

HISTORY, 19TH CENTURY TO 1914 May 17, 2023

1855, Epidemic and mission cross

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Whether you are a long time Capestang resident or newcomer, occasional visitor or tourist, the impressive mission cross, located on the small square between the Collegiate Church and the town hall, leaves no one indifferent. Erected on a stone base, very worn by time, a large pedestal supports the representation of Christ on a large metal cross, several metres high. The inscription "Souvenir of the mission – 1855" engraved on a square of white marble embedded in the pedestal, succinctly recalls the origin and the date of the monument.

What do we know about this cross? What does it say about the history of our village? No one, today, really knows. Time has done its work, both on the stones of its pedestal and on the collective memory, which has disappeared over time.... As for the municipal archives, they are silent on the subject.

If the search for historical sources sometimes requires long hours, spent combing through old dusty papers, this was not the case to find valuable information on the 1855 mission. It is simply by typing "Capestang" on the site internet of the Montpellier media library that we find it's trace in a book of 1876, entitled "History of the life and works of the Reverend Father Soulas" by Father Vigourel [1]. Some will see it as an unexplained sign or a mysteriously guided intuition... we rather lean towards chance...

The work in question, digitised and available online, is a biography of Father Soulas (1808-1857), vicar of the Cathedral of Montpellier, hospital chaplain and diocesan missionary. The author of the book is Father Vigourel, a friend of the missionary priest, to whom he pays homage a few years after his death. He recounts the mission carried out in Capeatang, at the request of Abbé Vernières, parish priest-dean.

In the religious vocabulary of the 19th century, a mission is a set of actions (sermons, prayers, masses) led by religious preachers within a parish, for several days or weeks, with the aim of restoring religious practice. and to unite parishioners in the Catholic faith.

Why carry out such a mission in Capeatang? What happened for the parish priest of Capeatang to request the organisation of such a mission?

During the summer of 1854, a cholera epidemic raged in France, particularly in the south. Capeatang was not spared. There are 153 deaths in 3 months. The priest who does not spare his efforts with the sick notes that "faith is awakening in the families...that the ice of indifference under which this population had slumbered since time immemorial is broken...in a parish whose reputation is not the best".

To strengthen this newfound faith, he asked Father Soulas for a mission in Capeatang in mid-November 1854. A sermon 3 times a week was planned. The first sermon takes place on a Sunday and "the whole population hastened to hear it and filled the immense vessel of the church". But Father Soulas, carried away by an exalted sermon, becomes unwell and nearly dies! The mission is then postponed to January 1 · 1855, and will be carried out by two other missionary priests... According to Abbot Vigourel "it produced good". We don't know which one!

It is therefore probably to commemorate this mission of 1855 that the large cross was erected. We have not found information on its financing, its manufacture and the date of its inauguration. Its location, on the site of an old cemetery, its immediate proximity to the collegiate church, its size and its height which still impress today, suggest that those who erected it wanted to mark the spirits of the Capeatang people of this time, rather than the established rebels! [\[2\]](#)

Fifty years later, in 1905, when the law separating Church and State had just been promulgated, the mayor of Capeatang issued an order for "the removal from the public thoroughfare of shops, kiosks, barracks and religious emblems, demolition of the mission cross near the church" [\[3\]](#) "

And yes ! The mission cross almost disappeared! Why was the demolition order not executed? Who saved the cross?

The answers are in a box in the departmental archives of Hérault, which we will consult one day soon...