The Drama at Lille: Republicans, Catholics and Sexual Crime at the Fin-de-Siècle

Timothy Verhoeven

In 1899 a murder in the northern city of Lille triggered a bitter confrontation between republicans and Catholics. On February 5, a twelve-year-old boy named Gaston Foveaux failed to return home from his school at 39, rue de la Monnaie, one of twelve in the city run by the Brothers of the Christian Schools (*Frères des Écoles chrétiennes*). That evening his anxious father went to the school and, with the help of one of Gaston's teachers, Frère Flamidien, conducted a search of the premises. All that was found was his coat and cap, still hanging where he had left them. A subsequent search also proved fruitless, and the following day the police conducted the most thorough inspection of the school and its surrounds yet. By now the local and national press were beginning to speculate on the fate of the missing Gaston Foveaux.[1] Finally, on February 8, the mystery was solved in the most horrifying manner. That morning the school's concierge stumbled on the body of the boy lying on a rug in a small visitor's room. Next to the body was a handwritten note signed by an "ardent socialist". The author apologized to the boy's parents for the grief he had caused them, and attributed his crime to an "impure passion" which he had been unable to control.

Coming in the wake of several days of suspense and speculation, the discovery of the body of Gaston Foveaux touched off a fierce reaction. The local and national press offered detailed and indignant accounts of what was being termed the "drama at Lille" on their front pages. But it was the reaction in the streets of the city that illustrated most vividly the level of popular anger at the crime as well as the presumption about the identity of its author. On the evening of the eighth, crowds roamed the streets looking for Catholic institutions to attack. The following day windows were smashed at, amongst others, the St Joseph College in the rue Solferino and the office of the Catholic newspaper "La Croix du Nord" in the rue d'Angleterre.[2] Catholic personnel wrote desperate letters to the Prefect, pleading for protection. The superior

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[1] For reports on the events of February 8, 1899, see *Petit Parisien*; *Progrès du Nord*; *Réveil du Nord*.

[2] Report of Capitaine Bagard, February 9, 1899. Archives Départementales du Nord, Lille (hereafter ADN), 1T 123/12.

of the *Maison du Sacré-cœur*, Catherine de Montalembert, described her fears for the safety of more than one hundred female boarders as her school came under assault.[3] A tense situation then threatened to escalate considerably when news broke that the police had arrested one of the teaching brothers. In one particularly dramatic moment, a crowd estimated to be three to four thousand strong surrounded the carriage transporting the brother to prison. Only the intervention of a brigade of mounted gendarmes prevented, in the estimation of authorities and the press, a lynching.[4] Cowering inside the carriage was none other than Gaston Foveaux's teacher, Frère Flamidien.

This was only the beginning of the Flamidien Affair. In the following months, republicans would mobilize to prove the guilt of the accused brother, while key Catholic figures set out with as much determination to show his innocence. The hitherto obscure brother thus became a central figure in what historians have labelled the "War of Two Frances," the France of the Revolution versus Catholic, conservative France.[5] The vision of a France divided into warring republican and Catholic camps has proven useful to deciphering many of the political controversies that marked the Third Republic. On one side, anticlericalism bound together a disparate group of republicans and emerged as a central component in their drive to modernize the French nation. When Léon Gambetta famously declared to the Chamber of Deputies "Clericalism—that is our enemy!" in 1877, he was both identifying the perceived obstacle to this republican project as well as offering a still shaky regime an identifiable enemy against which it might forge a sense of unity and purpose. On the other side, the Catholic leadership appeared determined from the outset to oppose a republican regime whose legitimacy it had never truly accepted. What followed was a period of bitter conflict which James F. McMillan characterizes as a French *kulturkampf*.[6] The battle would wax and wane. The period which followed Pope Leo XIII's call in 1892 for Catholics to rally the republic marked a moment of relative tranquility. But the peace was quickly and dramatically broken by the Dreyfus Affair. The vicious campaign on the part of certain Catholic orders, notably the Assumptionists, against Captain Alfred Dreyfus and his supporters sparked an intense republican backlash, making the National Assembly once again, in Maurice Larkin's terms, "an anticlerical wilderness."[7] So vehement was the republican reaction that the government acted in a manner which the majority of modern scholars describe as indefensible. Under the leadership of Émile Combes, the government dissolved hundreds of Catholic congregations, leading to the confiscation of approximately 200 million francs worth of property amidst widespread corruption, and the eviction of tens of thousands of monks and nuns from their communities.[8]

In recent years, however, scholars have begun to nuance this image of a France split into antagonistic camps. Several leading republicans with a reputation as fierce anticlericals reveal a more complex set of attitudes towards religion and the Catholic Church. This applies even to Gambetta, whose letters to his long-time mistress Léonie Léon are sprinkled with references to Catholic imagery and sacraments.[9] As Sudhir Hazareesingh argues, many republicans recognized the social utility of the Church, and tempered whatever hostility they felt towards its actions with a recognition of its enduring significance for large segments of the

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[3] Montalembert to Prefect, ADN, 1T 123/12, February 11, 1899.

[4] Procureur-Général to Minister of Justice, Archives Nationales (hereafter AN), Paris, BB/18/2108, March 27, 1899.

[5] Poulat, *Liberté, laïcité: La guerre des deux France*. For references to the Flamidien scandal, see Delmaire, *Antisémitisme et catholiques dans le nord*, 90-92; Harris, *Man on Devil's Island*, 172; Gildea, *Education in Provincial France*, 131-32.

[6] McMillan, "'Priest hits girl,'" 77.

[7] Larkin, *Church and State after the Dreyfus Affair*, 2. On the Assumptionist campaign, Harris, "The Assumptionists and the Dreyfus Affair."

[8] Sorrel, *La république contre les congrégations*.

[9] Foley and Sowerwine, *A Political Romance*, 140-43.

population.[10] From this perspective, even events which have long been seen as expressions of republican vengeance appear in a different light. This applies to the famous 1905 law on the separation of Church and State. That law abrogated the Concordat, under which the French state recognized and subsidized four faiths, including the Catholic Church. From 1905, the different faiths were largely left to their own resources, in the process breaking free of the system of state control and discipline which had been built into the Concordat and its associated Organic Articles by Napoléon Bonaparte. One interpretation of the law stresses its punitive nature. By stripping the Church of state subsidies, republicans hoped, in this understanding, to destroy its influence once and for all. But as even Catholic intellectuals at the time recognized, the 1905 law also offered the Church many protections and guarantees, notably over its property, while liberating it from the constraints imposed by the Concordat. For both reasons, it might properly be seen as a *loi'd'apaisement* rather than a *loi de combat*.[11]

These criticisms suggest the need for more sophisticated approaches that pay attention to moments of cooperation as much as antagonism, and that incorporate the range of postures taken by both Catholic and republican figures. But an examination of events such as the Flamidien Affair suggests that it would be a mistake to take these revisionist arguments too far. The year 1899 was clearly a moment of combat more than appeasement, for it coincided with the controversy that had so embittered relations between republicans and Catholics, the Dreyfus affair. On the day that much of the press announced the arrest of Frère Flamidien, another major news item was being reported: a vote in the National Assembly which established a special court to reconsider Dreyfus' conviction for treason. In the months that followed, the Flamidien and Dreyfus affairs would jostle with each other in the columns of the national dailies. Furthermore, just days after the events in Lille, republican anxieties about Catholic-inspired subversion were inflamed yet again. On February 16, President Félix Faure died; at the ensuing state funeral, Paul Déroulède, leader of a right-wing organization called the *Ligue des Patriotes*, tried to launch a coup d'état. Historians have judged this to be an amateurish attempt, but republican leaders were genuinely alarmed, particularly when links between Déroulède and the Assumptionists began to emerge.[12]

Because of its timing, as well as the awful crime at its heart, the Flamidien Affair was marked by an extreme degree of polarization. From the moment Gaston Foveaux's body was discovered, key republican figures expressed an almost unwavering conviction that one of the teaching brothers must be the culprit. In the wake of Flamidien's arrest, and despite some elements which seemed to at least throw doubt on the merits of the investigation, the anticlerical press in both Lille and in Paris kept up an unremitting campaign to prove his guilt. This level of certainty was more than matched on the Catholic side. Studies of the War of Two Frances have tended to focus on republicans. But the Church was hardly a passive bystander in these clashes. In the Flamidien Affair, the Church mobilized an impressive network of politicians, journalists and pamphleteers to portray the imprisoned brother as the innocent victim of a republican campaign of persecution. Here was proof, the Church argued, that the highest organs of the French state had succumbed to a dark anti-Catholic conspiracy, a conspiracy which made a mockery of the republic and its vaunted principles of justice and democracy.

What emerges as well from an examination of the Flamidien Affair is the importance of gender norms, and particularly norms of masculinity, in driving and in shaping the War of Two Frances. Using the Flamidien Affair as a case-study, I argue that we might conceptualize the clash between republicans and Catholics as, at least in part, a clash of competing styles of masculinity. Here my analysis builds on the work of Christopher E. Forth, and particularly his interpretation of the Dreyfus Affair. As Forth persuasively argues, both the pro- and anti-

[10] Hazareesingh, *Intellectual Founders of the Republic*, 286.
[11] Baubérot, *Histoire de la laïcité en France*; Cabanel, "1905: Une loi d'apaisement?" 68-71.
[12] Irvine, *Boulanger Affair Reconsidered*, 175.

Dreyfusard camps operated within conceptions of masculinity that both overlapped and diverged in significant ways. Dreyfus, in Forth's analysis, appeared suspicious to many observers on the grounds that his behavior failed to conform to a certain code of manly performance. At times during his ordeal, Dreyfus appeared too stoic, too self-controlled; at others his outbursts and protests struck observers as insincere, even staged. As Forth argues, Dreyfus failed to perform his masculinity in a manner which appeared credible to observers.[13] Other studies of trials have made a similar argument. To a degree which may appear surprising, convictions of guilt or innocence hinged on the accused's ability to play out a gendered script.[14]

The importance of masculinity and its performance is also evident in the Flamidien Affair. In the eyes of republican investigators, the masculinity of celibate Catholics was dubious. What marked Flamidien in particular as a target of suspicion was his incapacity to pull off a convincing performance of manly grief. Again, however, Catholics were far from passive in the face of such attacks. The literature on masculinity in the Third Republic has focused on republican articulations; in contrast, we know very little about the manner in which Catholics understood masculine norms. The few studies that we have suggest a model that, while drawing on elements in the wider culture, contained distinctively religious strains. In her study of the Zouaves who fought for the Papal States, Carol E. Harrison identifies suffering and sacrifice as central to their sense of self, a notion of sacrifice that extended beyond the nation to God.[15] Episodes such as the Flamidien Affair provide another insight. In their defense of the imprisoned brother, Catholics not only sought to prove his innocence, but tried as well to show that he embodied a set of recognizable, if distinctively Catholic, masculine virtues. For both sides, then, the masculinity of the accused brother became a key site of contest.

The Confrontation: Performing Republican Masculinity

The clash of masculinities began at the very outset of the investigation into the murder of Gaston Foveaux. At 10:00 a.m. on the morning of February 8, Charles Delalé, the investigating magistrate (*juge d'instruction*), arrived at the school at 39, rue de la Monnaie. Delalé embodied many of the traits of the republican male citizen. To begin with, his career had mirrored the rise of the Third Republic. From his first appointment in the small town of Cysoing in 1878, Delalé served in a number of posts before reaching the prestigious position at Lille in 1893. The reports of his superiors praised his efficiency, zeal and professionalism. His political background was described as "very firmly republican."[16] In his private life, too, Delalé appeared an exemplary servant of the Republic. Married and with two children, he had fulfilled the duty of all Frenchman to produce the next generation of citizens. His manner of handling the investigation was also typical of a generation of Frenchmen steeped in the values of positivism. As his reports describe, from the outset he examined the case with what he described as a cold and rational eye, carefully and methodically assembling the evidence that would unveil the truth behind the crime.

If Delalé represented the cherished traits of republican manhood, the teaching brothers who made up the bulk of the staff at the school represented a very different gender order. The nineteen *frères* had all taken the vow of celibacy, a vow which took them well outside the bounds of the normative ideal of republican masculinity. Central to this ideal, as Judith Surkis argues, was conjugal heterosexuality.[17] From the perspective of republicans, celibate brothers

[13] Forth, *Dreyfus Affair and the Crisis of French Manhood*, 28. For an analysis of the sexual dimension of the clash between republicans and Catholics, Kselman, "The Perraud Affair: Clergy, Church, and Sexual Politics in Fin-de-Siècle France."
[14] For example, Berenson, *Trial of Madame Caillaux*.
[15] Harrison, "Zouave Stories," 291. See also van Osselaer and Pasture, eds., *Christian Homes*.
[16] "Notice Individuelle," ADN, 8U57 (Dossier Delalé), August 17, 1884.
[17] Surkis, *Sexing the Citizen*.

posed two problems. Firstly, having renounced one of the most sacred duties of the citizen, marriage and fatherhood, the celibate brother was not bound to the social order. Secondly, and even more alarmingly, such an extreme form of sexual abstinence was understood as an incitement to crime. The notion that the celibate vow intensified rather than suppressed sexual desire was deeply embedded in republican thought. Throughout the nineteenth century, anticlericals cited notorious cases of priests and monks driven to commit rape and murder by their unnatural state. One case was particularly relevant to the crime at 39, rue de la Monnaie. In 1848, the body of fourteen-year-old Cécile Combettes was found near the wall of the monastery of the Institute of the Christian Brothers in Toulouse. Convicted of her rape and murder, Brother Léotade was sentenced to transportation.

In Lille the victim was a young boy. But as Delalé and his fellow investigators quickly concluded, the motive for the crime was sexual. The cause of death was clearly strangulation, but this was a by-product of a frenzied sexual attack. In the grip of his terrible lust, the murderer had inadvertently throttled the struggling boy. The note's reference to "impure passions" suggested as much, as did a cursory examination of the corpse. In particular, the disheveled state of the boy's clothes—the pants pulled down, the shirt slightly raised, a button torn off, stains of what appeared to be semen on the outer fabric—all indicated that at least an attempted rape had taken place.

For Delalé, then, many of the pieces to the puzzle appeared to fall quickly into place. Gaston Foveaux had been the victim of a frenzied sexual attack within the confines of the school, and the culprit was almost certainly to be found amongst the nineteen teaching brothers. This left a further question, however: which of the nineteen was the guilty party? To answer this question, Delalé turned to a technique which was routinely employed by investigating magistrates in this era: the confrontation.[18] The technique was simple. Each of the nineteen brothers would be made to file past the corpse of Gaston Foveaux and to gaze upon his face and his contorted limbs, all the while being lectured on the enormous gravity of such a crime. Delalé and his fellow investigators would then study intently the reaction of each man, looking for any sign in his expression or in his gestures that he was the culprit. The body of the boy would thus reveal his killer.

This was the most critical part of the investigation, and it raised immediately the question of masculinity and its performance. What after all was Delalé looking for? What were the bodily signs of a guilty man? The answer, as it turned out, was clear. According to his notes, Delalé found the reaction of all the brothers except one to be, in his words, "normal." Their reaction was sad but dignified; a few even let slip, as he noted, some signs of grief, all the while retaining their composure. Brother Flamidien, however, reacted very differently. Upon seeing the body, Flamidien dropped to his knees and appealed to those around him to explain how any person could commit such a vicious act. Startled by this reaction, which evidently struck him as exaggerated and false, Delalé immediately accused Flamidien of being the murderer. What followed struck Delalé as even more bizarre – protestations, appeals to various saints, and finally, in what seemed to the magistrate as particularly damning, a flood of tears.[19]

Flamidien had no doubt marked himself by reacting differently to his fellow brothers. But in Delalé's eyes, just as damning was the fact that he had behaved in a way that appeared unmanly. The question of when it might be appropriate for a man to cry was complex. On the one hand, prevailing notions of true masculinity stressed self-control and fortitude; on the other, controlled expressions of grief in particular circumstances were widely held to be not only appropriate but expected. But uncontrolled weeping was never acceptable. Flamidien's utter

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[18] For a contemporary defense of the technique, see Sarraute, *Manuel théorique et pratique du juge d'instruction*, 389.

[19] "Procès verbal de transport," Archives Lasalliennes, Lyon (hereafter AL), Pr. 10, no date.

loss of composure and dignity was seen by the men around him as effeminate. As Anne Vincent Buffault contends, “The man who sobbed found himself relegated to femininity and childhood.”[20] This is where Flamidien found himself too, and it had crucial ramifications for the entire investigation. Unable to believe that a man might naturally react in this way, Delalé saw instead a suspicious theatricality. Flamidien’s behavior, he recalled, looked “simulated, absolutely strange.”[21] At this absolutely critical moment, under the keen eye of investigators, his performance had failed to convince, and the consequences were grave. By so egregiously departing from a gendered script which called on men to retain their self-control, Frère Flamidien became the sole object of all suspicion. Everything about him now rang false.

Convinced that he had found his murderer, Delalé set out to gather physical evidence. A handwriting analysis listed Flamidien as one of four brothers who might have written the note left by Gaston’s body. Paper found in his room appeared similar to that used for the note as well. Then the magistrate noticed something else. Examining a blackboard in his classroom, he detected a similarity in the style of the letter “M” to that on the murderer’s note. All of this was sufficient for Delalé, who took Flamidien into custody. From the outset, the accused brother protested his innocence. But Delalé appeared unperturbed. Under the powers enjoyed by the *juge d’instruction*, he could now hold Flamidien in prison while compiling the dossier of evidence which invariably, in the French justice system, resulted in a conviction.[22] Cut off from his community, and subjected to several long and intense interrogations, the accused brother might even crack, and confess to his crime. In any case, Delalé was confident that he had solved the greatest case of his career.

The Catholic Response: A Rival Vision of Masculinity

As Delalé gathered his evidence, however, key Catholic figures and institutions rallied to the defense of the accused Flamidien. Their efforts to prove that a terrible miscarriage of justice was occurring took several forms. A lawyer hired by the Order, Pierre Chesnelong, set out to demolish the evidence against his client. To begin with, Flamidien had a watertight alibi. Scores of witnesses testified to seeing him during the evening of February 5, the period when the crime was alleged to have occurred. Against this, only one witness cast any doubt on Flamidien’s account of his movements that night, a fifteen-year-old boy who claimed to have looked for the brother for ten to fifteen minutes that evening without finding him. But even if true, this was far too short a time period to commit such a crime and to hide the corpse. A second key element of the defense was to suggest that the crime might have been committed by an enemy of the Order in an elaborate scheme to bring it into disrepute. This theory was put most forcefully by the Catholic and conservative press. As early as February 11, the conservative *Dépêche de Lille* was putting forward the thesis that the crime had been committed outside the school, and the body then smuggled into the establishment by someone with a grudge against the Order. The problem with this thesis was that the entrance to the school was guarded by a porter, and there had been a sizeable police presence from Tuesday morning. But the Catholic press was undeterred. Correspondents claimed that there was no surveillance in place at the entrance to the school in the critical period before the discovery of the body.[23] The abbé Henri Masquelier, editor of the main Catholic journal in the city, the *Croix du Nord*, produced yet more evidence to support the thesis. One letter-writer attested that on the evening before the discovery of the body, the entrance to the school was unattended. A special issue of the paper

[20] Vincent-Buffault, *History of Tears*, 246.
[21] “Procès verbal de transport,” AL, Pr. 10, no date.
[22] On the French judicial system, Martin, *Hypocrisy of Justice*.
[23] *Dépêche de Lille*, February 11, 1899.

hammered home the message, showing five different routes through which a murderer might gain access to the interior of the school without being detected.[24]

But another critical part of the defense of Flamidien was the effort to rehabilitate his masculine credentials. The republican press depicted a man who was hysterical, almost unhinged, and who might therefore easily be imagined as the author of such a terrible act. To counter this image, the Church took a careful approach. Even his most faithful supporters were forced to concede that Flamidien was a sensitive man. In an interview with the daily national *Le Matin*, the Superior-General of the Order freely admitted that Flamidien showed an "excessive nervosity, an extreme sensitivity." But this weakness was balanced by a host of admirable attributes. His colleagues as well as parents of his pupils would attest to Flamidien's zeal and dedication.[25] Most importantly, defenders of Flamidien sought to recast the image of his behavior during the famous confrontation. Far from showing a contemptible mix of effeminacy and guilt, Flamidien had reacted in a manner that was perfectly natural. How else should a man react to when confronted with the murdered body of one of his favorite pupils? His sobbing was laudable, a show of compassion and of grief that sprang not from a guilty conscience or a desire to dupe the investigators but simply from a genuine and naïve heart.[26]

In the eyes of his supporters, however, it was Flamidien's resilience in the months after his arrest that showed his masculine virtue. In the face of Delalé's increasingly desperate efforts to pressure Flamidien into confessing, the imprisoned brother projected a heroic calm. Gone was the man who broke down into tears and lamentations; in his place was a figure who showed an unassailable serenity. This was true even when subjected to the most extreme ordeals. In March 1899, the press began reporting the details of yet another confrontation between Flamidien and the corpse of Gaston Foveaux, which had taken place in the autopsy room on February 10. This confrontation was even more gruesome than the first, for the body now bore the incisions made during the autopsy. In the account of the conservative press, the poor brother was once again forced to gaze at the scarred body, all the while surrounded by a group of hostile investigators screaming at him to confess. What followed was even more ghastly. As the press reported, while Flamidien repeated his denials, one of the doctors seated at the end of the autopsy table surreptitiously lifted the head of Gaston Foveaux and manipulated the eyeballs so that they appeared to sway from side to side. This was a gesture designed to frighten Flamidien, and to convince him that the body of the murdered boy was silently admonishing him for his lies. Even then, however, Flamidien refused to recant. In the aftermath, the Catholic press rounded on the authors of such a ghastly *coup de théâtre*. The *Croix* denounced "a savage torture scene," the *Dépêche* a "horrible and odious mise-en-scène."[27] The outrage extended to the National Assembly, where the conservative Senator from the North, Louis Le Provost de Launay, formally demanded that the Minister of Justice explain the circumstances surrounding this confrontation.[28]

This reported confrontation in the autopsy room was a graphic demonstration of the bitter divide between Catholics and republicans. Few Catholics cast any doubt on the authenticity of the story; most appeared only too ready to believe that the republican administration would resort to such horrible tactics in its campaign of persecution against an isolated and frightened brother. Yet there were strong grounds to doubt many of the details of these reports. The Minister of Justice was sufficiently alarmed to order an investigation. There was no doubt that Flamidien had been confronted with the corpse in the autopsy room. But all

[24] *Croix du Nord*, AL, Pr. 20,
[25] *Matin*, February 14, 1899.
[26] *Temps*, February 15, 1899.
[27] *Croix*, March 14, 1899.
[28] Provost de Launay to Minister of Justice, AN, BB/18/2108, March 15, 1899. For the interpellation, see *Journal officiel de la République française. Débats parlementaires. Sénat* (March 27, 1899), 332.

of the witnesses refuted the story of the rolling eyeballs. A few noted that the doctor had indeed placed his hands around the eyes of the dead boy. But far from a means of scaring the accused, this was an effort to spare him by covering up the cuts and incisions made during the autopsy. All denied that there was any intent to traumatize the brother beyond the already horrible sight of the corpse.[29]

The Catholic press, however, discounted the investigation as a whitewash, and celebrated the courage and resolve of the imprisoned brother in even more lavish terms. Once again, the supposedly weak and hysterical brother had borne his ordeal with a heroism that sprang directly from his religious faith. In the eyes of his supporters, Flamidien was a Christ-like figure, stoically enduring the blows of his tormentors, and holding fast both to his faith and to the glory of his Church. There is some evidence that even Flamidien had come to see himself in this light. In a letter to Delalé, he described the strength he had gained through his ordeal. More than ever he would meet the "odious tyranny" inflicted on him with the meekness of "Christian resignation."[30] Here was a vision of masculine heroism, albeit expressed in a distinctively Catholic register.

The School Question

There was another figure in the Flamidien Affair whose masculine credentials were in question. This was the boy's father, Elisée Foveaux. Once his son had gone missing, Elisée had acted in a manner that was irreproachable. On two occasions, he had gone to the school to look for his son; by all accounts he was grief-stricken at the terrible news of the murder. But for republicans, Foveaux *père* was far from blameless. In particular, he could be held accountable for the decision to send his son to a Catholic school, a decision which had led, however inadvertently, to his death. By entrusting Gaston to the care of celibate brothers, his father had failed in a basic duty of care.

But Elisée Foveaux was not alone in making this error. The Flamidien Affair quickly became entangled with the broader school question which was such a fierce point of division between republicans and Catholics. Once entrenched in power after 1877, republicans sought to weaken the Catholic school system and to build up a state-run alternative. A series of laws from 1879 to 1886 banned certain orders, notably the *bête-noire* of republicans, the Jesuits, from teaching, required all religious teachers to obtain the official qualification, the *brevet de capacité*, and began a phased removal of Catholic personnel from the state primary school system.[31] The results, however, were disappointing, and the *Frères des Écoles chrétiennes* provided a striking example of their failure. Like many of the congregations, it experienced a phase of rapid growth in the middle decades of the century—from 4,376 members in 1846 to 7,787 in 1861.[32] With the passage of Jules Ferry's reforms designed to secularize the education system, the Brothers were largely forced out of the state school system. But the losses were offset by a growth in privately-run *écoles libres*. From 828 such schools in 1885, the Frères were running 1,307 a decade later.[33] A 1901 survey revealed 13,815 brothers responsible for 5,571 classes and 203,760 students across the nation.[34]

For republicans, it was imperative to prove that Flamidien was not an isolated case but entirely typical of the body of celibate teaching brothers. A poster in the streets of Lille sheeted the crime home to all Catholic congregations. The monstrous Flamidien was simply a "product

[29] Procureur-Général to Minister of Justice, AN, BB/18/2108, March 19, 1899.
[30] Flamidien to Delalé, AL, Pr. 12, no date.
[31] For a general survey, see McManners, *Church and State in France*, 45-58; Ozouf, *L'école, l'église et la République*.
[32] Sorrel, *République contre les congrégations*, 20.
[33] Bédel, *Initiation à l'histoire*, 35-36.
[34] "Institut des Frères des écoles chrétiennes, résumé de la statistique au 31 décembre 1901," AN F/17/12461.

of his milieu," and particularly of the vow of celibacy which had driven him to commit his ghastly crime. The lesson was clear: parents should never trust such men and their schools, but instead send them to state schools, where they will receive a "solid instruction and a civic morality which are suitable for true citizens."[35] At the same time, this was an attack on fathers who, like Elisée Foveaux, continued to put their sons in harm's way by entrusting them to congregational schools. It was a dereliction of duty, the *Siècle* argued, for fathers to leave their sons in the hands of men prone to "bouts of sadistic and bloody frenzy."[36] Those that continued to do so deserved the strongest condemnation. To reinforce the message, the press listed more cases of teaching brothers who stood accused of sexually abusing their students. In 1899 the left-leaning *Rappel* reported that no fewer than twenty-seven abbots, brothers and reverend fathers had faced such charges in the previous two years alone.[37]

In a reaction that was typically combative, supporters of the Church turned the accusation against their anticlerical opponents. In the streets of Lille, posters announcing the sexual crimes of secular teachers quickly appeared. One, titled "les crimes de l'école laïque," listed three cases from just one week, including a teacher accused of abusing no less than ten of his students. These were men, the poster stressed, that had not taken the vow of celibacy.[38] But the greatest victory for Catholic schools would be the exoneration of Brother Flamidien. Here, and despite all of the Catholic accusations of a republican plot against them, the court system came to their aid. After almost five months of incarceration, Flamidien was still in custody. In July the case moved to the *Chambre des Mises en Accusation*, the tribunal which determined if a case should proceed to trial. Delalé had by then accumulated a judicial file which contained some 810 pieces of evidence. But he had not obtained either compelling physical evidence linking Flamidien to the crime or a confession from the accused. On July 10, the court ruled that there were insufficient evidentiary grounds to warrant a trial.[39] After 152 days in captivity, Frère Flamidien was released. Although the court did not release its reasoning, it clearly was not swayed by the notion of truth emerging from an emotional performance, at least in the absence of further supporting evidence.

This decision might have been seen as proof that the republican courts retained a strong degree of impartiality, and were far from the hotbeds of anti-Catholicism that some of the most outspoken defenders of Flamidien imagined them to be. Yet the reaction followed the same polarized pattern that had characterized the Affair since its beginnings. Republicans decried the tribunal for ignoring the mass of evidence against Flamidien. At the same time, the press stressed that this was not an exoneration. A decision of *non-lieu*, as the *Siècle* reminded its readers, was not an acquittal, and there was still the possibility that new charges would be laid.[40] The reaction in the streets of Lille was more virulent, with angry crowds once again attacking key Catholic sites. As in February, Superior Catherine de Montalembert was moved to implore the Prefect for protection as a crowd set about battering at the door of her school.[41] The Catholic press, in contrast, was jubilant. The brother described as a "martyr of Christian education" was feted as a hero. On July 23, the annual reunion of the former students of 39, rue de la Monnaie greeted Flamidien with acclaim.[42] Amidst cheers and applause, the freed brother was presented with a crucifix to replace one that had been taken from him during his detention. Kissing the crucifix, Flamidien, perhaps to nobody's great surprise, began to cry.

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[35] *Progrès du Nord*, February 13, 1899.
[36] *Siècle*, February 11, 1899.
[37] *Rappel*, February 17, 1899.
[38] ADN, 1T 123/12.
[39] ADN, 2U 2/602.
[40] *Siècle*, July 14, 1899.
[41] Montalembert to Prefect, ADN, 1T 123/12, July 12, 1899.
[42] Report to Prefect, ADN, M154/49, July 23, 1899.

Conclusion

Years after the events of 1899, the Flamidien Affair continued to resonate. In 1903 Émile Zola's final novel, *Vérité*, appeared posthumously. An unsparing attack on the anti-Semitism propagated by the Catholic Church, the novel recast the dynamics of the Flamidien Affair. In Zola's rendering, a Jewish teacher in a republican school is falsely accused of the rape and murder of one of his pupils. The true culprit, a *frère chrétien*, is protected by his fellow brothers, who do all they can to hide the evidence of his guilt while incriminating the innocent Jewish teacher. Only when another republican teacher uncovers the truth is the true criminal brought to light.

By 1903 the republican regime was embarking on a new campaign against Catholic schools. Under legislation put forward just months after Flamidien's release, and which eventually became law on July1 1901, all religious corporations were forced to apply to the government for authorization. Under Emile Combes, the government used the law to abolish the majority of Catholic congregations. A further law in 1904 banned those that remained from all forms of teaching in France. Amongst its victims were the Brothers of the Christian Schools. In a report on the execution of the law, a government agent visited the school at 39, rue de la Monnaie which had been the scene of such drama only five years before. The premises, he reported, were empty; the neighbors reported that the brothers had packed up and left for Belgium a month before.[43]

While the Flamidien Affair was not the cause of this campaign, there is little doubt that key republicans drew on such scandals to justify their assault on the Catholic school system. Furthermore, the Affair points to the importance of gender, and particularly of masculinity, in framing and in driving the War of Two Frances. Republicans saw a mass of celibate men outside the social order and forever on the point of tipping over into sexual crime. More work remains to be done on the Catholic conception of masculinity and its relationship to wider social norms. What is clear is that Catholics used the Affair to articulate their own understanding of masculine virtue, an understanding that, while not entirely opposed to that of their republican opponents, placed a far greater emphasis on themes of sacrifice, piety and spiritual fortitude.

Unlike Zola's story, the Flamidien Affair did not have a conclusive ending. Frère Flamidien continued to protest his innocence until his death in 1939. In the same year that Zola's novel appeared, Henry Bourgeois, the Procureur-Général at Douai, wrote a report on the investigation in which he speculated about another possibility. For Bourgeois, the basic tenets of the investigation were correct: the crime must have been committed inside the school by one of the brothers. But perhaps, he implied, Delalé had indeed misread the fateful confrontation, and fixed on the wrong brother. The true culprit may then have been one of the other teaching brothers, a man who was able to dissimulate the bodily signs of guilt with much greater skill than the hapless Flamidien.[44] This hypothesis, however, was never pursued, and the murder of Gaston Foveaux remains unsolved to this day.

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[43] "Frères des écoles chrétiennes: loi 1904. Exécution," ADN, 6V/53.

[44] Bourgeois to Minister of Justice, AN, BB/18/2108, May 14, 1903.

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