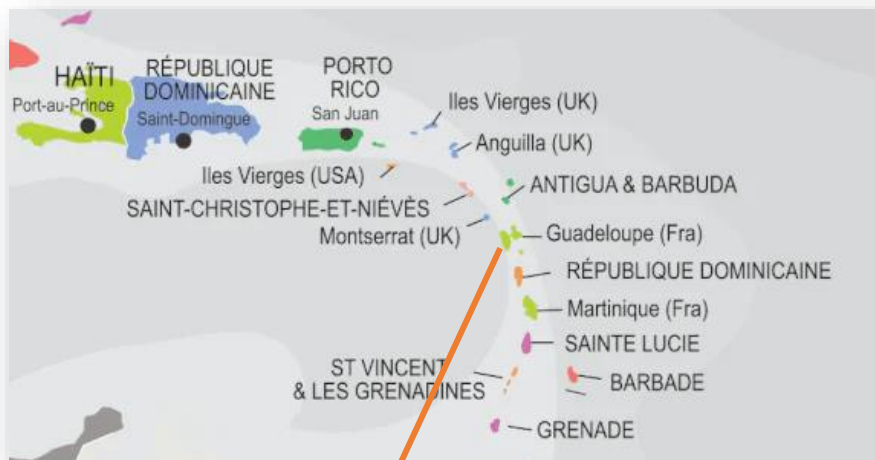


# BROTHERS WITNESSES OF HOPE

## 3- BROTHER HYACINTHE FICHOU (1813-1860)



*Landscape of Guadeloupe*



## **BROTHER HYACINTHE FICHO, 1813-1860**

### **Missionary of Fire among the Slaves of the Antilles**

The young Congregation of the Brothers of Ploërmel was barely twenty years old when it was called by the Government of France to Moralize and Instruct the Populations of the Colonies, in particular the Slaves. For about 70 years, Hundreds of Brothers gave their Energies, Health and often their Lives to the Service of the little ones, of the Free Blacks and Slaves. How many efforts did they make to reconcile Whites and Blacks, Masters and Slaves, by means of Evangelization and Education, inspired by Christianity! We would present one of these Humble Brothers who spent 20 years in the Ardent Climate of the Antilles, to the point of exhausting himself for his brothers in Guadeloupe. He was remembered with Emotion, even 50 years after his death: “In Basse-Terre Brother Hyacinthe, “Our Saint” as the people called him, by his irresistible word, by his Inexhaustible Charity...”

#### **1- A CHILDHOOD IN A COUNTRY OF FAITH AND WORK**



Plounéour-Ménez was a Small Town in Finistère, at the tip of Brittany. It was located at the foot of the “Monts” d'Arrée (350 m high) and its Countryside was Hard to Work, like its Granite Rocks.

The Inhabitants cultivated the Land, but they also supplemented their Income by manufacturing and selling Fabrics, especially Linen and Hemp. The most important families belonged to the category of Juloded: these, in addition to their Economic Activities, took care of the Social Aspect and contributed to the construction of Churches and the Splendid Parish Enclosures with their Suggestive Calvaries of the Region.

The Fichou Family lived in Plounéour-Ménez, precisely in La Ville-Neuve, Canton of Saint-Thégonnec, near Morlaix. In that Countryside, Papa Guillaume and Mama Marguerite Crenn worked their land with their five children, four boys and a girl. They were a family of workers who had reached a Fairly Comfortable State. Following a Secular Tradition, they practiced their Christian Faith with Fervor: Finistère was a Region plowed by Saints and Venerable Monks, dotted with Christian Signs. La Ville-Neuve kept the Remains of the Old Abbey of Relec.

In that beautiful family, Our Yves was born on November 28<sup>th</sup>, 1813, a Very Common First Name in the Region of Trégor and Léon, whose Patron Saint is St-Yves. He was baptized the next day. With his brothers, he spent a Peaceful Childhood in the Middle of the Countryside and Fervent Christian Traditions. But, around the age of 10, we found him in Pont-Croix,



at the Minor Seminary. The Documents saw us that he stayed there for 8 years, doing his studies, up to the Second Year of High School, after which he returned home. How could these events be explained? Had the

parents invested part of their Assets to give one of their sons a High Level of Culture, to enable him to exercise a Profession for the benefit of the family? Did young Yves feel attracted to an Ecclesiastical Vocation, perhaps interrupted by lack of Resources? In any case, these years at the Pont-Croix Seminary would prove providential for the future: The Instruction and Religious Training received would be invaluable for his work of Evangelization in the Missions.

After leaving the Seminary, he spent years searching for a Project for his future. Yves helped his family, gained Professional experience in important Families or Religious Institutions in the Region. Nevertheless, he was unable to see clearly his future, as if he were waiting for a signal from Providence. This signal came from a very young Institute, founded by Father Jean-Marie de la Mennais, who had opened Hundreds of Small and Medium-Sized Schools for the Instruction and Evangelization of children, especially the poorest. This Institute fully responded to Yves' desire and its past represented a perfect preparation for that Mission.

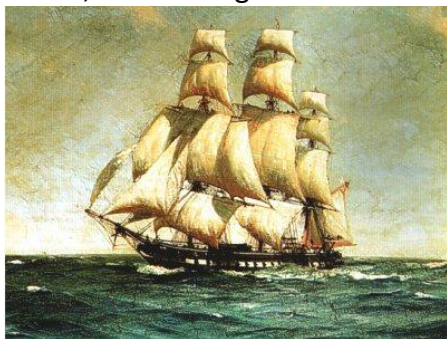
## **2- AT THE HEART OF THE CONGRERATION OF THE BROTHERS OF CHRISTIAN INSTRUCTION**

Young Yves was 26 years old - headed for Ploërmel, the Small Town in Central Brittany, where the Headquarters of the Brothers was established, animated by the presence of the Founder. The separation from his family had cost him many tears, immediately erased by the Joy of having finally found his way. He began his Novitiate without delay, in the Autumn of 1839. He took a Name that he would make Glorious: Bro. Hyacinthe. As he had a very Good Cultural Preparation, the part of the study of Subjects and the Pedagogical Preparation was carried out quickly. He devoted himself



to the study of the Rule, to Spiritual and Apostolic Formation, following the Spirit of the Institute. He was accompanied by Holy and Learned Brothers, such as Bro Hippolyte and Bro Bernardin and Venerable Priests, such as Abbé Ruault and especially Father de la Mennais.

Having entered in October, he was already ready for a First Placement in Séglien, near Pontivy, at the beginning of 1840. He spent a few months of Apprenticeship in one of these Small Parish Schools, where there was a Brother placed alone, in collaboration with the Rector. He learned to have a good hold on the students and to prepare himself well in order to give simple explanations of Christian Doctrine. At the end of the School year he returned to Ploërmel for the Retreat and the Deepening of the Rule, in the Joy of knowing the other Brothers of the Institute and living in Fraternal Union. In October 1840 we found Brother Hyacinthe in the List of Brothers ready to leave for the Antilles. [At the head of that List of Missionaries was the “saint” Brother Zoël, who would not leave, but would give his life at the age of 32 in the Heroic Service of Children and the Poor]. It was therefore a very definite choice to go on a Mission to difficult and Dangerous Territories, because the Founder only wanted to send Volunteers there. Brother Hyacinthe prepared himself Spiritually



according to the Exhortations of Father de la Mennais: “Would a Brother be afraid to cross the Seas to go and save souls? Oh, what good things *you could do to the young hearts entrusted to your care by the love of God! You would lead a crowd of children towards the path of Heaven... You would be the Guardian Angels of the Souls of Little Children.*”

### **3- THE MISSIONARY BROTHERS IN THE WEST INDIES: A WORLD TO DISCOVER, SPLENDID AND DRAMATIC**

On November 18<sup>th</sup>, 1840, Brother Hyacinthe left Ploërmel with Nine other Brothers, under the Leadership of Brother Ambroise Le Haiget, Appointed Director General of the Brothers of the Antilles. They embarked on the Frigate L'Andromède, which set sail on December 12<sup>th</sup> for Guadeloupe: Days of Favorable Wind and others of Storm. They arrived at La Basse-Terre, the Capital of Guadeloupe. The New Arrivals began to



discover their New Environment: A Splendid and Dramatic Country at the same time!

The Vegetation was flourishing, the Climate was Hot, the Crops are Abundant. But there were also Unpredictable and Serious Dangers: Yellow Fever Epidemics spared no one, especially Europeans; Hurricanes destroy Houses in a short time and were often followed by Vast Fires; the Volcanic Earth caused Earthquakes and Eruptions, which could cause Thousands of Victims.

The Population of about 120,000 was divided into Three Classes:

1- *The White Population*: Slave Masters (or Colonists), Administrative Personnel, the Clergy, Large Landowners and Merchants: they were around 5% of the Total Population.

2- *The Population of Colour*, Free or Freed: Self-Employed Workers, Small Traders, Craftsmen, Self-Employed Farmers, Fishermen. They formed the Largest Part of the Inhabitants of Towns and Small Cities. They constituted 10% of the Total.



*Slave Housing*

3- *The Slaves*, Descendants of the Ancient African Populations deported from Africa, who constituted the Mass of work in the Sugar Cane, Coffee, Cotton, Cocoa Farms.... They lived directly inside the “Habitations” (name of the Farms), inside Poor Huts. Their families, very

unstable, were considered property of the Masters. They had no Rights: they were mobile “Things”, at the Level of the Animals. To feed themselves they cultivated a Small Piece of Land, for a few hours on Sunday or short free moments during the Week. They formed 85% of the Population, around 95,000 people.

Overall, these Three Classes make up a Society with Strong Social Tensions. The Whites wanted to keep their Power by using Force and Laws in their Favour. The Slaves harbor a submission full of rage and feelings of vengeance, which break out in Revolts, Poisoning,



*Slaves at Work*

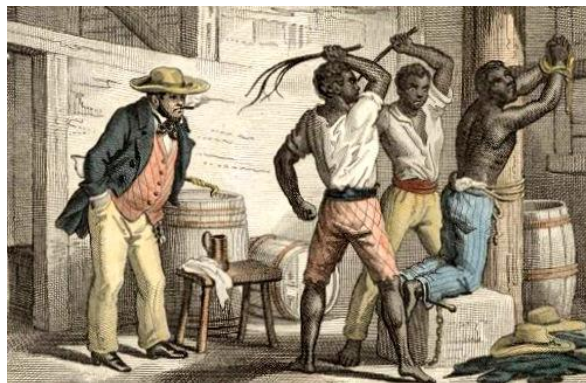
*Thefts, fleeing their Homes in the Interior of the Island (Maroonage) ... The Repression carried out by the Colonists was often Terrible and Bloody, but it only fueled the Chain of Violence. The Freedmen of Colour formed the Free Class on which we could count to begin to build a Society of Respect and Law: through Free Work, Education, the Practice of Religion, and Democracy. It was through them that the Brothers began their Mission of Evangelization and Civilization.*

*The Religious Situation* of the Church in Guadeloupe needed a New Impetus, especially in the Evangelization of Slaves, but also in Religious Instruction and the Practice of the Sacraments for the Freed Population. The Clergy included in its Ranks Holy Priests, full of Pastoral Zeal, but many Priests struggled to free themselves from the Influence of the Colonists, to approach the Slaves to bring them the Announcement of the Good News and their Dignity as Sons of God. All the more so since the Slaves were always working for their Masters and the latter did not give them any time to dedicate themselves to Religious Instruction and the Practice of the Sacraments.

Let us end this presentation with the Testimony of the First Brothers to arrive in the Antilles. “The Colonists are people without Faith and without Law, who occupied the Highest Region of Superiority; they are impious and



possess the Slave Negroes, who are regarded and treated by their Masters as Beasts and Beings without Souls and even refuse to be taught Catechism and to speak of Religion..." (Bro Ambroise) "Some Whites claimed that we would cut off their heads rather than let their children sit in Class on the same benches as the Colored Children. The Béquets (Whites) were convinced that this black Class was incapable of understanding anything; *"According to their system, they are brutes."* (Bro Saturnin) "The



Slaves were so numerous, they were regarded as Real Animals; when they made a few Mistakes, they were beaten in the Most Atrocious Manner; they were only given two moments for food, on Saturday and Sunday; also, on Sunday there was almost

no one in Church." (Bro Nicomède) "We witnessed a very painful scene: Three Negro Slaves, condemned for theft, received 29 lashes in the Public Square..." (Bro Arsène) "You have glimpsed from afar a herd walking quite quickly on a steep Hillside and followed by a man armed with a very flexible medium stick and a good whip which he uses for work. They went in line like Cranes: all the Arid Savannah was quickly changed into Good Productive Land and the whip had not remained folded over his shoulder. Midday came. They had to glean a little grass. Dinner was soon done. Same developments as in the morning. The time for rest arrived: a few rags spread out on the floor or on the bare Earth to make up their bed." (Bro Marcellin) "Almost all the Colonists were Tigers in front of their Slaves; now that we were talking about Emancipation, they were redoubled in cruelty. They took revenge on food: those Poor Unfortunates were wasting away day by day." (Bro Elric)

#### **4- IN THE TURMOIL OF THE MISSION IN GUADELOUPE: TRIALS AND HOPES**

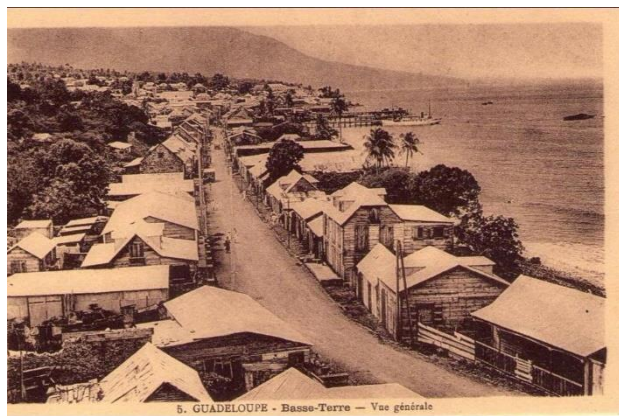
In that context so difficult from every point of view, it was not surprising that the Early days of the Brothers in the Colonies of the Antilles were complicated and even apparently a failure. The First Community paid dearly for the impact in that dangerous and often Hostile World. The First Director, Brother Antonin, a saintly and experienced Brother, was struck down by Yellow Fever. Other Brothers could not resist the change of Scenery and the Dangers and abandoned the Institute. New waves of Brothers, “Real Battalions of Saints” set foot in Guadeloupe and Martinique, the Schools asserted themselves and gained the esteem of the Population, especially the Freedmen and the Clergy, still rather cold towards the New Institute. In January 1841, Brother Ambroise arrived, becoming the Director General and taking the place of the Founder in the Antilles. His authority, sometimes a little harsh, supported the Brothers in respecting the Rule and encouraged them to embark on the Apostolate. To obtain better Spiritual Animation in the Schools and Communities, Brother Ambroise asked Father de la Mennais to send a Priest from Brittany to the Colonies, specifically Father Evain. He landed in the Antilles, but his presence proved to be a failure. Drawing on the discontent of certain Brothers with Brother Ambroise, he put himself at the head of the Revolt against the latter and he conceived the Project of becoming the Superior of the Brothers of the Colonies. Fortunately, the Founder quickly discovered that Cabal: he confirmed Brother Ambroise at the Head of the Mission, disavowed Father Evain who fled to other Islands. Calm gradually returned: The Brothers recognized the Authority and increased their Esteem for Brother Ambroise, who had been able to overcome that Painful Ordeal. From that moment on, we could resume the path of the Mission, which God would bless: it had been fertilized by the trial, the pain and even the mourning of four young Brothers, victims of the Yellow Fever Epidemics: they would be “The Protectors of the Beautiful Mission of the Antilles”. Our



Brother Hyacinthe, also involved in that Turmoil, had always supported his Director General. He wrote to the Father: "While Brother Ambroise would be invested with part of your powers, I would devote Blind Obedience to him." Now he would give himself even more completely to his Holy Mission.

## **5- THE BEGINNINGS OF BROTHER HYACINTE'S MISSION IN BASSE-TERRE: SCHOOL, RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTIONS, FIRST COMMUNIONS**

Bro Hyacinthe was called to the Community of La Basse-Terre, in Guadeloupe, the first founded by the Brothers in the Antilles. The Director, Bro Frédéric, exhausted by Dysentery, had to transfer to the Island of Marie-Galante, whose Climate suited him better and left his place to Bro Hervé Monnerais. At the beginning, Bro Hyacinthe was put in charge of the

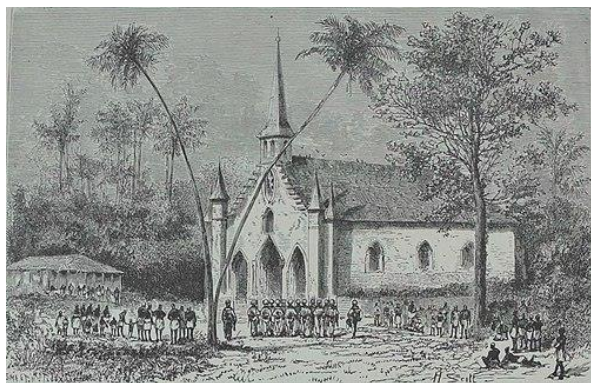


"Paying" Class, about thirty students who benefited from a Higher Education: it was a way of contributing to the Resources of the Mission, which needed everything. At the same time, the good level of his Cultural Preparation was recognized. Soon,

illness forced Br. Daniel, who had the little ones' Class, to get help from our Bro Hyacinthe. Which he did with Great Joy. He still had things to learn. He received the Founder's advice with Docility: "Apply yourself to hold the children well and to take over them all the necessary influence to maintain perfect order in your Class: follow on this point the advice which would be given to you by your Superiors." Indeed, he was inclined to lead his students more with Paternity and Mercy than with Rigidity and Severity: in that way he was very followed, because he was Very Loved. Soon he would

take on that Firm and Gentle Authority, entirely paternal which would always distinguish him.

In addition to Ordinary Teaching, the Brothers began to devote themselves to Direct Evangelization: the students who wanted to receive First Communion needed Specific Preparation. These young people were mainly Freedmen of Colour and a Few Whites from Christian Families. In the Evening, for Several Months, they returned to School to learn Christian "Doctrine." Mixed in among them were Adults and Elderly People who wanted to take advantage of that preparation to receive First Communion: they had not had the opportunity to receive it during their lives! Hundreds of people crowded into the Large Chapel of the School or even into the



*Catechism in the Homes*

Church. The Brothers, in close collaboration with the Priests of the Parish, explained with simplicity the Questions and Answers of the Catechism. Brother Hyacinthe was the soul of those Evening Religious Instructions, which following his example were repeated everywhere. The

Austere Br. Ambroise admitted: "Bro Hyacinthe: a small and a great saint: he did the Evening Instruction wonderfully, where there were more than 200 people; it was admirable, if you saw it, and the results were very edifying". That Evening Meeting was quickly enriched with New Initiatives: "We did the Month of Mary for Our Students, we also did it Every Evening in Our Chapel where about 200 people meet".

Among the initial difficulties there were also the composition of the Communities. The Brothers fell ill easily and had to be replaced or transferred. Other Brothers, in the impact of Colonial Society, had relaxed a little in the observance of the Rule. The distance from their Country, the

absence of the Founding Father - despite a close correspondence - sometimes created a Climate of Discouragement and Nostalgia. Brother Hyacinthe felt at ease in the Community and gave Moral and Apostolic Impetus: "The Community of Basse-Terre was doing wonderfully and Brother Hyacinthe brought cheerfulness everywhere!"

The Director of the Community was Bro Hervé: A Brother of good will; he had a very open Character, easy to get along with People, Authorities and the Clergy. He was very successful in Carpentry and he liked to provide Services in Churches; he had a Beautiful Voice and he went to the Parishes to sing on Ceremonies. Unfortunately, he spread himself too much outside and neglected his Community, did not follow the Spiritual Education of the students and was not always Faithful to the Rule. The young Bro Hyacinthe - was 29 years old - would bring Zeal, Observance, and Unity to his Community: everyone, Superiors and Confreres had absolute confidence in him and, in a certain way, he was the point of Reference: he brought Joy everywhere!

## **6- AN APOSTOLATE THAT SPREAD INTO NEW FIELDS: THE MARIAN CONGREGATION AND LETTERS**

In the various activities, both inside and outside the School, Brother Hyacinthe was truly the Linchpin. He replaced Brother Daniel in a Class of 86 Grandchildren; he was the Soul of the Evening Instructions; he prepared the First Communion. For that, the Brothers organized a Very Fervent Four-Day Retreat: the children were very recollected, the days were filled with Prayers, Instructions, and Pious Readings. The Brothers were always with them: they served them at table (Brother Ambroise was the first to serve them), they assisted them in the Dormitory. On Sundays they went to Church in Procession, with the girls guided by the Sisters of Cluny. "On the Holy Day of the First Communion, the Vows of Baptism were renewed, the hand on the Gospel. The Ceremony was very fervent and edified the Celebrants and the Assembly. The next day the Communicants did not



want to leave their Masters and they thanked them Officially, in the presence of the Apostolic Prefect.

Brother Hyacinthe was very pleased with this Spiritual Momentum of the young Communicants. At the same time, he was worried about their perseverance in the Practice of the Sacraments. They could not be abandoned. In Brittany he had known the Marian Congregations: Associations that followed young people regularly for years and supported them in their Christian Formation. So, he thought of importing it to



Guadeloupe as well: he would have brought together young Volunteers for Prayer, Religious Teaching, the Weekly Examination, the celebration of Mass in the Parish. The Congregationists committed themselves to dedicating themselves

to the Blessed Virgin, according to the Spirituality of St. Louis de Montfort: they followed a Regulation, they gave themselves Associative Responsibilities with Proper Elections. form, committed themselves to Mutual Assistance, even Material, with a Modest Sum. In that way they would have ensured their perseverance and they would have become the Leaders of their Companions.

Naturally, Brother Hyacinthe had taken upon himself the responsibility of that Beautiful Association, which began to grow: several dozen young people were Regulars and others joined them. To give signs of belonging and develop devotion to the Virgin, Brother Hyacinthe, as a Good Educator, insisted with the Founder to obtain Images, Formulas of Consecration and Medals.



Our Brother, not yet satisfied, had also planned another way to help the Journey of Faith, especially among those who had somewhat abandoned their initial fervour. He could not meet them at School, but he could write to them a Personal Letter! After obtaining the Authorizations of the Superiors and the Rector, he began to write long letters to each of his Former Communicants, to reawaken their Spiritual Impulse and bring them back to the fold.

Father de la Mennais followed his Apostolic Initiatives closely: he continually asked him for details, he read his letters to the Brothers, he spoke about them in Brittany and presented them to the Ministers of the Government. Brother Hyacinthe replied to him with long letters full of Information and Pastoral Passion. For the Founder it was an excellent way to transmit Apostolic Fervour to his young Institute and to call upon New Missionaries. And he himself received Valuable Information to give precise Indications, adjust difficulties, and develop other Projects.

## **7- “OUTGOING” MISSIONS IN SLAVE SOCIETY: AMONG PRISONERS IN THE JAIL AND SLAVES IN THE HOUSINGS**

All these activities, however demanding, were not enough for the Apostolic Heart of Brother Hyacinthe. When he crossed the City or, during his rare walks with his Brothers, explored the surroundings, he was struck by the degradations he encountered. “In the Jail there was a crowd of Prisoners: Most of them had never heard of God. On the dwellings the Slaves were abandoned and the Masters also needed Instruction”. Those Two Mission Fields opened up to his zeal.

In the Jail, 150 Prisoners were serving their Sentence. They lived in Conditions of Abandonment, Illness and above all without the Comfort of Faith. There were some who wore Chains. Brother Hyacinthe first went to help the Chaplain. He went to the Prison on Sundays and Wednesdays to teach Catechism for an hour. He announced the Good News to everyone,

men and women, Slaves and Free, he carried Images that comforted the Prisoners: “I would gladly spend the whole day to announce the Kingdom of God to an Innumerable Crowd of Individuals plunged into Darkness and the Shadow of Death”.

Brother Arsène, an Ardent Missionary who died very young from exhaustion, from time to time accompanied Brother Hyacinthe to the Jail. “A word concerning the Instruction in the Prisons of Basse-Terre by our good little Brother Hyacinthe. This instruction does an immense good. This good little Brother had already succeeded through his care in preparing several people sentenced to more than ten years of Detention to make their First Communion. Still others were very Assiduous in Religious



*Detention Center in Basse-Terre*

Exercises: I had this from the Chaplain.” He also had the Project of setting up Workshops for the Prisoners and to reserve, during Work Time, a time for Catechism. The Apostolate in the Prison was developing and we were seeing the Fruits of it. “The Prisoners were generally Punctilious. Those Poor Unfortunates had never heard the

sublime language of Religion, and they went to their duty as soon as they knew it. The Caretaker told me that he was satisfied with them. He no longer had to inflict punishments on them for insubordination; they were more respectful. Those who left Prison no longer exposed themselves to going back in: they would not have gone back in if they had known the Truths of Religion.” On that Singular Mission, almost unique in the History of the Institute, Father de la Mennais very much desired very detailed Information.

The other Missionary Field was even more engaging. It was about bringing Evangelization, in the strict sense, and consequently, the Moralization of Tens of Thousands of Slaves, in all the Colonies. It was necessary to go among them in their “Dwellings” (Plantations), to be accepted, to



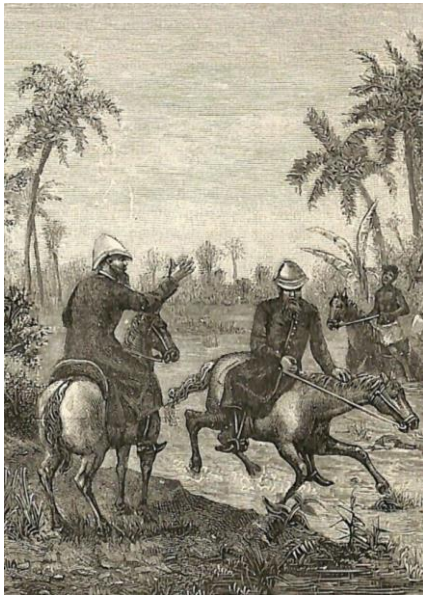
*Slave Dwelling-Sugar Factory*

overcome the distrust and opposition of the Colonists and the indifference of a Large Part of the Clergy. And still to go to meet dangers, in a Climate of Fire, with Fatigue and Sacrifices, to the point of giving of life for a large number of Brothers, even very

young ones. That Missionary Adventure would constitute a Heroic Epic for the young Institute which was barely twenty years old. Brother Hyacinthe would be one of the First Pioneers of this Glorious History.

The beginnings were very simple. “We took advantage of the Holidays to “Walk” on the Heights. We went there twice. The first time, at the Invitation of the Vicar of the Parish, we went to the Dwelling: we took half an hour from the Work of the Workshop and devoted it to Catechism. We divided the Workshop into Three Groups: Men, Women and Children. We were satisfied with this Dwelling composed of 98 Slaves and they seemed satisfied with us. Fifteen days later we returned to the same place with the same Eagerness and Satisfaction. The Manager of another Workshop came to asked us to go to his House to instruct his Slaves.” Little by little the Brothers, especially Brother Hyacinthe, went to the Dwellings. The Masters, seeing the benefits of Catechism, no longer put obstacles in the way of the Brothers’ coming: they were expected and greatly desired; There was even Jealousy between the Homes Visited and the Others.

The Evangelization of Slaves, which had started without any fanfare, was beginning to stabilize. Brother Hyacinthe opened that New Path. "On June 25<sup>th</sup>, I began to catechize at Home a Workshop of 150 Slaves, according to the arrangements made with their Master: they had 40 Minutes of Catechism Twice a Week. That Good Master was very happy to have his Slaves Instructed: he sent me a horse to go and come back from his house." The Instruction was taking shape slowly, even though it was very simple. "I limited myself to Catechism, the Rosary and the Singing of a few



After those First Attempts, people began to realize the importance of that Direct Evangelization of Slaves: it could transform a mass of Ignorant Individuals exploited almost to the level of beasts, into a people of people conscious of their Dignity and their Duties as Citizens. The means that could bring about that Social Revolution was Religion, brought to the Heart of that Mass by the Catechist Brothers. Brother Ambrose at first hesitated to embark on that New and Bold Enterprise because of the dangers to which his Brothers were exposed; then he eagerly embraced the cause: "Religion above all, that one trained man in Voluntary Work and Gentle Morals. In a few years we would succeed in creating a completely New and completely Agricultural People. Gentleness and zeal were needed and the Slaves would attach themselves to you. Since Religion had been taught in those Places, Marriages were encouraged, work was improved, the Personal Life of the Negroes acquired Dignity."

Faced with that change, the Clergy had admired the work of the Brothers and called them everywhere to spread that New Apostolate. The

First Catechist Brothers, Brother Arthur in Martinique and Brother Hyacinthe in Guadeloupe, had carried out an Apostolic Work that left everyone surprised with astonishment. “The Catechists experienced Great Consolation and they had had complete Success. When the Impetus was given, the Good would be very noticeable.”

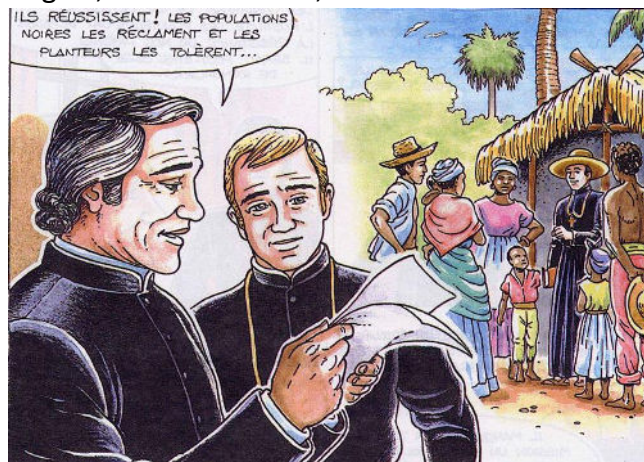
## **8- BRO. HYACINTHE: BROTHER CATECHIST IN THE HOUSINGS**

Following the First Spontaneous Initiatives of a few Brothers, the Colonial Administration had approved in 1846 the Institution of the Catechist Brothers, in agreement with the Apostolic Prefect and the Superiors of the Institute. They were in regular contact, they dedicated themselves full time to Evangelizing in the Homes - apart from Short Lessons for the sons of Slaves -, they received a horse to reach a greater number of homes. The Catechist Brothers began to spread throughout Guadeloupe: The Brothers Frumence in Capesterre and Trois-Rivers, Timoléon in Pointe-Noire, Donatien in Moule and Ste-Rose, Anastase in Moule and La Désirade, Elric in the surroundings of Basse-Terre, Herman-Marie in Canal, Célerin in Marie-Galante, Attale-Marie in Lamentin, Aristide in Ste-Rose and Camp-Jacob, Camille in Gourbeyre, Richard-Marie in the surroundings of Pointe-à-Pitre and Baie-Mahault... Likewise in Martinique there were among others Brothers Marcellin, Arthur, Fenin, Judoce-Mie, Polyme, Lambert, Jean-Pierre, Bonaventure-Mie, Urbain Catechists in the Homes of Fort-de-France, François, Vauclin, Rivière-Pilote, Carbet, Saint-Pierre...

Brother Hyacinthe started in the Dwellings near Basse-Terre, which he already knew. He was in charge of 24 Dwellings: in Baillif, Gourbeyre, Camp-Jacob, Matouba, Extra-muros (Saint-Claude). He visited them every Week or every 15 days, depending on the pace of the Work, mainly related to the cultivation of Sugar Cane. Let us follow our Brother throughout his day as a Catechist.



He prepared his Modest Meal in a small bag. He carried with him Pictures and Medals to distribute. He mounted a horse with some hesitation: he was not used to it and the roads were bad. There were Torrents to cross, where the horse had up to half of its body! He implored the help of Heaven for his Apostolate with Prayers: Veni Creator, Salve Regina, Ave Maris Stella, Litanies of the Saints and the 7 Psalms of Penance.



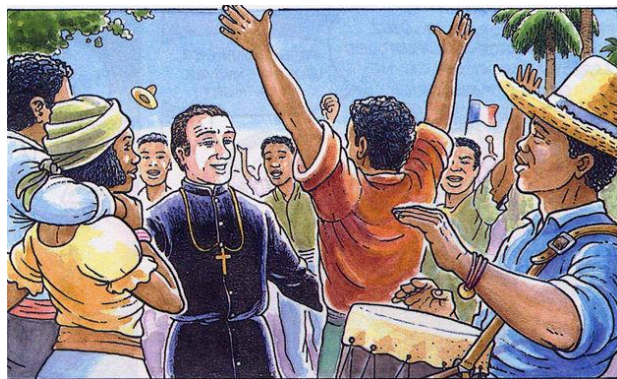
He arrived at the First House. Everyone rushed to go to Catechism, even the Old Men bent under the loads of grass and the weight of years. Catechism was done in a Chapel, or under a Tree, at the end of the work in field, in the

Courtyard... "I began with the Sign of the Holy Cross and the Prayers: Come, Holy Spirit, Our Father, Hail Mary, I Believe in God, I Confess to God, My God I would listen attentively to the Catechism. I taught them the Prayers, the Commandments, the Rosary and some Catechism Lessons with a short explanation. Many had not received Baptism. The Majority of those Souls did not know for what purpose they were on Earth. They had difficulty believing that they had a Soul created in the Image of God and made to Know Him, Love Him, Serve Him and Possess Him after life, if they Observe His Commandments.

To the Unfortunate Slaves, Bro Hyacinthe spoke of their Rights and Duties as Children of God, of the Infinite Love of Jesus, of their Belonging to Human Fraternity, of the Infinite Joys of Paradise, while the Depiction of the Sufferings of Hell awakened a Salutary Fear. To communicate with these simple people, the Catechist adapted to their Understanding: he used their Creole Language, he borrowed Images from their Daily Life, he



distributed small Prizes and Images. After an hour, the interrupted work must be resumed: a few Prayers and a Final Hymn (often the Montfortian



“I place my trust, Virgin, in your help”) that the Slaves would repeat as they spread out into the Fields.

“Bro Hyacinthe got back on his horse to reach another House: and it was Catechism

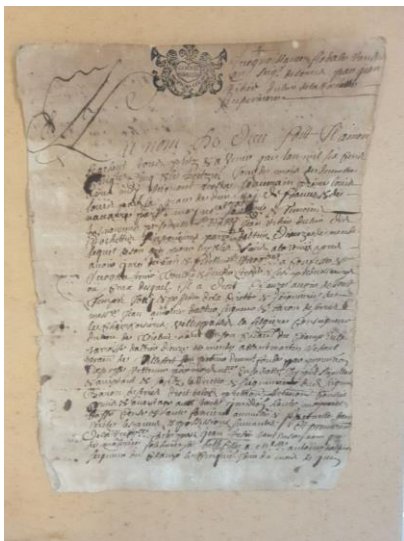
again for four or five times, during the whole day, except for a moment of pause in the middle of the day. In the shade of a Tree, he would have his Modest Dinner and collect himself in a moment of Personal Prayer”. In the Evening, he would return to the Community. And it was not finished: it was he who coordinated the Religious Instruction of the Evening and it was especially him that we waited for. Often the Chapel was insufficient and it was necessary to go to the Parish Church.

## **9- THE CHRONICLE OF EVANGELIZATION IN THE LETTERS OF BROTHER HYACINTHE: 1846**

To the Founder who wanted to have News on that New Apostolate of the Institute, Bro Hyacinthe replied with very detailed letters. In particular, the FIC Archives kept a long letter of 8 pages of February 18<sup>th</sup>, 1846 where he gave the account of his visits to Two Dwellings. In the First he began to already glimpse some Fruits of his Evangelizing Action, in the Second he was still in the First Approaches. Let us transcribe some passages.

## *First "Bologna" Dwelling*

"The Workshop was exact and began to have a Tinge of the Truths of Religion. I first asked for the letter of the Catechism, then I explain it. By means of the Catechism one could expose to man his Obligations towards his Creator, his Fellow Men and Himself. It was an Abridgement of the Gospel. I pointed out the Abuses to be repressed, the Evil that sin caused, to inspire horror of Vice and Zeal for Virtue. I showed the Peace that accompanied it even here below and the Eternal Reward. I explained with simplicity by interweaving Comparisons and Parables from the Gospel.



*"I had the satisfaction of seeing the Slaves come to Better Feelings. When someone was Sick, care was taken to have the Priest come to Administer the Sacraments. Recently there were Two Marriages on the same day, I hoped that others would engage in them. The Owner told me that he was satisfied with his Slaves. Prayers were said in Common, Morning and Evening, in an edifying way. Work was no longer forced by Punishment, it was*

*Voluntary and I believe that the Commander was no longer in the position of giving the Slightest Whip. While working they sang the Praises of the Lord and their Voices resound from all Sides. They repeated to me: Thank you, my Brother, thank you, my Brother!*

*The Owner told me that Theft, Maroonage, Quarrels, and Dissensions had Disappeared. Sunday was Sanctified and Most of them, simply dressed, gathered in the House of the Lord to attend Divine Services, taking care to use the free hours of the Week to cultivate their Garden. In their huts and all around them, order and cleanliness reigned. What remained to be*

*desired was that they entered into the Bonds of Marriage and made their First Communion. 5 of them had already made it..."*

In that letter we could touch with our fingers the Admirable Transformation brought about by Evangelization. In the Second Letter we could begin to glimpse the First Sparks of Light.

*"Catechism was held Every Sunday regularly, but with few people and a Climate of Revolt against the Master, who had requested the Intervention of the Police. Then I spoke strongly about the need to educate oneself, about the Terrible Account that one day would be given of so many means of Salvation... The following Sunday everything was back to normal. Now the Mothers came with their little children in their arms. I spend an hour Catechizing them in the Chapel. We ended with the Rosary, Prayers and Marian Hymns. At the beginning I found the Slaves of Bologna and Pelletier in Complete Ignorance of the End for which the Lord created them. I had taught them that End and the Truths of Salvation. They were delighted to hear of God, of his Power, of the Wonders He worked. When they learnt of the Punishment He reserved for the Wicked and the Reward He would grant to the Good, they applied themselves to doing Good in order to one day participate in the Happiness of the Saints.*

*"I saw no result of the Catechism except, according to the Manager's Report, more Regularity in Praying together Morning and Evening, More Punctuality in Work, and More Submission. There were no Maroons. A Slave had made his First Communion, others were preparing for it, as well as for Marriage.*

*"An obstacle to Catechism was the little time they had: they only had Saturday and Sunday to provide for their subsistence, they must work for their Masters from Sunrise to Sunset... There was still Resistance to the Law in favour of Religious Instruction for Slaves. However, the one who drew up that Law knew well that the Slave was also susceptible to improvement and that Religion Alone could restore him to Better Feelings and Pure Morals; from experience I could assure you that they could derive Immense Benefits*

*from the Benefit of Catechism: their future and the future of the Colonies depended on Catechism given regularly. They were Farmers: well, if they were instructed before the Emancipation from the need for work, Agriculture would not suffer afterwards Freedom."*



***Church of Basse-Terre***

We could observe in that story the Passion of the Apostle, the Fraternal Feelings towards his "Slave brothers", the Joy of Small Conquests, the Projects for the establishment of the Kingdom of God supported by very Practical Indications, Fruits of his Experiences and his

Fatigues.

Let us end that Chapter of Evangelization with an Anecdote which showed the Affection of the Population for Our Brother Hyacinthe: "The Virtues of the man of God attracted Universal Veneration. After having taught the Science of Salvation all day, he was returning home one Evening, mounted on a Fiery Horse which suddenly reared up, and, having got rid of its Rider, arrived in Town, Full Gallop. The Inhabitants immediately recognized Brother Hyacinthe's Horse. Fearing some Serious Accident for him, they ran anxiously to look for him. "Alas," they cried, "if our "Saint" was no more, who would protect us from the Hurricanes and Earthquakes that constantly threaten us?" Imagine their Joy when they met him, calmly reciting his Rosary. Their Groans were converted into Thanksgiving and, although it costed the modesty of the good Brother, they led him, or rather carried him in triumph, to the Community." (In Chronicle, n.6, 1876)

## **10- 1848: THE PROCLAMATION OF THE EMANCIPATION OF SLAVES IN THE FRENCH COLONIES**

*"It was about four years since Brother Hyacinthe, on his Own Initiative, had inaugurated his Apostolate among Slaves and Prisoners, when a Decree from the Government of the Second Republic, on March 4<sup>th</sup>, 1848, announced the Emancipation of Slaves in the near future in all the French Colonies."*



In Martinique that Announcement unleashed the Anger and desire for Revenge of the Slaves, which led to Bloody Revolts with Deaths. The Catechist Brothers, in particular Brother Arthur, succeeded with difficulty in calming the Spirits. In Guadeloupe everything took place peacefully. "Freedom was proclaimed. The Slaves did not cause any Disorder. They danced and it was agreed that the one who caused disorder would be taken to Prison. The Newly Freed went en masse to the Religious Ceremonies, holding a Bouquet of Flowers in their hands, shouting with Joy: "Long live the Republic, Long Live Religion!"

Why that difference between the two Colonies? In Martinique there were only two full-time Catechists and they had been working for only one year; in Guadeloupe there were 9 Catechists who had been working for 3 or 4 years. That was the realization of Brother Hyacinthe's "prophecy": he had immediately understood the importance of Religion for the moralization of people and Colonial Society. He had brought to the Interior of the Slave World the announcement of the Gospel which had turned the lives of Slaves and their Master's upside down, by bringing

Morals of Respect and Fraternity. The Former Slaves had acquired Inner Freedom and they were ready to receive External Civil and Social Freedom.

Now that everyone had become Free, Parents wanted to educate their children to ensure a better future for them. The Brothers' Schools filled up with Boys who had become Free. "Since Emancipation, Our Schools had been overflowing with children and soon I don't know what we would do if help didn't arrive," wrote the Director General of the Brothers in Guadeloupe, Brother Paulin. He had to make a Temporary Decision: all the Brother Catechists were to take their place in the Schools and be employed in Teaching. Shortly afterwards, the Governor approved that measure, which led to the Interruption of the Mission of the Brother Catechists. Brother Hyacinthe took his place again at the School in Basse-Terre. The students had increased from 250 to 500. The Classes were overcrowded and the Brothers had to help each other. He took the Class of the little ones, with 45 students who were increasing day by day. Always calm, letting himself be guided by the Will of God manifested by the Superiors, our Brother could bring the proclamation of the Faith to children and young people, not only through Catechism, but through all the teaching inspired by Faith: it was a long, profound Education, which placed the Gospel of Jesus within the Integral Education of the person and of Society. That was what the FH did – very well

At the same time, he took care of the Evening Religious Instructions. Emancipation had had the effect of increasing the attendance at the Sacraments. At the time of Slavery, the permission of the Masters was required to receive the First Communion, Confirmation and especially the Marriage and Baptism of children. Now that impediment no longer existed and the Mass of the Newly Freed approached the Churches. It was a very edifying spectacle to see hundreds of people attending the Evening Instructions, preparing themselves for the Sacraments by Meditative Retreats, Celebrating the Sacraments by Solemn Ceremonies. The New Christian Families and their Baptized Children gave a New Face to Society. "The New Citizens traveled two leagues in the Evening after having worked



all day under the Sun, to come to Our Houses to learn the Truths of Religion.” All that brought increased fatigue for Brother Hyacinthe, who devotedly carried out that task. After a hard day spent on the benches of a Large Class, he went to the Parish to give the Instructions that everyone listened attentively and with reverence.

Everyone appreciated the Apostolic Ardor of Brother Hyacinthe, the sentiments of his Faith, the Abundance of Evangelical Images, the Simplicity with which he explained the Great Truths of Christianity. The Priests also esteemed him greatly and counted on him for Retreats and Parish Missions. They had even come to the Agreement of the Clergy and



the Director General of the Brothers in the Colonies, Brother Ambroise, to propose to him to accede to the Priesthood. It was thought that he would have rendered great services either in the Parishes, or in the Communities and Schools of the Brothers. Brother Ambroise spoke about it to the Founder; the latter, even while recognizing the benefits of the proposal, wanted an Institute of Simple Religious, who remained in the humility of their Holy State. Brother Hyacinthe accepted with the Greatest Obedience and resumed with serenity working for the Glory of God and the Salvation of Souls in his Ordinary Occupations.

## **11- BRO HYACINTHE, A “LITTLE SAINT” IN BASSE-TERRE: TEACHER, DIRECTOR, ADVISOR AND FRIEND OF THE PEOPLE**

In 1851, Brother Hyacinthe was appointed Director of the School in Basse-Terre. He replaced Brother Hervé, who had returned to France for a period of rest and then been sent to Martinique. Our Brother was not used to Administrative Roles, but in a short time he made all fears disappear. “The Establishment in Basse-Terre was going very well. Brother Hyacinthe runs it wonderfully: The Brothers are well in Community and Brother Hyacinthe set an example in everything and everywhere. The Brothers are zealous and very regular; Charity reigned among them; they lent each other help and support in everything.” After the “Fiery Years” of the Evangelization of Slaves and the Great Masses, came the dark years of more ordinary activities: these were the years of Inner Formation, of the Fruitfulness of Humility. The Director had his work and his problems in the



Colonial Society which wanted to keep its privileges. It was necessary to fight against measures which kept Young Slaves away from Education: he opened the School free of charge to many poor children, he had established Branches in the Countryside, he defended the Brothers' Schools with the Authorities. Naturally he continued his Large Class and directed the Evening Instructions.

In 1854, the Administration decided to resume the Institution of the Catechist Brothers in the Homes, to continue the Work of Moralizing the

New Citizens and not to keep them away from the Workplace. Brother Hyacinthe felt the call to his Former Apostolate. But the Director did not allow him to take it back: he was too valuable at School. In addition, he had become the Secretary and Vicar of Brother Paulin, Superior of Guadeloupe. And yet, his health was beginning to give way to the enormous fatigue endured in the Colonies: he was tormented by Stubborn Dysentery. However, in his heart he regretted having had to abandon the Three Missions that had remained strongly in his heart: The Small Marian Congregation, Catechism to Slaves and visits to Prisoners. It was necessary to pass them, not without personal pain, into other hands, to take on other burdens “under which perhaps my weak strength would be obliged to succumb, but finally the would of God be done.”

He still had much to “do” - in addition to his Daily Teaching, the Management of the School and the Community, and the always crowded



*Bishop Augustin Forcade*

Evening Instructions: the Catechist Brothers took him on as Model and asked him for Advice; Sick Brothers willingly came to restore their Health and *rested* near his Community; the Priests of the Parishes of Carmel and St. Francis and even the New Bishop, Mgr. Forcade [future Bishop of Sainte-Bernadette in Nevers] continually sought his collaboration; people turned to him to receive his Advice, asked for his Prayers, open up to him the Miseries of their Hearts. Everyone considered him a True Saint, the Bishop and the Priests, the Administration and the people, the Old

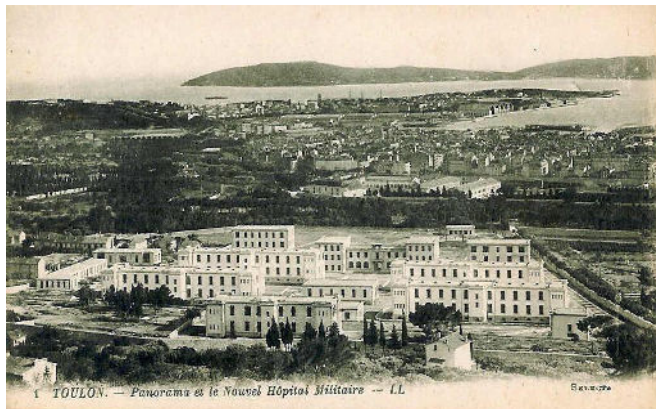
Masters and the Former Slaves. Recourse to his Prayer always gave Fruits of Peace, Conversion and sometimes Real Graces. Like that of a father who had asked him to pray to find his son, who had gotten lost in the Forests of the Island and who had been searched for in vain for three days. After

resorting to the Prayer of Brother Hyacinthe, the father found him and, full of Joy, exclaimed: I found my son thanks to the Prayers of the “Holy” Brother Hyacinthe!

Indeed, his Spiritual Portrait (Chronicle, n.6) showed Beautiful Virtues: Divine Charity: he was filled with zeal for the Salvation of Souls. Obedience: he felt himself in the hands of Providence and Superiors like clay. Humility: he desired lower and more painful occupations. Joy: he put Gaiety everywhere. Devotion to the Eucharist: he spent at the foot of the Altar all the time he could spare. Devotion to the Blessed Virgin: he had Boundless Trust in her, Filial Love, he placed his Apostolate under her Protection.

## **12- 1860: THE RETURN, A WAY OF THE CROSS AND RESURRECTION**

*“Never since his arrival in the Antilles, 20 years before, had he requested permission to go and spend a leave in his Native Country which would doubtless have restored his strength. Brother Paulin believed that it was not too late and that the Climate of France could still save him. Obedient until the end, Brother Hyacinthe embarked on June 14<sup>th</sup>, 1860, at*



**Toulon-Military-Hospital.**

*the end of the School year, for Toulon, France.”* The journey proved to be a Real Way of the Cross. He had been put on a Warship equipped with Medical Aid and destined for the Port of Toulon, where there was a Military

Hospital. Indeed, the crossing was difficult. As he set foot on land, he collapsed from exhaustion and fainted. He was taken to the Hospital, where he received the Last Sacraments. He was alive by a Miracle: “the

Doctor said that the Patient's Body was already Half Dissolved". In that circumstance, that Supplication to Divine Providence was reported: "O my God, may I have the consolation of returning to the Mother House, then, please, you would let your servant go in Peace; but, first of all, may your Holy Will be accomplished".

Contrary to all expectations, his Prayer was answered. But from Toulon to Ploërmel there were almost 1000 km. The Journey by carriage was long and painful: he fell into a swoon at every moment. He finally arrived at the Mother House of Ploërmel where he had the Sweet Joy of embracing the Venerable Father and some Brothers he had known. Two days after his arrival, like the "Third" Easter day, he fell Asleep Peacefully in the Kiss of the Lord. In him the Passover of the Risen Jesus had been fulfilled.



The Fame of Holiness of that Small and Humble Brother had never faded in the Institute. His example had inspired many Missionary Brothers who had brought the Good News to all parts of the World. In his humility, Brother Hyacinthe had somewhat erased his Memory. He had to leave the land of Guadeloupe before his death and, in the land where he spent 20

years, he was not able to leave his Mortal Remains. He did not stay much time in his Native Country, Plounéour-Ménez, Finistère, which he left very early. He was buried in the Brothers' Cemetery in Ploërmel, but, because of the Events of Secularization, his Remains were scattered. Nevertheless, Brother Hyacinthe left an Unforgettable Testimony of “Holiness” in the Institute, in the Memory of the Poor and especially in the Heart of God. It was to be hoped that one day his Heroic Virtues and Apostolate would be Recognized, even Officially, by the Church.