By former editor-in-chief, Yves Pitette
(Mr. Pitette recounts how, throughout the publication of 40,000 issues, this Assumptionist daily newspaper has tried to maintain fidelity to the tradition of its Catholic identity and editorial freedom.)





La Croix through the years

If one were to judge solely by the numbers, *La Croix* is not the oldest French daily*: Le Progrès* of
Lyon has it beat, having published 52,000 issues since 1859. But if you take into account the fact that since its first issue, which appeared on June 16, 1883, it has maintained the same title, the same owners (the Assumptionists) and has never swayed from its mission as a Catholic daily, the newspaper can certainly defend its position as the dean of French newspapers. But that is not what really matters. At an annual rate of about 305 issues, it takes more than thirty years to produce 10,000 issues.

What is striking, throughout La Croix's history, is its continuity, its fidelity to the role its founders gave it at the beginning, even if, obviously, the newspaper itself doesn't look like it did at first. Times have changed, *La Croix* has changed and its readers with it. But its role with them has

endured and evolved with them, often through many hard times. In the first issue of June 1883, an editorialist spoke of the press as “the scourge of the day”; he saw
La Croix
as a means to “meet the enemy on a battlefield he is destroying.” 35,000 issues later, in 1998, Bruno Frappat, a much later successor, saw the daily newspaper as
“an opportunity”
to contribute to the public debate in a democracy and
“something essential for believers and the Church”
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Highlighting the milestones of this long evolution by citing figures is obviously artificial --- but not without lessons to be learned. Nothing, apart from the number of the newspaper, characterized the 5,000th issue on August 3, 1899: at the time Fr. Vincent de Paul Bailly was in open conflict with the government of Waldeck Rousseau. Seven months later he withdrew from the paper, without a word of protest, at the request of Leo XIII who had become concerned about possible consequences for the Church resulting from this clash between the paper and the French government.



Photo sent by a reader, taken during World War I (around 1918), of·Joseph Emile Voisin (at

right), with a copy of *La Croix* at the entrance to his tent.

The number 10,000 was highlighted the day this issue appeared ---- October 15, 1915, and "Franc" (Fr. Bertoye, the editor-in-chief) emphasized that the *"reality of the harsh times we face"* makes it impossible to mark the
"celebration of the family"
as we had hoped. Already,
La Croix
had evolved:
"The struggle to promote the rights of God,"
wrote the same Franc, never prevented the paper
"from its serving with a zeal inferior to none all truly patriotic causes
."

There was no particularly distinguishing feature in the 15,000th issue that appeared on January 21, 1932. At the time peace and disarmament were the order of the day and the editorial stance was to favor a Polish initiative to the League of Nations calling
"for a moral détente to which all States would agree."
It likewise pointed to the repeated position of Pius XI on this matter,
"Does it not fall to Catholics, depositories of the Christian spirit, to penetrate institutions with this spirit and support governments who seek to put it into practice"?
So, a new step forward is taken, in the new spirit of the "Catholic Action" movement and the involvement of Catholics in all political and social institutions, whereas issue #1 almost said the opposite, completely taken up with defending what was Catholic in the face of an anticlerical Republic.

Number 20,000 of *La Croix* was a day of celebration, December 5, 1948. The paper, which had survived the war in spite of near collapse, presented itself to its readers with renewed enthusiasm. Fr. Merklen, the editor-in-chief and the great artisan of the La Croix's openness in the 30s, enjoyed recalling a phrase of the time whereby Cardinal Verdier, archbishop of Paris, defined the role of this daily, " *You are not the representatives of the Church, either official or unofficial; but prudence must be your quintessential virtue, since, for better or for worse, an article of La Croix often has more influence on public opinion than do many statements from the hierarchy".*
Here we have something new being said even if the age was still quite clerical. Luc Estang, novelist and editor of the literary section, has explained in his view the
"paradoxes of La Croix"
: his colleagues, he recounts at length with his great wit, don't understand well or consider ambiguous the permanent balance of the paper strives for, i.e. that between fidelity to the Church and editorial freedom.

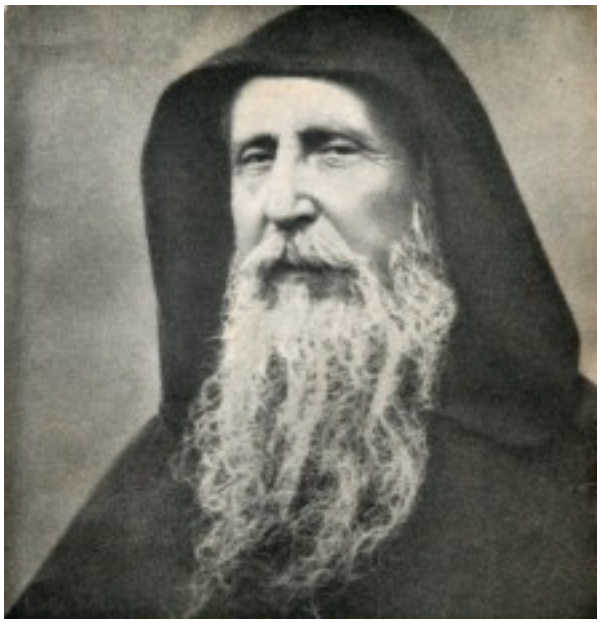
For the 25,000th issue, on March 9, 1965, there was another gala promotion since *La Croix* was fully on the move, just a few months after the end of the Second Vatican Council. Campaigns for municipal elections were in full swing and the first presidential election to be decided by direct popular vote was scheduled for the end of the year. Fr. Antoine Wenger, editor-in-chief, wrote,
"What La Croix once did in a combative and often polemical style, it is still doing with the same faith and under the same title, but in the spirit of this new age, of John XXIII and Vatican II, a spirit of dialogue, goodwill, and love."
Once more, on this somewhat special anniversary dates,
La Croix
tried to maintain continuity with its entire history, affirming what it had become and ever insisting on its fundamental values and its editorial policy adapted to the needs and demands of the time.



Lech Walesa, founder of Solidarity

The most spectacular moment was yet to come. In an absolute coincidence, Lech Walesa, who

had accepted an invitation from *La Croix* to pay a visit when he came to Paris, arrived, basking in the recent success of his Solidarity Movement, on October 17, 1981, the very day that the 30,000th issue appeared. And what can be seen on the front page but Lech Walesa setting in motion the rotary press that would print the 30,000th issue. It was a photo that captured history.



Thirty-three years and 10,000 issues later, here we are in October 2014. Journalists, generation after generation, have stood on the shoulders of those who came before them, all of them maintaining the paper's fundamental values, all of them maintaining a bond with their readers. Here we are 130 years after Bailly launched *La Croix* because he and he Assumptionists felt there was a compelling need, even if they didn't know where the funding would come from.