

## **OUR LADY OF THE WILLOW TREE (NOTRE-DAME-DE-L'OSIER) VINAY, FRANCE 1649**

The events relating to the origin of the shrines at Plantées seem beyond belief were it not for the testimony of witnesses, the formal inquiry conducted by the bishop, and the documentation that may still be seen in the Provincial Archives of Grenoble. Finally, the events were given Church approval when, on two occasions, Pope Pius IX ordered the solemn crowning of the statue that had been given the title of Our Lady of the Willow Tree (Notre-Dame-de-l'Osier). The drama of this event involves a farmer of the area, Pierre Port-Combet, who had abandoned the Catholic Faith for the heresy known as Calvinism. While still a Catholic, he had married a devout woman named Jeanne, but after he abandoned the Faith he refused to allow her to raise their six children in the Catholic Faith and instead drew them into heresy.

The village of Plantées at the time was Catholic. According to Church directives all work was to be suspended on Sundays and Church feasts so that all could spend the day in prayer and reflection. It was Pierre's delight to disobey this ruling of the Faith and he continued to work, especially on feast days dedicated to the Blessed Mother.

### **THE MIRACULOUS EVENT**

The miraculous event took place on the Feast of the Annunciation March 25, 1649, when Pierre decided to demonstrate his disdain for the feast by performing work where all would see him. He chose to stand beside a road where the villagers passed on their way to Holy Mass. Pierre drew his knife and pretended to be working by pruning a willow tree that grew beside the road. He stabbed the trunk and drew back in horror. The tree bled, and so much so that it splashed on Pierre's arms and hands. Thinking he was injured, he examined himself but no wound could be found. After a moment of



bewilderment he stabbed the tree once more and again the tree bled.

At this moment, his wife was passing by on her way to church and saw blood covering her husband's arms. She hurried to help him, but she too could find no injury. Pierre excitedly related what had happened, and to calm him, she took the knife and struck the tree. Nothing happened. More dismayed than before, Pierre took the knife, struck the tree once again and, as before, the tree bled.

A neighbor passing by, Louis Caillet, was told what happened and tried to produce the same effect, but without success, no matter how many times he tried. All the

neighbors who had gathered around the tree agreed that the miracle only took place at the hand of the heretic and that the prodigy was a stern warning for Pierre to convert and observe the laws of the Church.

After the miraculous event at the willow tree, the villagers frequently visited it with great devotion and cut away some of the bark as precious relics.

When Church authorities heard of the case and the prodigy of the blood from the willow, a tribunal of churchmen gathered for a formal inquiry as ordered by the bishop. The testimony of Pierre was taken, as well as that of witnesses. The decision rendered was that Pierre had received a severe warning from Heaven.

Pierre took the decision to heart and was seen occasionally at the willow tree in profound prayer. The Calvinists disapproved of this and even threatened him with bodily harm. For this reason, Pierre's conversion was stalled for seven years, until Our Lady intervened.

### **OUR LADY INTERVENES TO HASTEN PIERRE'S CONVERSION**

On the Feast of the Annunciation, March of the year 1656, in order to appease the Calvinists, he was working in his field when he looked in the distance toward an area known as the Thornhill and saw a Lady clothed in white, wearing a blue mantle. Over her head was a black veil that partially hid her face. As the Lady advanced toward him, Pierre thought she was lost and was coming to him for directions. Displaying amazing speed, the Lady was suddenly standing next to him.

The Lady, in a sweet voice, greeted Pierre: “

A Dieu-sois-tu, mon ami!” [“God be with you, my friend!”].

Pierre hesitated on hearing the sweet sound of the voice and the beauty of the woman. Again the Lady spoke: “What is being said about this devotion? Do many people come?” Pierre nervously answered, “Yes, many people come.”

Appearing satisfied with Pierre’s reply, the Lady continued, “Where does that heretic live who cut the willow tree? Does he not want to be converted?”

Embarrassed by her question, Pierre could only mumble a response. After a moment, the Lady asked: “Do you think I do not know that you are the heretic?” The Lady then gave Pierre this warning: Realize that your end is at hand. If you do not return to the True Faith you will be cast into Hell. But if you change your beliefs, I shall protect you before God. Tell people to pray to advantage, not to neglect the source of graces which God in His mercy has made available to them.

After this, the Lady began moving away, but Pierre, overwhelmed with remorse, ran after her to voice his apology and his willingness to convert. He then saw the Lady suspended several feet in the air and slowly fading from sight. Realizing that he had been granted a vision of the Blessed Virgin, he fell to his knees, and while sobbing uncontrollably, he pledged a complete reform.

## **PIERRE’S CONVERSION**

One month later, on the eve of the Assumption, Pierre contracted a serious illness. A priest of Vinay heard his Confession and welcomed him back into the Church. Pierre completed his conversion by receiving the Holy Eucharist the next day on the Feast of the Assumption. Pierre’s conversion influenced many to return to the True Faith, including his son and five daughters, as well as many Protestants and Calvinists. Our Lady’s words: “Realize that your end is at hand ...” were confirmed weeks later when Pierre died. In accordance with his final wish, he was buried at the bottom of the willow tree.

The Propagation of the Faith in Grenoble gave its approval for the purchase of the field of the apparition and a chapel dedicated to Our Lady of Good Meeting was soon built. This was replaced by a larger church which was dedicated to Our Lady of the Willow Tree.

During the French Revolution, terrorists from Grenoble unfortunately pillaged and desecrated the sanctuary and hacked to pieces a statue of the Lady that was sculptured according to Pierre’s description. Thankfully, a valiant woman hid the pieces until peace

was restored. A portion of the willow tree was also saved and was stored in a decorative box in the oratory.

Devotion to Our Lady of the Willow Tree was revived following the revolution by the Oblates of Mary Immaculate and in 1856, the second centenary of the apparition, Pope Pius IX decreed a solemn jubilee and a papal crowning of the restored statue on September 8, the birthday of the Immaculate Mary. Another crowning was ordered by the same pontiff in 1873.

The meeting between Our Lady and Pierre is depicted on a large painting in the chapel of Our Lady of Good Meeting. In addition, between the church and the Thornhill, where Our Lady left him, a specially marked path approximately four hundred yards long indicates the route taken by Pierre when he ran after the apparition.

The church built where the willow once grew was raised to the dignity of a minor basilica by Pope Pius XI on March 17, 1924. The once-mutilated statue of Our Lady is found here, and beneath her altar is the decorative box containing the piece of the willow tree, which is located near the same place where it formerly grew. Pierre's tomb is at the foot of this altar.

Many favors and cures have been attributed to prayers before the altar of Our Lady. In fact, more than one hundred cures are said to be undoubtedly genuine since they had been witnessed and sworn to by reliable people who testified under oath and affixed their names to written documents. Our Lady is especially honored at Plantées on feast days of Our Lady of the Willow, especially on March 25, in observance of the anniversary of the apparition, and on September 8, the birthday of the Blessed Virgin.