

Fall 10-1-2022

Jacques Madeleine Bertout, CSSp: Restorer of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit and Sixth Superior General of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit

John McFadden CSSp

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-horizons>



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McFadden, J. (2022). Jacques Madeleine Bertout, CSSp: Restorer of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit and Sixth Superior General of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. *Spiritan Horizons*, 19 (19). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-horizons/vol19/iss19/19>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Spiritan Horizons (English, French, and Portuguese) at Duquesne Scholarship Collection. It has been accepted for inclusion in Spiritan Horizons by an authorized editor of Duquesne Scholarship Collection.

Jacques Madeleine Bertout, CSSp: Restorer of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit and Sixth Superior General of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit



Fr. John McFadden, CSSp, of the British Province, gained a BA in theology from Louvain University in 1977 and a Licence in Church History from the Gregorian University, Rome, 1982. For six years he was on the formation team in his province and editor of the magazine, Missionwide. On mission for ten years in Makurdi District, Nigeria, he was the major superior there from 1997 to 2000. After six years as provincial in England, he became secretary general of Congregation up to 2013 and is now again in Rome as superior of the generalate community.

FR. JACQUES MADELEINE BERTOUT was born in Nieubourg in the Pas de Calais region of northern France on May 3, 1753. His life reflects the character of the stirring times in which he lived. On his journey to take up his overseas appointment in Cayenne, he was taken prisoner with another Spiritan priest after being shipwrecked on the west coast of Africa in 1778. He later was caught up in the French Revolution and had to flee to England as a refugee, remaining there ten years. On his return, he spent the rest of his life recovering the houses of his Congregation which had been appropriated by various state bodies and struggling hard to continue preparing priests to staff the French colonies confided to his Congregation. Koren writes: “It may be said without contradiction that the Congregation of the Holy Ghost would have perished if it had not been for the courage of one man—Father James Bertout.”¹

1. Henry J. Koren, CSSp, *To the Ends of the Earth: A General History of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1983), 121.

EARLY LIFE

Jacques Bertout, we could say, was born into the Spiritan family, as his mother's two brothers, Jacques and Jean-Marie Duflos, both attended the Seminary of the Holy Spirit. In fact, Jacques Bertout succeeded his uncle, Jean-Marie Duflos, who was considered the fifth superior general. Young Jacques came to Paris to study at the College Louis le Grand and was lodged with his uncles at the Seminary in the then rue des Postes (re-named rue Lhomond in 1867 after a famous grammarian).² Due to this contact with his uncles, the desire arose in him to follow in their footsteps in the priesthood at the service of the French colonies. By 1773 he was studying at the Seminary of the Holy Spirit and was eventually ordained a priest at Boulogne on May 24, 1777.³



He did two years of probation at the Seminary and was then asked by the superior general of the time, François Becquet, CSSp, to go to Cayenne. He was to accompany another Spiritan priest, Dominique de Glincourt, twelve years his senior, who had been appointed Vice-Prefect Apostolic of Guyane.⁴ This priest eventually set out three times to go to take up his appointment in Cayenne and on none of these occasions was he successful in arriving at his destination.⁵ The two priests left Le Havre on April 24, 1778, bound first of all for Gorée via Madeira and the Canary Islands, for the ship they sailed in, the *Marin*, was a slaving ship and had been chartered by the *Compagnie d'Afrique* to pick up 200 slaves at Gorée and transport them to Cayenne.⁶ They were the only two passengers on board ship, which had a crew of twenty-five at this first stage of the journey. It carried a cargo of cotton and woolen cloth, gallon hats, glass jewelry, metal

2. Jean Ernould, CSSp, *La Maison Mère de la Congrégation du Saint Esprit, 30 rue Lhomond Paris V* (Paris: Imprimerie Saint-Paul 55000 Bar le Duc, 1989), 5.

3. Jérôme P. Schwindenhammer, CSSp, "M. Jacques-Magdaleine Bertout, Restaurateur et 6e Supérieur de la Congrégation et du Séminaire du Saint-Esprit," in *Notices Biographiques, 1703-1803*, (Paris, 30 rue Lhomond: Congrégation du Saint-Esprit, 1908), 243-244.

4. Marie-Christine Varachaud, "D'un naufrage à un sauvetage : Jacques-Madeleine Bertout (1753-1832), 6e supérieur général du Séminaire du Saint-Esprit, in *Mémoire Spiritaine*, 22 (Deuxième semestre 2005) 8-44, here 13.

5. Koren, *To the Ends of the Earth*, 106.

6. Varachaud, "d'un naufrage," 13.

tools and utensils, barrels of alcohol and gunpowder to be used in the purchase of the slaves.⁷

In this day and age, it is sad to note that our ancestors in the Congregation did not see any wrong in thus being associated with a trade which has become infamous in human history. In fact, we actually owned a plantation in Guyane which employed slaves, so we were at one time more positively involved in this shameful trade.⁸

After one month at sea, and having already encountered stormy seas which delayed them, they hit a sandbank off the west African coast and had to abandon ship. They were stuck thirty leagues out at sea from Cape Blanc, off the present-day coast of Mauritania. Ten lives were lost in the efforts to get the lifeboats launched, so eventually seventeen of them managed to get into one of them and after two days reached an island where a group of Moorish fishermen took charge of them. They took away all their valuables and left them with only the clothes they arrived in.⁹

We know many of the details of this time in Bertout's life because he wrote a full day to day account of it himself; three copies exist today. One is in Caen, one in the national archives of Senegal, and the third in the Spiritan archives at Chevilly.¹⁰ Koren points out the interesting fact that de Glicourt and Bertout were the first Spiritans to set foot on African soil.¹¹

Seeing the possibility of earning a ransom for these Europeans, the fishermen, who in general treated them very well, eventually led their captives off on foot on a thirty-five-league trek, by night and by day, to the town of Portendik, on what is today the Mauritanian coast, in the hope of finding someone who would redeem them, but no Europeans were found when they arrived there. It was therefore decided to continue walking on until, five days later, they reached St. Louis, which was only a trading post at that time. The overall distance was between 350 and 400 kilometers.¹² According to Koren¹³ the British governor at St. Louis eventually gave the fishermen two guineas for each captive and they

7. André Zysberg, "Une Odyssée africaine au Siècle des Lumières : la Mission providentielle de MM. Deglicourt et Bertout au Sénégal (1778)," *Mémoire Spiritaine* no.22 (Deuxième Semestre 2005) 45-73, here, 47.

8. Zysberg, "Une Odyssée africaine," 47

9. Zysberg, "Une Odyssée africaine," 54-57.

10. Varachaud, "d'un naufrage," 13.

11. Koren, *To the Ends of the Earth*, 106.

12. Zysberg, "Une Odyssée africaine," 61.

13. Koren, *To the Ends of the Earth*, 108.

thus gained their freedom.

St. Louis had been captured twenty years earlier by the British during the Seven Years' War (but the island of Gorée was still in French hands). The Catholics still living in St Louis, about one thousand one hundred in number, were overjoyed at the presence of two priests among them, for they had not seen one for twenty years. De Glicourt and Bertout during their short stay among them baptized more than two hundred children and adults and were allowed to hear confessions and bless marriages, but Governor Clarke would not allow them to celebrate Mass even though, under terms agreed earlier with the French authorities,¹⁴ freedom of religion was to be guaranteed. Governor Clarke was keen to be rid of the two priests, however, and after only four days in St. Louis they boarded a ship, the *Betsy*, bound for London under the captaincy of Captain Good.

RETURN TO FRANCE

Their return journey was not much smoother than their outward journey and lasted nine weeks. On September 12, 1778, as they entered the English Channel heading for Dover, they were accosted by a French corsair, the *Furet*, commanded by captain Ducasson, and taken prisoner once again for war had again broken out between Britain and France. France had taken the side of the colonists in the ongoing American War of Independence.¹⁵ The two priests had some difficulty in convincing the French authorities at Le Havre that they were in fact their countrymen, since they had been given English style clothes to wear when they were in St Louis. They eventually convinced the Navy Commandant and were given a hundred *écus* for their immediate needs. De Glicourt and Bertout then left Le Havre for Rouen and arrived in Paris on September 26th.

The two priests were questioned in Paris by the Minister for the Navy regarding the strength of the British presence in St. Louis—the state of the defenses, number of soldiers, the mood of the people. It is not fully clear how the information they gave had any influence on the eventual recapture of St. Louis by the French in January 1779.¹⁶ Koren states that the two priests could not have given much information after such a short stay and that an expedition to recapture St.

14. Varachaud, "d'un naufrage," 16.

15. Varachaud, "d'un naufrage," 15.

16. Zysberg, "Une Odyssée africaine," 72.

Louis was already being planned. The British had a garrison of sixty soldiers in St. Louis¹⁷ and when the French came to recapture it they brought three hundred soldiers, so the British surrendered without a fight.¹⁸ What is clear however, is that if St. Louis had not been recovered by the French at this time, it would never have developed into a French colony which also played such an important role in the life and history of the Congregation.

CALM BEFORE ANOTHER STORM

Fr. Bertout eventually returned to the Seminary of the Holy Spirit in July 1779 and remained there teaching theology up till 1785 when he was appointed to the Seminary at Meaux, which had been confided to the priests of the Holy Spirit Seminary in 1737¹⁹; here he remained until the end of the academic year 1787. During his time in Paris he wrote several letters requesting an appointment overseas but, due to his recurring health problem, he seems to have eventually accepted that he could never serve in the colonies.

Bertout's name is found on existing papers witnessing to the election as superior general of his uncle Jean-Marie Duflos in succession to François Becquet. It was Becquet who began to style himself "Superior General"—up till then the leadership was usually described as superior of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit. There is an interesting discussion in Koren's book of how the title "Superior General" came into more accepted usage at this time, even though the body of men known as "Spiritans" did not correspond to what we understand it to be today.²⁰ The use of the term "Congregation" referring to the products of the Seminary of the Holy Spirit also seems to have grown in use at this time.

Fr. Bertout was back in Paris when the Revolution broke out in July 1789. It is worth noting that the Civil Constitution of the Clergy of July 12, 1790, stripping the church of all its lands, properties, and income and handing them over to the state, and requiring all bishops and priests to agree to it on oath, under pain of being pursued as fugitives from the law, deprived of their stipends and their rights as citizens, had been extended to all superiors and seminary directors later that year. But the priests and students of the Holy Spirit Seminary had

17. Koren, *The Spiritans: A History of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1958), 29.

18. Zysberg, "Une Odyssée africaine," 72.

19. Varachaud, "d'un naufrage," 18, footnote 23.

20. Koren, *To the Ends of the Earth*, 90.

refused to take this oath. The first response of the government was to stop the allocation of 100,000 livres accorded by the Ministry of the Navy for the clergy of French Guyane.²¹

Fr. Bertout was still at the Seminary in the rue des Postes on August 19, 1792 together with nine other colleagues and a dozen students when at ten o'clock in the evening,²² the house was invaded by the revolutionaries. It was as a direct result of another decree of the Legislative Assembly of the day before, which suppressed secular institutes and specifically mentioned the Holy Spirit seminary.²³ The mob had already visited the Irish seminary (which they found empty) and a nearby Eudist community where thirty-two priests were rounded up and arrested. These were all executed two weeks later.²⁴ By the time the mob arrived at the Holy Spirit Seminary, it seems they were very thirsty and made their way immediately to the cellar to help themselves to the wine. They then seemed to have forgotten why they had come and eventually tottered away, leaving the community safe and sound. It was a close call; the priests had readied themselves for the worst, but had miraculously survived.

Fr. Bertout may possibly have left the Seminary the next day to take refuge with his family in Nieubourg.²⁵ Others seem to have stayed on for a couple of weeks until the persecution of priests and nuns became considerably worse and it was not wise for them to remain. The Seminary building was eventually sold by the government at a ridiculously low price to a Mrs. Angar; at some point it became a wallpaper factory and then was taken over by the State Higher Institute of Education.

While in his home town, Bertout busied himself with the spiritual care of the local inhabitants, baptizing and instructing the children and bringing communion to the sick. There is a tradition in the town that he used to celebrate mass during the night in a barn.²⁶ However, he was eventually betrayed and had to leave quickly. On September 10, 1792, he managed to get a passport and passage to England where he arrived without any problem.

21. Varachaud, "d'un naufrage," 20.

22. Koren, *To the Ends of the Earth*, 95; also *The Spiritans*, 31.

23. Varachaud, "d'un naufrage," 20.

24. Koren, *To the Ends of the Earth*, 95.

25. Varachaud, "d'un naufrage," 21.

26. Varachaud, "d'un naufrage," 21.

REFUGEE IN ENGLAND

He set himself to learn English and after two years seems to have achieved enough knowledge to be able to preach in it.²⁷ There was a big influx of French priests and nuns into England at this time, when it became so dangerous for them in France, and they were generally welcomed because they were driven out by “the national enemy.”²⁸ There was much fear too that a similar violent revolution could be unleashed in England where social conditions were similar. There has been for a long time a theory that the country-wide spread of the Methodism of the Wesley brothers in this century, created a populace that was disinclined to overthrowing the “established order.” The number of so-called “*émigré* priests” in the town of Gosport for example, reached 250.²⁹ Many were dispersed in different parts of the country and gave sterling help to the small Catholic community.

Eventually we find Fr. Bertout in the village of Ugthorpe in north-east Yorkshire, just south of the port of Whitby, where a decisive synod had been held in 663 reconciling the different traditions and practices of the Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Churches. After the Reformation, there were pockets of Catholicism to be found all over Britain and in Yorkshire there were several. One of the English Martyrs, Nicholas Postgate, was born in Ugthorpe, so there seems to have been a strong Catholic tradition in the area.³⁰

The archives in Chevilly contain seventeen instructions, notes and articles written in his hand in English. It is estimated he gave his first homily in English on the Third Sunday after Pentecost in 1795 and his last for the Sunday within the Octave of Christmas 1801. Like many of the priests mentioned above, it was in 1802 that it became safe for him to return to France.

While at Ugthorpe, he is credited with obtaining money for the founding of a “free school” which was open to poor Catholics and Protestants alike and in which he was free to teach and employ others to do so.³¹ A centenary booklet produced in the town records that there were “a great number of communions and conversions” during his time there.³² In a general history of Catholics in

27. Varachaud, “d’un naufrage,” 21.

28. M.D.R. Leys, *Catholics in England 1559–1829: A Social History* (London: Longmans, 1961) 145.

29. Leys, *Catholics in England*, 145.

30. Varachaud, “d’un naufrage,” 22.

31. Varachaud, “d’un naufrage,” 22.

32. Varachaud, “d’un naufrage,” 22.

England, Ugthorpe is given a special mention at this time and it is tempting to conclude that maybe Fr. Bertout continued to reflect one of those other Spiritan qualities which has marked our missionary endeavors through the centuries—fundraising!

At Ugthorpe in Yorkshire money was raised by installing seats in the chapel; the wealthier members of the Congregation bought benches and paid rent for them, from two shillings a year for each seat in the front benches down to one shilling a year for a whole bench at the back, one being reserved for ‘ye poor strangers’ free of charge.³³

RETURN TO FRANCE

Sometime at the beginning of 1802, Fr. Bertout returned to France. We are not sure of the exact date, but it is presumed also that he spent some time with his family in the north before heading for Paris.³⁴ The situation had changed radically in France because Pius VII and Napoleon had signed a concordat in July 1801, which gave recognition to the church in France and thus quietened the tensions between church and state. A special Administrator for Cults was appointed and the atmosphere was more conducive to the activities of the clergy.

Close to the former Seminary buildings, Fr. Bertout found his seventy-six year-old uncle, Fr. Duflos, “almost blind, crippled by disease, and wholly incapable of exercising his office as Superior General.”³⁵ Other members of the Congregation had taken up positions in the city and other dioceses and could not easily abandon them. “With no house, no money, no personnel, no students and a superior in his dotage, it seemed hopeless. Bertout, however, was not the man to give up so easily. Courageously and almost single-handedly he undertook the task and finally succeeded in spite of almost insuperable obstacles.”³⁶

The first step was to get recognition from the government for the restoration of the Seminary. Napoleon was beginning to think that it might be possible to use missionaries for his political purposes.³⁷ At one time he proposed the merging of the Vincentians, the Foreign Mission Society of Paris, and the Spiritans

33. Leys, *Catholics in England*, 146.

34. Varachaud, “d’un naufrage,” 22.

35. Koren, *To the Ends of the Earth*, 121.

36. Koren, *To the Ends of the Earth*, 122.

37. Koren, *To the Ends of the Earth*, 122.

into one imperial institute called the Foreign Mission Society, but the Holy See would not accept this. Later on, it was changed to the same Society composed of three departments corresponding to the three groups. Bertout became a member of the Council of this organization as the Head of the Spiritan Department, but it did not endure.

Fr. Duflos died on February 28, 1803 and on March 23, an imperial decree giving formal recognition to the Seminary of the Holy Spirit (but not restoring to it the ownership of the house in rue des Postes) declared Jacques Bertout to be the superior in succession to his uncle.³⁸

STRUGGLE TO RECOVER RUE DES POSTES

The only property which was returned to the Spiritans by this decree was in the countryside near Orléans, and this was not suitable for the training of candidates, for which a property in Paris was essential. Eventually, authorization for opening a seminary was granted in 1806; a property was found in the rue du Cherche-Midi and the formation of new candidates could begin. The house though, soon became inadequate and Bertout tried as much as he could to repossess the house in rue des Postes, but to no avail. At one time, Bertout received a request from the imperial government to supply at once twenty priests for Guyane and twelve for Martinique; he politely pointed out to the authorities that it would take a little longer to adequately train his seminarians.

Over time, however, relations between Napoleon and Pope Pius VII deteriorated badly, and in order to strike a blow at the church, in September 1809 Napoleon once again suppressed the Vincentians, the Foreign Missions Society, and the Spiritans.³⁹ Bertout continued however to operate his junior seminary without any direct interference.⁴⁰ Napoleon continued to try to control France's missionary efforts and even transferred the headquarters of the Propaganda Fide to Paris in 1809 and forced several Italian cardinals also to attend his court.⁴¹ For a short period at this time, Fr. Bertout seems to have become discouraged; he went to live in the rue du Bac with the Foreign Missions Society and even became one of its directors.⁴²

38. Varachaud, "d'un naufrage," 24.

39. Koren, *To the Ends of the Earth*, 125.

40. Koren, *To the Ends of the Earth*, 125.

41. Koren, *To the Ends of the Earth*, 125.

42. Koren, *To the Ends of the Earth*, 126.

With the final defeat of Napoleon in 1815, France was reduced to its pre-Revolutionary boundaries and received back most of its colonies. The need for priests for them became urgent. On February 3, 1816, King Louis XVIII restored the Vincentians and the Spiritans. They were supposed to receive back their original seminary buildings but in the case of the Spiritans, their property in the rue des Postes had been legally sold, so there were problems in getting it back. Undaunted and after much haggling by Bertout, in 1819 the government was persuaded to let the Spiritans buy back their former property. On December 8, 1822, Bertout was able to move back into the Mother House in rue des Postes and the Holy Spirit Seminary began to function again. The government promised an annual subsidy of 50,000 francs. They had forty-three seminarians, including two Irishmen— one Corrigan, the other Henry Power.

Bertout had requested in 1819 that Propaganda Fide formally approve the Rules of the Congregation and the Seminary. This approval was given eventually in February 1824, after another attempt had been made by the French government to bring all the colonial missions under the authority of the archbishop of Paris.⁴³ By its pontifical approval, the Congregation changed its status from a purely diocesan Institute to one that was, at least partially, dependent on the Holy See. The right to confirm the superior general, however, still remained in the hands of the archbishop of Paris. The latter only confirmed the election of Bertout in 1829, meaning that he had been merely the *de facto* superior for twenty years!⁴⁴

FURTHER STRUGGLES

Thus, Koren summarizes the eventual return to the rue des Postes in 1822: “[...] after twenty years of continuous strife, Fr. Bertout’s efforts were finally crowned with success and the Congregation was once more established in its ancient Mother House.”⁴⁵ But things were not to remain calm for very long. The restoration of the monarchy after the fall of Napoleon was accompanied by a revival of so-called Gallicanism, that desire on the part of the church in France to be able to run its own internal affairs with as little interference from Rome as possible, especially in such things as the appointment of bishops. In 1825, a committee

43. Koren, *To the Ends of the Earth*, 128.

44. Koren, *To the Ends of the Earth*, 128.

45. Koren, *The Spiritans*, 53.

of bishops decided that they needed the buildings in the rue des Postes for their proposed Institute of Higher Ecclesiastical Studies. It was a consequence of the bishops' desire to do away with the Holy Spirit Seminary and to encourage each diocese instead to supply two priests each for the colonial missions. Fr. Bertout managed once again to prevent this plan from going ahead. Then again in 1830, with the overthrow of the monarchy, the Mother House was again invaded by the mob who entered and sacked everything in sight. The new government of King Philip disliked the Congregation and wanted to exclude its priests from the colonies; all subsidies were thenceforth withheld and Bertout had no alternative but to send his major seminarians home.⁴⁶ Bertout was able, with help from the Propaganda Fide, to re-open the following year, but on a much reduced scale due to shortage of funds.

The year after this, there was a cholera outbreak in the army and the existing hospitals could not cope with all the sick and dying. Fr. Bertout allowed the seminary buildings to be requisitioned as an emergency hospital, after receiving guarantees they would be returned afterwards. However, the government refused to give back the seminary to its owners when the emergency had passed. Koren summarises the sad situation thus:

This was the last straw. After thirty years of intense struggle, dashed hopes and ceaseless harassments, the eighty-year old Superior General found himself almost in the same position as when he had so hopefully started the work of restoration: most of his students had left, his funds were cut off, nearly all his confreres had abandoned him, and the government had seized his buildings once more. The shock was too much. He died before the end of the year 1832. Had he lived in happier times, his achievements undoubtedly would have rivalled the magnificent record of Fr. Bouic in the eighteenth century. As it is, his indomitable energy, perseverance and diplomacy in the service of God, saved the Congregation from what would otherwise have been inevitable extinction.⁴⁷

Despite all the setbacks, obstructions, and reverses Fr. Bertout had to deal with in the fifteen years preceding his death, he succeeded in sending out ninety-seven priests to the colonies.⁴⁸ At the time of Fr. Bertout's death, there were

46. Koren, *The Spiritans*, 54.

47. Koren, *The Spiritans*, 55.

48. Koren, *The Spiritans*, 55.

John McFadden CSSp

only three Spiritans left in the Seminary. One of them was his nephew, Fr. Amable Fourdinier, who had been assistant to Bertout since 1817, so he was all too aware of the great problems he himself was to face. With the same energy and commitment shown by his uncle, Fourdinier set about the task of getting the Congregation back on its feet again.

CONCLUSION

What we have seen in the life and times of Fr. Bertout are significant elements that many Spiritans since his time have known and experienced: a deep desire to serve God in a missionary situation; poor health interfering and impacting negatively on this desire; the abiding urge to be involved in the celebration of the sacraments and the instruction of the young; seeing at first hand situations of uncontrolled violence; forced evacuation into an unforeseen situation; the necessity of learning other languages and adapting to another culture; the central need to form and train young candidates willing to devote themselves to the preaching of the Gospel; the practical necessity of fund-raising and finding the means by which to carry on the work of evangelization; dealing with unsympathetic and often hostile state authorities; seeing one's life work come to nothing after much effort and dedication... One could go on, but this is the stuff of the Gospel story and having gone through all that, no doubt Fr. Bertout, like so many before and after him, would have been reminded of the words of the Lord in the Gospel of St. Luke: "When you have done all you have been commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants: we have done what we were obliged to do'" (Luke 17:10).

*John McFadden CSSp
Clivo di Cinna, Roma*