

Eugene Louis Bautain

Louise Humann was 30 years old when Eugene Louis Bautain was born in Paris on February 17, 1796. He was the only son of a well-to-do dance teacher and of Marie Catherine Françoise Alleton. He had one sister, Clotilde. Bautain was a sensitive and impressionable child and made his First Confession and First Holy Communion with great fervour.

He was placed in a boarding school at an early age and when the time came for more advanced studies he changed to Lycee Charlemagne where his search for Truth began. When he was 17, he enrolled at the prestigious Ecole Normal. Louis was handsome, ambitious, sociable and a high achiever.

At that time Napoleon was in power in France and he understood little of Christianity. The prevailing philosophy was rationalism which made little reference to God as the meaning of life. This left Bautain with a feeling of discontent and confusion. In Ignatian spirituality this would be called desolation.

At the age of 20, Bautain attained a doctorate in both literature and philosophy and was appointed to teach philosophy at the College Royal in Strasbourg. He was now indifferent to all positive religion, but was attracted to German philosophers, and consequently visited Germany in the summer of 1818, where he met Hegel and Schelling. Overwhelmed by their thought and theories, he left Germany with new ideas.

In the new academic year he no longer taught of reason as absolute, he now had faith in a personal God. He tried to present an explanation of God, of the human person and of the universe in a rational and coherent way. But he was swimming against the tide and in March 1819 he collapsed at the podium while delivering a lecture. He requested a leave of absence from the university and merited a suspension of his course. He returned to Paris feeling powerless, useless and desolate. It was this feeling of utter powerlessness that opened him up to God's action in his life.

To improve his health he decided to avail of the healing waters of Baden-Baden in Germany and there he met Louise Humann, the woman who would influence him for the remainder of his life. He looked on her as an angel sent to him. She was well versed in German philosophy and so with this as common ground their conversations began. She led him along and they began to discuss the Gospels. They agreed to meet back in Strasbourg after the holiday was over.

On returning from Baden-Baden, Louise led Bautain on an inner journey which was to have far reaching repercussions. She brought him to live at her newly acquired home, Number 7 Rue de la Toussaint. Under her spiritual guidance he regained his confidence. Faith was becoming for him an affair of the heart.

He started to give private lessons in Philosophy. His students, mostly Jewish, were later to form the nucleus of the Fathers of St Louis. Among them were Théodore Ratisbonne, Jules and Nestor Level, Isodore Goshler, Henri de Bonnechose, Leon de Regny, Adrien de Reinach,

Jacques Mertian and Louise's nephew, Adolphe Carl. They lived as a community and Louise was the heart of this group. They converted to Catholicism, received the sacraments and later studied for the priesthood.

Bautain discerned that his calling was to teach the Truth, and on August 16, 1828, together with Adolphe Carl, he entered the House of Ecclesiastical Studies in Molsheim. Just four months later Bautain was ordained. The other members of Bautain's group were also ordained in due course. They became known as The St Louis Fathers because they ministered at the Church of St Louis.

The Bishop gave them charge of the Minor Seminary in Strasbourg in 1830. But jealousy arose, partly because they taught theology through French instead of Latin and also because they were all young and well educated and believed the Church should be part of the new world. After four years they were dismissed from their positions in the Minor Seminary. Bautain was struggling with old accusations about his stance on the question of Faith versus Reason, and the Fathers were forbidden to preach, hear confessions or give spiritual direction. They were allowed to celebrate the Eucharist.

Within three weeks they set up a boarding school for boys and worked there until 1842 when a new bishop reinstated them in the Seminary. However, following an invitation to take possession of the famous College de Juilly, near Paris, they left Strasbourg for good.

Bautain started to organise the Society into a congregation. Some women who had worked with the group in Strasbourg transferred to Paris and later to Juilly. They were engaged in education and works of mercy and in turn became the nucleus of the Dames de St Louis. They made vows in 1842.

Gradually it became obvious that the Fathers branch was not going to survive. In 1849, Bautain was appointed Vicar General and Promotor of the diocese of Paris. In 1853, he was offered a post as Professor of Moral Theology at the Sorbonne. He still made fortnightly visits to direct the Sisters at Juilly. In 1858, he responded to the call from the Bishop of Clogher for sisters for the Irish mission and later accepted, not without pain, the break of Monaghan with Juilly.

Louis Bautain died on October 15, 1867, in Viroflay near Paris, and was laid to rest in Juilly. His vision of a world healed, unified and transformed finds a home in *Sint Unum*.