



MARTYRS FOR THE FAITH

based on an [article](#) by
John W. Carven, C.M.

How two Daughters of Charity
met death during the French
Revolution

The hospital of Saint-Jean, in Angers, was one of the oldest hospitals in France, founded in 1175 by Henri Plantagenet, Count of Anjou and King of England, to expiate for the murder of Thomas Becket.



(Much of this 12th century hospital still exists, and is today the site of the Jean-Lurçat Museum of contemporary tapestry, shown here.) [image source](#)

By the seventeenth century, the hospital needed restructuring. The Bishop of Angers and the Abbé de Vaux* requested of Saint Vincent that he send the Daughters of Charity.

*The vicar-general of the diocese, Guy Lasnier, known as the Abbé de Vaux, was well acquainted with both Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac and the work of the sisters in the confraternities.



[image source](#)



Aerial view of the hospital

[image source](#)



Location of Angers, France

In 1640, Louise de Marillac herself led a little community of 6 sisters to Angers to care for the sick in the hospital of Saint-Jean. They were the first to leave the environs of Paris and the Motherhouse.



A nearby street in Angers [image source](#)

The Daughters served there from 1640 to 1869, with a slight break forced on them by the French Revolution.



[image source](#)



At the time of the Revolution there were 39 sisters caring for the poor sick at the hospital, among them Sr. Marie-Anne Vaillot and Sr. Odile Baumgarten.

[image source](#)

Saint Vincent specified the reasons for the mission to Angers:

“The Daughters of Charity of the poor sick have gone to Angers to honor Our Lord, the Father of the Poor and His Blessed Mother, to assist, both bodily and spiritually, the sick poor of the Hôtel-Dieu in that city. Corporally by ministering to them and providing them with food and medicine, and spiritually by instructing the sick in the things necessary to salvation and, when they need a confession of their whole past life, by arranging the means for it, for those who would die in this state and for those who would be cured by resolving never more to offend God.”



Saint Vincent then proposed for them the means to be faithful to God and to become Good Servants of the Poor:

“The first thing Our Lord asks of them is that they love Him above all and that all their actions be done for love of Him. Secondly, that they cherish each other as Sisters whom He has united by the bond of His love, and the sick poor as their masters since Our Lord is in them and they in Our Lord.”

Pierre Coste, ed., Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondance, Entretiens, Documents. (14 vols., Paris: Lecoffre, 1920-1925, XIII: 539.)



Trouble began on the night of July 13-14, 1789. Saint-Lazare, the Motherhouse of the Congregation of the Mission and the residence of the superior general, was sacked by a band of rebels.



Sack of Saint-Lazare, July, 1789. Period engraving. Vincentiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, DePaul University. [image source](#)



The Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity, across the street from Saint-Lazare, also was attacked. Terrified, the ninety-eight seminary sisters and the elderly sisters in the infirmary watched the mob scour the house.

In November 1790, the government demanded that the clergy take a prescribed oath: "I swear to be faithful to the nation, to the law, to the king, and to uphold with all my power the Constitution decreed by the National Assembly and accepted by the king." The clergy split into two different groups: the minority who took the oath and formed the [Constitutional Church](#) supported by the government, and the majority who refused to subscribe and became known as the refractory clergy, condemned by the government.



[image source](#)



[image source](#)

Revolutionary committees and military commissions were established throughout France to arrest and judge suspects-- they had the power of life and death. France endured a Reign of Terror, with its executions and heinous butchery. A guillotine was permanently installed in Angers, and religious houses were turned into prisons for suspects.



[image source](#)

On Good Friday, April 6, 1792, a speaker in the National Assembly demanded the suppression of all teaching congregations. Another went further by asking for a suppression of congregations devoted to the care of the sick, and a bishop of the Constitutional Church wanted a ban on religious and ecclesiastical dress to be added. After a stormy discussion, the motion was carried.

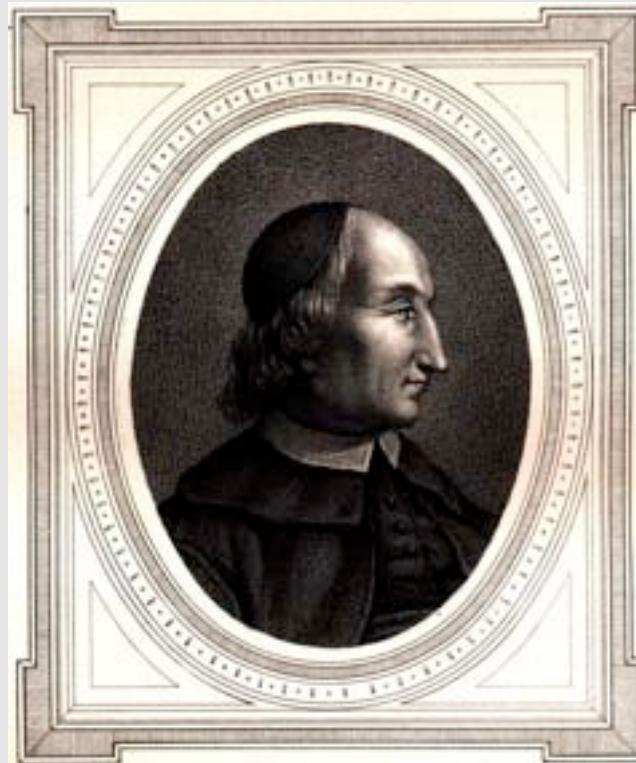
On April 9, almost immediately following the debates in the Assembly, Mother Marie-Antoinette Deleau sent a letter to all the houses:

“My very dear daughters, I have to tell you that on Good Friday, the 6th of this month, the National Assembly decreed the suppression of all ecclesiastical and lay corporations, and their dress, and although we are not specifically named, we are included in this category...

...I beg you, my dear daughters: 1- not to abandon the service of your poor unless you are forced to do so; 2- to ask the administrators for the cost of your first dress, if they demand that you lay aside your habit immediately after the sanction of the king. As this is a purely civil law, we can obey it [...] in order to be able to continue the service of the poor, give way to all that could honestly be asked of you in the present circumstances, provided it is not against religion, the Church, and conscience.”



[image source](#)



[image source](#)

By the beginning of November, 1792, the Superior General, Father Félix Cayla de la Garde, and his assistants, among them Father Carlo Sicardi, Director of the Daughters of Charity, had to flee France. The sisters witnessed the massacre of priests and religious and the deportation of others.

Backed by a new government, known as the Convention, the Reign of Terror established itself throughout France.

The Reign of Terror in Angers

On September 2, 1793, local revolutionaries were annoyed to hear that the Sisters were still working peacefully at the hospital of Saint-Jean. A petition was sent to the municipality: at all cost, and as soon as possible, the Sisters must be made to take the oath and shed their habit.

The Sisters replied that the oath was meant only for public officeholders; that their sole function was to look after the sick; that up to this time they had not disturbed public order; that, for these reasons, they considered themselves dispensed from all oaths, and that they would not take any.

Yet, some weeks later the sisters were made to change their habits. From Sister Marie-Anne's own words, on the day of her interrogation: the sacrifice of the holy habit was one of the most painful of her life. On their new headdress the Sisters had to wear the national cockade, which had been made obligatory for women by law.

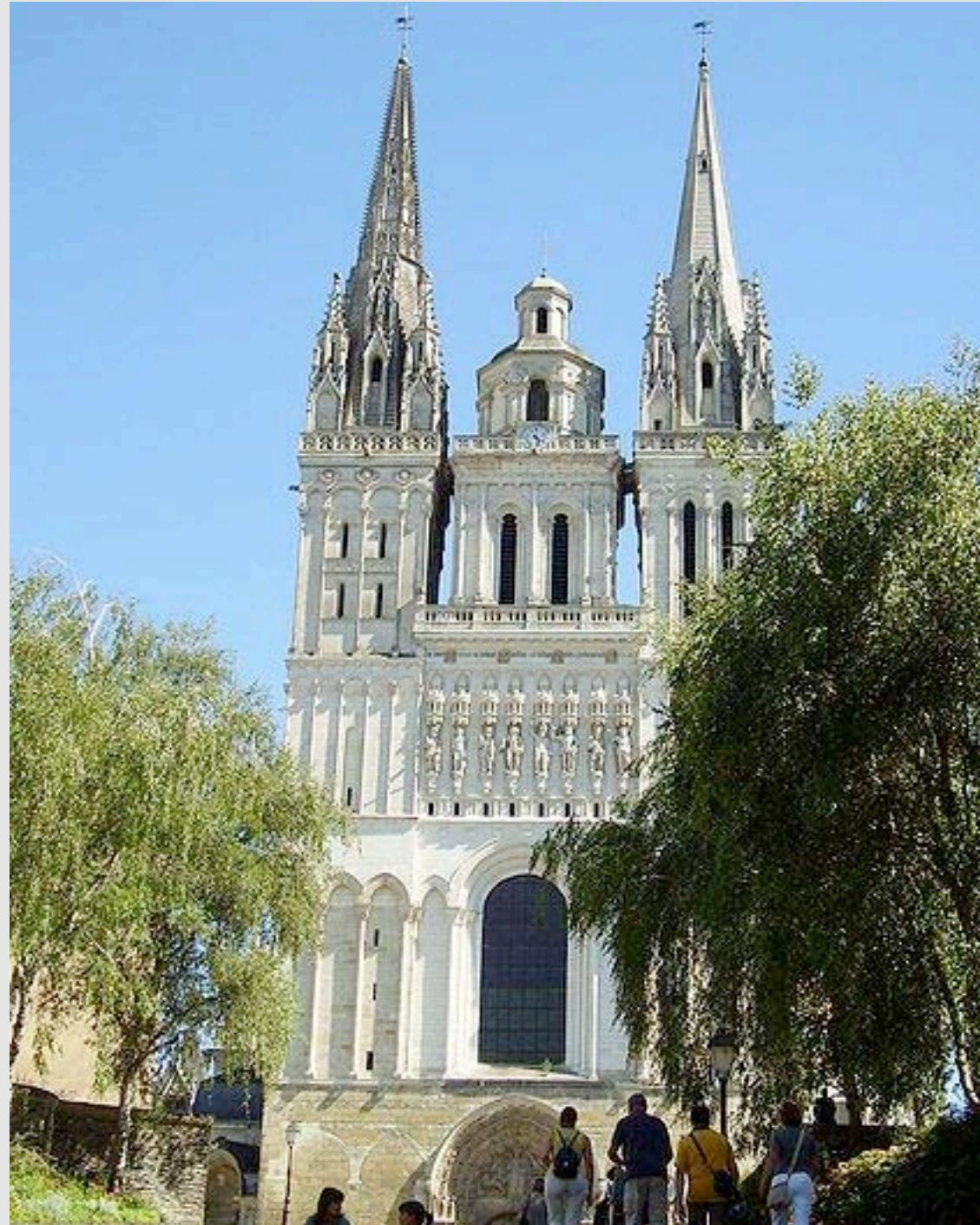


The year 1793 drew to a close amidst continual alarms.

On the night of November 11, the cathedral of Angers was pillaged, the statues mutilated or broken, the tombs desecrated.

The clock of the church of the Trinity, close by the hospital, was pulled down, the crucifix destroyed.

Christmas passed without Mass. The very name of Christmas had been eliminated from the Republican calendar.



Present-day view of Angers Cathedral, which dates back to the year 1096. [image source](#)

On January 5, 1794 a decree was passed by the Convention making the oath obligatory for all religious; the oath to be taken within ten days.

Only three sisters, namely Sisters Halicot, Melanie, and Adelaide, would make no difficulties about taking the oath. Thirty-six others refused.

The wrath of the municipality is evident in the report of the proceedings which the mayor gave his Council:

"...perhaps many of the others would have taken it if they had not been prevented by the perfidious suggestions and evil propositions of the ones called Antoinette, superior, Marie-Anne, and Odile, other sisters of the said hospital. It is urgent that these three persons should be referred to a judge because they are so dangerous for the hospital as well as for their companions."



[image source](#)

The Council applauded the mayor's idea and decided that Antoinette, Marie-Anne, and Odile should be arrested immediately and placed in the Calvary house of detention, as suspects. The arrest was made that same Sunday evening, January 19, 1794.

Marie-Anne and Odile appeared before their judge, Vacheron, of the military commission. Sister Marie-Anne was asked, "Where do you come from? Why are you here?" "I don't know," she replied, "unless it is because I refused to take the oath." Why? "My conscience will not allow me. I made the sacrifice of leaving my parents when I was very young so that I could come and serve the poor. I made the sacrifice of laying aside my habit and even that of wearing the national cockade." This last sentence so infuriated Vacheron that he shouted at her, "Don't you realize that transgression against the law is punishable by death?" When her turn came, Sister Odile made replies similar to those of Sister Marie-Anne, with the same effect on Vacheron.



The Departmental Archives contains a record of the interrogation:

“Marie-Anne Vaillot, aged sixty, born at Fountainbleau, Daughter of Charity of the Hôtel-Dieu of Saint-Jean of Angers, where she was living and where she was arrested a week last Sunday by some citizens; has said that the reason for her arrest is because she has not taken the oath, does not wish to do so, and has no fear of whatever treatment might be given her; it is plain to be seen from her replies that she is a fanatic and a rebel against the laws of the country; has never attended a mass celebrated by a priest who has taken the oath.



[image source](#)

Audile Bangard [sic], aged forty-three, born at Gondrechange in Lauraine [sic], Daughter of Charity of the Hôtel-Dieu of Saint-Jean, where she lived and was arrested a week last Sunday by some citizens; said that the reason for her arrest was that she did not take the oath, does not wish to do so, and has no fear of whatever treatment might be given her; it is plain to be seen from her replies that she is a fanatic and a rebel against the laws of her country."

In the margin, opposite the two paragraphs relating to the two interrogations, are the numbers 32 and 33 marked by a cross for emphasis, and below each number a small letter f, which signified "condemned to be shot".



[image source](#)



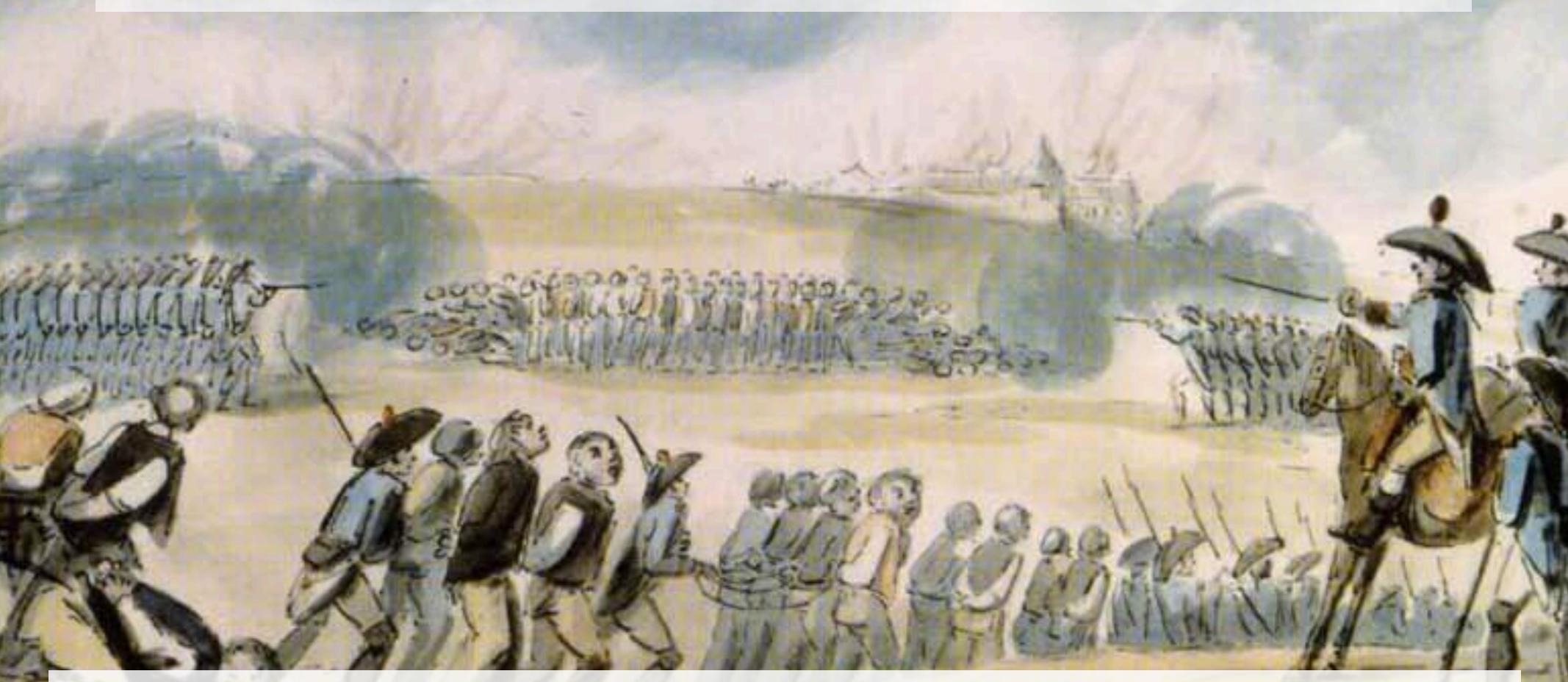
[image source](#)

The Lord himself seems to have forewarned and strengthened his martyrs before the struggle. On Friday, Sister Marie-Anne said:

"It seems that we are to die tomorrow, and that I shall simply be wounded at the first round of the firing."

"Yes," said Sister Odile, "but I shall die immediately from several bullets."

On the morning of February 1, a commissioner arrived at the prison and called the names of the victims for that day. Some tried to hide in order to escape death. They were to become, on this cold and rainy morning, part of a procession of more than 200 persons (mostly women), tied in pairs to a central rope.



Similar mass shootings at Nantes, 1793

(about 55 miles west, along the Loire River from Angers) [image source](#)

Guarded by mounted troops and gendarmes, the prisoners moved with painful slowness along the narrow street. At intervals during the passage, carts were loaded with those who could no longer walk. According to witnesses, they were piled one on top of another like sacks of wheat. Some suffocated before reaching the place of execution; others pleaded to be killed then and there.

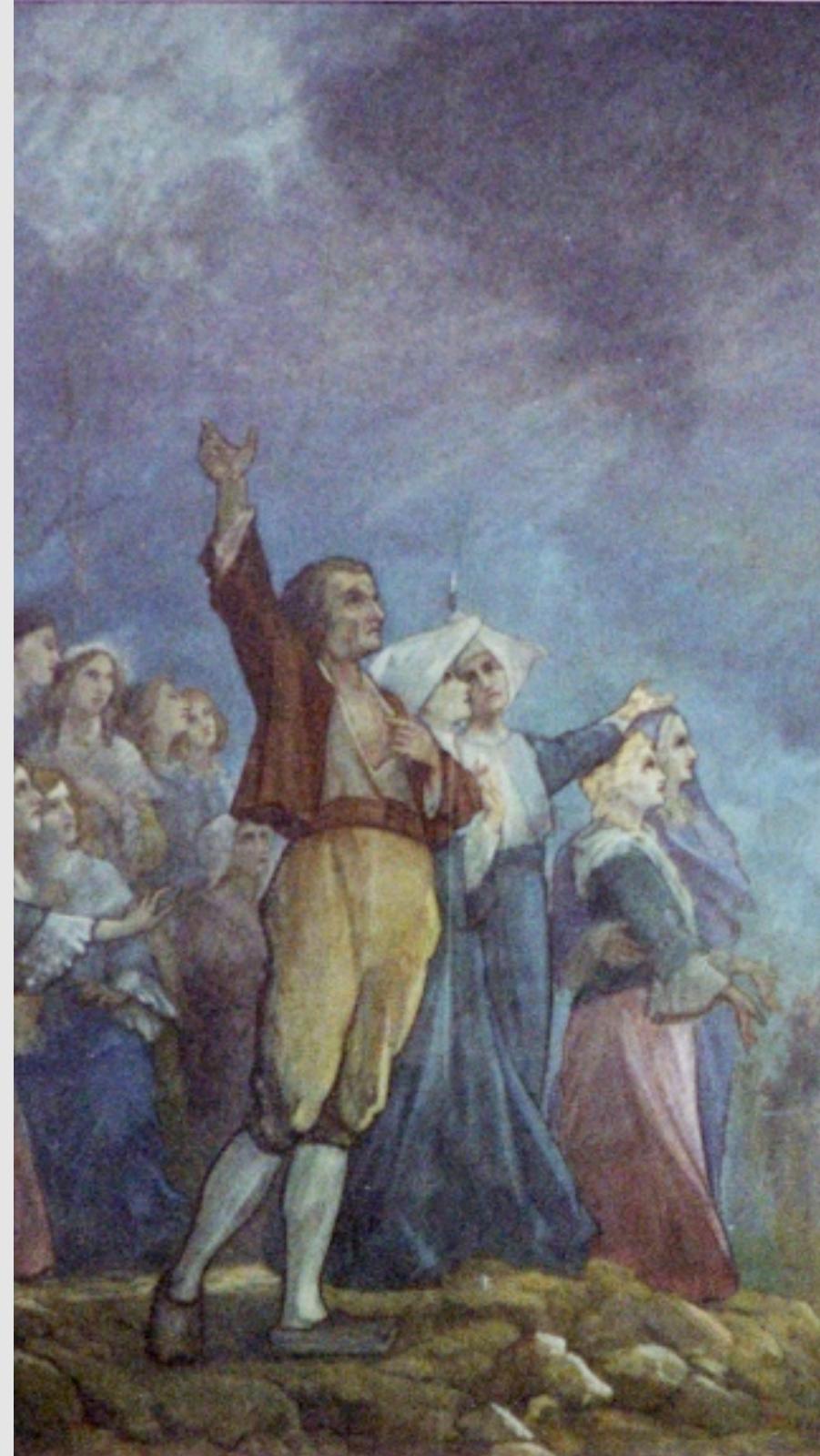
"Gentle Sister Odile," says an anonymous document, "seemed rather disturbed at the sight of these preparations and feared she was lacking in courage, but coming out of prison leaning on Sister Marie-Anne's arm, for the two were bound with the same rope, she drew from the steadfastness of this noble friend a strength of soul which thereafter banished all fear."

[image source](#)



At the initiative of the sisters, psalms and canticles of the Church were recited.

Those condemned to die received inspiration and strength from each other. An anonymous document notes: "They looked at one another with pious and tender affection, and witnesses all along the way heard from the lips of these two touching victims the following words, often repeated and never interrupted by a tear: 'A crown is destined for us, let us not lose it today.'" The sisters kept on saying to their nearest companions, "Just a little more effort and victory is ours."



[image source](#)

A dramatic incident, faithfully remembered and handed down by tradition:

Sister Odile dropped her rosary; she was probably wearing it under her clothing, for otherwise it would not have been tolerated. Wanting to pick it up this poor sister bent down and rested her hand on a stone, but just at that time, one of her executioners came up and gave her a blow on the hand with the butt of his rifle. One of the women in the crowd grabbed the rosary, which she later took to the hospital when peace had been restored.



[image source](#)

After a death march of some two miles, the convoy arrived at a small plateau and entered the Haie aux Bonshommes. On the eve of the execution trenches had been prepared. The victims had to make their way over the mounds covering victims of preceding days.

Sister Marie-Anne in a strong voice intoned the Litany of Our Lady, and the crowd of condemned people repeated it; thus she encouraged the other victims of this day to die in a Christian manner.

According to Mlle. Martha, an employee of the hospital who left us this account, the scene was so moving that one of the most furious and most irreligious of the Angers' revolutionaries was impelled to pity and remorse. "It hurts," he said, "to see such women die," and he left the scene.



[image source](#)

The commander of the execution squad tried to save the two sisters-- pity and admiration had taken possession of his heart. He said to them: Citizenesses, there is still time for you to escape death; you have rendered services to humanity; what! because of an oath you are asked to take, you would give up your lives and not continue to render services that you have always carried out; don't take the oath since it is repugnant and vexing to you. I will take it upon myself to say that you have taken it, and I give you my word that nothing will happen to you nor to your companions.

Sister Marie-Anne replied, "Citizen, not only do we not wish to take the oath of which you are speaking, but we do not want even to appear to have taken it."



While the pious singing continued, the victims, in groups of twenty, were moved one after another before the firing squad, but gradually the voices lost vigor as the numbers diminished. Bodies fell into the trenches, others slumped on the edge and tried to rise. There were cries and groans. The sisters seem to have been the last victims. True to their prediction, Sister Odile was killed immediately, Sister Marie-Anne first suffered only a broken arm before she was killed.

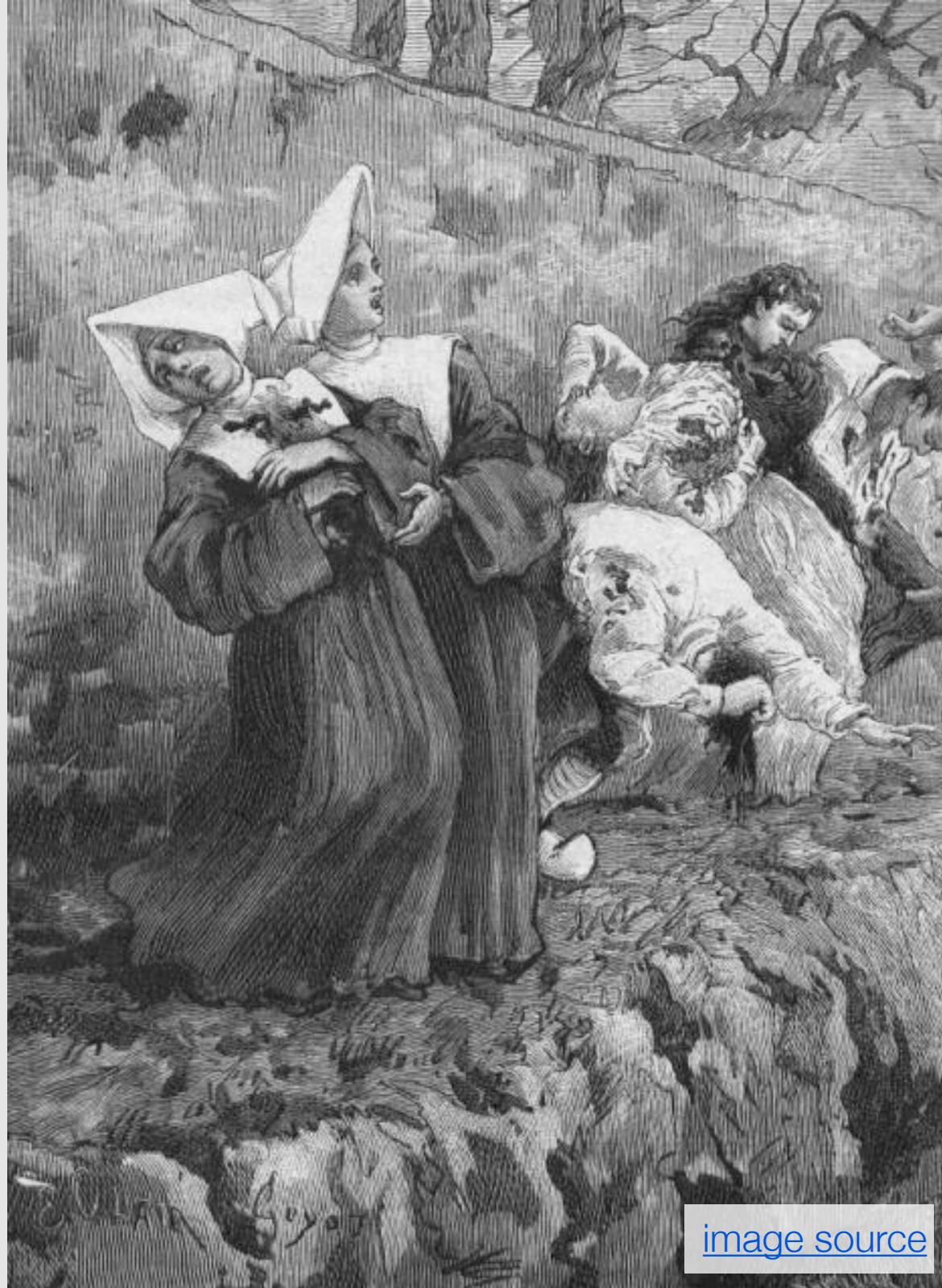
They were declared blessed in Rome on February 19th, 1984 by Pope John Paul II.

[image source](#)



Ninety-nine Christians were executed that day, including twelve diocesan priests; three women religious; and eighty-four lay people: four men and eighty women or young girls, of all social classes: nobles, peasants, businessmen, domestics, and craftsmen.

Fifteen of them were guillotined in Angers, the other eighty-four were shot. The guillotine was used for well-to-do people since their condemnation carried with it the confiscation of the condemned person's goods, which were used to pay the executioner and his assistants. The Daughters of Charity underwent the method of execution used for the poor.



They shall be faithful in having a pure intention of pleasing God in all things and to prefer to die rather than to displease Him.

- St. Vincent de Paul

How short this wretched life! How endless, blessed and desirable, eternity! The only way to get there is to follow Jesus, always laboring, always suffering.

- St. Louise de Marillac

Sufferings are the ties, the bands, which fasten and unite us to our Dearest.

- St. Elizabeth Ann Seton

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full text at [http://via.library.depaul.edu/cgi/
viewcontent.cgi?article=1060&context=vhj](http://via.library.depaul.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1060&context=vhj)