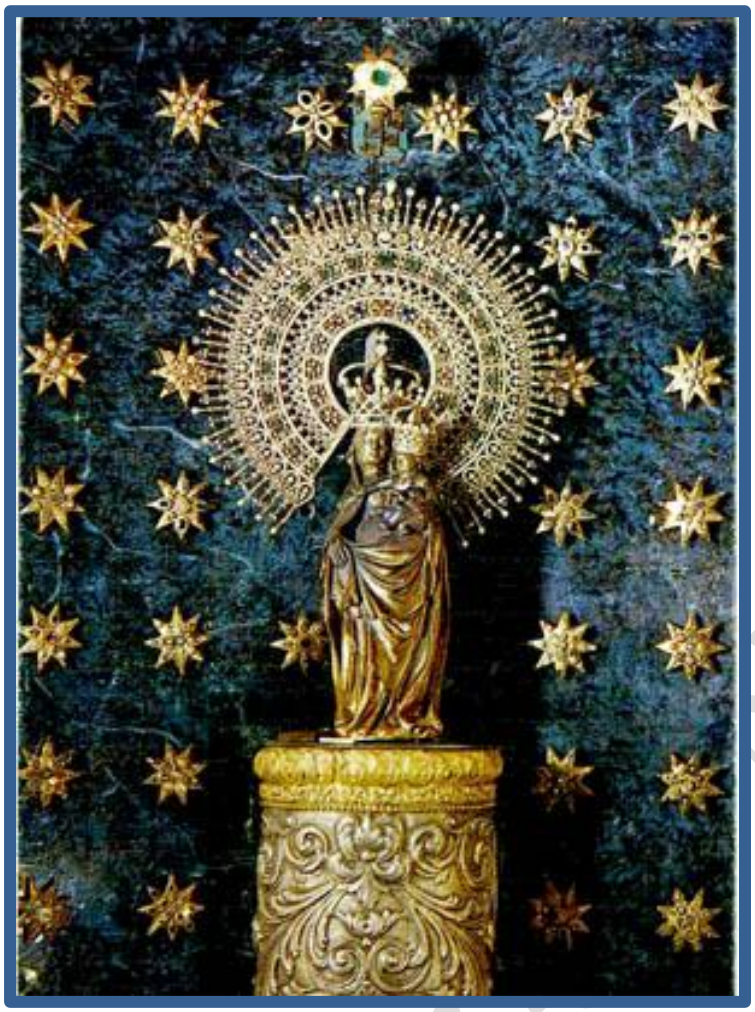


French School of Spirituality

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 *dirigée* 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 (2nd 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 *Éminence grise*, 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 (3rd SG, French Oratorians)
1611-1649	Gaston de Renty (Layman, Company of the Blessed Sacrament)
1622-1700	Louis Tronson, SS (3rd SG Sulpicians)
1627-1704	Jacques Bénigne Bossuet (Bishop of Meaux)
1651-1719	Jean Baptiste de La Salle (Founder, Christian Brothers)
1673-1716	Louis Marie Grignion de Montfort (Founder, Montfortians)
1732-1811	Jacques André Émery, SS (9th 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 *Augustinus*)
1581-1643	(Abbé of) Saint-Cyran (Jean Duvergier de Hauranne)
1591-1661	(Mère) Angélique Arnauld (Abbess of Port-Royal)
1612-1694	Antoine Arnauld (*le Grand Arnauld*, author of *De la communion fréquente*)
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 solitaries)
1625-1661	Jacqueline Pascal (a nun at Port-Royal)

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French School of Spirituality

by

Lowell M. Glendon, SS

[from *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Micael Downey (Collegeville: Minn: Liturgical Press, 1993), pp. 420-23.]



Philippe de Champaigne, *Cardinal Pierre de Bérulle*, 17th century, oil on canvas, Musée national des Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon, Versailles, France, https://alchetron.com/Pierre-de-Bérulle.

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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, indentifying 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 Grignion de Montfort (1673-1716).

The 17th 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.

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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 17th-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

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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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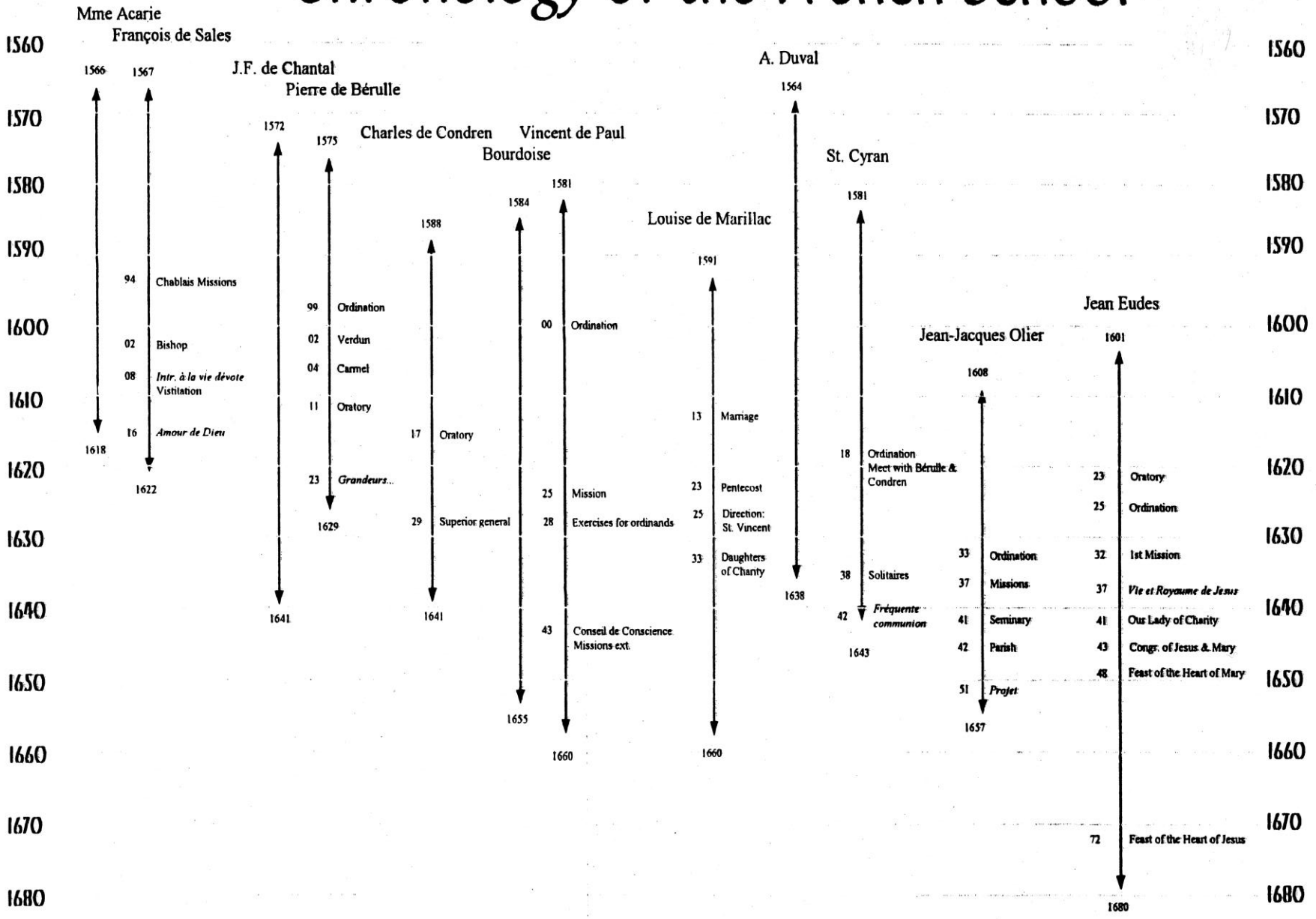
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Chronology of the French School



Alive for God in Christ Jesus: A Conference Exploring Contemporary Influeneces 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.

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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.

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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

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Charles de Condren
1588 -1641



Claude Mellan, *Le Père Charles de Condren*, 1641. Engraving. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, https://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_de_Condren.

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

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Saint Jean Eudes
1601-1680



Portrait of Saint John Eudes. 1673. Painting. In *Wikipedia*, s.v. "John Eudes." Last modified August 24, 2026, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Eudes.

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 Ie 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 August19

1925 Canonized on May 31

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Jean-Jacques Olier
1608 -1657



Unknown Artist. *Portrait of Jean-Jacques Olier.* 17th century. Oil on canvas. Church of Saint-Sulpice, Paris. Available from Wikimedia Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:J.J._Olier.jpg.

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 *Catéchism chrétien*

1657 Publishes *Introduction à la vie et aux vertus chrétiennes*.
Dies in Paris, April 2 at age 48.

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Saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle
1651-1719

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Anonymous, *Portrait of Saint John the Baptist de la Salle*, oil on canvas, Southern California Renewal Communities (SCRC), https://scrc.org/experience/feast.php?view=418.

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

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Saint Louis-Marie Grignion de Montfort
1673 -1716



Louis-Marie de Montfort, painting, Montfort Missionaries, General Delegation of Gt. Britain & Ireland, https://www.montfort.org.uk/Spirituality/Xtwisdom.php.

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

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