

Armand-Jean le Bouthillier de Rancé

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Armand-Jean le Bouthillier de Rancé.
Painting in La Trappe.

Armand-Jean le Bouthillier de Rancé (* January 9, 1626 Paris – + October 27, 1700 Soligny-La Trappe), abbot and reformer of the Cistercian abbey of La Trappe.

Biography

He was originally intended for the Knights of Malta. The illness of his older brother caused his father to dedicate him to ecclesiastical service, in order to preserve in the family the former numerous benefices. At twelve he published a translation of Anacreon with Greek notes. On the death of his brother, in 1637, he became canon of Notre Dame de Paris, abbot of La Trappe Abbey, and of several other places, which gave him a revenue of about 15,000 *livres*. In 1651, he was ordained priest by his uncle Victor Bouthillier, the Archbishop of Tours, and embarked on a career as a court abbot.

In 1652 his father died, leaving him a further increase in estate. At the age of twenty-six he was thus left with practically unlimited wealth. His uncle, who desired him as coadjutor, made him archdeacon, caused him to be elected deputy of the second order to the General Assembly of the French Clergy in 1655, and had him appointed first chaplain to Gaston, Duke of Orléans, in 1656.

The death of the Duchess of Montbazon, in 1657, gave him the first serious thought leading to his conversion. And in 1660 he assisted at the death of the Duke of Orléans, which made so great an impression on him that he said: "Either the Gospel deceives us, or this is the

house of a reprobate". After having taken counsel, he disposed of all his possessions, except the Abbey of La Trappe, which he visited for the first time in 1662.

He retired to his abbey, of which he became regular abbot in 1664 and introduced an austere reform. He devoted his spare time to manual labor, and to the compilation of spiritual books. These latter were by no means inconsiderable. Amongst the most important are: *Vies de plusieurs solitaires de La Trappe*; *Le traité de la sainteté et des devoirs de la vie monastique*; *La règle de s. Benoît, traduite et expliqué selon son véritable esprit*, etc.

His penitential mode of life made him many enemies, and caused him to be accused of Jansenism, but he refrained from defending himself, until finally, at the request of his most intimate friends, he wrote to the Maréchal de Bellefonds, stating that he had signed the *Formula* (against Jansenism) without restriction or reservation of any kind; adding that he had always submitted himself absolutely to those whom God had placed over him, i.e., the pope and his bishop.

He resigned his abbacy in 1695, owing to declining health, and died in 1700.

A biography of his life, *Vie de Rancé*, was the final work of the Romantic writer and politician, François-René de Chateaubriand, published in 1844.