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PECHERIN: FROM CATHOLIC TO CATHOLIC

Vladimir Pecherin, a Russian émigré, is one of the most enigmatic figures in Russian history. He spent most of his life abroad and led a life so intriguing that it was considered suitable material for a novel.¹

1 A life

Pecherin was born in 1807. His father was an army officer who frequently changed locations in which he was stationed. After a brief stay in Kiev's school, Pecherin moved to Petersburg in 1829 where after a brief period of work as a clerk, he became a student of classical philology in which he showed his exceptional linguistic talents. He graduated in 1831 as the only student that this year with a candidate degree. He became a lecturer of Latin and an assistant in the university library. He published scholarly papers and translations of Schiller and of classical authors. In 1833, he was sent to Berlin with other young scholars for further study. During his two-year stay abroad, he traveled in Italy, Germany, and Switzerland. The

¹ Robion de la Trehonnais (probably Tréhonnais) intended to write a novel about Pecherin (P 277). E. A. Hiller wrote a novel about Pecherin, which was never published (Кулешов В. А., Судьба неизданного романа, *Вопросы литературы* 1962, No. 12, 235–236). The figure of Stolygin in Herzen's unfinished novel, *Duty before all*, is based on Pecherin (И. Красовский, Ранняя редакция повести "Долг прежде всего," *Литературное наследство* 59 (1953), 27–28. References to Pecherin's ideas are also found in Dostoevsky's novels, *Devils*, *Idiot*, and *Row youth*.

stay made an indelible impression on all the participants. "They lost touch with Russia and the idea weighed heavily on them that they must vegetate in this kingdom of slavery forever. Pecherin was particularly gloomy."²

In 1836, Pecherin went to Moscow University where he taught for only one semester, but he succeeded in making an excellent impression on his students and colleagues. In the same year, he received permission for a trip to Berlin. He never returned to Russia.

For four years, he drifted through Europe, constantly having financial difficulties. He received temporary employment, frequently associated with his linguistic talents. He planned to participate in revolutionary activities, but apparently he did not go beyond the planning stage. Very much in the spirit of the times, Pecherin wanted to establish a commune in America, an ideal Christian republic where one would live in love and voluntarily submit to the chosen laws and leaders.

In 1840, he converted to Catholicism and became a Redemptorist monk, and in 1843, a Catholic priest. After his novitiate, he was transferred in 1841 to the Wittem seminary to teach history, Latin, Greek, and rhetoric. In 1845–1848, he served with two other monks in Falmouth (Cornwall) as a missionary and then moved to London. Afterwards, he was transferred to London suburb of Clapham. During this time, he participated in missionary trips throughout Ireland as an experienced preacher.³ In 1854, he went to Limerick to the first Irish Redemptorist monastery, Mount St. Alphonsus. During this period, he was accused of burning protestant Bibles. However, the much publicized trial that followed, exonerated him. He also proved to be a talented preacher.⁴

In 1861, Pecherin left the Redemptorist order but remained a priest. In 1862, he became a chaplain at the Mater Misericordiae hospital in Dublin, where he stayed for the remaining 23 years of his life. In contrast to his monastery life, in his last two decades he devoted much effort to learning new languages, studying science, performing experiments, and keeping abreast with the political developments in Europe and especially in Russia. He also resumed writing poetry.

It is in this period that he wrote his *Sketches from beyond the grave*. Actually, the *Sketches* is a collection of 44 fragments written in the form of letters, mostly to his friend from university years, Fiodor V. Chizhov, and a few to his nephew

² An entry in A.V. Nikitenko's *Diary* dated June 15, 1835.

³ During these trips, he was "very much loved because he was completely suffused with love for poor children and often publicly praised them. This might lead him to neglect certain things. In short, he did not preach with necessary seriousness and energy," Joseph Prost, *A Redemptorist missionary in Ireland, 1851–1854*, Cork: Cork University Press 1998, 37–38.

⁴ In the opinion of a Redemptorist priest, "with the possible exception of Fr. Bernard, Pecherin was the greatest Redemptorist orator that ever adorned a pulpit in Ireland," Alexander Lipski, Pecherin's quest for meaningfulness, *Slavic Review* 23 (1964), 250.

Savva F. Poiarkov. The *Sketches* were never completed. They were published posthumously twice in different arrangements of fragments with new material and some letters added in the second edition.⁵ The *Sketches* have been praised for their literary value and deservedly so. They read very smoothly and describe Pecherin's vicissitudes with a tinge of self-deprecation. The literary value is not surprising, considering Pecherin's high-quality translations of poetry and plays and his own romantic-style poetry.

The remarkable aspects of his life include three rather unusual turning points: leaving Russia, his conversion to Catholicism and becoming a monk, and leaving the order.

2 Leaving Russia

In his explanation to Chizhov, Pecherin listed three reasons for leaving Russia (P 175–176).⁶ First, religion: Pecherin stated that he could not “fast by order and blaspheme by receiving the Lord's Supper without faith” as he would have to do as a professor. Second, he did not feel a calling for a professorship and Moscow's social life repulsed him. Third, he did not believe that Russia, with its limitations, was an adequate field for the development of his literary talent. Of the three reasons listed by Pecherin after 30 years, the last two seem somewhat frivolous. Was it really necessary to make such a drastic step simply because the social life of Moscow did not measure up to Pecherin's standards? It would be sufficient not to participate in it without fleeing the country. Also, was it really impossible to develop literary skills even in the stifled atmosphere of Nikolai's Russia? It appears that out of the three reasons, the first is most important. Pecherin considered himself an unbeliever, and yet he found it blasphemous to follow the Orthodox rites without accepting their meaning. That is, he considered faith very seriously and appeared to be a faith seeker who wanted to follow religious precepts only as a free man. A forced exercise of religion was unacceptable to him because of the importance he ascribed to religious faith.

⁵ *Замогильные записки*, Москва: Мир 1932; *Замогильные записки (Apologetica pro vita mea)*, in Федосов И. А. (ed.), *Русское общество 30-х годов XIX в.*, Москва: Издательство Московского университета 1989, 148–311.

⁶ The following abbreviations will be used:
G – Михаил Гершензон, *Жизнь В. С. Печерина* [1910], in his *Избранное*, Москва: Университетская книга 2000, v. 2, 371–540.
P – Владимир Печерин, *Замогильные записки (Apologetica pro vita mea)*, in Федосов, *op. cit.*

In fact, the religious reason became prominent in the explanations Pecherin offered right after leaving Russia. He spoke about the life of Moscow society but gives in his description a more religious color. To him, this life was “crude and animal, [with] these subservient creatures, these people without faith, without God, living only to amass money and feed themselves, like animals; these people, on whose foreheads one would search in vain for a stamp of their Maker.” He became suicidal. To deal with the problem, he practiced an ascetic life of bread and olives and even had visions. In one of his visions, he heard God tell him to abandon the country, take up the cross and leave (a 1837 letter to Stroganov, P 172–173). Pecherin found the religious vacuity of Moscow life unendurable. The only way out was in heeding the call of the West.

This call of the West was not a new development that emerged under the influence of life in Moscow. It was only strengthened. Pecherin said that from early childhood he experienced a pressure of a hidden force to reach a goal – unknown and foggy, but charming and shining (P 172). And, in fact, at the age of 12, he was ready to go to France with an officer (P 151). His tutor, Wilhelm Kessman, instilled in him “the idea of freedom and of Christian equality” which Pecherin wanted to actualize (P 154). Books that he read as a youth also strongly influenced him. In particular, two articles by Voltaire about Quakers impressed him so much that he wrote a letter to Philadelphia to be admitted by the Quakers as a member (P 160).

The almost nomadic life led by Pecherin also contributed to his desire to leave Russia. His father was frequently stationed in places suitable for the military, but not for the talented young man who desired knowledge and cultured company. And yet, as he was certain, in the West someone at his age of 18, “prematurely grown up and hardened by freedom, already occupies a prominent place among his co-citizens ... All ways are open to him: science, art, industry,” etc. (P 161). In other countries, the goal is to develop as a human being; in Russia, to make one a clerk (P 162). To Pecherin, even university lectures were “terribly superficial” (P 166, 270). And so, one idea preoccupied him, “an invincible belief in the invisible force which called me to the West and which now leads through an unseen path to some higher goal, where all will be resolved, all will be explained, all will be finished” (P 149).

After his first trip to Berlin, Pecherin returned in a gloomy mood, and this gloom is reflected in an oft-quoted poem, written in Berlin, and that he later considered mad (P 161):

How sweet it is to hate the fatherland
 And eagerly await its destruction
 And in the ruin of the fatherland to see
 The dawn of the universal rebirth!

The same gloomy outlook can be seen in his unfinished tragedy, *Valdemar*, in which the hero wants to “break the chains that shackle his hands and with freed hands create for himself a new world” (G 415), and in an epic poem “The triumph of death.” In this poem, the city ends with the flood of the city (Petersburg is understood) and the death of all inhabitants.⁷ Also in Berlin, Pecherin speaks in a letter through Valdemar that “Christ commends us to leave father, mother, and brothers – for what? For one word! For one sacred thought! ... My fatherland is where my faith lives” (G 444).

Political, social, and particularly religious reasons drove Pecherin to the West in the hope of finding the promised land. Russia offered no hope for him, so he made a drastic decision to leave his country and try a new life abroad.

3 Conversion to Catholicism

In his travels, Pecherin meets variety of people, experiences different hardships and mishaps and sees that in the West status, money, etc. are just as important as he saw it in Russia. The Western countries were definitely not populated with saints. In the depth of despair, he seems to have been quite serious in desiring to sign a pact with the devil. He repeatedly called on him, but the devil did not appear (P 186).

In his words, the first seed of conversion was his visit to a Catholic church. He was in rags, unshaven, unkempt, and yet he could stand in the church next to others and listen to the mass. To him, all this “revealed a deeply democratic character of the Catholic church” (P 198).

However, he stated that “the decisive influence” in his acceptance of Catholicism was exercised by George Sand (P 231). Pecherin had always been enchanted by her writings even to the extent that he daydreamed about going to her place and asking to be admitted in her service (P 230). Also, his idea of freedom was to be able to lie in the woods or in a meadow with Sand’s novel in his hands (P 219). Commenting on the decisive influence of Sand on his conversion, Pecherin says that it in her novels she showed “the better sides of religion: ascetism, self-denial, and love of one’s neighbor can develop independently of it from pure reason with the help of Stoic philosophy” (P 231). It is rather puzzling why the fact that Sand showed that good attributes can stem from pure reason alone moved Pecherin in the direction of Catholicism. Moreover, the primary topic of her works (novels,

⁷ After his conversion, he considered this poem to be a crude and childish production, as reported by Herzen in *My past and thoughts*, part 8, appendix iii.

short stories, and plays) – particularly those from her early period, the works that could have been read by Pecherin before his conversion – is love, since “the sweetest, noblest, most beneficial thing in life is love” (*The master mosaic-workers*, ch. 4) and “there is only one happiness in the world, which is love” (*Jacques*, ch. 29). Only in a few works is the love story a secondary motif (*The uscoque*) or altogether absent (*Spiridion*, *The master mosaic-workers*, *Lettres d’un voyageur*). And because “love is the most malleable of all human sentiments; [because] it takes all forms, it produces all imaginable effects according to the ground in which it germinates” (*The uscoque*), there is no limit to the ways love can be described. Sand gives pages upon pages of confessions of love, assurances of love, meditations of love, analyses of the strength of love, the ways to incite and strengthen love, etc., the love that could be motivated as much by genuine passion as by outright *ennui*. Although many of the love games end up with marriage, marriage is not a necessary or even a desirable outcome since marriage “is the most bitter and most ridiculous perjury of human beings toward God” (*The private secretary*, ch. 21) and it “is one of the most barbarous institutions which it [society] has created,” and it “will be abolished if humankind makes any progress toward justice and reason” (*Jacques*, chs. 6, 14); therefore, signora Aldini who “did not seem to deny him [count Lanfranchi] the joys of marriage except the indissoluble oath” (*The last of the Aldinis*) is far from being an isolated case in Sand’s works.⁸

The religious aspects are barely present in Sand’s work and the mention of God is primarily limited to stock phrases such as “thank God” or “God knows.” References to religion have, generally, strong anti-Catholic and anti-monastic coloring.⁹ Such references are frequently limited to interjected phrases or descriptions of some personalities. The monk is said to have “faith in a blind master, friend of stupidity and degradation” (*The seven strings of the lyre*, act 1, scene 2). A reference is made to the coldness of “Christian egoism that makes us endure everything in view of a reward” and to the bareness of “monastic renunciation which prevents us from allaying the human life of others and of our own” (“Pauline,” ch. 2). In *The private secretary*, princess Cavalcanti says about her secretary, abbé Scipione: he “is a fool whom I make into a canon of the church” (ch. 3); and about Saint-Julien that his pride, intolerance, and suspicion are the results of being educated by a Catholic priest (ch. 15). The only priest in *Leone Leoni* is abbé Zanini,

⁸ Cf. also the case of Lavinia who rejects two marriage proposals because of her hatred of marriage, of “eternal vows and promises and plans and the future arranged in advance with contracts and deals, which are always laughed at by the fate” (“Lavinia”), and the case of Fiamma who does not want to marry by principle because her aversion to marriage (*Simon*, chs. 9–10; the aversion was eventually overcome, ch. 17).

⁹ Sand’s vitriol is somewhat puzzling since she attended a convent school with rigid rules for three years; and yet, she was happy there and was not hurt by the regimen of the nuns (*History of my life*, ch. 14).

who is a man of “incredible immorality and true cowardice beneath a hypocritical exterior of tolerance and common sense” (ch. 15). In the “Mattea,” the heroine’s mother was strict and despotic and “in the midst of her despotism, of her violence and her injustices, she goaded with an austere devotion and forced her to the narrowest practices of bigotry.” Mattea’s confessor betrayed her by discussing her confessions and prescribed penance with her mother (ch. 3). In the *Gabriel*, abbé Chiavari, Gabrielle’s tutor, on her grandfather’s orders, brings her up with the conviction that she is a boy, Gabriel (prologue); the abbé himself thinks it is a crime (act 5, scene 3). Also, Côme, Settimia’s confessor, “burned with shameful desire to Gabrielle and dared to tell her that” (act 3, scene 4). According to *The companion of the tour of France*, “the priests, by making themselves the ministers of temporal power and the agents of despotism, have become traitors to the thought of their master and altered the spirit of the doctrine” (ch. 27); a local curate lets himself be bribed “by means of presents to his cellar” in order to allow dancing on Sunday (ch. 20). In *Rose and Blanche*, a long depiction is given of a dull and pompous archbishop who publicly castigates a lieutenant allegedly responsible for insufficiently honoring the archbishop’s arrival to a city. Also, from the archbishop’s entourage, the *grand-vicaire* is a slick hypocrite, and “few women resisted” the libertine abbé R. (bk. 2, chs. 3–4). The book also gives in several chapters an unsympathetic and unappealing, almost grotesque description of convent life, “a sojourn of suffering, tears, and cries” (bk. 3, ch. 5).¹⁰

Sand frequently presents Catholicism as ineffective and even harmful. In the *Lélia*, Magnus tries to find peace in a Camaldule monastery (ch. 42–43), but in vain (ch. 45). In the *André*, religious and virtuous Geneviève succumbs to her passion for the title character (ch. 17), as does the heroine of the *Valentine* to Bénédict, in spite of her pious life (ch. 36). In fact, Valentine’s practices had the opposite effect: “her ascetic meditations tired her brain more and more and gave more intensity to the power that Bénédict had over her soul” (chs. 19, 30). In *The uscoque*, doctor Barbolamo advises the villainous Orio Soranzo of the means to combat depression by instructing him to go to the church and give alms; he adds that in the church, he “will see spectacles no less profane and men no less vain than in the world.” In the *Indiana*, the protagonist writes in her letter to Raymon: “your morality and your principles are the interests of your society that you fixed as the laws and concerning which you pretend that they emanated from God himself, as your priests instituted rites of the cult to establish their power and

¹⁰ Only on the last page of the last chapter did “happiness return to the convent,” and the chapter ends with the statement that “if convents were destroyed, some lives rejected by the society and some souls too delicate for rough happiness of our civilization would not have any more a place between spleen and suicide.”

their bounty over nations. But all of it is a lie and impiety” (part 3 ch. 7). In “The marquise,” the heroine complains about her “cloistered education [that] had succeeded in numbing” her “already quite sluggish faculties.” She “left the convent with the kind of silly innocence which we wrongly consider a virtue, but which often can destroy happiness for one’s entire life” (ch. 1).

Similar anti-Catholic sentiments can be found in Sand’s novels explicitly mentioned by Pecherin. In the *Spiridion*, father Alexis, in recounting his life that led to abandoning his Catholic faith in the monastery, explains to Angel that the cold treatment Angel receives from other monks is designed to kill in him everything that is good and noble, to teach him how to love only himself, to betray friends, to lie, and to dishonor others. Alexis says that he “encountered malice and falsity everywhere,” and when he dealt with simple souls, he noticed “cowardice under sweetness.” Intrigues were the order of the day, and mistrust was rampant. The worst thing that can happen to a monastery is a truly devoted abbot, since with him “the rule, which is what the monk hates and fears the most, is always in force and will in each moment trouble the sweet habits of idleness and intemperance.” Alexis even has a vision of priests trying to pull the heart from a living sacrifice, very much like the Aztecs, in a grizzly preparation for the Lord’s Supper.

In the *Mauprat*, Sand said that the monks in the Carmelite society led “the easiest and the idlest lives they had ever known” and presented the abbot as a conniving individual (ch. 19). She also described the dishonorable behavior of the Trappists during and after the trial of Bernard de Mauprat (chs. 25, 29); the only positive priest, abbé Aubert, is rejected by the Church. However, Pecherin saw himself in the figure of an ascetic peasant-philosopher, Patience, because, like Patience, he learned morality from the ancients (P 231).¹¹ But maybe Pecherin was also touched by the solitary and ascetic life of Patience as a way to personal holiness and such life can be found, in the 19th century, in a monastery. Maybe the holiness of the abbé Aubert, the Jansenist curé, also impressed on Pecherin’s mind.

As another justification of Sand’s influence on his conversion, Pecherin gave two quotations from her novels, “the two justifying fragments that had a definitive influence on my fate” (P 302). The reader can wonder whether he can quote two fairly long fragments from memory after some 30 years. If he did not quote, he must have had the books in front of him. Did he quote the same fragments that really moved him to conversion three decades ago? One fragment is from

¹¹ This seems to be a genuine influence, since Pecherin recounted some facts from the book from memory as testified by slight errors, e.g., Patience’s speech in court was before, not after the revolution (ch. 26). Also, it is only stated that bread had seemed to him a superfluity, not that he did not eat bread because people can kill for it (ch. 3).

the *Spiridion* and one is from the *Winter in Majorca*, whereby it is clear that Pecherin resorts to spinning. The latter novel was published in 1841,¹² a year after his conversion; clearly, it could not have exercised a definitive, or any, influence on this conversion. May it be considered an honest mistake. The *Spiridion* fragment appears in the middle of Alexis' anti-monastic account: "my soul grew in proud enthusiasm, the most pleasant and poetic thoughts crowded my brain at the time when daring confidence filled my chest. All objects at which I looked seemed to be clothed with an unusually beauty. The golden foil of the tabernacle glistens as though the heavenly light descended onto the holy of holies. Colorful stained-glass, embraced by the sun, reflected on the floor, forming between each column a large mosaic of diamonds and precious stones." Some more description of the interior of the church follows. This description, says Pecherin, induced in him a desire to go to the la Chartreuse monastery to become a monk (P 303). This rapturous moment that Alexis experienced coincided with the moment of making a vow not to touch Spiridion's book for six years; that is, it did not have much to do with the monastic life. Incidentally, a much better choice would be a long fragment later in the book when Alexis said that he, for the first time in many years, "became again sensitive to the poetry of the cloister" and described how this poetry manifested itself in his eyes.

If such a marginal and insignificant fragment of the *Spiridion* so struck Pecherin, it seems likely that other fragments also influenced him, although the memory of these fragments dissipated after so many years. For instance, Alexis, even after losing his Catholic faith, said that "in no other religion does man sense his closeness to God; in none was God made so human, so paternal, so worthy of worship, so patient and tender" than in the Christian religion. He still insisted that man will always "need religion since he has a soul and he must know God." Also, in spite of the sweeping statement of the falsehood of monks, there are in the *Spiridion* a few monks that can be considered exemplary characters (Spiridion, Angel, Fulgence, Christophore, an old hermit, even Ambroise).

Pecherin's insistence on the influence of the *Spiridion* on his conversion seems to be caused by the fact that he saw in that novel the history of his monastic life (P 232, 237). He highly valued the novel at the time of writing his *Sketches*, and thus gave it a prominent position in influencing his decision to convert. Because *Sketches* were addressed to a Russian reader, Pecherin may also have felt prompted to mention a literary figure so very important at the time in Russia

¹² In *Revue des Deux Mondes* as *Un hiver au midi de l'Europe*. In book form, *Un hiver à Majorque* appeared in 1842. Pecherin first quoted a fragment from this book and then a fragment from the *Spiridion*, which may have been influenced by the order in which the two novels were later published, Françoise Genevray, *De Spiridion au père Pétchérine ou le péché de Nicolas, Présence de George Sand* 31–32 (1988), 52.

as an influence. In fact, the first biographer of Sand said that Sand, called “our saint” by Turgenev, is, “as it were, the Russian force, one of the primordial forces of the Russian conscience of our time.”¹³ Generally, “favorable opinions [about Sand] have in Russia a stamp of fervor which sharply contrasts with the balance of praises made elsewhere.”¹⁴ So, it appears that, at the time of writing his *Sketches*, Pecherin wanted Sand to have been his influencing factor, but it is very difficult to acknowledge her as a real influence at the actual time of conversion. Other sources listed by Pecherin are much more believable.

One such influence was Lamennais’ pamphlet, *Paroles d’un croyant* (1833), “simply a work of a madman, but to me it was a revelation of a new gospel” (P 175). The pamphlet was written as if it were another book of the Bible: very short chapters, very short paragraphs resembling Biblical verses, written with the use of parables, prophecies, visions, and an ample use of biblical references. The pamphlet emphasizes the equality of all people and is full of sensitivity toward the suffering and the poor. The spirit of pacifism is prevalent. But what could have motivated Pecherin on the foreign soil is indicated in the last two chapters. In the penultimate chapter, Lamennais said: “may God guide a poor exile. I passed across nations, I looked at them, they looked at me and we did not recognize one another at all. The exile is alone everywhere.” And in this style, each statement ends with “the exile is alone everywhere” ten more, times and the chapter ends with the pronouncement that “the fatherland is not here; man is looking for it in vain; that what he takes for it, is but lodging for a night. He goes away wandering around the earth. May God guide a poor exile.” And the last chapter offers the vision of home, which is the triune God. “And I sensed that this is my fatherland,” concludes Lamennais.

As Pecherin stated, “the course of my life depended decisively” on Jules Michelet’s *Mémoires de Luther écrits par lui-même* (P 232), which struck him with the fact that “Luther found purified religion in the Bible ... If Luther could find pure faith in the Bible, why would I not succeed?” asked Pecherin rhetorically.¹⁵

¹³ Wladimir Karénine, *George Sand, sa vie et ses oeuvres*, Paris: Ollendorf-Plon 1899–1926, v. 1, 39.

¹⁴ Françoise Genevray, *George Sand et ses contemporains russes*, Paris: L’Harmattan 2000, 363. Genevray gives in her book a systematic analysis of Sand’s influence on Herzen, Belinsky, and Dostoevsky.

¹⁵ Pecherin simply said *Luther par Michelet*. The book is a collection of excerpts from Luther’s writings and letters, with sentences and paragraphs added by Michelet to create a more or less coherent narrative. The *sola Scriptura* aspect of Luther’s reform is not quite prominent in the book. The longest statement says that “against tradition of the Middle Ages and against the authority of the Church, Luther sought a refuge in the Scriptures that preceded the tradition and is above the Church itself” (bk. 1, ch. 2). However, the authority of the Bible is undeniable although hardly mentioned in the chapter about Luther’s views on the Bible (bk. 4, ch. 2). Interestingly, Pecherin was not struck by Luther’s long criticism of monasticism (bk. 2, ch. 2).

Since he was seeking a pure religion, he purchased the Bible in Hebrew and in English and studied it seriously for two hours a day before going to work (P 232–233). This led to the establishment in his mind of the authority of the Bible – the only authority for Protestants, whereas in his familiar Orthodox church, the Bible is considered part of the tradition (and even Septuagint). The Catholic church has two authorities, the Bible and tradition, so it occupies a middle position between Protestantism and Orthodoxy regarding the treatment of the Bible. That may have been an argument that resonated well with Pecherin.

He also studied intensely, “like a hungry wolf,” three volumes of *Religion Saint-Simoniennes* (P 233).¹⁶ This is a collection of *prédications*, which are speeches or rather sermons of Saint-Simon’s disciples (replete with expression like “in the name of God and in the name of Saint-Simon,” “you, children of Saint-Simon,” etc.).¹⁷ Pecherin basically discovered that Saint-Simonianism, his gospel, contained a strong resemblance to Catholicism, in particular a spiritual hierarchy with the equivalent of the pope at the top. And, in fact, Saint-Simonians do have “fathers of the new humanity,” secret of whose authority lies in their faith in God (ch. 11), but also “a supreme father of the new religion” (Enfantin at the time, ch. 43), even a new pontiff (ch. 12), “the popes of the new Church,” and the Saint-Simonian pope (ch. 30).

Through *Religion Saint-Simoniennes*, Pecherin encountered Joseph de Maistre.¹⁸ He studied de Maistre’s *Les soirées de Saint Pétersbourg* (1821), in which participants of dialogs discuss the problem of good and evil, original sin, innate ideas, natural laws, the efficacy of prayer, war, and suffering. The tenor of the book is that human reason is unreliable, “for few can reason well, and no one can reason well on every subject, so that it is in general wise to start from authority” (dialog 2), where the authority of the Catholic church is clearly understood. In any event, there is no doubt that Christianity is “the fount of all good and true knowledge in the world” (dialog 4). De Maistre taught that “religion and piety are the best preparations for the human mind,” and in all intellectual endeavors, Christianity should be the starting point. Even “when we are concerned with

¹⁶ This is what he most likely means when he mentions studying three volumes of *Religion de Saint-Simon*.

¹⁷ *Religion Saint-Simoniennes* was republished as volumes 43–45 of the *Oeuvres* of Saint-Simon and Enfantin.

¹⁸ “In this book, with particular praise they spoke about the works of Joseph de Maistre, particularly about his *Les soirées de Saint Pétersbourg*, in which he allegedly predicted the appearance of the new religion,” says Pecherin (P 233). Although de Maistre is mentioned a dozen of times in *Religion Saint-Simoniennes* – only as “an exclusive admirer of the Catholic and feudal era, this Jeremiah of modern Jerusalem” (ch. 8) or “the most powerful defender in modern times of the Catholic religion” (ch. 20) – no reference is made to any of his works or to his prediction of a new religion.

pure philosophy, never forget that every metaphysical proposition that does not issue from a Christian dogma is and can be nothing but a culpable extravagance” (dialog 10). Pecherin said that he “got used to his style and ideas” (P 233).¹⁹

It appears that the sources Pecherin listed as instrumental to his conversion exercised only an auxiliary impact, and it is quite improbable that Sand’s novels could have had a decisive influence. The decisive influence seems to have been the preaching of a Redemptorist priest, Charles Manvuisse. In 1840, in Liège, Manvuisse presented the principles of the Catholic faith and for nine days, twice a day, Pecherin came to listen to him. Pecherin was particularly impressed by the life of the founder of the Redemptorist order, Alphonsus de Liguori, a well-educated and prosperous lawyer who abandoned his profession to become a priest. After these nine days, he wrote a letter to Manvuisse in which he wrote that through his preaching he was “convinced about the truth of the Catholic faith” and asked the priest to instruct him and “direct to the right path” (P 240). The conversion was clearly not forced and Pecherin stressed his disbelief in the possibility that that kind of conversion could be accomplished with speeches and proofs. “No, each of us becomes convinced or conquered by his own mind and heart, and the external influence is nothing else but a pretext that we snatch to actualize a lasting striving or premonition of our soul” (P 241). At that time, then, he was genuinely assured about the truths of Catholicism, and the preaching only made him realize that fact.

In this state of mind, he wrote in 1840 to Chizhov: “Believe me, my friend, that only God and His infinite love can fill the emptiness of the soul, which, deceived in its dearest aspirations and convinced about the fruitlessness of its sacrifices, is torn apart by unbearable remorse” (G 473). With the zeal of a new convert, he also wrote to his parents: “through thousands of errors and thousands of disasters, His blessed right hand led me to the acknowledgment of the only true Catholic faith, which I here profess and will profess to the end of my life” (G 475). And in another letter, “now, I said goodbye to the world forever: what is left for me is to think only about God and eternity. My soul delights in indescribable tranquility. Prayer and study of the Scriptures is my only occupation” (G 477).

In 1840, in a church ceremony, Pecherin became a Catholic, and soon afterwards, he became a novice of the Redemptorist order. In his novitiate, “there was not a shadow of compulsion; this was in the full, literal sense a voluntary submission by faith and love” (P 250).

¹⁹ After many years, Pecherin found de Maistre to be “a fanatic without conscience who covers his political views with the mantel of religion” (P 234).

In a modest cell of the monastery in Saint-Trond (Belgium) he thought that “nothing can be better” and felt that he was in a familiar atmosphere (P 248). The activities were scheduled very strictly, and the novices had recreation time for only two hours a day during which time they could speak. But the remaining time of silence was to Pecherin “true delight” (P 252). He was satisfied with his teaching duties in the Wittem seminary in Holland to which he was transferred (P 253–254). In Falmouth, he was content with his work as a priest (P 270, 277). From here, he wrote in 1845 to his cousin that the mystery of love is the foundation of the Catholic religion. “Christ suffering on the cross and the heart of His Mother pierced by the sword of sorrow – this is the essence of our faith; and, practically, all of this comes to love of one’s brothers and giving one’s life for their eternal salvation” (G 479–480). For now, he found his peace. This peace is evident in the four published sermons he preached in 1848 and 1849 and included in a collection of best Catholic sermons.²⁰

In the sermon “On hatred,” he called for forgiveness and discusses six “means God placed in our hands in order that we may be cleansed from our sins and become reunited with Him”: prayer, almsgiving, sacrifice, penance, confession, and martyrdom. Yet a harbored unwillingness to forgive may thwart the effect of these means, and “for the unforgiving man there is no means of salvation” or reaching heaven, which is a “blessed abode where all is peace and love.”

The sermon preached on the Advent of 1848 begins with the statement that “it is a want, a necessity of the human heart to know the truth,” and the multitude of religions “is a most certain sign that there is no religion at all.” There are different beliefs even among the Jewish nation, which “for four thousand years has been the only depository of truth,” of knowledge of the unity of God. “But every where there was a general expectation of some one coming to redeem mankind,” the expectation fulfilled by Jesus and His suffering since “voluntary pain, voluntary suffering” is “the foundation of salvation; this is the remedy by which the meanest and the mightiest can alone be redeemed.” Yet Christians do not sufficiently appreciate that fact; they give way to pleasure and “indeed, it is certain that Heathens one day will come and reproach *us*, that *we*, having such a Heavenly Teacher, do not yet understand the way of salvation.” Already heathens recognized that the mark distinguishing man and animal is “the will to suffer; the capacity for suffering, making men like unto angels,” as summarized in the saying, *sustine et abstine*. And yet “we rebel against the least abstinence from pleasure, which Holy Church puts upon us.” And so, “now is the time to arise,

²⁰ E. Robillard (ed.), *The Catholic pulpit*, London: John Ringrose 1849, v. 1, 92–99, 154–160, 210–217, 453–457.

for God prepares a new birth and regeneration for His Holy Catholic Church,” which should remain the only spiritual authority since “there is none to answer in the world but the Holy Catholic Church.” The martyrdom of the Church is a testimony about the veracity of this statement, including the pope forced to leave Rome, Pius IX, in whom “we see the Jesus Christ face to face..” “Oh, how happy should I be, if I could but kiss those sacred feet that had always walked in the paths of righteousness,” exclaims Pecherin.

In the sermon “On mortal sin,” he stated that “contempt for God is the first and most odious of mortal sins ... The second characteristic of mortal sin is, that it is a black ingratitude in regard to our Heavenly Father.” The third – is an open rebellion to God the last degree of which is “a desire to annihilate Him, that He should not exist.” And he ends with the plea to the Virgin Mary: “bring me nearer to Thy beloved Jesus, that I may embrace Him, that I may love Him, and that I may reign with Him for ever and ever.”

In the sermon delivered on St. Patrick’s day in 1849, Pecherin delineated St. Patrick’s vicissitudes and his love for Ireland. As he says, “St. Patrick, as it were, created Ireland” and “whatever Ireland is, she owes to St. Patrick” and urges the listeners to follow in his footsteps.

4 Leaving the Redemptorists

As a 54 year old man, Pecherin writes a long letter to the general of the Redemptorist order requesting a to release from his monastic vows. He felt he was old and wanted some time before death to “abandon the world altogether and consecrate the few remaining years of life to penance in some stricter order.” The life of Redemptorists was too worldly for him, too intertwined with worldly affairs, so much so that it was impossible to say that the monks of the order abandoned the world. Even the conversations the monks have are to him “a constant object of serious temptations.” He wanted to die in a place “not reached by worldly noise,” to die unknown and even with an unmarked tomb, and he mentioned a Carthusian monastery in France as his possible destination (P 295–297). It is clear that Pecherin did not want to cease to be a monk. He wanted to bring his monastery life to a higher level. He did not want to abandon the life as a monk but to bring this monastic life closer to his ideal. And the ideal monk should be “immersed in contemplation of eternal truths, studying nature and art in solitude” (P 270).

Right after receiving the release, Pecherin set about to the Carthusian monastery La Chartreuse, near Grenoble. However, the monastery, in his view, had

turned into a winery and the monks into wine producers and sellers. Disappointed and disgusted, Pecherin left the area “where everything is beautiful except for man” (P 304) and went to the Trappist monastery Mount Melleray to find his ideal. “All we read about the early times of Christianity ... all of it is really and literally there” (P 306). But not for long. After about six weeks, he realized that he “cannot live without mental activity” and left the Trappists, “the only order which retained its original meaning” (P 307).

After a strict order turned out to be too strict, after the initial fervor passed, and after he left the Trappists, Pecherin wanted to be readmitted to the Redemptorists. He admitted his mistake in his desire to change the order and stated that he “did not have and does not have any other call than the one followed for the [last] 20 years.” He also stated that, better than at any previous time, he understood the price of being called to the monastic life and that he never wanted anything else but to be a monk (P 297–298). However, his request was declined using as an argument “the principle to never readmit to the congregation those who had the misfortune to leave it.”²¹

His reason for leaving the Redemptorists was the worldly character of the order, as Pecherin perceived it, but, arguably, the crucial trigger was his visit to Rome in 1859, during which he saw the Vatican as primarily a worldly power, acting as any other worldly power, with religious character being decidedly unimportant (P 293–294). According to Pecherin, the whole of the Catholic church was guilty of the same deterioration, starting from the top of the church. In rather heavy-handed statements Pecherin said that the pope’s power is “an affront to reason, a sacrilegious encroachment on the dignity of man” (P 271); Rome is the arena of ambition and intrigues (P 270, 294); the Vatican is “old junk” and should be destroyed so that “the meadow will finally be cleared” (P 100); having spilled a lot of blood and burned a lot of people, the Catholic church is dying of old age, in contrast to the Jews who are still young, vibrant in science, art, and trade (P 289); the Catholic church is like an old woman wearing makeup to look sixteen (P 273); “the Catholic church is a perfect school of hatred” (P 247).²² The Redemptorist order, in his opinion, was not immune to outside pressures and, in the process of influencing society with its Christian doctrine and deeds, it itself has been influenced by the society, thereby compromising its monastic standards.

²¹ Mauron’s letter to Pecherin, in Andreas Sampers, Wladimir Sergejewitsch Pecherin (1807–1885). Sein Austritt aus der Kongregation des Allerheiligsten Erlörers (Redemptoristen), 1861, *Spicilegium Historicum Congregationis Ssmi Redemptoris* 21 (1973), 194.

²² See also G 516; С. Л. Чернов, “От России я никак отделаться не могу,” *Вопросы философии* 2003, No. 2, 143.

Apparently, complete seclusion was the answer to the corruption of the church, and the Trappists offered such an answer. But, still, he could not embrace them. Although, as mentioned, he praised them for following the original monastic rules, he could not follow them for more than six weeks. In Trappists, with their silence, he said, thinking gradually disappears and “man falls lower than cattle and lives in some kind of vegetative life” (P 253). If man sacrifices his reason and will, what is left is “nicely clothed cattle, a horse or a dog performing a trick at the gesture of the owner” (P 280).

The political, social, and psychological aspects of the Catholic church and of monastery life were not acceptable to Pecherin, but we learn very little about his theology, particularly, in his chaplaincy years. As a reaction to his “vegetative life” in the monastic years, he turned to science and returned to linguistics and poetry. He read the materialist philosophers of his time and, at least to some extent, his studies of science and of the emerging biblical high criticism affected his theology. He said, for instance, “I do not believe in anything. I just believe in the gradual development of the human race through science and industry” (a 1865 letter, P 310); should this total disbelief be understood literally? Is it true that he turned into “an active atheist”²³?

He said that many people considered him to be a member of the order of Jesus, “I never belonged to that order; well, even Jesus himself I only know from hearsay.”²⁴ In a way, all believers may say that they know Jesus from hearsay, only considering the ontological abyss between a member of the Trinity and a finite human being. Man’s knowledge of God will always be minuscule in comparison with God’s infinite grandeur. And hence, man’s knowledge of God can be considered to come from hearsay. But maybe Pecherin felt that Jesus is distant, too distant in comparison with the closeness he would desire to have.

In the spirit of demythologization, he said that the Gospel miracles could be best explained by the gullibility of people (P 283). But does this mean a complete denial of the possibility of miracles? It may just as well reflect the caution the way the Catholic church exercises in its investigation of miracles, e.g., in the process of elevating someone to sainthood. Not everything that seems to be miraculous should be readily accepted as such.

Pecherin also made an off-hand remark that something reminded him of “the absurdity of childish fables about the resurrection of the dead” (P 279). Did he deny the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead? This would have been very

²³ As supposed by A. Сабуров, *Из биографии В. С. Печерина, Литературное наследство* 41–42 (1941), 471, 475. This opinion seems to be shared by Чернов, *op. cit.*, 146.

²⁴ A letter to Chizhov from 1870s, in E. Г. Местергази, *Новые материалы к биографии В. С. Печерина: Переписка В. С. Печерина с кн. П. В. Долгоруковым, Контекст* 1993, 38.

difficult for a chaplain working in a hospital where the problem of death and eternal life, more than any other topic, must have arisen in conversations with the patients. He would not have lasted long in his post of a Catholic chaplain if he pronounced to the patients that the talk about the resurrection of the dead was childish. Did he console the dying with the prospect of a future life in spite of his own convictions? It is hard to imagine that such hypocrisy could be maintained for long in such a sensitive soul as Pecherin's. In 1869 he wrote: "There is no death, and cannot be since each atom in space and each second of time are filled with life. Life flows everywhere to the brim. What we call death is nothing else but the end, a transition from one stream to another, a flow from one color of the rainbow to another" (G 509–510). Such a statement would be of little use in a hospital setting when attempting to console a believer. But at least it signifies that, for Pecherin, there is hope of life after death, although he did not speak about the nature of this afterlife.

Doubtless, some serious theological challenges have been at play. However, to Pecherin, this was not a matter of discarding religion, but purifying its concept. It seems that Pecherin steered toward a universalistic understanding of religion. For him, "all religions are equally true when they are alive." Truth is a completely relative concept. Religion is conditioned by geography, climate, ethnological relations of man. Besides, it can be that we are all striving now toward some universal religion in which all minds in the East and the West are united" (a 1865 letter, P 309).²⁵ He studied the Koran and the sacred books of the Far East in the original. About the sacred books of India he expressed the opinion that "our Bible pales before these wonderful poems and profound philosophical systems" and he considered the life of Buddha to be "the complete ideal of human perfection" (a 1868 letter, G 509).²⁶

In his studies, Pecherin seems to have gone from Catholic to catholic, from the specific religion of the Roman Catholic Church to a general, universal religion that somehow unites all religions. He retained the concept of the divine and he could practice Catholicism within such a broader framework. Now, he could see in

²⁵ A strong presence of geographical determinism is noted by В. Г. Шукин, *Запад как пространство "романтического побега"* (Замогильные записки Владимира С. Печерина), *Из истории русской культуры*, Москва: Языки русской культуры 1996, v. 5, 564. Pecherin himself observed that no one could be blamed for his fate. His situation was the result of "eternal and inviolable law of nature, before which all should bow their heads. This is the law of geographical latitude" (P 162).

²⁶ To his enchantment with Buddha and Buddhism we can attribute Pecherin's statement made when writing about his beloved dog: "more and more I get closer to the animal kingdom, to which I undoubtedly belong. I look at the dog as a younger brother," a 1876 letter, in Наталья М. Первухина-Камышникава, *В. С. Печерин: Эмигрант на все времена*, Москва: Языки славянской культуры 2006, 293.

Jesus one possible manifestation of the impenetrable divine sphere which we know from hearsay or, better yet – very much in the spirit of the apophatic theology so well absorbed from the Orthodox church in his Russian youth – about which we cannot say anything due to the inadequacy of our concepts and of our cognitive apparatus. This divine sphere manifests itself differently in different parts of the globe and in different times and geographic aspects play no small role in the way this manifestation is actualized. And so, within the Catholic church, Pecherin remained a catholic priest extending the limits of Catholic theology to include what belonged to other theologies. Inevitably, this meant serious theological compromises but somehow it brought some peace to Pecherin's tormented soul.

Interestingly, this transition from Catholic to catholic could have also been inspired by the books which, in his opinion, led to his conversion. A universalist tendency is found in Lamennais, particularly at the end of his life. In *Les affaires de Rome* (1836) he advocated a universal religion – one, eternal, and surpassing all transitory forms – a religion that could rejuvenate Christianity.

The *Religion Saint-Simonienne* is a proclamation of a new religion, a religion of universal peace and wellbeing. It proclaims that religion is “the manifestation of the sentiment that binds man to his fellow men and to the world,” whereby “all religions of the past, including Christianity, were not false religions, but incomplete religions and, in consequence, temporary ... Each religion is true simply because it is. And because it is, it establishes bonds between men. But the complete and definitive religion, the one which will not be catholic by name alone, but also by fact, the religion which will replace all others, is the one which will wipe out from humanity all war, all antagonism, all hate under whatever form it appears, substituting them everywhere with peace, association, and love” (chs. 20, 50). Similar statements can be found in Saint-Simon himself, who, in his last and most religiously oriented book, *New Christianity* (1825), stated that in the new Christianity, morality has a prominent position; the form of worship and dogma “will be regarded only as secondary features for the purpose of fixing the attention of the faithful of all classes on morality.” The whole of the Christian religion is reduced to one principle, “men should treat each other as brothers.” Based on this principle, “Christianity will become the universal and only religion” (dialog 1). That is, Saint-Simon practically purged his religion from religious aspects, reduced it to morality and in this, his approach was similar to Buddhism, which is disinterested in religious and theological issues, focusing instead on improving oneself.

In de Maistre's *Soirées*, Pecherin could read an allusion to the fact that man “bears always the evident marks of his divine origin in that every universal belief is always more or less true” (dialog 4), that “paganism is nothing but a system of tainted and ill-conceived truths which need only cleaning,” and a mention of the

future possibility of “some kind of great unity toward which we are moving very rapidly” (dialog 11).²⁷

The new Christianity promoted in Sand’s *Spiridion* is a form of universalism. Alexis says that Paul was not more inspired than Plato, and Socrates was not less worthy to redeem the sins of humanity than Jesus. “India certainly did not seem to be less enlightened in respect to the idea of the Divinity than Judea.” Jupiter did not appear to him to be inferior to Jehovah, Christ did not seem to him to be more of a Son of God than Pythagoras, and the disciples of the latter were not lesser apostles than the disciples of Jesus. He considered religion “the faith full of desire and hope in the Divinity, an unshakable sensation of the just and unjust, a great respect for all religions and for all philosophies, love of the good and the need of truth.” Elements of such universalism can also be detected in other works of Sand. Mattea, “loving virtue and adoring Christ,” separated herself from “the dogma in respect to several arbitrary points” and created a personal religion, pure, sincere, and instinctive and absolved even heretics and unbelievers, regarding them as brothers (*Mattea*, ch. 3). In *The seven strings of the lyre*, Albertus serves the divinity “of Pythagoras and Plato, as well as of Jesus” (act 1 scene 2). Even in an uplifting short story, “The unknown God,” a story of the conversion of a Roman woman, the religion to which she converts is called Christian, but Christ plays no role in it. It is a religion of a universal God who remains unknown.

It is then quite remarkable that the sources he considered to have influenced his decision to become Catholic and a monk, could have also been instrumental in his abandonment of the Catholic orthodoxy in favor of a universal religion that included features common to many religions. Possibly, to some extent, he may have followed the path of Liguori who at the end of his life experienced “a dark night of the soul” through deep spiritual depression. Even the greatest of mystics were not immune to a period of doubt and trial of faith. Pecherin certainly experienced such trials.

It is also clear that Pecherin was not the only one who thought about the modification of the Catholic religion. In any event, such theological disturbances did not adversely affect his priestly duties. He remained a priest to the end and was remembered fondly by those who knew him. “His charity was so great ... that the long time he lived as chaplain to the hospital she [the sister superior] never heard an uncharitable remark from him. He had cultivated the other virtues, humility, prudence, patience, etc. in like proportion. He was very exact in the performance of the very trying labours of his calling,” said Pecherin’s successor

²⁷ The views are spoken by the Senator, whereas the Count is de Maistre’s spokesman. It appears, however, that de Maistre was not entirely opposed to the idea of such unity. For example, the Count says that Plato is “the human preface to the Scriptures” (dialog 5).

to the chaplaincy. The archdeacon of the church where the hospital was located considered him “a very holy priest.”²⁸ An archivist of the order stated that the Redemptorists continue to be proud of Pecherin, considering him an exemplary priest.²⁹ Although he expressed his doubts in theological matters, he remained faithful to the cause of Catholicism in general and Redemptorism in particular in bringing solace to the poor and suffering in the face of the world that awaited them after their earthly pilgrimage ended.

²⁸ Quoted after Eóin MacWhite, *Towards a biography of Father Vladimir S. Pecherin (1807–1885) – a progress report and bibliography*, Dublin: Royal Irish Academy 1980, 157.

²⁹ Lipski, *op. cit.*, 257.