

Jean Lafon

Leader of the Malet Conspiracy

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Jean Baptiste Hyacinthe Lafon was a decidedly singular character, typical of a turbulent period in history, whose life story is a web of whims of fate, surprises, and erratic strokes of fortune. He was born in Pessac-sur-Dordogne, was baptized shortly thereafter in the parish church of Saint Vincent on January 15, 1765, and was given the single Christian name, Jean. He died in the town of his birth on August 15, 1836.

He was ordained at the age of 62 after having been made subdeacon and deacon 39 years earlier. He was successively a private tutor, a secondary school teacher, a sodalist, a prefect of the Sodality, a prisoner of the State, a conspirator, a prison escapee, Commissioner of King Louis XVIII, assistant director of the Pages, president of a Christian philosophical society, and an apologist. He died an honorary canon of the Cathedral of Saint André in Bordeaux, a Knight of the Legion of Honor, a Roman count, and a Knight of the Golden Spur. His was a most uncommon life, certainly worthy of not being allowed to fall completely into oblivion!

1. His Family and Upbringing

His roots were humble, very humble.

What public or private archives¹ tell us about his family, his childhood, and his adolescence leaves us very unsatisfied. The poor seldom need the services of notaries public, and the parish registers of the time that have come down to us (the forerunners of our modern civil registers of vital records) are not swarming with details.

Michel Lafon and Marie Laprade, the parents of Abbé Lafon,² were married around 1760. Their illiteracy made it impossible for them to sign any legal document; they were known simply as the

¹ See AGMAR 16.2.119-132.

² [Since Lafon was an ordained deacon for most of his adult life, he could be addressed as “Abbé Lafon,” even though he was not a priest and did not become one until he was 62. In the English translation of this monograph, we shall follow this practice and sometimes refer to him as Abbé Lafon.]

domestics of Mme de Montelon. They had a daughter, Marguerite, who was born around 1763, and on January 2, 1764, a son, Joseph, was baptized but lived only twelve days.

Marie Laprade died in 1785 at the age of 45, and her husband seems not to have survived her very long.

Marguerite married Jean Gémon, a man from the region of Pessac, on September 9, 1790. They had six children, three boys and three girls, but Adélaïde is the only one who survived to continue the family line. On September 22, 1836, she married Jean Descornes, a justice of the peace of the Canton of Pujols and councilor of the District of Libourne.

In 1809, our Jean Lafon, who rounded out his first name by adding Hyacinthe, will claim to have studied in Bordeaux. What induced him to choose the priesthood? What clerical qualification earned him the subdiaconate and the diaconate? Where and by whom were these two orders conferred? When and why did he decide not to advance to the priesthood? We do not know.

Was he a Freemason as certain of his family traditions claim? This would not be surprising and not even a source of scandal because in the Bordeaux of that time, eminent ecclesiastics like Father Sicard, teacher in the school for the deaf and dumb [special needs], Father Desbiey, canon of Saint André; the historian Dom Devienne, OSB; and many other priests and religious were bona fide Masons. In 1805 Bishop Jacoupy of Agen would write, "I trust in the enlightened zeal of the confessors to judge whether their penitents are exposed to any danger by frequenting those societies until the government informs us whether the papal bulls dealing with Freemasonry apply also to France."

But what qualifications did a poor deacon have to draw the attention of a Masonic lodge? After careful consideration, I would be inclined to answer negatively when this question is asked about Jean Lafon. It seems certain that he was a member of the *Institut Philanthropique*, a society that was just as secretive as Freemasonry, if not more so, and very political in nature. Confusion may have arisen from this fact later.

In any case, once the revolutionary tempest had become history, the authorities in the Archdiocese of Bordeaux could present our deacon to Archbishop d'Aviau with the recommendation, "he behaved well during the Revolution, has extraordinary talents."

2. A Testimony

We have proof that not only was he not a proponent of the schism created by the requirement of the oath to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, but also that he was instrumental in bringing certain juring priests to retract the oath they had taken to the Civil Constitution.

Is there anything more admirable, more charitable, and more appropriate than the note he sent on August 10, 1795, to Father W.J. Chaminade, then penitentiary of the Archdiocese of Bordeaux, on behalf of the former prior of the Franciscan Recollects, Antoine Rondel, who had become the juring

pastor of Listrac?

Pessac, August 10, 1795

The Reverend Prior of Listrac, my neighbor and good friend, has unfortunately succumbed to some errors which his heart had always repudiated. He is anxious to wipe the slate clean by whatever means that the Church, to which he has always been attached, will prescribe, and he now turns to you with confidence and submission. In my private capacity, I can vouch for the genuineness of his sentiments and beg you to believe that if ever a priest has had to struggle against deplorable circumstances, without a doubt he is that priest.

He was caring for an aged and sickly mother and simply could not resign himself to abandon her in her adversity. At present he is firmly resolved to make reparation for all his faults. You have but to speak and he will obey. He possesses only what is strictly necessary to provide for his subsistence, so that you would be rendering him a great service were you to send him back to his family. You have my word that his behavior will be exemplary.

I await the pleasure of your reply, and am your good friend in Christ,

Lafon³

The tone of this mediation and especially of the last lines indicates that the author is addressing neither a stranger nor a recent encounter. Jean Baptiste Hyacinthe Lafon and Father W. Joseph Chaminade are no strangers and undoubtedly have been friends for several years; while we cannot doubt this we know nothing of their first encounter.

Nevertheless, circumstances will very soon not only recall these contacts but increase their frequency and make them closer.

3. Sodalist and Prefect of the Sodality

The Concordat has now restored religious peace, reopened church doors, and reorganized worship. After three years of exile in Saragossa, Chaminade returns to France and takes up residence in Bordeaux. He is named honorary canon of the cathedral after having administered the former Diocese of Bazas at the request of Archbishop de la Tour du Pin of Auch. He chooses to exercise his pastoral ministry through a Marian Sodality that he plans to make the pivot of the religious restoration of his homeland and the means par excellence of honoring the title of missionary apostolic conferred on him by the Congregation of the Propaganda. He is 42 years old.

Lafon also has lodgings in Bordeaux and earns his livelihood by tutoring students in their homes.

³ AGMAR 12.7.27, p. 29, for this note about Rondel from Fr. Chaminade: "M. Rondel, a retracted priest, is employed by the commune. Since his retraction he has come into possession of the priests' residence and of several church buildings. He has talents but little character."

From his address at 24 Rue Labirat, he leaves for Pessac in early October 1798 and on the third of the month (12 Vendémiaire in the year VII) he visits his brother-in-law, Jean Gémon where, in the presence of M. Martel, a lawyer, he signs a blanket power of attorney that gives the bearer “full and total power, in his name and capacity, to represent him before the proper competent courts, to deal with the affairs he already has in litigation and for whatever reason.” In 1801 he is 36 years old. For personal reasons of which we know nothing, he does not deem it opportune to seek ordination as a priest, but his zeal for a good cause has not slackened.

Under these conditions could the two who were friends during the recent trying days not meet again and work hand in hand now that the circumstances are favorable?

On July 26, 1801, private tutor Lafon is received into the Sodality.⁴ In January 1802, he is elected prefect and reelected to that office on February 2, 1803⁵; he will be prefect again in July 1805.

Every biography of Father Chaminade describes the organization and work of the Sodality during those years, and I can only refer to their testimony, particularly to that of Father Joseph Simler. To give some idea, it is sufficient to quote the ardent words which our prefect addresses to the sodalists on July 26, 1805, at the time he was assuming his third term as prefect.

For the third time, I am being called to perform the duties imposed by the office of prefect.

You have entrusted me with your authority and your confidence. What can you expect of me? To lead you, to guide you, to exemplify virtue, and so make it lovable—that is the responsibility you impose on me today.

I am called to foster in your souls the tender and affectionate love that we should all have for the Mother of God, for it is she whom we recognize as our august protector. It will also be my duty to preserve among you high moral standards and to work zealously to sustain our confreres whom the world and passions would estrange from Jesus Christ. Furthermore, I shall have to extend a generous and compassionate hand to those who, not knowing the good fortune of belonging to the Sodality, would expose themselves to succumb to the horrors of libertinism and fall into the frightful abyss of irreligion.

These are, without a doubt, the obligations which I am contracting as I accept the office of prefect. Furthermore, terrified by the difficulties which accompany this office, I sought to distance myself from it forever. However, reassured by your solemn promise to help me by your spirit, your constancy, and your good conduct to maintain and to bring renown to a society whose promoters you must be, the trust and the hope I have placed in you for realizing the good of the family to which I belong have overcome all my reluctance. I am delighted at the sight of so many young people, in a city as corrupted as this one, devoted to

⁴ See AGMAR 43.1.2, p. 12, where it states that he is “appointed *introduceur* on Sept. 10, 1801.”

⁵ AGMAR 46.1.13.

the worship of the Mother of God, publicly professing to practice virtue and to win souls to Christ. I yielded to the dearest yearning of my heart and considered the great consolations that would be mine if I could preserve the virtues and moral conduct of our youth which attract the esteem and affection of the public.

Because you have given me a position of trust, I am responsible for you in a very special way, and to a certain extent I must answer for you in the eyes of the Lord. Therefore, all of you have the satisfaction of belonging to one of the divisions of the Sodality, and you can and you must come to me with complete confidence. You will be the object of my concerns and of my instructions and directions. I shall lose no opportunity of proving my desire to make myself useful to you every time I can be of service. And if I have the joy of comforting you in your distress, I shall try with consoling hand to soothe the pain by sharing it with you if it is not in my power to banish it completely.⁶

An ambitious program! As the facts attest, it certainly did not remain a dead letter. Never did the Sodality enjoy better, more lively, and more prosperous years than those from 1801 to 1809.

4. In “The Plot of the Altar Boys”

Unfortunately, as we know, the invasion of the Papal States (1807) and the occupation of Rome (1808) by French troops did not cause Pius VII to modify his policy of neutrality toward England. On May 17, 1809, Napoleon decreed the union of the Papal States with those of the empire; and to this act of spoliation the pope responded on the following June 11 with the denunciation in the Bull *Quam memoranda*, which, without designating names, imposed major excommunication on all the violators of the patrimony of St. Peter.

This caused more than a rift between the empire and the Holy See; it was an officially declared conflict. With the captivity of the pope at Savona, then at Fontainebleau, and the imprisonment or the dispersal of the cardinals, it will last until 1814.

I have related elsewhere⁷ how during this period the Bull *Quam memoranda* and other pontifical documents were printed clandestinely and brought to the attention of the French thanks to the initiative of a number of fervent Catholics, mostly members of the Marian Sodality of Paris or of others in the provinces. This is what Napoleon disdainfully labeled “the plot of the altar boys.”

⁶ AGMAR 47.2.24.

⁷ See Joseph Verrier, “François-David Aynes: La diffusion des documents pontificaux pendant la captivité de Pie VII à Savone,” *Revue d’histoire ecclésiastique*, vol. 55 (Louvain, 1960), pp. 71-121 and 453-91. See also Joseph Verrier, *Jalons: The English translation of “Jalons d’histoire sur la route de G. Joseph Chaminade,”* vol. 2, chaps. 4-6, pp. 82-170 [corresponds to chapters 4, 5, and 6 of series 3 of the original French].

Lafon was one of these “altar boys.” Ever since 1803 he had been in touch with Alexis de Noailles, a sodalist in Paris, because of the concern of the Paris Sodality for the members of the Sodality of Bordeaux who were temporarily in the capital for their studies, or because of other reasons. In the spring of 1809, Lafon travels to Brittany and during the summer, on his return via Paris, he has the occasion to meet Alexis and other sodalists. The text of *Qum memoranda* had just arrived, from Rome strangely enough, brought most probably by Father Perreau; the sodalists made copies which they distributed. Lafon brought a copy to Bordeaux. On August 2, he writes to Noailles in naïvely conventional language:

I have distributed M. de Laharpe’s last opus to a good number of hack writers. Even though it is not well known, it has provoked the utmost enthusiasm. I assembled the minions of the Muses and acquainted them with it; they are now making copies of it to show to their friends. One must admit that Laharpe put his best effort into this work. What vigor, what passion in every theme he discusses. As I write, more than thirty persons are assembled around a table and are taking notes. Such is their patience that they read everything, extract every thought, and even transcribe the whole, which keeps them busy for many an hour.⁸

What imprudence! Lafon has no inkling that his correspondence with his friend will fall into the hands of the police, alerted by Fouché to prevent the circulation of the pontifical documents.

On September 10, [1809], Alexis de Noailles is arrested at his residence in Paris. Lafon meets with the same fate in Bordeaux on September 19, [1809], at the home of M. J. B. Mareilhac, where the tutor is staying.⁹ A few days later he is transferred to Paris where both he and Noailles are subjected to lengthy interrogations. The two detainees, like many others, have helped spread the knowledge of the papal bull. They admit it. They are guilty and therefore must stand trial, for the law of the empire stipulates that every arrested person must appear before a tribunal within ten days.

For the high and mighty imperial police, there is no law. “La Force” (the prison) exists for individuals like Alexis de Noailles, Jean Baptiste Hyacinthe Lafon, and their ilk.

Alexis de Noailles will be set free in 1810 on the occasion of Napoleon's marriage to Archduchess Marie Louise, and thanks, most probably, to the intervention of his brother Alfred de Noailles, who had been won over to the emperor. Alexis, put under house arrest, will not delay crossing over into Switzerland where he will travel from capital to capital, preaching a European crusade against the person whom he looks upon as the antichrist.

For Lafon, it is the beginning of a three-year term of detention.

⁸ AGMAR 16.2.131, document (c).

⁹ Ibid., document (g).

5. Every Plea for Clemency Meets with Refusal

On his arrival in Paris, Lafon was interrogated by Pierre-Hugues Veyrat, “one of the most highly rated inspectors at police headquarters ... a former prisoner, a former counterfeiter but ... a close friend of Napoleon's valet, Constant.”¹⁰ This is the man to whom our culprit first addresses himself because he feels somewhat lost in Paris where all his acquaintances are like him, behind bars.¹¹

He wrote to Veyrat as follows in December 1809:

Pity is one of the sweetest and most delightful impulses of the soul. It is always accompanied by the most lovable benevolence and shares with it a sentiment that inclines it to empathize with the forlorn. M. Inspector, it is because I have detected these lovable qualities in you that I presume to write to you and allow the painful sentiments that trouble my heart to lodge within your bosom.

After this *captatio benevolentiae* which met only with the icy silence of the policeman, he pleads his cause like the orator that he is. In the first place he cannot understand how his arrest and incarceration could be justified.

I have been kept in irons for two months now, without knowing why. Is it, as I presume, for having received the documents from the Roman court, and for having shown them to certain persons? But the motives which induced me to do this, and which are noted in my cross-examination, the uncontested proofs that I have given to my friends, and which I am willing to repeat should I be asked, have confirmed that neither the Head of State nor his deputies had been censured; hence my concept of the public weal which impelled me should be requited with a tribute of praise and honors.

I have demonstrated very clearly in the recent past what our august emperor has just announced to the ambassadors from Rome when he said so eloquently “that he was the eldest son of the Church ... that he had no desire to leave its bosom.” Yet I am punished for having contributed to the peace and tranquility of many consciences.

Is it because in my letters to M. Alexis de Noailles I expressed my sentiments of respect and submission toward the Holy Father? But the emperor in the same reply to the ambassadors has given me the example when he said that in the spiritual order, he is the Church's eldest

¹⁰ Ibid., document (k). [Veyrat (1756-1839) started his career as a police spy in 1795. In the time of Napoleon he came to be known for his cruelty and cunning. Louis Constant Wairy (1778-1845) was Napoleon's influential head valet. In his memoirs, Constant portrayed Napoleon as a hero and published details of his private life.]

¹¹ Ibid., document (1). [Lafon to Veyrat, Dec. 1809.]

son. That is also what I wrote.

Or would it be because M. de Noailles has sent me two letters, one dealing with politics and the second in which he makes irreverent allusions that apply to a certain august personage?

These two letters, seized in his living quarters, are certainly compromising, and he knows it and will use all his dialectic—I was about to say, all his shrewdness—to lessen the resulting impact and consequences.

As to the first one, it must have been noticed from my letters that I have never reacted to the news they contained; that I never let them influence me; and that I never felt any guilt, any surprise, or any regret. I have been a stranger to politics all my life, and yet if I had been eagerly involved in it, would I not have reacted to whatever M. de Noailles had to say on the topic? I would at least have given some hint, some sign revealing my inclination, my preference. I take the whole universe to witness that I have never meddled in the affairs of State. I already have indicated, and I do so admit in writing, that I agree to undergo capital punishment if, by some remote chance, it can be shown either that I had contacts with the enemies of the State or that I encouraged them in any manner whatsoever, or even that I had anything to do with them.

M. de Noailles is the only one with whom I have corresponded and that was only to get the papal decisions.

You may question him on this matter, ask him if I have ever written or spoken to him about matters political. The constituent bodies of Bordeaux may be asked if they ever had reason to complain of me, if they learned that I have been a member of a group they considered subversive, if I have ever been the victim of a denunciation.

One could also make inquiries in Figeac, where I occupied important posts in public education such as the head of a *college*, and the authorities and citizens could testify as to what my conduct was like and whether or not my name is held in esteem. My principles, which are those of the Gospel, have always contended that the princes of the earth have received from God the power to govern the nations, and that they were owed obedience, respect, and love. That is what I have practiced; that is what I have taught.

Now let us discuss the letter that contains insulting allusions. It cannot, without injustice, be imputed to me. I have condemned it because it is contrary to every principle. The one who is responsible for this burst of humor, this slip of the imagination, must be reprimanded and not the one who received a packet through the post.

Had the circumstances allowed me to reply to this friend, I would have restored to his heart that peace with which it is usually endowed. The peevish outburst lasted perhaps no more than the hurt itself, and to him must be applied an unforgettable word of the great Napoleon. When he was asked what ecclesiastical obsequies would be appropriate for impenitent sinners, the emperor replied: "They must be judged in their last moment even if there were

only two seconds between it and their blasphemies. Two seconds are as two centuries; their secret repentance would have enough time to be all-encompassing.”¹²

Blessed are the people whose prince knows how to speak and concurrently to act with such wisdom and energy! Can you think of a better occasion for displaying to advantage this great common sense than concerning an opinion gleaned from a secret letter as it could be from a shredded conscience?

Under these conditions is he not a most unfortunate individual worthy of pity?

As I was on my way to Paris, I thought that, in view of my innocence and my impeccable conduct, I would only have to explain myself to the authorities to enjoy the privilege that even the most merciless justice cannot refuse an honest citizen: I mean liberty. However, here am I, confined without knowing when I shall leave my prison. I have been snatched from my family and from my friends, escorted by a gendarme and a police commissioner, as if I were a conspirator, obliged to pay them, to feed them at my expense, and so to become indebted to my friends to the tune of 100 louis. Because I am not one of “fortune’s favorites” I was obliged to plunge deeply into debt, which I have no way to repay. Should my incarceration be prolonged, I run the risk of losing a profitable situation that was my livelihood and which allowed me to help my family now in straitened circumstances because of the Revolution.

If at least they had confined me in one of the prisons of Bordeaux, or placed me under the supervision of the constituent authorities, I should have found both the means and the solace that I cannot enjoy here where I have neither family nor friends.

Meanwhile such is my sad predicament at the very moment when the palm of victory and the olive branch of peace wreath the brow of our august emperor; just when I, innocence itself, am less elated than the Tyrolese, those enemies of France who have been granted amnesty. I say: behold my fate, even though they are unable to make one fully justified accusation against me, unless, and I repeat, you make a crime out of possession of the papal documents which several Jews and Protestants received long before I did.

Here I am in Paris, without acquaintances save that of a brave tinsmith, who sometimes neglects his trade to bring sympathy and the means to provide for my sustenance.

The unfortunate man places his trust in the “kindheart” of the inspector and in expectation he vows everlasting gratitude.

¹² During an audience granted to the clergy of Bordeaux, 1808.

Please excuse me, Inspector, if I make bold to give you a detailed account of my troubles. I rather like to pour into your generous heart the painful emotions that distress mine. Behind the inflexibility that your functions impose on you, I was able to detect in your person an element of justice, of uprightness and fair play, which are some of your outstanding personal qualities. I have discovered especially the existence of this charming sensitivity of soul which inclines you to pity and to bring relief to the melancholy, and here the maxim of a great man applies: "All my sorrows come from the heart but I thank heaven I was born tender-hearted." I am without connections in this city, without the means of alerting the authorities to my just claims. The caring and just man puts all his glory and zeal into protecting the innocent from oppression and misfortune; gestures like those must appeal to your heart and I trust that, should a favorable occasion present itself, you will be my zealous defender.

In the meantime I shall indulge my genial fondness for gratitude. It is never snuffed out in generous souls. If unfortunately it is powerless to shine forth in myself, it will at least compensate me by the awareness of all that it could not accomplish.

Yours truly . . .

A deferential P.S. ends this lament, which is worthy of marking a milestone in the career of a seasoned officer like Veyrat:

"P.S. I have not seen M. Hadriot for almost twenty days, although I have written to him twice. Would you kindly allow me to speak from time to time with the young law student who, with your permission, came to see me the other day? I did not dare take it upon myself to suggest this before having your consent. It is so painful never to see a living being."

As was to be expected the plea remained fruitless. An officer does not have the authority to release anyone who has been arrested by order of a superior.

It was early in the year 1810 that the merchant Mareilhac in Bordeaux obtained the agreement of Gramon,¹³ the deputy mayor of the city, to request the release of the tutor of his children. In fact, on January 28, [1810],¹⁴ Gramon appealed to Desmarest, the counselor of state in charge of the second police precinct, but to no avail.

In March, however, on the occasion of the wedding of the emperor to the Archduchess Marie Louise, Fouché proposed to free all the prisoners involved in the circulation of the pontifical documents. Unfortunately for Lafon, Napoleon checked the list and crossed out Lafon's name.

¹³ AGMAR 16.2.131, document (m).

¹⁴ Ibid., document (n), [Gramon to Desmarest, Jan. 28, 1810].

Worse than that, the very next decree dated April 8, [1810], orders that Abbé Lafon, named specifically, be held in detention until further notice.

Why this discrimination? The answer is not explicitly stated. An explanation comes to mind. By using the title *Abbé* for Lafon, the clergy is being targeted. The emperor is embroiled with the pope who is a prisoner at Savona. The clergy is supportive of the pope; as long as the pope and the clergy will not yield, neither will the emperor. Let there be no mistake about it.

On May 22, [1810], a report from Dubois, the police chief of Paris, insists in vain that

[T]he suggestion that M. Lafon be given his freedom is based on the fact that M. de Noailles, the ringleader of the affair, having obtained his freedom, Lafon should, in justice, enjoy the same privilege.¹⁵

It is a matter of justice indeed ...

On June 3, [1810], Fouché falls into disgrace and Duke de Rovigo succeeds him.¹⁶ On the following June 8, [1810], four days after Lafon¹⁷ had made a new petition in which he had suggested that he remain under police surveillance 40 leagues from Paris, Dubois repeated his request of the previous month with the same lack of success.¹⁸ Napoleon had the word “refused” put into the margin of the petition during a privy council meeting held at Saint Cloud on June 30, [1810].¹⁹

A week before that date, thanks to a plea by Alexis de Noailles, the unfortunate cleric was nevertheless authorized to be transferred from La Force to Dr. Dubuisson's health establishment.

Dr. Dubuisson's institution was in Paris on the outskirts of Faubourg Saint Antoine. It was one of several bourgeois prisons to which the imperial police sent some of their prey who feigned illness or were really sick. Life here was more pleasant than at La Force, but it was not freedom and rent was charged. Abbé Lafon therefore will continue proclaiming his innocence and demanding that justice be done.

Count Jolivet was appointed commissioner in charge of state prisoners by his majesty the emperor. It was an opportunity for the Dr. Dubuisson's guest to draw attention to his own case. On December

¹⁵ Ibid., document (o).

¹⁶ [In 1810, General Savary, the first Duke de Rovigo (1774-1833), succeeded Joseph Fouché (1759-1820) as head of Napoleon's secret police.]

¹⁷ AGMAR 16.2.131, document (r).

¹⁸ Ibid., documents (p, q).

¹⁹ Ibid., document (s).

8, 1810, he writes to Duke de Rovigo:

Your Highness,

A commission has just been appointed by his majesty the emperor to deal with the fate of prisoners; and I hasten to send you, as I did three months ago, my legitimate complaints in the hope that you will take an interest in my sorry situation.

I have been in irons for fourteen months. According to M. Jolivet, state councillor, the reasons for such a long detention are the reception of the papal documents and being the head of a religious society established in Bordeaux.

Now as to those papal documents, several Catholics, along with some Jews and Protestants have received them before I did. I have made no illegal use of those papers. Besides, there can be no guilt involved because the person who had sent them to me was given his freedom nine months ago, along with others who had been arrested in this affair.

At the time of my arrest I was not the head of the religious society in Bordeaux as M. Jolivet maintains in his statement. It is even public knowledge that during the last six years I had no definite occupation. This society was protected by the archbishop of Bordeaux, who had even assigned a church to it. It was under the protection and the supervision of all the authorities of Bordeaux with the special cooperation of the police commissioner. If I am punished for having been a member of that society, why was the same sentence not rigorously meted out to those who had been in charge before me and to those who were the leaders when I was arrested? I should not be treated more harshly than they.

The principles of justice which guide Your Excellency and of which you have given such striking proof, have made me confident that you will graciously plead with the commission which is to decide my fate, to grant me the justice to which I am entitled.

Your Highness, with all due respect ... sincerely yours...²⁰

The police statement to which Lafon refers in that letter to Savary has been preserved. It has this to say about the detainee:

Arrested on September 17, 1809, in Bordeaux. He is the director of a society established in this city and which was in communication with the one that existed in Paris, whose director was M. (Alexis) de Noailles. . . .

An examination of the papers has revealed that Lafon was his correspondent in Bordeaux, and to him were addressed the documents that were to be circulated among the members of

²⁰ Ibid., document (u), [Lafon to Savary, Duke of Rovigo, Dec. 8, 1810].

the society.

No sooner had the accused noted the manner in which the facts were presented, than he was ready with an answer:

The religious group in Bordeaux of which he was a member was in existence during the regime of the Executive Directory, under government supervision. Neither the prefect of the department nor the chief of police of Bordeaux could find anything reprehensible in the association.

Concerning the documents that M. de Noailles, the son of the viscount, had sent him, they were publications of the pope. The prisoner had previous knowledge of them from a Jew, but he only used them in the government's interest to calm uneasy consciences. To this, all the constituted authorities in Bordeaux can testify.

M. de Noailles was released six months ago. Freedom also was granted to M. Beaumes, to his son, and to his mother, in whose home similar documents were found.

On December 27 [1810], during the emperor's privy council meeting, it is decided to send the prisoner to Batavia. For a reason not revealed in the documents, perhaps due to the international blockade by England, the sentence was never carried out.

At the next meeting of the privy council, on March 7, 1811, Count Jolivet made the following statement:

Every piece of correspondence between this prisoner and M. Alexis de Noailles displays a kind of fanaticism, of proselytism, and of loyal attachment to the Roman Court; these make it impossible for us to grant this prisoner his freedom at this time, even though M. Alexis de Noailles, his director and correspondent, who is now at liberty, is less innocent than prisoner Lafon, as is shown in the letter of September 3, 1809, no. 24.

Besides, it has seemed to His Majesty's commissioner that M. Lafon has taken advantage of his detention to improve his mind and favorably to modify his religious opinions. Should he continue in this fashion for some time we will run no danger by granting him his freedom.

After which the privy council decided to prolong Lafon's detention for another year!

At its meetings of July 10, 1811, and May 3, 1812, the same council merely confirmed its earlier

decision.²¹

The emperor certainly has no idea that he is laying the groundwork for the “Malet Affair.”

6. The Malet Affair, or Is It the “Lafon Affair”?

Lafon now begs in vain to be transferred to the health institution of Dame Payron, 1 Rue du Faubourg Saint Jacques, where he could live more economically. In fact, he was now the daily recipient of the sum of 40 sous, the regular allowance sanctioned by law to political prisoners, and for which he had applied on March 19, 1812.²² Jean Baptiste Hyacinthe Lafon was still under the care of Dr. Dubuisson when, in early June 1812, the police gave him a companion in the person of General François Malet, who had been under ordinary detention for the last eighteen months.

The two men had nothing in common save a fierce animosity against the emperor. But was there anything more apt to draw them together and to unite them than a utopian undertaking whose objective was nothing less than a change in the form of government?

The “Malet Affair” is history, and it has been the topic of many a dissertation. One question is still unanswered: does Lafon bear the full responsibility? Would there have been a “Malet Affair” if the general had never met Lafon? If the latter had not persuaded him to try his luck and had not furnished him with the personnel and the means he needed and used to launch the coup?

Already in 1846, in *Les Fastes de la Légion d'Honneur* the author of the article *Réal* wrote that “the Malet conspiracy” would be more correctly named “the Lafon conspiracy.” L. Garros and other historians agree and not without reason. The very idea of suddenly announcing the death of the emperor, who was then in Russia, and of seizing power in the wake of the surprise caused by this news (or a modern version of the *senatus consultum*²³) to nip any resistance in the bud—all this was due to Malet. Four years before the general had already conceived such a coup d'état that relied on similar tactics. During the night of October 22-23, 1812, it is Malet again who risks his own neck. But he needed a site where certain preparations would escape the eyes of the police. Who provided it? Lafon did through Father Caamano, a simpleton who was obligated to him. In his maneuvers the general is accompanied by an aide-de-camp of sorts. Provided by whom? Why, by Lafon, or course, who profited by the circumstances to promote to the rank of officer a Corporal Rateau, a Bordeaux compatriot who was garrisoned in Paris. Under the name of General Lamotte, Malet installs a young Boutreux as chief of police. And who is this Boutreux? A young man whom Lafon knew ever since his trip to Rennes and whom he recruited for the operation. Every supposedly official document that was submitted is stamped with Lafon's own seal.

²¹ Ibid., documents (v, w).

²² Ibid., document (w).

²³ Decree of the ancient Roman senate.

If it is pointed out that this conspiracy was not totally unknown by the royalist party, that some contacts it had established with the party and would not have been possible except through Lafon; if to this is added the fact that Lafon had not reserved a single dangerous mission for himself in this fantastic enterprise, that, having foreseen the possibility of a setback, he had provided for refuge for himself in the countryside, that he had escaped with the general, and that using the pretext of a twisted ankle in the course of the escapade, he followed at a distance all the episodes of the drama up to the moment when he sensed himself to be in danger—considering all these facts, is one not led to believe that Lafon was more than an accomplice in the affair but its instigator?

Besides, in 1815, did not Lafon himself claim this role while conversing familiarly with the young Lamartine? Chancellor Pasquier writes, “Abbé Lafon seems to have had courage enough to be the equal of Malet.” Who knows whether by publishing the history of the Malet conspiracy in 1814 and underscoring, without some exaggeration, its royalist character, it was not his intention either to salve his conscience or to obtain a compensating pension for the general’s widow?

7. On the Run

Lafon has narrowly escaped the firing squad that on October 29, 1812, put an end to the prank of October 23, [1812]. What is in store for him?

While the police are searching for him in the vicinity of Bordeaux and Libourne, he is hiding in Burgundy. The *Mémoires* of Ferdinand de Bertier tell us that “Abbé Lafon goes into hiding for three weeks in the château of Sauvigny where my brother has ordered that he be received in spite of all the deplorable consequences which the granting of this refuge might have.” Bertier adds, “He forgot to thank him.” Lafon must have had other worries on his mind.

His biographers, who are more or less well informed, tell us that in the aftermath, under an assumed name, he became a teacher in a *collège* which they situate in Louhans in Saône-et-Loire. A letter which he wrote in Paris on May 20, 1814, to the secretary of the archdiocese and which is preserved to this day in the archives of the Archdiocese of Bordeaux, partly confirms and completes this information but without saying anything about Louhans. In it we read:

Personally, I enjoy the consolation of having labored with some success for throne and altar. While a price was put on my head in Paris, I was giving missions in the Jura. I gave two instructions a day, and my efforts have been rewarded. Through my writings I prevented some dioceses from acknowledging those bishops who had received no other canonical appointment than the one in Troyes. I was president of a *collège* where I taught philosophy and paved the way for the entrance of enemy troops into our territory by my treatises on the legitimate right of the Bourbons to the throne of France. These writings were widely circulated along the frontiers, and the Sovereigns were well pleased with them.

On two different occasions our good king has given me some money so as to tide me over till better days. His own finances are in such a deplorable state and he has so many expenses

that he cannot give me much, just enough to keep me from being a burden to others. All my belongings, even my clothes, have been sold, so I must handle my funds with great care to replace the essentials.

8. Toward the Priesthood and . . . the Episcopacy!

Who would have guessed it? The same letter contained an urgent plea for the priesthood.

I believe that I am called to the sacred ministry. The reasons which until now have diverted me from this goal have vanished. I owe my conscience and the Church the firm resolve to walk in the steps of the apostles and to consecrate to the glory of God those feeble talents which I have received from his goodness. I remember, my dear friend, your former touching invitations to consummate my pious undertaking. At the time I was turned away from the sanctuary by the painful prospect of being obliged to be yoked to the chariot of a usurper and to help in consolidating his tyranny. Now that we are going to live under a legitimate king, we must all help to consolidate his throne. We shall achieve this only by opening the eyes of his followers, by exterminating the countless errors that have plagued them so long, and above all by being ourselves the first to preach good example by our virtues and our attachment to the faith.

I asked for dimissorial letters from our venerable archbishop so that I might be ordained on the Feast of the Holy Trinity. I want very much to be ordained on that feast for many reasons which it would be tedious to enumerate. One must take advantage of the auspicious proddings of the Holy Spirit. I have no need to search for my vocation. During my five years in prison and the one in exile I had ample time to think about it. Be so kind as to hurry the despatching of these letters and please do not put it off till the last moment. I am relying on our mutual friendship and on your devotedness.

Why this haste? The answer is to be found in another letter written on October 7, 1814, to Archbishop d'Aviau by L. de Sambucy, an attaché to the French Embassy at the Holy See, which enlightens us on the attitude of the archbishop of Bordeaux.

I believe it is important that I warn you confidentially that Abbé Lafon is asking for a bishopric and that he has involved several cardinals in the process of obtaining the bishopric of Île Bourbon²⁴ from the Holy Father. We were consulted in the matter and our response was the following: Abbé Lafon is only a deacon, hence he has not exercised the sacred ministry, an essential apprenticeship if one is to guide others in that career. This is the situation. I believe that Your Excellency has ordered him to enter a seminary so as to

²⁴ [“Île Bourbon” is the former name of the island of Réunion, a French overseas possession in the Indian Ocean about 500 miles east of Madagascar and about 200 miles south west of Mauritius, the nearest island.]

acquire the ecclesiastical virtues, and having him close at hand will enable you to pass sounder judgment on him than we could. Besides, we are not authorized to make a decision about the matter.

Archbishop d'Aviau knows Lafon. He took the advice of Father Carbon,²⁵ the Sulpician superior of his major seminary: Lafon should enter the seminary where his vocation can be evaluated.

We can imagine how disappointed the interested party was with this decision, and he reacted vigorously. In a long letter that he wrote at the time to a friend, a Bordeaux priest, and which is also in the archives of the Archdiocese of Bordeaux, he vented his bitterness and gave free rein to his disappointment. The letter bears no date, but its contents leave no doubt on that score. It reveals the personality of the author better than any evaluation. Here is the text.

My very dear Father,

It is with great pleasure that I have just read your letter. In it I have recognized the expressions of those enduring sentiments which the kindhearted never lose. I shall most willingly help you in any way in which I am able. I am sufficiently loved and esteemed to be able to do something for my friends. The minister of the Queen of Etruria,²⁶ a friend of mine, will intervene with the head of the Church in our behalf and will render any service that is in his power, in a manner consistent with his office.

I was very much taken aback on noting that the intention of the archbishop of Bordeaux is to make my entry into the sacred ministry subject to the will of the superior of a seminary who, being a man, may have his whims, some little eccentricities that are unfortunately too prevalent in our pitiful humanity. I cannot give my consent to this proposal. I do not object

²⁵ [On the question of Lafon's ordination, it is not clear whether it was Fr. Carbon or one of his predecessors as seminary superior from whom Archbishop d'Aviau took the advice that Lafon first go to the seminary before being ordained. During the years from 1809 to 1826, the Bordeaux Major Seminary had three superiors: Pierre Vlechemans, CM (1809-14); Jean Jacques Cartal, SS (1814-17); and Étienne Carbon, SS (1817-26). Vlechemans resigned in the summer of 1814 due to ill health, and Cartal took over as the first Sulpician superior in November 1814. If d'Aviau sought the advice of the superior of the seminary shortly after he received the letter from Attaché de Sambucy, written on October 7, 1814, it could have been Vlechemans or Cartal who advised that Lafon go to the seminary and undergo the scrutiny of the seminary authorities to determine whether he should be ordained to the priesthood.]

²⁶ [Etruria is a region of Italy in Tuscany and part of Umbria, where the Etruscans were once dominant. In 1801 Napoleon created the Kingdom of Etruria, and in 1808 it was incorporated into the French Empire. During the years 1801-1803 Louis I was king and his wife Maria Luisa of Spain (1782-1824) was queen of Etruria. On her mother's side, she was a great-granddaughter of King Louis XV of France. As a boy, Charles Louis, the son of Louis I and Maria Luisa succeeded Louis I when the latter died. Maria Luisa acted as regent for her son and continued her reign as queen of Etruria during the years 1803-1807. When Napoleon annexed the Kingdom of Etruria to his empire, she was exiled and imprisoned for a period in Fontainebleau and later in Nice and Rome. After the fall of Napoleon and the Congress of Vienna, Maria Luisa continued to be known as the queen of Etruria even though the kingdom of Etruria had ceased to exist. She became duchess of Lucca during the years 1817-24.]

going to the seminary for a time to prepare myself for my awesome functions. My intention was to exercise the ministry only after I had spent some time in that institution; if I asked to be ordained on the Feast of the Holy Trinity it was to hasten the time when I could be of service to the Church. But it is up to the archbishop to specify the date and not to ask that a Superior suggest one to him. If the archbishop wishes to treat me like a callow youth whose vocation is uncertain, who has given no guarantee to the Church, and whose behavior must be put to the test, then the archbishop is acting sensibly. On the other hand, five years of suffering in the defense of the rights of the Church, an exile that lasted eighteen months, constantly menaced with the death penalty, during which time I was teaching young men theology and the validity of religious truth—all this should, in his eyes be probation enough. Why demand of an ecclesiastic whose fidelity to religion, to the faith, whose insights, wisdom, and reputation are known throughout France—why impose trials which were not imposed on the unfortunate schismatic priests who were posted in dioceses whose faith they corrupted? In a word, the archbishop himself reproached me for not advancing to the priesthood at a time when my conscience would not allow it; and now that all obstacles have been removed, he would be the only one opposed to it! I am offering my services to the Church, and the Church has need of good priests. If the archbishop does not want to accept my services, or if he will accept them only under conditions that I cannot meet, let him either give me my *exeat* or let him remove the obstacles. And should he want neither the one nor the other, he will be answerable before God. In that case I would not consider these obstacles as an order from God, banishing me from the sanctuary, but I would direct my efforts in another pursuit where I can indirectly be of service to religion.

Here is what I intend to do. I am not averse to passing at most two or three months in a seminary provided I am assured of receiving the priesthood at the end of that period. Should my conduct, my principles, or my morals become deviant, then, of course, I would be refused the dimissorials; given that assumption, I myself would have lost all appeal for that state. When I say at most three months, it is not that I am loathe to live in a seminary, but I am driven by duty and necessity. I have not the means to pay for my lodging; on the contrary, I must be gainfully employed so as to rid myself of certain debts of honor contracted during my days of misfortune. I could have avoided all these heartaches if I had enrolled in the service of Bonaparte and defended his government. All Paris knows that he offered me a bishopric and 300,000 francs in hard cash to set up a household, had I wanted to sell myself to him. Had M. de Noailles acted dishonorably, he could have received a pension of 50,000 livres, been landholder of magnificent properties, and occupied an important post. These are the facts, and the archbishop undoubtedly does not know about them. Because I have never consented to enter the service of this tyrant, that I have preferred prisons, the scaffold, every kind of hardship, the sacrifice of my honor and of my principles, must I now be treated as a stranger, as if my principles were suspect, and must I be excluded from the priesthood while insulting my sensitivity and my feelings? Should the archbishop persist, please ask him for my *exeat*; and should he not wish to grant me that, he will be answerable before God for the services I could have rendered and which he makes it impossible for me to render. I prefer to have you as intermediary in this instance, for, did I write myself, I might show lack of respect which would be contrary to my heart's intent.

With a loving embrace, I am

J. B. Hthe Lafon

The intermediary to whom he appealed must have interceded on his behalf because his letter is in the archdiocesan archives; however, his plea did not have the desired success.

Our candidate was very persistent for on February 17, 1815, with the support of the superior of the Seminary of Versailles, he made a direct effort to sway Archbishop d'Aviau. Witness this new petition which exhibits this time all the niceties of the strictest etiquette:

Your Excellency,

In spite of the annoyance which I may have caused you, in spite of the biased opinions you may have of me, you have sought only the good and would want always to be just. Therefore you will not believe that considerations of interest, vanity, or ambition now urge me to take the final step in the ecclesiastical career. I have the honor of telling you frankly that I have but one desire, that of consecrating myself totally to the welfare of the Church and to serve it to the extent of my feeble capacity. The superior of the Versailles Seminary has applauded my resolve. If the request he has made in my favor has put your mind at ease on my behalf, for my part I hearken to his voice as to that of God, and I submit unreservedly to his decision and his advice. And so, Your Excellency, you are the master of my fate. Grant me either the dimissorial letters or an *exeat* as you, in your wisdom, see fit. I have been offered a foreign mission where I would preach the faith; before either accepting or rejecting it, I intend to consult persons who are enlightened and moved by the spirit of God.

In your kindness please accept the sentiments of submission and profound respect with which I am Your Excellency's very humble and obedient servant.

Abbé Lafon

Paris, Place Cambrai, no. 3
February 17, 1815

What the reaction of Archbishop d'Aviau was we do not know. In Paris, Lafon was preparing the second edition of his *Histoire de la conjuration du Général Malet*. On March 1, Napoleon landed at Golfe Juan, and on March 20 he entered Paris. In the meantime, Louis XVIII had retreated to Ghent while the deacon-candidate for a bishopric, urged on by his mania for theatrics, had found his way to Switzerland to repeat his role of 1814, that of gadfly among the allies with the title of Commissioner of the King for the Eastern Departments.

9. The Hundred Days

During the whole period called the “Hundred Days,” Lafon was living in La Chaux-de-Fond on the Franco-Swiss border in the company of a certain inhabitant of the Jura, Lemare by name. Lafon, the king’s commissioner, publishes a flood of declarations, proclamations, and every type of decree in support of the royal cause.

He has a supporter in Zurich in the person of Count Auguste de Talleyrand,²⁷ French ambassador to Switzerland, who writes the following to Count de Jaucourt on April 23:

My dear Count,

I beg you to dissuade His Majesty from sending some great swindler here as an ambassador. I am asking you this for the sake of the king's own influence. Lafon and Lemare are more useful than a high sounding name. To be effective here we must truly understand the territory. An expedient who is successful in the Midi is useless in the East. In the former the royalists are well established, but here it is the republicans whom we must win over to the cause of the king. A great name will be very effective in Provence, in Bordeaux, but will spoil everything in the Jura, in the département of Haute-Saône where the aristocracy is looked upon as one does a scarecrow. Lafon and Lemare belong to the favorite class of the republicans; they speak in the name of the king and hence have a greater hold on these people than a Montmorency could have. I find the proof of this in the marvellous effect which their decrees and their writings have, coming as they do from one town after another.

One of Lafon's ideas was to spread the rumor that “in the Northeast (of France) huge armies of Russians, Bavarians, Würtembergians, Austrians, Hessians, etc., etc., are assembled between Basel right up to Mainz, offering their support to the brave inhabitants of the Doubs and the Jura, and by their imposing mass are calling on Alsace and Lorraine to promptly repent.” He warned that a royalist army was gradually assembling about him.²⁸

This hoax hoodwinked at least one victim in the person of the young Lamartine²⁹ who was burning with impatience to rush to the help of Louis XVIII. In pages of his *Mémoires* spiced with humor, he has left us an account of his setbacks, the essentials of which I consider it appropriate to recall here. I quote:

At that time, La Chaux-de-Fonds was a rather poor Swiss village on the border zone of

²⁷ [Count Auguste de Talleyrand (1770-1832) was a cousin of the celebrated Prince Charles de Talleyrand (1754-1838) who famously played influential roles all in the successive regimes of France from the Revolution to the July Monarchy.]

²⁸ See AGMAR 16.2.21.

²⁹ [Alphonse de Lamartine (1790-1869), noted French poet and statesman.]

France, inhabited by peasant watchmakers. Rustic houses dotted arid grassy fields fronting on a stand of fir trees. I was dressed much like a watchmaker who had come in search of work with a master of the mechanics of the trade. I entered the first tavern noticed, and I asked for the address of the staff headquarters of the French army. Glances were exchanged at these words; after some moments of smiling consultation, the patrons of the alehouse decided that I must be looking for a French priest, Lafon by name, who had taken lodgings one or two months ago in the larger inn of the village. I was offered a guide in case I needed one. I began to have misgivings about the vanished staff headquarters replaced by an abbé who lived in a solitary run-down hostel on the slopes of the Alps. However, having come this far, I wanted to see, and I did.

The larger inn of La Chaux-de-Fonds stood at the end of a solitary street in a direction opposite to that of my entry into the town. The young lady who was my guide entered and said to the innkeeper, "Here is a gentleman looking for the French army. At my establishment they told him that it was here and bore the name of Abbé Lafon."

"As a matter of fact," replied the innkeeper, we have here a gentleman who calls himself Abbé Lafon and who claims to be the Major General of the French army. If the gentleman wishes to speak to him I shall beg him to come down. Meanwhile, here is a table, some cheese and a mug of ale for refreshment.

This simple lunch was brought to me, and I sat down to do it honor in the large dining hall of the inn.

I had hardly seated myself at the table when I observed a short man, with pleasant features, between 30 and 40 years of age, coming down the wooden staircase. "Here is the Abbé," said the servant girl, leading him toward me.

He was wearing a brown frock coat that gave him an appearance that was partly military and partly ecclesiastical. Black stockings carefully stretched over well-shaped legs indicated a priest. A black tie protruding through white piping indicated an officer. The double nature was thus represented, the ecclesiastic below and the soldier above. His accoutrement was such as to satisfy the most eclectic taste. I invited him to sit. He ordered some eggs for our lunch and as we talked we emptied our mugs of ale.

"Have you come on behalf of M. de Vincy?" he asked.

"Here is his letter," I replied.

He read it and said, "I had guessed as much."

"I have come to swell the ranks of the army that is being organized under your orders at La Chaux-de-Fonds," I answered. "I have no intention of serving with foreigners against France, but I am eager to fight for the king against the emperor. Where is the army?"

“I am the army,” he told me. “There is no other. Two years ago, did I not singlehandedly constitute the army of the general who, with this one man, put a whole ministry into prison, and an empire in his pocket? Men are nothing; the idea alone is everything. I have the idea; and if I can persuade every single soul between here and Besançon that a formidable army is massing on this frontier, ready for action when the time is ripe, now is that not in fact just as awesome as if a number of battalions were on the verge of penetrating into France by that route to sound a warning and to bring help to the royalists? Without money, without soldiers to pay, I keep a whole province in check besides paralyzing Besançon and Belfort. You yourself have come to share in the action, and you find only a leader instead of followers. Nothing more is needed, believe me. Stay with me and that will make two of us, and when the emperor is defeated in open field by the armies of Europe, we shall be given credit for a great insurrection, and both France and the East will look upon us as their saviors.”

I joined in his laughter.

“From which we must conclude, Monsieur l’Abbé,” I said, “that phantoms are just as powerful as bodies, and that imagination has the edge over reality.”

“Did I not prove that to you in 1813?” he continued. “And if General Hulin had allowed himself to be convinced by a bullet in the jaw that the emperor was dead, was not the empire in fact dead?”

“You are right, Monsieur l’Abbé,” I replied, “but a surprise is not a revolution. Should a man appear who is more curious and more obstinate than the others, and instead of an army he finds a spiritual abbé; if he does not care to become an adventurer, he puffs on the shadow, and there is nothing there. Let us have our lunch, then allow me to take my leave. I shall no longer believe in the insinuations of one man and shall simply wish you well.”

He realized that his army would never have two recruits and was content to regale me with the tale of the Malet conspiracy, of which he was the principal and sole agent. Fifteen or twenty innocent Bonapartists were executed to convince the emperor of the reality of the conspiracy; and Abbé Lafon, the only culprit, had vanished. He had hoped to play the same role for a second time. I refused to be his petty officer.

On the whole he was a man with a great sense of humor; that, in justice, I must concede. . . . He was a clever politician, but he always played the same tune and knew nothing of the art of variations. After being struck with admiration at the way he played this character all evening, I left him the next day and went back down to Neuchatel, disappointed with my search. . . . There is a God for men with imagination; Abbé Lafon was one of these men.

10. The Rewards

After Napoleon was defeated at Waterloo and Louis XVIII had returned to Paris, so much

devotedness must necessarily be rewarded.

On July 25, 1815, Count Auguste de Talleyrand bore witness to the services rendered by Lafon and Lemare:

Now that the king has reclaimed his throne, summoned to it by the will of the nation, I hasten to recognize the outstanding services you have contributed to the cause of His Majesty.

I am happy to testify that, since the departure of the king from Paris, you have, with a zeal that no obstacle, no danger could cool, informed and strengthened the Departements of the East by the publicity which you have been giving to France by means of the royal proclamations and decrees, by the news and articles which you have circulated. It is thanks to you in great part that we owe the raising of the white flag [of the monarchy], so cherished by the majority of the inhabitants; it fluttered in many of the communes of Doubs and Jura even before the appearance of the allies and in spite of the dangers that menaced the people from the snipers. Finally, thanks to your talents and your tireless zeal, peace now reigns in this land where you have largely contributed to maintain an excellent spirit and brought back to the king's cause subjects who had wavered to the extent that, were it not for the unwillingness of the allies and of the Swiss, the whole population would have risen in arms against the approaching enemies of their king.

Believe me, Monsieur, that it will give me great pleasure, every time I find the occasion, to highlight in the eyes of His Majesty the countless proofs of your devotedness, and I shall always make it my duty to vouch for the same.

Pray accept, Monsieur, the assurance of the high esteem and friendship that I have vowed to you for life.

The Minister of France in Switzerland
Count Auguste de Talleyrand

Unfortunately, from now on our documentation no longer has the reliability that we would wish for. To follow Abbé Lafon—it is under this name that history claims him—during the last twenty years of his life, we must rely on data of unequal value.

At the end of 1815, Lafon is a Knight of the Legion of Honor and Assistant Governor of the Pages.

In 1816 his presence and his movements in the Bordeaux area intrigue the bishop of La Rochelle who brings them to the attention of Lainé, then Minister of the Interior. The latter writes to Archbishop d'Aviau on July 20 [1816]:

The bishop of La Rochelle has just shared with me a report received from Bordeaux that an ecclesiastic calling himself “the assistant private tutor to the pages, and claiming to be entrusted with a secret mission has shown up in that city without presenting himself to you or to anyone in authority.” The bishop believes that this ecclesiastic has no mandate from the Government but that he has been sent by those who protect the dissidents.

I would be grateful, Your Excellency, if you were to send me the information you have on the matter, which, I believe, it is important to clarify with all the discretion which you deem appropriate.

Yours truly . . .

The travels of Abbé Lafon had not escaped the attention of the archbishop. On July 27 [1816], he replies:

Monseigneur,

I was aware that an ecclesiastic, M. Lafon, has indeed been appointed assistant tutor of the pages, that he had spent a week or perhaps more either in Bordeaux or in the vicinity, that he was conscious of the surprise he had caused by failing to report to the archbishop, to which he had responded that his assignment forbade him to communicate with the local authorities. Some inquiries which I made upon receipt of Your Excellency's letter revealed his claim to be on a mission by order of His Majesty himself. . . . Whereupon, I thought it advisable not to press any further.

What was the objective of this mission? We have no way of knowing. Nothing even permits us to conjecture about its nature.

The following year, if we are to give credence to the family papers studied by Father Klobb a century ago, Lafon went to England. He is no longer a tutor of the pages.

Later we find him in Paris, where he maintains contact with certain members of the Roman Curia, whom he had befriended under circumstances unknown to us.

And these contacts were not made without producing results. A letter from Cardinal Consalvi dated January 26, 1820, informs him that His Holiness Pope Pius VII confers on him the title of count, and on March 3 of the same year, a papal brief gives him the title and insignia of a Knight of the Golden Spur.

Who would have thought it possible? Two years later, the publication *L'Ami de la Religion et du Roi* takes us to the period when the prefect of the Marian Sodality of Bordeaux was collaborating with Canon W. J. Chaminade. In the issue of May 4, 1822, we read:

In each parish (in Paris) a Sodality has been formed whose director is the pastor of the parish or one of his assistants. The meetings take place at least once a month and must feature only religious exercises.

On Sunday, April 28, a delegation from the Sodality of Saint Nicolas was deputed to visit its counterparts of Sainte Geneviève and of Saint Jacques. M. de la Grandière spoke in the first of these churches and M. Lafon in the second. He urged his listeners to unite for the glory of God and the edification of the neighbor, and he recalled the more outstanding benefits of religion. Father Boscheron, director of the Saint Jacques Sodality, responded to this appeal, and a missionary, Father de Mesnildot, also addressed some words to the audience. M. d'Amécourt, who presided at the assembly, praised his colleagues for the sentiments they had expressed.

At the same time, and always according to the family documents to which I have referred, Jean Lafon is president of a society of Christian philosophy, of which we have no other information.

And so ends Abbé Lafon's life in Paris.

To know something of his last years we must return to Pessac where his presence from 1824 appears certain. We find little to help us answer the questions that suggest themselves. Age and life's disappointments have undoubtedly mellowed him, but how does this Roman count subsist without endowment of property or privilege? Shall we ever find out?

Tradition tells us only that in this region where Catholic and Protestant families live side by side, Lafon gives free rein to his zeal; and in discussions with his separated brethren he tries to bring them back to unity in the faith. This situation and this activity can only exacerbate his regret at not being a priest.

In fact, though, he died a priest, and even an honorary canon of the cathedral of Bordeaux. It was long believed that he was ordained while the archiepiscopal see of Bordeaux was vacant following the death of Archbishop d'Aviau. We know today that he and some seminarians of the Archdiocese of Bordeaux received the priestly ordination from Bishop Jean Jacoupy in Agen, on May 31, 1828, with dimissorial letters from Archbishop J. de Cheverus, the successor to Archbishop d'Aviau, but who, for some reason, possibly absence, was unable to perform the ceremony himself.

The nomination of Father Lafon as honorary canon of the cathedral of Saint André is also certain and must have been conferred some years later. It does tell us indirectly that the priesthood must have stimulated further the activity of our Abbé, and that Archbishop de Cheverus held him in high esteem. While his age did not allow him to assume a ministerial function in the archdiocese, he devoted his time to preaching the Word, to the immense satisfaction of the pastors in the region. In 1834, Father Caillet does not hesitate to call on Lafon's generosity to help put the finishing touches

on the repair of the chapel of the Madeleine.³⁰ It is on this occasion that his old friend, Quentin Lousteau, writes to him:

My very worthy friend,

Just a word for you on behalf of Father Caillet, who is in charge of the church of the Madeleine.

The repairs on the chapel have made it necessary to call on the generosity of our oldest friends and so to awaken in them their dearest and also perhaps their most precious memories, for it means recalling the wonderful days of our youth, of the purest virtues and zeal. How many young people were brought back to the beautiful path of faith and to the sanctifying practices of Christianity by the spiritual fervor of their word, and by the charitable attentions of an almost heavenly friendship! You have long presided at this work of God, and you want it to continue.

M. Andigne, a merchant at Gensac, is the representative of M. Durand, a wax manufacturer of Bordeaux; the latter will transmit to Father Caillet the amount of the generous subscription you will place into the hands of M. Andigne.

All your friends protest against the haste with which you pass through our city. When will you ever grant us some moments of your time?

Sincerely yours,
Lousteau³¹

In spite of being a Roman count, a Knight of the Golden Spur, a Knight of the Legion of Honor, a canon of a famous metropolitan church, Lafon is still a common mortal.

Hardly two years later the priest in charge of Pessac will write in the funeral register of his parish:

On the seventeenth day of the month of August, one thousand eight hundred and thirty-six, in the auxiliary church of Saint Vincent of Pessac, were celebrated the religious obsequies of Abbé Lafon, priest, knight of several Orders, about seventy years of age, who died in this parish in the locality called Méjean, on the fifteenth at nine o'clock in the evening, fortified with the sacraments of the dying and with a plenary indulgence. In witness whereof we, the undersigned priests, have drawn up the present certificate.

³⁰ AGMAR 24.4.313, August 2, 1834.

³¹ AGMAR 24.4.313, August 5, 1834.

The priest's signature is followed by those of the pastors and assistants of Saint Aulaye, of Lustrac, of Flaujagues, and of Lamothe-Montravel.

May this child of the world rest in peace with his qualities and his faults, with his acts of generosity and his ambitions, with his dreams and illusions, and with his devotedness, his responsibilities, his weaknesses, and his ideal. . . .

At the end of this evocation of his life, with its many and varied trials and tribulations, and being struck by the silence that surrounds his memory today, I am reminded of these reflections of Lacordaire, just slightly his contemporary, which a devoted and esteemed teacher had his students commit to memory when I was in the *cinquième*³² in 1917:

We aspire after love all our life, yet never attain it except imperfectly; and this causes the heart to bleed. And have we attained it in this life, how much of it would be left after death? Granted that the prayer of a friend follows us beyond this world, a pious memory still pronounces our name, but heaven and earth have soon marched on and we are draped in oblivion and steeped in silence. From no source is the ethereal breeze of love wafted over our tomb. It is the end, the everlasting end, and this is the history of man's dalliance with love.

I am mistaken; there is a man whose love keeps watch at the tomb; it is you, O Jesus!

11. Epilogue

Canon Lafon, a Roman count, a Knight of the Golden Spur and of the Legion of Honor, left only a single close relative, his niece Adélaïde Gémon, at whose home in a locality called Restaurat in Pessac he had most probably spent the last years of his life.

In September 1836, her husband, Jean Descornes, had become the nephew by marriage of the famous Abbé Lafon, and he felt in duty bound to preserve in his family some of the honors that had come to the uncle.

On May 1, 1862, he wrote to Pope Pius IX who had substituted the Order of Pius IX for that of the Golden Spur.

Most Holy Father, His Holiness Pius VII of happy memory, did grant to Jean Baptiste Hyacinthe Lafon, who was commissioner of the King of France in 1815 and who died in 1836 decorated with several French and foreign Orders, and honorary canon of the

³² [The *cinquième* is a grade in French junior high schools equivalent to the seventh grade in the US system.]

archdiocese of Bordeaux, the title of Knight of the Golden Spur and the hereditary title of Roman count in reward for his six years of captivity from 1808 to 1814, for his attachment to the Church and to the Holy See.

His Eminence Cardinal Donnet, archbishop of Bordeaux, had addressed a petition to Your Holiness in July 1857 and again in May 1859, recalling these titles and asking that they be transmitted to me so as to perpetuate in my family and in the region where I live, the memory of the distinguished services rendered to religion by Father Lafon, of whom I am the nephew and sole heir, being, as I am, the husband of his only niece.

Emboldened by the kindly support of His Eminence the Cardinal, I come very humbly, Most Holy Father, to beg you again, to grant me the title of Knight of your Order which has replaced that of the Golden Spur, and the hereditary title of Roman count to be transmitted to Jean-Gaétan-Sylvestre-Ludovic Dayre, husband of Marie-Elisabeth Nofalie Descornes, my only daughter.

I prostrate myself at the feet of Your Holiness, and I declare that it is for the greater good of religion that I lay claim to the distinguished honor associated with these titles. I who make this request, Most Holy Father, am the most humble and obedient of your servants and most submissive in Jesus Christ, Jean Baptiste Eutrope Descornes, justice of the peace of the Canton of Pujols, councilor of the District of Libourne.

The letter was accompanied by the following note:

Explanatory notice of the petition addressed to His Holiness Pius IX by Jean Baptiste Eutrope Descornes, justice of the peace of the Canton of Pujols and councilor of the District of Libourne (Gironde).

M. Jean Baptiste Hyacinthe Lafon was arrested in 1808 while in the process of printing protests of the Pope against the occupation of his States and the Bull of excommunication. He was taken to Paris where he endured six years of captivity.³³ When he died in 1836 he was ex-commissioner to the King, wore the insignia of several French and foreign Orders, and was honorary canon of the archdiocese of Bordeaux.

M. Descornes is the only heir to have benefited from the estate, for he was the husband of Adélaïde Gémon, his only niece.

Among M. Lafon's honorary titles were those of Knight of the Golden Spur and the hereditary title of Roman count, the first granted by the Pontifical Brief of March 3, 1820, and the second, conformably to the terms of a letter of January 26 of the same year addressed to M. Lafon by His Eminence Cardinal Consalvi.

³³ *Biographie des hommes vivants*, vol. 4, p. 41, 1818 edition.

Shortly after Lafon's death M. Descornes was urged to ask for the rights to the two titles in question; both documents were confided in 1837 by the archbishop of Bordeaux to Abbé Cabanès, a missionary apostolic, who was leaving for the Holy City, and was to keep track of the proceedings.

Both documents were mislaid, and M. Descornes was informed that to obtain the titles in question, he should simply address himself directly, through the archbishop of Bordeaux, to the cardinal secretary of briefs. The petition was made in July 1857 by His Eminence Cardinal Donnet, and repeated in May of 1859.

M. Descornes then sent a petition to the Holy Father, a copy of which has already been given here. Again he asks for the medal of the Order of Pius IX which had been substituted for that of the Golden Spur. The reason alleged was that the early services of M. Lafon were of such a nature as to complement the rights he personally may have to that favor, about which modesty bids him to keep silent.

Secondly, he asks that the hereditary title of Roman count be transmitted to Jean-Gaétan-Sylvestre-Ludovic Dayrie, the spouse of Marie-Elizabeth-Nojalie Descornes, his only daughter, because this having been M. Lafon's title, he considers it one of the most precious items of his estate which he has at heart to preserve in his family.

It will be noted that M. Descornes' letter and the explanation that accompanied it conform less to historical reality than to certain biographical accounts of Abbé Lafon that were circulated during his lifetime. Today we are closer to the truth. Lafon was not in the process of printing the pontifical documents when he was arrested, in 1809 and not 1808, and he was a prisoner only from 1809 to 1812, having escaped during the Malet Affair.

However that might be, because the two documents we have just read are presently in the archives of the Archdiocese of Bordeaux with the handwritten notation "to be classified," we may conclude that they were entrusted to Cardinal Donnet who did not think it opportune to send them on to Rome. He must have notified the party concerned. Should Descornes have answered, he could only have sent His Eminence a duplicate of the letter composed under similar circumstances, to his Eminence. Here it is:

I beg Your Eminence to accept my most sincere thanks for the consideration you have manifested toward me as expressed in the answer with which Your Eminence has honored me. I am well aware that according to your information that nothing more is to be obtained from Rome. If my hopes have leaned in that direction, it is because I counted less on my personal merit than on the hereditary privilege attached to the titles of the late M. Lafon. Hence, I never had the Legion of Honor in mind, one of his decorations which was promised to me at the end of 1829, shortly before the fall of the legitimate monarchy.

By revealing to Your Eminence my desire to possess some of the titles of honor I was guided less by personal motives than by a consideration of public utility. I know that the reward for the good that we do is the joy of doing it. However, I have every reason to rejoice for having approached you because I have obtained one of the sweetest and most precious satisfactions that I could have hoped for: Your Eminence's approval. It is with the utmost respect that I have the honor, Your Eminence, to be your very obedient and humble servant, Descornes, justice of the peace of Pujols, Pessac, Canton of Pujols, October 5. 1851.

And so, honorable justice of the peace, *sic transit gloria mundi*.³⁴

³⁴ [So passes the glory of the world.]

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