

# **Armand-Jean de Rancé, a teacher of times gone by?**

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## The charisma of unity and charity.

‘Allow me to imitate the passion of my God’. This phrase of Ignatius of Antioch represents fully the ardent and fruitful spiritual search which marked the life of the Reformer of la Trappe. Armand-Jean Le Bouthillier de Rancé, from the moment of his conversion in 1657 to that of his death on October 27, 1700, exactly three hundred years ago.

The little child born on the ninth of January 1626 and presented in baptism by Armand-Jean du Plessis Cardinal de Richelieu and by the Marchioness d’Effiat, would show from his youth a great and outstanding personality. Incapable of putting any value on half measures with his loyalty, his courage, and the basic tendency of his decisions, Rancé was able to make himself loved and hated with about the same intensity.

A concern for his family and above all the ambitions of his father obliged the little Armand-Jean, previously slated for a military carrier, to take up the ecclesiastical following, without having any vocation to this.’ In the morning preach like an angel, and in the afternoon go hunting as a demon’. This is the way Rancé himself described his way of life, having become a court ecclesiastic, rich, intelligent, lauded by all.

But Providence had other plans. The year 1657 marked the point of rupture with this style of life and the beginning of a long search which was to lead him six years later to his final conversion. In 1657, in fact, the Countess of Montbazou, whom he loved, died unexpectedly; and the enmity of the prime minister Mazzarin, brought about his fall into disgrace and his withdrawal from public life.

From that moment, in his castle of Véretz - one of the most beautiful in France - Rancé meditates, prays, and asks spiritual direction. Little by little he dispossesses himself of the various monasteries and priories which he had in commendam, five in all, and decides to restore and to live in, as yet only as a commendatory abbot, though, the abbey of La Trappe, belonging to the Cistercian Order.

Only on April 17, 1663 during the psalmody of sext was he to be indelibly struck by the words of Psalm 124, ‘He who trusts in the Lord is like Mount Zion; he will not fail forever’. He decided then to become a monk. After a year of canonical novitiate at Perseigne, he became abbot of La Trappe on July 13, 1664. From then on he dedicated himself to the reform of the monastery with the enthusiasm of a neophyte and his fiery and loyal character, heedless of the failures and the numerous difficulties which he would have to overcome in the course of the last 37 years of his life. The calumnies and the persecutions of which he came to be the object on the part of those who judged his work to be the fruit of pride and presumption, did not make him back down on his purpose. In fact they made him more patient and docile to the will of God to such an extent that the motto of his life seem to be ‘to love one’s enemies’. His work was openly blessed by the Lord, and, though having begun with just a handful of disciples, Rancé left at his death a flourishing community composed of about 90 monks. The fecundity of the Trappist reform was destined to perpetuate itself through the centuries, and at the present time has monasteries of monks and nuns spread throughout the whole world, which try progressively to inculturate themselves in the places in which God has put them.

During the long years of his abbatial tenure Rancé learned to submit himself to the school of the Holy Spirit, allowing himself to be transformed and made gentle in all of the rough edges of his character. A true father in the Spirit, very much loved by his monks, he was able to transmit to them the passion for God which filled his heart. The unanimity with which abbot and monks continued together for years to be faithful to the decision made at the moment of their religious profession manifests the great importance given to fraternal life in

common, based on the exercise of faith, hope and charity. The sacramental life, above all Eucharistic, very objective and profound, and prayer, are the places where, under the guidance and influence of the Holy Spirit, the monks receive the strength to support one another in the search of the face of God, for the glory of his name.

One of the most beautiful chapters of his leading work, *De la sainteté et des devoirs de la vie monastique*, is that in which he speaks of the love for God and for the brethren and founds the bases of the common life, taking as his own the 17th chapter of the Gospel of Saint John and the First Letter of John.

The community therefore is the place of the sanctification of the monk. Veritable friends of the spouse, the brethren testify and mutually sustain fidelity to Christ and in Him they live, as children of the Father. "Charity is the bond and the foundation of the monastic communities. Thus she forms them, she conserves them. She makes it possible that the brethren live according to the law of God in harmony, in a holy understanding, and that they bear all together the yoke of the Lord 'humero uno', with one sole heart and one sole spirit and one sole will." (*Sainteté et devoirs...* 1, p.322, Paris 1701).

Rancé outlines in this way the foundations of the common life. The other fundamental point in the teaching of Rancé is the 'imitation of Christ'; nowadays we would say the 'following of Christ'. He puts emphasis above all on filial obedience to the Father and humility, which Christ has exemplified for us during all of his earthly life. With this imitation one reaches conformation to Christ, profound transformation, purification of the heart, simplicity, because God is simple. Affirmations, these, of great intensity, which draw our attention to the true motive force of the interior way indicated by the abbot of La Trappe: the love of Christ. The teaching of Rancé is very austere, but at the same time full of serenity, of peace and of equilibrium. It's right in the themes of self denial, of humility, of sacrifice that one can gather all of the clear-cut nature of these aspects. Furthermore, the Church, through the leading spiritual directors at this time - the *école française* being the most evident - put forward the importance, even the absolute necessity, of abnegation, purification of the heart, of sacrifice, for the following of Christ the Savior, as the conversion from a culture in an age in which the exaltation of the 'IO' in its more deteriorated manifestations, had become the soul of a society always more and more worldly and superficial.

The heroism of their faithfulness made the community of La Trappe and his abbot famous, and their style of life legendary. We shouldn't be surprised at this. Rancé in fact had taken as his spiritual masters the fathers of the desert, the ancient Fathers of the Church, the founders of the Cistercian Order, and St. Bernard whom he loved to such a degree as to become known as 'the new St. Bernard'. With these being his preferences, he had thus by this fact chosen a certain type of spirituality. It is well known that these great masters have formed their theological teaching into a complete opus which takes up Exegesis, Dogmatics, Moral Theology, and Spirituality. By this fact they have by no means left themselves at the margin of theological dialogue, but have entered into the very heart of theology, passing unto us their experience of profound communion with God.

Rancé stayed anchored at the Christological and Pneumatological aspect of their doctrine, and this means making the holiness of God the fulcrum of all theological and spiritual treatment. This means basing it on the very interior itself of the mystery of the Word Incarnate, and on the relationship between the Old and the New Testament. On the moral aspect itself of the following of Christ, of his act of obedient love to the Father, it is obedience which makes the monk (*Sainteté et devoirs...* 1, p. 132). The brethren constitute a community which finds its archetype and its unifying dynamism in the life of unity of the Persons of the Most Holy Trinity (*La vita fraterna in comunità*, 10).

If there was one virtue evident in the life of La Trappe, it was charity lived out in all the aspects. How, now, should we answer the question expressed in the title given to this article?

The recent documents of the magisterium 'Vita Consecrata' and 'Fraterna Life in Community' in their theological organizational structure seem to give, indirectly, a very modern charismatic aspect to the teaching of Rancé. In effect they underline numerous themes which were taken as the foundation of his reform.

In the current renewal of our monastic life in accord with the magisterium of the Church and taking into consideration some adaptations required by cultural changes, it is fundamental to return to the doctrine of the ancient Fathers and founders of the Order, to the study of Holy Scripture and to the true theology which one learns in profound communion with God.

The Trappist monks of today, following this vein are trying to live the ascetic life in the dynamics of a new joyful sense of brotherhood, in a cloistral contemplative and hidden life, in faithfulness to the Rule of St. Benedict and to the teaching of the Fathers of Citeaux, and they become in this way a living part of the nuptial mystery of Christ and the Church.

From La Trappe through the centuries there arrives even to our time a message of fire, and we know that 'without memory there is no future'.

*Translated by Ansgario Christensen.*

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