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FRANCE: Protesters set on fire a historical convent—only three lines in the media

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During the pension reform protests, radical demonstrators in Rennes tried to set on fire the

Convent of the Jacobins together with a police station.

By Willy Fautré

Bitter Winter (18.04.2023) – On 14 April, in the city of Rennes, radical anti-Macron protestors from the extreme-left, who oppose the new law fixing the retirement age at 64, started a fire at the historical Convent of the Jacobins, converted into a congress hall, and did the same at a police station that was empty at that time. The French media outlets only devoted a few lines to this act of violence targeting a 14th-century Catholic building.

Considerable damage was also caused to shops in the centre of the city.

Minister of the Interior Gérald Darmanin strongly condemned these outbursts on Twitter. “The damage and attacks tonight in Rennes, against a police station and the Convent of Jacobins, by thugs determined to fight are unacceptable.” He promised “full support to the police and gendarmes mobilized,” adding that “the perpetrators will be prosecuted.”

The union of officers and police commissioners also reacted to the damages at the police station deemed “lamentable.” “Here is a police office in Rennes intended to welcome our fellow citizens that is going up in smoke. Why? This action of activists discredits the fight against the pension reform,” said the unionists.

Following these fires, an investigation was opened for “damage by dangerous means and criminal association.” Three people have been taken into custody. We will see what will be the final outcome of the prosecution—if any.

The convent is a foundation of the Order of Preachers, better known as Dominicans or (in France) Jacobins. The originality of this new order, created in 1215, lied in its location in the heart of the cities.

The first stone of the convent was laid on February 2, 1369, in the presence of the Duke of Brittany and built on the land of two generous donors, Pierre Rouxel and his wife. Its construction marked the beginning of an important spiritual, intellectual, and political revival in the history of the city and of Brittany. The work was rather slow because it was only based on donations from the faithful. To accelerate the undertaking, Duke John IV of Brittany gave his financial support and became the official founder.

The convent of Jacobins quickly became the place of an important pilgrimage, thanks to the devotion given to the image of the Virgin of Good News.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, the importance of the Jacobin convent was not only linked to the worship of Our Lady of Good News, but also to its intellectual influence, which led to an increasing number of religious vocations. Theology was the primary subject taught here, which could be supplemented by philosophy, canon law, and the Holy Scripture.

The teaching was based on the important library of the convent: there were more than 5,000 printed books (a part of which is now kept by the library of Rennes Métropole). Just before the Revolution, some of the friars adhered to the new ideas of Freemasonry. Of the twenty or so Dominicans remaining in the convent in the 1770s, at least five were active in the "Parfaite Union" Masonic lodge.



At the Revolution, all religious properties were seized and became state property. Many of them were dismantled and sold as national assets. However, the convent buildings did not find a buyer. In 1793, the convent was assigned to the army and adapted to serve as military stores. Until the 1980s, the convent was the headquarters of the army's sports associations; it also housed equipment and certain archives of the Ministry of Defense. The convent was listed in the supplementary inventory of historical monuments in September 1986. It was classified as a historical monument in May 1991. In 2002, it became the property of Rennes Métropole, which transformed it into a Congress Hall in 2018.

Photo 1: The attack against the Convent of the Jacobins. From Twitter.

Photo 2: Rennes' Convent of the Jacobins (photo taken before the attack). Credits.

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He has carried out fact-finding missions on human rights and religious freedom in more than 25 countries He is a lecturer in universities in the field of religious freedom and human rights. He has published many articles in university journals about relations between state and religions. He organizes conferences at the European Parliament, including on freedom of religion or belief in China. For years, he has developed religious freedom advocacy in European institutions, at the OSCE and at the UN.

Further reading about FORB in France on HRWF website

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