

# THE ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S DAY MASSACRE 1638

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*Maximilien de Béthune*

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Hatred between Catholics and Huguenots (French Protestants) sparked civil wars in France, the most violent occurring in 1572. Catherine de Médicis, a Catholic and the mother of the king of France, feared that the Huguenots had too much influence over her son. She hatched a plan to kill all the Huguenots and persuaded her son to agree to it. On the morning of August 24, St. Bartholomew's Day, the massacre began. Homes and shops were attacked, and thousands of Huguenots were killed. The massacre is described in the following account by a surviving Huguenot, Maximilien de Béthune, who was 12 years old at the time.

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Analyzing Issues**

What were the choices that Maximilien de Béthune had to make during this tragic event?

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I was in bed, and awaked from sleep three hours after midnight, by the sound of all the bells, and the confused cries of the populace. My governor St. Julian, with my *valet de chambre*,<sup>1</sup> went hastily out to know the cause; and I never afterwards heard more of these men, who without doubt were amongst the first that were sacrificed to the public fury. I continued alone in my chamber dressing myself, when in a few moments I saw my landlord enter, pale, and in the utmost consternation: he was of the reformed religion, and having learned what the matter was, had consented to go to mass, to save his life, and preserve his house from being pillaged. He came to persuade me to do the same, and to take me with him. I did not think proper to follow him, but resolved to try if I could gain the college of Burgundy, where I had studied: though the great distance between the house where I then was, and the college, made the attempt very dangerous. Having disguised myself in a scholar's gown, I put a large prayer-book under my arm, and went into the street. I was seized with horror inexpressible, at the sight of the furious murderers, who, running from all parts, forced open the houses, and cried aloud, "Kill, kill, massacre the Huguenots!" The blood which I saw shed before my eyes redoubled my terror. I fell into the midst of a body of guards; they stopped my, interrogated me, and were beginning to use me ill, when, happily for me, the book that I carried was perceived, and served me for a passport. Twice after this I fell into the same danger, from which I extricated myself with the same good fortune. At last I arrived at the college of Burgundy, where a danger still

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1. My governor St. Julian, with my *valet de chambre*: de Béthune's teacher and a servant

greater than any I had yet met with, waited me. The porter having twice refused me entrance, I continued standing in the midst of the street, at the mercy of the furious murderers, whose numbers increased every moment, and who were evidently seeking for their prey, when it came into my mind to ask for La Faye, the principal of this college, a good man, by whom I was tenderly beloved. The porter, prevailed upon by some small pieces of money which I put into his hand, admitted me; and my friend carried me to his apartment, where two inhuman priests, whom I heard mention Sicilian vespers, wanted to force me from him, that they might cut me in pieces, saying the order was, not to spare even infants at the breast. All the good man could do was to conduct me privately to a distant chamber, where he locked me up. Here I was confined three days, uncertain of my destiny; and saw no one but a servant of my friend's, who came from time to time to bring me provisions.

At the end of these three days, the prohibition for murdering, and pillaging any more of the protestants, being published, I was suffered to leave my cell; and immediately after I saw . . . two soldiers of the guard, who were my father's creatures, enter the college. They were armed, and came, without doubt, to rescue me by force wherever they should find me. They gave my father a relation of what had happened to me; and eight days afterwards I received a letter from him, in which he expressed the fears he had suffered on my account, and advised me to continue in Paris, since the prince I served [Henry of Navarre] was not at liberty to quit it. He added, that to avoid exposing myself to an evident danger, it was necessary I should resolve to follow that prince's example, and to go to mass. In effect, the king of Navarre had found no other means of saving his life.

**Source:** *Memoirs of Maximilien de Béthune*, Volume 1, translated by Charlotte Lennox, 1761 (London: H. G. Bohn, 1856).

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY: ANSWER**

De Béthune had to either surrender to the Catholics or attempt an escape. He escaped by dressing as a scholar with a prayer book and then hid in a college. Later he had to choose between being persecuted further or renouncing his faith by going to mass. He chose the latter.