


Thoughts from Modern Martyrs – Jean Theophane Venard

 [Saint Jean-Théophane Vénard]

Jean Theophane Venard was born November 21, 1829, in the Diocese of Poitiers, at Saint Loup.

The father of the family, which included six children, was a village schoolmaster. One of Theophane's brothers, Eusebins, later became cure of the parish of Assai, a small village six miles from Saint Loup. Melanie, Theophane's "second self," entered a religious community at Amiens.

As with the martyr, Just de Bretenieres, the call to the Apostolate seems to have come to Theophane Venard at an early age; for Eusebius Venard relates that when Theophane was nine years old, the latter was one day reading aloud to his sister Melanie from the life of Father Cornay, who had shortly before been martyred in Tonquin; and suddenly the boy exclaimed, "When I am big enough I, too, will go to Tonquin, and I, too, will be a martyr."

Theophane Venard made his early studies at a school in Doue, and while here his mother died. At the end of a six years course, he went to Montmorillon, an excellent preparatory college not far from Limoges, instituted for the training of boys who, though young, have already shown an inclination for the priesthood. Theophane Venard is one of the honored alumni of this house, and scenes from his life are preserved today on the chapel walls. None of his former classmates are now at the College, as the professors are all young priests, but Theophane Venard's is a hallowed name, and his gay disposition has become proverbial in the traditions of this school.

At eighteen years of age, he entered the Seminary of Poitiers, receiving minor orders in 1850. The following year, at the cost of a great sacrifice, due to his intense family affection, he applied for admission and was received at the Missions Etrangeres in Paris. Two of his fellow students were in this seminary when the writer visited it. One of these, the Superior, the late venerable Father Delpech, on several occasions spoke to the writer about Theophane Venard, but never without alluding to his bright and happy nature which made him always the centre of life in whatever group of students he might be found.

On his recovery from a severe illness, he was ordained on June 5, 1852, in company with several priests from various seminaries in Paris. Among these was the first superior of Saint John's Seminary in Brighton, Massachusetts, the distinguished Sulpician, Father John B. Hogan, who always kept an affectionate remembrance of Theophane Venard.

The departure took place, unexpectedly at the end, on September 19. Four other priests left Paris with Father Venard and embarked from Antwerp. Their vessel was driven by a heavy gale into Plymouth, England, and after some delay sailed October 10 for the East, arriving at Singapore on New Year's day, 1853. After spending three weeks here, Theophane Venard was sent to Hong-Kong, where he remained fifteen months studying the Chinese language. The mission which he most coveted was Tonquin, and, although his preference had not been expressed to his superiors, he was assigned to the desired field, receiving orders to assist Bishop Retord in the western district.

The thought of martyrdom seems to have been with Father Venard constantly, and he could not help alluding to it in occasional letters to his fellow priests, always, however, in a joyous strain.

Towards the end of May, 1854, Theophane Venard started with another missionary for Macao, and after a pleasant visit to the Spanish Dominicans, boarded a Chinese junk, where the two young priests were stuffed into a small hole in which they could barely lie down, and which was filled with vermin. During a week they remained thus concealed, going on deck only at night to breathe a little fresh air.

They anchored at a place called Cua-Can, where the vessel was inspected by a Chinese mandarin who failed to discover the two missionaries in hiding; and the following day they were safely landed in the Bishop's house. From this point they were carried in a kind of net, by bearers, through a dangerous locality, to the river, where a Christian was waiting to row them in a junk to the hut of Bishop Diaz at Central Tonquin. Two carriers were awaiting them here, and, after a few days rest, they began the last stage of their journey, passing by night a citadel guarded by two thousand soldiers. Having escaped pursuit several times, they arrived safely at the house of Bishop Retord.

A frightful persecution of Christians had just devastated the Tonquin mission, and a lull had come for the moment. One bloody edict had followed another during the sixteen years of Bishop Retord's episcopacy, yet fifty thousand converts had been gained in that time, and these native Christians practiced their religion, as the Bishop testified, in a way that would shame many Europeans.

Unfortunately the lull was of short duration, and very soon Theophane Venard made his first flight to the mountains. There he caught a violent cold which attacked his lungs, but he recovered and resumed his labors, being placed over twelve thousand Christians who were divided into four large parishes and ministered to by six or seven native priests.

Father Venard's position was far from comfortable. He and his fellow priests were, as he expressed it, like birds on the branch of a tree, always on the alert, daily receiving messages which announced that missions had been pillaged, that such and such Christians had been put to death because the priests continued to reside among them. To spare the faithful, the young priest and his companions continued to hide in boats, in caverns, or in the mountain fastnesses, venturing out as often as possible to administer the Sacraments, to preach and to catechize.

On the 30th of November, at nine o'clock in the morning, five or six junks hove in sight a few yards away from the mission house to which Father Venard had returned. The young priest, realizing at once that he had been betrayed, concealed himself between two walls. The chief of his pursuers cried out, "Let the European priest come forth." Father Venard's catechist presented himself boldly, saying, "I occupy this house." He was immediately seized and garrotted, while the chief, giving a powerful kick to the partition behind which the missionary was hidden, attacked Father Venard brutally and dragged him to the boats. Arrived at the chief's house, the priest was secured in a bamboo cage, and a cangue, a kind of yoke, placed on the neck of his catechist; both were then brought before the Mandarin.

This official had not desired the capture, but could do no more to relieve the situation than provide Father Venard with a larger cage and a lighter chain. A detachment of soldiers then conveyed the two prisoners to Kecho, the capital, bringing them directly to

the judge's tribunal. Here, during a long interrogatory, the charge was made that the missionaries were in league with French troops who had made war on the Annamites. The complaint proved to be only a pretext, the real cause of the arrest being the propagation of Christianity. Father Venard was commanded to deny his faith and to trample on the cross. Refusing to yield, he was condemned to be beheaded.

In the days which elapsed between his trial and the execution of his sentence, Father Venard wrote from his cage several beautiful letters. Three of these, addressed to members of his family, are preserved today at Saint Loup.

While in captivity a native priest, Father Thinh, came from Bishop Theurel and, with the clever assistance of a Christian guard, managed to hear Father Venard's confession and to give him absolution. Towards evening, the Blessed Sacrament, concealed in some bread, was brought to the prison through the instrumentality of a devout widow, and Father Venard enjoyed the companionship of the Real Presence until after midnight, when he communicated.

The execution took place outside of Kecho in presence of the officials and two hundred soldiers. During the procession, which occupied half an hour, Father Venard sang Latin psalms and hymns. The executioner asked his prisoner what he would give to be executed promptly and well. The answer was: The longer it lasts the better it will be. Stripped of most of his garments, the young priest's elbows were tightly tied behind his back, so as to force him to hold up his head for the first stroke, which was only a trial blow. The second stroke cut the head partly off, the stake and the victim falling together. Then the executioner, finding his sword blunt, snatched another and hacked at the neck, amid the indignant murmurs of the bystanders. Seizing the detached head by the ear, the wretch offered it to the presiding official, who instantly sounded the retreat.

The troops had hardly withdrawn before the Christians precipitated themselves on the spot to soak their handkerchiefs in the martyr's blood. The body, wrapped in a cotton sheet and roughly encased, was buried only a foot deep, and later was removed. Today it lies under the chapel of the Mission House in Paris. The head, by official order, was placed in a box and elevated to the top of a pole. After three days, it was thrown into a river, but was regained through the vigilance of the affectionate natives, who carried it to Bishop Theurel. Today this precious relic is an object of veneration among the Catholics of Tonquin.

Theophane Venard was beatified by the Church, May 2, 1909.

Thoughts from Jean Theophane Venard

My God, help me to say, "Thy will be done!"

Today in the chapel of the college at Doue, I made a vow to Mary, Refuge of Sinners, to say my Rosary every day, in order to obtain a special grace from God.

If religious services on earth are so glorious, what must they be in Heaven? Eternity! Have you ever thought of this word? Eternal, Eternal! A thing which will never, never end!

Work hard, work well, not to get praise, or honor, or prizes, but because you will thus please God. Take this as the maxim of your life: All for our God."

True devotion is natural, gay, and bright, according to the words of Saint Paul, "*Gaudete in Domino semper; iterum dico, gaudete.*" "Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I say, rejoice."

What is the priesthood? Is it not the entire detachment from all worldly goods a complete abandonment of all temporal interests? To be a priest, one should be a saint. To guide others one must first learn to guide oneself. Then should not the life of a good priest be one of continual sacrifice, self-immolation, and mortification of all kinds?

"Piety," some say, "is only good for priests and nuns. God does not expect so much of us." How do you know?

"Cor unum et anima una" one heart and one mind. Such words can come only from God Himself. Is not this the link which unites all Christians? Is it not this feeling which creates the Missionary, the Priest, the Christian Brother, the Sister of Charity?

Read Rodriguez on Humility in his treatise on Christian Perfection. But do not let this book give you any scruples, as it is addressed to nuns, and one must not confound absolute precepts with practices which vary according to the position and duties of each person.

To God alone it pertaineth to judge of others. We have only to look to ourselves.

Every living thing seems to me to follow its vocation. The river flows to the sea, the plant germinates, the animal feeds and grows, and man lives and draws daily nearer to God. But each man walks after his own fashion. The business of one is to cultivate the soil; another, the intellect. Handicrafts supply the material wants of mankind; politics, the social. One and all gravitate towards their end, which is death, although each follows a different path. In one sense man has a free will, but he can scarcely be said to choose his career; it is almost always marked out for him. If he wanders from it, nothing but confusion is the result.

The world and its maxims have long ago had their condemnation from the mouth of our Divine Lord Himself. Ah! Lord God, Thy thoughts are not as our thoughts, and Thou walkest by paths of which the world knows nothing.

Do not love the world or its pleasures. They are all seemingly attractive and beautiful; but within, all is corruption, vileness, emptiness, and remorse. Oh, my brother, let us love God, our dear, good God, and be as sheep under His hand. Love Him, and you will have no cause for repentance even on this earth. He, too, promises us joys and pleasures, but they are joys certain, inexpressible, eternal, *pax Dei quae exsuperat omnem sensum*, the peace of God which transcends every sense.

One more sacrifice is asked of us; but does not our Lord prove those Whom He loves so as to make them more worthy of Himself? Must we not all pass through the crucible? A cross is given to us. Let us embrace it generously and thank Him. Our tears must flow. Well, let us offer them up to Him Who has called them forth.

Only a little more confidence in God! A little more patience! and the end will come, and the past weary years will seem as nothing; then will arrive the moment of reunion, and all will be amply compensated and repaid, principal and interest. Christian hope! How beautiful thou art! How thou dost satisfy the heart of man, the creature of a day, yet created for an eternity of Bliss!

A great servant of God once said that, if some gall were not mingled in our earthly cup, we should be content with our exile, and think less of our own true country."

God alone is the sovereign beauty; His works are perfect and glorious. If man be ever so great, it is only when he draws his inspirations from God, and when, in heart-felt humility, he gives to Him the glory.

Even if we do part here for a little time, it is only our bodies that are separated. Our souls are united more closely than ever in thoughts which know no space or distance. We shall meet one another in heaven. Yes, all of us shall be together then. Let us trust in God, and make the sacrifice generously.

Happiness is to be found only in the home and in the domestic circle where God is loved and honored, where each one loves, and helps, and cares for the others.

Life well employed consists in this: a faithful correspondence to grace, and a good use of the talents given. There is no other religion than this, and the rule of life is the same for all.

Make a little book in which you can write down your impressions, and your religious feelings, now and then, putting down the date; you can dedicate it to our Lady. Some day later you will read these thoughts again with pleasure, and they will serve to brace you up when days of heaviness and weariness overcome your courage.

Since our Lord Jesus Christ became man, His Divine manhood must take the lead in human affairs; for a people calling itself Christian, and throwing off all allegiance to the Most High, becomes thoroughly ungovernable, for the simple reason that corruption is greater when it shows itself in what was originally good.

I am, first of all, a man, a reasonable being, created to know, love, serve, and glorify God. I come from God. I go to God. I belong to God. My body is His. My mind is His. My heart is His. I shall be judged according to my works and to the way I have corresponded with the grace given me. Well then, God helping me, I will use this body, this mind, and this heart, as much as I possibly can, for His greater glory, honor and love.

Suffering is the money with which one buys Heaven.

Poetry presupposes a soul lifted above the things of sense; it means the outpouring of a heart full of love for God and for our neighbor, keenly alive to the beauties of nature and of grace. The mysteries of Christianity and of the Blessed Eucharist are eminently fitted for a poet. So also are pure love, devotion, heroism, self-sacrifice, and the rest. Poetry is not meant to be the exaltation of sensual indulgence. Yet three parts of the world call this poetry. Let us draw all our inspirations from purer sources! The literature of the day seems to me to run forever either in impure or rationalistic channels, so much so, that I dread lest we shall all be submerged in the foul tide.

Don't be afraid of being laughed at. You will crown all by keeping up the tender love of a little child for the Blessed Virgin and a confiding trust in your Guardian Angel.

God is surely very good to our human hearts, which He has formed, and of which he knows the yearnings and the weaknesses: and then He is the same in China as in France, and what do we want beside Him on earth or in heaven?

God is represented on earth by His Holy, Catholic, Roman, and Apostolic Church. She is the City of God, whose citizens we are, no matter in what corner of the world our lot may be cast. Our Lord Jesus Christ is the chief of this city; but we shall not see this clearly until the consummation of all things.

Perfection does not lie in one state of life more than in another, but consists in an entire correspondence with grace in the position in which God has placed us.

O my God! It is not wrong, is it, to love one's home, and one's father, and one's brothers, and one's sisters; to suffer terribly at being parted from them; to feel one's loneliness; to try and console one another; to mingle our prayers and our tears, and also our hopes?

Courage! When we leave any thing for God He rewards us a hundred-fold; He has said so Himself. But," you say, "I am alone, quite alone. Oh, no, you are the child of our Divine Lord and His Blessed Mother, the child of His love, the sheep of His pasture; have confidence in God.

Be agreeable in conversation, good-humored and merry, full of cheerfulness and fun, and not brooding on things disagreeable.

"The hand of God is everywhere." This shall henceforth be my motto. The hand of God is every where; therefore it will be everywhere with me.

True love cannot be snapped asunder; it spreads and widens, but never diminishes. Love never dies, for it is stronger than death. God Himself has said so. The strength and increase of love is in prayer. We are little and weak and miserable, but He Who sustains us is strong and mighty. His arms are ever stretched out towards us; let us lift ours to meet Him.

I must disregard human opinion, cultivate humility, bear to be despised, and follow my Lord and Master everywhere, always, and in spite of all.

Life has many bitter, sad, and weary hours; often it can scarcely be called existence. The little rivulets, as well as the great rivers, all empty themselves into one source the sea. God is an ocean of love and mercy; in Him alone is the fullness of joy. Patience and courage, then! A little while and we shall be with Him. He has promised it and He never belies His word. When the little river is dried up, the heavens give rain, and the river gaily continues its course. When our life is arid and we are ill at ease, let us ask for the dew and the refreshing rain and the food from God.

What God keeps is well kept.

When the body is deprived of food, it languishes and dies; and it is the same with the soul, without the Bread which sustains its life.

In the midst of discouragement one must try to take one's heart in both hands, and force it to cry out, "Welcome joy all the same!" The soul finds itself, some days, gay and calm, and at ease; other days, sad and weary, and broken-hearted. This is the case with everybody who is not a phenomenon. I believe it is a struggle between the upper and the lower parts of our nature. When the better part triumphs, we are at peace; but when we yield to our natural inclinations, then comes disorder, anxiety, longing after the impossible, and dissatisfaction with our lot.

My heart is too large, and nothing which you call happiness in this world satisfies it.

Here am I, O Lord, thy little martyr! I shall present my palm to Our Lady and say, "Hail, Mary, my Mother and my Mistress, all hail!" And I shall take my place in the ranks of the thousands killed for the holy name of Jesus; and I shall intone the eternal Hosanna.

Our life must be not only the active one of Martha, but the contemplative one of Mary, for both were united in the Mother of our dear Lord. The true science of piety, in fact, consists in reconciling these two. Do the work of Martha with the spirit of Mary; let the interior life leaven the exterior, conforming your will to the will of Jesus.

I should have been very happy to have gone on working with you. I do so love this Tonquin mission. But now, in place of the sweat of my brow, I give them my blood. The sword hangs over my head but I have no fear. God has taken pity on my weakness and filled me with Himself so that I am happy, and even joyous.

I am now only waiting patiently for the day when God will allow me to offer Him the sacrifice of my blood. I do not regret leaving this world; my soul thirsts for the waters of eternal life. My exile is over. I touch the soil of my real country: earth vanishes, Heaven opens, I go to God. Adieu! The prisoner of Jesus Christ salutes you. In a very short time the sacrifice will be consummated. May God have you always in His holy keeping!

Vain are the efforts of men when God opposes their designs.

When my head falls under the axe of the executioner, receive it, O loving Jesus! Immaculate Mother! as the bunch of ripe grapes falls under the scissors, as the full-blown rose which has been gathered in your honor. Ave Maria!

We are all flowers planted on this earth, which God plucks in His own good time; some a little sooner, some a little later. One is as the blushing rose, another the virginal lily, a third the humble violet. Let us each strive to please Our Sovereign Lord and Master according to the gift and the sweetness which He has bestowed upon us.

Guide your ship well. Let prudence take the helm; let humility be the rudder, God your compass, Mary your anchor of hope. And then, in spite of the disgust and bitterness which, like a howling sea, will sometimes overwhelm you, never be cast down. Have confidence in God and, like Noah's ark, you will float always above the waters.

I leave you in the field of virtues and good works. Reap a great harvest of these for the eternal life which awaits us. Gather faith, hope, charity, patience, gentleness, sweetness, perseverance, and a holy death; and we shall be together, now and forevermore.

– from *Thoughts from Modern Martyrs*, edited and arranged by Father James A Walsh, M.A.P.

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