Notre-Dame on the Move: Catholic Processions and Politics in Post-Liberation France

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On the evening of 11 March 1946, a crowd of an estimated three thousand Catholics gathered at the church of Notre-Dame de Nazareth in Vitry-sur-Seine to accompany a statue of Notre-Dame de Boulogne to the neighboring Parisian suburb of Thiais. The crowd was forbidden to carry the statue in procession as it had been done elsewhere in France for three years, and instead the statue was loaded on a police truck to be taken to the next parish. As cries of "Long live liberty" rang out among the crowd, a group of men, many of them seminary students, besieged the truck to keep it from moving. While the crowd drowned out the police whistles with singing, the men removed Notre-Dame de Boulogne from the truck and a group of repatriated prisoners of war carried the statue, with the crowd forming a column behind them. A former deportee who had spent a year and a half in Dachau led the Catholics, clothed in his camp uniform. Although the police set up two roadblocks to impede the procession, the seminary students and other crowd members succeeded in overcoming them, and their delirious cries of joy gave way to a pious, reverential, and emotional atmosphere. By the end of the evening, ten people had been arrested and several policemen injured.¹

¹ This scene is reconstructed from several accounts: "Au nom de la liberté de pensée! Violents incidents à Thiais," L’Époque, 14 March 1946; Centre national des archives de l’Église de France (hereafter CNAEF) 7IR2, Dossier 5, letter written from the seminary at Chevilly dated 12 March 1946, no author; CNAEF 7IR2, Dossier 5, "28 Cachan – Chapelle Saint-Jean."
While this vignette of the Grand Retour de Notre-Dame de Boulogne on the outskirts of Paris hardly represents a typical visit of the statue to a parish, it was also not wholly exceptional. It was, in fact, the culmination of growing tension and conflicts over the movement in the Parisian suburbs. What happened between Catholics and the police at Vitry and Thiais illustrates the desire of French Catholics to claim their intrinsic Republican right to liberty, while seeming to challenge the secular nature of the Republic. In the years following the Liberation, the prominent processions of the Grand Retour served as a site for both Catholics and non-Catholics alike to assert political legitimacy in the new republic. While scholars have paid much attention to the association of Catholicism with collaboration, the Grand Retour demonstrates that Catholics were emboldened after the Liberation to seek their rights as French citizens in the new republic because of Catholic participation in the Resistance.\(^2\) The Grand Retour had no specific political aim in itself, but it often inflamed existing local controversies in the tense postwar atmosphere. It became a medium for Catholics, communists, socialists, and others to work out both the recent Vichy past and the future of France as it emerged from that dark period.

For previously politically marginalized groups such as Catholics and communists, the new republic offered a chance for political and social prominence. Despite the obvious differences between the two, they both based their legitimacy in their participation in the Resistance. Ninety-six percent of voters rejected a restoration of the Third Republic when it was

proposed by referendum in October 1945. Most French men and women agreed, therefore, that a new government and constitution were needed, but how much to retain from the Third Republic was a point of great contention. The question of laïcité, the French separation of church and state, and subsidizing religious schools became a critical issue soon after the Liberation. Catholic schools had been granted government allocations under Vichy, and Catholics risked seeing their schools shut down if the allocations were revoked. Socialists and communists formed a united front in defense of laïcité, falling back onto their prewar positions. For these opponents of the allocations, overturning Vichy policies was a necessary component of the Liberation purges. As early as February 1945, the Commissioner of the Republic for Angers warned that "the Government was letting the religious wars rekindle" by not settling the Catholic school question. While the Catholic Church had been greatly compromised by its close ties to Vichy, Catholics had also gained new legitimacy from the strong Catholic presence in Resistance movements. After the war and the collapse of the traditional right, a new, prominent Catholic political party emerged—the Mouvement républicain populaire (or MRP)—that made religious schooling one of its top concerns. Catholics hoped to turn the page on Vichy, but they

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also feared a complete return to the policies of the Third Republic. They put their hopes in the establishment of the Fourth Republic to guarantee their religious liberties.

The Grand Retour de Notre-Dame de Boulogne serves as an interesting lens to view the evolution of political tensions during this period both because of the enormous scope of the movement and because it emerged relatively unscathed from the Occupation period and, in fact, gained momentum after the Liberation. From 1943 to 1948, four identical statues of Notre-Dame de Boulogne visited almost every diocese in France, traveling from parish to parish with a team of missionaries over four separate routes. Bearing a message of penitence and consecration to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, the missionaries and organizers of the Grand Retour sought a return of France and the French people to God and the Catholic Church. The theme of return spoke to a French people who were seeking the return of a peace that would bring back their absent POWs, workers in Germany, refugees, and deportees. The experiences of the German occupation and the liberation shaped how people responded to the movement, and even well after the end of the war the Grand Retour's message remained relevant.

The hallmark of the movement was its processions between and through villages, towns, and cities. While processions were an integral part of traditional Catholic piety, the Grand Retour went beyond the normal bounds of the parish procession. The Grand Retour was in constant movement, stopping at a parish for sometimes no more than a few hours, other times for weeks or months. Catholics decorated the path of Notre-Dame de

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6 While there have been several articles that look at the Grand Retour as a regional or local event, Louis Pérouas has been the only historian to study the Grand Retour as a whole. See his "Le Grand Retour de Notre-Dame de Boulogne à travers la France (1943–1948): Essai de reconstitution," *Annales de Bretagne et des pays de l'Ouest* (1983): 171-83 and "Le Grand Retour de Notre-Dame de Boulogne à travers la France (1943–1948): Essai d'interprétation," *Archives des sciences sociales des religions* 56, no. 1 (1983): 37-57. Pérouas did not have access to any of the Grand Retour's archives when he wrote the articles, however.

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Boulogne with garlands, greenery, paper flowers, and triumphal arches. They often included the French flag or the Resistance Croix de Lorraine in the decorations, displaying their patriotism and intertwining Catholicism and Frenchness, and they constructed banners committing the local population and its territory to the Virgin. Municipal figures frequently participated in the festivities, and it was common for a mayor wearing his tricolor sash to carry the crucifix of the Grand Retour as he led the cortege. All local Catholic groups participated, including members of religious congregations. Hundreds or sometimes thousands joined in these processions, and devotees often walked barefoot for kilometers over tough terrain or held their arms outstretched in a form of a cross. All along the route, the crowd sang hymns and recited a seemingly unending chain of rosaries.

The very public nature of the Grand Retour contributed both to its enormous popularity and to its rejection by many critics within and outside of the Church. To some, Catholics claiming public space for processions and decorations seemed to be a threat to laïcité, particularly when municipal authorities overtly sanctioned the Grand Retour by joining in the processions, speaking at the ceremonies, or lending municipal decorations. Sometimes the mayor even presented the town's keys to Notre-Dame, at once honoring the visitor and transmitting symbolic ownership. Processions of barefoot penitents appeared to many to be a step backwards from the secular policies established by the Third Republic, which had used science and reason to triumph over fanaticism. Comparisons with Lourdes and reports of miracles attributed to Notre-Dame de Boulogne only heightened skepticism towards the movement, and, in many places, the Grand Retour gave new birth to freethinker societies who aimed to defend the secular republic.

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Soon after the Allied landings in June 1944 the movement attracted negative attention, mostly in the context of the purges of collaborators. Support for the Vichy regime by many bishops and other members of the clergy fueled attacks on the Grand Retour as Catholics were accused of having been a disloyal fifth column. Initially, communists abstained from criticizing the movement in the spirit of Maurice Thorez's outstretched hand to Catholics. They hoped preserving the unity of the Resistance would be an avenue for achieving their political aspirations. In the Côtes du Nord, the local communist party denied any involvement in attacks on the Grand Retour, attributing the acts of vandalism that had occurred to those who sought to undermine their legitimacy as the communist foothold in the government strengthened. By 1946, however, the communists had formed a tenuous alliance with socialists against the MRP, which had become the strongest political party in France, and they no longer refrained from denouncing Catholics. Communists often proved to be the most virulent critics of the Grand Retour. It was also at this time that the criticism of and attacks on the movement became more explicitly tied to the political debates over French secularism.

Although the missionaries of the Grand Retour promoted reconciliation, the movement often intensified divisions among the local population. In many areas, the Grand Retour provoked heated exchanges in the press, especially at times of elections. Communists, socialists, freethinker societies, and former Resistance groups held their own counter-demonstrations in some places to protest the presence of the Grand Retour.

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10 In the election of June 1946, the MRP earned 28.2 percent of the votes and had 168 deputies in the National Assembly. Béthouart, "Entry of Catholics into the Republic," 85.
Because Catholic processions had been among the only public demonstrations permitted during the Occupation, many people interpreted the Grand Retour as a resurrection of Vichy and as an affront to those who had fought in the Resistance. It exacerbated dissatisfaction with the incomplete purge of collaborators and brought lingering questions of legitimacy to the forefront of local political debate. In some regions, forms of protests were destructive or even violent. In 1947 in the Lot-et-Garonne the streets were sown with glass and nails in a few locations where the barefoot pilgrims would pass. In Chambéry, bombs exploded in two chapels—one which had just received the Grand Retour, and the other which was due to receive it the next day.

While many municipal figures took part in the demonstrations, mayors also prohibited the processions in the name of public order and in defense of the secular nature of the Republic. Catholics interpreted such obstructions as pure sectarianism, which they believed went against the spirit of unity that was much needed in postwar France. Such was the case in the department of the Oise where communists feared that the Grand Retour was an attempt to influence the upcoming elections and urged the readers of their newspaper not to listen to nonsense and instead vote for the candidates that would best defend their well-being. The Freethinkers of Beauvais

11 The initial retributive violence that accompanied the Liberation gradually gave way after official committees were instituted at the local, departmental, and national levels to deal with the issue of collaboration. However, isolated attacks against individuals continued for years after the war. On the purges, see Fabrice Virgili, *La France “virile”: Des femmes tondues à la Libération* (Paris: Payot, 2000); Luc Capdevila, *Les Bretons au lendemain de l’Occupation: Imaginaire et comportement d’une sortie de guerre 1944–1945* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 1999).

12 "La Chapelle-aux-Pots: Maneuvres," *Le Travailleur de l’Oise*, 16–22 November 1946. While the Grand Retour did not have explicit political goals, correspondence between the organizers revealed their disappointment that the success of the movement had little influence on the outcome of local elections. The model of the Grand Retour was adapted in Italy for the explicit political purpose of getting the Christian Democrats elected. See Robert Ventresca,
organized a counter-demonstration "in defense of the Republic" to coincide with the Grand Retour's visit. They sought to act against such "masquerades that dishonored their era" and to defend Marianne against the Virgin Mary. For these freethinkers, whose mission was to protect the separation of church and state while policing Catholics, the Grand Retour and Catholicism itself was a direct threat to the principles of the French Revolution. They made their view of Catholicism's opposition to Republicanism clear by situating Marianne, the ultimate symbol of the Republic and the Revolution, against Notre-Dame.

When news of the planned counter-demonstration reached the mayor, the municipal council decided to prohibit all scheduled demonstrations, including those of the Grand Retour, in the interest of preserving public order. Catholics took the decision personally, and the Grand Retour processions continued despite the interdiction and a barricade was erected by those whom the Oise Républicaine journal assumed to be sympathizers of the freethinkers. While most missionaries tried to honor bans on processions, Catholics did not always obey them, and neither did some particularly zealous priests. Parish priests sometimes defied municipal decrees out of animosity that went back to the years of the Popular Front and even earlier.

In the Parisian suburbs, the Grand Retour took on a particularly combative nature. Although the prefect of police had forbidden the Grand Retour processions in the streets of Paris since October 1945, it was only in the early spring of 1946 in the "red suburbs" that Catholics began to fight for their right to have

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From Fascism to Democracy: Culture and Politics in the Italian Election of 1948 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).

13 “Miracles ou Manifestation idolatrique,” Le Travailleur de l'Oise, 16–22 November 1946. The call to action was also published in the Patriote de l'Oise, 13 November 1946.

14 “En dépit d'un inqualifiable arrêté muninicipal [sic], interdisant la manifestation, plus de 5.000 ont accueilli et se sont prosternées aux pieds de N.-D. de Boulogne, lors de son passage à travers les champs de ruine Beauvaisiens,” Oise Républicaine, 12 November 1946.
the processions. On 28 February Catholics began to cry out "Liberty! Liberty!" as police attempted to load the statue of Notre-Dame onto a police truck to take it to the next parish. *Le Figaro* reported that a week later, on 8 March, a hundred policemen had to stand guard against a mass of Catholics attempting to form a cortege at Ivry-sur-Seine.\(^{15}\) As in Cachan, the resistance of the police provoked the crowd to cry out "Liberty!" A Catholic source reported a different version of events at Ivry in which four thousand Catholics faced a counter-demonstration of sixty people who were singing the "International."\(^{16}\) The Catholic crowd let them be while they sang their own "Ave Maria of Lourdes." The next day, two hundred counter-demonstrators gathered, again singing the "International." They then followed the Catholics for a kilometer in an attempt to intimidate the pilgrims and to keep them from praying. The communist mayor of Ivry claimed that the counter-demonstrators were singing the "Marseillaise" and the "Chant du départ," which had different political connotations than the "International."\(^{17}\) The tension in the suburbs only escalated—days later police and Catholics faced off in the more violent confrontation at Vitry and Thiais.

These confrontations outside of Paris between police, counter-demonstrators, and Catholics bear a striking similarity to the violent encounters during the Corpus Christi processions in 1903, which Michel Lagrée has studied.\(^{18}\) Lagrée argues that legislation separating church and state and a political climate that was moving to the left in the wake of the Dreyfus Affair

\(^{15}\) "Incidents sur le passage de la Vierge de Boulogne," *Le Figaro*, 10–11 March 1946.

\(^{16}\) CNAEF 7IR2, Dossier 5, "Cachan—Chapelle Saint-Jean."

\(^{17}\) "Question de MM. Georges Marrane et Frérot à M. le Préfet de police sur les mesures qu'il compte prendre pour obtenir de ses subordonnés l'application de ses instructions interdisant sur la voie publique les cérémonies religieuses de nature à troubler l'ordre publique," *Bulletin municipal officiel de la Ville de Paris: Débats des assemblées de la Ville de Paris et du Département de la Seine* 66, no. 5 (30 March 1946): 111.

introduced a new semantic charge to processions. Catholic processions were no longer just about transmitting religion, but had an added dimension of transmitting political opinion. As with the Grand Retour in the Parisian suburbs, Catholics participating in the Corpus Christi in 1903 were confronted in several places by socialists or youths singing the "International"; Catholics also employed the cry of "Liberty" to lay claim to their Republican rights. The Grand Retour never encountered the level of violence that had occurred in many places in 1903 despite the similarly volatile political climate. The crucial difference was that while Catholics were still battling for their religious rights, they were now trying to work within the framework of the Republic. Catholics in 1946 were not contesting an established leftist government as their predecessors had in 1903; rather, they were emboldened by a strong representative party and the promise of the new constitution that was being drafted.

The German occupation also added a new element to the fight over laïcité. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the debates positioned Catholics as enemies of the French Revolution, but after the Liberation, Catholics could use their participation in the Resistance to defend their rights as citizens.19 Because Catholics had defended Republican values in the Resistance, they felt they deserved a share in those liberties they had fought to preserve. Jean Gerard, a former prisoner of war, wrote to the journal *L’Epoque* decrying the police suppression at Ivry, Vitry, and Thiais. He argued that "all conscious and sincere men should regret such infringements on the liberty that every truly democratic Republic owes all of its citizens."20 By framing his critique in terms of citizenship and Republican rights, Gerard implied that Catholics were not second-class citizens and should not be treated as such. His


designation as a POW showed his sacrifices for the nation, and he complained that a Franciscan brother who had been imprisoned at Belsen and a missionary who had been in Dachau had been among those arrested after the incidents at Thiais. Gerard sought to remind people that communists were not the only martyrs who sacrificed their lives for the Republic and that Catholics also deserved their rights respected because of their own sacrifices for the nation.

Invoking the Resistance was a double-edged sword for Catholics because the Church's collaboration during the Vichy period could also justify suppression of their rights and their exclusion from politics. When the Parisian municipal assembly discussed the recent problems in the suburbs, the delegates who defended the Grand Retour brought up the Catholic resistance and even attempted to frame the missionary movement as part of the Resistance, citing an instance where the Germans had dispersed a crowd of pilgrims at Chalon-sur-Saône by pointing machine guns at them. In turn, the mayor of Ivry-sur-Seine, Georges Marrane, and his allies suggested that the general German toleration of the Grand Retour during the Occupation was proof that it was tainted by collaboration. One delegate could not help commenting that the Germans also approved subsidizing Catholic schools.

Marrane went so far as to accuse the organizers of the Grand Retour in the suburbs of being inspired by the same aim of collaboration—to provoke disunity among the French people. He insisted that the object of the processions could be nothing less than pure provocation in an area where three-quarters of the population had no confessional affiliation. Marrane argued that the public processions of the Grand Retour threatened the religious peace and would resurrect a new wave of anticlericalism. The defenders of the Grand Retour, however,

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21 “Question de MM. Georges Marrane et Frérot à M. le Préfet de police,” 114.
22 Ibid., 120.
23 Ibid., 113.
placed the blame for the evolution of events on police presence and municipal repression. Had Catholics been able to freely exercise their rights to demonstrate in public, such confrontations would not have occurred.

The Grand Retour tested the Fourth Republic even before it was instituted by raising the question of who would be included as full citizens and to what extent the rights of Catholics, communists, and all French men and women would be honored. Catholics sought a republic free from sectarianism, but they often proved to be as intolerant and unwilling to compromise as those who opposed them. Having tasted greater freedom of religion under Vichy, many Catholics did not want to give those gains up even as they desired France's return to a republican form of government. The Grand Retour shows that the postwar years of the long Liberation were not just about exorcising Vichy, but also about trying to avoid repeating the failures and exclusions of the Third Republic in the Fourth Republic.  

Unfortunately, it was all too easy for Catholics, socialists, and communists to fall back to prewar positions. By resuming the battles of the Third Republic they dealt with neither its legacy nor the French experience under Vichy. Catholics challenged secularism as a core component of the French Republic but could not offer a viable alternative. The myth of the Resistance could only go so far in serving as a foundation for the Fourth Republic.

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24 This concept of a "long Liberation" that spans 1944 to 1947 forms the basis of Andrew Knapp, ed., The Uncertain Foundation: France at the Liberation, 1944–47 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).