

**Mass Commemorating the
150th Anniversary of the Death of
Father Henri-Dominique Lacordaire, O.P.**

**Homily Preached by Guy Bedouelle, O.P.[†]
2 October 2011—Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time**

*Church of Our Lady of Peace
Sorèze, France*

EARLY in the year 1850, Father Henri-Dominique Lacordaire wrote to one of his friends: “Why do you always return to this idea that ‘I meddle in politics’ and that ‘I must stay out of it’?” “To the contrary,” he continued, “my crime is that I do not engage in true politics, which would be to remain outside of all parties and to tell everyone, as the occasion demands, the great social truths of the Gospel.”

Who is this Lacordaire? Who is this man whose 150th anniversary of death we celebrate today in the very place where he is buried? Today he may be little remembered by Catholics, but in the middle of the nineteenth century, Père Lacordaire was the most well-known Catholic priest in France, one who attracted to himself both admirers and critics.

After the Revolution of July 1830, the young Lacordaire joined his fellow cleric Félicité de Lamennais to found a daily newspaper, *L’Avenir* (*The Future*), which boldly carried the motto: “God and Freedom.” Within its pages, Lacordaire wrote in favor of the separation of Church and State. This was at a time when neither the Church nor the State desired such separation. Lacordaire also penned articles to defend the rights of oppressed peoples. Since the Church signaled to Lacordaire certain exaggerations in his manner of speech, he submitted to the correction, though without renouncing his points of view. Some time later, Lacordaire accepted the invitation of the Archbishop of Paris to deliver a series of contemporary talks on the truths of the Catholic faith.

Nova et Vêtera was saddened to hear of the death of Fr. Bedouelle on May 22, 2012.

Note from Aquinas Guilbeau, O.P., translator: This special Mass of commemoration was televised live on “Le Jour du Seigneur,” France’s leading Sunday morning religious program. The original French of Fr. Bedouelle’s homily can be found at the program’s website: www.lejourduseigneur.com.

Among the many Catholic students who urged the Archbishop to invite Lacordaire was Blessed Frédéric Ozanam, who later founded the St. Vincent de Paul Society. Thus began Lacordaire's famous Conferences of Notre-Dame, in which he developed at length his thoughts on the Gospel and society.

After a period of retreat, Lacordaire undertook in France the reestablishing of the Dominican Order, which like other religious congregations in France had been abolished at the time of the French Revolution. Lacordaire did not intend to reclaim the social privileges enjoyed by clerics and religious during the *ancien régime*. Instead, he argued only that the friars as simple citizens should enjoy the right of association. Lacordaire spoke of his project; he wrote about it, and, when, in 1843, he opened his first Dominican priory in Nancy, he realized his goal.

In February 1848, a moment arrived for Lacordaire that he considered providential: another revolution in France led to another republic. The result of a popular uprising, to be sure, this new republic however pursued peace, loved justice, and above all held religion in respect. Frenchmen everywhere planted "Liberty Trees," which were blessed by both bishops and parish priests alike. Without thinking much of it, Lacordaire let his friends add his name to the list of candidates for the future National Assembly. The voters of Marseilles elected him. All of a sudden, Lacordaire found himself, as was said, a "representative of the people" from the Bouches-du-Rhône. Upon joining the Assembly, Lacordaire, dressed in his Dominican habit, decided to take his seat among the members of the extreme left! This strategic choice ill-suited someone who wanted to remain above all partisan politics. After a band of insurgents broke into the chamber and tried to seize power—a show of violence which in Lacordaire's view produced the very negation of democracy—Lacordaire made one of the many abrupt decisions that marked his life: after serving just fourteen days in the National Assembly, he resigned his seat. Lacordaire explained his decision to his constituents: "In a political assembly, where impartiality condemns one to impotence and isolation, one must choose sides. I could not bring myself to do so." He went on to clarify: "For me, politics means speaking the truth, the most common truth, to the rich, to the poor, to believers, to non-believers." And so, for Lacordaire, political activity coincides with promoting Christian values, especially foundational moral truths. To his mind, political freedom corresponds with Gospel freedom.

Père Lacordaire was certainly a political idealist. He was incontestably romantic. At the same time, he was anchored resolutely in modern society, which for him represented the social and political culture that issued

from the Revolution of 1789. While Lacordaire of course rejected that Revolution's excesses, he looked at the society it created with both Christian eyes and a Christian heart. He wanted to convert this modern society. He wanted to inform its public opinion, which never adverted to God. It was for this new evangelization that he wanted to form authentic Christians. To this end, Lacordaire dedicated the last seven years of his life to the Abbey-School of Sorèze. This apostolic work confirmed him in his vocation as an educator and a preacher, as well as that of a public servant. While director of the Abbey-School, Lacordaire, true to form, held a seat on the Sorèze city council!

"Brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." We heard St. Paul address these words to the Philippians in today's second reading. This was certainly the posture with which Lacordaire approached his own time, and it is, I believe, the approach that is demanded of each Christian generation. The Gospel of Jesus Christ contains both a power and a grace. It both awakens and embraces the desire for justice and truth latent in every heart. The priest whose memory we honor today, Henri-Dominique Lacordaire, witnesses to this service that the Christian religion still renders to civil society. **N-V**