

Introduction to
Defender of the Church, Defender of Liberty:
Henri-Dominique Lacordaire, OP (1802–1861)
By Peter M. Batts, OP¹

Jean-Baptiste Henri-Dominique Lacordaire (1802–1861) called himself “a man of the future.” Indeed, he was a prophet who prepared the way for one of the greatest achievements of the Second Vatican Council, the *Decree on Religious Liberty*. He was born in the aftermath of the French Revolution which affirmed the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity yet denied freedom to the Catholic Church; at one point, the revolutionaries even tried to destroy it. The young Lacordaire, baptized in infancy, knew more about the ideals of the Revolution than he did about the basic teachings of the church. Even after his adult conversion to Catholicism and his ordination as a diocesan priest of Paris, he remained deeply devoted to the revolutionary ideal of liberty. He saw no incompatibility between being a Catholic and being committed to liberty in such forms as freedom of religion, of the press, and of education. As a result, Lacordaire was suspect in the minds of the majority of nineteenth century French Catholics who saw religious liberty as religious indifferentism and as a danger to the faith; they longed for the pre-revolutionary period when the Catholic Church and the French state were one, when church and crown were united.

Lacordaire became associated with the cause of “God and liberty” early in his priesthood. He, along with a few other young French Catholics, sought to reconcile the church and the modern world, the world which flowed from the Revolution. They advocated separation of church and state. This would allow the church to be autonomous and truly free. They involved themselves in struggles for freedom of education in order that Catholic children might receive a religious education. They founded a newspaper, *L’Avenir*, in order to disseminate their views. In the face of massive opposition to this newspaper and to the movement which it supported, Lacordaire and his colleagues appealed to Pope Gregory XVI for approbation. He responded by condemning the entire project of “God and liberty” in his 1832 encyclical, *Mirari vos*.

Although he was an influential journalist and a tireless advocate of liberty, Lacordaire is best known as the greatest preacher of nineteenth century France and as the refounder of the Dominican Order in post-revolution France. He devoted

¹ © 2013 Peter M. Batts, OP. All rights reserved.

himself to preaching after the papal condemnation of 1832. Lacordaire is especially remembered for his Lenten conferences at Notre Dame Cathedral in 1835 and 1836. In these sermons, he stressed liberty not as an ideal originating in the French Revolution but as a gift of God. Liberty comes from God, who created us free, and from Christ, who died in order that we might be free. This was a powerful apologetical message for a generation that so deeply loved liberty in all its forms.

After becoming convinced that nineteenth century France could best be re-evangelized by a religious community committed to preaching, Lacordaire decided the Dominican Order was best suited to that task. In 1838, he wrote the *Essay on Re-Establishment of the Order of Preachers*, in which he argued that the French government, which was opposed to the restoration of religious orders, should allow people to live together for religious reasons if it was truly committed to freedom. There can be no liberty without religious liberty; this was a continuation of the views which he had expressed earlier as a journalist and later as a preacher at Notre Dame. In spite of opposition from church and state, Lacordaire restored the Dominican Order. He became provincial of the new province of France in 1850, witnessed the incredible revival of the once outlawed Order, and was elected to the French Academy. He died at 59 in 1861, still committed to the cause of “God and liberty.”

The translators of these works by Lacordaire have provided a great service to English-speaking Dominicans, to the church in English-speaking countries, and to all Anglophone lovers of liberty. We owe a great debt of gratitude to them for their impressive and skillful translations. The writings that they have chosen provide a broad introduction to the thought of Lacordaire; he dealt with topics such as his religious conversion, clerical salaries paid by the state, and the life of Mary Magdalene. His views on religious liberty as expressed in *L’Avenir* and *L’Ere Nouvelle* are especially interesting because of their contemporary relevance for us. Religious liberty was one of the great passions of Lacordaire’s life. He saw it as essential for the evangelical mission of the church. He opposed the Gallican dependence on the state because he believed that the church needed freedom from it, even financial freedom, if it is to carry out its task of preaching and teaching the gospel.

Lacordaire, in his life and work, is a prophet for our time. As we struggle with our own issues of religious liberty, may he be an inspiration for those of us who are Dominicans, who are Catholics, and for all of us who cherish a society

where there is true freedom of religion, education, and the press. We pray that our translators will persevere in their great work of familiarizing twenty-first century Americans and other English-speakers with our great nineteenth century prophet of liberty.