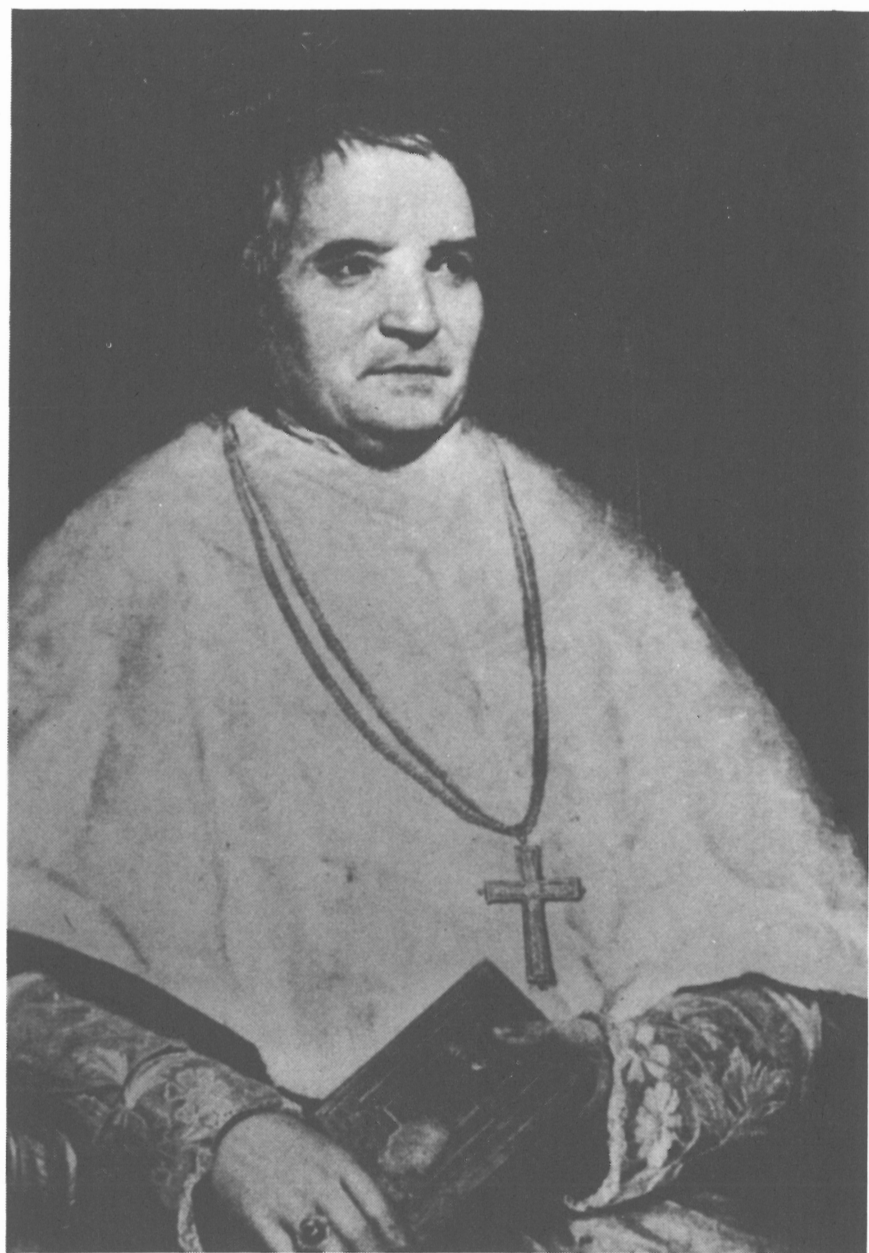


**JOHN DUBOIS:
FOUNDING FATHER**



JOHN DUBOIS: FOUNDING FATHER

By
RICHARD SHAW

*The Life and Times of the Founder of Mount St. Mary's College,
Emmitsburg; Superior of the Sisters of Charity; and Third Bishop
of the Diocese of New York*

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To
my spiritual father
Bishop Edward J. Maginn, D.D.
who was John Dubois to my generation,
and to my brother
Father Dominic Ingemie
who is being John Dubois to the generation following ours.

Preface

“He did everything for us. Everything,” said old Sister Martha Daddisman when interviewed by younger Sisters of Charity in 1877, “That’s why I’m mad with you. You make so much fuss over Bishop Bruté and you never say anything about Father Dubois and he did a great deal more. How I did cry when he went away to be Bishop and Father Hickey told me he wished I’d cry as much for my sins.”¹

The month after John Dubois’ death in December 1842, *The Catholic Expositor and Literary Magazine* wrote: “The details of the life of this lamented prelate would fill a volume and no doubt will, in due time, be collected and preserved for posterity.”²

They never were. Though John Dubois appears in numerous biographies of contemporaries whose lives he affected—Elizabeth Seton, John Hughes, John Nepomucene Neumann, Simon Bruté, John Carroll, and a number of others—no biography was ever written about him. In time even the whereabouts of his grave was lost. Only in the late 1970s were his remains rediscovered—under the pavement in front of old St. Patrick’s on Mott Street in New York City.

John Dubois had played a role in the life of Saint Elizabeth Seton which strongly paralleled the role played by Saint Vincent de Paul in the life of Saint Louise de Marillac. Then, at the age of sixty-two he had left Mount

St. Mary's College and Seminary, which he had established, and the motherhouse of Elizabeth Seton's Sisters of Charity of which he was both builder and Superior, to become bishop of a vast territory inhabited by an evergrowing number of Catholic immigrants—the majority of them Irish.

He moved from holding a position in which he had been loved and respected for decades to one in which he remained somewhat lost until the day he died. A gentle Frenchman, he was no match for the rough-and-tumble New York Irish who resented the appointment of a "foreigner" as their bishop. A missionary whose presence had been welcomed by the Catholics of rural Virginia and Maryland since 1791, he could not effectively cope with the wealthy urban Catholic trustees who were determined to rule their churches spiritually as well as temporally.

For sixteen years he was beleaguered, ridiculed, and rendered ineffectual by those of his people who were concerned with gaining and holding power. By contrast, he seems consistently to have been loved by those who might be termed "little people": the meek of the earth. In this respect the nineteenth-century historian John Gilmary Shea wrote of him:

It is strange that the papers of a man like Bishop Dubois have not [been] preserved here [New York] or at Mount St. Mary's. We have little of him but platitudes, generalities and newspapers, not always, in fact rarely, friendly. My boyish recollections of him are vivid and my harsh father's opposition to him as trustee of the Cathedral ranged me on his side. Children generally have implicit faith in their father but in my case we were negative poles and almost spontaneously I took the opposite. As I saw those who went to their duties cling to the bishop it gave him a halo in my boyish fancy and I felt great veneration for him.³

It is hoped that this narrative will help to place the accomplishments of John Dubois into a proper perspective in American Church history, and render him some of the veneration which is due to him as a good—in fact in would seem—great and holy man.

Prologue: The Lost Bishop

Bricks shattered the windows, startling into wakefulness the sick old man who was in his seventy-eighth year. Terrified and confused, he lay in bed in his ground floor room while an angry mob bashed in the front door of the house. The orange glow of torches lit the night. Above the tumult individual screams of anger filled the air: "Blood will flow"—"The Pope rules the Republic." Were they coming to get him for not taking the oath? The clatter of hoofbeats pierced the noise in the streets. The riot act was being read. Was it Lafayette again? Was the National Guard saving the priests from death? Where were the cries: "To the lamp post"?

What was it? Was his Mountain school on fire again? Were the students safe? Cries were discernable in the din, cries about infidel Papist schools poisoning children's minds. Which was it? Louis Le Grand, about to be turned into "Equity College" to please the ruling Directory? Mount St. Mary's, folding in debt and about to be sold as a school for cadets? The doomed college at Nyack or the sisters' orphanage, both burned to the ground?

The hollow crash of splintering glass and the frenzied cheers told him that the stained windows in the church across the street were now the object of destruction. Which church? Was it St. Sulpice? Was it St. Mary's on Grand Street again being put to the torch? He was caught up once more

in the sounds of revolution. But which revolution? 1789? 1830? A new one?

Gradually the police gained control. The howling mob dispersed. Fully awake, the old man was calmed. It was not St. Sulpice which was threatened. It was St. Patrick's on Mott Street in New York—his cathedral—a small building which might have fit into Our Lady's Chapel in St. Sulpice in Paris. The mob had cried out for the blood of the bishop. He was the bishop. But only in name. The mob did not want him. Their wrath was aimed at his absent auxiliary, a virile young fighter who, in this year of 1842, manipulated the local elections to show the voting clout of the Irish immigrants.

The old man tried to resume his rest. He had escaped from death so many times before. The noise might have frightened him as well as the violence of the mob, for a lifetime of turmoil had not hardened his child-like heart. But death itself did not frighten him. Preparing for it was the only work which was left to him in this life.

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CHAPTER 1

The Child of the Ancien Régime

The child, John Dubois, just entering his second decade of life, poked his head out of the seventh-story dormer cut into the roof of the school of Louis Le Grand. Situated almost at the top of a hill on the rue St. Jacques, the height gave him a view of Paris which seemed almost from the clouds. The Seine was only a short distance down the hill, its ancient bridges still crowded with houses. At the river's closest point was the Ile de la Cité where the towers of Notre Dame rose majestically over the city. At the very crest of the hill, directly at the end of the school's property, could be seen the slowly progressing construction of the mammoth romanesque church being built in honor of Saint Genevieve. Construction had begun in 1764, the year of his birth,* the intent being to replace the small Gothic church to the rear of the rising edifice with a shrine worthy of the city's patroness. Yet, even if Paris was considered one of the great cities of the world, the boy could see, from his window, neighboring farmlands. The countryside was so close that the masters of the school had found it necessary to warn the students while on their free time against trampling through vineyards, wheatfields, and chasing after game.

*His birthdate was August 24th.

Younger than his classmates by as much as two years, the child John's innocent brown eyes, soft face and small size made him seem younger still. Nonetheless, he had a natural merriment of nature and a precocious intelligence beyond his years. This intelligence had won him a scholarship which only a year earlier would have been denied to him because of his lack of noble birth.

In 1763 the Jesuits had been suppressed in France. King Louis XV, faced with replacing them as instructors in educational institutions throughout the nation, chose Louis Le Grand as a vehicle for training a whole new generation of teachers. According to the King's orders, entry was to be gained by intelligence rather than blood. The ironic effect of this decision by this most absolute of monarchs was the democratization of this school, once run by the Jesuits exclusively for the sons of the nobility. The sons of the lower classes now paced its halls, and their places were won by nomination, strict testing and fairly-won scholarships. So it was that the precocious child John Dubois, the son of a bourgeois widow, was named to the school by some observant and sympathetic curé or civic official. Nonetheless, John—so intellectually advanced for his years—had to prove himself on his own. That he had done so and won his scholarship in so prestigious a school remained a source of quiet pride for him till the end of his life. Other boys of poor backgrounds also gained entry into this great experiment of the king and became John's companions and schoolmates. One of these was Camille Desmoulins. Another, from Arras, was Maximilien Robespierre.

If the latter two in later life were to make their mark in other fields, John Dubois would someday have much to do in the field of education in a new nation yet to be formed. The rules and the spirit of the school in which he lived for the next dozen years of his life would be deeply ingrained in him and would become the tools of discipline with which he would build his own schools.

With his schoolmates, he followed a rigorous schedule. Awakened each morning at 5:30, he was given half an hour to be dressed and in place for prayers and devotional readings. At 6:15 he went to a study hall which included "the learning and recitation of verses from scripture." At 7:45, two hours and fifteen minutes after rising, he went to breakfast. Morning classes were followed by daily attendance at Mass and then by another study hall. An hour and fifteen minutes was allowed for lunch and recreation. At 1:15 the afternoon classes and study halls began, continuing until 4:30 when a half hour of recreation refreshed the boys for another hour and fifteen minutes of supervised study. At 6:15 individual conferences were given for each class. Supper at 7:15 was followed by recreation until 8:45 when night prayers were said, followed by devotional reading. At nine o'clock the students were packed off to their dormitories. Even at this late hour John was permitted few mind wanderings, for, as the boys pre-

pared for bed, they listened to a reading from the life of the saint whose feast day was being celebrated.¹

Externally it seemed forbidding, yet according to the spirit of the rules personally written by the king, discipline was purposefully moderate. If boys entered Louis Le Grand as young children and remained there the full twelve years until they were in their early twenties, it was only right to hope, as did the king, that they should "consider themselves as brothers and children of one family." Professors were discouraged from using "severe" punishments "unless they have exhausted all other means" and if severe punishments were necessary they were to be administered "in a way that tempers bitterness." The students on their part were taught respect for their home ("It is expressly forbidden to write on the tables or desks . . .") and cleanliness ("They will wash their hands at least once a day and change their linen several times a week.")

In short the king ordered that the young men learn to be gentlemen.

"Students will acquire from an early age the habit of mild and honest intercourse with others," the king directed, "In outward action and speech they will avoid whatever may jar upon well-bred people such as conceited airs, haughtiness, scorn, sarcasm, ridicule, gesticulation, etc."²

To help instill these gentlemanly graces, the boys, at mealtimes, were not herded into a hall to eat barrack style. Meals were designed to be a time of gentle conviviality. Tablecloths were used and every boy was given his own silver utensils with which to eat.

Daily Mass and prayers were mandatory and the oldest students (called as a class, Theologians) had to meet regularly for philosophy discussions in which they were "expected to take part in the argument." One of John's professors, the Abbé Proyart, had written a book of meditations based on the life of a student who died shortly before John arrived.

John, small and timid by nature, was thoroughly malleable to all of this. On one occasion his confessor set out to curb in him a habit of exaggerating tales into lies. The priest ordered that he should catch himself as soon as he realized he was committing this fault and retract his false assertions on the spot. John remembered this order halfway through fabricating a tale. He stopped, struggled with his conscience and won the day for virtue's sake by suddenly blurting out the truth of the matter. The triumph of self-humiliation was too much for him. He fainted dead away.

John shared a talent for classical languages with the older Maximilien Robespierre. Maximilien, an aloof loner, withdrawn from the schoolboy pleasantries of his classmates, liked the shy, happy-natured younger boy, a happenstance which would one day become a life-saving factor for the latter. As students, both boys would win their class Latin prize as they graduated.

The school placed a heavy emphasis on the political literature of ancient Rome, and some observers felt that this was an incipient danger in the

minds of young men of lower class. Louis Sebastian Mercier warned in his pre-revolutionary work *Tableau de Paris* that “after hearing so much of the Senate, of the liberty and majesty of the Roman people . . . of the justified death of Caesar . . . it is a hard lot to leave Rome and find one’s self again a bourgeois in the rue des Noyers.”³ Events were to prove him a prophet. Louis Le Grand would afterward be labelled “the school of the French Revolution.”

The atmosphere in which Desmoulins, Robespierre and Dubois grew was a mixture of philosophical extremes. Abbé Proyart would remain strongly conservative throughout and long after the Revolution. By contrast the students were constantly exposed to the thinking of radical professors such as the Abbé Yves-Marie Audrein, the assistant headmaster, Abbé J. B. Dumouchel and Jean François Champagne.

Abbé Audrein, who authored an ultra-liberal book on education before the Revolution, would take the revolutionary oath, marry, and accept a state-issued bishopric in Brittany. He would eventually be assassinated by a rightist group which would stop a public coach in which he was riding, drag him into the road, and shoot him.

Abbé Dumouchel would likewise become a state bishop, but would ride through all the storms and become the head of public instruction under Napoleon.

Jean François Champagne, who had ended his studies for the priesthood while a subdeacon, would take the oath to the state, and then renounce Christianity altogether. Taking over as head of Louis Le Grand, he would change its name to “Equity College” in 1792 and keep it open—the only college in France to be kept open—through every twist and turn of the Revolution.

Some students were ripe for the radical new philosophies; among them the pale, grim-faced adolescent Robespierre whose coldly staring, steel-colored eyes disquieted adults. Another was Camille Desmoulins who, though younger by several years, was a close friend of Maximilien. Desmoulins, closer still in age to John Dubois, was not liked by the student who could faint at the prospect of telling a lie. Dubois would one day recall for his own students that the acid-tongued Camille wore a perpetual scowl and was a bully over smaller boys—smaller boys such as himself.

The timid Dubois’ was readily drawn under the influence of Proyart’s ideas and sought friendships with like-minded students. Among these was John Cheverus, as much his junior as Desmoulins was to Robespierre. Cheverus would follow in Dubois’ footsteps through Louis Le Grand, through the seminary, and then to the new United States of America.

In the summer of 1775 a new king, young Louis XVI, returned from his coronation at Rheims and attended a Solemn Mass at Notre Dame. His entourage crossed the Seine to the left bank and made its way up the rue St. Jacques to pay respect to the remains of Saint Genevieve. By arrange-

ment, he stopped at Louis Le Grand to assume the king's role as the school's special benefactor. John crowded into the entranceway with the rest of his schoolmates, for the king did not leave his carriage to enter the courtyard. Robespierre, so gifted in the classics, stepped forward to represent his fellow students. The soft, fat young king and his soft, pale-faced queen, Marie Antoinette, sat impassively while the seventeen-year-old student rendered to his ruler a polite address telling the king only what he was inclined to hear.

Whether or not Louis listened at all to this, one of many speeches of coronation praise, he nonetheless bowed politely to Maximilien before the immense, gilded carriage lumbered away, moving up the hill to the shrine of the city's patron saint.

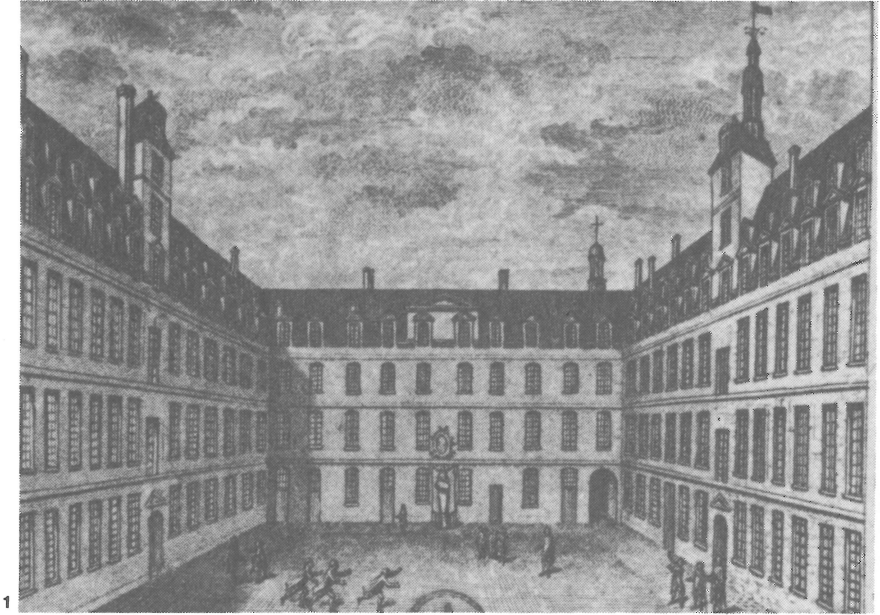
Paris was a city of churches and John paid great attention to them as his ideas about the priesthood matured into a vocation. As the idea grew within him, so too did the nearby Church of St. Genevieve grow towards completion. Walking a short distance from Louis Le Grand, he could watch construction on the massive Church of St. Sulpice where a second tower, mismatched with the first, was being added. Attached to the church was a seminary of the same name. Watching the seminarians, while wondering about his own vocation, he saw there and later at the Sorbonne across the street from Louis Le Grand one seminarian who dragged his right foot in a constant limp. The seminarian became in time more notable since gossip scored him for being openly careless in his companionship with an actress who lived in the vicinity. Such conduct might have created open scandal in other times and places, but it was only cause for raised eyebrows in these last years of France's ancien régime. Neither the seminary nor the Archbishop of Paris would do anything, for the young man, Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, was of the nobility.

France's long-standing class orders divided society into three "estates": clergy, nobility and commoners. In reality, the first category was twofold, for the ranks of the clergy were filled from both of the other estates and the separation caused by their origins remained intact. The caste system within the Church was as notable as that in secular society. The nobility, seeking titles and riches for younger sons had long since preempted the ranks of the hierarchy. Almost without exception the Sees of France, as well as the lofty titles and financial revenues attached to the wealthy religious orders, belonged to the sons of the second estate. It was expected that those of the third estate who felt called to the priesthood would be confined to serve in the lower ranks of the clergy. The abuses of wealth and power in the Church were parallel and often identical with those in the kingdom at large. The need for purgation was realized by many from within the Church, but the hierarchy, in control of the machinery needed to effect reform, remained complacent and comfortable. Purgation would come—as it had before in history—from without.

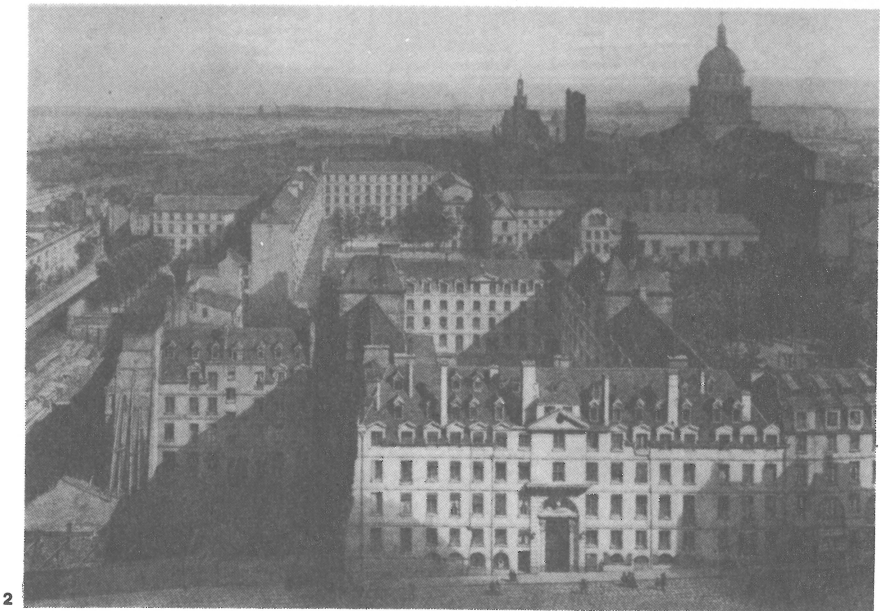
Talleyrand was but one of a legion of examples. Even before he was ordained for the diocese of his uncle, the Archbishop of Rheims, this dotting relative granted him the benefices from the Abbey of St. Remy—a yearly income some one hundred times that received by a curate in an ordinary parish. Ordained in 1779, the limping young man never worked as a priest in his diocese but remained in the salons of Paris, active in the getting of mistresses, an illegitimate child, and, above all, prestige at Versailles.

The priesthood, despite the inequities, still attracted men of good character. Almost all historians of the Revolution would eventually agree in saying that, no matter how indolent the religious orders had become and how corrupt the hierarchy was, parish curés and curates throughout France were generally holy men, living simply (of necessity) and giving goodly service to their people. Ironically, when the Revolution came many of these men, so immediately available, would suffer the brunt of hatreds meant for the noble clergy while many of these latter, having the means to do so, escaped at the first signs that the long-overdue deluge was on the way.

In the early 1780s the academically gifted John Dubois, certainly aware that his origins in the third estate would limit any ambitions he might have with regard to a clerical career, nonetheless decided to give his life to God and join the lower ranks of the first estate. It would have been vain for him to think of the possibility of ever becoming a bishop. He entered the Seminary of Saint Magloire planning to live and die in the ranks of the priesthood in Paris.



College Louis-le-Grand, Paris. Above, the main courtyard showing boys at recreation, about 1780. Below, as it appeared in the 1860s. The College is in the foreground, and the dome of the Pantheon looms at upper right. Note the similarity of the architecture to Dubois' college at Emmitsburg.



CHAPTER 2

The Deluge

In 1787 official France began to yield slowly to the ideas of the Enlightenment. An edict of toleration was passed allowing at least some civil status for the 5% of citizens who were Protestant. The provisions of the edict included such basic rights as legitimizing marriages and births (such records in France had been legally kept by the Catholic parishes). In September of that same year John Dubois was ordained to the priesthood by M. de Juigne, Archbishop of Paris. Dubois, precocious and younger than his classmates as a student, was, at 23, too young for the priesthood according to Canon Law. His appearance could only have added to making him appear too young for ordination. He was small of stature and his features, with his dominant nose and cleft chin, were soft. His dark eyes carried an expression of vulnerability. A dispensation was granted to him because of his age.

He was assigned to the huge parish of St. Sulpice, the towers of which he had watched being constructed while he was at Louis Le Grand. It was a parish of some 90,000 communicants in an area of 120,000 inhabitants. The church itself inspired extremes of opinion from admirers and from detractors. Massive in size, its facade, with high columns and stories of porches, looked like an overly ornate Roman temple. The funds for the

construction of the recently completed, mismatched towers had been raised by special lotteries—a rage with the French at the time. The seminary attached to the parish was run by the Sulpicians, and this, along with the great population of the parish, caused some sixty priests to be assigned there. People who admired pomp and majesty set against marble and stone could attend religious ceremonies at which some two hundred ecclesiastics participated.

Others, less impressed with size, found the place aesthetically appalling. Gouverneur Morris, the United States Minister, accustomed to small wooden churches, judged the exterior to be “disproportionate and fantastic”; the interior, “immensely heavy.”¹ Visitors could view the mammoth, clamshell-shaped holy water fountains and the famous silver statue dubbed “Our Lady of the second-hand plate”—made from melted-down dinnerware stolen over the years from weddings and banquets by a former Curé, M. Languet de Gergy.

Just as the edifice itself inspired wide-ranging reactions, the population of the parish included a wide range of society. Among the nobility who were parishioners were members of the Noailles family. The women of this family were a rarity for that age and class, being at the same time well educated and deeply religious. One of the Noailles daughters, Adrienne, had married the Marquis de Lafayette who made his house a center for the representatives of the new republic he had helped to bring about. Thomas Jefferson lived in Paris for several years and enrolled his daughters in a convent school in the vicinity of St. Sulpice. They remained there until one of them began to express an interest in Romanism, whereupon Jefferson promptly pulled them out. The Marquis de Lafayette himself, after a brief period of piety as a young man, adopted an attitude not far from Jefferson’s deism and remained for the rest of his life a Catholic only in name. Discussing the possibility of a United States’ military invasion of Catholic Canada in a 1785 letter to George Washington, Lafayette offered himself as a potential commander, the advantages being both his French nationality and his Catholicism. This latter advantage he qualified in his awkward English as “my Roman Catholic Creed or supposed to be so at least if anything.”² In contrast his wife Adrienne made religion the center of her life and was an active parishioner at St. Sulpice.

Voltaire had died in the parish in 1778. One of the curates, Abbé Gauthier, had visited the writer and had brought him to the point of reconciliation with the Church. Unfortunately, this was destroyed by the rigoristic behavior of the Curé, Jean-Joseph Tersac, who followed up his assistant’s interview with a righteous and demanding one of his own.

The sternly aggressive Tersac was still Curé when John Dubois arrived. He assigned the newly ordained priest as chaplain at the Petites Maisons run by the Daughters of Charity on the rue de Sevres. Originally founded in 1497 for the care of lepers, the hospital had become under the sisters a