

From Loving Family to *Holy* Family

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Pierre Bienvenu Noailles (1793-1861), Founder of the *Association of the Holy Family*, was born in Bordeaux in the south-west of France on 27 October 1793 at the height of the Reign of Terror - the most violent period of the French Revolution.

All the evidence points to the fact that Bienvenu came from a loving, close-knit family. The very names of some of the children show how pleased their parents were to have them-Desiree (desired one), Cheri (darling one), Aimee (loved one) and, of course, Bienvenu himself (welcome one). He said later that 'the most tender affection' welcomed him when he was born.

In the late eighteenth century, Bordeaux was not a healthy place in which to live and, at the time of Bienvenu's birth, his parents had already lost three children. Probably to protect him and possibly because his mother was not able to nurse him, his parents made the sacrifice of being separated from him for some time, and he was sent to the country where the mayor of Pugnac and his wife, M. and Mme Pauvif, fostered him for three years. This arrangement also helped the Noailles family. At that time, food was scarce and expensive in Bordeaux but the Pauvifs managed to smuggle bread, fresh vegetables and other food to them. Fr Noailles used to joke about this later saying that he became a breadwinner for the family almost as soon as he was born. Bienvenu was very fortunate in having loving and affectionate foster parents and he loved the Pauvif family. He cried bitterly when leaving them but the care and attention that he received at home ensured that he soon settled back again with his parents and siblings. He always kept in contact with the Pauvifs and was very happy on the rare occasions when he was able to return to visit them.

Mme Noailles seems to have been quite indulgent with her family while, at the same time promoting Christian virtues among her children. 'Her gentle empire was established and accepted without question because she reigned with her heart.' Love rather than fear was the rule. This is evident from an incident which happened when Bienvenu would have been about ten years old. One day in school a teacher raised his hand to strike him and he re-acted by throwing an inkwell at him. He ran home immediately to his mother confident that she would take his side. When the teacher arrived soon after him to complain about his behaviour, Mme Noailles acknowledged that what Bienvenu had done was wrong. However, she said that his reaction was the result of shock since he had never been struck at home. She then informed the teacher that Bienvenu would not be returning to his school, a courageous decision considering the scarcity of educational opportunities at the time.

Monsieur Noailles 'loved his family to the point of weakness.' He was always ready to excuse their pranks and misdemeanours, and trusted them so much that they enjoyed unlimited freedom. He was even prepared to change his life-style for Bienvenu's sake. As soon as his wife told him that it was his bad example which was leading Bienvenu to abandon the practice of his religion, he immediately went to confession with him and altered his ways. He was recognised to be an honourable and honest man, so much so, that bearing the name 'Noailles' alone won his family respect, good-will and affection from all.

Desiree, the eldest Noailles daughter, was like a second mother to her sisters and brothers. It was to her that Bienvenu always turned when he ran out of money. She used to remonstrate with him and protest but always ended up by giving him what he wanted. Much later in life he said of her, 'She is so good to us, we cannot do too much for her.' Bienvenu and his younger brother Arnand spent a lot of time together as children, Bienvenu often leading his brother into mischief while warning him not to report their doings to their mother - a warning what usually went unheeded.

Bienvenu's letters from the seminary of St Sulpice in Paris show how much he loved and missed his family. They also reflect an ease of relationship with them in that, for example, he did not hesitate to ask them to send him books and other necessities, while at the same time, telling them that if he thought they were depriving themselves for his sake, he would not let them know what he needed. And once, when writing to his younger sister, Fanny, he said that he was sending her as many kisses as there were stitches in the socks

she was going to knit, for him that winter, letting her know how much he loved her, while at; the same time telling her what gift he wanted. It seems also that it was the family who shared the expenses of Bienvenu's and Arnand's seminary training (Bienvenu in Paris and Arnand in Bordeaux). Cheri's letters to him show how united the family was in their support of him in his choice of vocation, how delighted they were that he and Arnand were happy at their respective seminaries and how they loved and missed them.

Shortly before Bienvenu had left for Paris, his older brother Cheri, then a lawyer, had married a widow with two small daughters and moved into her house. He brought his mother, three sisters and brothers with him, and it became the family home. Desiree who did not get married, spent the rest of her life there helping to look after the children. It was in that home that Bienvenu stayed for a while when he first returned from St Sulpice as a priest and it was there that he and Arnand used to go for Sunday lunch whenever they could. The family wanted Bienvenu to continue to live with them but he found it more convenient to live nearer to the church. They also asked the archbishop not to transfer Bienvenu from the city of Bordeaux. However, when Bienvenu discovered what they had done, he wrote to the archbishop asking him to disregard their request and telling him to place him wherever he judged best for the greater glory of God alone.

When we look at the history of the early days of the *Association of the Holy Family* (begun by Fr Noailles in 1820 and completed by him in 1859) we find that it is almost a continuation of the history of the Noailles family. Fr Noailles's sister Aimee came to his rescue at the very beginning when Zoe de Raquine, one of the three young women who were to form the first community, was obliged to withdraw. Aimee is often considered co-foundress of the *Holy Family*. As Mother Trinity, she held several positions of responsibility in spite of poor health and a nervous and scrupulous disposition. His sister, Fanny, joined the *Holy Family* in 1821 and, as Mother Aloysia, proved to be a gifted teacher of young girls. When she was in Paris where he had sent her—much against the wishes of the family—she became very ill. Fr Noailles was so upset when he heard the news that he fainted while trying to preach.

It is to Mother Aloysia that we owe some of the poetry which Bienvenu wrote as a teenager and which he had destroyed on his return from St Sulpice. Many years later she was able to recite it from memory. Bienvenu's brother Arnand, who was ordained a year after him, obtained permission from the archbishop of Bordeaux to resign from his curacy and become a priest member of the *Holy Family* in 1823. He remained a faithful member all his life. In fact, it was while hearing confessions in one of the orphanages in 1862 that he collapsed and died. At the time of his death it was said of him that he was 'a pure stream that flowed always in the shade' [of his older brother, Bienvenu]. He was 'of one heart and one mind' with his brother and it was in him that Bienvenu confided most. Several other members of the Noailles family also supported Bienvenu in his work and many were lay members of the *Holy Family*. Desiree was one of the first lay-women to be solemnly received into the Association.

Fr Noailles always remained close to his family. His intense sadness on the deaths of Cheri, in 1840, and Mother Trinity, in 1850, is obvious from the letters he wrote on those occasions. When his nephew was ill, he brought him to spend some time with him and when, a short time later, that same nephew was dying, it was his uncle that he asked to hear his confession and anoint him. When he himself was ill and dying he got great support from the family. His brother Arnand was constantly at his side; his sister Mother Aloysia rushed to Bordeaux to be with him but she was so upset at seeing him suffering so much that she was unable to stay with him. He had frequent visits from other family members.

Fr Noailles knew how to be happy with his family, too. For example, he preached at Arnand's first Mass and he celebrated the wedding Mass of at least two of his nieces. The day of Arnand's first Mass must have been a very happy one, not only for the Noailles family but also for the *Holy Family*. The day was Trinity Sunday, 1820—the day that the first community came together for the first time. The three foundresses attended Arnand's Mass and then went home to begin their new life.

The family kept in contact with Bienvenu too when he was away from Bordeaux. An indication of this is that while he was in Rome, in 1840, he wrote that he owed a long letter to his sister, Desiree, his sister-in-law Annette, his nephew Regis and his niece Clarisse in return for the 'charming' letters they had written to him.

And it was not just Bienvenu that the family all loved. They were also close to one another. We read of Arnand, 'He loved his family tenderly. His face lit up with happiness when he was surrounded by his sisters and brothers, his nieces and nephews and grand-nieces and nephews.' He had to bear the loss of two brothers and two sisters. But it seemed that according as death deprived him of some of his relatives his love for the

remaining ones increased. When he himself collapsed and was dying, his nephew Regis was one of the first on the scene.

It is obvious that many of the virtues that Fr Noailles proposed to the members of the *Holy Family*, for example love, communion, gentleness, forgiveness, charity, patience, were characteristics of his own home life when he was growing up in Bordeaux, and of the extended Noailles family of his nieces and nephews and their children. And belonging to such an affectionate family must surely have influenced Bienvenu in his attraction to the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph when he entered the seminary of St Sulpice. The Priests of St Sulpice had a very special devotion to the Holy Family which can be traced back to their founder, Jean-Jacques Olier (1608-1657). They were very zealous 'in reproducing in their own conduct and in engraving in the hearts of their pupils the virtues which Jesus, Mary and Joseph practised in the humble retreat of Nazareth and in their relationships with their neighbours.' Bienvenu made this great devotion his own, consecrated himself to Jesus, Mary and Joseph and repeatedly resolved 'to use all the means with which Providence would provide him to spread the spirit and virtues of the Holy Family everywhere.' This led him to begin the foundation of the *Association of the Holy Family* less than a year after his ordination when he was only twenty-six years of age. The Association he envisaged was a 'pious association of people of both sexes whatever state [in life] they had embraced.' To form this Association, he founded seven congregations of women, what would now be called a secular institute for women, a congregation of priests and various groupings of clergy. To all these members, he gave as their not just in their hidden life at Nazareth but 'from Bethlehem to Calvary.'

He himself was constantly aware of the presence of Jesus, Mary and Joseph in his life. In fact, he was so conscious of it that one could sometimes get the impression he was the fourth member of the family. He looked on them as models of every virtue, as companions, as guides, as protectors, as people who must be honoured and, above all, as a family who lived for God alone. His love for them was like the back-drop to his whole life from the time he imbibed the devotion in St Sulpice until his death.

In all Fr Noailles's writings we see how important a family spirit as lived by Jesus, Mary and Joseph was and how much he wanted the members of the Association to live it. Even in his last recommendations given a few days before his death he mentions it, saying 'Dear children, continue my works and uphold them. Preserve in them the spirit with which I sought to inspire them: a spirit of devotedness, of charity, of piety, of self-denial; a spirit of God alone, a family spirit. O yes, love one another, love one another tenderly' echoing what he had said to the members at the very beginning of his foundation - that however ¹⁵⁵ diverse their works were, they were to be 'one single family consecrated to God alone in Jesus, Mary and Joseph.' The idea of the Association being a family was very important to him to the end of his days.