

Fr. Damien-Marie Saintourens

13 May 1835 – 26 September 1920



*“O the Holy Virgin, when one confides in her
as a child, she never loses sight of you.”*

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Introduction

In his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelica Testificatio*,

Pope Paul VI wrote:

“...the Council rightly insists on the obligation of religious to be faithful to the spirit of their founders, to their evangelical intentions and the example of their sanctity.” (Part I N^o.11)

In keeping with the spirit of these words we present a brief sketch of the life of our Founder. For the most part, we have quoted from his own Autobiographical Journal. In this way, Father himself tells us the story!

Family Life

Pierre-Auguste Marie Saintourens was born 13 May 1835 into a deeply Catholic family in the city of Marmande, in southwestern France. Amidst the loving care and encouragement of his parents, sister and two brothers, young Pierre received his earliest Christian formation.

From his Autobiographical Journal we can get a glimpse into the home of the Saintourens family.

“I often recall, that being still a child of nine or ten, how I used to construct little chapels in honor of the Holy Virgin. My mother had given me a table especially for a small altar; my sister had given me furnishings and lace to decorate it...

From the age of nine I used to say that I desired to be a priest, and the vocation was already so rooted in my small head and in my heart that my greatest happiness was to say Holy Mass. My father brought me from Bordeaux a small chalice with a paten, an ostensorium to give Benediction, and small candelabras to decorate my altar. My oldest brother, who was then in the major seminary preparing himself to be ordained priest, cut out for me some ornaments from large sheets of strong paper...

I remember I was about ten...one day I called together my little friends for a sermon. I climbed upon a chair in the front room in which I had my little chapel in honor of the Holy Virgin...Mounted on my chair, my book in my hand, I read and explained...”

“At last, the twenty-first of December, 1845 was the chosen day, the great and beautiful day of my First Communion...my confessor had prepared me for this great day so that it would coincide with the first Mass of my brother.

My brother would say his first Mass, and I would receive Our Lord for the first time. The first Host which my brother gave was to me.

My second brother served the Mass. Around the altar were gathered my father, my mother, my sister and the other members of my family...”

“I wished to be a priest...my pious mother supported this pious desire...”

Priest of the Diocese of Agen (France)

“On **June 2, 1860** I was ordained priest at Agen. The next day I said my first Mass at Marmande. One hundred and fifty children made their First Communion at this Mass. That evening I preached my first sermon before a considerable crowd. There I am, a priest, O my God; what shall I do to thank you for so great a grace; what shall I do to thank your divine Mother? It is she who has obtained for me this divine favor, for I was unworthy of it. What shall I do? First, I shall work at my sanctification since that is what you wish before everything. Then I shall work for the salvation of souls; I am a priest so as to fulfill this sublime mission. But while keeping in the foreground this double task, I shall propagate devotion to Your Holy and Immaculate Mother. Oh, yes! I know, O my God, what I owe to her!...I am what I am through the unique favor of the Most Holy Virgin; I wish to be a missionary of the Most Holy Virgin.”

“On the **1st of July 1862** I was installed as pastor of St. Victor. It was an extensive parish of four churches;...As there were few priests in the diocese, I was also named curate of another parish, St. Eulalie...I loved my people very much and I was happily busy. With the coming of Lent I prepared my parishioners for their Easter duty by sermons and frequent parish visits...

I had a good ritual. I had organized a society of young people for the chanting of the Divine Office. It was a means of attracting them and of interesting them. These services well chanted were an excellent means of bringing my people to church. It was necessary to forget no one.”

1863

“I was happy in my parish, nevertheless, I always had in the depths of my heart the thought of the missions, which tormented me...Every time I read in the Gospel those words of Our Lord: ‘Go and teach all nations,’ my heart beat with emotion.”

4 August 1867

“I love my ministry, nothing is repugnant to me...But I always have the thought that far off, very far away, there are souls lacking missionaries to care for them. I again ask permission from my Superiors to leave. Again it is refused. However, I received information from Rome. If I make the request a year in advance, after a year it could no longer be

withheld. Therefore, I made my request in a decisive way the fourth of August, feast of St. Dominic...”

2 February 1868

“...The Dominican Fathers wish to carry the Gospel even to the end of the world; this is what I desire...”

Fr. Damien Marie: The Dominican Preacher and the Missionary of the most Holy Virgin were inseparable.

Such was his life as preacher and missionary that his own brethren would write after his death:

“From the beginning he was a preacher, intrepid, excellent particularly in the missions but much appreciated also in the great pulpits of Paris or the Province. One remembers, in more than one place, his words, warm and vibrant which an accent very pronounced, rendered perhaps more attractive still. One must cite the long list of his stations of Lent and of Advent or his Month of Mary in Paris in the churches of St. Denis of the Blessed Sacrament (1874 and 1885); of St. Michael of the Batignolles (1875); of St. Laurence (1880 and 1888); of St. Nicholas of the Fields (1886)...Algiers (1874)...and his numerous missions, especially in the Midi which it is impossible to enumerate.”

The Dominican vocation opened for Fr. Saintourens a broad new horizon for his preaching and profound love for the Blessed Virgin Mary. As one Dominican has written: “St. Dominic did not write any books. The task of elaborating a theology was left to St. Thomas. But Dominic gave us the Blessed Virgin. He himself did not experience the fullness of contemplation; no saint except the Blessed Virgin ever did. But St. Dominic gave and entrusted us to her, and it is the superabundance of her contemplation that will give the Dominican the audacity to preach.”

Undoubtedly, Fr. Damien Marie's total submission to the Queen of the Most Holy Rosary served to fire his zeal and charity in preaching the Word of God. Having arrived in New York City on the 6th of January 1886, he remained a few days with the Dominican Nuns in Newark (NJ). He then began the long journey to New Orleans to fulfill his mission of preaching the Lenten services there. Once there he wrote:

11 February 1886

“Before opening my big valise, I went to the Cathedral to prostrate myself before the altar of my Divine Master Whose Word I have come to preach...

My joy was great when our Father Provincial proposed my preaching here during Lent. I realized immediately that it was an excellent opportunity for propagating the Perpetual Rosary...”

As all missionaries do, Fr. Damien Marie utilized every opportunity to evangelize and to propagate devotion to the Mother of God. So that, from Boston to New Orleans, from Quebec to Vancouver, from the Maritime Provinces to Cuba and the West Indies he preached and organized the Perpetual Rosary devotion in honor of the Most Holy Virgin. In the life of Fr. Damien Marie, the Dominican Preacher and the Missionary of the Most Holy Virgin were inseparable.

Fr. Saintourens Becomes a Dominican

Now known in religion as Fr. Damien Marie he wrote in his journal:

26 January 1869

“Three months ago today I began my Novitiate. I am still very happy. Not for a minute have I regretted leaving all for God...”

10 October 1869

“...To be a truly apostolic man, to open to souls the ways of God, choice blessings are necessary. To obtain them, I wish to be before all a man of prayer, to pray and to have others pray; to practice humility, detachment, sacrifice, constancy and generosity, and above all, to love God. When one possesses this love of God, he has nothing to fear, not even those sacrifices of the heart which sometimes frighten us in advance. The love of God replaces everything, softens everything, and overflows everything. When love of God inundates the soul, its illuminating force enables one to see everything in its true light. This is what takes place in Heaven for the elect, and even on earth for those who give themselves without reserve...”

25 November 1869

“...There exists a beautiful devotion which I did not know about before entering the Order; I became acquainted with it during my simple Novitiate. This is the Perpetual Rosary...”

4 April 1870

“When in days gone by, I made the resolution to preach devotion to the Rosary, I did not think that a day would come when I would engage the faithful to rise at night to recite it. Oh! wonderful work! How does it happen that this devotion is not better known in the world? It does not require too much, an hour of prayer each month, any hour at choice to be kept at home or in the church. What must be done during the hour? Recite the fifteen mysteries of the Rosary. This is the simplest and easiest of prayers. More than ever I resolve to preach and organize the Perpetual Rosary.”

Founder of the Perpetual Rosary Sisters

“So great was Fr. Saintourens’ love for the august Mother of God and so utterly convinced was he that the prayer of the Perpetual Rosary “gave the most beautiful and desirable form to this love”, that he soon sought permission to establish religious communities dedicated exclusively to this work. In this way the Rosary could truly be perpetual.

25 August 1881

“...All the life of the Sisters of this institute converges toward Our Lady of the Rosary and her beloved work...”

8 September 1881

“In all things and places the Dominican Sisters of the Perpetual Rosary adore Jesus through Mary and honor Mary in Jesus...Thus, the Sisters, while meditating on the mysteries which accompany the recitation of the Rosary in their Hour of Guard ought to be penetrated with the fruit of each mystery, that is the virtue which it recalls and to put it into practice in their life according to the principle of the Rosary.”

Due to religious persecution in France, the Sisters were forced to relocate from the first foundation made in the city of Calais, 20 May 1880. They moved to safety into Belgium where they flourished and in 1891, as a result of Fr. Saintourens’ missionary journeys, the first American foundation was made in Union City, NJ. In time, numerous other houses were founded in the USA, Europe, Japan and the Philippines. Our own Monastery, here in Fatima, was founded 16 June 1954.

Conclusion

We conclude our brief sketch of the life of Fr. Saintourens by quoting from a homily given in 1955 by Fr. Edward L. Hughes, O.P., who was at that time Provincial of St. Albert's Province (USA). The occasion was Holy Mass marking the 75th anniversary of the Foundation of the Dominican Nuns of the Perpetual Rosary. He said:

“Fr. Damien was a humble man. He completely effaced himself and his own name in the propagation of the Perpetual Rosary. He must receive in the grave what he shrank from in life, recognition and tribute for his wonderful accomplishments in favor of devotion to the Mother of God.”