

A Bit of Viatorian History

The Berceau and the Grande Maison in Vourles

I spent part of my sabbatical year with the Viatorians in Vourles, France where I learned a very interesting story about the history of the *Berceau* and the *Grande Maison*. In 1903 the government of France nationalized all of the institutions and property owned by religious teaching communities. These two institutions, along with all the other Viatorian schools and religious houses in the three provinces of Vourles, Rodez and Ternes, were forcibly taken from the congregation and the religious were



forced from their homes. **Br. Jean-Pierre Bruyère, CSV**, who had been in the community at that time, chose to stay in France while the rest of the members of the community went to Belgium, Spain and Canada. After teaching for awhile, he left the community and married a woman of some means. After the death of his wife, he petitioned to reenter the congregation. With the inheritance he received from his wife and income he earned, he bought back the Berceau and the Grande Maison.

The Berceau of the Viatorian Community

Upon returning to Arlington Heights after my time in France, I paid a visit to the archives. After relating the story to our archivist, **Associate Joan Sweeney**, I began researching the *Annales* of the congregation, putting to good use the French I learned during my sabbatical. In time, I was able to learn more about this bit of Viatorian history.

The following excerpt from 1903 *Annuaire* proved most helpful.



The Grande Maison which today houses College Louis Querbes

“The years 1901 and 1902 had piled on our heads clouds full of threats; the year 1903 has seen the storm strike with fury, transforming into ruins the works that had cost us three quarters of a century of efforts, of patience, of labors and of privations. At this hour still, the tempest does not cease to rage and to destroy, without one being able to perceive where it will stop its destruction. Everywhere, in France, our schools are violently closed, our teachers thrown in the street, our students left abandoned, our holy images torn from the walls and trampled under foot, our pious sanctuaries profaned or put under seal. There you have it, some of the first fruits of the Law of July 1, 1901.” (Annuaire 1903, pp. 9-10)

Further research of a work by **Brother Roger Bou, CSV**, entitled, *La Province-Mère Vourles 1859-1991* provided much help. A quick scan of the index led me to page 106 and a section on the repurchase of the Grande Maison in 1935. I was fascinated to learn that Br. Bruyère (1863-1954) was indeed the brother who provided the means to repurchase the Viatorian religious house and school in Vourles. He lived twenty-five years as a religious in vows, eighteen years as a married man, and then another twenty-eight years as a religious. Having stayed behind in France as a teacher in 1903, he continued to direct a school. In 1907 he asked to be dispensed of his vows and married a wealthy English woman, Mary, from a family whom he tutored. After just six years of marriage, Mary became ill with a disfiguring disease. Jean-Pierre nursed her for twelve years until her death. Eight days after her death, he contacted his old classmate in the novitiate, Fr. Bousquet, the Provincial of Vourles, seeking permission to re-enter the congregation. He was accepted and completed his second novitiate in Westmalle, Belgium in 1926-1927.



Br. Bruyère had made a small fortune in commerce during his time away from the Viatorians. Upon his return, he donated it to the congregation. Since the law at the time did not recognize the legal status of the congregation, the money stayed in his name. The General Chapter of 1928 expressed the desire of repurchasing the *Berceau* and the *Grande Maison* when the price became favorable. In 1922, the owners had requested 225,000 francs for the *Grande Maison*, a price well beyond the means of the province at the time. It was being used as a brush factory; however, the business went bankrupt in the 1930's. In 1935, the property was given to the major creditor, Mr. Lardon, who approached the congregation, *“The Tribunal has given me your house in judgment as principal creditor, but as a good Christian I do not want to gain a property stolen from religious, and I come to offer you to buy it from me.”* (Annuaire 1954, p.97) Mr. Lardon offered it to Provincial Fr. Brousquet for a very favorable price of 55,000 francs. Br. Bruyère offered to purchase the property for the congregation. It was registered as a property of the Clerics of St. Viator of Canada. The building remained empty and watched by the brothers who taught at the Vourles School. During the Second World War, it was used as a school for police under the Vichy regime, and for a while, it housed German troops. In 1944, the *Berceau* became available. Br. Bruyère bought it for 80,000 francs. In 1947, the Juniorate was moved to the *Grande Maison* in Vourles and Br. Bruyère moved in to live out the rest of his years. He died in 1954 at 91 years of age.

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