

Reynolds's News and Miscellany

HISTORY, LITERATURE, POETRY, AND LITERARY CRITICISM

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The Real Bishop of Digne: The Man Behind Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*

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Anything he might have allowed himself beyond what was absolutely necessary, he would have regarded as a theft committed against the poor, and consequently against God.

[Tout ce qu'il se fût accordé au-delà de l'absolu nécessaire, il l'eût regardé comme un larcin fait aux indigents, et, par suite, à Dieu.]

L.J. Bondil, *Discours sur la vie et les vertus de Monseigneur Charles-François-Melchior-Bienvenu de Miollis* (1843)

The town of Digne, in [France](#), at the beginning of the nineteenth century, was a picturesque collection of rustic dwellings gathered at the foot of the Alps. Seen from above, the town lay both sheltered and exposed: it was partly enclosed by the old castle walls, some sections in picturesque ruins, while other parts stood tall. The whole was held in place by the river to one side and the mountains behind, yet open to the wide sky above. Even now, the roofs of the houses are packed closely together around a central church, whose pale stone and square tower rise with quiet self-assurance above the surrounding dwellings. Behind this scene, the rugged hills ascend steeply, their cliffs pale and unyielding. Overhead, the clouds drift in unhurried formations; the entire scene giving the impression of a place that has learned how to endure quietly.

The medieval ramparts which encircled the town spoke to its inward character. Life continued much as it had done in the days of the French kings. The streets remained unpaved, and unlighted. There existed no provision for the removal of manure from the streets, which, at times, rendered traffic to and from the small houses somewhat unpleasant. Even the proud central church around which town life revolved was dilapidated.¹ In short, very little about the town could lay claim to modernity.

¹ Françoise Delannoy, et al., *The Inspirational Life of Monseigneur de Miollis: Discover the French bishop who inspired Victor Hugo in writing Les Misérables* (New York: Magnificat, 2024), Kindle, ch. 1, Location 79.

THE GUICHARD PRINTING HOUSE AND THE PUBLICATION OF BIENVENU DE MIOLLIS'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

This small town in the part of the century about which we write did, however, boast a family publishing house that went by the name of Guichard. The firm's founder, André Agricol Guichard (1781–1833), born in Avignon, received a printing licence on 1 August 1816 from the Royal Printing Office. His wife, Adélaïde Marie Anne (née Eyssautier), worked with her husband eking out a living by producing lithographs because he was denied the permission to sell books. The extent of Adélaïde's involvement at this time is unknown; the couple had had a son, André Firmin, two years before André obtained his licence and, given the custom of French society at the time, the lion's share of the caring responsibilities for young André would have fallen to the mother. It is not known when Guichard moved to Digne, but by 1828 he was in Digne, at 7, Place de l'Évêché, and finally authorised to both print and sell books. Guichard was called to Digne at the behest of the diocesan authorities and served as the town's ecclesiastical printer and the firm's output consisted mainly of saints' lives and sermons.²

Tragedy struck the small family in 1833 when André died. His wife, as the law permitted her to do, then assumed the printing and bookselling licence which she would hold until her son was ready to take over the business, which he did in 1836.³ It was during Adélaïde's tenure that a local canon, L.J. Bondil, would have presented to Adélaïde the manuscript of a book which, when printed, was given the title *Discours sur la vie et les vertus de Monseigneur Charles-François-Melchior-Bienvenu de Miollis* (1843) ("Discourse on the Life and Virtues of Monseigneur Charles-François-Melchior-Bienvenu de Miollis"). Bondil's book, more a hagiography than a biography, gave readers the very first glimpse of the real man whom readers and theatre-going audiences would come to know as the Bishop M. Charles-François-Bienvenu Myriel of Digne in Victor Hugo's epic of *Les Misérables* (1862).

THE SON OF A COUNCILLOR

Hugo, evidently having read Bondil's work, made very little attempt to disguise the identity of his fictional bishop. The similarity of Hugo's bishop's name, M. Charles-François-Bienvenu Myriel, and that of the man himself, Charles-François-Melchior-Bienvenu de Miollis, is telling enough. The *real* bishop, Bienvenu de Miollis, was born on 19 June 1753 in the town of Aix-en-Provence. He hailed from a modestly affluent and well-respected family. Little is known of the life of the future bishop's mother, Delphine-Thérèse Boyer de Fontcolombe, but that she came from a family of which generations of male line had enjoyed eminent parochial government positions.⁴ Further light can be shed on Bienvenu de Miollis's father, Joseph-Laurent de Miollis. Hugo, when he introduced readers to Myriel, said that he was "was the son of a councillor of the Parliament of Aix."⁵ Joseph-Laurent was indeed a councillor and minister of accounts in the Parlement of Provence. The parlement was responsible for administering justice and the collection of taxes. The salaries for the parlement's provincial councillors were modest; they earned between 800 and 1,000 livres per annum, in contrast to councillors from the larger cities where an office holder might earn 40,000 livres.⁶

² Anon. 'Guichard, André Agricol', *Dictionnaire des imprimeurs-lithographes du XIXe siècle* <<http://elec.enc.sorbonne.fr/imprimeurs/node/23328>> [accessed 26 January 2026].

³ Anon. 'EYSSAUTIER, widow GUICHARD Adélaïde, Marie, Anne', *Dictionnaire des imprimeurs-lithographes du XIXe siècle* <<http://elec.enc.sorbonne.fr/imprimeurs/node/23329>> [accessed 26 January 2026].

⁴ Delannoy, et al., *The Inspirational Life of Monseigneur de Miollis*, ch. 1, location 96.

⁵ Hugo, *Les Misérables*, I, p. 1.

⁶ Monique Cubells, 'Le Parlement de Provence', n.d. <<http://www.citedulivre-aix.com/Typo3/fileadmin/documents/Expositions/parlement/html/texte.htm>> [accessed 30 January 2026].

Despite the modest salary, it was by no means unprofitable for a councillor to perform their duties to the best of their ability for further rewards might follow, notably: ascension into the ranks of the Second Estate. French society under the *ancien regime*—that is, before 1789—was comprised broadly of three “estates.” The clergy were the First Estate; the aristocracy were the Second Estate; and commoners formed the Third Estate. Sitting atop this social hierarchy was the monarch. Joseph Laurent was ennobled, via letters patent, by King Louis XV in 1769 for his services to the region. The salary remained the same but it would mean that the family were, like the clergy, exempt from direct taxes on any lands they held but were liable to pay the *capitation* (poll tax) and the *vingtieme* (income tax), as well as any duties associated with the purchase of goods and services. Meantime, the Third Estate bore the greatest brunt of the tax burden despite being relatively poorer.

“IT WAS THE EFFECT OF HIS FAITH”

From commoner to aristocracy, the provincial family was rising through the ranks of the *ancien regime*. Bienvenu de Miollis was the third son of a large family and one of 16 children (seven of whom died in infancy). The noble title could only pass to one of them, the first-born. Such was the doctrine of *primogeniture*, which stipulated that only the eldest son could inherit a noble family’s land and titles. What Joseph-Laurent needed to do was to fix each of his sons in a station of life in which they would be able to thrive after his departure from the world.

Joseph-Laurent was a pious man and the head of a holy family. The young Catholic Hugo would have admired the family’s faithfulness; their morning started always with family prayers and readings from the catechism. Bienvenu de Miollis may not have been the first-born son to whom the noble title would pass, but he was an intelligent young man, and a career in the church beckoned. Into this career did young Bienvenu de Miollis progress, earning his baccalaureate, then his licentiate, and then his doctorate in theology by the age of 23.⁷ On 20 September 1777, the young man was ordained a priest.

The future bishop, in the early part of his life, appears as a man who was devoted to his studies. But *Les Misérables* is a tale of redemption, and a major preoccupation of Hugo’s novel is the change, for good or ill, that comes over certain characters as they progress throughout the narrative. Hugo’s bishop, then, had once been married and “the earlier part of his life was devoted to the world and to gallantry.”⁸ While the modern meaning of “*gallantry*” carries connotations of bravery in battle, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century word was associated with drinking and promiscuity. No—such a life was not for the studious and pious young cleric. Witness the words of his biographer:

“Who knew him, and was not often edified by his indifference to the amusements of this world, by his complete renunciation of pleasures, even those most innocent? It was the effect of his faith: it revealed to him the emptiness and frivolity of the entertainments of this life, and he deemed them unworthy of occupying hearts made for an eternal happiness.”⁹

“Qui l’a connu et n’a été souvent édifié de son indifférence pour les passe-temps d’ici-bas, de son renoncement complet aux plaisirs les plus permis, aux jeux les plus innocents? C’était l’effet de sa foi; elle lui découvrait le vide et la frivolité des amusements de cette vie, et il les croyait indignes d’occuper longtemps des cœurs faits pour une éternelle félicité.”

⁷ Delannoy, et al., *The Inspirational Life of Monseigneur de Miollis*, ch. 1, location 143.

⁸ Hugo, *Les Misérables*, p. 1.

⁹ L.J. Bondil, *Discours sur la vie et les vertus de Monseigneur Charles-François-Melchior-Bienvenu de Miollis* (Digne: Guicahrd, 1843), p. 17.

The narrative of Hugo's bishop's life, as we shall see, both converges and diverges with the history of Bienvenu de Miollis in several places.

Bienvenu de Miollis's first appointment, after he was ordained, was in the town of Brignoles. About a day's walk from his native Aix, Brignoles was, in character, much like his hometown. An inland town enclosed by low hills, from above, the town is compact and appears as though it had grown inward rather outward. The narrow streets, filtering like brooks away from the main squares, seemed to fold inward, almost pressing the terracotta roofs of the dwellings together, as though the town had learned long ago to contain itself. The buildings themselves were rustic but not neglected, and it was in these edifices that the larger part of the inhabitants, most of whom were members of the labouring poor or artisanal classes, lived and worked. Even the lifestyles of the bourgeoisie were, just as in Aix, relatively modest when compared to their wealthier counterparts in the capital. The trades that people occupied themselves with in this simple town were papermaking, soap making, tanning, cork making, and perfumery trades. Out of the limits of this settlement, the landscape provided employment for bauxite miners.¹⁰

It was in this town that Bienvenu de Miollis preached the gospel to its poorer inhabitants. He was not one of those hypocritical priests with whom one meets in the pages of early nineteenth-century French literature. He devoted his life to ministering to the poor. But soon events, far away in Paris, would change his world forever.

THE ESTATES GENERAL

On 5 May 1789, the French king, Louis XVI, convened a meeting of the Estates General at the Assembly of Notables in Versailles. French society at the time was divided into three estates: the clergy, or First Estate; the aristocracy, or Second Estate; and the commoners (comprising the bourgeoisie and the labouring classes), or the Third Estate.

The meeting was, for all Frenchman living in 1789, unprecedented. The last time that a meeting of the Estates General had been convened was in 1614. The French state needed a solution to its financial problems. Having helped the Thirteen American Colonies win their war of independence against Great Britain, the nation's finances were in a parlous state: the American war had cost the French state 1.5 billion livres.

Initially, the reception that the king and the representatives received as they processed through the streets of Versailles to the assembly hall was positive. Shouts of "Vive le Roi" ("Long Live the King") echoed down the Rue des Chantiers as the representatives made their way.¹¹ But the approbation that fell on the king's ears that day masked a deeper dislike for the Louis's consort, Marie Antoinette, and a burning dissatisfaction, on the part of the Third Estate, with the privileges enjoyed by their "betters." The clergy and the aristocracy, as we have seen, were largely exempt from taxation save for a few indirect or occasional taxes; the major share of the taxes thus fell on the backs of the poor.

It was to ameliorate the nation's financial woes, representatives of all three estates were invited to discuss the matter. After the king gave an opening speech, it was the turn of Louis's finance minister, Jacques Necker, to give the full lay of the land. His speech of approximately three hours' length reportedly bored the audience. The ensuing debates were not to go smoothly; from the outset, the deck was stacked against the representatives of the commons. Voting rights at the Estates General were not by head but by Estate, meaning that the Third Estate would always be outvoted by the Second and First Estate (for the latter two Estates mostly voted together). The commons' first solution was to invite members of the clergy to join them and vote, as occasion might require, against the aristocracy. Some of the more progressive members of the priesthood and the aristocracy did indeed

¹⁰ Peter McPhee, *A Social History of France 1780-1914* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2017), p. 149.

¹¹ Christopher Hibbert, *The French Revolution*, 2nd edn (London: Penguin, 1982), p. 50.

join them. From the beginning the Third Estate counted among their ranks Honoré Gabriel Riqueti, comte de Mirabeau (1749–91), who, like Bienvenu de Miollis, hailed from Aix en Provence; they also had the outspoken Louis Philippe Joseph d'Orléans (1747–93), a prince of royal blood who believed in the principles of the revolution so much that he renamed himself Phillipe Egalité.

With members of the clergy and aristocracy and even royalty now on the side of the Third Estate, one argument advanced by the Abbé Sieyès came to look like common sense: the Third Estate now represented more than 96 per cent of the nation, henceforth they should consider themselves the representative body of the entire nation and begin the important work of repairing the nation's finances, whether the king gave his consent to the new arrangement or not.¹² After this realisation, there seemed little point in retaining the old feudal name of Third Estate. No—as a new body they constituted an assembly of the representatives of the entire nation, and what better name could they give themselves than that of the “National Assembly”?

The new name was adopted on 17 June. But when the 576 representatives of the National Assembly tried to enter the Salle des Menus-Plaisir where the proceedings of the Estates General were taking place, the door was locked against them. Seizing the momentum, the National Assembly's representatives retired to the royal tennis court and there they all took the following oath:

“Considering that it has been called to establish the constitution of the realm, to bring about the regeneration of public order, and to maintain the true principles of monarchy; nothing may prevent it from continuing its deliberations in any place it is forced to establish itself; and, finally, the National Assembly exists wherever its members are gathered. Decrees that all members of this Assembly immediately take a solemn oath never to separate, and to reassemble wherever circumstances require until the constitution of the realm is established and fixed upon solid foundations; and that said oath having been sworn, all members and each one individually confirms this unwavering resolution with his signature. We swear never to separate ourselves from the National Assembly, and to reassemble wherever circumstances require until the constitution of the realm is drawn up and fixed upon solid foundations.”¹³

A revolutionary act. The assembly would not disband until the king granted a constitution that guaranteed their rights. As a result of this oath, political sovereignty in France now resided not with the monarch in a specific place but with the people and their representatives in the National Assembly, wherever those representatives chose to deliberate. Louis and the remaining nobles now had no choice but to endorse the National Assembly.

FORWARD YE MADDENED SONS OF FRANCE

“But judge,” exclaimed Thomas Carlyle, “if France, if Paris, sat idle all this while!”¹⁴ If debates were heated inside the chambers, the atmosphere on the streets of Paris was reaching boiling point. Conservative members of the nobility had convinced Louis XVI to dismiss Necker from office on 11 July. At the same time, Parisians surveyed the number of foreign mercenary troops stationed in Paris and saw that the hated symbol of medieval royal tyranny—the Bastille prison—had recently been reinforced with Swiss mercenaries. One of the most logical conclusions that the French people could draw from such occurrences was that conservative elements among the aristocracy were plotting to end the revolution. The people of Paris decided to establish, under the command of

¹² Hibbert, *The French Revolution*, 55.

¹³ Laura Mason, Trans. ‘Gazette Nationale, ou Le Moniteur universel’, in *The French Revolution: A Document Collection*, ed. by Laura Mason and Tracey Rizzo (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), pp. 60-61.

¹⁴ Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution: A History* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1889), p. 128.

the Marquis de Lafayette, a bourgeois militia composed of citizens. As a counter to the royal army, the new militia was named the National Guard. It was the people of Paris, and soldiers of the new National Guard, who on 14 July stormed the Bastille, released its political prisoners, lynched three of the soldiers who were on duty and executed the prison's governor. Their heads were paraded on spikes through the streets.

The revolution was turning violent. The unrest was by no means limited to Paris. In France's southern countryside, from the Rhône Valley to Provence—where Bienvenu de Miollis lived and ministered to the poor—famine took hold. The famine, so thought the rural peasants, was a plot by the aristocracy to starve the common people and weaken the gains wrought by the revolution. This was *la grande peur* ("the Great Fear").¹⁵ Riots ensued:—

“Forward, ye maddened sons of France; be it towards this destiny or towards that! Around you is but starvation, falsehood, corruption, and the claim of death. Where ye are is no abiding.”¹⁶

The peasants revolted—the rural estates of some of the nobility were attacked by armed multitudes, often with the tacit approval, if not the participation, of the local bourgeoisie and artisans.¹⁷ It is not, at the same time, to be supposed that the rural rioters were guilty of indiscriminate and mindless violence. When they stormed the houses of the nobility, they sought out the documents which confirmed their lordships' feudal privileges and burnt them, often sparing the houses themselves, and rarely harming the persons of the nobles themselves.¹⁸

The rural peasants used physical force to mount an attack upon class-based privilege, the representatives in the debating chamber attempted to use moral force to attack it in the debating chamber. A major achievement in the demolition of upper class privileges was the adoption, on 26 August, by the National Assembly, of the *Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen* ("Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen.") It declared that

“Les hommes naissent et demeurent libres et égaux en droits. Les distinctions sociales ne peuvent être fondées que sur l'utilité commune.” (“All men are born free and remain equal in rights. Social distinctions may be founded only upon the general good.”)

The principle of equality before the law had arrived. Tax, furthermore, would also be collected from people of all classes according to their ability to pay.

THE CIVIL CONSTITUTION OF THE CLERGY

“When the Revolution broke out,” wrote Bienvenu de Miollis's biographer, “it was with deep sorrow that he found himself compelled to interrupt the humble duties of his pious ministry.”¹⁹ In tandem with the adoption of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen came a raid on church finances, and a broader attack on the activities of the church as a whole. The nation's financial woes still remained to be solved, and here was an organisation whose boasted wealth in land and money amounted to a perhaps exaggerated 150 million livres. On 2 September 1789, the newly-established National Constituent Assembly decreed that all church land must be placed at the disposal of the nation. Further attacks on the church's wealth followed; tithes were banned and much

¹⁵ John M. Merriman, *A History of Modern Europe from the French Revolution to the Present*, 2 vols (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1996), I, p. 481.

¹⁶ Carlyle, *The French Revolution*, p. 144.

¹⁷ William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 114–15.

¹⁸ Georges Lefebvre, *The Great Fear of 1789: Rural Panic in Revolutionary France* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. 118.

¹⁹ Bondil, *Discours sur la vie et les vertus de Monseigneur Charles-François-Melchior-Bienvenu de Miollis*, p. 38. In original: ‘Quand la révolution eut éclaté, ce fut avec une vive douleur qu'il se vit contraint d'interrompre les humbles fonctions de son pieux ministère.’

of the church's lands, which constituted one-sixth of all the land in France, were auctioned off to investors.²⁰ The Constituent Assembly moved to ban anyone from taking holy orders and then, on 13 February 1790, all monasteries were ordered to be closed. Such an attack on the Catholic Church had not occurred in Europe since the days of England's Reformation in the sixteenth century.

To the new revolutionary constitution should *citizens* (no longer "subjects") show the utmost loyalty. Yet, there was one class of people in the country who gave their loyalty to another figure outside the nation. The Pope in Rome was the figure to whom the clergy looked to for authority. The National Assembly, stuffed as it was with bourgeois intellectuals, philosophers, deists, and political radicals, decided, on 27 November 1790, that priests and clerics of all ranks must now show their loyalty to the nation by taking the Oath to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. The name of the oath seemed very undramatic. Its first few articles called for changes in the organisation of the church in France. The number of dioceses was to be just ten, and bishops were to be elected by the people of France rather than appointed by the Holy Father. Protestants, Jewish people, as well as Catholics, could potentially influence Church matters. Had the Civil Constitution of the Clergy limited itself to bureaucratic restructuring, however, it perhaps would not have generated much controversy. However, the real test of faith for many bishops and priests came with Article IV:

"No church or parish of France nor any French citizen may acknowledge upon any occasion, or upon any pretext whatsoever, the authority of an ordinary bishop or of an archbishop whose see shall be under the supremacy of a foreign power, nor that of his representatives residing in France or elsewhere; without prejudice, however, to the unity of the faith and the intercourse which shall be maintained with the visible head of the universal Church, as hereafter provided."²¹

Henceforth, priests could acknowledge the Pope as head of the church, but his authority on matters of faith did not extend into France. Many priests were in favour of taking the Oath to the Civil Constitution. Once they had taken the oath they become known as "juring priests." Popular prints from the time celebrated the juring priest as "le pretre patriote" (the "patriot priest").²² Those who refused to take the oath—and they were numerous—were deemed "refractory clergy." The Catholic Church in France was now split between the "patriots" and those who clung to the old order. The divisions spread beyond the narrow confines of the theological seminary and impacted family life. Some families accepted the judgement of their priests who had taken the oath while the rural poor would only give their moral support to the priests who had refused.²³

Thus, "the Revolution came," said Hugo, "events hurried; the parliamentary families, decimated and hunted down, became dispersed. M. Charles Myriel emigrated to Italy in the early part of the Revolution."²⁴ We know not what Bienvenu de Miollis's thoughts on the initial events of the revolution were, but the Oath to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy was something to which he could not consent. He became a member of the Refractory Clergy. He, too, like is fictional counterpart, emigrated to Italy when it was clear that his refusal to take the oath meant that he would be stripped of what little income he gained from his position as treasurer of the university at Aix.²⁵

²⁰ Mike Rapport, *Rebel Cities: Paris, London, and New York in the Age of Revolution* (London: Abacus, 2017), p. 214.

²¹ Anon. "The Civil Constitution of the Clergy, July 12, 1790", in *Readings in European History*, ed. by J.H. Robinson, 2 vols (Boston: Ginn, 1906), II, pp. 423-427.

²² *Pretre patriote pretant de bonne foi le serment civique* (Paris: Villeneuve, 1790), Paris, Bibliotheque Nationale de France, <http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb41089872h>

²³ Hibbert, *The French Revolution*, p. 112.

²⁴ Hugo, *Les Misérables*, I, p. 2.

²⁵ Delannoy, et al., *The Inspirational Life of Monseigneur de Miollis*, p. 21.

Bienvenu de Miollis went straight to Rome and settled in the Convent of Sant'Onofrio. Although little survives of his daily life in the Eternal City, through some of his recollections later in life, the impression is that it was quite a solitary existence, and a poor one. The admirable priest “accepted as a favour the privations and hardships of exile.”²⁶ Nevertheless, his faith spurred him on:

“Who knew him, and did not often admire the equality of his soul in difficult circumstances, his submission to all events, his resignation amid even the most painful trials?”²⁷

He certainly did not have a wife in Italy, although the fictionalised Myriel had one.²⁸ Hugo’s insertion of this false biographical detail into Bienvenu de Miollis’s life did not please the good bishop’s brother after the novel was released, as did the invention of the bishop’s youthful “gallantry”:

After having thus clearly indicated my uncle, M. Victor Hugo had no right to introduce details wholly contrary to truth, and of a defamatory character. “It was said,” he writes, “that his father had married him very young, at eighteen or twenty years of age. Charles Myriel, notwithstanding his marriage, had, it was said, caused much talk. He was well formed, though rather short, elegant, graceful, and witty. The whole of the first portion of his life had been given up to society and to gallantry.”

It is my duty to protest against these statements, which are entirely unfounded, and to declare in the most formal manner that the principles attributed on certain occasions to Bishop Myriel were never those of Monseigneur de Miollis.

Monseigneur Charles-Bienvenu de Miollis was never married. The whole of his youth and of his priestly life was marked by the most fervent piety and by an example of exemplary regularity. His evangelical gentleness was often remarked in circumstances wherein even the most practised patience might have failed. I appeal to the testimony of all who knew him in Provence up to the year 1843.²⁹

Francis de Miollis

No—the future bishop’s life in Rome was largely spent in devotion to the Christian religion and communion with the saints. As his hagiographer observed:

²⁶ Bondil, *Discours sur la vie et les vertus de Monseigneur Charles-François-Melchior-Bienvenu de Miollis*, p. 45. In original: ‘il accepta comme une faveur les privations et les amertumes de l’exil.’

²⁷ Bondil, *Discours sur la vie et les vertus de Monseigneur Charles-François-Melchior-Bienvenu de Miollis*, p. 16.

²⁸ Hugo, *Les Misérables*, I, p. 2.

²⁹ Francis de Miollis, ‘Lettre de M. Francis de Miollis au journal *L’Union*’, 21 April 1862 <<http://seditious.frenchboys.net/miollis.html>> [accessed 12 February 2026]. In original: ‘Après avoir si clairement indiqué mon oncle, M. Victor Hugo n’avait plus le droit d’ajouter des détails complètement contraires à la vérité, et qui ont un caractère diffamatoire. «On contait, dit-il, que son père l’avait marié de fort bonne heure, à dix-huit ou vingt ans. Charles Myriel, nonobstant son mariage, avait, disait-on, fait beaucoup parler de lui. Il était bien fait de sa personne, quoique d’assez petite taille, élégant, gracieux, spirituel. Toute la première partie de sa vie avait été donnée au monde et aux galanteries... » Il est de mon devoir de protester contre ces détails qui sont complètement faux, et de déclarer de la manière la plus formelle que les principes qu’on prête, en quelques circonstances, à l’évêque Myriel n’ont jamais été ceux de Mgr Miollis. Mgr Charles Bienvenu de Miollis n’a jamais été marié. Tout le temps de sa jeunesse et de son sacerdoce a été marqué au coin de la plus fervent piété et d’une régularité exemplaire. Sa douceur évangélique a souvent été signalée dans des circonstances où la patience la plus exercée eût pu faillir. J’en appelle au témoignage de tous ceux qui ont pu le connaître en Provence jusqu’en 1843.’

He would recount with pleasure what had most deeply moved him during his stay in Rome [...] you heard the solemn Litanies echoing over the waters of the Tiber, as the procession passed over the bridge in front of Hadrian's mausoleum; he would lead you down into the dark dungeon where Saints Peter and Paul were chained; you followed him to the Vatican, beneath the magnificent dome where the first reposes; along the Ostian Way, amid the ancient columns that adorned the tomb of the second. He would point out to you: here, the gridiron upon which Saint Lawrence was horribly tortured; there, the bath in which Saint Cecilia was suffocated; farther on, the well where Saint Praxedes gathered the blood of the martyrs; elsewhere, the venerable site where, by order of Julian the Apostate, the holy and courageous brothers John and Paul were beheaded. He would open to you the dark depths of the catacombs; then he would speak to you of those little roadside shrines that protect the houses in every street, and before which, in the evening, by the light of candles, popular piety raises the joyful cry of *Vive Marie, vive son Créateur*.³⁰

He also devoted himself to the study of historical architecture and left eleven volumes, all of which remain unpublished, of a planned book titled *Observations sur la Rome ancienne et moderne* ("Observations on ancient and modern Rome").³¹

Back in France, Catholicism came under increasing attack. A towering symbol in stone of the new hostility to the church was the rededication of the newly-built Church of Saint Genevieve into the Panthéon, which would house the relics and remains, not of any long-dead saints, but of people who were held dear to the revolution. The revolution generally became ever more violent, especially once the Montagnards—led by Maximilien Robespierre—gained ascendancy over the moderate Girondins in the National Assembly and the later Legislative Assembly. A great number of the Montagnard (or "Mountain") Party had been members of *La Société des Jacobins, amis de la liberté et de l'égalité* ("The Society of the Jacobins, Friends of Liberty and Equality"). They were, despite their anodyne name, a radical debating club who believed that the gains of the revolution needed protecting from its enemies within and without and who, being "friends of liberty," denounced the monarchy.

Priests were fair game for radicals. With profound sadness and mourning did a letter arrive to Bienvenu de Miollis in Italy of the death of one of his former priest colleagues at the hands of the local Jacobins, who had thrown the cleric into the River Var where he drowned. Moved with sorrow, the exiled priest made an internal vow never to return to France until the Church was restored:

"For my part, ever more overwhelmed, I withdraw further and further from a land that leads its inhabitants astray; and I go into solitude to weep for my virtuous friend, until it shall please the Lord to restore peace to His Church and liberty to our country."³²

³⁰ Bondil, *Discours sur la vie et les vertus de Monseigneur Charles-François-Melchior-Bienvenu de Miollis*, p. 18. In original: 'Il redisait avec plaisir ce qui l'avait le plus touché pendant son séjour à Rome : vous assistiez aux cérémonies attendrissantes de la semaine sainte ; vous entendiez les Litanies solennelles retentir sur les flots du Tibre, lorsque la procession passait sur le pont et devant le mausolée d'Adrien ; il vous faisait descendre dans le sombre cachot où furent enchaînés saint Pierre et saint Paul ; vous le suiviez au Vatican sous la coupole magnifique où repose le premier, sur la voie d'Ostie au milieu des colonnes antiques qui décoraient le tombeau du second. Il vous montrait: là, le gril sur lequel fut horriblement tourmenté le diacre Laurent; ici, le bain dans lequel fut étouffée sainte Cécile ; plus loin, le puits où sainte Praxède recueillait le sang des martyrs; ailleurs, le lieu vénérable où furent décapités, par ordre de Julien l'Apostat, les saints et courageux frères Jean et Paul ; il vous ouvrait les noires profondeurs des catacombes ; ensuite il vous parlait des madones qui protègent les maisons dans toutes les rues, et devant lesquelles, le soir, à la lueur des cierges, la piété populaire pousse le cri joyeux de Vive Marie, vive son Créateur!'

³¹ Delannoy, et al., *The Inspirational Life of Monseigneur de Miollis*, p. 21.

³² Bondil, *Discours sur la vie et les vertus de Monseigneur Charles-François-Melchior-Bienvenu de Miollis*, p. 115. In original: 'Pour moi, toujours plus accablé, je m'éloigne toujours davantage d'une terre qui dévoie ses habitants ; et je vais dans la solitude, pleurer mon vertueux ami, jusqu'à ce qu'il plaise au Seigneur de rendre la paix à son Église, et la liberté à notre patrie.'

Louis XVI had increasingly been at odds with the Legislative Assembly and with the more hard-line revolutionaries in the Legislative Assembly. He had attempted to flee from Paris in June 1791 and might have made it over the border into the Austrian-controlled Netherlands, had not he been found in the town of Varennes. Even in the eyes of his supporters, the attempted escape was unacceptable and for his detractors, who gathered in coffeehouses and had the power of the printed word at their disposal, this was tantamount to a repudiation of the revolution. Back to an increasingly hostile Paris were Louis and his family brought.

The new constitution had given him the power of a veto over any measures and, unable to escape, he began to use it. Many Frenchmen, including Bienvenu de Miollis, had fled to neighbouring countries when the revolution began to evolve into something that they could no longer support. To stem the tide of these “traitors” leaving the country, the Legislative Assembly, on 9 November 1791, presented a bill to the king for him to give it royal assent. The bill required that any *émigrés* found on the border be subject to the death penalty. Louis rejected the bill. This was not the only time he used the royal veto, and his position as constitutional monarch of the new revolutionary state became increasingly untenable.

THE REIGN OF TERROR BEGINS

Bienvenu de Miollis’s nephew, Francis de Miollis, wrote in 1862 that “All his life, he was the faithful defender of the Church and the Papacy. The Revolution never found an adherent in him.”³³ Even if the future Bishop of Digne might once have been tempted to take the Oath of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy and stay in France, his life as a priest would have become increasingly more difficult as the revolution’s assault on the Catholic Church continued. Bienvenu de Miollis had voluntarily fled France in 1791, but if the legislature had gotten its way, the decision might have been made for him just a little later for, on 27 May 1791, the assembly ordered that any priests who refused to sign the Oath to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy be deported. The king stepped in once again and vetoed this law, further alienating him from some of the hard-line radicals who would only have been happy to dispense with his services as the constitutional head of the nation.

The king, who by this point was lodged in the Tuileries Palace with his family, was not helped by the fact that the Austrian army had begun marching on Paris vowing to defend the monarchy. The king’s weakening position, along with a perceived return to absolutist tyranny through his use of the royal veto, meant that those who previously had only hinted at the abolition of the monarchy now called for it in the open. On 4 August 1792, representatives for virtually the whole of Paris sent a petition calling for the removal of the king and the establishment of a republic. If their demands were not met, they would call an insurrection on 10 August. The day before the promised insurrection, Georges Danton and his “Cordelier” faction (who were closely associated with the Jacobins) took control of Paris’s town hall and established the Revolutionary Paris Commune.

On the day appointed for the insurrection, a mob of sans culottes and members of the National Guard stormed the Tuileries. The Swiss guards who were defending the royal family were all massacred. The king and his terrified family took refuge in the Legislative Assembly. Yet if the king were hoping for succour, it would not be forthcoming from the assembly. On the same day that the visibly terrified family threw themselves upon the mercy of the legislature, deputies responded by suspending the authority of the king and ordering the formation of an entirely new legislature: The National Convention. The first French Republic was born. A thousand years of monarchy ended.

³³ de Miollis, ‘Lettre de M. Francis de Miollis au journal L’Union’. In original: ‘Toute sa vie il a été le fidèle défenseur de l’Église et de la Papauté. La Révolution n’a jamais pu trouver en lui un adhérent’.

Bienvenu de Miollis was a royalist.³⁴ He also despised the National Convention.³⁵ The following events would surely have saddened the good priest and loyal subject of Louis XVI. The Convention elected an Executive Committee on 11 August, headed by Danton. The next day the royal family were imprisoned in the temple. No longer king, Louis XVI Bourbon was renamed Citizen Capet, a name derived from his distant medieval ancestor Hugh Capet. Louis had a surname just like any other French citizen.

With Danton in charge, the Parisian communes were authorised to begin arresting and imprisoning the supposed enemies of the revolution. The church came under attack again. Religious schools and hospitals were abolished. The Petit Séminaire Saint-Eutrope (“Saint-Eutrope Little Seminary”), where Bienvenu de Miollis studied to enter the priesthood, was a victim of the abolition of religious schools. All items of gold and silver in every church throughout the length and breadth of the country were requisitioned by the state.

The former king posed an awkward problem for the revolutionary leadership. They could depose him, but he remained a potent symbol—something for peasants and provincial nobles alike to rally around. With rebellion at home and foreign armies at the borders, Robespierre rose in the Convention on 3 December 1792 to argue that the king must die. The trial that followed had the air of due process, but the outcome was scarcely in doubt. On 21 January 1793 Louis was executed by the guillotine, still a comparatively new machine, promoted as a more “humane” form of judicial death.

The fictional bishop, Mgr. Myriel, was also depicted as a royalist and in the early part of *Les Misérables* enters into a political and philosophical debate regarding the rights and wrongs republican government with a “Conventionalist” (Member of the National Convention). Although Myriel gives the man grudging respect for not having joined the regicides, it is clear that Hugo’s bishop had no respect for the republican form of government:

“I congratulate you,” [Myriel] said in a tone of reprimand; “at least you did not vote the king’s death.”

The republican did not seem to notice the covert bitterness of the words, *at least*; he replied without a smile: “Do not congratulate me, sir: I voted for the death of the tyrant.” It was the accent of austerity opposed to that of sternness.

“What do you mean?” replied the bishop.

“I mean that man has a tyrant,—Ignorance; and I voted for the death of that tyrant which engendered royalty, which is false authority, while knowledge is true authority. Man must be governed by knowledge only [...] as for Louis XVI., I said, ‘No.’ I do not believe I have the right to kill a man, but I feel it my duty to exterminate a tyrant,—that is to say, to put an end to the prostitution of women; an end to the slavery of men; and an end to night for children. In voting for the republic, I voted for all this: I voted for fraternity, concord, the Dawn! I aided in the overthrow of errors and prejudices; and such an overthrow produces light. We hurled down the old world.”³⁶

To the Conventionalist, all that was wrong with the “old world,” or “ancien regime,” was embodied in the monarchy. The trial and execution of Louis XVI were therefore

³⁴ Jean Cousin, ‘Mgr Myriel dans les ‘Misérables’, *Revue d’Histoire littéraire de la France*, 33: 3 (1926), pp. 420–26 (p. 424).

³⁵ Cousin, ‘Mgr Myriel dans les ‘Misérables’, p. 425.

³⁶ Hugo, *Les Misérables*, I, p. 41.

“Fatal breaths which blew upon the old torch of monarchy, that had burned for eighteen centuries, and blew it out. The decisive trial of all kings in this one king, was like the point of departure in the great war against the Past.”³⁷

Such was Hugo’s later verdict on the trial and execution of Louis XVI. The trial and execution of the king was a war waged against history. The tombs of medieval French monarchs were not safe from desecration. The Convention officially decreed that the tombs of historical French monarchs could be desecrated. Thus, the meaning of the word “revolution” was shifting. Where it had often implied a political “turn”—a restoration of lost rights, a return to an older order—it now increasingly signified rupture: progress purchased by breaking with the past.³⁸ In that logic, the offices of king, lord, and priest could not be reformed; they had to give way. Following this, if the revolution represented progress and its gains needing to be safeguarded at any cost, then the nation needed to rid itself of all enemies of the revolution.

“Revolution,” one of Hugo’s later novel’s characters would say, “is humanity’s surgeon, it cuts out the tumour, it cuts off the gangrened limb.”³⁹ The king was the first enemy that the nation needed to excise and then, during the Reign of Terror, upwards of another 40,000 souls lost their lives after revolutionary tribunals had decreed that they were traitors to the revolution. That they were fellow Frenchmen did not matter. The peasants from northern France, particularly in Brittany, could no longer brook the death of their king at the hands of the distant revolutionary government in Paris. Loyal to their king, their church, and their priest, they took up arms and rebelled against the revolutionary government. The War in the Vendée had arrived. It would be brutally suppressed by the powers that be.

REVOLUTIONARY FRANCE’S WARS OF LIBERATION

Bienvenu de Miollis was, when the Reign of Terror began, safely ensconced in Rome. Yet, even far away among the churches of Rome and the ruins of that once-great civilisation, he would come face-to-face with the revolution.

The king’s execution caused many neighbouring states, who had initially been neutral towards the revolution, to break off diplomatic relations with France. Three days after Louis’s guillotining, the British recalled their ambassadors from Paris. By 1 February, the French Republic declared war on Great Britain and the Dutch Republic. Nor were Britain and the Netherlands the only powers that came into France’s crosshairs. The revolutionaries who sat on the Convention’s Executive Committee had gradually decided that it was not only Frenchmen who deserved the rights of man, but any abroad who lived under the yoke of absolutist and Catholic rulers.

One of the first, though not the only, campaigns to “liberate” people abroad were those living in Italy. At the time, the peninsula was not a single unified country but a collection of smaller states. The Papal States, ruled by the pope, stretched from Romagna in the north to Campagna in the south. The pope also held sway over the papal enclave of Avignon in the south of France.

Avignon was one of the first territories to be annexed by the revolutionary government. But in June 1796, a young Corsican general, under orders from the recently-established Directory (a body which replaced the Executive Committee) invaded the Romagna region of the Papal States. The Pope was forced to recognise French annexation of Avignon, and Napoleon, as part of the negotiations, demanded that the pope hand over priceless antiquities and manuscripts to the invading French army. Pope Pius VI stalled, and refused, so in February 1798 French forces invaded Rome itself. The invaders ransacked the Vatican Library and the pope was taken back to

³⁷ Victor Hugo, *Ninety-Three* (London: Richard Edward King, c.1890), p. 104.

³⁸ Bellos, *The Novel of the Century*, 37.

³⁹ Hugo, *Ninety-Three*, 106.

France, where he died in exile. The city was then declared to be liberated and a new Roman Republic was established on 15 February 1798.

Perhaps fearing that the clergy might face the same oppression as they had in France, and be forced to swear allegiance to a new civil constitution in the Roman Republic, de Miollis escaped from Rome. Might the new Roman Republic begin its own reign of terror as that which had occurred in Paris in the early years of the revolution (and which had now, thankfully, been put an end to after much bloodletting)? Such questions undoubtedly weighted upon the beneficent priest's mind as he made the journey from Rome to rural Tuscany, which was to be our priest's next safe haven from the revolution. He remained in Tuscany for three years after which he returned to Rome to be there when the election of a new pope, Pius VII, was announced.

The revolution, by 1799, had been moderated by the Directory. Anybody advocating a policy of state-sponsored "terror" against those who disagreed with the revolution could be tried and executed. The state and the people were weary of the bloody excesses of the year 1793. Others, in real life and in fiction, looked back on that year with profound regret, even anger. The opinion of Hugo's Bishop Myriel was that '93 (as the French referred to it) was "inexorable."⁴⁰

Yet the French state still faced royalist rebellions within and there had been, despite Napoleon's successes, military reverses in other campaigns abroad. But this young general Napoleon, whose martial prowess seemed equal to any feat, had become popular with the patriotic French people. The people themselves were wearied with continuing changes in government and the dissolution of new legislatures. The Jacobins—those who had orchestrated the terror in 1793–94—still sat in the legislature but were increasingly unpopular. Thus, in a show of force, on 9 November 1799 (or in the French Revolutionary calendar the 18 Brumaire), but under the pretext of preventing a Jacobin coup against the Directory, Napoleon and his grenadiers marched into the Palais Bourbon and forced the five "directors" to adopt a new constitution in which three consuls would rule: Napoleon, the Abbé Sieyès, and Roger Ducos. Napoleon, of course, would be First Consul.

THE PRIEST RETURNS HOME

Despite Napoleon's invasion of Rome and his kidnapping of the pope, he would be the man responsible for allowing Bievenu de Miollis to return home to France, and for the lowly priest's elevation to the rank of bishop.

In the early years of the revolution, the radicals who peopled the coffeehouses and debating societies, and the Montagnards and Jacobins who gained a foothold in the French legislature, were anti-Catholic and anti-Christian. The radicals who fervently believed in the Enlightenment ideals of progress and rationality espoused outright atheism. To them, Catholicism was backward, superstitious, thoroughly "medieval." As a result of these radicals' actions several of France's churches were desacralized and converted into Temples of Reason. Even the towering edifice of Notre Dame became a Temple of Reason in 1792.

Robespierre promoted deism. Deism is the belief that a rational creator exists and made the universe, but that does not intervene in it through miracles or ongoing revelation. The architect of the Terror even established the Cult of the Supreme Being, which he desired would eventually become the state religion of a new French Republic. To worship the Supreme Being was to be a most virtuous republican, for with it came a mission to "cleanse the earth" and "restore justice" to it. As Robespierre said:

He did not create kings to devour the human species. Neither did he create priests to harness us like brute beasts to the carriages of kings, and to give the world the example of baseness, pride, perfidy, avarice, debauchery, and falsehood to the world. But he created the universe to celebrate

⁴⁰ Hugo, *Les Misérables*, I, p. 44.

his power; he created men to help and to love one another, and to attain happiness through the path of virtue. The Author of Nature linked all mortals together in an immense chain of love and happiness. Perish the tyrants who have dared to break it! Frenchmen, Republicans, it is up to you to cleanse the earth they have sullied and to restore the justice they have banished from it. Liberty and virtue issued together from the breast of the Supreme Being. One cannot reside among men without the other. Generous people, do you want to triumph over your enemies? Practice justice and render the divinity the only cult worthy of it. People, today let us give ourselves over, under its auspices, to the just transports of a pure happiness, Tomorrow we will again combat vices and tyrants; we will give the world the example of republican virtues. And in doing this we honour it again.⁴¹

The Cult of the Supreme Being proved wildly popular with the French people as a whole, especially after the Festival of the Supreme Being was held on 20th Prairial in Year II of the Republic (8 June 1794). Virtually every town and hamlet throughout France held their own celebrations in honour of the new rational and enlightened deity.⁴²

Yet the people's loyalty to the Catholic Church, the Blessed Virgin, and the sacraments could never be fully extinguished. When Napoleon became First Consul, one of his first steps was to reconcile the French Republic with the Catholic Church. The new pope, Pius VII, for his part, proved amenable to the *rapprochement*. Prior to his election as pope, in 1797, when he was Bishop of Imola, he had delivered a Christmas sermon arguing that Catholicism was not incompatible with democracy and equality.⁴³ The pope and the first consul were evidently pragmatists.

Bienvenu de Miollis's thoughts on the reconciliation are left unrecorded, but the Concordat was signed in Paris on 16 July 1801. The agreement recognised "that the Roman, Catholic and Apostolic religion is the religion of the great majority of French citizens."⁴⁴ But for Catholic worship to continue unabated in France, the church would need to submit to the state's authority. It would be the First Consul who appointed bishops. The bishops' spiritual authority came from the pope; their temporal authority came from the state. The first consul, through the finance ministry, would also provide funding to the church.⁴⁵ The clergy would also have to swear an oath to uphold the constitution of the French Republic:

"I swear and promise to God, upon the Holy Scriptures, to remain in obedience and fidelity to the Government established by the constitution of the French Republic. I also promise not to have any intercourse, nor to assist by any counsel, nor to support any league, either within or without, which is inimical to the public tranquillity; and if, within my diocese or elsewhere, I learn that anything to the prejudice of the State is being contrived, I will make it known to the Government."⁴⁶

⁴¹ Maximilien Robespierre, 'The Festival of the Supreme Being', 8 June 1794, <<https://www.marxists.org/history/france/revolution/robespierre/1794/festival.htm>> [accessed 15 February 2026].

⁴² Jonathan Smythe, *Robespierre and the Festival of the Supreme Being: The search for a republican morality* (Manchester University Press, 2016), p. 146.

⁴³ Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution*, p. 386.

⁴⁴ Anon., 'Convention Between The French Government And His Holiness Pius VII', 1801 <https://www.napoleon-series.org/research/government/diplomatic/c_concordat.html> [accessed 15 February 2026].

⁴⁵ Robert Gildea, *Children of the Revolution: The French, 1799–1914* (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 6.

⁴⁶ Anon., 'Convention Between The French Government And His Holiness Pius VII', *op. cit.*

The Catholic Church had essentially become a department of the state.⁴⁷ It was one of Napoleon's political masterstrokes: having suppressed the Catholic, and Royalist, Vendéean rebels, the new alliance between republic and religion meant that no one could now oppose the new regime on religious grounds. Freedom of religion and belief was also granted to France's many Protestants, as well as its deists and atheists.

Thus, in 1801, once the Concordat had been signed, Bienvenu de Miollis made his way from Rome back to Provence. The then Archbishop, Jerome-Marie Champion de Cicé, appointed him as a vicar at the town's cathedral. It is often said, indeed, that "the revolution eats its children." Champion de Cicé came from a most illustrious noble family. His brother had been a general in the American War and during the Estates General—for he served as one of the First Estate's representatives and later Keeper of the King's Seal—he spoke out in favour of the adoption of a bill of rights following the American model:

"This noble idea, conceived in another hemisphere, was bound to be transplanted first among us. We contributed to the events that restored freedom to North America; it shows us on what principles we must base the preservation of our own. And it is the New World—where we once brought only fetters—that today teaches us how to spare ourselves the misfortune of wearing them ourselves."⁴⁸

Champion de Cicé enthusiastically gave his energy to helping to draft the first Declaration of the Rights of Man of the Citizen. Yet, when the time came to swearing the Oath to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, his faith and loyalty to the Church of Rome would not allow him. He, like Bienvenu de Miollis, went into exile, although it was England, rather than Rome, that gave refuge to Champion de Cicé.

The cathedral of Aix, whence Bienvenu de Miollis was sent, rises from the tight streets in warm, honey-coloured stone, has the air of a reliquary enlarged to the scale of a town. A tall, plain bell-tower stands sentinel to one side, while the entrance itself is an eruption of late-Gothic carving: ranks of saints in narrow niches—whose likenesses survived the revolutionaries' vandalism—would have looked down on de Miollis as he made his way to and from the church each day, surely standing as a reminder to the priest of the permanence of the Catholic Church that he so dutifully served. Bienvenu de Miollis's appointment as a vicar, however, would not last long.

THE PRIEST BECOMES A BISHOP

Although the good priest fled Paris at the beginning of the revolution, his brother, Sextius Alexandre François de Miollis (1759–1828), remained in the city and appears to have supported the revolution. At the time of the Estates General, Sextius was already a hero of the American War of Independence where, at the decisive Battle of Yorktown, he was permanently disfigured by an explosion.⁴⁹ After the revolutionary government reconstituted the army, Sextius stood for election in the new nation's forces and was promoted to the rank of Brigadier General in 1796. His bravery in battle brought him to the notice of Napoleon and, having played a leading role in the revolutionary army's Siege of Mantua, the future emperor appointed him as the governor of Tuscany. Two years

⁴⁷ Gildea, *Children of the Revolution*, p. 6.

⁴⁸ Institut Français, 'Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen', *L'édition électronique*, n.d. <<http://www.inrp.fr/edition-electronique/lodel/dictionnaire-ferdinand-buisson/document.php?id=2519>> [accessed 15 February 2026]. In original: 'Cette noble idée, dit-il, conçue dans un autre hémisphère, devait ne préférence se transplanter d'abord parmi nous. Nous avons concouru aux événements qui ont rendu à l'Amérique septentrionale sa liberté : elle nous montre sur quels principes nous devons appuyer la conservation de la nôtre ; et c'est le Nouveau-Monde, où nous n'avions autrefois apporté que des fers, qui nous apprend aujourd'hui à nous garantir du malheur d'en porter nous-mêmes.'

⁴⁹ Jean Tulard, '[Review] Henri Auréas, Un général de Napoléon, Miollis. Paris, Les Belles-Lettres, 1961 (Public. de la Fac. des Lettres de Strasbourg, n° 143)', *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, 168 (1962) pp. 250–51 (p. 250).

later, as the British and the Austrians besieged Genoa, Sextius once again distinguished himself in battle and become one of Napoleon's trusted allies.

Yet, when Napoleon proposed that he be allowed to remain as First Consul for life, Sextius did not vote for him.⁵⁰ Sextius's republican principles were by now so entrenched that he even published a short pamphlet in which the character and qualities of George Washington, the noble republican general, were set alongside the less than noble and borderline tyrannical character of Napoleon.⁵¹ A rift, consequently, occurred between the two men, and Sextius went off into an early retirement.

Napoleon did need allies, and it behoved him to heal as many rifts with those who had been alienated by his elevation to First Consul. In 1804, meanwhile, Napoleon had crowned himself Emperor of the French in Notre Dame Cathedral on 2 December 1804. It was clear that the republic was no more and, for his part, Sextius decided to respond to Napoleon's overtures to heal the rift that had grown between the two men.

One of the gifts that it was in Napoleon's power to give, since the Concordat of 1801, was the granting of Church offices. The emperor knew that Sextius had a largely penniless brother of a priest; alongside a new military commission for Sextius (the governership of French-occupied Mantua), then, was the elevation to the rank of bishop for Bienvenu de Miollis. Thus, early in 1805, Napoleon directed that Sextius's brother be given the Bishopric of Digne.

Hugo, of course, wanted his good and faithful priest to have been given the bishopric solely because of his virtue, and not through means of nepotistic family connections. Napoleon, so impressed with the man's piety and loyalty to himself as emperor, appoints him Mgr Myriel as Bishop of Digne:

"About the epoch of the coronation, some petty affair connected with his curacy—just what, is not precisely known—took [Myriel/Bienven de Miollis] to Paris. Among other powerful persons to whom he went to solicit aid for his parishioners was M. le Cardinal Fesch. One day, when the Emperor had come to visit his uncle, the worthy Curé, who was waiting in the anteroom, found himself present when His Majesty passed. Napoleon, on finding himself observed with a certain curiosity by this old man, turned round and said abruptly:—

"Who is this good man who is staring at me?"

"Sire," said M. Myriel, "you are looking at a good man, and I at a great man. Each of us can profit by it."

That very evening, the Emperor asked the Cardinal the name of the Curé, and some time afterwards M. Myriel was utterly astonished to learn that he had been appointed Bishop of D—.

What truth was there, after all, in the stories which were invented as to the early portion of M. Myriel's life? No one knew. Very few families had been acquainted with the Myriel family before the Revolution.⁵²

The truth is that Bienvenu de Miollis disliked Napoleon and his disdain for the emperor continued throughout his life. Now that he had been given a bishopric, however, Bienvenu decided to use his new position to do some good in the world. He had seen poverty, illness, and starvation first-hand in the houses and hovels that he visited during the years he spent as a priest. Perhaps, with the handsome state-endowed salary from the emperor, he could, in his own way, help to alleviate the spiritual and material suffering of the small part of mankind of whose spiritual needs he now had charge.

⁵⁰ Cousin, 'Mgr Myriel dans les Misérables', p. 424.

⁵¹ Tulard, '[Review] Henri Auréas', p. 251.

⁵² Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, Trans. Isabel Hapgood, 5 vols (New York: Thomas Y Crowell, 1887), I, p. 2.

HIS CHARITY WAS GREAT

“To love God,” exclaimed L.J. Bondil, “one must know Him ... A pure and steadfast faith is therefore a favourable condition for the development of charity.”⁵³ Both the real and fictional Bishops of Digne devoted much of their wealth to charitable causes. Surely Hugo did justice to the great bishop’s memory when he took some poetical licence and ruminated in the first chapters upon Mgr. Myriel’s charitable endeavours towards the poor.

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When Myriel is elevated to the rank of bishop, with it comes an eye-watering salary of 15,000 livres. Yet rather than live the comfortable life of a bishop, Hugo gives the reader an itemised account book drawn up by his fictional bishop, which shows where the majority of his state salary went.

NOTE ON THE REGULATION OF MY HOUSEHOLD EXPENSES

For the little seminary	1,500 livres
Society of the mission	100
For the Lazarists of Montdidier	100
Seminary for foreign missions in Paris	200
Congregation of the Holy Spirit	150
Religious establishments of the Holy Land	100
Charitable maternity societies	300
Extra, for that of Arles	50
Work for the amelioration of prisons	400
Work for the relief and delivery of prisoners	500
To liberate fathers of families incarcerated for debt	1,000
Addition to the salary of the poor teachers of the diocese	2,000
Public granary of the Hautes-Alpes	100
Congregation of the ladies of D—, of Manosque, and of Sisteron, for the gratuitous instruction of poor girls	1,500
For the poor	6,000
My personal expenses	1,000
TOTAL	15,000

At another time in Hugo’s novel, the Bishop, upon visiting the small three-room single story hall that serves as the town’s hospital, decides that he no longer needs the grand episcopal palace that he has been granted. He subsequently orders that the hospital be transferred to the bishop’s palace while he and his sister, plus the housekeeper, will remove to the hospital. “One may also judge,” said Bondil, “a Christian’s love for God by the manner in which he fulfils the second duty of charity, which is the love of neighbour. For God, who has no need of our goods, our counsel, or our assistance, has substituted our neighbour in His place and entrusted His rights to him.”⁵⁴ Although Hugo’s imagination supplied these little details as to what exactly the bishop spent his money

⁵³ Bondil, *Discours sur la vie et les vertus de Monseigneur Charles-François-Melchior-Bienvenu de Miollis*, p. 23. In original: ‘Pour aimer Dieu, il faut le connaître ... Une foi pure et ferme est donc une condition favorable pour le développement de la charité.’

⁵⁴ Bondil, *Discours sur la vie et les vertus de Monseigneur Charles-François-Melchior-Bienvenu de Miollis*, p. 25. In original: ‘On peut encore juger de l’amour d’un Chrétien pour Dieu, par la manière dont il s’acquitte du second devoir de la charité, qui est l’amour du prochain. Dieu, en effet, qui n’a nul besoin de nos biens, de nos conseils, de notre aide, s’est substitué le prochain et lui a transmis ses droits.’

on, the table outlining his expenses should be viewed as the fictional expression of the truth of Bienvenu de Miollis's life as a bishop.

The bishop appears, indeed, to have left his own table rather simple. His dwelling at 47 Rue de l'Hubac (formerly the Rue du Jeu de Paume). Where he lodged until 1825, was bereft of all but the most basic comforts. He had one servant and, after 1815, a priest, M. Canon Trenquallye. The meals that he enjoyed were indeed Spartan. His usual bill of fare usually consisted of a pottage of chickpeas at breakfast, soup, lamb, and cheese at noon, and bread and soup in the evening) enabled the bishop to set aside three quarters of his salary for the poor, the hospital, the local seminary.⁵⁵

The seminary that Bienvenu de Miollis re-established trained priests but also had a wider social mission: the education of the children of the poor, both boys and girls. Education would, in his view, lead to both spiritual and temporal salvation. The ability to read would bring them closer to God while improving their prospects in what was still, despite the Rights of Man, a highly unequal society.

Testimonies, to his charity, would be endless and unnecessary, were it not to convey the warmth and affection with which he was remembered by now anonymous members of his parish:

“Each month, through his care, we received the bread we lacked; and he was not content that the distribution should be made regularly—he wished also, with the tenderness of a father for his children, to make sure that the bread given to us was good; and often he himself had none other upon his own table.”⁵⁶

And there is the testimony of another: “He stripped himself of everything to feed us; it was the price of his own patrimony that saved us from despair and perhaps from death.”⁵⁷ The need to feed the poor was especially acute in 1811, when famine gripped Digne and the surrounding countryside and children were so hungry that they took to eating grass and tasteless herbs from the surrounding hinterland.

Bienvenu de Miollis not only provided nourishment for his flock but also clothing:

“Every year he gave us decent clothing; and he took care not to distribute it until winter approached, so that his charity might be doubly useful, defending us against the rigours of the season. And, as if to console us and prove that in doing this he made himself one of the poor, he ended by clothing himself in the same fabric as we; the only difference was in the colour.”⁵⁸

“He did not limit himself, in fact, to loving the poor,” exclaimed Bondil, but “he strove, as far as it depended upon him, to draw nearer to their condition.”⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Delannoy, et al., *The Inspirational Life of Monseigneur de Miollis*, p. 28.

⁵⁶ Bondil, *Discours sur la vie et les vertus de Monseigneur Charles-François-Melchior-Bienvenu de Miollis*, p. 29. In original: ‘Chaque mois, nous recevions, par ses soins, le pain qui nous manquait ; et il ne se contentait pas que la distribution s’en fit régulièrement ; il voulait encore, avec la tendresse d’un père pour ses enfants, s’assurer si le pain qu’on nous donnait était bon ; et souvent lui-même il n’en avait pas d’autre à sa table.’

⁵⁷ Bondil, *Discours sur la vie et les vertus de Monseigneur Charles-François-Melchior-Bienvenu de Miollis*, p. 29. In original: ‘Il se dépouilla de tout pour nous nourrir ; ce fut le prix de son patrimoine qui nous sauva du désespoir et peut-être de la mort.’

⁵⁸ Bondil, *Discours sur la vie et les vertus de Monseigneur Charles-François-Melchior-Bienvenu de Miollis*, p. 29. In original: ‘Tous les ans il nous donnait des vêtements honnêtes ; et il avait l’attention de ne les distribuer qu’à l’approche de l’hiver, afin que sa charité nous fût doublement utile, en nous défendant contre la rigueur de la saison. Et, comme pour nous consoler et nous prouver le cas qu’il faisait des pauvres, il avait fini par se vêtir de la même étoffe que nous ; il n’y avait de différence que dans la couleur.’

⁵⁹ Bondil, *Discours sur la vie et les vertus de Monseigneur Charles-François-Melchior-Bienvenu de Miollis*, p. 42. In original: ‘Il ne se borna pas en effet à chérir les pauvres ; il s’efforça, autant qu’il fut en lui, de se rapprocher de leur condition.’

The Concordat of 1801 had severely reduced the number of dioceses in France. This administrative detail is often a footnote in many histories of the French Revolution but it had a profound impact on Bienvenu de Miollis's daily life. Prior to the Concordat the Bishopric of Digne comprised 32 parishes, 41 vicariates, 280 dependent churches. For any bishop to cover these would have been difficult, but nonetheless manageable. After the Concordat, the Archbishopric of Embrun, the bishoprics of Gap, Sisteron, Senez, along with a majority of Glandèves, and of Riez, and several parishes of Aix, were all subsumed into the post-1801 Bishopric of Digne. In total, then, Bienvenu de Miollis had more than 500 parishes under his care, and he made sure to visit each one of them as often as he could. But the mode of his transport bespoke of no extravagance: he was often seen dressed in simple clothing, carried along rough mountainous terrain in a humble wicker horse-drawn cart.⁶⁰ Nobody was beneath his help. If there were someone in need, help would be given. Even criminals, those whom society had shunned, could be sure of assistance from the bishop.

AT THE CONCILE NATIONALE

Napoleon had established a truce with the Church of Rome but it was an uneasy constitutional settlement, and Bienvenu de Miollis—as he was represented in Hugo's novel—who had never been particularly enamoured with the emperor, began, in the latter years, to hold an increasingly low opinion of him who ruled over France.⁶¹ Napoleon, in his war against Great Britain and her allies, realised that the British had mastery of the sea as his plans for an invasion of the British Isles came to naught after the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805. However, perhaps he might, as master of Europe, hit Britain where it hurt. The British were a “nation of shopkeepers,” he once quipped, and its economy reliant on international trade. A continental blockade, which saw most of Europe's ports closed to British commerce, was one potential way of winning the war against Britain on the economic front. If economic collapse occurred, so too would military collapse. Thus, on 21 November 1806, the *Blocus continental* (“Continental System”) was established.

The Napoleonic Empire, in 1806, was vast. Napoleonic France either ruled, directly or indirectly, not only France but parts of Italy, northern Spain, and central Europe. As a major world power, under France's sphere of influence also fell Spain, Portugal, Netherlands, and Poland. Yet when the Continental System was established, several nations either refused to join or enforced it in only a lacklustre manner. Where states refused to fall in line, Napoleon's armies marched in to enforce it. England's oldest ally, Portugal, was one such nation which refused to fall in line. When the Napoleonic army invaded to carry out retribution, the Portuguese king and his entire court set sail for Brazil. The pope, as ruler of the Papal States, never strictly enforced the ban on British commerce either, despite numerous threats from Napoleon. “Tell [the papal ambassadors],” thundered Napoleon to one of his own diplomats, Cardinal Fesch,

“that I have my eyes open. That I am only fooled inasmuch as I let myself be fooled. That I am Charlemagne, the sword of the Church and their Emperor. And that I should be treated as such. [...] I have briefly laid out my intentions. If he does not reply, I shall reduce him to the condition of his predecessors before Charlemagne.”⁶²

⁶⁰ Cousin, ‘Mgr Myriel dans les Misérables’, p. 424.

⁶¹ Hugo, *Les Misérables*, I, p. 51.

⁶² Napoleon, ‘No. 11,450’, in *Correspondance générale de Napoléon* (Paris: Fayard, 2009) quoted in Peter Hicks, ‘Napoleon and the Pope: from the Concordat to the Excommunication’, n.d. <https://www.napoleon.org/en/history-of-the-two-empires/articles/napoleon-and-the-pope-from-the-concordat-to-the-excommunication/> [accessed 19 February 2026].

The pope did find himself “reduced.” Napoleon, finally frustrated with the pope’s recalcitrance, had his armies march to Rome. The emperor’s forces arrested the pope, and annexed Rome to France, transmuting the Holy City to the status of a *department*.

The church had already, essentially, become a ministry of the state, and the emperor was the man who appointed bishops (as he had done with Bienvenu de Miollis), but now Rome and France were one, as it were. Yet the appointment of clerics was both a civil and a religious matter, the appointments had to be approved by the pope. The question of who remained supreme in such affairs remained to be settled, and the Emperor of the French wanted the final authority to rest with him.

Napoleon subsequently convened the *Concile Nationale* at Notre Dame in 1811, to which our bishop was also called. Hugo imagined that the poor and slightly rustic Bishop Myriel/de Miollis might have felt like a fish out of water when he attended the *Concile*: “those gentlemen,” muses the prelate, “are princes while I am only a poor peasant bishop.”⁶³

His major hope was that a council of French bishops would vote for him to exercise religious authority independently of the pope, particularly in the appointment of bishops. Napoleon’s aim was primarily political and administrative — to ensure the functioning of the imperial Church — but his heavy-handed intervention and coercion alienated many bishops, who ultimately feared state domination and a return to the more oppressive early days of the French Revolution. The council therefore failed to come to an agreement on the matter; fewer still, including the Bienvenu de Miollis, supported Napoleon’s position on the matter. Napoleon was displeased with the prelate whom he had a few years back elevated from the position of a simple vicar. Napoleon’s courtiers tried to prevail upon de Miollis by reminding him that he owed his career advancement to the emperor, but the bishop would not be swayed. Furthermore, in private conversation with Napoleon, the following exchange occurred between him and the man of Digne:

“I am in the habit of making no important decision without having consulted the Holy Spirit; I ask you for a little time.”

“Well then! Do so,” said Napoleon, “and you shall tell me tomorrow what you have resolved.”

The next day the Emperor again approached Mgr de Miollis.

“Well then, Monsieur Bishop, what did the Holy Spirit say to you?”

“Sire, not a single word of what Your Majesty was pleased to say to me yesterday.”⁶⁴

The constitutional and religious question of who was supreme in French religious matters continued to be a controversial topic.⁶⁵ The danger to de Miollis’s liberty cannot be understated. Napoleon had had some of the other bishops arrested and imprisoned for not giving their assent to his measures. Such a fate befell the Bishop of Tournai; the Bishop of Ghent, the Bishop of Troyes who were kept in the solitary confinement in Vincennes, where they were deprived of pens, ink, books, and paper. The Archbishop of Bordeaux was threatened with the same, although the threat was not carried out. It may have been de Miollis’s military family connections that saved him from a similar fate.

⁶³ Hugo, *Les Misérables*, I, p. 49.

⁶⁴ Bondil, *Discours sur la vie et les vertus de Monseigneur Charles-François-Melchior-Bienvenu de Miollis*, p. 137. In original: “Sire, dit le prélat qui l’avait écouté fort attentivement, je suis dans l’habitude de ne prendre aucune décision importante sans avoir consulté le Saint-Esprit; je vous demande un peu de temps.” “Eh bien! faites, dit Napoléon, et vous me direz demain ce que vous aurez résolu.” Le lendemain, l’Empereur aborda de nouveau Mgr. de Miollis. “Eh bien! M. l’Évêque, que vous a dit le Saint-Esprit?” “Sire, pas un mot de ce que Votre Majesté a bien voulu me dire hier.”

⁶⁵ Ambrogio A. Caiani, “The Concile National of 1811: Napoleon, Gallicanism and the Failure of Neo-Conciliarism”, *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 70 (2019), pp. 546–64 (p. 546).

Hugo disapproved of the bishop's opposition to Napoleon, not only at the Concile but in his attitude more generally. Writing in *Les Misérables*, Hugo stated that,

“while allowing that God had not created Monseigneur Bienvenu for political functions, we could have understood and admired a protest in the name of justice and liberty, a haughty opposition, and a perilous and just resistance to the omnipotent Napoleon. But conduct which pleases us towards those who are rising, pleases us less towards those who are falling.”⁶⁶

As Hugo proceeds to intimate: by 1811, a series of reverses affected the French nation. The peninsula war had started, which saw Spain and Portugal ally with Britain against France. Napoleon mounted a disastrous invasion of Russia in 1812. In the great author's view the nation, an important part of which were its bishops, needed to be united.

THE MAN WHO STOLE A LOAF OF BREAD

Napoleon's downfall came swiftly after the disastrous invasion of Russia. Deposed in 1814, he was exiled to the Island of Elba. Yet he returned a year later to assume once again the imperial throne of the emperor of the French. The final battle of the Napoleonic Wars then took place on the field of Waterloo on 18 June 1815. France was defeated. The empire, as all empires eventually do, fell. British and Prussian forces were victorious. Allied armies occupied the French capital.

Bienvenu de Miollis had never been a republican. He had never supported Napoleon Bonaparte. The bishop's reaction to his country's defeat on the field of Waterloo remain unknown. The frequent changes of government throughout the revolution, its excesses moderated by the Directory, and the strong leadership of Napoleon, did not appear to have brought with them any change in the condition of the poor. Government changed; the streets did not. Paris still had its slums. The countryside remained with its illiterate peasants. People still struggled to obtain the basic necessities of life.

Throughout the tumultuous years of the revolution and the First French Empire, however, the one friend that the poor of Digne could count on was their bishop. He could not change their world, but he could offer a tiny bit of material and spiritual comfort to them. The prelate's biographer wrote that “Those who did not experience his beneficence either had no need of it or did not ask for it; otherwise, there was no one who did not know his charity.”⁶⁷ Bondil's sentiment was as true of the real bishop as it was of the fictional Myriel. Perhaps no figure of French, or even world literature, so illustrates the power of repentance and redemption as that of Hugo's character, Jean Valjean. It has become a commonplace among literary critics to assert that the character of Valjean and of his nemesis, Inspector Javert, were drawn from the same spring: Eugène-François Vidocq (1775–1857). Vidocq was a criminal-turned-detective and it is not wrong to say that elements of both Javert's and Valjean's lives on the printed page owe much to him. However, there was another man, whose name is less well-remembered, but who is the inspiration behind a key part of Valjean's backstory: the stealing of a loaf of bread and the encounter with Mgr. Myriel.

The real man who stole a loaf of bread, and who subsequently applied to Bienvenu de Miollis for assistance, was a man called Pierre Morin. As Jean Cousin explained:

⁶⁶ Hugo, *Les Misérables*, I, p. 52.

⁶⁷ Bondil, *Discours sur la vie et les vertus de Monseigneur Charles-François-Melchior-Bienvenu de Miollis*, p. 31. In original: ‘Ceux qui n’ont pas éprouvé sa bienfaisance, ou n’en ont pas eu besoin, ou ne l’ont pas réclamée; du reste il n’est personne qui n’ait connu sa charité.’

“Victor Hugo’s hero was not called Valjean. His true name was Pierre Morin. He was born at Forcalquier. His sister’s family being in deep poverty and dying of hunger, he conceived the guilty thought of stealing a loaf of bread. Taking advantage of the night, he broke into a baker’s shop. The baker came upon him; a terrible struggle ensued with the thief, who, brought before the assize court, was sentenced to five years’ hard labour. At the expiration of his term, Morin returned to his country; but it was in vain that he sought means of livelihood through work. No one would employ him. One evening, finding himself in Digne and, after making fruitless efforts to find shelter, he slumped, discouraged, on a stone milestone. A lady coming out of church, having noticed him in this desperate posture, asked him whether he was ill. Morin replied that he was turned away everywhere and that he had knocked in vain at every door.—“There is one you have not thought of,” the lady said to him, “that is the bishop’s, and that one, certainly, will open before you.”

Encouraged by these words, the unfortunate man asked to be introduced to the bishop.

‘I am cold, I am hungry,’ he said, ‘no one will take me in, and yet I have money to pay my keep.’

The bishop, moved, said to him: ‘My friend, you will sup with us and you will sleep here.’

‘Alas!’ cried the former convict, ‘I am no one’s friend any longer; I am nothing but an object of repulsion and fear’ [However, Monseigneur and his secretary comforted him and then sent him to take the rest he needs so much. The next day, the bishop has Morin brought before him....]

‘I understand,’ he said to him, ‘the distrust your unfortunate past has produced. You inspire in me a lively interest by your repentance and your desire to rehabilitate yourself. You are robust, energetic; the way to raise yourself up again is to offer yourself on the battlefield. If you wish, I will recommend you to my brother who commands a division in Italy.’”⁶⁸

There is no reason to suppose that this anecdote is untrue. Bienvenu de Miollis likely did meet with a man who had once stolen a loaf of bread and found it difficult to procure work. But the man who related the anecdote had clearly read *Les Misérables* after it was published. The dialogue matches much of what appears in the novel when the bishop and Jean Valjean meet. The memory of Pierre Morin, in the mind of the man who related the anecdote, thus became fused with Valjean’s story. Of course, Hugo’s novel also diverged from the real-life account. In Hugo’s novel, Valjean steals two silver candlesticks from the bishop’s house, only to be brought back by police to the bishop’s house. The Bishop then tells the police that he gifted Valjean the candlesticks, whereupon the ex-convict is set free and pledges to abandon his criminal ways. Yet as the above passage shows, Bienvenu de Miollis advised the starving Morin to join the army, and offered to facilitate this through his brother’s agency.

⁶⁸ Cousin, ‘Mgr Myriel dans les Misérables’, p. 420: In original: ‘Le héros de Victor Hugo ne s’appelait pas Valjean. Son vrai nom était Pierre Morin. Il était né à Forcalquier. La famille de sa sœur, étant dans une profonde misère et mourant de faim, il eut la coupable pensée de dérober un pain. Profitant de la nuit, il s’introduisit avec effraction chez un boulanger. Celui-ci étant survenu engagea une lutte terrible contre le voleur qui, traduit en cour d’assises, fut condamné à cinq ans de travaux forcés. A l’expiration de sa peine, Morin revint dans son pays ; mais c’est en vain qu’il chercha des moyens d’existence dans le travail. Personne ne voulut l’employer. Un soir, se trouvant à Digne et après avoir fait de vains efforts pour trouver un asile, il s’affaissa, découragé, sur une borne de pierre. Une dame qui sortait de l’église, l’ayant aperçu dans cette attitude désespérée, lui demanda s’il était malade. Morin lui répondit qu’il était repoussé de partout et qu’il avait en vain frappé à toutes les portes. — “Il en est une à laquelle vous n’avez pas songé, lui dit cette dame, c’est celle de l’évêque et, certes, celle-là s’ouvrira devant vous.” Encouragé par ces paroles, le malheureux demanda à être introduit près de l’évêque. “J’ai froid, j’ai faim, dit-il, personne ne veut me recevoir et cependant j’ai de l’argent pour payer ma dépense.” L’évêque, ému, lui dit: “Mon ami, vous souperez avec nous et vous coucherez ici. — Hélas ! s’écria l’ancien forçat, je ne suis plus l’ami de personne, je ne suis plus qu’un sujet de répulsion et d’effroi.” Cependant Monseigneur et son secrétaire le réconfortent et l’envoient ensuite prendre un repos dont il a tant besoin. Le lendemain, l’évêque le fait venir devant lui. « Je comprends, lui dit-il, la défiance qu’ont fait naître vos malheureux antécédents. Vous m’inspirez un vif intérêt par votre repentir et votre désir de vous réhabiliter. Vous êtes robuste, énergique ; le moyen de vous relever est de payer de votre personne sur le champ de bataille. Si vous le voulez, je vous recommanderai à mon frère qui commande une division en Italie.’

There are two kinds of immortality, according to one eighteenth-century essayist; that which the soul has after its earthly life has passed, and that through which men's lives are illuminated in print for generations afterwards.⁶⁹ Little else is known of Morin. No one can say if he joined the army. He enters fleetingly through history's annals but, through his association with the Bishop of Digne and thence with Jean Valjean, Pierre Morin, the lonely man who once sought succour from a kindly bishop, has become, so to speak, immortal.

The good bishop retired in 1838 after an increasing series of infirmities and ailments got the better of him. Gangrene had set in on one of his legs and rendered him virtually housebound, unable even to go to and receive the sacrament at church. He wrongly began to believe that his illnesses were his own fault, and that God was in some way punishing him for past misdeeds. He resolved, in consequence of this, to make his home life ever more Spartan. He would rarely allow the fire to be lit, even in winter as the snow and ice gathered outside. He would not refuse food, but he would never ask for it to be prepared for him. He would spend virtually the entirety of every day in prayer; his biographer reported that over the course of two days in 1843 he spent 28 hours in prayer without ceasing.

Five years later, at the age of 90, Bienvenu de Miollis passed away. On his deathbed, he, who had so often worked for the betterment of those who had less than himself, was anxious lest he had not done enough. Yet the judgement of those who had known his charity was kinder than his own: he had spent a lifetime proving that holiness might be measured in bread given, burdens lightened, and doors opened to the outcast.

⁶⁹ Joseph Addison, 'Number 81', in *The Tatler*, ed. by Donald F. Bond, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), II, pp. 13–21 (p. 13)