wrote to his devout protégé that he could no longer oppose the will of God, and that he had asked the Bishop of Luçon for permission for him to enter the Marist Fathers, which had been granted.

Seminarian Nivellean’s joy was great, but it was tempered by the thought of a difficult duty that still lay before him: that of informing his parents and obtaining their consent. As we shall see, it was not without a struggle that he achieved success. Here is the letter in which he informed them of his plan.

God alone! — Paris, 29 March 1845. — “I write to you today, my dear and beloved parents, to speak to you about a very serious matter. You know that I spoke to you, a few years ago, of my desire to become a missionary, and since then, God has continually nurtured this inclination in my soul.”

“If I have not expressed this more formally until now, it is because I was waiting for the Lord’s voice to speak more clearly to my heart. Well then, my dear parents, I have heard that voice; God has spoken very clearly and I cannot resist; I do not wish to be unfaithful to it. I did not wish to stand in its way, for it is not I who, at this moment, am asking you for the grace to allow me to follow my vocation, and you have not opposed it so far. I thank you for this, and may God be blessed for it! No, it is not I, but that great God against whom man can do nothing, that great God who disposes of us as He pleases. It is not I, but those poor unbelievers who

reach out to you and say: ‘Ah! Let him come and save us, and we, we shall pray for you, and your crown will be beautiful in Heaven.’”

“Yes, dear parents, that is how it is; and it is impossible for you not to consent to this wholeheartedly, for you are so full of love for God, my dear father and my dear mother. Oh! no, you would not wish to offend such a good Master and displease Him by opposing His plans. Now that you have consecrated me to the Lord, I belong to Him and He may dispose of me as He sees fit.”

“So, with your consent, my dear and beloved parents, I shall leave as soon as possible to join the Society of Mary. The missionaries of this fine Society are destined for the peoples of Oceania.”

Here, the devout seminarian, in order to better touch his parents’ hearts, tried to make them understand that the choice he had made was the best; his love for the Blessed Virgin, his attraction to the peoples of the Pacific, on islands more beautiful than France, where missionaries are, he said, welcomed with open arms, honoured and respected—these were the reasons he put forward to ease the pain he felt he would cause his family. Alas! This was nothing but pious exaggeration born of his tenderness.

“Moreover,” he adds, “my beloved parents, nothing has been decided in absolute terms; I wish to undergo further trials in addition to those I am already enduring. For at least a year, I shall be trained at the novitiate in Lyon, so that I may clearly discern the Lord’s will. Thus, you have nothing to fear in allowing me to go to Lyon; if I do not have a vocation for the missions, I shall not be sent there.”

“Ah! my beloved parents, as father and mother of a family, how enviable is your lot! If you cannot yourselves bring glory to God in a very direct way, you can do so through your children. It is your blood that flows through my veins, beloved parents. Ah! May I pour it out entirely for the glory of my Saviour! I shall carry you everywhere in my heart; everywhere I shall think of you; and when I teach our holy religion to my neophytes, I shall tell them to pray for you, and then a new pearl shall adorn your crown. Ah! How beautiful it will be!”

“I embrace you from the bottom of my heart, O dear and beloved parents, and I beg you to believe in the most sincere affection and eternal gratitude of one who will never cease to love and cherish you. Give my love to my dear brothers; I dare to believe, and indeed affirm, that in our separation, the greatest sacrifice lies on my part...”

The reply was not long in coming. That very day, seminarian Nivellean’s mother wrote, her eyes filled with tears, setting out all the difficulties her maternal affection could suggest to persuade her son to remain in France. Yet one senses her faith shining through all the reproaches with which her letter is filled.

On April 5, 1845, seminarian Nivellean hastened to refute, as follows, all the reasons and objections put forward by his family.

— God alone! — Paris, 5 April 1845... “Tears have flooded my eyes because of the pain I am causing my mother, yet my heart remains steadfast in its resolve. It was not out of indifference or coldness that I concealed my plan from La Pommeraye, but solely out of a desire to lessen, with the passage of time and distance, the severity of the blow that this news would deal her.”

“How can I tell you,” he added, “just how much it has cost my heart to think that I was to be separated from you, from such a dearly beloved mother, so as not to stifle the voice of the Lord which was speaking with such force in my soul; but no, that is not permitted to me, and God alone will know all the pain I have endured within my being. If I acted in this way, O my dearest mother, it was because I wished to ascertain God’s will, and I could only know it by consulting my spiritual directors, in Luçon and in Paris.”

“Your tenderness towards me led you to suggest all the reasons that might seem to stand in the way of what God is asking of me. I thank you for this with all my heart, but I have long since considered all these reasons, and it was only after the longest and most serious reflection that I wrote to you. Yes, I have weighed up before the Lord all the reasons that were to be decisive for me; for, do not think otherwise, I am not going to the missions for my own pleasure; no, I am going there solely to obey the voice of God, and to do His holy and adorable will.”

“I shall not repeat to you that I am in excellent health, for if it were not true, I would not have told you so. Admittedly, I do not, as you say, have the gift of the pulpit; but over there, there is no need for grand sermons, one need only teach, and, God willing, I shall endeavour to teach these poor savages our holy religion.”

To reinforce the point that he would be quite capable of instructing others without being a distinguished preacher, he told his mother that “they have put me, poor seminarian that I am, into a catechism class more advanced than the one I used to teach”; it is well organised and includes more than *four hundred children*.

Madame Nivellean warned her son of the depraved morals of these ‘savages of Oceania’ that he might have to face, especially as he had *such a delicate, indeed scrupulous*, conscience. To this, Charles replied: “I am all the more certain that God is calling me to this way of life because, being scrupulous in the sense you attach to the word, I should never have even considered it.”

“I am not yet a priest,” you tell me again, “but I may become one after my novitiate, and this can only bring forward the time when I shall have the joy of celebrating Holy Mass. Moreover, my dearest mother, you know that I am neither hot-headed nor impetuous; consequently, I have only made up my mind after the most careful consideration, and only after consulting my spiritual directors; and it was they themselves who authorised the steps I have taken only after imploring the Holy Spirit through fasting and prayer. I cannot, my good and tender mother, fail to respond to the Lord’s call, and you too, my dearest mother, surely you no longer wish to resist His holy will.”

“No doubt it will cost you a little at first, but this sacrifice will be far more painful for me; you have several sons to take my place and cherish you all the more, whilst I have but one mother whom I love so deeply. One day, your heart will find joy and peace again, for your sacrifice will bring upon you great blessings from the Most High. Let us therefore submit ourselves together, my dear and beloved parents, let us submit ourselves to the Lord’s will... Ah! Were I to throw myself at your feet, dear and excellent mother, to implore you to no longer stand in the way of my departure, I would not hesitate to assume this supplicating posture. But your faith will spare me that; God wills it, therefore my good mother wills it too. Oh! Thank you, my God, for having given me such a Christian mother, so submissive to Your will.”

“It is you yourself, O beloved mother, whom I entrust with the task of informing my father of my plan. I beg you to shower him with my most affectionate kisses, to accept my entreaties, and—as I am deeply convinced—this sacrifice will be for you a source of heavenly blessings.”

“And all of you, my beloved brothers and sisters, join together to convey my feelings of love to our cherished parents; love them more than ever and redouble your care for them, to help their tender hearts bear my absence and view my departure with a peace of mind. From now on, my dear brothers, you will be the joy, the happiness and comfort of our kind parents, and they will enjoy a tender tranquillity in your company.”

Mrs. Nivellean’s Christian sentiments yielded to such persistent entreaties, but, as Charles’s letter contained this sentence: “I intend to leave *as soon as possible* to enter the Marist Fathers’ house in Lyon, so as to begin my novitiate”, she held out hope that her dear son would come to see her at La Brunière, and she sent two of her children to Paris—among them Léon, whom we have seen so devoted to his brother—to see him and persuade him to make the journey to the Vendée. It was a futile effort: the moment of parting would have been too painful, the emotional turmoil too overwhelming; Charles resolved to deny himself that satisfaction, and, accompanied by his brothers, he went to board the stagecoaches that were to take him to Lyon.

On May 5, 1845, seminarian Nivellean, having obtained all the necessary authorisations, left Paris to go to the novitiate of the Society of Mary.

CHAPTER IV

La Favorite, Novitiate, Priesthood – Studies and Ministry

in Preparation for the Missions

(1845–1847)

‘La Favorite’ is the name of a property situated in one of Lyon’s suburbs, a short distance from the Church of Saint Irenaeus. The entire surrounding area still bears witness to the Christianity of the early centuries and to the steadfastness of the nineteen thousand martyrs whose precious remains rest in the crypt of the parish church. A garden and an orchard surround an elegant residence that had once served as a Christian boarding school. By agreement with the headmaster, the property had been acquired by the Marist Fathers and had become the novitiate of their fledgling society.

No sooner had he entered and been admitted to the rank of novice than Brother Nivellean expressed all his joy in the following lines, addressed to his spiritual director, Father Gelot: “It would be difficult for me to put into words the happiness and joy I feel in this sweet refuge. Can one, indeed, be happier than when one rests in peace in the arms of a tender and beloved mother, a mother as good as Mary herself! Through her, one sees peace, tranquillity and a piety as gentle as it is affectionate reigning here. The novitiate is a family of brothers who, united by the tender bonds of charity, seek only to please their common Father and their beloved Mother!” (Letter of May 17, 1845)

This house was then directed by a religious of outstanding virtue. “He was, in the words of a respected author, one of those labourers of the first hour whom God endows with special gifts, whom He arms with a generous faith and to whom He grants, before their time, all the wisdom and prudence of the elderly.” Such was the figure of the Reverend Father Maitrepierre, amidst these novices of all ages and from all regions, whose very name seemed to foreshadow his irresistible influence over souls. All those for whom he served as spiritual director and father cherish his memory with the respect and veneration that the saints inspire in us.

The testimonies of this man of God are the first to come to mind in revealing to us what Brother Nivellean was like during his novitiate. “What can one say of that year spent in seclusion and trials? One could only quote every article of the rule and repeat, after even the most minute points as well as the most important ones: *Bene omnia fecit* [he has done everything well]. Yes, he did well in all the things required of him by the Rule: religious silence, perfect punctuality in all the exercises of the house, angelic piety in the sanctuary, fervour in his visits to the Blessed Sacrament, and diligence in serving at the altars and in receiving Holy Communion, which he did very frequently.”

In turn, all his brothers in the novitiate were keen to pay tribute to the virtue of their young companion. Having come from very different regions, there were bound to be differences and contrasts in their assessments of people and things. Yet they were unanimous in their praise of Brother Charles Nivellean in every respect. In this account, we shall confine ourselves to quoting the testimonies of those who had a closer relationship with him.

We shall first give the floor to Fr. Dumont, a native of the Normandy coast: “I recall,” he wrote, “the joy we derived from our conversations, listening to Brother Nivellean speak of God and the salvation of souls. He was a soul ardent for virtue and so filled with the Spirit of God! I have rarely seen anyone embrace all the exercises of the novitiate with such zeal. He was so deeply convinced of the necessity of perfection in a priest and a missionary that nothing discouraged him during that probationary year. I often picture him, with his affability, his ever-even temper, his piety so lively and heartfelt, setting enthusiasm and a good example wherever he went. If only I could go into more detail! In a word, to recount the life of Fr. Nivellean, it would suffice to say what he *must have been*, and that would be to say *what he was!*... a model for all his brothers.”

Among the most fervent novices of that time was one who had only recently arrived from Lorraine and whose name was Jean-Baptiste Moulin. Stricken by illness, he remained at La Favorite after his novitiate and died a few years later, having led a life unknown to men but rich in merit before God.

Father Moulin said of his young friend: “In his dealings with his brothers in the novitiate, Brother Nivellean was affectionate and exquisitely polite. Full of charity towards all, he was

quick to render them any service they might need, whilst also avoiding anything that might have caused them any distress. His piety did not make him austere in conversation; indeed, he was quite cheerful, but with that gentle and modest cheerfulness which we observe in the lives of the saints. Thus, one's presence in his company was always a source of both pleasure and edification..."

"He was humble; I do not recall ever hearing a word from his lips that smacked of vanity. Far from relying on his own strengths, he readily sought to understand others' ways of thinking and acting, so that he might conform to them, or at least benefit from them when the occasion arose."

"He was deeply mortified and very inwardly focused. Something he said to me one day led me to believe that he exercised great vigilance over his senses, and that he even reproached himself for things that a great many pious souls would not have paid any heed to. Nothing ever happened..."

"His patience was remarkable, and he demonstrated this during a rather serious illness he suffered whilst he was a novice. One night, when he was in great pain, I had the privilege of being chosen to keep vigil by his side. What a source of edification he was to me during the few hours I spent by his bedside! Seeing that it was already late, he urged me repeatedly to go and get some rest, so great was his fear that anyone should tire themselves in the slightest because of him... To tell you the truth, Brother Nivellean was an excellent novice, and subsequently a fervent religious, for he had a singular love for our Rules. His great desire was to take them with him to the far reaches of Oceania, so that he might reread those pages and draw inspiration from their spirit."

To this testimony from the deceased, we wish to add that of the few survivors who undertook the novitiate exercises with him. The Reverend Father Ducrettet, who came from Savoy, wrote to us on June 26, 1888: "What I can attest to regarding the much-missed Fr. Charles Nivellean—for I have never forgotten him—is that, during the months of the novitiate which I had the good fortune to spend with him, I greatly admired his character, which was always amiable, obliging and devoted to everyone. I would add that during study periods, when we were together, he was wholly absorbed in his duty. He never looked up nor took any notice

of what was happening around him. In church and during prayers, the joy on his face reflected what was in his heart.”

“In all his conduct, one could see that he strove to put into practice this precept of Our Lord Jesus Christ: *‘Discite a me, quia mitis sum et humilis corde’* — ‘Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart’. He had become so master of himself that I never saw him lose his composure, whatever trials he had to endure, whatever labours, hardships and setbacks he had to suffer. Towards his neighbour, he fulfilled to the letter all the duties of true charity, of which he was later to give heroic proof on the islands of Madeira, in Rio de Janeiro, and finally in the Tonga Islands.”

“The divine Guest of our tabernacles often inspired Brother Nivellean to utter words ablaze with love, and one need only cast a glance at this excellent religious to feel oneself drawn into fervour.”

In January 1889, the Reverend Father Tricand de la Goutte summarised his memories as follows: “I lived with the excellent Father Nivellean, and the sight of him always struck me as that of a true little saint. In everything he resembled his heavenly Mother, through his modesty, his gentleness and his piety. I have often, during the retreats I have preached, drawn on these memories to lead souls more effectively to virtue.”

Finally, the Reverend Father M. Gay,¹⁶ who had “the good fortune to undertake the month-long Exercises of St. Ignatius with him in 1846,” assures us that no one had ever seen a novice whose character was more amiable, whose heart more open, or whose charity more benevolent and humble. The mere sight of him inspired a love of piety. Whenever one had the good fortune to converse with him during a break or a walk, one came away with a sense of virtue whose impression lingered throughout the day. Everything about him exuded the spirit of Mary and of our dear little Society.

We have taken care to quote these testimonies at length, for they more than make up for all the words and acts of virtue we would have liked to highlight in the conduct of ‘Brother

¹⁶ Provincial of the Society of Mary, in Paris.

Nivellean'. These accounts say enough to convince us that his outward demeanour, so orderly and modest, was a reflection of the order that reigned within the depths of his soul.

Nor shall we dwell further on the fervour with which 'Brother Nivellean' devoted himself to all the spiritual exercises customary in the novitiates of the Society of Mary. The recitation of the Office in choir, manual labour, penance, explanations of the Rule, —in short, the young novice approached all these with the joyful disposition of a true child of the Blessed Virgin.

The religious talks given by the Reverend Novice Master were the object of his particularly devout attention. Every day he carefully noted down the passages he deemed most suitable for forming his heart in virtue. The following notes will show us in their true light the everyday reflections of the fervent novice and his diligence in putting them into practice:

"Pride. — Pride is the sole source of our sorrows; it is man's tormentor. Why kill oneself for the sake of praise? — Oh! how false, self-serving and short-sighted are the praises of men. — How I pity the vain!

Purity of intention. — One must bring great purity of intention to one's studies, as to all one's works; otherwise, one will not see the truth... Man is so made that his intellect is subordinate to his heart and his will. If you do not have a pure and upright intention, if you study, for example, to appear learned, self-love will cast clouds and mists over your mind and your intellect, and you will not succeed.

Obedience. — *Vir obediens loquetur victorias* [the obedient man shall bear witness to victories] — Let us never say: 'This pleases me, this appeals to me'; but rather: 'God wills it, so I too will it, up to the limit that God also wills. I do not understand the reason for this command at present, but I shall understand it later; I believe it, since I am told so.' Oh! Let us never do things simply out of personal inclination; we would get nowhere. God wills this now; I will it too...

I am at an age when I must be taught. — I do not see this, I do not see *the reason for that*; let us never speak like this, but let us repeat: I am a novice to be taught, by way of authority.

Contemplation. — It consists in uniting our faculties with God: *Conversio omnium facultatum nostrarum ad Deum* [the conversion of all our faculties to God]... Distraction, on the other hand,

is: *Conversio ad creaturas* [conversion to creatures]... Coming and going, idle talk, which springs solely from nature—all this disturbs us, all this draws us away from solitude.”

Every Marist should be stirred by this thought: the holiness of my Mother... that is my model. Oh! What a sweet image! — To be gentle, humble, to live unknown, hidden, unnoticed, alone under my Mother’s gaze, clinging to her, following her everywhere to draw near to Jesus—to the tabernacle to adore him, to Calvary to sympathise with him, to the manger to love him... We love all that is small. If I live very small, very small, God will love me. If I make no noise, I shall hurt no one. Let us remember this favourite maxim of our venerable Founder: *Goodness makes no noise; noise does no good.*

Forgiving insults. — Although I am no one’s enemy, I must forbid my heart to harbour even the slightest resentment at any lack of consideration or poor manners. One must, they say, defend one’s rights, preserve one’s dignity! What a fine thing! Will not charity suffer as a result? And is it not better to set one’s heart free? No mockery, no hurtful words! — Nevertheless, one may well feel in one’s heart the arrow that pierces you, without thereby failing in the virtue of gentleness that remains silent, of patience that endures, of generosity that forgives. Souls that feel nothing are like ‘*pachyderms*’ and, consequently, incapable of virtue.”

From these reflections, we see with what vigilance Brother Nivellean examined his heart. God responded with intimate consolations that led him to write to his mother: “*My life here is full of delights.* Oh! Beloved mother, put an end to your worries; it is impossible for me to be any happier than I am. You have given me unspeakable joy by telling me that, every day, you raise your maternal and supplicating hands to the Lord, so that He, that good Father, may deign to bless His child and yours. Oh! Please do continue, and God, who knows that you pray to Him with such purity of intention, will certainly enable me to fulfil His holy will, the one and only thing I desire...” (Letter of July 7, 1845).

Brother Nivellean was ordained a deacon in December 1845. This new step, which would bring him so close to the summit of the mountain of the priesthood, inspired in him, as always, mixed feelings of fear and hope, of joy and pious sadness. “I am going to draw closer to the adorable person of Jesus,” he wrote, “alas! this thought fills my soul with a very legitimate fear; poor as I am, devoid of all virtues. However,” he adds, “I have a gentle trust in the Lord’s

goodness; He knows my wretchedness and will have mercy on me. Yes, I consider myself very fortunate to strengthen the bonds that bind me forever to the service of this loving Master. What joy it will be for me when, in a few weeks' time, I am allowed to carry his adorable body and touch it with my own hands. How I long for this lovely Saviour to look upon me then with a favourable eye and not find my hands too impure to approach His sacred Body."

Brother Nivellean's fervour was evident throughout his correspondence, and one day his mother, edified by the zeal her dear son showed in mortifying his inclinations, wrote to him urging him to moderate his penances somewhat and not to ruin his health. She knew, because she had seen for herself, whilst he was with her, just what Charles was capable of. To allay his mother's fears, he replied, dated July 7, 1845: "You believe, dearest mother, that your children resemble you in every way. You kindly assume that I perform many acts of penance. Alas! Yet you know full well that I am not a man given to mortifying myself and that I would not make a good Trappist. Moreover, even if I wanted to crucify my flesh and ruin my bodily constitution, I could not; the wise superiors whom Divine Providence has placed in charge of my guidance would strongly oppose it, for, as we are called to work for the salvation of souls, we need good health. So do not worry; we do nothing that might impair it; our activities are varied, and our recreation is quite frequent. Moreover, we live in a charming country house surrounded by magnificent grounds which are at our disposal; the air there is very pure. So, you can see that I am not to be pitied too much."

A little later, he thanked his family for the money they had sent him, telling them that he had no need of it for himself, but was leaving it, as his allowance, in the hands of his superiors, so that he might accustom himself to poverty. "I must force myself," he added, "to deny my heart the satisfaction of repeating here the feelings it experienced on receiving your dear news. Your thoughtfulness in sending me money touches me, not because I am attached to it, but because of this token of affection towards me..."

The graces of his diaconate ordination prompted him to write to Fr. Gelot on January 26, 1846: "What a beautiful day it was! Why was it not longer than the others! It is impossible to express on this paper all the feelings I experienced then! My initial fears had finally given way to a wholly filial trust. It seemed to me that I loved my God and that I was loved by Him. A

gentle peace reigned in my soul, and I then realised keenly that God truly treats as friends those whom He binds to His divine service. Before that happy moment, I would never have believed that it was so sweet to consecrate oneself to the Lord. I would never have suspected that He allows the soul to taste such pure, such perfect joy when one approaches His holy tabernacles.”

The great question of a vocation for foreign missions remained Madame Nivellean’s chief concern. She always flattered herself that either her dear son would be forced, for health reasons, to abandon his plan, or that his superiors, deeming him unsuitable, would send him back home. One day, in the hope of having the final say on the matter, she even went so far as to reproach Charles for not opening his heart sufficiently to his mother. The poor novice, deeply saddened, hastened to reply: “No, it is not so, O dearest mother, for your child hides nothing from you. You wish to know my future, but I myself do not yet know it. All I can tell you is that my desires are yours, for you and I wish only to do the Lord’s will. Well then! When that will is made known to me through the voice of my superiors, we shall come together to give thanks and bless the good Lord, and then, with zeal and joy, we shall hasten to carry it out. Ah! If I were faint-hearted enough to procrastinate, you would be the first, O my dear mother, to urge me to obey the Lord, for you know only too well that this is the sole reason we are on this earth of exile. Once my superiors have spoken to me, you will be the first to know their decision, and if the good Lord wishes me to be amongst my dear family, fear not: a false sense of shame will not be able to delay my return for a single moment...”

A little further on, no doubt seeking to dispel the sombre thoughts that haunted his brothers’ imaginations regarding his departure for distant lands, he sought to distract them with the kind suggestion *of a short pleasure trip*: “One can,” he writes, “reach America in a very short time; there, before long, a railway will take you from the United States to California, then you will board an American steamer which, in a few days, or perhaps a few weeks, will carry you to Oceania. Then we shall return cheerfully to La Brunière, to our dear little castle, my darlings, after having seen Charles and travelled round the world. This very pleasant, very interesting journey can be made in a short space of time. So, if the good Lord sends me to Oceania, you will come to see me, and I shall be delighted to return the visit. There are plans to cut through the Isthmus of Panama or to build a railway there; this project will make communications very

easy between Oceania and Europe... So, you can see that, if I do leave, there is nothing to stop you from coming to pay me a little visit..." (Letter of February 22, 1846).

However, the novitiate year was drawing to a close; Brother Nivellean, too young to be ordained a priest but nevertheless happy to extend his probationary period, longed for the sweet moment when he might ascend the final steps of the sanctuary and set off for his beloved missions. To this end, more immediate preparation was becoming necessary; he explains this as follows in a letter dated May 22, 1846: "I left La Favorite nearly fifteen days ago, and now I have the good fortune to be living under the watchful eye of my first superiors. My main occupation at present is to devote myself to study: knowledge is so essential for anyone who wishes to teach others! Thus, I am preparing myself to fulfil well the duties that Divine Providence may see fit to entrust to me, once I have received the holy anointing of the priesthood."

"It is true," he adds in a letter dated June 9, 1846, "that I am continuing my novitiate here, since it lasts eighteen months, but from another perspective, I am devoting myself more specifically to studies in preparation for the ministry of souls."

Delighted, as he told us, to be living closer to his superiors, he was at the same time able to witness their virtues and be inspired to follow their examples, particularly those of the venerable Fr. Cholleton, former Vicar General of Lyon, who, having distinguished himself through his learning in the chairs of theology at the Major Seminary, edified those amongst whom he had come to mingle as a simple Marist religious through his profound modesty, his exemplary regularity, and his spirit of poverty.

"I find myself very happy," wrote Brother Nivellean, "in my new position, and here, as at La Favorite, the tender and good Virgin Mary pours out her most remarkable favours in abundance upon her children. Seeing all the tenderness and anxious concern in your hearts towards me, O beloved parents, tears would have wet my eyelids had I not made an effort to hold them back. You think I am in distress, that my heart is suffering: oh! I beg you, do not be under any such illusion, for neither sorrows nor worries, with their dark retinues, have come to assail it, and my soul admits only sweet and tranquil peace, only pure and holy joy. If I had had

any sorrows, dear mother, you would have known of them, for, I repeat, your child hides nothing from you.”

Just then, the Most Reverend Father Colin, Superior General, arrived from Rome, bringing a dispensation from the age requirement for Brother Nivellean. Our pious novice announced this happy news to Father Gelot and exclaimed with rapture: “If only I could, at this very moment, carried on the swift wings of the wind, transport myself to your side and share with you the feelings that are surging in my soul... I am therefore to receive the anointing of the priesthood at the forthcoming ordination on September 19, 1846!... May this thought, my dearest Director, whilst filling me with joy, also humble and overwhelm me! Yes, I look forward with joy and gladness to that day—for me the most beautiful of all—when I shall be granted the privilege of offering up the pure and spotless Victim, when I shall be granted the privilege of celebrating the most august and most sacred Mystery, the one most pleasing to God and the most meritorious and consoling for us. But I cannot help but tremble when I reflect on the qualities required by this incomparable favour, which no man can merit. What purity! What holiness! What love! And I, alas! who am I?”

The Nivellean family, in turn, were informed of this momentous news. It was decided that they would go to witness the double consecration of the newly elected priest, who was due to make his religious profession around the same time. As they sensed the resolve Charles had made never to return to his homeland, his devout parents were all the more willing to go along with this plan, wishing, through their presence, to ascertain their son’s state of mind and, if necessary, to endorse his complete dedication to the Lord. Mrs. Nivellean therefore travelled with her daughter Clarice as far as Lyon, and both attended—shedding tears of joy and holy submission—the twin ceremonies of taking his religious vows as a Marist on September 17 and the ordination to the priesthood, which took place two days later, on September 19, 1846.¹⁷

Great indeed was the joy of both son and mother at being reunited, but even more worthy of God’s gaze was the spectacle of the sacrifice that was about to be made. It was an eternal farewell to the earth, to their homeland, to family, to friends, and to the sweetest and most legitimate affections that these holy souls were about to exchange. “He spoke to us constantly,”

¹⁷ On that very day, the Most Holy Virgin appeared to two poor little shepherds on the mountain of La Salette.

wrote his sister Clarice, “of his burning desire to set off for Oceania as soon as possible and to be part of the first group of missionaries to depart; ah! one must not have mentioned coming to see us at La Brunière to bid us farewell. His sole thought, his whole heart, was to go, as soon as possible, to win souls for Jesus Christ.”

Father Nivellean, accompanied by his dear mother and his beloved sister, went up to Fourvières, where he wished to offer the first fruits of his priesthood and renew the offering of his very self. Clad in the sacred vestments which his dear family had embroidered or procured for him, he celebrated the Holy Mysteries with a fervour easier to imagine than to describe.

But, alas! the cruel hour of parting was about to strike. We shall refrain from describing the anguish that tore at the poor mother’s heart as she embraced her dear son for the last time. Tears were her only response, flowing more freely with every word of consolation her son offered her. However steeled their hearts might have been against such emotions, their eyes betrayed their grief. Charles, Clarice, and their mother remained there for a long time, weeping in silence, unable to exchange a single word. No, faith does not prevent nature from asserting its rights, but after these necessary moments of solace, it restores their courage and, with eyes raised to Heaven, prompts them to say: “God wills it! *Ita, Pater, quia sic fuit placitum ante te!* [Yes, Father, for so it seemed pleasing in your sight].”

Madame Nivellean gave Charles her final blessing and set off with her daughter for La Brunière, followed by the delighted gazes of the angels and the saints. God alone knew the secret of the family’s moving scenes upon the return of the two travellers; God alone, too, will have known how to grant them a fitting reward.

Filled to the brim with the graces of his priesthood, Father Nivellean, in turn, addressed the following letter to Father Gelot:

“Lyon, 21 October 1846. — They have thus passed, my dearest Director, those beautiful days, those days so great and so memorable when the Lord was to work so many wonders within me; when He was to lift me from my lowly state to count me amongst His friends and the princes of His court. Your child is now a priest and a religious! Yes, and I say this with joy, but also with humility. However, allow me now to set aside my insignificance and my wretchedness so that I may speak to you only of the Lord’s mercies!”

“17 September 1846 was the blessed day on which I was granted the grace to renounce everything in the world and myself, to bind myself to God with unbreakable bonds, and to follow in the footsteps of the divine Saviour of the world. I had, from afar, welcomed the break of dawn, and the night before, in the silence of the night, I was still thinking of the happiness that awaited me. ‘Tomorrow,’ I said to myself, ‘tomorrow I shall be the beloved child, the privileged child of Mary,’ and this thought filled my soul with an indescribable joy. I compared my happiness to that of the lowliest of slaves who were told that, in a few hours’ time, he would become the son of a great king. But this comparison seemed to me very feeble and far removed from reality. How can I convey to you all the feelings that surged within my heart when, before the whole heavenly Court, in the hands of my good and tender Mother, I bound myself irrevocably to her and to her Society; especially when that most lovable Mother welcomed me into the number of her children. It seemed to me that all the heavenly treasures were open to me, and my trust in the goodness of Jesus and Mary knew no bounds.”

“Purified, as I had hoped, by this new baptism, ah! with what confidence I immediately prepared myself to receive the anointing of the priesthood. As a child of Mary, presented by her to Our Lord, it seemed to me that I had nothing to fear.”

“Comforted by these thoughts, I went joyfully to my ordination. I lack the space to tell you of the emotions that filled me during the ceremony and on the day I offered the Holy Victim for the first time; besides, true piety does not consist in these emotions of the soul or these outpourings of the heart. However, I should like to tell you, my dear Director, that I did not realise, before I was given the opportunity to celebrate Mass, *that a priest experiences such happiness in offering the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.*”

The priestly dignity with which Fr. Nivellean had just been invested enabled him to devote himself to all the works of zeal prescribed by the Society’s Constitutions: preaching, hearing confessions in the communities of the town and the diocese, and especially amongst the ‘Little Brothers of Mary’, whom their holy founder, the Reverend Father Champagnat, a Marist, was so keen to keep bound by the ties of a gentle and respectful subordination to their fathers, the priests of the Society of Mary. Wherever the young Father Nivellean went, people were deeply edified by his ardent zeal for souls, by his charity in relieving his brothers of any duties too

burdensome for their age or infirmities, and finally by his fervour at the altar when he celebrated the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

Our young priest's stay in Lyon often gave him the opportunity to see and hear missionaries from the New World. The martyrs of China and Tong-King [i.e. Vietnam], in turn, came to him through the *Annals* to keep alive in his heart that sacred fire which ever consumed him. "You may ask me," he wrote, "what I think I will become. Ah! That question makes me tremble with joy; I hasten to answer you, pointing to Oceania: *Haec requies mea* [this is my resting place]; yes, it shall be the place of my rest! How this thought makes my poor heart throb with joy!"

Alongside these expressions of zeal, this devout child of Mary also possessed, to a most commendable degree, a spirit of proselytism; he was so keen to see a great number of labourers come to the Lord's vineyard; his letters to Fr. Gelot bear witness to this. "So, you will send me alone from the Vendée, my dear Director. Ah! May one of my brothers leave your ranks and hasten to join us. It is not I alone who desire this; the good and tender Mother Mary desires it too; she wants other people from the Vendée under her glorious banners.¹⁸ Why stifle the pure and ardent zeal of my dear fellow students, who burn with the desire to devote themselves to the foreign missions? They have heard the sighs of the poor pagans of Oceania; they have lamented their misfortune. God wills it; what more is needed?... And besides, if you send from your ranks one of those who have just received the holy anointing of the priesthood, the Lord will increase the zeal and fervour of the others; He will stir up new vocations, and thus His glory will shine all the more brightly within our Catholic Vendée."

Whilst Father Nivellean was writing these lines, Captain Marceau was criss-crossing the waters of the Pacific at the helm of the *Arche d'Alliance*, thus becoming the missionary of missionaries. Soon a Marist bishop, an apostolic vicar, arrived in France to oversee the work of his mission. Preparations were made for the departure of the labourers of the Gospel, who were to go ahead of him to these islands and spread out across the various archipelagos entrusted to the Society of Mary. The hour of departure was drawing near for our young apostle.

¹⁸ Her wishes were granted, and several Marists from the Vendée, in addition to those carrying out their ministry in France, have been sent to New Zealand and New Caledonia.

In September 1847, he was seen among those who bid farewell at the foot of the altar, in the chapel of our residence in Lyon, before his superiors, a large number of his fellow religious and a devout congregation of the faithful gathered from all parts of the city. After a moving address on the noble mission they were about to undertake, the fifteen missionaries¹⁹ made their consecration to the Blessed Virgin, inscribed their names on a ribbon already bearing those of all the Marists who had gone abroad, and enclosed it in a golden heart which they hung around the neck of the statue of Mary. After this consecration, they struck up the farewell hymn, to which the entire congregation responded. Once the blessing of the Blessed Sacrament had been completed, followed by the prayers for the journey, the missionaries went, amidst a profound silence, to give a final embrace to their assembled brothers. It was the farewell embrace. A profound emotion then took hold of every heart; many tears were shed, and it was these alone that brought the ceremony to a close, thus bearing witness to the sentiments of charity towards God who inspires this parting, towards those poor souls who commanded it, and towards Heaven which will be their just reward.

¹⁹ Here are the names of the fifteen religious priests and brothers of the Society of Mary, destined for the Apostolic Vicariates of Central Oceania and Melanesia:

Fr. Chapuy (André), of Avignon.
Fr. Chatelut (Eugène), from Lyon.
Fr. Ducrettet (Eugène), from Annecy.
Fr. Gagnière (Mathurin), from Clermont.
Fr. Goujon (Prosper), from Belley.
Fr. Mondon (Hippolyte), from Valence.
Fr. Nivellean (Charles), from Luçon.
Fr. Palazy (François), from Alby.
Fr. Piéplu (Alfred), from Bayeux.
Fr. Trapenard (Pierre), from Clermont.

COADJUTOR BROTHERS:

Br. Mallet, from Lyon.
Br. Véran, from Avignon.
Br. Conil, from Valence.
Br. Barbary, from Cahors.
Br. Reboul, from Fréjus.

PART TWO
THE APOSTOLATE OF FR. NIVELLEAU
(1847–1852)

“My dear Society of Mary! May I,
more and more, grow attached to your members and
especially to those who lead you! May I,
more and more, come to share your spirit and
reflect it in my conduct.”

(Letter of Fr. Nivellean, 28 August 1849)

CHAPTER ONE
Departure for Oceania – Stops in Madeira, Brazil, etc.
(1847–1850)

On September 8, 1847, Fr. Nivellean left Lyon with the other missionaries, bound for Marseille, where they were to embark. Bishop Douarre, Vicar Apostolic of New Caledonia, was awaiting the generous cohort of apostles in that city, as he had been informed. After a few weeks of ministry in the city and the surrounding areas, whilst awaiting the day of departure, he took part in the religious ceremony for the blessing of the *Stella del Mare*, the fifth ship dispatched by the Society of Oceania for the service of the missions.

An altar had been set up at the stern of the vessel, which was at anchor in the harbour, amidst ships from all nations. Gathered beside the altar were the guests, the passengers and their relatives, amongst whom were the Marist missionaries, along with twelve Sisters of Saint Vincent de Paul, Lazarist missionaries, and members of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts

bound for the American coasts, as well as four young men from leading French families travelling on board for an educational journey: Mr. de la Myre-Mory, Mr. de Fitz-James, Mr. de Dreux-Brézé, and Mr. Paul de Lorge accompanied by Mr. Nepveux, his tutor.

Opposite the altar, in the front row, stood His Grace the Bishop of Marseille with his clergy; next came the young captain, Viscount des Cars, with his noble father, General Duke des Cars on his right, and his first mate and the ship's doctor on his left; finally, the representatives of the Society of Oceania. At the bow of the ship stood, in perfect order, the crew, made up of selected men, led by the lieutenant and the boatswain.

The Bishop of Amata [Douarre] celebrated the Holy Sacrifice in an atmosphere of the deepest reverence. Bishop Douarre then spoke a few words, full of solemnity and in the form of a farewell. He concluded by asking for the bishop's blessing for the passengers and for himself, as he put it, a poor missionary, and then, in a spontaneous gesture, fell with all his brothers at the prelate's feet. The Bishop of Marseille tried in vain to help him up and had to yield to his request. This unexpected scene made a deep impression on the assembly; everyone's eyes filled with tears, and there was a moment of indescribable emotion.²⁰

On Saturday October 23, 1847, the eve of the feast day of the Blessed Virgin, they set sail before a vast crowd gathered at the harbour. The departing group responded to the cheers and emotional farewells by singing the *Ave maris stella* and the *Nunc dimittis*. "All the voices joined together," recounts a nun on board, "and the air resounded with these pious chants. Oh, how moving it was! How many tears of emotion, gratitude and love were shed all around us."

"The ship, blessed with splendid weather, swiftly carried us away from our dearest loved ones. Soon the blessed summit of Notre-Dame de la Garde vanished from view, yet our hearts did not leave it; more than ever, they were fixed upon the heart of She who dwells in that sanctuary of hope... How many thoughts came to my mind! But my overriding thought was this: *You are leaving everything for God!* This joyful truth filled my whole being with the purest happiness..."

²⁰ Extract from *The Life of Bishop Douarre, First Apostolic Vicar of New Caledonia*, volume II, pages 202 ff.

Crosses are, especially for the missionary, a precious blessing; our devout travellers were to receive them in abundance. Already a Marist missionary, Fr. Piéplu, had been forced to remain in Marseille, confined to a bed of suffering, and could not set out again until the following year.

What a sorrow this was for Fr. Nivellean, who had found in him such a warm friendship during his novitiate year and his stay in France, and who had rejoiced to see him called, like himself, to apostolic work. God, however, was to reunite them once more in circumstances we shall see later, and grant both of them a death worthy of envy.

Four days after leaving Marseille, the ship had already passed through the Strait of Gibraltar when a missionary, Father Mondon, in turn fell ill with a high fever and soon found himself in grave danger. Fortunately, they were not far from the islands of Madeira; the captain, on the doctor's advice, agreed to call there, and the dear patient was left on this island, whose climate is renowned for its health-giving properties. The good Father Nivellean immediately offered to stay with Father Mondon, and lavished upon him the most tender and devoted care. He will himself recount the vagaries of his journey in the following letters addressed to Father Gelot.

"19 November 1847. — Look for a small, isolated island in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, seven to eight hundred leagues from our beautiful France, and you will find your son's new home. He is no longer a passenger on the *Stella del Mare*; he is now a resident of Madeira. 'Ah!' you say, 'what an intrepid apostolic missionary! He has given up at the very start of his career... What has become of those magnificent plans, those admirable projects for the conversion of the pagans?...'"

"With all my heart, dearest Director, I applaud all these words, and I am happy to laugh at my own bravery and courage; and yet, now, another cause—alas, a rather sad one—keeps me in Funchal. The Lord has chosen to test his children; he has chosen to make us walk ceaselessly along the royal path of the Cross... Oh! How hopeful we are for the future of our mission, for we have no doubt that the suffering of our dear confreres will be for us the source of the most remarkable graces."

"At the time of our departure, we were obliged, to our great regret, to leave one of our Fathers behind in Lyon, as he would not have been able to endure the hardships of the crossing. In Marseille, another fell ill two days before the ship set sail; and we had to part ways once more

with this dear confrere; we could do no more than pray for his recovery. These were indeed many trials; but that was not enough: the Lord was asking for another victim. Not a week had passed since we had bidden farewell for the last time to Our Lady of the Guard, when one of us was struck down by a very serious illness. Everything about his condition seemed to point to a severe cerebral fever. The illness was taking such a heavy toll on our colleague that it was not thought prudent to leave him on the ship; he was disembarked at Madeira.”

“I was chosen to remain in Funchal with the sick man; I bless the good Lord for this with all my heart; my lot is truly enviable; my mission is so noble. I consider myself infinitely fortunate to be able to bring relief to my beloved brother on his bed of suffering, and to be able to render him all the services he requires. If I were to do this well, the august Blessed Mother Mary, whose child he is and whose minister he is, would reward me abundantly.”

“Ever since I have been in Funchal, I have had the good fortune to celebrate the Holy Mysteries every day; this is my sweetest and greatest consolation; I endeavour, in this way—by preparing myself as best I can and thanking Our Lord with all my heart for the outstanding grace He has bestowed upon me—to make up for the shortcomings in my other devotions, which cannot be carried out very well due to the constant care required by my patient...”

This devotion was truly heroic. As the sole carer, in this foreign land, for his fellow priest, with no possible contact with the local inhabitants, Father Nivellean remained, night and day, by the side of the poor sufferer, bestowing upon him, alongside the medicines prescribed by the doctors, the gentle consolations of the faith and the kind inspirations of his charity. His breviary, devotional readings and the recitation of his rosary constituted all his occupations during the rare intervals afforded him by the care of his dear patient. This care extended even to the most arduous tasks, given his frailty, and often exceeded the limits of ordinary strength.

After a three-month stay, the two missionaries continued their journey towards Oceania. The voyage was to be long and arduous. On their way, they passed through Pernambuco and Bahia and remained for six months in Rio de Janeiro, before finding a ship to take them to Valparaíso. On July 8, 1848, Fr. Nivellean wrote to his former Director:

“Like the unfaithful Israelite, I wander here and there, from town to town, before reaching the Promised Land of Oceania, that land which the Lord has been pleased to give me as an

inheritance. I am once again going to fold up my tent and will not pitch it again until I have greeted the angels who watch over the seas of the Pacific Ocean... Together with my fellow missionary, Fr. Mondon, of whom I am now the *trusted companion*, we shall set out in a few days for Valparaiso, and from there we shall proceed to Tahiti. That's quite a few stops along the way, and we are not surprised by them; is not the soldier who leaves his army corps obliged to make his way, stage by stage, to the place of battle?"

It was a life of trials to which God subjected the patience of our zealous missionary, but, as he himself said, such a life certainly has its charms, and what life is not filled with delights when one is with Jesus and Mary. "Despite our utter unworthiness, this good Master and this tender Mother have never ceased to watch over us, as over their beloved children."

On February 11, 1849, he set sail from Callao, the port of Lima, for Tahiti, and was in the best of health, as we learn from a letter from Rev. Father Eymard, Superior of Lyon, to his family. "I need say nothing," the letter reads, "of Father Nivellean's admirable conduct during his stay in Rio, in Valparaíso, and on board the ship. You are fortunate to have such a son, Madam, and generous to have given him to God and to Oceania. Such a sacrifice has earned you many graces."

At last, he arrived in 'Uvea (Wallis) on a passing ship, which was already carrying Bishop Douarre and several missionaries who had set out from France in October 1848. Wallis, the first island where he encountered our missions, seemed to him like a part of that longed-for land for which he had sacrificed everything. He wished to inform his Superior General, the Most Reverend Father Colin, of this in the following letter:

"Uvea, May 9, 1849. — Here I am in Wallis, amongst our dear Oceanian people; I am overjoyed. If only I could convey to them the feelings my heart is experiencing! If only I had the gift of tongues, so that I might set to work at once! We were received with great kindness by Bishop Bataillon; although I do not yet know where His Grace will place me, I have no concerns in this regard; provided I do God's will, all else is of no consequence to me."

The missionaries' poverty inspires in him nothing but respect, joy and veneration: "Is it not our greatest treasure, since it makes us like Jesus and Mary... Ah! My Most Reverend Father,

please pray and ask others to pray that your child may become holy and not spoil the work entrusted to him.”

Father Nivellean had initially been assigned to New Caledonia; but a letter reveals how he came to be attached to the mission in Central Oceania. We shall quote only the following passages, which relate to the innermost sentiments of his soul:

“Wallis Island, 28 August 1849. — My Most Reverend Father, you have deigned to write to me; what kindness on your part! How deeply moved I am by your entirely paternal concern. How happy one is in a Society where one can count as many fathers as one has superiors! Dear Society of Mary! May I, more and more, grow attached to your members and especially to those who lead you; may I, more and more, enter into your spirit and reflect it in all my conduct!... Now, I have but one wish: that Jesus and Mary may never allow me to stray from our holy Rules. I wish, at all costs, to live as a religious and as a Marist. Certainly, I have come to Oceania solely to sanctify myself further and to earn a more glorious crown in Heaven, whilst at the same time bringing glory to God here on earth; and would this be the case if I were to stray from the straight path you have laid out for us? I do not believe so; therefore, I am absolutely determined never to live alone, and I know that in this, my Most Reverend Father, the Society will fulfil my wishes.”

“The few words you have deigned to write to me have greatly comforted me, and I have been deeply moved by your most fatherly kindness. I prostrate myself at your feet, my Most Reverend Father, to receive your holy blessing; deign to grant it to me and to all those whose salvation will be entrusted to me. Oh! How much we need, in these parts, help from on High. How keenly one feels one’s own powerlessness when it comes to the conversion of these unbelievers.”

Wallis, a mission so flourishing under the leadership of its first apostle, Bishop Bataillon, was not the land chosen as Father Nivellean’s inheritance. God was preparing him for a ministry of devotion more taxing on his zeal than that of keeping a faithful flock on the paths of the faith and in religious practice. This is how he informed his Superior General:

“Tonga, 12 March 1850. — After travelling the world for three years, I have at last settled down. Tonga is the mission which Divine Providence has just assigned to me. I can only bless

the Lord and repeat the words of the prophet: *Funes ceciderunt mihi in præclaris* [the lines have fallen for me in goodly places]... I am infinitely overjoyed to be with the venerable Fr. Chevron. What a blessing it is to be able to train for the apostolic life under such a fine teacher. The time I spent in Wallis, though long, was very useful to me. I have come to know the spirit of the Apostolic Vicar and his approach to the missions; I have begun to learn the languages of this country and have strengthened my health. I have lived in contemplation and retreat with the excellent Father Mériaux. However, my Most Reverend Father, I still have much to reproach myself for. I must often lament my lukewarmness. Alas! How I fear that on the Last Day, our august Queen will not find in me the traits of her divine Son. I shall endeavour to renew myself in the spirit of my holy vocation alongside Fr. Chevron, who is more fervent than a novice. May Jesus, my divine model, deign to impart to me a little of his spirit and enable me to live by his life.”

Father Chevron, of whom our young missionary speaks in such glowing terms, deserved, based on his virtues, the veneration he has always inspired in his brothers and his neophytes. “His example inspired the pursuit of the highest perfection,” writes one missionary. “Prayer, the Stations of the Cross, frequent visits to the Blessed Sacrament, and the constant awareness of God’s presence are so natural to this excellent Father that it is impossible to spend any time with him without coming to love these practices, which blend so well with the hidden life. Added to this is a character fundamentally full of kindness.”

“Life is truly very sweet with the Reverend Father Chevron,” says Father Nivellean, “so, when we are together, we do not weep often, I assure you.” In a word, the heart of this excellent superior was the sanctuary of the virtues of a Marist and an apostle; thus, he lived in peace and once said: “I do not like people talking to me about fearing hell; it seems to me that we would be insulting the good Lord if, after all the sacrifices we have made, we still harboured the slightest doubt about his mercy towards us.”

We summarise this portrait, along with a missionary, in these terms: “Father Chevron possesses, of all virtues, the one that seems to me the most difficult to acquire: to work hard and to rejoice even when one does not succeed. Indeed, he was never seen to be more at peace

than on those days when the Catholics of Pea were deserting him by the hundreds: 'It is today,' he would say, 'that God is teaching us what we are capable of.' ”

CHAPTER II

Tonga Islands before and after Christianity's arrival

Tonga or the Friendly Archipelago²¹ lies between the 18th and 22nd degrees of south latitude, and the 176th and 178th degrees of west longitude from the Paris meridian. It consists of three main groups: in the north, Vava'u; in the centre, Ha'apai; and in the south, Tonga, which gives its name to the entire archipelago. The islands and islets that make up these various groups number close to a hundred. Several of these islands are uninhabited, and the population does not exceed thirty-five thousand.

The main island is Tonga-Tapu or 'Holy Tonga'. The country does not present the spectacle of a magnificent landscape resulting from a multitude of mountains, valleys, plains, streams and waterfalls, but it displays to the observer the most abundant fertility. The areas left to the care of nature are just as indicative of the soil's richness as the districts cultivated by the islanders. Greenery is ever-present in both, and the vegetation thrives with admirable vigour. "Yes," writes one missionary, "Tonga also has its charms for lovers of simple, beautiful nature: ever-lush vegetation, eternal spring, solitary walks beneath the broad leaves of our trees, no mountains to climb, no precipices to cross, no thorns in the forests, save for those of the lemon and orange trees."

The island is nothing but a succession of gardens and orchards. There are fences to mark out each person's property, and nowhere in Oceania is this demarcation of individual ownership more clearly displayed than in Tonga. The villages are criss-crossed by well-trodden paths, lined with artfully crafted palisades and shaded by tall trees that provide delightful shade almost everywhere.

But whilst nature is beautiful here, there is also much to suffer. "The wild cries of wild beasts," wrote a missionary, "lend a poetic air to the labours of the tireless apostles who work in the vast regions of Asia and Africa. Here we have neither lions, nor tigers, nor bears, not

²¹ We have drawn the following notes on Tonga from the missionaries' letters and, chiefly, from the excellent work entitled *Mgr Bataillon and the Missions of Central Oceania* by Rev. Fr. Mangeret, S.M.

even snakes, but we do have mosquitoes. In the first few days of battling them, one might well call them the insects of penance. They have a predilection for newly arrived Europeans, a predilection they maintain to our detriment. At the altar, whilst reading the breviary—what a torment! My companion, who has lived in this country for many years, usually has about ten of them on his forehead, in his beard, and on his ears, which are as red as blood. He seems not to feel them at all, but they drive me mad. Ah! Let us bless Providence for having sent them to us to make up for the mortifications we are unable to practise, or to keep us awake with their little song when, whilst meditating, we might be lulled to sleep. It is then that we love them, despite everything, and bless them, remembering that they were the special friends of Saint Rose of Lima.”

The inhabitants of Tonga were also to contribute to the missionaries’ suffering through their vices and depraved morals. This moral ordeal far exceeds the physical pains of which we have just given a soft account. A missionary who had known and studied them at length, despite his affection for them, did not hesitate to write the following lines: “You in France cannot imagine the degree of savagery one must wade through to reach these poor people and make them Christians... It seems to me that the sight of our devotion, our sacrifices and our hardships would make a very different impression on even the most hostile populations of Europe than it does on our islanders.”

The Tongans were as vicious as other peoples of Oceania; whilst their customs might seem milder to travellers, they were no less cruel; one need not look very far back into the past to find cannibals in the archipelago. As vicious as other Oceanian peoples, the Tongans were, more so than the others, lazy and proud.

“Laziness runs so deep amongst the natives,” said a missionary, “that they spend at least half their time lying down; the rest they spend sitting, even whilst working the land. One never sees them standing, except when they are walking, and they never take a single step simply for the sake of a stroll. If you pay visits to their huts, you will find everyone idle and very often asleep. They wake up to welcome you, but they do not always get up, or they go back to bed before the visit is over. If they come to see you, it is quite common for them to lie down in your home, fall asleep there and continue sleeping until the next day. To find this improper would

be to pass oneself off as a man of poor manners. When they do not sleep at your house, they at least tell you on leaving that they are going to bed, and, in good form, you must reply: “Very well.” People also greet one another by saying, out of politeness: “Malo e mohe! Sleep well!”

Amidst their idleness and other vices, the Tongans indulged in an incomparable sense of pride. “They are full of themselves,” said Captain Morvan. “They regard themselves as intellectually and physically superior to Europeans. But the high opinion they have of their intelligence does not yet match that which they hold of their physical attributes.”

Their presumption, in this respect, knows no bounds. They admire with self-satisfaction the beauty and elegance of their physical proportions, the fineness and at the same time the abundance of their light, though voluminous, hair... In their eyes, their race is a race apart.”

“No people on earth,” says another, “seem to him worthy of comparison with the people of Tonga. Compared to them, the others know nothing... Rest assured that, in the eyes of the chiefs—and indeed of a large proportion of the people—we are no different from what Negroes are in the eyes of their masters. We are regarded and exploited like beasts of burden. This is deeply offensive to our self-respect, but it is in keeping with the natural order of their thinking.”

Such, in brief, were the people whom the Society of Mary was to evangelise. However, by the time Father Nivellean arrived on these islands, a considerable group of neophytes had already formed a fervent Christian community under the guidance of their holy and valiant missionaries, at the head of whom shone the venerable Father Chevron.

CHAPTER III

Fr. Nivellean's Ministry in Tonga – His Virtues

(1850–1852)

According to the mission they are called to fulfil, God bestows upon his apostles the gifts specific to their ministry: the strength and zeal of conquerors upon some, the gentle and patient charity of a watchful guardian upon others. Father Nivellean was to become a humble co-worker entrusted with the care of a flock devastated by the enemy of souls. “The young priest who wishes to devote himself to the conversion of our poor islanders,” wrote a missionary from Tonga, “must, before leaving France, have built up a good store of virtues. I would place foremost among these: detachment from all the goods of this present life, a love of humiliation, level-headedness, self-doubt, a love of contemplation and the hidden life, and the most rigorous obedience.”

In transcribing these lines, we felt we could already discern in them the qualities and virtues of the young Father Nivellean. The pages that follow will show us how these developed.

An account written on the spot²² relates that the young missionary had courageously set about learning the Tongan language. Although very easy to learn and understand, the Tongan language has a peculiarity that makes it difficult to use. If you mispronounce a word, you alter its meaning, sometimes unwittingly expressing things that provoke either laughter or horror amongst the locals; they then have no qualms about openly expressing their mockery or revulsion. It takes more than a day to be forgiven for such a gross mistake. Father Nivellean found himself more exposed than anyone else to this ordeal, for, in his zeal to preach, he did not wait for long practice to have trained him in all the subtleties of the language. He let them laugh without being ruffled, he allayed their instinctive aversions, and eventually won the full attention of all the islanders. “What does their laughter matter,” he would say afterwards, “so

²² Note by the Rev. Fr. Calinon on Fr. Nivellean: family manuscript.

long as the truth remains with them; would we not do the same, were they to take it into their heads to speak to us in French?”

It was only after six weeks that he thus gave his first lesson; he relied on God's support and trusted in the obedience that prompted him to speak.

On other occasions, his pride must have suffered at the naivety of the natives who came to say to him: “Patele (Father), you don't speak as well as the new missionary from Pea; and besides, he sings much better than you... Why is that?” Father Nivellean, charmed by this frankness, tried to laugh it off, then, in turn, relayed these words of praise to Father Piéplu, saying kindly to him: “You see, you speak like a book, you sing like an angel; but be careful, too, that you make the best possible use of these talents.”

“As for me,” he wrote to his Superior, “you can see how useless and lacking in fervour I am; you can see how unworthy I am to bear the lovely and glorious name of Marist. It would be a great pity to have come so far, only to be less fervent than one would be in one's own homeland.”

A trial far more cruel for the young missionary's zeal was seeing that his arrival in these islands coincided with the apostasy of the Tui-Tonga, the great chief, who fell into Wesleyan heresy and dragged along with him those weak Christians who yielded solely to the fear of displeasing that proud Chief. It is impossible to convey the piercing sorrow that tears a missionary's heart when he sees spiritual sons, for whom everything has been sacrificed and whom he loved a hundred times more than a mother loves her children, leave the holy Church and, for childish motives, throw themselves into the arms of heresy, under the yoke of the devil. One of these good missionaries went so far as to say: “The death of my father and my dearest friend, or the burning of our homes, would not cause me a fraction of the pain caused by these apostasies.” As for Fr. Nivellean, far from becoming discouraged or irritated, he exclaimed: “All this will compel us to love Our Lord more deeply and to rely more fully on His mighty protection, since the leaders of this little world are not on our side...”

Alongside the anguish of his heart, Father Nivellean found himself facing physical and mental fatigue, which reveal his perfect equanimity. It is worth noting that the tropical climate has a considerable influence on the character of Europeans. One sees naturally gentle people

become easily ruffled and require great vigilance so as not to succumb to these outbursts of temper. Our young apostle was one of those who paid the least tribute to this aspect of nature; and yet, his daily sufferings, the delicacy of his temperament, and his habitual physical weakness should have made him more quickly susceptible to this common temptation. All those of a natural disposition who knew him have assured us that they never saw the slightest sign of impatience in him. The missionaries who lived with him testified that he never raised his voice, that he would not engage in any argument, and that he preferred to claim ignorance and defer to the opinions of others.

He was once asked why he liked to appear to be in the wrong, and this is what he replied: “To tell you the truth, it is because, being unable to do anything else, I practise these small acts of virtue which do not tire me. There is nothing to be gained by being right, but one gains a small measure of merit through humility by sacrificing one’s own point of view for that of others. ‘It was not I who devised this secret,’ he would say, ‘it is a recollection of the lessons I was taught at the Seminary and which the Reverend Novice Master repeated to us during the novitiate.’ ”

He alluded to these humble virtues, which were so dear to him, in the following lines: “The various trials one goes through, the state of abandonment in which one finds oneself, strengthen the soul and accustom it to being always content and at peace, come what may, and they establish it in the most perfect indifference. It now seems to me that I possess a greater peace than ever before, a more complete and continual contentment and peace of mind. I do not know whether the indifference I feel towards everything that does not pertain to my duties and my salvation is blameworthy or praiseworthy, but I find it beneficial for my own happiness, and I can say that I am truly happy, amidst my miseries and sufferings. Could this be the hundredfold reward that the good Lord has promised to those who have left everything for His sake? Yet I fear (and this fear stirs within my soul from time to time) that, having come so far to save others, I may have the misfortune of being damned myself. Please, Reverend Father, pray for your child, lest this dreadful misfortune befall me. I also beg you to pray for our dear mission; it is doing well, despite the trials and persecution...”

Father Nivellean always welcomed his uninvited visitors—often driven by sheer curiosity—with a cheerful demeanour. Despite all their faults, he found in them enough virtues to make one love and respect them, for the sake of their souls redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ. “They have,” he would say, “flaws that the French do not have, but let us also admit that they possess qualities of which we are utterly lacking; that is enough for me to love them.” His patience remained unwavering toward the catechists of heresy, despite their profound ignorance of our holy religion, against which they set themselves up as foolish teachers.

If such was the young missionary’s conduct towards these enemies of the faith, one can only imagine his care and patient charity towards the sick. No matter how far away they were, he would set off, on the pretext that he needed a walk, always offering his services to his superior and the other priests at the mission. There were a few lepers lying twenty minutes’ walk from the mission; it was a true joy for him to go and visit them. Towards these sick people, who could nevertheless transmit their dreadful affliction to their visitors, he showed no aversion and took none of those precautions which human prudence would have demanded, but which would have humiliated these unfortunate souls.

The instinctive horror that the sight of them inspires is scarcely imagined in Europe, where this disease has disappeared. Yet in Tonga, as everywhere, heresy reveals its true nature: cowardly and fainthearted. The Protestant missionary can only view these poor sufferers from a distance; the priest, on the other hand, mingles with them, regards them as his own children, baptises them, visits them, hears their confessions, instructs them himself, and often even provides them with the most disagreeable forms of care, without worrying about contagion. The lepers, seeing Father Nivellean visit them so assiduously, marvelled at his humble charity; they welcomed him as an angel of the good Lord, and out of a sense of gratitude, promised to devote themselves to Our Lord Jesus Christ, who had sent them such a good priest.

For Father Nivellean, this was the only reward he sought. When asked why he took such pleasure in visiting these unfortunate people, he would reply: “Ah! It is so that I myself may learn to suffer. I see lepers with twisted eyes, contorted faces, and hands and feet ravaged by the disease. These poor people suffer greatly and are despised by their chiefs, yet they do not complain, even though they know less than we do of the merit of humiliation and suffering.

This is what encourages me to endure everything with greater submission and love for the good Lord.”

Father Nivellean did not wish to remain a stranger to any kind of ministry. Always inspired by obedience, he took pleasure in carrying out the humblest and most arduous duties. He loved teaching young children the basics of reading, instructing them in the catechism, and hearing their confessions. He said that he found particular consolation in this. He left the more honourable tasks to his brothers. For this reason, he never called upon anyone to be baptised, leaving it to his superior to make that delicate choice. He was more willing to devote his time to the holy tribunal [i.e. confession] to hear the most serious offenders. He regarded as a great miracle of grace the frankness of the Tongans at the holy tribunal, they who are so accustomed to lying and take hypocrisy to its very limits.

Such was the outward life of Father Nivellean. He himself reported on it to his Superior General in these terms: “I endeavour to fulfil, amongst the natives, as well as I can, the duties entrusted to me, which consist of preaching several times on Sundays, teaching catechism during the week, visiting the sick and the various Christian communities in our district. One of these Christian communities, amongst others, is quite large; it numbers more than two hundred Catholics...”

As for his private life and the virtues he practised therein, the author of the biographical note goes into details which we are pleased to reproduce and which merely confirm what Fr. Nivellean himself said in a heartfelt confession to his superiors: “I regularly perform all my devotional exercises. Despite my spiritual and physical miseries, my heart is filled with joy... Yet, almost every day I feel a desire to do even better; but a lack of vigilance and energy often renders this futile. I do not lose heart; I hope that God will have mercy on me and that Mary will obtain for me the grace not to be so unworthy of approaching the holy altar every day.”

The more Father Nivellean was convinced of his own helplessness, the more faithful he was to the practice of prayer. He carried out all the exercises of the spiritual life with the precision of a novice. He did not believe that even in Tonga one could find a reason to dispense with morning prayer or meditation. He never went to bed without preparing for it with the utmost care, even when he had no strength left and was exhausted by the day’s errands and labours. If,

at times, illness caused him certain distractions or interruptions, he made up for what he called his ‘poor meditation’ by spending more frequent and longer periods before the Most Holy Sacrament.

What sustained in his soul the habit of all the virtues was his love of prayer and the fervour with which he practised it. Father Chevron, his venerable superior, therefore loved to pray with him, to recite the Breviary or the Rosary with him. He said that he believed he was in the company of an angel of God or a saint from heaven. The memory of this unwavering piety remained deeply etched in the heart of this holy religious, Fr. Chevron, and whenever he was spoken to about the Reverend Father Convers and the great examples of virtue he had left to his brothers in the Society of Mary, he would exclaim: “Well then! Let Father Convers be your saint; mine will always be Father Nivellean.”

We shall add, on this subject, what the same religious said upon learning of the steps taken towards the beatification of Father Chanel. Father Chevron had been to Futuna with this venerable missionary; he had been able to appreciate the virtues and merits of his holy companion; he had even nearly taken his place, and, consequently, the palm of martyrdom. Nevertheless, he did not hesitate to tell us that, “if he had to choose between beatifying Father Chanel or Father Nivellean, he would cast his vote for the latter.”

“I do not know,” says the same account, “whether it is an exaggeration permitted by modesty, or whether it is out of love for pure truth that Fr. Chevron confessed to us that Fr. Nivellean’s presence was for him like a true novitiate.” If we are to believe him, it was this young priest who, with his characteristic humility, taught him a host of practices designed to keep his mind more firmly fixed on God and the memory of His holy presence, whilst helping him to express his love and gratitude to Jesus Christ more frequently. It was like an open book from which he read a new page every day. It was there that he had learnt to undertake his monthly recollection and annual retreat with greater care and fruitfulness.

Then, showing us a breviary, he said: “Do you see this breviary? I prefer it to all the gilded ones; it is Father Nivellean’s, and I never recite my office without thinking of the admirable devotion with which he himself performed this important duty.”

Since, as the excellent Captain Marceau quite rightly observed, it is always more through piety than through learning or any other human means that the priests of Oceania make themselves useful to the peoples they instruct, we shall now describe the acts of piety which Father Nivellean frequently performed for the benefit of the Tongans.

His demeanour at the altar, whilst he celebrated the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, had filled even the natives themselves—who were usually so distracted and so ill-equipped to appreciate the devotion of good priests—with admiration. Father Chevron, for his part, had observed that this pious missionary adhered with scrupulous precision to all the rules of the Church. We shall also mention the particular joy that Father Nivellean expressed aloud when he saw, contrary to all his fears, that he would be able, in Oceania just as in France, to celebrate Holy Mass every day and make loving visits to Our Lord in His Tabernacle. At the time in question, one might easily have feared the opposite.

But it took even more to bear witness to his love; he took pleasure in beautifying the house of the Lord and in doing everything in his power to enhance the service at the altars. It is easy to understand that these still-new mission stations, situated amidst Christian communities devoid of all material wealth and the riches of art, presented to the saddened eyes of the first missionaries nothing but the most absolute destitution in matters of worship: a table serving as an altar and vestments whose only value lay in the cleanliness with which they were endeavoured to be maintained. Father Nivellean made every effort to embellish this extreme poverty of the house of God, working with his own hands to bring in flowers, remove the dust and tidy up all the furnishings of their humble sacristy.

He did even more. He made use of the generous offers from his family, which were intended to ease his circumstances or improve his health. Completely forgetting himself, he devoted his parents' gifts to the decoration of the humble chapel at Mu'a. At his request, liturgical vestments even arrived which appeared so beautiful to the neophytes that, as they left the church, they said: "Let them come now and tell us, let them come and make us believe that this religion is false, a religion whose ministers have parents so good and so generous as to provide us with such precious things; that is not possible."

These sacred vestments sent to Tonga by Father Nivellean's parents were, as we have just seen, a more convincing argument in favour of the Holy Church than all the finest sermons of the greatest orators. They also put to shame the slanderous insinuations of the heretics, who accused the missionaries of coming to Tonga because they could not make a living in France.

The Protestants' hatred or indifference towards the Most Holy Virgin only served to inflame his love for her, and we could not possibly recount here all the devotions to which he devoted himself in order to honour her more fully and make amends for so many outrages. He had grown accustomed to addressing the Blessed Virgin as he would his visible superiors, giving her an account of all his actions and intentions throughout the day. He would then kneel, bowing his head deeply, and humbly ask her forgiveness for his transgressions, praying that she might help him to correct his faults, and imposing upon himself a penance, which consisted of walking the Way of the Cross, or of maintaining an uncomfortable position for as long as possible, or, finally, of depriving himself, in his diet, of those foods that could only whet his appetite without satisfying it.

He would always stand in the presence of the Blessed Virgin, as if in the presence of a loving mother, and repeat to her a hundred times a day that well-known verse which was so familiar to him: *Maria, mater gratiæ, dulcis parens clementiæ, Tu nos ab hoste protege et hora mortis suscipe* / Mary, Mother of grace, sweet Mother of mercy, protect us from our enemy and receive us at the hour of death.

Extreme circumstances call for extreme measures. Not content with these daily practices, which were intended to sanctify all his works, he imposed upon himself even stricter obligations whenever some public calamity loomed. Before the War of Pea broke out—which we shall discuss shortly, as everything pointed to its coming—the missionaries in Tonga increased their visits to the Blessed Sacrament, their recitations of the Rosary and their novenas, in order to avert the impending scourge, or at least to ward off its disastrous consequences.

Father Nivellean then devised a further means of halting the evil and attracting divine protection. He asked his Superior to allow him to devote greater care to his annual retreat, to deepen his solitude, and to observe absolute silence, so that he might speak to no one but God alone. This was the first instance in Tonga of such a retreat; for the natives are by nature

indiscreet and do not know how to wait for the right time and moment to speak with their priests. Moreover, the missionary's duties absorb him entirely and make this life of retreat extremely difficult for him. Moreover, Father Nivellean had a hut whose walls were so thin that it had not been thought possible until then to remain there in complete silence. Yet this is what happened, to the great edification and astonishment of our neophytes. It took all the piety, all the strength and all the willpower of the young apostle to overcome these difficulties. He overcame them so effectively that, from that time onwards, his method has been followed by all the other missionaries and has brought them the most precious benefits in the spiritual life.

As for his poverty, his love for it led him to deny himself everything beyond the bare necessities, and to refuse even to give a medal to a neophyte without his Superior's permission. He could not conceive that a religious who leaves his family, his father and mother for God, could become attached to anything. "How blessed we are," he said to us one day, "we no longer see money and we can do without a host of things which, in Europe, would seem indispensable to us. Oh! When will we at last be able to do without everything, except Our Lord Jesus!"

And so, Father Nivellean brought his second year of ministry in Tonga to a close. He had not had the opportunity to display his virtue on a grand stage, but he had shown himself to be humble, gentle, resigned, poor, and charitable. He had carried out, almost silently, the great apostolate of prayer. We shall see him take his charity to the point of heroism during the War of Pea.

CHAPTER IV

The Siege of Pea – Fr. Nivellean’s Ministry of Charity

(22 March to 15 August 1852)

The spread of the Catholic faith in the Tonga Islands had only served to intensify the hatred of the Wesleyan heresy, which had long been established in that archipelago. The ministers and influential figures of this sect persuaded King George, a native prince of Oceania to whom these islands are subject, that his authority was under threat, and that France, through its missionaries, was seeking to seize his territories in the not-too-distant future. This slanderous insinuation would have seemed too crude had it alone served as the basis for the operations of the Church’s enemies. Another motive was needed, one drawn from outside religious rivalries. King George therefore sought an opportunity, which was not long in coming, and here are the circumstances.

Long before the introduction of Christianity, a family from the Tonga Islands had established the Fort of Pea as a defiant challenge to all the other chiefs in the country. Takai and his brother Taufu [Fa’e] had, at this cost, managed to command the respect of the enemy tribes. Lavaka, the commander of the fortress and their successor, had just died, and a certain Moeaki, who only very recently had so courageously supported the Catholic cause there against the heretics, had already received, in another life, the reward for his generosity. Everything therefore suggests, from what has just been said, that the Catholic population of Tonga had made this fortress their regular refuge against the harassment and persecution of either Protestants or pagans.

Be that as it may, at the time in question, there were no longer any chiefs in Pea capable of upholding the rights of the weakest. The opportunity was ripe; King George seized it. Eager to seize this fort and expand his power, he enacted laws which, no doubt, directly undermined the customs or privileges of some of his subjects. What suggests that a religious motive was skilfully disguised in this is that some Catholics declared their support for King George. And yet, as this account will show, it was the ruin of Catholicism that was regarded above all else, as the heretical

catechists were everywhere preparing Protestants for a war which they openly called the death of 'Papism' and 'Paganism'.

Whilst the strictest neutrality was dictated by the prudence of our missionaries, their charity, on the other hand, was to find ample opportunity to be exercised. It was undoubtedly a harsh reality for them to see that, despite all the fine assurances from Nuku'alofa, representing King George, it was more than likely that Catholicism was under attack and that Catholics, misled as to the true motives behind this expedition, were going to take part in this infernal undertaking.

Father Nivellean was particularly keen to pour out his heart to the victims of these sinister machinations. Aspiring to the honour reserved for Fathers Calinon and Piéplu of living amongst the Catholics besieged inside the Fort of Pea, he would often visit them, travelling the nine miles—or about three leagues—separating Mu'a from the Fort of Pea whilst praying. He offered the sacrifice of his life to God in advance. The journey, indeed, was not without peril; he had to fear ambushes; but his trust in God led him to say: "If I were to die whilst fulfilling a duty imposed on me by charity or obedience, it would be for me the most desirable of all deaths."

If we wish to get an idea of the fortress where the Catholics had taken refuge, we shall hear Captain Morvan's description of it: "Pea is surrounded by deep moats, within which stands a high wall, formed of long coconut tree trunks planted vertically, pressed tightly against one another and firmly bound together by ironwood planks. Behind this imposing palisade lies a wall of earth mixed with broken coral reduced to rubble. It is six metres thick, twice the width of the outer moats. The village can only be entered through arched gates cut right through the thickness of this wall. The coconut tree trunks flanking and bordering each gate are pierced to form loopholes. Earthworks surround the encircling wall at some distance outside the moats. These earthworks are bristling with iron spikes as sharp as spearheads. One cannot take a single step there without taking the utmost precautions. To storm it, under a hail of gunfire and arrows from the inhabitants sheltered behind their strong wall—which towers above all the outer defences—would be a perilous and difficult undertaking. The bottoms of the moats are also strewn with iron spikes, as are the narrow, winding paths which lead, between the earthworks,

to each of the gates giving access to the village. Pea is accessible only via the inlet on the banks of which the fortress stands, and which only small canoes could navigate upstream.”²³

Mgr Bataillon, Vicar Apostolic of this archipelago, had hastened to the scene at the very first signs of danger. The question was whether the Catholic missionaries could remain in Pea to provide the wounded with spiritual comfort, without failing in prudence or religious obedience. Father Nivellean longed too much to share in this privilege of devotion not to hope for an affirmative answer. He prayed inwardly to the Holy Spirit to turn away all suggestions of human prudence, and the Bishop fully approved the generous resolve of the priests in Tonga to go and die amongst their Christians. It was then that Fr. Nivellean said to Fr. Piéplu, his friend: “You may now, with a clear conscience, win the palm of martyrdom. If only I could share the same hope as you!”

Around the same time, Bishop Bataillon reported on the situation in a letter to the central councils of *The Society for the Propagation of the Faith*. We quote the following passages from it:

“King George, spurred on by I know not whom, has declared war on the Catholic population of Pea and Houma. Under his command, all the able-bodied men of the archipelago have come to attack the two forts where the small number of our Christians have taken refuge. It is painful and appalling to see this handful of people surrounded on all sides by a multitude three times their number, who relentlessly fire day and night at the besieged and who have sworn to starve them into submission if they cannot defeat them by other means. It was in this state of siege that I found our Catholics in Tonga last April [1852]. Several pagans were converted during this unjust war. How hard it was for me to leave our fellow priests and our neophytes in such a predicament, without being able to do anything to help! I hope, however, that this trial will turn to the glory of God. Experience has shown us that, in these countries, when we are persecuted, it works to our good, and that instead of dwindling, our numbers tend to increase.”

In these sad circumstances, Father Nivellean continued, alongside his superior, his work of patience, pushing his submission to God’s will to its very limits. “As for us,” he wrote on April

²³ Extract from the work: *Mgr Bataillon and the Missions of Central Oceania*, vol. 2.

17, 1852, “we leave everything in the hands of Divine Providence; it is Jesus and Mary who steer our boat and guide it safely to harbour. It is true that the sea is raging, that the waves are surging, that the winds are unleashed, that lightning flashes across the sky; but our divine Master need only show himself and all will return to calm...”

“Our lives are not entirely safe, but Mary watches over us and, if we must die, we are only too happy to receive the fatal blow as a reward for our devotion. It is inconceivable how many bullets have struck the Fort of Pea, and on several occasions our Priests and Brothers have narrowly escaped being hit. Father Chevron and I, who are staying in Mu’a with a considerable number of Catholics, are not without danger. We remain exposed to the hatred of the Protestants amongst whom we live and to their bullets when we go to visit our brothers and our Christians in Pea. Perhaps we shall be forced to cease these visits, which have yielded such good results.”

These predictions were to come true. The steps taken in Sydney by Bishop Bataillon to obtain aid and send a ship [the *Atalina*] only served to aggravate the situation. The slanders of the heretics sought to make people believe that the prelate was seriously considering seizing the entire archipelago. Evidence was produced, and defectors were brought forward as witnesses; further, far more odious accusations were added, which would have portrayed the holy bishop as a tyrant and an abominable man.

So, the missionaries resolved to take advantage of the ship’s passage to send one of their number to Tahiti and inform the Governor of the state of affairs. This course of action was distasteful to Father Nivellean, the account states; he would have preferred to face whatever risks of persecution might arise. But those who know our Oceanian peoples are aware that these childlike peoples are incapable of resisting the violence of their chiefs; to persecute them is to cause them to apostatise. Moreover, their lives would have been under greater threat than those of the Catholic missionaries. It was therefore not the fear of martyrdom, but the fear of the loss of souls and love for their neophytes that drove the priests in Tonga to seek the protection of France. Father Calinon was sent as a representative for this purpose, whilst Father Piéplu was to remain alone amongst those under siege.

Fr. Nivellean could not bring himself to leave his fellow priest in such solitude. He asked Father Chevron, his superior, to go himself and put his life on the line. The author of the notice remarks that, had Father Dubreul been there, he might have said that Father Nivellean had not corrected his one failing; that is to say, since his condition was always sickly, it was hardly a way to preserve a life so precious to the mission to send him to a place where he would be exposed to all the dangers of war, without being able to give the slightest relief to his habitual sufferings. For Father Nivellean, going to Pea meant going to his death. Father Chevron understood all this and, at the same time, felt held back by the pain of parting with his young fellow priest whose virtues he held in such high esteem. But the fear of opposing God's will led him to acquiesce to Fr. Nivellean's act of charity, and the latter set off joyfully for the perilous post, where he arrived on June 24, 1852.

The following letter from Father Chevron gives us a sense of the harsh circumstances to which these two young missionaries subjected themselves:

"I believe that, humanly speaking, there is no situation as precarious as ours at present; and yet I think there are few people more at peace than we are, and just as content with the part Divine Providence has assigned us... Pea, the fortified camp of the Catholics, is surrounded by five Protestant forts within a short rifle's range. It is there that our poor neophytes are surrounded by the entire population of Tonga and by volunteers from the neighbouring islands. There are, I think, nearly four thousand besiegers. Fathers Nivellean and Piéplu have shut themselves up in Pea to ease, or at least share, the plight of their beloved flock under threat. As for me, I had to remain outside the blockade with Brother Jean Reynaud."

"It would be impossible to tell you everything the attackers rain down on their opponents every day—insults and bullets alike. When they hear the bell ringing for prayer, the gunfire is enough to make anyone unaccustomed to it feel dizzy. Some aim to shatter the bell, whilst others fire at those on their way to church or gathered there. "Stop ringing your bell," they shout at them, "Papism is dead in Tonga; you are ringing the bells for its funeral." Moreover, they are no more restrained when it comes to us. The Protestant chief tried to drive the priests out of Pea, firmly convinced that the Catholics, once deprived of the consolations offered by their religion, would soon give in and could then easily be led into apostasy. The priests refused.

This led to a redoubling of hatred against us. I have explained the reason for this generous refusal on several occasions, but I have always been branded an impostor.”

“So far, those under siege have responded to every ultimatum by stating that they would rather die than surrender. It has been announced in recent days that a general assault will take place on the day a French ship appears in the harbour. The Catholics are expecting this and are preparing, should they have to succumb, to die at least as brave men and women. There are more than fifteen hundred people in Pea: men, women and children. If the fort is taken, no mercy will be shown, not even to our two missionaries.”

These few lines were written on August 6, 1852. By voluntarily offering to enter this sort of tomb, from which anyone still breathing had little hope of emerging alive, Father Nivellean had acted without taking his frail constitution into account. However, Divine Providence directed events in such a way that he did not meet the death he had hoped for there, but only encountered the seed of the illness that caused his death a few months later. On this subject, we read the following reflections in a letter to the Most Reverend Father Colin, Superior General:

Tonga, 29 August 1852. — “It is not to you, my most reverend Father, that there is any need to point out all that must have been heroic in your son’s devotion. But to others I could perhaps say that to choose such a position, and to remain there to the very end while having the possibility of leaving it; to gaze with resigned eye upon that abyss of the tomb which swallowed, one after another, those around him; to await at every moment the final signal for himself; to find in his heart enough courage both for himself and to rekindle that of others; to forget his own life and lavish it a thousand times over for the spiritual good of the neophytes — to do all this, I say, presupposes a strength that does not come from man, and to find its source one must go back to Him who, in circumstances not entirely analogous, gave it to Ignatius of Antioch, to Cyprian of Africa, to Irenaeus of Lyons...”

It is well known that the siege of Pea ended in a treacherous attack, but we must allow Father Nivellean himself to recount the vicissitudes of that siege to the Most Reverend Superior General.

Tonga, 29 August 1852. — “The fears I expressed to you in my last letter, concerning our war, have come to pass. I was very much afraid, as I told you, that our enemy, once victorious,

would tear off the mask with which he liked to conceal himself and would openly persecute the Catholic faith. Well then! The mask has fallen, and this war, which he never ceased to call a civil war, was, in essence, nothing but a religious war.”

“Pea is no more; its inhabitants, after five months of siege and overcome by famine, surrendered; the fort has been razed to the ground and burnt, and now nothing remains but ashes and ruins. Perhaps it would still be standing had the Protestant chief not resorted to the blackest of betrayals to force the stronghold to surrender: he sent a proposal for peace, urged the chiefs to come to him, promising them that, once they did, the war would be over.”

“The over-trusting chiefs yielded to his entreaties; then the traitor took them into his custody and, the following day, stormed the fort, which he left to be plundered and set ablaze. My colleague and I were the first to be plundered. Father Piéplu was held at gunpoint, and I was treated rather roughly.”

“It was a dreadful and heart-rending sight to see those thousands of men rushing upon the mission’s possessions with more fury and greed than ferocious beasts upon their prey. Our houses were ransacked in the blink of an eye, and almost all our belongings carried off with the same speed. Our church met the same fate. I was inside when the raging mob stormed in, and I had scarcely finished receiving the Holy Sacrament when I saw the tabernacle and the altar decorations being carried off. I had taken care to remove ‘the sacred stone’ [on the altar with relics of a saint], which I placed in an ornate chest; I then stood in front of this chest to protect it, fearing desecration, and managed to keep it safe thanks to the resistance I offered to all those who sought to steal it. In the end, a chief approached and pretended to protect me. I begged him to have this box taken to the house where Father Piéplu was staying, as he was unable to act because of his injury; there, it was safe, thanks to the guards the Protestant chief had posted there. Seeing that all our belongings had been taken away, he appeared angry, though inwardly he was very pleased, and posted guards at all our houses; but they were empty.”

“Of all the inhabitants of the fort, only Father Piéplu, an Englishman attached to the house, and I remained; all the others had fled to avoid being massacred and had sought safety in flight.”

“Left alone, we became the target of all our enemies’ hatred. Consequently, there was no insult, no outrage, no abuse that we did not have to endure at their hands. They came, one after

the other, to insult us, and everything their hearts, filled with bitterness, could dictate to them, was hurled at us. It is impossible to recount to you everything with which we were accused. According to them, we were the instigators of the war, the spark of discord; then it was the turn of France, our beloved homeland, which they in turn heaped with sarcasm and mockery. Alas! Poor people! They were wasting their time; for these insults affected us no more than they would have affected a dead man. Our hearts were glad to have something to suffer for the name of Jesus, and in return for their hateful accusations we would have liked to render them our help, just as we had done for the people of the Fort of Pea.”

Father Nivellean summarises in a few lines what the missionaries had done for those under siege. Everything that the tenderest and most ingenious charity can inspire in a mother’s heart for her children, they undertook for their spiritual children, going so far as to deprive themselves of food and refuse the provisions they gave to the natives.

“How did the natives respond to such charity?” adds the same missionary. “Did they become more devoted to the faith? Alas, no; gratitude is not the defining virtue of the Tongans. Almost all our people have abandoned us, so that the mission now resembles an orchard ravaged by a storm, and the few faithful who remain can be counted, just as one counts the scattered fruit on the trees that the storm has spared. Will they remain steadfast to the end? I do not know, for this is the tactic employed by our cunning persecutors to make them change their religion.”

“First they place them in a Protestant environment, and there they employ flattery, threats, and every means at their disposal to make them renounce Catholicism. Those who remain unshaken are exiled, taken to a distant island, where they are condemned to hard labour. Then, separated from us, without aid or support, they find themselves in a position where they feel compelled to become Protestants.”

“This was indeed the plan of action long envisaged by the heretics. Their leaders, according to the same account, sought to destroy Catholicism, to uproot this evil plant from Tonga and to remove it down to the very last root...”

“The only thing my dear colleague and I regretted was that our enemies had not carried out their plan, which was to ‘massacre us and *cut us to pieces*’, as they had openly declared. No, they

had made no secret of their intentions, and it was we who were to be the first to be struck down, had the fort been stormed. We rather liked to hope that such a fate might befall us; but, alas! we were not worthy of it; martyrdom must wait for another time!”

All our readers will admire the calm with which this account was composed. One senses that its author had, for a long time, contemplated the full horror of his situation and all the consequences that followed from it. But what shows even more clearly the extent of the young missionary’s composure are the words with which he concludes his lengthy correspondence:

“In closing,” he says, “a few words about my inner state: I am always happy and content; my heart is filled with joy and peace. The path along which Divine Providence wishes me to walk is the Way of the Cross. Can there be one more beautiful, one greater, one more worthy of envy? Is not the Cross our wealth, our happiness and our joy on this earth? What a blessing, indeed, to follow Jesus and Mary along the sorrowful path to Calvary! Therefore, I shall never cease to thank our divine Master for the share he deigns to give me: *Hereditas mea praeclara est mihi* [for my inheritance is glorious to me] and I’d like to think that the good Lord will grant me the grace to be ever content, whatever may befall me here on earth, provided that I fulfil my duties and have nothing to reproach myself for...”

Love for souls leads to martyrdom; missionaries do not die like others; they lay down their lives in the service of the Gospel, convinced that death is more fruitful than life and that the blood of the apostles is the seed of Christians.

CHAPTER V

Culmination: Illness and Death of Fr. Nivellean

(August to December 1852)

The siege of Pea had claimed no victims amongst the missionaries. At first it seemed so, but subsequent events showed that this was a mistake. Fathers Nivellean and Piéplu, both of whom had been ordered to leave and abandon the fort and their neophytes, as we have already mentioned, refused categorically. They replied that they were aware of the danger to which they were exposed, but that they believed it was their duty not to withhold the assistance of their ministry from the Catholics; that in any event, even if those under siege were to be treated as rebels, since there were many elderly people, women and children amongst them who took no part in the war, the missionaries could not be regarded as guilty.

“I had obtained,” wrote Father Chevron on August 27, 1852, “permission to bring our two confreres out of the fort and to hold a meeting with them. By mutual agreement, we proposed to the Protestant chief that the people of Pea should be persuaded to submit, provided the terms were acceptable. He would not hear of it and, whilst refusing peace, reproached us once again for being responsible for the loss of so many lives should an assault be launched. Fathers Nivellean and Piéplu thanked him for the death with which he was threatening them and told him that they forgave him in advance. They were joyful. I made futile efforts to hold back my tears. The chief himself [i.e. Taufa‘ahau] was astounded by their resolve. I could only embrace them, weeping, and we bid each other farewell. I thought it would be the last time.”

Father Nivellean has already told us of the odious manoeuvre by which the good faith of the besieged was deceived, the relentlessness with which the victors sought to seize the sacred objects that fell into their hands, and the cruelty to which the Catholics fell victim.

Despite such a cruel ordeal, in which he saw this flock so dear to him—won over or preserved for Jesus Christ through so much toil—fleeing and abandoning him, Father Nivellean remained no less serene than if everything had gone exactly as he had hoped. He liked to repeat

that, since the disciples of Our Lord had forsaken him “at the very moment when he was announcing to them the miracle of his Eucharistic love,” one should not complain if neophytes abandoned us for a far less reprehensible reason—the reason of fear.

Let us hasten to say that, once the initial feeling of fear had passed, a good number of these poor lost sheep returned to the fold. Others, more timid, perhaps more ignorant, would go to the church of the heretics and then hurry home to recite the Rosary.

It was at this juncture that Father Calinon returned from the Navigators’ Archipelago, having failed to accomplish the delicate mission that had prompted his journey. He had been unable to reach Tahiti because of headwinds. It was yet another humiliation added to so many others. It was tantamount to telling the Tongans and their chiefs that they could treat the priests and their neophytes as they saw fit. Should he make a fresh attempt, or leave everything in the hands of Providence? The latter course appealed to Father Nivellean, who was at that time making a special effort to rely solely on God. But the fear of not doing enough for a people incapable of resisting persecution compelled Fr. Calinon to set sail once more for Tahiti. In the meantime, the priests of the mission resumed their ministry of devotion and charity, rendering service even to their bitter enemies.

As for Fr. Nivellean, he was reaping his harvest for Heaven. The privations and anxieties from which he had not been spared at Pea had considerably weakened his already frail health. He found himself forced to take much-needed rest, which he accepted only with deep regret at seeing his fellow priests overburdened with the work he could not do himself; yet, as one account adds, “they would have been only too happy to do even more, to see such a good missionary recover or, at the very least, to bring him some relief.”

In November, a French warship commanded by Mr. Belland finally arrived in Tonga. Father Nivellean had travelled with this captain; he had won his esteem and affection, and although a Protestant, Mr. Belland had admired all the qualities of Father Nivellean’s character. He was delighted to see him again, quickly took an interest in his state of health, and, because of him, showed great sympathy towards the missionaries at Mu’a.

But, alas! that was to be the limit of his mission. Imbued with the false principles of a wholly human policy, he insisted on protecting the missionaries themselves, whilst paying no heed to

their neophytes. The prejudices of heresy prevented him from seeing that the greatest torment for a priest would be to remain peaceful and untroubled whilst those entrusted to his care were being mistreated. He refused to understand that the priest, like the good shepherd, gives his possessions and his life for his flock, and that he does not wish to be protected himself whilst his beloved flock is left unprotected. Would you believe it, this very same captain went so far as to reproach Fathers Piéplu and Nivellean for not having heeded King George and for not having abandoned their spiritual children to the fury of their enemies, for whom they would have given their lives a thousand times over.

“This was the last straw in the series of humiliations that Divine Providence had inflicted upon its true ministers in the Friendly Archipelago,” adds one missionary. “Our poor neophytes, who did not yet know the value of the Cross, joined forces with our enemies to ask us where this formidable power was, which, according to our unfounded hopes, was supposed to put an end to their sufferings and raise them above their adversaries.”

It was therefore impossible to find a single moment of weakness in our virtuous missionary, or to hear a single word of complaint escape his lips. Ever true to himself, he smiled in the face of misfortune and found a way, through his pious and kind reflections, to restore calm and peace amongst our poor neophytes. His presence was therefore doubly precious to the mission, but it was necessary to consider a decision that was painful for everyone, and which would have been even more so had its consequences been foreseen. The ship’s doctor, who was informed of Father Nivellean’s poor state of health, declared that, in order to restore him to health, it was absolutely essential to send him to Sydney. He added that this course of action offered great hope and that a few months’ stay would restore to the patient the strength he had lost. It is impossible to express the anguish of the missionaries or to count the tears of the neophytes at this sad news. Yet they had to submit; this separation, demanded and dreaded by the holiest of friendships, was urgent.

At that solemn moment, Father Nivellean demonstrated all that is heroic in the holy detachment of a perfect religious. “My Reverend Father,” he said to Father Chevron, “if you tell me to stay, I shall stay with the greatest pleasure; if you tell me to leave, I shall leave without

delay. Speak, and do not fear causing me any distress; I shall be only too happy to conform in this way to the adorable will of God.”

The decision might have been a matter of doubt as regards obedience; it could no longer be so as regards the concern of a superior and a father. “Since obedience demands it,” said Fr Nivellean, “I wish to leave,” and throwing himself at Fr Chevron’s feet, he asked for his blessing. “I shall go to Sydney, as I am asked to, and I shall be back with you as soon as you show me that you wish it. — Yes, my dear Father, and as soon as possible, but do get stronger. — May God’s holy will be done.”

Father Nivellean rose, calm and submissive, and made a request which shows how much he feared failing to observe religious poverty and how deeply he cherished his parents’ loving concern. “There is money in Sydney,” he said, “sent by my parents to a house, so that, should I need anything, I might obtain it without causing harm to either the Society or the mission. If you do not think it wrong, I would like to use this sum to buy a horse. In this way, I could more easily and for longer assist you, on my return, with the duties required by the holy ministry. However, I shall abide by your decision.”

This request could not be refused, but, alas! these hopes and good intentions were never to be realised. Father Nivellean had only twenty days left to live.

Father Nivellean left Tonga on November 23, 1852. Father Calinon, who needed to move further away still, so as not to exasperate the Protestant chiefs who regarded him, quite wrongly, as their greatest enemy, had the privilege of accompanying the missionary—whom the Tonga mission mourned—on ‘La Moselle’. It is he himself who will recount to us the final moments of his young fellow priest:

“During the first ten days of the crossing, my dear travelling companion showed no signs of any trouble. He went about his spiritual exercises as usual, as even the most fervent novice would have done; he conversed amiably with the passengers, dined with everyone else, and complained only of a severe loss of strength. But when we soon found ourselves in relatively colder latitudes, and the weather had turned stormy, the patient was seized by violent bellyache; his nervous agitation and fever intensified, and the spasms were visibly weakening him. However much the ship’s doctor applied all his zeal and skill to the poor patient’s care, nothing

could halt the progression of the illness. The misfortune is that at sea there are hardships which no one can prevent. The winds raged, whipping up the waves; the ship leapt through the furious swells that crashed against its sides. The result was a rolling motion that was distressing even for men in good health. What must the effects have been on our dear patient, who had long been exhausted, and whom the nature of his illness compelled to change position constantly? We tried to make do with the resources we had on board. Two beds were set up for him in the gun deck, one fixed and the other suspended, so that he could change his position. A rotation of nurses never left his bedside, and we did everything possible, hoping for better days to come.”

“Those days finally returned. Alas! It was too late; the dear patient already offered no hope. As for him, despite his pain and extreme weakness, which went as far as fainting spells, he did not even suspect the danger he was in. We were only a week away from Australia, and he imagined that everything would be all right once we arrived. I spent long hours by his side and we would chat a little during his moments of calm. I came to share his outlook; his favourite subject was always Tonga. He loved to return there in his thoughts, as if our misfortunes had served only to anchor his affections there all the more firmly. He calculated the estimated length of his absence, the joy of his return, and told me of his views and his new plans for devotion to our dear Christians, who were beset by so many calamities. “How happy I would have been,” he would exclaim, “to follow them into exile, to sustain them in their faith...” I was, of course, far from sharing his illusions, but they were too innocent for me to try to take them away from him. The time had come when I had to tell him that he was ready for Heaven. I broke the news to him, cloaked in the language of prudence. “Do you think I am in danger?” he asked me calmly. — “I do believe you are very ill, and, at sea, you know as well as I do...” He did not let me finish: “Enough,” he said, “I understand you.” Then, gathering his thoughts for a few moments, he prepared to make his confession. He made it with the piety of a child of Mary preparing to rejoin his Mother.”

“During the forty-eight hours he survived, his every thought and action sprang from a heart ablaze with love for God. At times, he was so exhausted that even the power to think deserted him. He would then ask me to think for him. Once, I asked him if he had a word for his family, for our absent priests: “Yes,” he said to me, “I have my mother and my brother, who

accompanied me as far as Lyon; I have my other relatives, my fellow members of the Society of Mary, and the people of Tonga... I love them all; tell that to those you will see again... as for me, I am leaving... Let us focus on my journey... When I have arrived, I shall think of them, of all of you.”

“This took place the day before his death. The next day, he went into his final agony at daybreak, and all I heard from him were broken words. I could make out his thoughts from the movement of his eyes and lips. At about half past nine, the doctor, who had already visited him, returned. He, too, could draw only monosyllables from him. A plea for forgiveness for his faults was heard once more; after which, he fell silent... “Ah!” exclaimed our good doctor, “he is asking forgiveness for his faults; I am quite sure they were never very serious. Those who have lived with Father Nivellean long enough to appreciate him could, if necessary, confirm this testimony and add to it.”

“Does something ineffable take place within us at that supreme moment? This is, at any rate, a fairly common belief in Europe and one also found amongst the peoples of Oceania. Numerous legends recognised by the Church tell us that, as they departed this life, some holy figures had visions, others received prophetic insight, and many were given a foretaste of the joys of Heaven. Whatever the truth may be of what I am about to say concerning my colleague, since, in those seas at the ends of the earth, I found myself by his side—the sole representative of the Society of Mary, of his family and of his friends—I was obliged not only to help him die well, but also to observe every last stage through which his fine life passed before it came to an end.”

“It was perhaps half an hour before his final breath. With the doctor and myself present, he was speechless; his extremities were cold, his breathing short and laboured, and he was unable to move. Lost in my grief, I was waiting only for the moment to close his eyes, which he kept vaguely fixed upon the heavens. Suddenly, a strange movement, though not convulsive, came over his whole body. I can find nothing to compare it to, save what I have sometimes seen in a small child, restless in its cradle, straining to lift itself towards its mother as she bends over it. He raised, as far as he could, his hands, emaciated by suffering, saying first, with visible emotion and joy: ‘Ah! Ah! Ah!...’ then he uttered these words, speaking them in very halting bursts: *Et*

exultavit spiritus meus in Deo salutari meo’ [and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour]. He quickly sank back into his former stillness, seemingly oblivious to anything external. He said in a calm and slow tone: ‘Mr. doctor will be one of those who die last...’ After a short pause, he added in the same tone: ‘Father Calinon will have his days prolonged.’²⁴ These were his last articulate sounds. The doctor, who had heard everything, just as I had, left without making any comment.”

“Finding myself alone with the dying man, I brought my mouth close to his ear and asked him how he was feeling. I realised, from the movement of his lips, that he was saying to me: ‘Fine.’ What had just taken place had struck me, and although he had remained conscious right to the end, I wanted to ask him a few questions to make sure he had not, in the end, shown any signs of delirium. I asked him: ‘What does this emotion mean that came over you just now?’ His lips quivered, but no sound came out. I then phrased my questions so as to elicit answers by a nod or a shake of the head.”

“For example: ‘Do you love the Lord?’ He answered with a nod. ‘And the Blessed Virgin?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘Were you perhaps thinking of her when you recited that verse from the Magnificat?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘Did she perhaps appear to you?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘Do you wish to follow her into Heaven?’ ‘Yes.’ — ‘Do you regret life in this world?’ — ‘No.’ — ‘Are you attached to anything on earth?’ — ‘No.’ — ‘Yet you do love your mother, your parents, your fellow priests and our faithful in Tonga, do you not?’ — ‘Yes.’ — ‘Will you forget us when you are in Heaven?’ — ‘No.’ ”

“That was enough; all that remained was for him to return his beautiful soul to his Creator; which he did gently and without the slightest tremor or the faintest sign of convulsion.” It was December 10, 1852, the Feast of Our Lady of Loreto, at about half past ten in the morning. The following day, at about the same time, the entire crew was in full regalia; the funeral ceremony was held, and two cannon shots signalled to the Ocean to receive into its depths the mortal remains of this child of Mary, to return them on the Day of the Resurrection, along with many others it already holds within its bosom. Who would not wish to die in the same circumstances, with such a pure soul!!! Any grave is a fitting resting place for one whose soul is

²⁴ Fr. Calinon did not die until April 8, 1877 in Tonga, aged sixty-eight, twenty-five years after Fr. Nivellean.

in God's possession. He who created man will easily recover all the elements of his body when the time comes to rebuild it for the triumphs of Heaven.

When the Reverend Father Colin, Superior General of the Society of Mary, learned of the blessed death of Father Nivellean, he hastened to send the poor mother the letter which we are about to read, and which confirms, with the authority of his holy word, all that we have said about the virtues of this perfect child of Mary:

“Lyon, 7 June 1853.

Madam,

I refrained from informing you directly of the death of Father Nivellean, your beloved son and our highly esteemed and revered colleague. I could gauge your grief from the sorrow I myself felt, and I did not have the strength to bring to your mother's heart news that tore—and still tears—my own heart apart.

Like you, Madam, I would have wished to be at the bedside of our dearly departed during his illness. I would have wished to lavish all my care upon him, or at least to be present at his final breath. Providence willed it otherwise; it has deprived both you and me of that consolation; but, Madam, that same Providence grants us another kind of consolation, one that is purer and more worthy of your faith and ours.

Madam, your son, by a grace of special favour, was chosen by the Lord from his very childhood; wherever he went, through his virtues and the qualities of his heart, he was a model to his peers and to those around him. I still recall with admiration the dispositions of that beautiful soul, the sentiments that animated him during the brief period of his novitiate amongst us. His heart, detached from earthly things and ablaze with divine love, longed only for the glory of God, and for the moment when he might be granted the opportunity to extend His kingdom, to win souls for Him, and to shed his blood for the Gospel, if need be. Such were these sentiments within him that he could hardly wait to set out for the distant and arduous missions of Oceania and devote himself to the salvation of those poor savages.

He was under no illusions about the hardships of every kind, or the privations to which he was condemning himself. His noble and affectionate heart made him keenly feel the full extent

of the sacrifice he was making to his homeland, his friends, his family and, above all, to a tender and beloved mother; but his love for God, his ardent desire to make Him known and loved, to suffer for His glory, and to save souls, made him regard all these heroic sacrifices as of little consequence. He remained unshakeable in the generous resolution he had made before the Lord, to offer himself entirely for the glory of Him who shed every last drop of his blood for the salvation of mankind.

No sooner had he set sail for Oceania than God put his charity to the test and gave him the opportunity to show the full generosity of his heart towards his fellow priests, in whom he saw none other than Jesus Christ. One of them fell seriously ill; Fr Nivellean, though the youngest and though eager to reach the people of Oceania as soon as possible, stepped forward and asked, as a favour, to stay with the sick man to look after him. God alone knows what he had to endure in Madeira, and then during the rest of the voyage to his destination. God alone also knows with what gentleness, patience, charity and equanimity he lavished his care on the sick man, both in Madeira and for the rest of the journey!

I cannot, in a single letter, go into the details of Father Nivellean's all-too-brief apostolic career. I hope that Divine Providence will later provide us with the opportunity to highlight, for the edification of all, all the zeal, virtue and patience displayed by the young apostle whose loss we mourn. But, Madam, he was ready for Heaven, and we may confidently apply to him these words from Holy Scripture: 'In a short time he has fulfilled the course of a long life; his soul was pleasing to God, which is why He hastened to take him from the midst of iniquity.' This is the pure consolation which the death of your beloved son, our dearly cherished brother, leaves to you and to us. We offer him the tribute of our prayers with all our hearts, yet with the deep confidence that these very prayers will descend upon you and upon us, together with those of our young apostle in Heaven.

Please accept, and ask all your children to accept, the respectful sentiments with which I remain in Our Lord,

Madam, your most humble and obedient servant,

Colin, Superior of the Society of Mary"

THE REV. FR. PIÉPLU, S. M.

A FRIEND OF REV. FR. NIVELLEAU

PREAMBLE

God had placed alongside Father Nivelteau, as a fellow captive in the Fort of Pea, a religious who, having been his equal in virtue during the novitiate, also became a model of courage and charity. As we do not wish to separate, after death, those whom Heaven had so closely united during their lifetime, we feel it our duty to recount here, in brief, the labours and death of this holy missionary.

Apart from a few details, this entire account is a reproduction of what was recounted in the work entitled: *Mgr Bataillon and the Missions of Central Oceania*.

ALFRED PIÉPLU, S.M.
MISSIONARY TO TONGA
(1818–1857)

Alfred Piéplu was born in Colleville-sur-Orne, in the diocese of Bayeux, on May 18, 1818. The eldest son of a very large and deeply Christian family, he felt a strong calling to the priesthood from an early age. His childhood and adolescence were such that it was said of him: “The candour, simplicity, good-naturedness and tender piety that distinguished him as a priest had already made him a sought-after and beloved role model during his student days.”

At the Major Seminary, he had a holy and close friend to whom he confided his apostolic vocation. In the heartfelt exchanges between two souls so well-suited to understanding one another, Alfred Piéplu had shared with his friend his pious and ardent desire to go and preach where no one had yet spoken of Jesus Christ. Alfred’s friend listened with deep emotion to this confidence and, as a token of their friendship, promised to give him a mitre when the missionary became a bishop. God had decided otherwise. Alfred Piéplu was to die a simple missionary of the Society of Mary, and the one who had promised him the mitre now wears it, to the great joy of the Church of Nantes.

The *Annals of the Propagation of the Faith* soon brought to the zealous seminarian’s attention the new lands opening up to the Gospel and the name of the new family of apostles who, under the banner of Mary, were rushing to win them over. This twofold prospect was so very much in keeping with the desires of his heart and his tender devotion to Mary that he could not help but make up his mind. Faithful to the voice of God, he generously severed all ties that bound him to his family and his homeland and, in answer to his prayer, was admitted to the novitiate at La Favorite in October 1845.

There he met Brother Charles Nivelteau. Their two souls, wholly united in spirit, aspired to nothing more than to walk the paths of virtue through complete self-forgetfulness combined with a great love of God. “In them,” wrote a novice at the time, “one could see that God was

everything, that they walked continually under His gaze, because they carried Him in their hearts. Nor did I ever see them indulge in boisterous merriment, nor ever display any ill humour. Being of such amiable character, we sought their company during recreation periods, confident in advance that our conversations would be as pleasant as they were edifying. They would never have allowed themselves to do anything that might have offended propriety or charity, even in jokes. For them, the Rule was truly the voice of God, as well as the will of their superiors, and I know that they took with them to Oceania the habits of regularity they had acquired during their novitiate.”

It was in 1847 that Fr. Piéplu set off for Marseille with the other missionaries, among whom was Fr. Nivelteau. But a few days before boarding the *Stella del Mare*, which was to take him to Oceania, he fell so seriously ill in that city that he had to be taken back to Lyon, from where he did not set off for Tonga until the following year.

He arrived at this mission shortly before the outbreak of the war that led to the capture of Pea and the dispersal of the Christians. Confined within that fort, where his devotion to the neophytes kept him confined, he was often threatened with death, and was miraculously spared under the circumstances we are about to describe. Father Chevron wrote on August 27, 1852: “Father Piéplu was shot in the chest; fortunately, the bullet was cushioned by two partitions and a brass wire mesh, which it passed through. The missionary was knocked down by the blow. We hope, however, to nurse him back to health... His cassock and shirt were pierced but not torn.”

Father Piéplu lived for another five years, tirelessly devoting his heart and care to all the ministries of the mission.

One of those who witnessed his life as an apostle and a Marist was able to say of him to the Most Reverend Father Colin: “From the very first day of his apostolic career right up to his final hour, his actions reflected the wise counsel you gave to your children before their departure. With what pleasure, after eight years in the ministry, he would still read to us that interesting document in which your concern for our spiritual welfare was expressed. How skilfully he could repeat to us the learned lessons of the Reverend Father Maitrepierre! He never forgot any of the examples set for him in France by our elders in the priestly and religious life.

Having recently left our shared homeland, I ought to have taught him something about the spirit of the Society; he asked me a thousand questions on the subject, and yet he knew better than I did what he wished to learn, so thoroughly had he retained the fruits of his novitiate.”

After the siege of Pea, when Fr. Nivelleanu was leaving for Sydney, Fr. Piéplu was appointed to remain with Fr. Chevron. Nothing was more admirable than the bond between these two religious, who found their greatest joy in working together for the divine mission in Oceania. Fr. Monnier, who, from Ma‘ofaga, liked to visit them often in Mu‘a, later wrote to the Most Reverend Superior General: “I must say a word to you about their holy friendship. It was truly like that of David and Jonathan; they carried out to the letter everything you had said. They said their prayers together, recited their breviary together, and went together to visit the sick. One could not be with one of them without being with the other. Between them, there were neither orders nor refusals; there was but one thought, one aim: they loved the good Lord together. Oh, what a precious bond! How I loved, having finished my Sunday work, to set off on Monday, travelling a five hours’ distance, to learn from Fr. Chevron and Fr. Piéplu what one must do in Tonga to be a good Marist missionary!”

“It was a great learning experience to live under the guidance of a superior such as Fr. Chevron, and they retained precious memories of those who had died in the exercise of their zeal and charity, as the young Fr. Nivelleanu had done. God was to crown Fr. Piéplu’s life with a death no less enviable, surrounded by circumstances which we make it our duty to recount here based on the account of Fr. Monnier. His serious and reserved nature lends these events every indication of the utmost accuracy, although this in no way characterises them: “One of our neophytes,” he said, “had seen, during the night, a crowd of people descending from heaven and coming to rest in the church at Mu‘a; each of these new guests was surrounded by a blazing light, which made this Catholic fear a general conflagration. Suddenly, ‘Patele Lutoviko’ (this was Father Piéplu’s Tongan name) appeared in the midst of the heavenly host. He was taken up into the heavens, and the vision vanished. The story had been recounted on the island a few days before Fr. Piéplu fell ill.”

This event took place in early September 1857. On the eleventh day of the same month, Father Piéplu believed he had received a secret warning from God which could not fail to strike

him deeply. He never meditated on death. “This subject,” he said, “no longer makes any impression on my soul. I long for death; I have ceased to fear it.” On that day, therefore, he had meditated no more on death than on other days, and yet, at the end of his prayer, he heard an inner voice which said to him: “You are going to fall ill; this illness will be your last; all remedies will be of no avail; prepare yourself to die.”

“The following day, Saturday, the warning began to come true. On Sunday morning, despite his weakness, the sick man went up to the altar; but that was the last time he celebrated Holy Mass. Despite all his assurances of his imminent death, at first no one believed the gravity of his condition, and his words were regarded as mere figments of his imagination; but the illness soon took on an alarming character. Two months of terrible suffering sapped the young missionary’s strength and proved that he had not been warned in vain of his final day. He had never ceased to set the finest example of invincible patience and fervent piety...”

“As few medicines as possible,’ he would say to those who were treating him, ‘will be best for me. However, I shall take whatever you wish, even though I would prefer not to take anything. Besides, whether your medicines are effective or not is of little concern to me.’ He even took a certain pleasure in this enforced deprivation of the doctor’s care, and would joke gently about it. ‘It is not to man,’ he would say, ‘that we entrust our health. One doctor is as good as another. It is God alone who heals!’ His trust in God grew as his health declined. He liked to be told that his illness was serious, and he was distressed when people gave him hope of recovery. But, he would always add, ‘May God’s will be done!’ When he came round after violent fits, he would exclaim: ‘Oh! How good suffering really is!’ He said it with such conviction that those listening were themselves deeply moved. One could not spend an hour with him without him saying: ‘It has been a long time since you last read anything to me. Do read me something, then.’ For these readings, he preferred the deeply devotional works of Saint Alphonsus Liguori and Saint Francis de Sales, such as *The Clock of the Passion* and *Treatise on the Love of God*.”

In a letter he wrote to a missionary in Samoa, Fr. Monnier gave the following touching details about Fr. Piéplu’s illness: “I asked him one day if he did not get bored during his long suffering: ‘How can one get bored,’ he replied, ‘when one is with God?’ And, indeed, I can

assure you, without the slightest exaggeration, that our dear patient never showed the slightest sign of boredom. Apart from the moments when his fits took hold of him, he was always cheerful; he always showed us that smiling face you know so well. He even reproached himself for the complaints that escaped him during his fits, when the violence of his illness robbed him of his freedom of will.”

“One day, Father Chevron asked him: ‘Which do you prefer, your recovery or your imminent death?’ The patient replied only with a smile. Father Chevron added: ‘Ah! I can see you are eager to go to God!’ The patient replied: ‘I want nothing but what God wills.’ On another occasion, he said: ‘Oh! What a wonderful retreat I am having in my bed!’ Father Chevron seemed surprised that it was possible to make a good retreat whilst suffering so much: ‘Oh yes, Father! It is quite possible that I assure you I have never made such a good retreat in my life. I now feel that I am no longer attached to anything.’”

“Before falling ill, he had read and reread the life of Saint Francis de Sales by Fr. Hamon. This work had delighted and captivated him. During the last week of his life, he asked for the final volume to be read to him again; he wanted to know how the Bishop of Geneva had prepared himself for death, and he strove more than ever to imitate this great saint, for whom he had a special devotion.”

“Father Chevron, Brother André, and Brother Jean shared the task of caring for the sick man. Father Calinon came from time to time to exhaust the resources of his medical skill; for, as you know, he has earned a reputation as a doctor, and I believe he deserves it. As for me, my regret has always been that I did almost nothing to relieve this dear patient. I could only pay him rare visits; I was more occupied with drawing edification from the examples of virtue he gave us all than with rendering him services which others performed better than I; I would have liked to retain every word he spoke; I would consult him on certain practical matters, as one consults a friend on the threshold of eternity; I received answers which reassured my conscience all the more because they could only have been dictated by a pure love of truth. I then had to take my leave, to resume the work of my ministry at Ma‘ofaga.”

“Father Piéplu received Holy Viaticum and the Sacrament of the Sick with a fervour that Father Chevron will never forget. He received Holy Communion once more on the eve of the

feast of Saint Andrew and intended to do so again the following day; but on that day, the only signs of life left in him were those which herald his passing.”

“I arrived at his bedside at five o’clock in the evening; I had come to bid him my final farewell. He did not recognise me. A few moments earlier, he had replied with a ‘no’ that came from the heart to Father Chevron, who had asked him if he had any worries. He had also been asked, when the clock struck five, if he had thought to say the Hail Mary, and he had replied ‘yes’. Those were his last words.”

“He slipped into a silence that might have been taken for the repose of a soul in prayer, and on Tuesday, December 1, 1857, at ten o’clock in the morning, that righteous soul presented itself with confidence before the throne of the God whom he had loved so dearly and whom he had so earnestly sought to make others love.”

This death, precious in the sight of God, was surrounded by every expression of grief, respect and affection. Even the Protestants were not left unmoved. The chief of Mu’a, a Wesleyan catechist, said that one could not give too honourable a burial to a truly holy man, whose soul was so beautiful and whose body so pure. The Protestant minister visited the Catholic priests, promised to attend the funeral, then sent a letter retracting his initial decision; yet, in that letter, he stated that Father Piéplu was certainly in Christ because he had believed firmly and practised his faith faithfully. Even amongst the missionaries themselves, great consolation mingled with their grief at the sight of a death so full of hope. Father Monnier wrote: “We believed that he had gone, with Saint Francis Xavier, to celebrate in Heaven the great feast of our Mother, the Immaculate Conception.” Father Chevron, whose heart was so painfully stricken by this parting, did not, however, wish anyone to show signs of grief or regret: “I myself,” he added, “would not wish to bring this dear friend back to life, even if I had the power to do so, so certain am I of his happiness in Heaven.”

During Fr. Piéplu’s illness, the neophytes had shown their anxiety and grief. Upon his death, they wished to prepare a tomb for him as they would for one of their great chiefs; he was the first priest to die in Tonga, and they were keen to honour his burial. Fr. Chevron objected to all these extraordinary honours; he remembered that Father Piéplu had often said to the neophytes: “I want to live with you, die with you, remain with you until the Resurrection, and even

afterwards, in Heaven.” The deceased’s words were respected; his grave was dug in the cemetery, amongst those dear neophytes whom he wished to have by his side, in death as in life.

The funeral ceremony was described by Father Monnier, who witnessed the scene: “Our Christians contributed their most precious possessions towards the cost of the burial. The deceased, clad in his priestly vestments, lay in state in the church, upon the Tongan fabrics which our islanders call ‘treasures’; he lay on his bed thus covered, as though death were but a sleep. The news spread from one end of the island to the other; within moments, and in a spontaneous outpouring, our faithful flocked from all directions to join their tears and prayers to ours. Never had a funeral ceremony seemed more moving to me. For our native people, it was an entirely new sight; the lifeless face of Father Piéplu still bore the expression of the beauty and gentleness of his soul.”

“The church was full for almost the whole night. There was no long procession of priests at the Lord’s altar; yet we believed that Jesus and Mary also graciously received the twenty hours of prayers, rosaries and hymns offered to them by people who are now so good, but were once so wicked. When the time came to carry the precious remains to their final resting place, they were about to be covered in the countless folds of Tongan drapery; but suddenly people threw themselves upon him, kissing his face, hands and feet; the funeral hymn was sustained only by dying voices; these were replaced by others, even more choked with emotion. The officiating priest suspended the ceremony; tears streamed from every eye. At last, the body was carried into the grave and, a few minutes later, covered with the finest sand that had been fetched from a great distance, as a mark of honour. There he lies in peace, awaiting the General Resurrection.”²⁵

²⁵ The work from which we have drawn the documents for this note recounts the following incident, which occurred after the death of Fr. Piéplu. It was on the evening of Easter Sunday, following Fr. Piéplu’s death, that is to say in 1858. In his village in Normandy, news of this death had not yet reached the villagers. The deceased’s youngest brother was chatting peacefully with one of his cousins. His wife and children had just left him to go and rest. Suddenly, she heard a cry from voices that were agitated and even frightened: “Alfred! Alfred!” She rushed downstairs and found her husband in a state of indescribable agitation. Father Piéplu had just appeared to them, dressed in his cassock and choir robe; his face was radiant and a smile full of kindness played on his lips. The vision had vanished just as the wife, alarmed, came to join her husband. The cries had been heard from

outside. An aunt, who lived very close by, hurried over, fearing some misfortune. The vision was recounted by these men, who were still deeply moved and who, just a few minutes earlier, had been peacefully discussing their business; they know what they owe to this intervention, which they regarded as a favour from Providence.

