

## Sœur Léonide, Saint-Lazare, and the Legion of Honor

By

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Not long after the end of the bloody Parisian Commune of 1871 a young twenty-year-old nun belonging to the order of Marie-Joseph walked through the gates of Saint-Lazare in Paris and took up her new duties as a *sœur surveillante*. More than sixty years later when the prison was finally closed, this now venerable sister left Saint-Lazare as a decorated *chevalier* and *officier* of France's prestigious Legion of Honor.<sup>1</sup> Until the end of her long-life, Sœur Léonide proudly wore these colorful decorations on her habit.<sup>2</sup>

Justine-Julie Lateuligne (in religion Sœur Léonide) was born on March 21, 1852, at Coupiac.<sup>3</sup> From the time of her first communion at the age of eleven she was determined to become a religious. On a visit to Montpellier, when she was eighteen, she had her first contact with the Sœurs de Marie-Joseph and their innovative ministries with female prisoners and former prisoners. She soon entered the novitiate at the mother house in Dorat (Haute-Vienne) where she received her initial formation in religious life prior to her assignment at Saint-Lazare.

In the final decades of Saint-Lazare's existence, Sœur Léonide became the public symbol for the prison's "softer" or more human side. The strident rhetoric of the prison's many critics (especially as the facility aged very ungracefully) rarely extended to the Sœurs de Marie-Joseph.

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<sup>1</sup> The Legion of Honor (*Ordre national de la Légion d'honneur*) is the highest award granted by the French Republic. Originally founded by Napoleon in 1804, the Order is awarded in five degrees: *Chevalier* (Knight), *Officier* (Officer), *Commandeur* (Commander), *Grand Officier* (Grand Officer), and *Grand Croix* (Grand Cross). Sœur Léonide was awarded the Legion of Honor on December 31, 1928, and was promoted in 1931.

<sup>2</sup> Sœur Léonide was also the recipient of the *Croix de Guerre* and a medal awarded by the Department of prisons.

<sup>3</sup> A small town in the Department of Aveyron, in the region of the Midi-Pyrénées.

The popularity and almost romantic fame of Sœur Léonide was a reflection not only of her own “devotion and admirable selflessness,” but also that of all the sisters.<sup>4</sup>

In the publicity and subsequent memoirs and histories which surrounded the high profile prisoners at Saint-Lazare during this era, the role and presence of Sœur Léonide never escaped mention.<sup>5</sup> For example, in her *Memoirs*, Madame Steinheil described in great detail the awful physical conditions at Saint-Lazare, but also the always-humane and kind treatment afforded by her Sœur Léonide. She recalls that as she left the prison, “I thanked Sister Léonide for all she had done for me, but there must have been more gratitude in my eyes than in my words.”<sup>6</sup>

In the flood of post-war publicity about the imprisonment, trial, and execution of Mata-Hari, the role of Sœur Léonide in ministering to the condemned woman became part of the history and myth surrounding the episode.<sup>7</sup> According to Sœur Léonide’s own account, as they arrived at the place of execution Mata-Hari turned to her and said: “My little mother, promise me something. May I ask you to say a short prayer for me each day?” The nun later testified, “I have never failed to do so.”<sup>8</sup>

At the time of her promotion as an *Officier* of the Legion of Honor in 1931, the public citation noted:

...for exceptional services: in the course of her sixty years of service, Sœur Léonide has consecrated her life to the supervision and moral amendment of prisoners with an admirable devotion that joined together kindness and firmness.

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<sup>4</sup> “Sœur Léonide est promue officier de la Légion d’honneur,” *La Croix*, 7 August 1931, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Another famous nun from Saint-Lazare was the long-time superior Sœur Marie-Perpétue (Gabrielle-Claudine Chabat). Sœur Marie-Perpétue was also honored as a chevalier of the Legion of Honor in 1927. See, Archives Nationales: site de Paris, Cote LH/463/96.

<sup>6</sup> Marguerite Steinheil, *My Memoirs* (New York: Sturgis & Walton Company, 1912), 414.

<sup>7</sup> The figure of Sœur Léonide even appeared in the highly fictionalized 1931 film *Mata Hari* starring Greta Garbo.

<sup>8</sup> L. Ginistry, “71 ans de vie cellulaire pour l’amour de Dieu et du prochain,” *La Croix*, 12 December 1941, 4.

During the war she was specially charged by the *Conseil de Guerre* with the supervision of prisoners who had been sentenced to death. She acquitted herself of this painful and delicate task to the complete satisfaction of the administration. She in every way merits the high distinction for which she has been presented.<sup>9</sup>

The executions of spies and collaborators, and this special role of Sœur Léonide, did not conclude with the end of the First World War. In the vindictive post-war atmosphere, trials and executions of spies and collaborators continued for some time. Alice Aubert was another high-profile accused spy incarcerated at Saint-Lazare. She was among a group of spies and collaborators who were tried in 1920.<sup>10</sup> Condemned to death, she too was accompanied to her execution by Sœur Léonide. The woman's last words were recorded by the nun: "No, my sister it is not the justice of men that I fear, for what is this compared to God's justice? It is that, that I fear."<sup>11</sup>

When Sœur Léonide's Legion promotion was announced in 1931 one of her most famous former prisoners was fulsome in her praise. Marthe Hannau (1890-1935) had been the mastermind behind a huge financial fraud. She was the Bernard Madoff of France in the late 1920s. She was imprisoned for eighteen months at Saint-Lazare during the time of her very public and sensational trial. At one point, she went on a hunger strike in prison and the authorities removed her to a hospital where she was force-fed. She escaped from the hospital

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<sup>9</sup> "La Citation de Sœur Léonide," *La Croix*, 10 August 1931, 5.

<sup>10</sup> "Try French Spies for Aiding Germans," *The New York Times*, 23 March 1920. See also, "La quadruple execution d'hier matin," *La Petite Parisien*, 16 May 1920, 1.

<sup>11</sup> L. Ginistry, "71 ans de vie cellulaire," 4.

and went directly back to Saint-Lazare. To the warden's great surprise she entered his office and said: "I demand to be re-imprisoned here."<sup>12</sup>

After her release from Saint-Lazare she bought the magazine *Forces*. It was in the pages of this publication that she had this to say about Sœur Léonide:

Since my former cell was so close to yours (the prison sisters lived in cells among the prisoners) I watched and listened to you very carefully my good sister. I know that the assistance that you afforded me reflects all that you did day after day to relieve such atrocious suffering there. You have fulfilled, to the highest degree, your noble mission to relieve pain and suffering on this earth. It is you, Sœur Léonide who honor the Legion.<sup>13</sup>

After the closure of Saint-Lazare, Sœur Léonide continued her prison ministry at la Petite-Roquette in Paris until September 1941 when, at the age of 89, she retired to the sisters' mother house at Dorat.

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<sup>12</sup> "France: Café au Lait," *Time Magazine*, 31 March 1930.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*