

# French School of Spirituality

## Chapter 3

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## French School of Spirituality and Other Spiritual Movements of 17th France

### Key Figures of the French School

1575-1629	(Cardinal) Pierre de Bérulle (Founder, French Oratorians)
1578-1637	(Mère) Madeleine de Saint-Joseph (a <i>dirigée</i> of Bérulle, one of the first seven French women to join the Paris Convent of Carmelites of the reform of Teresa of Avila)
1588-1641	Charles de Condren (2 <sup>nd</sup> SG, French Oratorians)
1601-1681	Jean Eudes, CJM (Founder, Eudists)
1608-1657	Jean Jacques Olier, SS (Founder, Sulpicians)

### Other Important Persons in Spiritual Movement of Seventeenth-Century France

1566-1618	(Madame) Barbe Acarie (Marie de l'Incarnation, as a Carmelite)
1563-1610	Benet of Canfield, OFMCap (William Fitch)
1564-1626	Pierre Coton, SJ
1577-1638	(Père) Joseph, OFMCap (the original <i>Éminence grise</i> , François Leclerc du Tremblay)
1581-1660	Vincent de Paul, CM (Founder, Vincentians)
1591-1660	Louise de Marillac (Founder, Daughters of Charity)
1567-1622	François de Sales (Cofounder, Visitandines)
1572-1641	Jeanne de Chantal (Cofounder, Visitandines)
1585-1662	François Bourgoing (3 <sup>rd</sup> SG, French Oratorians)
1611-1649	Gaston de Renty (Layman, Company of the Blessed Sacrament)
1622-1700	Louis Tronson, SS (3 <sup>rd</sup> SG Sulpicians)
1627-1704	Jacques Bénigne Bossuet (Bishop of Meaux)
1651-1719	Jean Baptiste de La Salle (Founder, Christian Brothers)
1673-1716	Louis Marie Grignon de Montfort (Founder, Montfortians)
1732-1811	Jacques André Émery, SS (9 <sup>th</sup> SG, Sulpicians)
1648-1717	(Madame) Jeanne Marie Bouvier de La Motte Guyon
1651-1715	François de La Mothe Fénelon

### Jansenists

1585-1638	Cornelius Jansen (author of the <i>Augustinus</i> )
1581-1643	(Abbé of) Saint-Cyran (Jean Duvergier de Hauranne)
1591-1661	(Mère) Angélique Arnauld (Abbess of Port-Royal)
1612-1694	Antoine Arnauld ( <i>le Grand Arnauld</i> , author of <i>De la communion fréquente</i> )
1593-1671	Agnès Arnauld (also Abbess of Port-Royal)
1625-1695	Pierre Nicole (a Port-Royal solitary)
1623-1662	Blaise Pascal (a Port-Royal solitary)
1639-1699	Jean Racine (student of the Port-Royal solitaires)
1625-1661	Jacqueline Pascal (a nun at Port-Royal)

## French School of Spirituality

by

Lowell M. Glendon, SS

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**Pierre Cardinal de Bérulle**

### French School of Spirituality

Henri Bremond, in his classic treatise (*Histoire du sentiment religieux en France*, 1921, 3:3-4), first popularized the term *French School of Spirituality*, although it seems that he did not coin it. Today, particularly in the French-speaking world, the term *Berullian School* is preferred, identifying Pierre Cardinal de Bérulle (1575-1629) as the fountainhead out of which this current spirituality flowed. Major figures with him were Charles de Condren (1588-1641), Bérulle's successor as superior general of the Oratory; Jean-Jacques Olier (1608-1657), founder of the Sulpicians; and St. John Eudes (1601-1680), founder of the Eudists. Other figures were Mother Madeleine of Saint Joseph (1578-1637), disciple of Bérulle and the first French prioress of the Great Carmel in Paris, one of the forty-three convents he helped found in France in the years following Teresa of Avila's reform in Spain; St. Jean-Baptiste de La Salle (1651-1719), founder of the Christian Brothers; and Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort (1673-1716).

The 17<sup>th</sup> century French School of Spirituality grew out of a number of significant movements of the time. Most important among them were the renewal in biblical and patristic studies; the Catholic Counter-Reformation, especially the need for the reformation of the clergy; and a strong reaction to what Bremond calls "devout humanism." These writers had a strong, contemplative, apostolic, and missionary spirit. They professed a Trinitarian theology and believed deeply that men and women are called to commune intimately in the divine life of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

As Bérulle and subsequent writers sought to thematize their own religious experience, they evolved a number of major themes that have characterized the faith and

formational practices of this spiritual movement for over three and a half centuries. They are theocentrism, Christocentrism, Mary, and the priesthood.

### Theocentrism

Cardinal de Bérulle called for a type of “Copernican” revolution in which we would relate to God in Jesus as the sun and therefore the center of our spiritual universe rather than ourselves and our world, which Renaissance humanism seemed to prefer. This fundamental theocentric spiritual attitude was grounded in awe and adoration toward God expressed through what was called the virtue of religion. Denis Amelote, in his *Life of Condren* (1643), wrote that there were many holy and virtuous people in that century but that he saw “more familiarity with God than reverence; there are many people who love God, but few who respect him” (Thompson and Glendon, p. 100).

In his *Introduction to the Christian Life and Virtues* (1657), Olier says: “Our Lord Jesus Christ came into this world to bring love and respect for his Father and to establish his reign and his religion. . . . His incessant desire was to open the minds and hearts of the faithful to this religion” (Thompson and Glendon, p. 217).

Integral to this sense of awe before the triune God was the awareness of the nothingness of all creation in itself. Condren, who influenced both Bérulle and Olier, had a transforming vision at the age of twelve in which he saw all creation annihilated before the majesty and wonder of God. This particular type of *via negativa* and accompanying negative language is a characteristic of the French School and is one of the reasons for its decreased influence in our culture since the Second Vatican Council.

### Christocentrism

While Christianity, by its very nature, is in some manner centered on Christ, the French School has its own way of expressing and living this truth. Christ is seen as the incarnate Word, the one who offers perfect religion, i.e., praise, adoration, obedience, and love to God. Therefore we are called to conform ourselves to Jesus Christ, especially in his “states” (*états*), i.e., the interior dispositions through which he faithfully lived out the mysteries of his incarnation, passion, death, resurrection, and ascension. While his actions were transitory, his dispositions are permanent and available to us today; through them we can commune with Jesus and render perfect religion to God. In a strong reading of Gal 2: 20, these authors portrayed the life of the Christian as the life of Jesus in us. John Eudes wrote: “It follows necessarily from this that, just as bodily members are animated by the spirit of their head and live its life, in the same way we must be animated by the spirit of Jesus, and live his life, and walk in his ways. We should be clothed with his sentiments and inclinations, perform all our actions with the same dispositions and intentions he brought to his. In a word we should continue and bring to fulfillment the life, religion and devotion with which he lived on earth” (*The Life and Kingdom of Jesus in Christian Souls* (1637), in Thompson and Glendon, pp. 293-94).

### Mary

Mary, the Mother of God, occupies a very important theological and affective place in the French School. The poetic and effusive way in which these authors speak of her seems at times foreign and exaggerated to us. It is, however, a natural development of the virtue of religion, which is foundational to their spirituality. For if we contemplate God with awe and reverence, what should be our attitude toward her who was chosen to bring forth the eternal Word into this world? In his *Life of Jesus* (1629), Bérulle speaks of Jesus dwelling in Mary’s womb as in a temple: “It is the first and holiest temple of Jesus.

The heart of the Virgin is the first altar on which Jesus offered his heart, body and spirit as a host of perpetual praise; and where Jesus offers his first sacrifice, making the first and perpetual oblation of himself, through which, as we have said, we are all made holy” (Thompson and Glendon, p. 161).

St. John Eudes develops the theme of the heart of Mary, which for him primarily indicates her interior life. She lives so fully in the dispositions and sentiments of Jesus’ mysteries that the founder of the Eudists sees her as the icon of Jesus.

While the language is lavish and often archaic, the insights are theologically and spiritually precise. The French School’s Marian spirituality conforms fundamentally to the emphasis of the Second Vatican Council, which places Mary’s graces and privileges in the context of her unique relationship, as Mother of God, with the Triune God and the Word Incarnate.

### **Priesthood**

St. Vincent de Paul and Jean-Jacques Olier were involved for a number of years with parish missions in the provinces of France. It became clear to them that the renewal of the faithful would bear fruit only if their pastors were deeply spiritual and learned men. These reformers were concerned with the often lamentable state of the priesthood in 17<sup>th</sup>-century France. Bérulle and Condren with the Oratory, Olier with the Sulpicians, St. Vincent de Paul with the Vincentians (*Lazaristes*), and St. John Eudes with the Eudists created institutions imbued with the spirit of the French School to train men worthy of the vocation to the priesthood.

While their Neoplatonic view of Church and ordained priesthood was hierarchical, they had a clear sense of both the priesthood of the faithful and the universal call to holiness, themes which appear in the documents of Vatican II and which are the theological basis for the contemporary blossoming of lay ministry in the Church. Some scholars see clear similarities between the French School and the documents of the council in these areas, and especially in some of the themes of the Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests (see M. Cancouët, “Traces de la théologie et de la pratique de l’écôle française à Vatican II et au-delà,” *Bulletin de Saint Sulpice* 6 [1980] 214-36).

### **Contemporary Significance**

As noted above, the French School connects with a number of contemporary spiritual themes. There are also aspects of its doctrine and practice that seem offensive to contemporary American sensitivities. It is unfortunate that some negative anthropological language, a hierarchical worldview, and at times a lavish style of writing present a major obstacle to many contemporary readers in the English-speaking world. For there are many valid insights that could enrich our efforts at a theologically balanced spirituality. Among them are:

1. The heightened sense of the transcendence of God has receded from the contemporary collective consciousness as we have reemphasized, for good reasons, the beauty and holiness of the human as spiritual path. However, since the full truth lies in the paradoxical mystery of God as both transcendent and immanent, this spirituality models for us one way of maintaining both aspects of this divine mystery. For the sense of awe and mystery of God is continually held in balance with a powerful intuition of the mystery of the incarnate Word.

2. The essential connection between the life of prayer and ministry is another strong belief of the French School. The revitalization of the spiritual life was the cornerstone of their efforts to reform the Church of their day. There is a strong emphasis on the

communal spiritual life, experienced through the Church, seen as Mystical Body, and the sacraments. At the same time, the French School has always had a profound respect for the unique work of the Holy Spirit in the individual person. This respect has been the life force and dynamism behind the long and rich history of commitment to spiritual direction. As we experience today a widespread renewal of interest in this *ars artium* and in directed retreats, there are important insights to be gathered from the French School.

For example, Olier offers us an essential practical teaching about spiritual growth. He points out that progress is best nurtured by admitting our own powerlessness (*anéantissement*) and turning our lives over to the Holy Spirit. Our own efforts are doomed to fail unless they flow from the Spirit of Christ. Furthermore, emphasizing our own agenda for spiritual growth can be a most subtle trap that makes us even more self-centered than before. Therefore we are called to commune in the interior life of Jesus Christ as a way to spiritual fulfillment and let God do the work (*Mémoires* 1:44; see also how Olier embodies this strategy in his approach to prayer (Thompson and Glendale, pp. 228-32).

3. Several communities flowing from this tradition have been able to renew their constitutions credibly for today by drawing on the central themes of the French School and the writings of their founders. These documents model well a dialogue between an older spirituality and our contemporary sensitivity, need, and vocation.

The French School offers a powerful spiritual synthesis, blending profound mysticism with zeal and energy for reform. Rarely has such a deep sense of the communion with God in the Spirit of Jesus Christ been expressed and written not only for priests and religious but for the laity as well. It is a spirituality of profound transformation and exquisite adoration. It is lyrical, poetic, and passionate in its love for Jesus Christ and, through his Spirit, in its devotion to the Father.

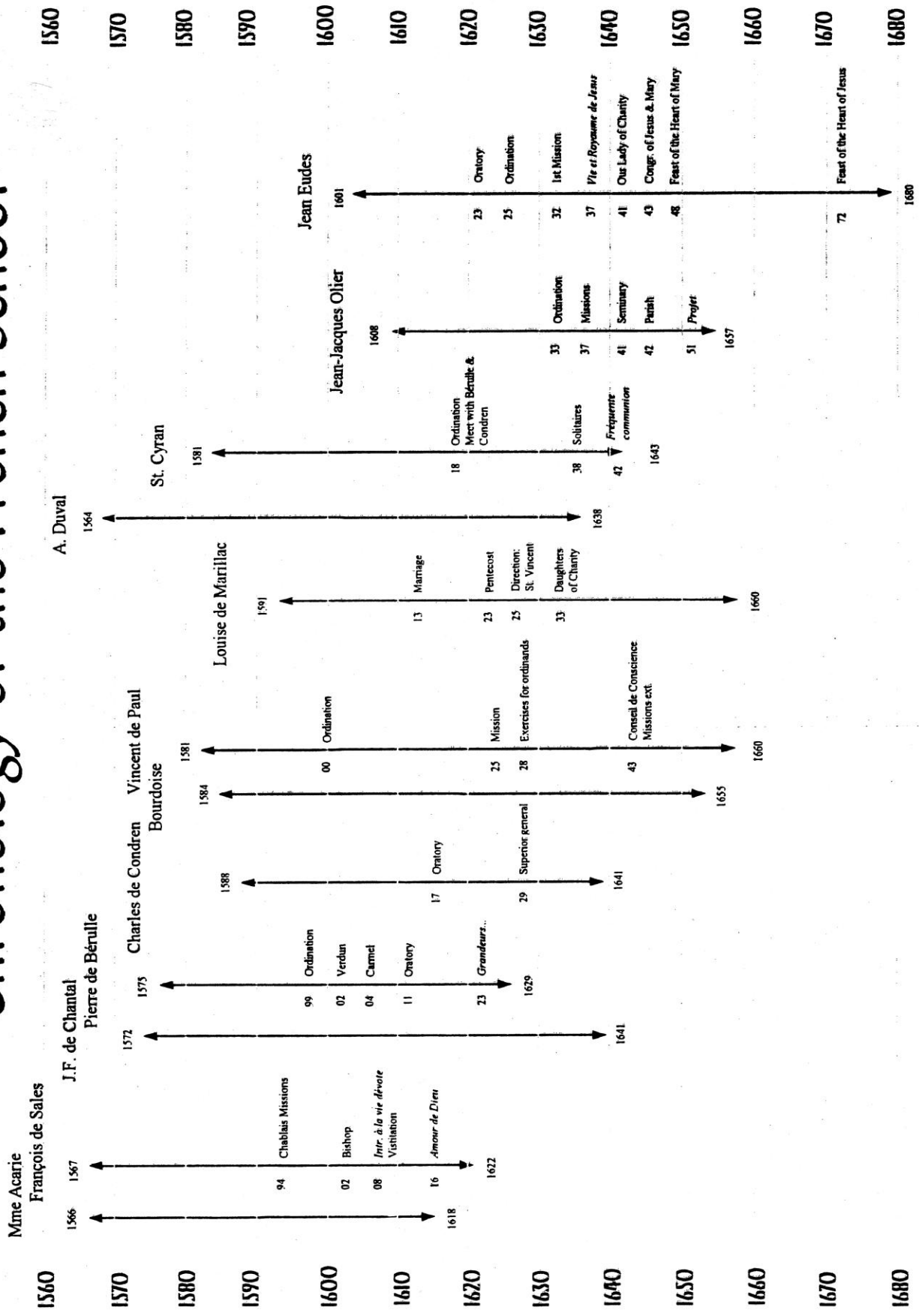
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# Chronology of the French School



*Alive for God in Christ Jesus: A Conference Exploring Contemporary Influences from the French School of Spirituality, August 18-24, 1995*



## Thoughts on the French School of Spirituality

[French School Notes by Hugh Bihl, SM]

Spirituality concerns (1) God (or the Beyond, the most transcendent, the Holy Mystery in Karl Rahner's phrase) (2) human beings [all the length, depth and breadth that this implies] (3) steps to be taken on the human journey into the Holy Mystery. The way these three are configured and the emphases within each of the three are what constitute a particular spirituality.

The time of the major developments of the French School of Spirituality extends from 1600 through 1720. The prime figures in this development are Pierre de Bérulle, Charles de Condren, Jean Jacques Olier, St. John Eudes, and St. Louis Marie Grignon de Montfort. Many religious congregations and religious founders drew heavily on the wisdom of the French School throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Among them, of course, was Father Chaminade.

### Chief Features of the French School:

1. The emphasis is on God. The steps on the journey are somewhat abbreviated, simplified – although this characteristic depends in part on the individual's psychology. Careful discernment, good spiritual direction is necessary here.
2. The French School is highly **Christocentric** – i.e., Incarnation-centered. God reaches us in, through, and with Christ.
3. The spiritual journey consists primarily in an immediate and in-depth plunge into the Christ Mystery and remaining there. The journey aspect takes place *within* this mystery – i.e., it requires working out the implications of living “in Christ” for this individual's psychology.
4. The Incarnation is lived out through the **Mysteries** and **States** of Christ. “Mysteries” here refers to the events of Christ's life as they are lived for our sakes. These events have an interior aspect as well as the more obvious external, historical one – they reflect a specific modality of the divine descent into the human, a particular expression of the divine love. In this sense, they are eternal and as such are always available to us. “States” refers to the more inward, more permanent ground(s) of the mysteries...the inner dispositions of Christ. Thus, the Christmas mystery – the mystery of the birth of the Incarnate Word – is grounded in one of the “states” of Christ, such as the Holy Infancy, Christ as always present to his Father, etc.
5. The Incarnation itself is the “state” that most moved Bérulle. He saw the humanity of Jesus as always permanently “open” to the Father, as always in an attitude of adoration. Christians can participate in this openness and in this adoring posture through union with Christ in his mysteries.

Two permanent attitudes characterize the spiritual path of the French School:

*Adherence*

*Aneantissement* (variously translated as annihilation, self-abasement, self-abnegation, death to self, “putting off the old man,” etc.). This aspect of the French School is difficult for contemporary people to enter into. My suggestion to someone who wishes to explore it for his own life: read Thomas Merton and pay close attention to his distinction between the false self and the true self. It is the *false self* which must be destroyed (actually, mostly by turning away from it) so that the *true self* can come into its own. And in the French School context, the true self blossoms only in *becoming Christ* . . . In the words of Saint Paul, “I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me.”

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Father Chaminade takes all this up in his own way. For him, the abiding state of Christ that we are to “adhere” to is his condition of being the Son of Mary. This grounds all of Marianist spirituality. In Father Thomas Stanley’s thesis (*The Mystical Body of Christ according to Father Chaminade*, pp. 144-52) he notes that Marianists are not expected to linger long on the mysteries of the Holy Childhood – and so on the state of perpetual dependence – but are expected to grow through all the mysteries of Christ, taken up at appropriate times and conditions throughout a person’s life. Here also there is much need for careful discernment.

Pierre Cardinal de Bérulle  
1575-1629

- 1575** Born at Cérilly, February 4
- 1582** Father dies, the Bérulle family moves to Paris. Upon being informed of his father's death, Bérulle remarks, "God has desired it, one must desire it."  
Makes vow of perpetual virginity in imitation of St. Catherine of Siena.
- 1592** Studies at the Jesuit Collège of Clermont
- 1594** After the exile of her husband, Madame Acarie takes up residence with the Bérulle family.  
Publishes *Bref discours de l'abnégation intérieure* under a pseudonym.
- 1599** Ordained to the priesthood, June 5
- 1602** During a retreat at Verdun, he determines he does not have a Jesuit vocation.  
The retreat also marks his shift to Christocentrism
- 1604** Instrumental in bringing the Carmelite nuns to France
- 1611** Founds the Oratory
- 1614** Named perpetual visitor to the women Carmelites in France
- 1615** The Oratory makes the vows of servitude to Jesus and Mary
- 1616** Jesuits and Carmelite friars launch attacks against him and the vows of servitude
- 1623** Publishes *L'État et les grandeurs de Jésus*
- 1624** Negotiates the marriage of Henriette of France with Charles I of England
- 1625** Publishes *Élévation sur Sainte Madeleine*, partially as a source of comfort for Henriette  
Cardinal Richelieu begins to oppose him more forcibly
- 1627** Named cardinal
- 1629** *Vie de Jésus* is published  
Dies, October 20



(Originally developed by David Thayer, SS)

Charles de Condren  
1588 -1641

- 1588** Born at Vaubuin, December 15
- 1600** Has a deep experience of the grandeur of God
- 1603** Begins studies with the Jesuits at Harcourt
- 1613** Enters the Sorbonne
- 1614** Ordained to the priesthood
- 1615** Receives doctorate in theology at the Sorbonne
- 1617** Enters the Oratory
- 1618** Founds a house of the Oratory at Nevers
- 1619** Assists in the foundation of a seminary at Langres. Will spend the next few years in such enterprises
- 1625** Returns to Paris  
Named confessor to Gaston d'Orléans, the brother of Louis XIII, a position he is loathe to accept
- 1629** Elected superior of the Oratory after the death of Cardinal Bérulle  
Renounces visitorship to the Carmelites
- 1631** Presides at first general assembly of the Oratory, tries to resign and is reaffirmed as superior general
- 1634** Second general assembly of the Oratory, again tries to resign
- 1638** Accepts position of superior general upon his confessor's threatening to withhold absolution
- 1641** Dies January 7



(Originally developed by David Thayer, SS)

Saint Jean Eudes  
1601-1680

- 1601** Birth at Ri, near Argentan
- 1615** Studies with Jesuits at Caen
- 1623** Enters the Oratory in Paris
- 1625** Ordination to the priesthood
- 1632** First of more than 100 missions
- 1637** First edition of *The Life and Kingdom of Jesus*
- 1641** Meets Marie des Vallées, founds Our Lady of Refuge in Caen
- 1643** March 19 founds seminary in Caen. March 25 founds Congregation of Jesus and Mary
- 1648** First public celebration of the Feast of the Heart of Mary in Autun
- 1651** Our Lady of Refuge becomes Our Lady of Charity
- 1653** Seminary and Collège in Lisieux
- 1654** *Contrat de l'homme avec Dieu par le saint baptême*
- 1657** Seminary in Rouen
- 1666** Our Lady of Charity approved by Rome; *Le bon confesseur*
- 1667** Seminary in Evreux
- 1670** Seminary in Rennes
- 1672** First liturgical celebration of the Heart of Jesus
- 1674-79** In royal disfavor
- 1676** Last mission at Saint-Lô
- 1680** Dies on August 19
- 1925** Canonized on May 31



(Originally developed by David Thayer, SS)

Jean-Jacques Olier  
1608 -1657



- 1608** September 20, birth in Paris.
- 1617-24** Years in Lyons
- 1622** Blessed by St. Francis de Sales
- 1625-30** Philosophy at Harcourt, then theology at the Sorbonne.
- 1630** Rome and Loretto, receives “a great desire for prayer.”
- 1633** May 21, ordination to the priesthood. Vincent de Paul becomes his spiritual director. Attends *Conférences du Mardi* (Tuesday Conferences).
- 1634-41** Rural missions
- 1634** Meeting with Agnès de Langeac
- 1635** Charles de Condren becomes his spiritual director.
- 1638** First contact with Marie Rousseau
- 1639-41** July to July 1641: the great trial.
- 1641** Death of Condren in January, beginning of seminary at Vaugirard, December 29.
- 1642** January 11: Vow of servitude to Jesus. Dom Tarisses, then Dom Bataille, becomes his spiritual director. Under the command of the latter, he begins his *Mémoires*.
- 1643** January 11: Vow of servitude to souls.
- 1644** March 31: Vow as victim-host.
- 1648** Begins action against Jansenists.
- 1649** Seminary in Nantes.
- 1650** Seminary in Viviers.
- 1651** *Projet* to Assembly of Clergy of France. Seminary buildings blessed on August 15.
- 1652** Resigns as Curé of Saint Sulpice due to illness in June.
- 1653** Partial paralysis, September 26
- 1655** Publishes *The Christian Day*
- 1656** Publishes *Catéchisme chrétien*
- 1657** Publishes *Introduction à la vie et aux vertus chrétiennes*. Dies in Paris, April 2 at age 48.

(Originally developed by David Thayer, SS)

Saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle  
1651-1719



- 1651** Born on April 30 in Rheims
- 1660** Studies at the collège of *Bons Enfants* in Rheims
- 1667** Canon of the Cathedral in Rheims
- 1670** Enters Saint-Sulpice in Paris
- 1672** Departs Saint-Sulpice upon the death of his father to care for his family
- 1678** Ordained to the priesthood on April 9 in Rheims
- 1679** Meeting with Adrien Nyel. Direction of a school started by Nyel.
- 1680** Invites school teachers to eat with him
- 1681** Invites school teachers to live with him
- 1682** Goes to live with the teachers
- 1686** Assembly of brothers
- 1688** Goes to Paris with two brothers
- 1691** Vow of association and union with two brothers
- 1692** Opening of novitiate at Vaugirard
- 1694** First assembly of brothers, approval of common rules, first vows
- 1711-13** Travels in Provence. Condemnation. Exiled in Grenoble
- 1714** Return to Paris
- 1715** Definitive departure for Rouen
- 1717** Brother Barthélémy elected first superior general
- 1719** Dies in Paris on Good Friday, April 7.
- 1900** Canonization
- 1950** Named “Protector” of educators

(Originally developed by David Thayer, SS)

Saint Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort  
1673 -1716



- 1673** Born in Montfort-la-Cane on January 31
- 1675-84** Childhood in Iffendic
- 1684-92** Studies with the Jesuits in Rennes
- 1692-1700** At Saint-Sulpice in Paris
- 1700** Ordained to the priesthood on June 5, celebrates First Mass in the Blessed Virgin Chapel at Saint-Sulpice
- 1701-03** At Saint-Clement, in Nantes, and in the General Hospital, in Poitiers
- 1703** Clothing of Marie-Louise Trichet, co-foundress of the Sisters of Wisdom on February 2. Spends autumn in Paris.
- 1704** Returns to Poitiers
- 1706** Travels to Loretto and Rome. Audience with Clement XI.
- 1706-16** Missions in the West of France
- 1712** *Treatise on True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*
- 1716** Dies on April 28 during a mission in Saint-Laurent-sur Sèvre.
- 1947** Canonized on July 20

(Originally developed by David Thayer, SS)