



**Across this darkness
I salute the dawn**

Biography of
MÈRE MARIE EUGÉNIE MILLERET
Foundress of the Congregation of the Religious
of the Assumption

A Translation of
MARIE DOMINIQUE POINSENET'S
FEU VERT...
AU BOUT D'UN SIÈCLE

Translated by
Sister Maria Luisa Locsin, R.A.

“... men who are truly new and artisans
of a new humanity can be forthcoming.”
The Church Today, 30,2.

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FOREWORD

On the cover of the book, "*Feu vert ... au bout d'un siècle*," the author, Marie Dominique Poinsenet, writes of Mère Marie Eugénie: "Ardent democrat. . . at the epoch of the Restoration.

"Her gaze fixed on the future . . . at the time when men were looking back to the heritage of the past.

"Woman with a passion for a world-vision that would be condemned . . . woman whose prophetic intuitions find recognition today.

"Daring in her faith, faith re-discovered after years of agonizing and restless search in a milieu, indifferent and superficial

"Educator with a broad vision, careful to form free persons and leaders according to their particular aspirations and talents.

"Open to the social needs of her time . . . and opposed her initiatives, but persuaded that one day Christians will hunger and thirst for social justice.

"That was Mère Marie Eugénie Milleret.

"After a century Vatican II and the Medellin Document give the Go! signal to her message."

A century is a long time. But is this not the confirmation of what Mère Marie Eugénie herself had said: "A Religious of the Assumption ought to die in order to live" ... yes, die like the seed buried in the earth? Lacordaire had told her: "Learn to grow as a seed, slowly, humbly." This she did and soon we shall acclaim her and to her: "Blessed Marie Eugénie de Jésus, pray for us!" Her message to us rings loud and clear. Because we want to share it with our students and alumnae, our faculty members and friends, I have undertaken to do this translation.

I should like to thank all who have helped me: the College Faculty, Administration and Staff, the Sisters and the alumnae, and, above all, my brother Teddy.

Sr. Maria Luisa Locsin, R.A.

PREFACE

“Christ is our Source. Christ is our Way and our Guide. Christ is our Hope and our End.”

These words of Paul VI at the opening of the Second Session of the Council would have made the foundress of the Sisters of the Assumption rejoice. For did she not thus define the spirit in which the new Congregation should grow and develop since 1850? “There is only one foundation stone, Jesus Christ,” she said to her daughters. “It is on Jesus Christ that we are built, that everything is built.”

Marie Eugénie Milleret spoke from experience: It was at the call of Jesus Christ that, attentive to His voice, founded and rooted in Him, she worked out her response to God, to that transcendent Love which in a brief moment of time had taken hold of her on Christmas Day of 1829 so powerfully that she could “never forget it.”

According to human logic, what could be more disconcerting in the history of this vocation than the generous but impulsive zeal of a possessive and authoritarian director? Intolerable today!

In the light of faith, it was the wonderful journey of a person, specially chosen and rigorously tempered.

Because she was completely given to the Lord, Mère Marie Eugénie knew how to discern in all circumstances, beyond the misunderstandings, the smallness or errors of men the call of the Spirit. She suffered from those men of the Church who wanted to keep the Spirit “in chains” within their structural forms, and according to their plans. Sometimes it was agony for her, but her faith came out of it purified, renewed, strengthened, founded on the absolute, Jesus Christ, who animates and guides His Church.

Alert to discern the signs of the times, as we would say today, Mère Marie Eugénie reveals herself as one ahead of her time.

Through the pages of this biography, Marie Dominique Poinset presents to us a witness. Through the many quotations harmoniously woven together into a unified whole, we have the impression of going back to the sources as pilgrims. We participate in the profound intuitions that marked the beginnings of a Congregation dedicated to the education of the young: respect of persons, of their uniqueness, formation of character, openness to others, sense of social and missionary responsibilities, solid, personal and dedicated faith. It anticipated the spirit of Catholic Action and Vatican II.

In the difficult times that we are going through, before so much uncertainty and hesitations, when many despair or search falteringly, this witness is a source of strength. Better than just an example of the past, it lights our way; it points to the future.

Many an educator will find in it a new reason for living and hoping.

May the example of Mère Marie Eugénie serve as a call for the young to total giving of themselves for a higher service.

Cardinal Francois Marty
Archbishop of Paris

CHAPTER 1

...I hold on to my faith

“Man’s dignity demands that he act according to a knowing and free choice. Such a choice is personally motivated and prompted from within.”

The Church Today, 17

It was Spring of 1836. For the second time in Paris, the Lenten Conferences at Notre Dame attracted a dense and motley crowd. The conferences were scheduled at one o’clock, three hours after the late Sunday Mass. Notwithstanding the three hours of waiting, many Mass-goers preferred to stay in the Cathedral so as to be assured of good seat close to the pulpit.

The preacher was Henry Lacordaire, a young priest only thirty-four years of age, who held his listeners both by the fire of his eloquence as well as by his deep insight into the world of his time. Twelve years earlier he had surprised his friends by leaving behind him a brilliant future as lawyer in the Courts of Justice of Paris, and entering the Seminary of St. Sulpice. He was ordained priest in 1827. As a friend of La Mennais, he worked assiduously together with Montalembert for the publication of the controversial newspaper, *L’Avenir*. The condemnation of ideas he had sincerely and strongly supported and the consequent defection of La Mennais was a blow that cut him to the heart. It was not easy to break ties with his one-time friend.

As early as 1835, he had already perceived in his own talents, his natural eloquence, his keen perception of the problems which haunted the minds and hearts of people in an epoch of political, social and religious turmoil, and in his personal experience of an authentic and living faith re-discovered at the age of twenty-two, an instrument of service for the Church in France.

Lacordaire saw in his initial success at Notre Dame the possibility of carrying out a project he had been considering for some time: to live the religious life as a Dominican and to bring the Order back to France. If God is God, he thought, it is worth sacrificing all in order to give oneself to Him for life so that His Truth may be proclaimed everywhere, because only the Truth can set man really free, Freedom. This was precisely what men during the Restoration were thirsting for. Five years later, in 1841, when Lacordaire preaches again in Notre Dame, it will be in the white woolen habit and black cowl of the Dominican that he will stand at the pulpit. Among his listeners during that Spring of 1836 was a young girl of eighteen: Anne Eugénie Milleret. Was she listening with faith in her heart? It was hard to tell.

Anne Eugénie was born in 1817, the year when, in the words of Joseph de Maistre, the first volume of La Mennais’s “*Essai sur l’Indifférence*” sounded like “a thunder clap in a clouded sky.” She was born on the feast of St. Louis, king of France, in the city of Metz, during the reign of Louis XVIII.

One of her ancestors, Paolo Miglioretti, had served Francis I and had received a title of nobility from the king. The motto inscribed on the family blazon was: NIHIL SINE FIDE.* (*Nothing without faith.)

In the course of time, as the name Miglioretti gradually took the French form of Milleret, the motto, NIHIL SINE FIDE became less and less meaningful to the succeeding generations of Millerets.

Jacques Milleret, the father of Anne Eugénie, was Voltairian in his thinking and openly on the side of the liberal opposition in the Restoration movement. Eugénie de Brou, who became his wife at the age of sixteen, came from a noble family of Gand. More Catholic by tradition than by personal conviction, the education she gave her children was sound and strong but lacking in the motivation that comes from a living faith. An atmosphere of youthfulness, spontaneity and gaiety ordinarily prevailed in the home, although her children had learned to be more respectful than affectionate in their relationship with her.

Madame Milleret tried to maintain this atmosphere with increasing concern as she perceived in her husband a growing coldness and distance from the family.

Anne Eugénie was the fourth child. Before her were three boys: Eugene, Charles and Louis. Coming only after ten years of marriage, her birth was an occasion of great joy to the family, particularly to her mother.

Speaking about it, Anne Eugénie would merely say: "I was born in Metz, in a house that was part of the ancient castle of King Dagobert, on the 25th of August in 1817, but I was baptized in the chapel of Preisch." Preisch was a magnificent estate situated between Metz and Luxembourg that Mr. Milleret had acquired. Its two hundred hectares held much that wealth could provide: a chateau, orange grove, river, lake, woods, cultivated fields, hunting grounds . . . nothing was lacking to give comfort and pleasure. But Preisch also meant enjoyment of the quiet and beauty of nature. The deepest souvenirs of childhood that remained in the heart of Anne Eugénie were her playful wanderings in the woods and her random frolic in the meadows with her brother Louis, her inseparable companion. As a child, Anne Eugénie declared, she preferred to play rather than study. Play for her consisted in using up her youthful energy in the wide stretches of the family estate. One day, Anne Eugénie and Louis slipped unnoticed into the barn where they could slide down the haystacks as they wished, without strait. All of a sudden they heard a call. It was their mother. Down they went . . . so quickly that Anne Eugénie lost her balance and almost broke a leg.

What the brother and sister loved most were their two dogs. "I prefer them to dolls . . . they are alive," Anne Eugénie would say. "We took them to the river to bathe them, then left them in the sun to dry as we cooked their soup." "Children," she would add later, "love to own something. I do not see why parents spend so much money to get them expensive toys. The most insignificant is enough to make them happy, provided it is their own." "We also had a nice little gazelle who ate bread from our hands and then ran back to the woods to enjoy her freedom and independence."

Anne Eugénie not only treasured these souvenirs in her heart . . . souvenirs of a happy and carefree childhood. From these she would later on draw her pedagogical conclusions: "This free life in the country where the child can let herself 'go' in the wide open spaces, engenders a strong and emotionally stable character, capable of undertaking difficult studies and assuming serious responsibilities. It is better in this respect than the closed-up atmosphere of the city."

Madame Milleret would have considered it a weakness on her part if she had failed to teach her children how to remain self-possessed in difficult situations. During

a trip, the carriage in which Anne Eugénie and her mother travelled almost slipped off the riverside because the road had become unpassable due to the recent heavy rain. The horses lost their foothold. The danger was real. The young girl, trembling with fear, looked at her mother. Their eyes met. That was all. Anne Eugénie understood what her mother expected of her. The danger over, Madame Milleret said simply: "I would have been very annoyed if you had screamed." Then added: "In times of danger, it is necessary to remain cool and silent."

Rise over her feelings, take possession of herself, be silent. Many occasions to put these into practice had already been given to this young girl of eighteen.

How distant seemed the sunny days of her childhood in Preisch! The festival days, the receptions, the balls, the banquets . . . how these events of her adolescent years had slipped into the irrecoverable past! It was high living in the great family estate. Mr. Milleret's fortune was rising: already Chevalier of the Legion of Honor, Member of the Societé d'Agriculture and of the Royal Council of Manufacturers, he was made deputy of Moselle in 1829. At the time when the first railways were constructed in France, his expert advice was sought on important administrative and financial matters.

That was less than a year before the July Revolution. Politics was as unstable as the shifting sands . . . bad financial management, unwise speculations and all crumbled down like a house of cards. Prestige, wealth . . . in a few months, nothing was left. The family estate of Preisch was up for sale. All the political hopes of the former deputy vanished. And worst of all, the family was dispersed.

Madame Milleret left for Paris with her daughter. Mr. Milleret also went away, after deliberation, hoping to build again elsewhere both his political career and his family life. In Preisch remained only the dead: Charles, who died at the age of nine, and Elizabeth, the youngest, who died before she was one year old.

The mother and daughter now enjoyed for the first time an intimacy they had never known before. "My mother was the only person I loved," Anne Eugénie avowed later on. In 1832, a cholera epidemic broke out in the capital. Worn out by fatigue and disappointment caused by the recent family misfortune, Madame Milleret was among the first victims it claimed. In three hours she was dead.

Anne Eugénie was just fifteen years of age.

One after the other, at the request of her father, two relatives offered to take her into their homes. In neither did Anne Eugénie find the love she craved for. Here was enough to throw a sensitive adolescent into confusion and break her spirit for life.

However, Anne Eugénie lived through it unbroken. Why? Perhaps, because deep down in her heart was a souvenir . . . no, more than a souvenir. . . a certitude of a personal encounter with God that went as far back as Christmas of 1829.

Anne Eugénie was then twelve years old. In the Church of Sainte-Segolaine at Metz, she received her first Holy Communion for which the family had hardly prepared her. The immediate preparation was left to the parish priest. Intelligent and willing to learn, Anne Eugénie had acquired secular knowledge that was broad and deep. But, she would say later on, her knowledge of the doctrines and teachings of the Church was very meager and inadequate.

"And yet I had studied the catechism like everybody else, and I had made my first Communion with love."

On this Christmas Day, the love of a child who offered herself was suddenly drawn into the powerful wave of another love. Through the luminous mediation of Christ, God would reveal Himself in the mystery of his transcendence to this child whom nothing had prepared for such an encounter. Two certainties remained engraved in her spirit, simple but clear as a lightning flash.

“I was struck by the grandeur of God and my own extreme littleness. This experience was so strong that for a moment everything around me vanished. I felt myself transported to the presence of God, to give God through Him whom I had just received an adoration that I was not capable of giving by myself. The encounter was short. But I cannot forget it.”

As the child walked down the aisle to rejoin her mother, she felt in her heart a premonition that she could not doubt: This mother would be taken away from her but God would be more than a mother to her. . . and one day, God would ask her to leave all that she loved to glorify the Lord and serve the Church whom she did not as yet know.

To whom could Anne Eugénie speak about this experience, so intimate, mysterious, and heart-rending because of the future that it allowed her to see? No one. She knew, however, that she could give to God the glory He deserved whenever she received Holy Communion because then it was Jesus Christ who adored in her.

Did Anne Eugénie after this frequently receive the Eucharist? It was not likely. The family was not too concerned about this. Even in the boarding school at Metz where she studied for two or three years, frequent communion was not the rule.

A case of typhoid fever obliged the young girl to stop her studies. Anne Eugénie loved to read and the leisure forced on her by illness became hours of delving into the works of Friedrich Schiller which she could read in the original German. Anne Eugénie could read and speak fluently both French and German and she had a special liking for the German classics.

Then came the sudden reversal in fortune . . . the dispersion of the family, the death of her mother. What remained of that experience of Christmas in 1829? A souvenir? An indelible souvenir? But nothing more it would seem, since it had not given a definite direction to the personal life of this young adolescent. Faith? Did she still believe? It was certain that in the family that welcomed her in 1832 her faith was not enlightened and strengthened. There was little time for religious concerns at Châlons-sur-Marne, in the household of Madame Doulcet, wife of the “receveur general.” Immensely wealthy, the family held endless receptions. Where could one find time to think of God? Could there be anything interesting in it?

Caught up in the whirlwind of worldly celebrations, Anne Eugénie soon stood out among the young, attracting many admirers by her refinement, her unaffected reserve, and the clear, steady gaze of her brown eyes. For a moment, she allowed herself to be carried away by this frivolous life. But very soon she realized how empty it was. Matured by the trials she had borne, she felt the urgent need to place before herself the big questions of life.

The books she had recently read, the conversations she had heard, confirming the ideas her father supported... all deeply troubled this young girl to whom none of these was inconsequential. Confronted by problems whose gravity she could sense, she had nowhere to find support.

“My thoughts,” she wrote, “were like a raging sea.” She wanted “to know all, to analyze all,” and to do this, “to launch into frightening regions . . . pursued by a restless need to know the truth that nothing could satisfy. Then there were the yearnings of her heart, the craving for love that nothing could fill.” Alone in the crisis of adolescence, sensitive to the least hurt, she felt herself drowning in a wave of sadness that came close to disgust for life. “All this,” she said, “I hid behind a seeming indifference because I knew there was no one who had a minute to lose to try and bring life back to my heart . . .” Loneliness was crushing her. “I am alone, alone in the world. All those around me, what do they matter . . . these friends who do not know me, who press my hand without showing any concern for my suffering? If I die tomorrow, I shall be forgotten day after tomorrow.”

What is the meaning of life? The meaning of death? If only those around her would think of them! These were vital questions that this young girl of sixteen or seventeen could not evade. “I often asked myself what will happen to all of them and to myself; if beyond this life, something of ourselves remains, and above all, what is the mystery, what is the purpose of our existence here below? She wished she could evade these problems that filled her anguish and left her no respite, by refusing to think about them. But this she knew she could not do. For “only God can command the waves of the sea: Stop, Do not go farther.”

So, after all, God still remained for her, someone she instinctively turned to. Yes, because God, she would say later on, left her “un lien d’amour.” She could doubt the immortality of the soul, but she could never question even for a moment the reality of Christ’s Presence in the Eucharist. More than this, she prayed to Christ whenever she assisted at Mass. She asked Him to keep her pure and to draw her to Himself from above.

She prayed for those who seemed to be unconcerned about the problems that troubled her. She prayed, but this did not seem sufficient for her. “To pray is not enough. It is necessary to pray in action. If I do a good deed, God will bend down to me . . . God who has promised to raise up and support those who are tired.” There was something incoherent in her thinking. She did not know why. Years later, as she grew up and acquired more learning, she would see that all her instruction where Christ had no place at all became an obstacle to the deepest aspirations of her heart. As she thus pursued, alone, her search for God, a sudden decision of her father removed her from the frivolous life of the Doulcet family.

Madame Foulon, a cousin of the Millerets, offered in her turn to take Anne Eugénie into her home. It was a milieu completely different from that of Chalons. Madame Foulon and her daughters lived part of the year in Paris and the rest of the year in the country. They were practicing Catholics . . . but this was perhaps a greater danger.

“They annoyed me,” Anne Eugénie said. “They looked to me so narrow-minded. They irritated me and I became worldly in my thinking, as I had never been before.”

Did she discover here a religion marked by conformism, against which the ardor and honesty of her youth rebelled? Whatever the case may have been, the change from one milieu to the other was hard and painful. Anne Eugénie felt that the problems that tormented her would not find their solutions here.

She could not yet see how these “dead-ends” were leading to God. St. John of the Cross writes: “O Lord, my God, who is there who seeks You with a pure and simple love and does not find You according to his taste and his desire? You reveal Yourself first and You come to meet those who desire to find You.”

The hour had come for Eugénie to experience this... For the Foulon family, it was unthinkable not to attend the Lenten conferences in Paris. These conferences were held in several parish churches. The church that attracted the biggest crowd in 1836 was Notre Dame, where the preacher was the Abbé Lacordaire. It was to Notre Dame that Anne Eugénie went.

Perhaps the preacher would be able to answer one or another of the burning questions in her mind. She wished he would, but she did not dare to hope he actually would.

Inside the cathedral, the voice of the preacher resounded, warm, vibrant, ringing with a tone of personal conviction that sounded authentic to his listeners. "We ask ourselves," he cried out, "where do we come from, and where are we going? But can we not say also these words: You, You who made us, help me to get out of my doubt, of my misery? Who cannot pray in this way?" That year, the preacher spoke of the mystery of the Incarnation. Slowly in the mind of the young girl, the light began to dawn. Six years later, she would write to Lacordaire: "Your word answered all my questions, explained my best intuitions. It completed my understanding of things and brought to life again in me that concept of duty and that desire for the good which I was at the point of losing; finally it endowed me with a new generosity, a faith that nothing ought to shake from then on . . . I dared to ask for some moments of your time, and though I talked of nothing but my doubts, my difficulties in the situation I was in, and my first thoughts of a vocation only drew a smile from you, nevertheless, I was really changed and a desire to give all my powers, or rather, all my weakness to this Church which in my own mind held the secret and power for good, was awakened in my heart."

Conversion, religious life, total gift of oneself to the Church of God. All these were one in the heart of this young girl who did not reckon with half measures. Was this just youthful enthusiasm or was it an authentic call the Lord? The Abbé Lacordaire could not tell at this first encounter. He smiled. Then, by way of answering he asked a question: "Do you know the Order of Mercy?" And, to explain, added: "Those who joined it were men who, knowing that other men were slaves, offered their liberty in exchange, so that these might go free. That is what the religious life is. It is a gift of oneself for the salvation of men." Then, to end the interview, he said in prudence: "Wait and pray."

If it was not yet for Anne Eugénie the "right road seen clearly," it was definitely the coming out of the uncertain state of doubt.

"My vocation began in Notre Dame," she would repeat throughout her life.

The light that had been given to her had changed her Life. Of this she was certain. Nevertheless, she could in all honesty also say with conviction: "*I hold on to my faith as something I have discovered.*"

CHAPTER 2

I am free...

“The Spirit sets men free, so that by putting aside love of self and bringing all earthly resources into the service of human life they can devote themselves to that future when humanity itself will become an offering acceptable to God.”

The Church Today, 38-4.

The Church to whom Anne Eugénie had decided to dedicate her life, what image did she project in the world of the 19th century, particularly the first half of this century in Europe? The bloody French revolution, more than being just a national upheaval, was a sign of the times. Crises of growth in European society, fundamental changes in the ways of thinking and in the aspirations of peoples presaged the unfolding of a new era, a new civilization. But new ideas, new ideologies put into question traditional and accepted values, if not in the entire world, at least in Europe and in the countries she had colonized. In 1830, Pius VIII died after a very short pontificate. Of him, it was said in Rome: “He was born, he wept, he died.” In reality he did more than that, but as Daniel

Rops put it, “He came at the hour when the Sphinx of History placed before men terrible questions to answer.” For this task, Pius VIII was too weak, physically and morally . . . moreover, elected too late, to be able to give his full measure. Was Gregory XVI, who succeeded him as vicar of Christ as well as temporal Head of the Papal States, better prepared for the task? Assuming the responsibility of the Christian world at a time of transition, when one historical epoch was giving way to another that was still searching for itself, was far from being easy for anyone. Notwithstanding the solidity of his doctrine, the high quality of his priestly and religious life—he had been the abbot of a monastery—the new Pope lacked the diplomatic mind, a keenness of perception that could discern the beginnings of inevitable changes, the breadth of spirit that could grasp in one clear vision the magnitude and the urgency of new problems and deliberately fix his gaze at the future rather than at the past. For in the prophetic words of Napoleon, the “Revolution was following its course, and history is irreversible.”

The future . . . A radical group of young and not so young, especially in France, looked toward the future with enthusiasm. The word “liberty” was on the lips and in the mind of everyone. To this group, liberty was the key that would open to their generation the solution to the problems of their times, and perhaps, of all times. Soon after the Revolution of 1830 and the succession of Louis-Philippe to the throne, a newspaper appeared. Its title: *L’A VENIR*, i.e., *THE FUTURE*. Its rallying cry: “Dieu et la Liberté.” With the director of *L’A VENIR* worked a most heterogeneous group of collaborators: Lamartine, Victor Hugo, Vigny, Balzac, Michelet, Sainte-Beuve, Alexander Dumas, l’Abbé Combalot, Charles de Montalembert, Dom Gueranger, Henri Lacordaire . . . Felicité de la Mennais, perhaps drawn to the priesthood in spite of himself, directed its publication with fire and passion from the College of Juilly where he resided. Deeply disappointed by the government set up by Louis XVIII and Charles X, he rallied around him men who stood for liberal Catholicism and fought vigorously though not too clearly for religious freedom, freedom of assembly, freedom of the press, freedom of education because only these

freedoms actually exercised, he strongly affirmed, could win back the masses to the truth that Catholics profess.

He was at 48 years of age a man of extreme sensitivity. with a delicate nervous temperament and a fighting, unconquerable spirit. Victor Hugo said of him: "He is an appalling figure of the future." And Lacordaire: "He is a Druid come back to life and speaking the language of Brittany." Daniel Rops looking back more than a century later did not hesitate to compare La Mennais with Karl Marx. Both, he said, had a strong feeling of certainty that the end of the world was coming during their own lifetime. Both saw through the breakdown of the present order the dawn of a new light in the future. But this future, in the vision of La Mennais, is not what *Das Kapital* foresees, materialistic and atheistic. For La Mennais this future is Christian.

The prophetic vision which he showed on many occasions seems incredible to us today. He saw as coming the declaration on the infallibility of the Pope, the stand of the Church on democracy and freedom. Already, he thought it was good for the Church-ideas never thought of in those times-to give up her temporal power and to separate church from state. He foresaw the coming of liturgical reforms, a return to Sacred Scriptures, the adoption of new pastoral approaches. He sensed in the rising importance of the laity in the Church the flowering of Catholic Action which became a reality in the 20th century.

These ideas, prophetic as they now appear to us today, alarmed and stupefied the most speculative minds during the first half of the nineteenth century. Mixed though they were at times with erroneous ideas and utopian and ambiguous speculations, they could have won their way slowly and surely if they had been exposed with moderation, delicacy of feeling and tact. But moderation and humility were not characteristic of La Mennais.

Thirty years after the bright, hopeful beginnings of *L' A VENIR*, Montalembert recognized its central defect. It did not distinguish between what was proven correct by experience and what was mere speculation carried to the extreme. Everything was supported with equal vehemence with the absoluteness that kills the cause it does not put to ridicule.

Without doubt, La Mennais thought it was a sign of clear thinking on his part to denounce as harmful and dangerous an indissoluble union of church and state, to see in this a permanent stumbling block to the real mission of the Church as far as the development of man and the respect due to the conscience of every man were concerned

Without doubt, to brand as erroneous the social stand of men like Jean Baptiste Say for whom the emergence of a property-less proletariat was only a consequence of industrial progress which, fatal though it be, was inevitable - this, for La Mennais, was to stand for justice. It would not have mattered too much if only politicians had this false idea of social justice. But to quote the words of Jacques Loew during the retreat he preached at the Vatican in the presence of Paul VI in February of 1970: "It is impossible for us Catholics not to blush with shame before all that had been said and repeated, done, thought, written, published during the Restoration by laymen, bishops, and even by a Leo XIII in the Pontifical States. To speak of the inequality of social conditions as necessary and unchangeable because willed by God, and this at the full emergence of a growing proletariat, was not just a question of mentality . . . - it was a theological question."

There were then many in the Church who were instinctively repelled by the idea of a social revolution, the reasons for which they refused to acknowledge. They were incapable of distinguishing harmful and sterile immobility from the immutable continuity

of a Church which incarnated in human history, cannot remain faithful to her mission except by following, herself, in her own specific role, the new direction toward which the world is moving. For others, together with the unreasonable fear of the new and unbeaten track came the fear of losing privilege, wealth and security. This was the hard reality. Why not recognize it?

It was not, however, by means of a bitter and unhealthy controversy where often the truth was distorted and charity wounded that the fight for a just cause should have been pursued. Minds were confused and the vehemence of passions unleashed since 1789 poured itself out into a battle of words, bitter, ironical. Attack was followed by counter-attack in the press. From Joseph de Maistre to Leon Bloy, the Church in France would have a squadron of militant Catholics who would fight with much with sound and fury. Among them was La Mennais.

He defended his views with uncompromising tenacity. His way of judging, of condemning, of denying and affirming gave the impression that he thought he alone possessed the truth. An attitude like his, at this period, could not but arouse much heart-rending misunderstanding and fierce opposition. Full of his own sense of superiority and a prey to his own sensitiveness, he could not keep his head cool and his heart open and teachable, even regarding the cause he so loyally fought for.

On the 15th of August 1832, despite the respectful intervention of Lacordaire and Montalembert, Gregory XVI condemned without further discussion the theses of *L' A VENIR* by issuing the encyclical, *Mirari Vos*. A dialogue conducted in a climate of trust could doubtless have averted the evil. But it was not yet the age of dialogue . . . La Mennais at first submitted. Then, suddenly, he attacked with brutal force the very authority he had defended. Was it rebellion? or despair? The herald of freedom, the freedom of the Church, the man who could look far into the future and could have done much to bring it into reality - this man found himself alone in La Chesnaie, abandoned by his admirers and his friends of yesterday.

If he had been humble or even only clear-sighted and practical, Lacordaire would say, he could have found himself again in 1841 assuming the leadership of the liberal Catholic group, at the front line of a crusade of his time, greater, stronger, more respected and revered . . . No one ever passed into obscurity with so little struggle.

La Mennais had slipped into the shadows. But the leaders of the liberal Catholics did not give up. Within the frame of mind of the Church, these men picked up what was good and viable in the theses of *L' A VENIR*. With the same thrust but with more prudence, they continued the fight.

The first target was freedom of education.

The battle had started in 1830. A petition signed by fifteen thousand persons was presented to the two Houses in order to obtain permission to open private schools. Casimir Périer answered by closing parish schools for singing. The editors of *L' A VENIR* staged a very subtle counter-attack.

On May 9, 1831, La Mennais and Lacordaire with their friend Montalembert opened without permission from the government a primary school where they themselves taught. An order was immediately issued to close the school but no one moved to follow the order. It was necessary to call the police to drive both the pupils and their teachers out of the school. As they had foreseen, the question of freedom of education was brought to the public eye. In the hearing that followed before the Upper House, Lacordaire and

Montalembert defended the right to freedom of education. Though sentenced to pay a fine of one hundred francs, they in reality won the case. In 1833, Guizot granted full freedom of elementary education in France.

The Law of 1825 allowed the establishment of religious Communities in the country. So, from 1833 France became a fertile ground for the birth and flowering of religious congregations both of men and women dedicated to education.

Catholics, however, wanted more. They wanted the re-establishment of freedom of education on the secondary level. This was finally granted on March 15, 1850 by the passage of the Falloux Law.

Engaged in the "battle" for freedom of education were men like Lacordaire, Montalembert, Ozanam, Veuillot, Dupanloup. The battle raged with a torrent of words, invectives hurled indiscriminately. Expectedly, this did not result in bringing about a friendly and beneficial relationship between the State University and private institutions of learning.

In 1844, religious congregations were forbidden to run secondary schools. Perhaps this was a move to drive the Society of Jesus out of secondary education. A Catholic newspaper fired back: "The State University is preparing for us a generation of man-eaters." Such a bold statement drew down on its author the sanction of the Law: a fine of four thousand francs and fifteen days of imprisonment. The Abbé Combalot took pride in the reaction his words provoked. He went farther. He prepared in his own hand-writing the inscription on his tombstone: "Confessor of the faith." This was, of course, overstressing the importance of a small incident in the fight for a great cause.

The Abbé Combalot was, however, a unique personality. Long before 1830, he took sides with La Mennais and threw himself into the combat heart and soul. His lack of moderation and his unstable temperament could only be equalled by his ardor and loyalty to the Church.

He was thirty-five years old when *L' A VENIR* was condemned. With real sorrow in his heart, he broke his friendship with the man who had moulded his life for a decade. In his heart, however, he neither rejected the ideas of La Mennais which he thought right, nor his bellicose manner of defending the cause of God. A rabid controversialist at an epoch when controversy was causing much havoc, he knew no moderation, and made no allowances for differences of opinion. He was not a Lacordaire. Nor a Curé d' Ars. But he was, nevertheless, a man of faith, sincere, generous, always ready to be at the front line in battle. He had no fear of battles. He would stir up new ones, if there be need. He attacked the hierarchy as well as the government. The parish priests who welcomed the tireless missionary as he cut his way through France armed with the "word as his sword" Soon began to fear his uncompromising tenacity-and with good reason. At the time when he strongly supported Dom Gueranger in his campaign for the Roman liturgy, it was indeed un fortunate if any one was found with a breviary or ritual in the vernacular in his possession. To the flames went the incriminating books.

But the Abbé Combalot had, nevertheless, many and ardent admirers. For he was representative of the state of mind of his contemporaries. . . at least a good number of them. The announcement that he would preach the Lenten sermons in 1837 was received with indescribable enthusiasm, wrote a contemporary. People hurried, crowded into the church - it was always too small - and when the preacher thundered and threatened from the pulpit, every one was captivated, taken out of himself. For the Abbé "all decay and die" in the

world as in the Church. So he felt within himself a prophetic call to re-animate a dying world and a dormant Church.

In fact, this man in whom balance was never a dominant quality could on certain occasions show lightning insights which, though appearing at first as only idle fancy, the future would prove well-founded. Unfortunately, he would envision at the same time a thousand unrealizable projects. Without due deliberation he would follow his own impulses rather than the prudent dictates of reason. It was rare that he would see to the end the multiple projects he began. Thus, though the bishops recognized his genuine apostolic zeal, they were mistrustful of his “incandescent” head. They hesitated to consider as truly inspired by God any project of his, even if in reality it was. His most consistent ideas were often mixed with unrealizable plans and illusory dreams.

Nevertheless, since 1825, an idea pursued him, haunted him day and night. That it came from God, he was absolutely certain. That others were less certain was not surprising. While he was praying in the sanctuary Sainte-Anne-d’Auray, he said, he was as it were struck by a very strong interior light, an idea deeply engraved in his mind, far beyond the capability of feeling and imagination to conjure: He must establish in France a new religious congregation.

Its purpose would be to glorify God for all the graces given to Mary, particularly in her Assumption. This was in 1825, twenty-nine years before the definition of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception by Pius IX in 1854, and one hundred twenty-five years before the promulgation of the Dogma of the Assumption by Pius XII in 1950.

The founding of a new congregation was neither extravagant nor unusual in that epoch when the Church in France saw the rise of seventeen religious institutes for women between 1814 and 1830. By the end of the century, this number more than doubled. But one problem remained for the Abbé. That was to find a foundress. Nothing more. Nothing less. He had not yet met her, but he had no doubt that Providence would put her across his path when the right moment came. This time he was not wrong.

The ways of God, Isaiah tells us, are not our ways. Can it not to be also said that at times His ways not only disconcert us, they can also be touched by wit and humour? In the mind of the Abbé, the foundress should be a well balanced person, refined, tactful, perceptive, able to discern the finest nuances in meaning, self-possessed, with a horror for agitation and oratorical battles. Unknown to the Abbé, this foundress was preparing herself in solitude for the mission that would be given to her.

She was Anne Eugénie Milleret. In 1836 she had re-discovered her faith - in reality it had always been there, in the depths of her being, but hidden. Having discovered it, she read with avidity the books recommended by Lacordaire. *Mysteres* by Bourdaloue, *Mélanges* by M. de Bonald, also the works of Joseph de Maistre.

Through personal reflection Anne Eugénie also tried to deepen the human foundations of her faith- tried to understand the meaning of the spiritual road she was taking.

“How did I pass from doubt to faith? The more I progress on the way of faith, the less able I am to explain how I came to believe.

“What is the meaning of good? of evil? Where do they come from? It was in trying to answer these questions that I arrived at the certitude of the existence of God, a God who revealed Himself. He is powerful. He is just. This is why we honor and respect the law in us that directs us towards the good. The good is nothing else but the will of God carried

out. Evil results when the will of God is opposed. "If God who is just and powerful, who knows the meaning of our existence, all the secrets it holds, if He has spoken to us, is truth not that which conforms to His word. . . for all that God has spoken must be true.

"He is almighty. He is truth. He has revealed His will to us. These are basic truths that we believe. But they give rise to a disturbing question. If God is powerful, how can we be free, subject as we are to Him? If God does not know the future, if He does not direct the course of history, there must be a limit to His power. Where is this limit? Who is greater than He? The finite, the limited, implies the infinite.

"I have no answers to these questions. All I know is that I am free. I cannot doubt the existence of good and evil. And good and evil cannot exist, unless I am free."

Light came to Anne Eugénie, simple, limpid as a stream. not doing violence to her reason but rising above it.

She asked herself what the true nature of man was. Again here she had no adequate answer. But "I like to believe," she wrote, "that man becomes more man in the measure in which he becomes more enlightened, more perfect."

On her first Communion day God had revealed to Anne Eugénie His transcendence. Now in prayer and reflection He revealed to her His presence within her. "God is Love: if I love God, He must be in my heart. God is Truth; if I believe in Him, I must possess Him." This experience of God's immanence began to fill the void in her heart and to draw her to divine union. She longed for God; she longed to see, to touch, to render homage to the sacred humanity of Jesus Christ, the God made man.

Her mind had always played an active role in her life. That was why she could speak of her faith as something she had won and this filled her with an inebriating sense of having fought and won a battle. But she was troubled by the transformations in her own mind and heart. And there was no one to guide her and to explain to her the way through which God was leading her.

"I do not know how to think clearly when I get involved in a discussion on some religious question. I can give no reason for my faith. And yet I know that I have not arrived at it without the support of my own reasoning. I had argued with myself for and against it and when finally I submitted to authority, it was because I saw the reason for it clearly."

Having experienced through faith the love of God. Anne Eugénie now no longer cared to argue. She wanted to be silent so that she could plumb the depths of that love which the sacrifice of the Cross and the Eucharist - these for her were inseparable - prove beyond any doubt.

Grace also sustained her. "God sees that I am weak. I cannot walk without help from Him that I can perceive and feel. He sends me such sensible proofs of His presence that like St. Thomas on the day of the Resurrection, faith no longer has any cost for me. I feel like a child sleeping in the arms of Christ . . . when I wake up I want to see myself still weak and small . . . I do not want to grow up."

Had she been familiar with the writings of St. John of the Cross, Anne Eugénie would have recognized in her own experience the first steps on the way to divine union. "The grace of God, this mother full of tenderness, usually treats a person to whom she has given new life, new ardor in tite service of God, as a mother who nourishes and caresses her baby does. She presses him to her heart, nourishes him with savourous milk, feeds him

with what is good and pleasant to the taste; she carries him in her arms and shelters him in her embrace,” writes the mystical doctor of Carmel.

For Anne Eugénie everything now became a source of joy - the meadows, the trees, the woods, the rivers, the fields ready for the harvest. She found in them the visible signs of Him who created all the beauty around her. The Eucharistic presence above all filled her with joy.

“Who can describe the goodness of God?” she wrote in her diary. “No sooner do I desire to come to Him when I already feel His presence in my heart. In the past, solitude weighed down on me. I looked for affection, for sympathy and I tormented myself in vain. Now I no longer feel the need to go to anyone. I feel that God listens to me. He is with me. . . I would be afraid to admit a third person into this sweet companionship that I have with God.”

Christ was clearly sounding in the heart of Anne Eugénie the call that He once sounded in the heart of the rich voting man when he looked at him lovingly: “If you want to be perfect, leave all that you have, and come follow me.

To this call of the Lord she was decided to respond unconditionally. The religious life, the following of Christ, the life totally given to Him, was for her. If during the first years of her religious life she would speak of it in terms then common to her contemporaries, as a refuge of salvation away from the world, she would soon understand the true dimensions of this life. She never sought in it an escape from the problems of the world or personal security. Her ideal-already evident in her resolution in 1837- was to cooperate in the renewal of the world through the law of love that Christ had entrusted to His Church.

Chapter 3

I wish I were a man...

“The mission of the Church is not only to bring the message and the grace of Christ to men but also to permeate and to perfect the temporal order through the spirit of the Gospel..

Apostolicam Actuositatem, 2-5.

For Anne Eugénie there was now only one road to take and that was to follow Christ-Christ of the Gospels more closely. She felt that God was leading her with tender, personal care through the thousand unforeseen circumstances of her life-circumstances men would call haphazard. “It seems to me at times that Divine Providence has a definite plan for me. Nothing is impossible to God and not to trust in Him is false humility.” She wanted to find someone who could guide her. She could not expect to get this guidance from the Abbé Lacordaire because he was in Rome.

But to wait and remain inactive was impossible for Anne Eugénie. There were too many of her contemporaries who suffered from the confusion and violence racking men’s minds and bodies.

“I have not ceased asking God to send me someone who can help me find the way to serve Him. But where can I find him? I have thought of this day and night since Christmas of 1836.”

Friends recommended some well-known preachers. Among them was the Abbé Combalot who was going to preach the Lenten sermons in 1837. Anne Eugénie decided to listen to him. His fiery and tempestuous words repelled rather than attracted her. Feeling, however, that she had to make a decision and there was no one else to whom she could go for advice, she decided to ask for an interview. At the first encounter, in his usual abrupt manner, he took the lead and gave her no time to explain.

“Do you have a great devotion to the Blessed Virgin?” he asked.

“Not as much as I should like.”

“Well, then, there’s nothing more to be said.”

As Anne Eugénie was about to leave, he said to her, as though on second thought: “Come and look for me at the confessional at six-thirty tomorrow before Mass.”

Early next day, Anne Eugénie was at the confessional of the Abbé Combalot. She found no help in his impulsive direction, so she decided to look for another director.

As tactfully as she could, she wrote him a note and brought it to the sacristy herself. As soon as he read it, he ran out to look for her but she was gone. He found her finally in the church. “God sends you. God wants you to stay.” She had no idea of what he had in mind but she could not turn away. To the Abbé, however, it was clear: this young girl was the foundress he had been waiting for. Without further explanation, he told her about his plan to found what he called the Order of the Assumption.

Through this institute, he said, the words of St. Paul, *Instaurare omnia in Christo*, could become a reality. The purpose of the Order certainly answered her deepest aspirations. But to be its foundress, she who had no experience of religious life at all-this was folly, nonsense, absurd.

She had good reason to think so. But her argument had to be stronger to make the Abbé Combalot change his mind. He insisted: “The work of the Assumption depends

on you. Reflect, pray and you will soon see that you are not only free to refuse if you want to enter into the plan of God who is entrusting this mission to you.”

Before such a categorical statement, there was nothing else to do but to reflect and pray. And so it was that in prayer, gradually as though seized by a power she could not reject, she entered into the plans of the Abbé Combalot, unreasonable though they seemed to her.

She had not yet received the Sacrament of Confirmation. “Let me receive the Holy Spirit,” she said to him, “so that I can become a new creature. Then perhaps I shall be capable of accepting the task that you are giving me.”

On the octave of Easter, Anne Eugénie received the Sacrament from Monseigneur de Quelan in the chapel of the archdiocese of Paris. Looking back years later, she could say: “From this day, my vocation was fixed. Confirmation was for me the door to a new life.” In the spirit of faith, Anne Eugénie accepted both her mission as foundress of a new religious congregation and the part that the Abbé Combalot would play in its foundation. The project could be realized only in a climate of mutual trust.

But right from the start, there was a stumbling block. The Abbé certainly had the grace of conceiving the idea of the Congregation of the Assumption. The obstacle was in the attitude he took towards it. He saw it as his work and the future foundress as in the words of the Abbé d’Alzon, his property.

At the very beginning the existence of the Congregation was threatened and its true nature put into question. The supernatural spirit of Anne Eugénie and the maturity of her judgement helped to save it. The fantastic and impulsive direction of the Abbé became for her a school of asceticism and self-denial such as no other novitiate could have been. It was at the same time providential—an experience which nurtured sound principles for the time when she, in her turn, would guide her daughters along the way of religious perfection.

Now that he had found the long-awaited foundress, Abbé Combalot would not brook any delay in the realization of his plan. Real problems that such an enterprise would bring up, risks inherent in such hasty decisions, all these were brushed aside as though they did not count.

He was going to preach a retreat to a community of Dominican Sisters during Eastertide. Anne Eugénie, he decided, would follow the retreat.

Anne Eugénie felt joy and anguish alternating in her heart as she followed the retreat. “My heart is filled with joy by the lightning intuitions into His infinite love that God, at times, grants me.” And Soon after: “I rebel beforehand at a thousand things. I become a prey to fear and anxiety. I refuse to surrender my will. I withdraw in horror.”

However, the certitude that she was answering a genuine call of the Lord overcame her fears and doubts. “The Holy Spirit urges me to surrender,” she wrote in her diary. When she finally did, she found again “joy, readiness to pray, spiritual energy and peace.”

She tried to understand how grace was working in her: “It is curious how at times we pit our power against God’s, refusing to surrender ourselves to Him, demanding one thing, refusing another, asking a return for what we give Him . . . God has done so much for me. I want to do something for Him . . . not that God has need of me but because I should not Oppose His designs . . . God has made me free, free even to go against His

designs-a frightening power when I realize that the least act of refusal can bring about so much evil and prevent so much good-but the sacrifice of my own will, fidelity to the inspirations of grace is the way to enter into the plans of God's Providence"

The objective of the Congregation she was asked to steer one day was certainly in harmony with her strongest desires. "For a year now," she noted in her diary, "I have been wishing I were a man, a Lacordaire, a Montalembert, a La Mennais."-that is, before he defected. She envied her illustrious contemporaries. "I believe that these men are truly serving the country by leading her to the source of truth." That she would be associated with them, miserable and weak though she was, never occurred to her. And yet so it happened.

Anne Eugénie did not fear to look at the possibilities opened to her in the formidable adventure she had embarked on. "Perhaps I shall do great things. Perhaps I shall have saints among my daughters and perhaps they in turn will be great saving influences in the world."

At twenty Anne Eugénie could look far and wide. Was her youthful enthusiasm, just like the passionate ardor of the Abbé Combalot, carrying her towards impossible horizons? Not likely. In her desire inspired by zeal for the Kingdom, there was no uncontrolled exultation. Neither was there personal ambition. The great things she envisioned would not be her achievement nor her possession. She could only be an instrument in God's hand, weak and inadequate, but willing to make herself docile and supple . . . "If my humble sacrifice is total, God will bless it . . . " This was the condition for the divine blessing to descend on the new institute. The Foundress must learn not only to efface herself but to die perfectly to herself so that she could say in truth: "I live, no, not I; but Christ lives in me."

Here was a rule of life more demanding than the one being prepared for her by the Abbé Combalot.

The retreat was hardly over when he asked her to make temporary vows of chastity and obedience. This was not contrary to the custom of the times. It showed, however, that from the start the Abbé was claiming an authority over her beyond what was due him. This may have been dictated by a loyal and apostolic ardor, but more likely than not it was the outcome of his own restless temperament. He did not seem to understand the meaning of co-responsibility.

From this incapacity to understand an inevitable conflict was bound to arise sooner or later.

In her own judgement marked by common sense and a keen supernatural insight, Anne Eugénie saw that time was needed to allow both the idea and the means to be used to realize it to become clearer and more precise.

The Abbé Combalot, however, thought otherwise. He wanted Anne Eugénie at once to inform her family about her decision. But there were no plans of foundation as yet-absolute secrecy was considered necessary. What could she tell them? That she wanted to enter the convent? They would ask: Where? . . . The most she could say would be that she felt drawn to the religious life. She was not yet twenty and could not make any decision on this matter without the consent of her father.

In July of 1837 she wrote to the Abbé Combalot: "My family and friends cover me with attention. They plan social gatherings for me, but I decline the invitations- thanks to my father who allows me this liberty. They forgive my lack of amiability . . . they want to

please me . . . they accept my new ‘taste’ which they think is just a passing fancy . . . My room is full of books. I have two Bibles at my disposal. You can see that I read Sacred Scriptures. I have little liking for spiritual books, except the writings of St. Teresa-these always help me to pray, to practice humility and to love. I also love St. Paul and I should like him to be one of the special patrons of the Assumption whose mission is to bring the knowledge of Jesus Christ also to women. Perhaps I guess your own intentions.” Thus began a long and prolific correspondence which lasted for more than four years.

In the month of May Anne Eugénie met near Thornville some friends who, like her, were disturbed by the growing de-christianization of their milieu. They were troubled by the absence of the element of faith in the education given to young girls in the schools of Paris. On the 24th of August of the same year, she wrote to the Abbé Combalot: “Tomorrow I shall be twenty. In a year, no matter what happens, I shall be free, wholly given to your work.”

But the Abbé wanted immediate action.

Anne Eugénie had already written to her father to tell of her intentions. Mr. Milleret, however, doubted her motivations: “If you want to enter the convent because you do not want anymore to stay with Madame Foulon,” he wrote to her, “then come and stay with me. I shall rent another apartment and you will keep house for me.” Nevertheless, respecting her own freedom, he assured her that he would never put obstacles in her way, no matter how much it pained him . . . provided, he concluded, her decisions are seriously taken. “Look, reflect, wait until you are of age.”

The delicacy of this answer caused Anne Eugénie more sorrow than a refusal would have done. After so many years of painful separation from her father, how strange it was that now she should feel so close to him after all. Suddenly a new question arose in her mind: Is not her true mission precisely to stay close to her father so that she can bring him back to the Lord?

She consulted the Abbé Combalot and the immediate answer was: “No, that is not your mission.”

He urged Anne Eugénie to leave her family as soon as possible and live as a lady boarder in a convent. “This is my advice; I beg you to follow it; if it is necessary to persuade you, I command you to follow it.” The convent at his choice was a monastery of the Benedictines of the Blessed Sacrament, a cold and forbidding building situated on the street Sainte-Genevieve.

Despite the opposition of her family, Anne Eugénie decided to follow the advice. Mr. Milleret insisted on visiting the convent and seeing for himself. He came back, somewhat reassured. “Better than any argument to dissuade her,” he said to himself, “the austerity and sadness oozing from the walls of this monastery will suffice to take away from a young girl of twenty any inclination towards the cloistered life. Let her not expect me to visit her often in this stupid seclusion. If she prefers this kind of imprisonment to the life offered her by her family, let her suffer the consequences.”

For Anne Eugénie, to stay in this forbidding place was easier to bear than the reproaches of indifference to her family that were not sparingly thrown at her.

“I love you all,” she protested. “Nothing has changed in my love for you, if it is not to make it greater, for now it is in Jesus Christ that I cherish you. All mankind finds a place in my heart, for God increases daily its capacity to love all whom Christ has redeemed.” It was not for selfish security that she would put a wall between herself and

her family. Of course, they would not be able to understand why. It was not in order to love less but in order to be able to love more. “Now, the world is too small to contain my love,” she wrote. In God she discovered the source of all truly human love. Love of daughter, love of spouses, love of mother, all find their source and strength in Him who is Love. “Above all,” she added, “I yearn to bring this light and this love that I now enjoy to those who do not have it.”

Again and again she would repeat to her family that, despite appearances, she loved them . . . “But,” she affirmed, “I love God more.” Here was the answer to why she was willing to gamble away her life, why she was willing to lead the life asked of her at the time by the Abbé Combalot.

The Abbé Combalot himself entrusted her to the Superior of the monastery and to the confessor of the Community, the Abbé Gaume. But under no circumstances was she to speak to either of them about the future foundation.

The Abbé did not stop to consider the psychological disturbances that such a seclusion could produce. No community life, since she would stay outside the cloister. No direct contact with the Superior. No possibility of Meeting the young novices.

“I do not see anyone here,” she wrote to the Abbé. “There is only one lady boarder I am allowed to see . . . but she is sixty years old and I have no desire to make her acquaintance. I am a stranger to all here, except Our Lord. For Divine Office the Superior has given me a place among the Religious. For the rest of the day, I pray before the Blessed Sacrament in a tribune surrounded by iron bars.”

There was only one person to whom she could write as often and as much as she wanted. That was the Abbé Combalot himself. “I take advantage of this permission,” she told him with a touch of humor, “since this is the only compensation you give me after putting me under lock and key.”

It was exactly that. Locked up with no possibility of human contact and healthy relaxation. One source of distraction was left open to her. “From the third story where I stay, I can watch the little boys in a school just in front as they play. I like to hear their cries of joy, much to the displeasure of the Superior. This helps to bolster up my spirit.”

“Though my day is well employed in prayer, reflection and serious study of English and Latin, the hours seem interminable at times.” However, to reassure the Abbé Cambalot, she wrote to him: “I can find something to like in my solitude. I like the freedom I have to plan my day.” Unfortunately, even this freedom was soon taken away by the Abbé Gaume when he gave her a schedule to follow. “Tomorrow,” she wrote again to the Abbé Combalot, “I shall no longer be free to think for myself. I shall no longer be my own master.”

From Turin, the Abbé tried to console the future foundress. He told her that he also experienced in the novitiate of the Society of Jesus a frightening solitude, a terrible feeling of isolation. The pain of separation from his family joined to this loneliness had thrown him into an abyss of anguish and sorrow. But in two weeks he was able to overcome his loneliness. He did not seem to remember that, more than his devotion to La Mennais, it was loneliness that drove him back to the ranks of the secular clergy.

That the seclusion could break the health of Anne Eugénie did not seem to occur to him. Happy at having discovered the “corner-stone” for his work, he told her that God had given her gifts he had not seen in any one yet. This “corner-stone” he himself would

shape and polish, forgetting that this was the work of the Holy Spirit and not that of directors who, in the words of St. John of the Cross, can only “strike as blacksmiths do.”

The silence he imposed finally began to weigh heavily on Anne Eugénie. “You do not want me to tell M. Gaume what is in my mind,” she wrote to him. “The future determines my conduct now to a great extent, and creates for me new responsibilities which I can discuss with no one but you.”

The Abbé himself could not be silent about the future. He could not keep himself from showing the letters of his spiritual daughter to some friends. He was both proud of her and jealous of his work. He did not realize that he was endangering both the work and the life of a young girl of twenty by imposing on her a solitude he himself could not endure. He could not read between the lines in the letters that came from Paris. “I should be able to tell my family that I am well,” Anne Eugénie wrote. “When shall I have companions to love me and whom I can love in return? This absence of human companionship dries me up.

“You are right in wanting to select carefully your spiritual daughters, to choose for your work only mature persons. What I fear is that you may be too slow in this matter.”

The letters of the Abbé Combalot did not do much to console her. “You pity me. You make me look like a saint, a martyr. And this after severely rebuking me, lest you fall from the clouds when you see me again. What I feared when I decided to abandon myself to your guidance, was your impulsive character. I knew I would have much to suffer from this.” Then to the preacher whose vehemence needed to be tempered, she gave this advice: “You realize that your ways do not make the archbishops eager to welcome you. What makes me happy is your resolution to practice prudence. The impulse to say all that comes into our minds comes from our unregulated nature. The spiritual man, as St. Paul whom you love so much says, weighs all and takes only what is good.”

Before the end of the year, it was becoming clear that, despite the authority claimed by the Abbé Combalot, Anne Eugénie was beginning to take the leading and decisive role that was rightfully hers. This she did with prudence and tact. She accepted only what was sound and viable in the many suggestions and directives given to her by the Abbé. In silence, reflection and prayer she abandoned herself totally to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The main thrust of her thinking at this time revealed not only a superior cast of mind but also the creative activity of the Holy Spirit in her. One wonders to what pretentious idea of the Abbé Combalot she was referring when she wrote to him thus:

“It is not proper for us to think that we are called to begin a revolution in education and in the religious life. It would be better to say and to think that though we are not courageous enough to embrace the austerity of the great contemplative orders, there seems to be still a place in the Church where we can sow and reap.

“What we want to establish is a religious congregation whose members are bound by genuine charity. Since an education in faith is a need of our time, our mission in the Church is clear. We must use for this apostolate all that is good in modern methods of teaching. By placing ourselves under the protection of Mary assumed into heaven, we find in her mystery of glory the joy that sustains our weakness.

‘Woman is elevated,’ cannot be our motto. We can only have one battle cry: ‘Jesus Christ, Mary, the Church.’”

A program of such depth and breadth could not but fill the Abbé with joy. The physical endurance of Anne Eugénie, however, was failing, and this he had to admit

when he came back to Paris.

Mr. Milleret was also anxious. Much though he admired the spiritual vigor of his daughter, he saw that the life she was leading was too much for the strength of a young girl. He decided to take her out more often. This was a wise decision but it did not please the Abbé. Anne Eugénie could have given in to a sense of frustration at the new tension that was building up between her father and the Abbé. Common sense, tact and humor saved the situation from becoming melodramatic. To the Abbé again on the road she wrote:

“I have just come from a sermon. It was on the Blessed Virgin. I liked the subject but I found the ideas presented narrow. That was, however, better than going to the theatre. I can see you raise your eyebrows in disapproval. If I were naughty I would leave you in Suspense for some time.” Refusal to go with the family was not easy. They tried all means to persuade her. “Finally when they saw that they could only do it by using physical force, I was left alone, accused of being a fool, absurd, a typical example of feminine stubbornness . . . The stupidity of my unknown spiritual director was not spared, too.”

The situation became more trying the following week: “My family is beginning to realize that I am serious about my decision and they will try all means to dissuade me.” In fact, they now tried to win her by many signs of affection and concern. This was harder to bear than their open, sarcastic remarks.

Something had to be done before the situation became impossible to bear. “If I say that I need to try my vocation in this life of solitude, my family will say to me: If you are not sure, then you are crazy to sacrifice your friends for a dream. And if I say that I am decided, they will ask: What order have you chosen? And here I have to be Dumb.” From her reasoning only two conclusions could be drawn:

“As long as I do not belong to any established religious order, I belong morally to my family.

“In the monastery where I stay, I learn English and Latin but nothing of the religious life.”

Chapter 4

The divine presence within me...

“Christ is active in the hearts of men. He awakens in them, not only the desire for the world to come, but also vivifies, purifies, and strengthens those generous aspirations which urge the human family to improve their conditions of life.”

The Church Today. 38-1.

A new way out of the dilemma must be found. This was becoming clear to Anne Eugénie and she proposed it with more insistence to the Abbé Combalot. Would he allow her to make her novitiate in a convent far from Paris where she could live with the community, truly as one of them, yet without the intention of staying?

The Abbé was all for the idea. Moreover, one of his friends was the chaplain of the Visitandines in Côte-Saint André. He could arrange for her to go there.

Anne Eugénie was not yet twenty-one and still needed permission of her father to change her residence. Worried about the health of his daughter, Mr. Milleret was thinking of sending her to the hot springs in the Pyrenees for a cure. The Abbé suggested to Anne Eugénie Aix-les Bains, instead. One health resort instead of another and also located in the mountains should not make any difference. Then a long stay with the Visitandines at Côte-Saint André on a lower altitude would surely restore her to health. Mr. Milleret felt uneasy about the growing influence exerted by the renowned preacher on his daughter. Though some admired him, some also were critical of him. Moreover, he was not always on good terms with the hierarchy. Seeing all his plans cast aside, Mr. Milleret started to protest. Then an idea came to his mind. He had some business matters to settle in Savoy. Why not ask Anne Eugénie to go with him and see the Grande Chartreuse, Geneva, Aix before she settles down? He insisted on her choosing a place where the house would be beautiful, and the air, pure . . . and where she could meet some women of refined upbringing. Above all, he did not want the experience at Sainte-Geneviève repeated.

Anne Eugénie urged the Abbé to take advantage of this trip and meet her father. It would be an occasion for him to explain to Mr. Milleret the unusual circumstances of her present life. The meeting could take place sometime in July and with his permission she would then pass the winter at Côte-Saint-André

The Visitandines, on their part, were willing to take Anne Eugénie into their community under the conditions placed by the Abbé Combalot. The decision proved a happy one. “The Sisters welcomed me with open arms,” she wrote on the feast of the Assumption in 1838. “They consider me one of the Community. This morning I renewed my vows only for another three weeks, that is, until the feast of the Nativity of Our Lady.” Anne Eugénie wanted to be prudent. She did not want to precipitate things. She must go the way of an ordinary novice.

The Superior also welcomed warmly the spiritual daughter of the Abbé Combalot. She assured him that Anne Eugénie would be given a true and solid religious formation. This task she would entrust to Mère Marie Caroline, a strong woman with the qualities of an excellent teacher, though often lacking in the gentleness of the holy founder, St. Francis of Sales.

Mère Marie Caroline took her mission seriously. To guide Anne Eugénie on the road to perfection -that she would do to the best of her ability. But the Abbé Combalot had

no intention of ceding his place as spiritual director to any one, or even share it. "The charity that the Holy Spirit has awakened in my heart for you," he wrote to Anne Eugénie, "is an ambitious charity. If God, as I believe, has called you to help me realize my project, it is clear that you cannot fulfill that mission unless you attain a holiness that is not common. If ever the Order of the Assumption becomes a reality, it cannot be one built on sand. Therefore, begin to strive after sanctity, do not dely to cross the arid desert of purification, declare a relentless war on your evil inclinations." Sound premises, indeed. But the work of purification is not the work of man alone, though it calls for fidelity.

It depends primarily on the Holy Spirit who breathes where He wills. The rhythm of consolation and desolation is set by the Spirit. Only God, who alone is holy, can make us participate in His holiness.

The Abbé was, however, impatient for results. She must reach his ideal of "someone called to be his second" in as short a time as possible. Every morning she must make what he called "oraison de prevoyance." She must look ahead at all that she was to do that day. Take up each occupation, one after the other, point by point, as in meditation.

For her part, Mère Marie Caroline initiated the novice into the practice of writing down a strict account of her day. This Anne Eugénie followed only to be told that she was inclined to look at herself too much, to examine herself instead of looking at God.

Look at God, contemplate God. This was all she wanted. If only she would be given time to do so. God was drawing her inward to the "deepest center of her being." But the double direction coming from the Abbé and her novice mistress was pulling her away from this inner presence.

"If only I were faithful in following this attraction towards God within me, God known to be there only by faith and love without the support that comes from feeling and imagination, I feel that I shall gain much in serenity, interior light and, above all, in self-abandonment. At times, I am drawn very strongly to this complete surrender of myself, in spite of the repugnance I feel."

The directives she was thus receiving from two sides, one from the Visitandines whose spirit, excellent though it was, nevertheless, was not in complete harmony with her own vocation, and the other, from the Abbé Combalot-both blocked the infinitely supple and delicate action of the Holy Spirit in her. Follow them-that she would do to her utmost. But was not God just asking her to put aside all anxiety and care and be content to look at Him lovingly, in stillness, without seeking sensible consolations, without desiring to feel and taste His divine presence?

How well she understood and expressed in her not what St. John of the Cross says on the dark night of the soul: "This presence of God that I experience is not the same as at the beginning of my conversion. Then it seemed to me that God came and sought me. Now I have to seek Him in faith.

"Lord, why should I be tormenting myself when all I should do is to remain at Your feet and do what deep within me I want to do . . . just listen to your voice? Then I should look up at the sky, drink in its beauty; gather the flowers in the fields, contemplate them, see Your goodness in them; allow the beauty of Your creation to bring peace to my soul.

"My God, my heart wants love and my spirit looks for beauty. Let me no longer be torn apart by seeking both in You. Let me look for You in everything, find You in everything and live by You. "The kind of perfection I am striving to reach, kills me. It is something borrowed from books.

“You, my God, Your works, Your word teach me better... To be able to rise and leave all for Your sake, my wings must not be clipped.”

Here was the way of perfection for her: God awakening in heart the desire to find Him and follow Him detachment it is true, but one that is no other than an emptying of herself in order to be filled by Him.

Happier now than she had ever been at the Benedictine Monastery in Paris, the young novice enlivened the recreations of the Community by her spontaneity and charm. But an aged Augustinian Sister who had also been admitted into the Community under extraordinary accommodations found her exuberance out of place. So, Anne Eugénie decided to be more serious at recreation until The Superior, noticing the change, asked for the reason. No, she told her, St. Francis of Sales certainly would not think so. A healthy gaiety should not be suppressed in the name of virtue misunderstood. Looking back to this experience later on she would say to the Sisters: “I cannot understand why there are Religious who do not radiate joy around them.”

The Abbé Combalot had drawn out a program of Scriptural and theological studies for her. No other work could have done as much good, were it not for the unreasonable demands of the Abbé. Every day she must devote one hour to the study of dogma in St. Thomas, one hour to moral theology in St. Alphonsus de Liguori, one hour to Sacred Scriptures. This was to be done without neglecting her spiritual reading and the exercises of the novitiate.

Nor was this enough. The Abbé Combalot had begun a treatise on the Blessed Virgin which he had not been able to finish because of many apostolic missions. She must devote two hours every day to revise the finished chapters and to complete the work.

Tyrannical, one would say. But there was more. The Novice must work without interruption the whole morning and must not, for any reason, break the silence until the midday meal.

Anne Eugénie had every reason to say that the program was “somewhat” heavy. But unreasonable though it was, she could benefit from it. Gifted with a keen, clear and intuitive mind, she could grasp without much difficulty the substance in the writings of St. Thomas. She relished her studies and drew from them nourishment for her spiritual life.

“My studies pass into my meditations. What St. Thomas teaches me enters into my prayer, vivifies it and gives it direction. Assured of walking on sure ground and guarded from error by the faith of a doctor of the Church like St. Thomas, my spirit can take off with greater freedom and confidence.

“I believe that next to charity, what elevates man here below is the knowledge of God, His perfections, His works, knowledge reaching up to the highest possible degree that the human mind can reach.”

Anne Eugénie undertook with great seriousness the work of revising and completing the Abbé’s treatise on the Blessed Virgin. She liked the Marial doctrine that he had started to develop. At the same time she was not sparing in pointing out deficiencies regarding style and content. “Can you let me finish the correction of the first chapters?” she wrote to the Abbé. “I have noticed more than one error which I did not at first understand and did not dare to correct.” One philosophical idea she found completely contrary to the theology of Saint Thomas. She advised him to look up the Treatise on the Trinity, specifying the particular questions and the articles. What she wanted was perfect

orthodoxy in the matter of dogma, with the clearest and least technical expression of it. "It seems to me," she added, "it is not worth the trouble of writing a book if it is not going to be read. I believe that to express great theological ideas in a poor form is to devalue them. And this often happens, permit me to say it, because one is too lazy to use a better one."

She advised the Abbé to write something that would be on the level of the ordinary reader. "Your style is rich and vigorous, sometimes too vigorous, I find. What is lacking is coherence, brevity and a clear line of thought running through from beginning to end. Try to keep your promise to me. Go through your work again with a highly critical eye. Remove whatever is repetitious."

By a funny twist of events, Anne Eugénie now also assumed the role of director to her director. "For your own progress in perfection, I believe that you have a much need to calm down as I have to get excited ... When the fire burns too quickly, it all goes up in sparks and smoke."

The Abbé readily accepted this observation from his spiritual daughter. Perhaps he would have been happier had he followed it.

At Mimes he met two of his friends: the Abbé d'Alzon and the Abbé Sibour. Of course it was impossible for him not to tell them about his project that was beginning to take clear shape. At his request, the two priests successively wrote to Anne Eugénie who was not too pleased by what she considered premature meddling. The letters were, in fact, more full of reservations than encouraging. "It is true that while relying on the power of God, one must be at the same time determined to overcome all obstacles; yet one must be careful not to give rise to these obstacles, oneself," M. Sibour wrote. "Moreover," he continued, "it would be contrary to prudence to make the plans known too quickly, lest they be misunderstood." On these two points, the novice at Côte-Saint-André was in perfect accord with her unknown correspondent. She was uneasy about the Abbé's precipitous moves and she expressed her fears to him: "I cannot take out of my mind the thought that you are not suited to make this foundation. It seems to me it would be better if another under your direction and following your idea, undertook the work. For you neither have the calm, nor the prudence, nor the perseverance, nor the spirit of true leadership to realize it." In this she would later find that her judgement was in accord with that of the Abbé d'Alzon.

Before going to Châtenay to see his mother and sisters, the Abbé Combalot stopped at Sarlat to preach. Here he came across Josephine de Commarque in whom he recognized fine qualities and a desire to live the religious life. This was enough to start him thinking about the place where the first school of the Assumption could be opened.

In Bergerac, he thought, it would be flourishing in no time but he was not too sure about Bordeaux or Périgueux. His letters to Anne Eugénie proposed a different place each time.

Anne Eugénie advised prudence. Josephine de Commarque had no experience of religious life as yet and she was still living with her family. Perhaps it would be better to first establish a community with a definite life-style and spirit before thinking of opening a school. The Abbé said he knew of a convent where the life-style might be more suitable for the future Assumption than that of the Visitandines. She asked him to get some needed information about them: How do the religious live? What is their understanding of obedience? Of poverty? How much value do they give to personal prayer? To the Office? What is the quality of their novitiate? Their community life? How do they relate to their pupils? All these seemed important to her. Anne Eugénie was not in favor of starting a

school in a provincial city where they would probably be the target of much comment and small talk. Moreover, she told the Abbé, a letter from her family dated September 29 opened a possibility for the Community to be established in Paris, which from every point of view was the best place for a novitiate of studies. "Once my family sees how much this work means to me, I will not be surprised if they do all they can to help us find a suitable place in Paris. To find help and protection there where I feared to meet the most obstacles is, indeed, a singular sign of God's Providence."

Her uncle M. de Franchessin, a man loyal and respectful of the opinions of others, had just written to her: "Since your views are different from ours, let me at least know what you desire, in what way I can serve you and do a little to make you happy in the life you have chosen."

Anne Eugénie wrote to the Abbé Combalot to tell him of her uncle's kind offer but advised him to go slowly. "I write as though we shall soon begin the foundation. Do not be in a hurry and, above all, do not promise anything. I do not think it can be this year. It should not be. I say this solely because of my concern for the foundation and not because I want to delay the hour of sacrifice."

The following month the Abbé spent a few days of rest with his family at Châtenay. His mother and sisters had already met Anne Eugénie for he had given them permission to visit her at Côte-Saint-André and to take her out occasionally for long walks. It was arranged that the Abbé d'Alzon and Anne Eugénie would be the guests of Madame Combalot sometime in October of 1838.

The Abbé Combalot and the Abbé d'Alzon had met for the first time only some months earlier at Lavagnac. Of course it was not possible for the Abbé Combalot to be silent about his project and the foundress he had found. "I will let you see her," he told the Abbé d'Alzon to whom it sounded as though Anne Eugénie were the property of his newly-found friend.

Young as he was then, the Abbé d'Alzon was already Grand Vicar of Nimes in 1838 and had a good reputation as a preacher. An admirer of La Mennais, he himself looked hopefully towards the spiritual regeneration of France and wanted to dedicate his priestly life to this Cause. He was also convinced of the primordial role of an education illumined by faith in this spiritual rebirth. Although he mistrusted the impulsive and unreasonable moves of the Abbé Combalot, the idea of a new religious institute dedicated to Christian education aroused in him a real and deep interest.

Meeting this young girl of whom the Abbé Combalot spoke so highly, in his opinion, too highly, would enable him to see for himself and to form his own opinion about her. At table where they first met, he observed Anne Eugénie closely.

She was reserved, much too reserved in the mind of the Abbé Combalot. But the Abbé d'Alzon perceived in her reserve a finesse which he appreciated. However, it was not her graceful manner and finesse that he admired most in her. It was something deeper. "Each word she said carried the mark of a solid judgement and a person accustomed to prayer," he said of her later. "She spoke about a Christian sensitivity to be developed in persons. Her insights captivated me. They revealed to me my deepest thoughts on education and the religious life. Her words seemed to have been seriously weighed before God."

The Abbé d'Alzon was completely won at this first encounter. More occasions to talk with her during the following days convinced him of her exceptional qualities. She

was certainly one among the few who never give in half measures. That she had the “stuff” of a foundress, he had no doubts.

He admitted honestly to the Abbé Combalot that he had not exaggerated. The Abbé Combalot was happy, very happy, at hearing this. Surely now everything would go smoothly. Was not the judgement of the Grand Vicar of Nimes a great encouragement?

But the Vicar of Nimes was not too sure. He turned to the Abbé Combalot with a troubled look. “I see only one obstacle to the foundation,” he said. “Which?” “You yourself, my dear friend.”

Chapter 5 This fraternal love. . .

“The social dimension man is revealed in the interdependence between the development of the human person and the development of society itself.”

The Church Today, 25-1

The Abbé Combalot looked upon the remark of the Abbé d’Alzon as nothing but a joke. More than ever, he was persuaded of his major role in a work that in reality was not his.

This man of fiery temperament, as Mgr. Ricard put it, was not suited to assume the task of founding and governing a new religious institute. Nevertheless, the Lord saw fit to use him for some more time to carry out the original inspiration that came from his personal charism.

In the same way that he perceived, as though by Prophetic intuition, the main thrust of the new institute And revealed to Anne Eugène Milleret her special charism As foundress, so would he recruit with supreme assurance The first members of the Assumption. He was the instrument of Divine Providence. For in spite of his weaknesses, his eccentricity, his uncertain temper, he was a man with “an excellent heart and a volcanic head,” in the words of Msgr. de Hercé Bishop of Nantes and his contemporary.

Like a good stag-hound, the Abbé Combalot veritably went on a “chase” during his constant missionary journeys for the first daughters that he would send to Anne Eugénie. Remarkably enough, he did not act blindly. He did not arbitrarily pick his recruits from among the young girls who came to his confessional and who felt called to the religious life. Aside from a few mistakes, he discovered with admirable precision the women who would be the foundation stones of the Assumption.

In his own unique way he found them and won them over. How he did it, it is difficult for us who live in a different epoch to understand. What happened then appears so unreal, even nonsensical.

It was September of 1838. The Abbé Combalot was preaching a retreat for priests at Sarlat. Soon the whole assembly including the Bishop, Monseigneur Gousset, knew about the Order of the Assumption. In due time, the preacher discovered that in a manor of La Bourlie, a few hours by horseback from the city, was a young woman of twenty-seven, Josephine de Commarque. She had only one desire: to enter Carmel. This, however, she could not realize, SO strong was the opposition of her family which argued that her health was too frail for such a life. Without enquiring further, the Abbé sent her a message to see him at Sarlat where he had very important things to tell her.

The de Commarque family, hoping to draw her mind away from Carmel, at once organized a party to go with her. The next morning a big happy group left on horseback for Sarlat. There she found another letter of the Abbé waiting for her. “The mission of the Religious of the Assumption,” it read, “is to bring all human sciences into the light of truth and the love that is in Jesus Christ. They will consecrate their lives to the education and the instruction of young girls. This Congregation should unite to the contemplative life the sacerdotal mission of Religious.” The Abbé ended with the words: “It seems to me that you can render more glory to God, the Church, and the Blessed Virgin in a Congregation that

unites the contemplative life to an authentic apostolate than in a purely contemplative Order.”

Josephine de Commarque did not quite know what to make of this letter. She decided to get some advice from the Curate of the Cathedral before meeting the Abbé Combalot.

“Does this Congregation already have many members?”

“Oh, I think so. Perhaps two thousand.”

The Abbé had spoken so highly of the Congregation to the retreatants that they had the impression it was not just beginning but already in a flourishing state.

Expecting to find the Assumption as it was described to her, Josephine went to see the Abbé himself. He referred her to Monseigneur Gousset, who, as friend of the family, should be of assistance to her.

“Education,” the Bishop assured her, “is the most important thing in the times in which we live. It is the women who form society.” And, he thought, the de Commarque family would look more favorably on a teaching Congregation than on Carmel.

Josephine persuaded the Abbé to come himself to La Bourline and plead with her family for her. Early the next day, before dawn, the party started for home. Josephine maneuvered to ride beside the preacher. In the course of their conversation, she learned that the foundation had not yet been made and that Mlle. Eugénie was the only Religious he had in mind. From two thousand the number suddenly dropped to two with her. This, however, did not discourage Josephine. “I felt,” she said, “that God was taking me by the hand and leading me.” The consent of the family was secured without too much difficulty. Though the Assumption was not yet founded, neither Josephine nor the Abbé doubted that it would come into existence in God’s good time.

The next thing to do was to bring Mlle. de Commarque and Mlle. Milleret together by correspondence. From Côte-Saint-André Anne Eugénie wrote to Josephine de

Commarque on October 22nd: “Let us place ourselves under the protection of St. Teresa whom you love and I also love.” To this Josephine answered with a charming spontaneity: “How the love of Jesus Christ unites us in a marvelous way! Only a few days ago, I had no idea of your existence and you had no idea of mine. I love you as though I have always known you. I am so happy that you love St. Teresa for I love her to the point of enthusiasm. Her great love and her courage captivate me.”

Anne Eugénie responded to this childlike confidence with equal spontaneity. She outlined for her the main goals which would form the framework of the Congregation. “Should we not be happy if we can contribute to the building of the world of grace which Our Lord wants to create in the hearts of men? A person who is saved is a world, St. Teresa said. And perhaps this is the joy the Lord reserves for us, to hear one day from someone: ‘You have been our mother in the order of grace. You have helped us to know and love Jesus Christ in truth.’”

It was already September in 1838 and Josephine de Commarque was still at La Bonnie. Her family was warned about the Abbé Combalot, an enterprising man but without any prudence, they were told. Madame de Commarque decided to ask the advice of the Archbishop of Paris and wrote to some friends who were in a position to get some information from him. Josephine was flabber-gasted when she learned about it. The Abbé had asked her to keep secret the project. If the clergy in Paris and, worst of all, if the Archbishop knew about it, that would be the end of it. He had warned only Josephine and

had not said a word about it to her parents. The reply came from Paris: “The Abbé Combalot,” the Archbishop wrote, “is a highly imaginative and impractical man. He had tried to found a new Congregation but I will never permit him to establish it in my diocese. The Congregation does not exist and will never exist. If Mlle. De Commarque wants to become a Religious, she can come to Paris and I will see to it that she is admitted to the Congregation of the Sacred Heart.” If this was the case, then Josephine, who was already twenty-eight would give up the idea of joining a Congregation whose existence she might jeopardize and enter Carmel instead. Before such determination, the parents of Josephine saw that the last word was not theirs. They consulted Monseigneur Gousset, the Bishop of Perigueux. He advised them to let Josephine have her way. The Abbé Combalot had promised him that she would not be expected to make any definite commitment before passing some time again with her family.

Josephine arrived in Paris on the 5th of October. Two young novices had arrived before her at “rue Férou”: Anastie Bévier from Normandy, joyful, lively, and Kate O’Neill from Ireland, stately in bearing and somewhat distant in manner. Both were twenty-three years old.

Anastasie was a confirmed intellectual. An orphan from an early age, she had spent her childhood in a lay boarding school where her passion for studies grew with the years. Then she came to Paris for higher studies and, attempting something unusual at that time, took the examination at the university and passed with honors. But her critical and analytic mind perceived the one-sidedness and partiality of the books placed in the hands of the students. Already from the age of fifteen or sixteen, her great concern had been what she called the “teachings of the faith.”

Like Anne Eugénie she had been painfully confronted during her adolescent years with the problem of faith. . . personal faith, freely accepted. She liked the Catholic religion. But . . . if only she were sure it was true! If not, there was only one thing left for her to do: jump into the river -so impossible did life without faith seem to her! Her confessor tried to make light of her fears and doubts. Then, in His goodness, “God who made us for joy had pity on me,” she said. One day in the street, she was suddenly struck by an idea she had never read or heard before: “Jesus Christ did works beyond the power of man to do: miracles that only the power of God can accomplish. He gave them as signs of His divinity. Therefore, He must be God because someone who is not God cannot exercise the power that belongs to God alone.”

The light dazzled her . . . It was the most beautiful moment of her life, she said. From that moment her decision was final. She would dedicate her life to teaching-teaching that was decidedly Christian, wholly directed towards an education of the young in the faith.

Teaching congregations were not lacking. But which one? Her confessor suggested that of St. Clotilde. No, she wanted a Congregation dedicated in a special way to Our Lady. One morning she went to Mass at the Carmelite Church. A burst of impatience occasioned by her maid just before she left the house somewhat troubled her. She entered the nearest confessional.

“My daughter, what are you doing now?” asked the priest.

“Nothing, Father. I want to become a Religious.”

“Very well, I have all that you need. Come and see me.”

Somewhat taken aback, she retorted:

“I want an Order dedicated to the Blessed Virgin.” “Good. Good. I have what you want, I tell you.” And the strange confessor gave her his address: “rue Vaugirard.”

Anastasie Bevier thought it over. The invitation seemed foolish . . . and she could not remember the name of the priest nor his address. Well, thank God, she had an excuse.

Some days later, another burst of impatience and again Anastasie thought another confession would do no harm.

Hardly had she knelt at the confessional. . .

“Why did you not come?” asked the priest.

He was the same one. Now she could not evade him. It was impossible to go away without being impolite. So she went to see him at his office.

“Father,” she announced without ceremony. “I want absolutely a teaching Congregation.”

At this the Abbé literally jumped with joy. “I have all that you want my daughter. You will study, you will teach, you will spread the truth in the hearts of men.”

And he praised to the skies the future Congregation and the future foundress, who was in Dauphiné, and the first Religious, who was in Périgord.

For all that, Anastasie was not convinced. The Assumption? A congregation that existed only in the imagination of her interviewer? The Abbé, however, without losing ground, continued to “sell his goods.”

“You will carry the name of the Blessed Virgin and then you will learn Latin.”

In a sweeping gesture he pointed to his library, the *Summa* of St. Thomas, the writings of the Fathers of the Church.

“Oh, then, I am all yours!” cried Anastasie.

On the 4th of August, the new recruit joined Mlle. Eugénie at “rue Férou.” After her arrived two from Ireland, Kate O’Neill and her elder sister, Marianne, who would not at any cost separate from her.

The two sisters had never been apart since the death of their mother. Kate was then six years old. Now she was twenty-three. They had been brought up together by Religious at York and then at New Hall where they were given a strong intellectual formation. Like Anne Eugénie, Kate had received her first communion also on December 25th, on Christmas eve of 1827. Like her, too, on this first encounter with Christ, Kate had experienced a call of the Lord. She was seventeen when Mr. O’Neill decided to take his daughters back home to live with him at Liverpool. For the first time in their lives, the two girls who had known only the rigorous discipline of boarding schools now enjoyed the ordinary life of the adolescent. They, too, liked to dress up, to dance. For Kate this was a happy and necessary experience. It was at this time that her real motivations surfaced and her religious vocation was purified of sentimental reasons. Her personal notes reveal a great deal of common sense: “If the sentiments I now feel for the religious life disappear, will the religious vows I make not be just chains of iron?”

Her aspirations knew no limits, nor her independent spirit, always searching for the absolute. Perhaps a case of atavism, her distant ancestors having once ruled Ireland. But as with St. Teresa, her thoughts went beyond natural. “If I enter the convent,” she wrote, “people will no longer talk of me here on earth, but I will gain a name and fame in eternity.” In 1836, she was a guest in a châteaux belonging to a relative. One day her cousins found her beside the lake, admiring the beauty of the landscape.

“All that is yours if you want,” they told her.

The joke was followed by a joyful burst of laughter. Unwittingly perhaps, it revealed a plan of marriage forming in the mind of her family.

“It is beautiful,” she replied, “and I would like to own it but without the master.”

Then a reversal of fortune struck Mr. O’Neill. Kate decided to go to Paris and Rome with her elder sister. Perhaps she got the idea from “Corinne,” the book of Madame de Stael which she had just finished reading. Impoverished though they were, they could live with dignity and enjoy independence and freedom in a foreign country. This would be better than living with an aunt who had opened her home to them. January of 1838 saw them installed in the Abbaye-au Bois at “rue de la Chaise” in Paris. They rented a small apartment outside the cloister and hired a maid to help them keep house. Kate brought along her books. They were her dearest friends, her own world, she said. They had more influence on her than any living being. She would soon be twenty-three. The possibility of a religious vocation both attracted and repelled her. More than anything else, she wanted her independence. And yet, she said, if she were to ask advice, she would not like to be told to remain in the world.

Kate and Marianne spoke French quite fluently and it was not long before they found friends in the intimate circle of Madame Recamier who, like them, occupied an apartment in the Abbaye. In her group of friends, they met Madame de Castelane, Chateaubriand . . . soon Paris was no longer for them a strange city.

Then Lent of 1838 came. The two sisters accompanied Madame de Castelane to listen to the sermons at Saint Sulpice. The preacher did not much impress them, nevertheless, they attended the sessions to the end. One Sunday the preacher, speaking with enthusiasm about the re-establishment of the Order of Preachers in France, stressed the necessity and relevance of religious orders in the Church. Kate thought he would be a good priest to consult about her religious vocation and decided to see him on March 23rd. She asked to be shown his confessional in the Carmelite church. He was the Abbé Combalot. Before she could finish her sentence, he asked her point-blank:

“Are you married? Are you free? Independent?” “I depend on no one, but...” “Stop. I have something to tell you. Come and see me at 10:00 o’clock.”

“And my confession?” “You will do it later.”

At 10:00 o’clock, Kate accompanied by Marianne who followed her like a shadow, knocked at “rue Vaugirard.” She was admitted alone into the office of the Abbé Combalot. With a compelling certitude, the Abbé told the young stranger before him that she was thinking of entering the convent. This was all he knew about her. “God wants you; you should be a Religious.”

“You do not know me,” Kate answered back, and with good reason. “How can you know that at a glance?”

A very strong light came to him, he assured her, as he heard her voice for the first time this morning. He was absolutely sure of what he was saying. “God wants you for an Order that I have to found,” he continued.

“You will think me crazy if I accepted all that you are telling me,” replied Kate. “You do not know me, you do not know my needs, my aptitudes; you know nothing of what concerns me and you want to determine my life in ten minutes?”

The Abbé did not give up. He continued the struggle.

“I do not need to know all that. God wants you for this Congregation that I want to found.”

“What is it for?” “For education.”

“I do not want it.”

“But you do not understand that it is through the influence of women that a dying Society comes to life again. Young girls are taught pious practices but that is all. They do not really come to know Jesus Christ. He is not revealed to them. They do not learn how to find the unity of all things in Jesus Christ. *Instaurare omnia in Christo*. Restore all things in Christ. This is what I propose to do.”

Kate found herself listening, breathless. This man was revealing her own vocation to her. Nevertheless, her whole being revolted against such a hasty and unreasonable decision. She took up the offensive.

“What confidence can I have in your judgement?”

“It is God’s will that I am pointing out to you.”

“What you mean is that you need people for your work. That, I believe, is your real reason for asking me to join.”

The argument was logical; it had weight. It would have embarrassed anyone other than the Abbé Combalot. He was content, however, to say: “My daughter, you are beating around the bush. What I am telling you is the will of God. You should not reject it. That would be . . . I speak to you in the name of God: if this apostolate fails to materialize because of your refusal, you will have to answer for it before Him.” When the two sisters got back to the Abbaye-au-Bois, Kate was terribly upset and Marianne, indignant. Break relations with this visionary. . . Marianne must do exactly that.

However, some days later, another visit to “rue Vaugirard was unavoidable. This time Marianne decided to take the matter into her own hands. She announced to the Abbé that she and Kate were planning to go to the races at Longchamp on Friday, that is, on Good Friday. That was enough to make him explode. If these two Irish girls were thinking of doing that, then he would have nothing more to do with them.

“What happiness,” Marianne burst out as soon as they were out. “We shall be free again. . .” At once she made arrangements for their departure for Rome, the second part of their trip.

The happiness was of short duration. The Abbé Combalot appeared at the Abbaye-au-Bois on Easter Sun the two sisters were leaving for Mass. Mlle. Eugénie coming to Paris very soon, he said. Kate must join her at once. There was no question about her going to Rome. Independent though she was, Kate could no longer be deaf to what she felt was clearly the call of the Lord. All her resistance broke down. But she was not submitting to the Abbé. No. Far from it. It would never be for him that she would sacrifice anything at all.

This was soon evident to the Abbé. The following summer he thought it was time for Anastasie Bévier and Kate O’Neill to pronounce a private vow of obedience before him. Overflowing with joy, he exclaimed in front of Kate: “Now, my daughter, you are all mine.” “No, Father,” Kate replied with vehemence. “I belong only to God.”

Anne Eugénie, too, was preparing to leave Côte-Saint-André, but not without fears and doubts. She had warned the Abbé against making a foundation without sufficient guarantee for its survival. She had reminded him of the grave obligations that a founder assumed as soon as the first community of Religious was established, no matter how small it be. “I am afraid,” she had written to him, “that with so many other things on your mind, you will soon lose interest in following to the end a project that up to now seemed to take

up half of your life. I am afraid that you will be continually tempted to change its direction according to the advice you get from people you esteem or you will be lacking in certitude yourself.”

Anne Eugénie felt uncertain about the will of God for her. Should she just leap blindly into the unknown? The thought of a final separation from her father posed a question. What really was her vocation? This role of foundress seemed so unreal. And yet she must sacrifice her duties to her father to this dream. The future was so un-certain and the direction of the Abbé Combalot, so changeable. She opened her heart to the Abbé Pion. “You ought to obey God,” he told her without hesitation. He had no confidence in the Abbé Combalot as founder. “But I have confidence in you and in the design of God for you. Walk then with courage and do not be afraid.”

On the 30th of April the first Community of the Religious of the Assumption was established in a small rented house at “rue Férou,” only a few steps away from Saint Sulpice. With Anne Eugénie Milleret were Anastasie Bévier and Josephine Neron who soon after had to leave because of poor health.

Kate at the moment had to go slowly for Marianne refused to be separated from her. Everyday, however, both went to “rue Férou” to follow the course in Latin given by Mlle. Eugénie and that in dogma conducted by the Abbé Combalot himself.

This religious life had nothing official about it yet; it did not, however, fail to elicit an encouraging word from the Abbé Affre, vicar of Monseigneur de Quelan an recently nominated coadjutor of Strasbourg.

On the 4th of August, Mlle. Eugénie and her first companions rented a provisional residence for the Community at Meudon. There Kate and Marianne joined them the next day, accompanied by their young maid. It was the feast of Our Lady of the Snow. For Kate this day was her definitive entrance into the religious life. This was the start of a long journey towards the perfect following of Christ. That she had many things to learn was clear to her. With great generosity she gave herself up to follow whithersoever God would lead her. A deep friendship soon developed between Anne Eugénie and Kate. The foundress quickly perceived both her great qualities and her weaknesses. But what bound them together was the love of Christ. “I feel that this fraternal love binds us more strongly than any other human sentiment. . . and it does not destroy in the least the human,” she observed.

Driven by his need to travel and preach, the Abbé Combalot was again on the road to La Rochelle, Auch and Nimes. The fears of Anne Eugénie were more than justified. By November, he was back in Paris to celebrate the first Mass in the small chapel of the Community now finally established at “rue Vaugirard.”

For Anne Eugénie the Congregation was truly born on this day. From that day on it was the regular life; studies were pursued with accelerated pace: Latin, Dogma, Patristic theology. Soeur Eugénie was now ready to explain to her companions the treatise of St. Thomas on the Incarnation.

When Advent came around, the Abbé substituted the Roman Breviary for the Office of the Blessed Virgin. Prepared for this both intellectually and spiritually, the Community relished the strong food it gave to their spiritual life. The Divine Office, accepted unanimously by the Community, thus became an established common prayer for the Congregation. Poverty was present at “rue Vaugirard.” Special care had to be observed by all if they would live within the meager budget—not more than the usual small

allowances given to young girls at that time. Household chores, particularly the cooking of meals, were problems for these young women who knew little about housekeeping.

Marianne, who had decided to try the religious life rather than be separated from her sister, was more of a nuisance than a help to the small Community. Then Josephine Neron had to leave on March of 1840. Providentially, two new members came to join them. Their numbers was now six. Anne Eugénie took the name of Mère Marie Eugénie de Jesus; Anastasje Bévier, Sr. Marie Augustine de Saint Paul; Kate O'Neill, Sr. Thérèse Emmanuel de la Mère de Dieu; Josephine de Commarque, Sr. Marie Thérèse de l'Incarnation. Henriette Halz, who arrived in February as soon as she came of age, carried the name of Sr. Marie Joseph. Constance de Saint-Julien, who was only eighteen years of age, took the name of Sr. Marie Gonzague. Mère Marie Eugénie knew how to bind hearts and minds together in charity. Sr. Thérèse Emmanuel, speaking of the blessings experienced by all at this time, said: "If, as people say, God's special blessings are attached to the beginnings of a new Congregation, we can say that we experienced these blessings." There was, however, nothing idyllic about their community life. The rubbing together of different temperaments and characters, and feminine touchiness must hurt in spite of the good will of everybody. For a long time, these served as the best school of asceticism for the Community.

But a storm was brewing in another quarter. Between the direction given to the Community by the young and ardent foundress and the authoritarian attitude of the Abbé Combalot, a conflict was bound to arise. Sr. Thérèse Emmanuel saw it coming. God had certainly chosen the Abbé Combalot to bring forth the idea of a new Congregation and to gather together its first members, but it was clear that he did not possess the proper temperament to follow its growth and development to the end. Though his faith was great, he was as restless as a child, impressionable and lacking in measure and moderation. From the very first days, he made it clear to all that he was to be consulted in everything . . . even regarding the smallest details in the ordering of their day. Characteristically, he issued orders that were quickly followed by counter-orders. Every day he presented new ideas that came from persons he had met the day before. Today he would impose unreasonable mortifications; tomorrow he would relieve them from the most ordinary observances. One day he would require from the Sisters studies beyond the need of their future mission; the next day he would order them to close all books and attend only to material work. What was done today was undone the next day. There was no room for discussion or dialogue under his despotism, unconscious though it might have been. His restlessness became a danger to the Congregation-the danger of changing its spirit and mission or compromising them. Mère Marie Eugénie, anxious about the future so laden with uncertainties and threats, was in the meantime re-flecting on her role as foundress and the authority that she ought to exercise as such. She saw in this authority a mission for service, for selfless, unpossessive service. "I must become," she said, "the humble servant of my Sisters, serving them in both their physical and spiritual needs. I must have no other will for them than the will of God."

For all that, the future was not without great dangers and risks.

Chapter 6

A colossal task

“Laymen should also know that it is generally the function of their well-formed Christian conscience to see that the divine law is inscribed in the life of the earthly city.”

The Church Today. 43-2.

On December 31, 1839, Monseigneur de Quelan died. Appointed to succeed him as Archbishop of Paris was Monseigneur Affre. The small Community at “rue de Vaugirard” to whom Monseigneur Affre was a sympathetic friend, looked on the appointment as providential. As early as March of the following year, the Constitutions drawn up by the Abbé Combalot and Mère Marie Eugénie were presented to him for examination. “There are many things in these Constitutions,” he remarked. “It will not be easy to adopt them all.” He counselled moderation: “Apply them little by little to the concrete reality of your life.” As a matter of fact, however, the rule was already being observed in its entirety by order of the Abbé.

On the 14th of August the new Archbishop of Paris presided at the clothing of the first Sisters of the Assumption held in the little chapel at “rue de Vaugirard.” He was accompanied by an Irish bishop and his vicar, M. Gros. The joy and the honor of preaching the sermon he delicately left to the Abbé Combalot. Three months later on November 21st, a second clothing ceremony took place, that of Sr. Marie Gonzague. M. de Chateaubriand and his wife were among those who came. Both did not hesitate to show signs of affection and appreciation for the new Congregation . . . in fact M. de Chateaubriand was so moved during the ceremony that many took him for the father of the novice.

Two young Bearnaises joined the small group not long after. A note of mutual support and understanding tempered the dynamism of the Sisters and this would have been a source of quiet joy for the young foundress were it not for the unreasonable demands of the Abbé Combalot. These were beginning to weigh heavily on her. In his mind three vows were not enough. She must make seven. And for advice, she must consult no one but him.

“I am often anxious for the future of the Congregation,” Mère Marie Eugénie would say, “but having no support other than Divine Providence and knowing from experience what the Providence of God can do, I do not hesitate to abandon myself to her.”

Abandonment, however, did not mean cowardice or unwillingness to assume the responsibilities that were truly hers. By force of perseverance she finally obtained permission to consult the Abbé d’Alzon. Though he was at Nimes, 200 leagues from Paris, his answer to her question came: “A painful situation like yours cannot be endured for long. At the present moment all that we can do is to take a position and wait. Leave it to Divine Providence to free you from your chains.”

These chains were in reality at the point of breaking in a way that was both final and brutal. It was March of 1841. The Abbé Combalot suddenly thought things would go faster if he sent the Constitutions immediately and directly to Rome for approval. Realizing the disastrous consequences that such a move would bring in its wake, the foundress pleaded with the Abbé not to do so. The Constitutions were not yet in their definitive form, she told him. There had not been enough time to really live under them and they had not

yet been approved by the Archbishop of Paris. Monseigneur Affre was also becoming more reticent about the person who openly claimed to be the founder of the new Congregation. His lack of moderation and stability posed serious questions in the mind of the clergy in Paris. Reluctantly the Abbé gave in to the pleas of Mère Marie

Eugénie. The Constitutions were not sent to Rome. Soon, unconscious of the tension that was building up, he was out on the road again preaching in the provinces around Paris.

During his absence a letter from the Archbishop arrived at “rue de Vaugirard.” Monseigneur Affre would like to speak to the foundress now elected by the Sisters as their Superior. Without ambiguity he explained the situation to her. “You are not yet duly constituted under the Ordinary,” he told her, “and you have a Father with a fiery head.” Mère Marie Eugénie knew how true this was. Monseigneur Affre promised he would make it clear to the Abbé Combalot that the new Congregation must be placed under the jurisdiction of the Ordinary. The Abbé returned to Paris in mid-April. He was immediately called by the Archbishop and informed about the matter. Never, he protested with vehemence, never as long as he lived would his daughters have any other

Superior but he. M. Gros at Once informed Mère Marie Eugénie. The Abbé Combalot rushed to “rue de Vaugirard” and, calling the Community together, announced to them his decision to leave Paris. Since the Archbishop of Paris refused to recognize his rights and his authority over the members of the Community he had founded, he was ready to take his daughters to Brittany where Madame de la Breteche had left at his disposal her own chateau. This, he concluded, must be done without much delay.

Sr. Therese Emmanuel, who did not hesitate to act when necessary, stood up and spoke for the Community: It was not advisable for more than one reason to leave Paris.

Taken aback by a resistance he had not foreseen, the Abbé left. Before long he returned, this time to attack the very person he had been praising so highly for the last four years. Perhaps without realizing the gravity of his act, he tried to rally the daughters of Mère Marie Eugénie against her. The Young Community understood what he was driving at. They had to choose whom to follow since collaboration between the founder and the foundress was no longer possible. For the Young Superior it was agony. What saved the Community was the love that knitted them together. “There was a great intimacy among us,” Mère Marie Eugénie would say later. “We felt so strongly united one to the other . . . and it was this that saved the foundation”

On the 3rd of May, feast of the Finding of the Holy Cross, the Abbé Combalot came again to “rue de Vaugirard” to celebrate the Mass. After the Mass he asked to speak to the Community without the Superior. It was necessary, he told them, to withdraw from the authority of the Archbishop of Paris and the Sisters must follow him immediately.

Again Sr. Thérèse Emmanuel spoke without ambiguity for the Community: Not one of the daughters of Mère Marie Eugénie would follow him to Bretagne although they considered him their father and founder.

In a fit of rage he asked for all his books, his letters... and left announcing that he would never see them again. The next day he left for Rome, a trip he had long ago planned. He took time, however, to write a letter to Monseigneur Affre asking him to take care of the small Community of Sisters that he was abandoning, though not ceasing to love and esteem them. “They will no longer have storms to brave,” he concluded, “and since I lack the qualities and the virtues needed to complete the edifice, I shall praise God for its

growth and I ask you to give to this Community the effective and paternal help it needs to exist and endure.”

In harmony with the feast of May the 3rd, the day was indeed crucial for the Community. “I have truly found my cross,” Mère Marie Eugénie remarked sadly.

“And we,” replied Sr. Thérèse Emmanuel, “we have lost one.”

The decision of Monseigneur Affre was indeed wise. Without that confrontation, the Abbé Combalot could never have recognized how a temperament like his was incapable of assuming the responsibilities, at once delicate and heavy, of a Superior, much less of a founder. The break was real, nonetheless, and painful.

Already since September of 1838, Eugénie Milleret had felt it coming and had wanted to prevent it: “I would be happier,” she had written to the Abbé, “if another, under your direction and following your ideas, would take over the foundation.” These words were echoed by Sr. Marie Thérèse in May of 1841: “Through him we found the will of God for us and we look up to him as to a father.” The young Superior now had to face difficulties alone especially those coming from outside. She was pre-occupied, often afraid. “Now that we are face to face with reality and no longer live in illusion as we did when M. Combalot was with us, I am often afraid,” she confessed, “although I do not show my fears.”

For Sr. Thérèse Emmanuel, recalling the classics of her own country, the situation was for the Congregation a question of “Shakespeare’s to be or not to be.”

Despite the storm of prejudices brewing outside against the new Congregation, Monseigneur Affre made the Sisters feel his paternal solicitude for them. He named M. Gros their ecclesiastical Superior and personally looked into the rule, the mode of life, and the prayer life of the Religious. Not one among them had made her religious profession. Approval, surprise, inquietude - each had a part in his Concern for them. The choral recitation of the Divine Office seemed to him too heavy for a teaching Congregation.

“It will limit your action,” he said. “Monseigneur,” replied the foundress, her voice ringing with conviction “our vocation is, above all, to join prayer to action. We do not propose to do all that is possible but rather to strive after the perfection of what we do.”

Convinced by this response, the Archbishop approved the recitation of the Divine Office, though without some apprehension about the future on this particular point. The future would prove Mère Marie Eugénie right.

But it was not just the future of the Congregation that haunted her. It was the future of France, of the Church, of society, of the whole of human society. The motives that had drawn Mère Marie Eugénie and her first companions to a Congregation that did not yet exist appear in the introduction to the Constitutions that the Abbé Combalot had written himself. They were not his ideas, it is true. They were borrowed from the dynamic and prophetic group of editors of *L’A VENIR*. They were meant to effect a revolution in the minds of 19th-century Christians. After La Mennais these same ideas were taken up by men like Lacordaire, Buchez, Montalembert and others who, sensitive to the signs of the times, saw in the bloody French Revolution the beginning of an irreversible social revolution. The emancipation of woman and her new role in the future would be one of the consequences of this social change.

Everywhere new religious congregations for women sprang up to meet the urgent needs of the times. Among these needs, was not truth the most imperative? “Women,” the Abbé Combalot said, “could be associated with the mission given by Christ to the Apostles: ‘Go and teach.’ Mary did not receive the sacerdotal dignity, but her mission was

to give to the world the Son of God who by the Incarnation became also her son. In the order of grace there is a spiritual motherhood to which Religious dedicated to teaching are called. The importance of the role of woman in society is clear. The future of mankind depends on her.” There was, in fact, nothing original in his thinking. However, in the historical context of 19th-century France, its implications would inevitably lead to the social problems that the rise of capitalism and the emergence of the proletariat had made increasingly acute. For the members of the new Institute one thing was primordial. No matter from what social milieu their pupils would come, there was a clear direction to take: “Your vocation calls you to serve the poor. While educating the children of the rich, you must seek in this only one thing: to make them friends and mothers to the poor.” Thus, it became necessary for the Religious to assume the responsibility of forming truly Christian women from among the daughters of the nobility and the rising bourgeoisie. For to teach them to overcome egoism, self-centeredness, pride, the life-destroying love of pleasure and ease in themselves was to demolish bit by bit the deep-rooted cause of the widening gap between the social classes. For Mère Marie Eugénie and her Sisters, it was a question of starting a fundamental revolution by leading them to experience and understand the values of the Gospel to the point of radically changing their lives. For this colossal task, “the whole educational process must be permeated by the light of Christ, directed towards the greater knowledge and love of Christ until the spirit, the heart, the deepest center of one’s being is reached. It is there that the seeds of a new life in the family and in society can be sown.” It was a colossal task, indeed, for it implied stretching to the farthest limit the consequences of the Incarnation and the Redemption. Surely a task beyond the strength of man and impossible to accomplish unless it rested on the foundations of divine faith, hope and love.

On the human level, it seemed to be another utopian dream, not too different from the attempts made again and again to establish some kind of Catholic socialism in France by men of vision like the editors of *L’Avenir*. The task of realizing this program was now the sole responsibility of the Superior who was not more than twenty-four years of age. “Today,” she wrote to Père Lacordaire in the Spring of 1841, “I have regained the independence of all future Superiors. But this independence carries risks and difficulties. I do not shrink from the suffering but I fear my incapacity to come up to the perfection Jesus Christ requires of his spouses.”

To the difficulties coming from outside was now added the responsibility for the spiritual direction of the young Community. There was manifestly a growing intensity in the spiritual life of the Sisters. Sr. Thérèse Emmanuel discerned clearly the orientation of her whole life as she prayed on the eve of her profession on August 14, 1841: “God is All. I must be completely attentive to this immense All who is the Infinite. I must walk in pure faith yet assured that the sun itself is less bright than this dark light.” To her life as educator she must flow join a life of intimate Union with God along the way traced by St. John of the Cross.

Mère Marie Eugénie wrote of her own experiences at prayer to Père d’Alzon: “Have you not also experienced Father, this almost imperceptible force drawing you to the Lord, leading you to that state of simplicity and interior calm in which it seems YOU encounter the truth for the first time? I do not remain silent . . . I dwell on one or two words that absorb me and draw me to God.” Then on another occasion: “I cannot quite describe what I experienced. It seemed to me that after I had expressed in my heart my faith in Jesus

Christ, totally open to the Father to receive all truth from Him, and I had placed my hope in His prayer to the Father for us, I felt while pronouncing these words of the Psalmist, 'the king rejoices in your strength,' the presence of Jesus Christ close to me, a presence at once inexpressibly calm and powerful. Only one desire took hold of my whole being: desire for the divine life of grace, the life of holiness, the life of Jesus Christ. . . and my will united to the will of God. To will all that He wills, as He wills, when He wills it, through whom He wills it."

The prayer of St. John of the Cross: "Lord, to suffer and to be counted as nothing for your sake," Mère Marie Eugénie now made her own, not from a morbid desire for suffering but to conform more and more to Christ whom she wanted to love in spirit and in truth.

From the letters that arrived to him at Nîmes, the Abbé d'Alzon could see the urgent need of the young Community for a spiritual director who was objective in his judgment and open to the movements of the Holy Spirit. He also feared that the climate of mistrust created by the Abbé Combalot might be indefinitely prolonged and endanger the future of the Congregation. In fact, M. Gros their ecclesiastical Superior, could not see the need in the Church for the religious family that Mère Marie Eugénie was forming. He had received the temporary vows of the first Religious of the Assumption on the 15th of August of that year. But he saw in this no promise for the future. The austere life of the Sisters was not attracting novices. Their study of the sacred and secular sciences made them appear as learned women. And the work of education they had proposed to undertake was not yet started after more than a year since the small Community had come together.

To M. Gros the situation looked hopeless. Why did Mère Marie Eugénie not remain at the Visitandines of Côte-Saint-André? Why did she embark on this venture whose future was so uncertain if not already compromised?

He posed these questions directly to Mère Marie Eugénie. The Superior appreciated his frankness. The time had now come for her to assume the full responsibility for the Congregation. In a letter that she wrote after some days of reflection, she told him her thoughts on the foundation. If she did not present the totality of her vision, it was to avoid misunderstandings that such an exposé might prematurely provoke.

The inspiration that led to the foundation of the Congregation was one of zeal. It was zeal that determined her Vocation.

Taken in the context of her notes, her talks and letters, the meaning that this word had for Mère Marie Eugénie is found in the words of the prophet Elijah when he cried out: *Zelo zelatus sum pro Domino*: "I am filled with jealous zeal for Jahweh Sabbaoth, because the children of Israel have abandoned you" (1 Kings 19,10). The Psalmist in his turn exclaims: "Zeal for your house devours me" (Ps. 38,10). And the prophet Isaiah, announcing the marvels of the Incarnation and the Redemption, affirmed: "The jealous love of Jahweh Sabbaoth will do this" (Is. 9,7).

But this word which evolves ardour, agitation, fire, jealousy, can also be taken to mean a driving passion towards the good or the bad. "Jealousy and anger shorten your days," says the author of Ecclesiasticus (30,24). And St Paul severely reproached the Corinthians because of the jealousy and discord he found among them.

That Mère Marie Eugénie would use the word "zeal" to describe what had the most resonance in her whole being was not of little significance. It reflected her love of

the Word of God in Sacred Scriptures of which she had more than an ordinary knowledge. It was zeal that determined the vocation of Anne Eugénie. This same zeal would be the source of her dynamism and also the cause of her deepest sufferings which even the closest of her advisers could not quite understand.

It was to M. Gros that she explained in 1841 the origin of her zeal:

She belonged to a family without faith and was brought up in a society steeped in unbelief. At the age of fifteen she lost her mother and was thrown into the world sooner than it was customary for young girls to be. Thus, she could understand through experience the misfortune of the social class to which she belonged.

Knowing the profound indifference to religion of three-fourths of the rich and influential families of Paris, anyone with even just a little love for the Church would feel the urgency of the need to bring Jesus Christ back into their midst. What did parents, even Christian parents, ask of the educational institutions to which they confided their daughters? Nothing more than the qualities the world of their time asked of them; hence, an exaggerated instruction on good manners. Then the antiquated ways of religious institutions repelled the social class to which she referred. Convent schools were also disliked on grounds of poor instruction, lack of good manners and political coloring. All these ideas were already in her mind before she met the Abbé Combalot. Aware of the gift of faith that she, the only one in her family, had received, could she in conscience refuse to answer the call of God? "In spite of the repugnance that I felt, I was driven by a burning zeal to say yes. And I knew that from then on, I would count suffering as nothing if I could in some way participate in the saving mission of Jesus Christ." She had known moments of doubt. The easy solution would have been to remain as a simple Sister of the Visitation. She had actually thought of this before God. Now the road to take was clear for her. Moreover, God had given her Sisters as ready and decided as she was to carry out the objective of the zeal she had just spoken of. Methodically, point by point, she refuted the criticisms that troubled M. Gros: "1. We are not cloistered. In removing the grills, we have also removed a number of obstacles to education. The prejudice of parents against grills is of little importance to us. More important than that are other considerations. The absence of grills will mean openness to the misery around, search for human equilibrium in concrete works of charity, and above all, for the upper social class living in security and affluence, contact with the under-privileged of society.

"Not only our pupils but we ourselves will benefit from this openness. It will mean for us growth in maturity, exposure to the hard reality of life, and preparation for our mission with the families of our pupils. On this point, I was following the example of the Religious of Saint Maur and some others.

"2. We recite the Divine Office. This form of prayer has a particular attraction for all the Sisters, which can therefore be taken as indicative of God's will. Religious dedicated to education are in greater need of prayer than others. The Scriptural texts of the Divine Office help us find God and nourish our personal prayer. It makes us daughters of the Church. . . The children in their turn will learn from us a greater love for the public prayer of the parish. . . more than if we had a particular office of our own. In short, participation in the liturgical life of the Church is one way of leading them to God.

"3. Our beds and the things we use in the refectory are like those in use in Carmel. This is not great austerity. They cannot shock people since they do not enter into

these places. They do not undermine the health of the Sisters. Precisely because we open our doors to children accustomed to soft and luxurious living, our witness of actual poverty can never be too much, so that we can teach them to despise, no matter how little, the comforts of life and to preserve ourselves from seeking them.

“4. The studies required of us educators are also motivated by zeal. For the Religious educator, they are an asceticism for the sake of the Gospel. They are not to be pursued superficially nor cursorily as dilettanti. They are means of making Jesus Christ better known. Many among the wealthy families seek a strong intellectual formation for their daughters and look for schools that can give this. Why, then, should we not exert a little more effort and respond to this desire, not for human success but to give to this social class, often so unchristian, an education in the faith?”

All these reasons, viable as they were, could crumble down with one blow. There was as yet no school of the Congregation. Mère Marie Eugénie assured M. Gros that her companions were ready to begin as soon as they had made their religious profession.

“It is not success that I am seeking. The work is not mine; therefore, if the Archbishop thinks the Sisters are not capable of doing it, and it is better if others should do it . . . forgive me if I take the liberty to tell you. . . this work is so necessary that sooner or later others, better qualified and holier, will undertake it. For myself, I do not think I have any other vocation than to participate this work no matter what sufferings and difficulties it will entail.”

On November 7, 1841, M. Gros sent his reply to the foundress: “All your views are Christian, religious and worthy of esteem. I can only thank God for the graces. He has given you and will continue to give you in the future.” Two months later, three little girls of ten to twelve years of age were entrusted to the Assumption. With their coming the beginnings of a school were made. It became necessary to leave “rue de Vaugirard” for a bigger house. The Augustinian Sisters had just vacated two houses in the Latin district. They were modest in appearance and had a garden with beautiful trees. The chapel was in good condition, though not artistic, and the rent was reasonable. In Spring of 1842 the Religious and their pupils moved to “l’impasse des Vignes.” By October the number of pupils increased from three to twelve. Two ceremonies of profession took place even before the house was completely ready for occupancy. One on the 25th of May and the other on November 8. Chateau briand and Montalembert, a relative of the de Commarque family, were among those present. Two newspapers, *L’Univers* and the *Gazette de France*, published an article on the ceremony. Summing up the essential ideas developed in the sermon given by the Abbé Deguerry, the *Gazette de France* said: “To prepare women to fulfill their mission as true mothers of families; to give them opportunities to acquire a wide knowledge of the human sciences and to develop deep-rooted habits of simplicity, without which they will not know how to exert a Christian influence in the world: these are the objectives of this new Congregation full of promise for the future.”

The first stage had been crossed. The Congregation could now look ahead to the future with courage.

Chapter 7

Everyone has a mission on earth

“The social order and its progressive humanization demands a renewal in attitudes and great social changes...”

The Church Today. 26-3

With the opening of the first school at “L’impasse des Vignes,” a great step towards the future was made. It was a happy time for the small group of Religious and their pupils. And for Mère Marie Eugénie it was a crucial time. The adjustments needed to transform the house into a convent and a boarding school brought the Community into close daily contact with masons, painters, Carpenters for six months. Mère Marie Eugénie soon recognized the value of this experience and drew from it practical conclusions. All inevitably led her to the social question. She had been hearing from reliable sources that despite the prevailing anti-clericalism in France, there was genuine Christian charity in the heart of the French people. Her contact with the working class proved the hear say true. She saw in the workers who came to the convent a delicate concern for others, a sense of solidarity among themselves, and a great esteem for work. She marvelled at the readiness they showed to help the Sisters who, like them, were engaged in manual work . . . and to see that the workers did not consider them great ladies was a joy to her.

“They found us quite adept in the common household work,” she said gently. “This, they highly esteemed in us . . . as much as they esteemed it in their wives and daughters. We became the best of friends. To know the virtue of a person who goes out of his way twenty times a day to help a woman draw water from a deep well, one must know from experience how tiring this work is.”

The young foundress did not mind the fatigue or the pain for herself and for her companions. On the contrary she wanted to maintain in the Congregation the first fervor that the difficulties of beginnings make a necessity. “To know how to wash, to iron, to cook, to clean the dormitory, to varnish furniture . . . these skills are of greater value to the Sisters than learning Latin. And I hope that we can communicate something of this practical ‘*bon sens*’ to our pupils.” The practice of actual poverty was essential if the Sisters would identify themselves with the plight of the working class. The most intellectually gifted among them must show the greatest readiness to do any kind of manual work. “For sharing the hard labor of the workers gives us a sense of fellowship with the poor, helps us to understand their fatigue and suffering and even the origin of the defects we blame them for. Above all this is the way to win them.” In modern terminology, openness and sharing enabled the Community to become a visible sign of the Kingdom in a milieu that was not theirs.

From this first experience Mère Marie Eugénie drew practical conclusions that no religious order had any Conception of at the time. For her the question of religious poverty was to be considered in the light of the actual poverty of the working class. She had heard complaints about the permissions she gave to the Sisters to go out of the convent. But the idea of strict enclosure for Religious educators was absurd to her. And she feared most of all the “cutting off” from the world that such a practice would imply. It would build a kind of wall between the Religious living a hidden mysterious life apart and the milieu

they would evangelize. If they no longer saw the poor in the reality of their life. how could they be truly Sisters to them? At that, no matter how austere and poor the life of the Sisters might be, it was still a life out of the ordinary. For the Religious who had made a vow of poverty did not know the loneliness, the anxieties-today we would say insecurities-the humiliations of poverty and its continual dependence on work.

To be a century ahead of one's time is never without risks. Thus, Mère Marie Eugénie knew the trials of men of vision: misunderstanding, false accusations even by those from whom she expected the greatest support.

Could the girls who heard the joyous laughter of their teachers during recreation in the garden ever have suspected the deep anxieties in the heart of the dynamic young Superior? With the Sisters themselves Mère Marie Eugénie kept silent, not wishing to disturb their peace. She must bear her burden alone.

Six years ago in 1836 when she had found her child-hood faith again. she had wanted to dedicate her life to the service of the Church which for her possessed the secret and the power for good. But she did not then know the members of this Church. "I had dreamt to find in them apostles. But I found them to be only men." This was the cause of the despair that sometimes tormented her. Her thinking was contrary to the accepted Catholic mentality of the time. She could not understand that men belonging to the Church showed less enthusiasm and dynamism in living their Faith and in proclaiming the Gospel to the world than did men in the political world who defended their opinions and accepted the consequences of these opinions. She remembered very well the influence exerted on her by men of her own time- men of vision calling for a democratic way of life, a better future, a new moral nobility in France. Their ideas found an echo in her own mind and in her heart. She could not think of Christ as other than the Lord who brings into the world the law of liberation and renewal in order to transform the whole of society. She could not help feeling bitter and sad about the social doctrines to which the intellectual elite among the Catholics subscribed. Were not these doctrines at the root of the disheartening immobility of the Church at the time when the world was moving towards an irreversible transformation? Mère Marie Eugénie tried to understand the meaning of the historical developments. She kept out of politics as long as it remained on the purely theoretical plane, but she could not be indifferent to whatever touched the free activity of men. If she asked questions, it was only for the purpose of finding answers that could give direction to her own actions, bringing to light whatever in their life had to be modified, corrected or maintained. Viewed thus, the ideas of Joseph de Maistre aroused in her not admiration but revolt. What did he mean by saying that social expiation was necessary because of the sin of humanity? How could his ideas on war, torture, capital punishment, racial discrimination and religious life be reconciled with the Gospel? How could men who profess to be Christians arrive at sanctioning the crimes of men in the name of salvific expiation? How could they think of religious life as something like a balance sheet of debits and assets wherein the sins of society were balanced by an equal weight of expiatory suffering? Men of the liberal party reacted strongly against these social ideas and the young foundress was in sympathy with them. It was true that some very generous souls offered themselves as victims to Divine Justice, to pay in part, as it were, the price of sin. But this would substitute the law of strict justice to the law of love and could falsify the concept of religious vocation. Many Catholics readily accepted the idea that the inhuman condition in which the working class lived was a necessary ransom paid to the Creator for

the sins of mankind that this was the specific role of the working class in society. For Mère Marie Eugénie this was not only a mental aberration; it was also a scandal. She felt in her own heart the anger of Philippe Buchez who did not hesitate to denounce those who preached penance to the hungry and yet were silent about the indifference and high living of the rich whose consciences were eased by the doctrine of social expiation. Most of the Catholics in France still believed in the out-dated idea of the indissoluble union of church and state. For them the aspirations of the people for a democratic way of life was contrary to the “divine rights of kings.” They could not see or they refused to see that they were not only acting contrary to the Gospel but were also opposing the irreversible progress of history.

For the Superior of “l’impasse des Vignes” this was going backward instead of forward. Mère Marie Eugénie did not reject the necessity of suffering and expiation. But her faith built on a solid knowledge of Sacred Scriptures and Theology gave her a new insight. “I believe,” she told Père d’Alzon in 1844, “that God wants to create by the law of the Gospel and the Redemptive action of Christ a society where no man will be oppressed by another and the only sufferings man has to endure will be those that come from natural calamities.” For Mère Marie Eugénie suffering could not be a payment for sin since the ransom for sin is the Blood of Jesus Christ. But suffering could be an educative means to free man from the consequences of sin. “The sacrifice of Christ on Calvary continues . . . at each moment it can redeem man and nations from a sinful past. But to return to God requires from man effort to get out of the effects of sin in him. Penance corrects the sinful inclinations of man so that he can be capable of good.”

Expiation could not be equated to suffering and misery destined by fate to fall on an individual person or a social class. It was for her a corrective principle that liberated a person who knew he was free because he had been pardoned. Thus it was with Mary Magdalen, pardoned by Divine mercy and transformed by suffering. From this personal conviction Mère Marie Eugénie drew practical consequences for the religious life. “I believe that all men are redeemed by the Blood of Jesus Christ not only from personal sin but also from the sinful conditions into which they are born. I see in the Redemption a work of universal liberation not yet fully accomplished. And for me the religious life today is identical with the redemption of captives.” It was in this perspective that the Abbé Lacordaire had presented the religious life to her in 1836. His word had sunk into the depths of her being. Like the small spark of love that God infuses into the soul and which according to Teresa of Avila becomes a raging fire there where it does not meet any obstacle, this view of religious life became for Mère Marie Eugénie a burning brasier, an incoercible inquietude, an impetuous zeal that no human intervention could stop froth spreading. Why did she choose the religious life? Was it to escape from the dangers of the world? No. To insure her own salvation? Neither. To enjoy even here the divine intimacy? She had experienced the reality of divine intimacy but it was not for this that she decided to follow Christ’s call. She was impelled by the passion to bring to all men the liberating power of Christ.

“What I mean is that social institutions should come to the aid of those who unfortunately are born outside the social conditions that assure the moral freedom of man, those for whom the family does not provide a Christian education, and those whom poverty deprives of the freedom to live an honest life. “To recognize in a man the possibility of conversion is to save him from a fatalistic view of life and enable him to do good. Suffering

has a positive value because it is a means of education. The word, education, means: *educere* that is, allow the good that is in every human being to break through the 'crust' that imprisons it to the light where it can blossom and shed its radiance."

This was a colossal task and the young foundress knew it. Her ideas seemed pretentious. To follow them to the end was perhaps a utopian dream. But "since I knew of no other institution but religious orders to realise this 'dream' and provide an education that can lead all to the freedom won by Christ, I became a Religious. For me religious orders exist for no other purpose than to lead all men to the full redemption in Christ."

Her ideas on suffering borne with love as redemptive were not different from those of St. John of the Cross or Saint Catherine of Sienna or St. Francis of Sales. "Suffering alone does not transform man unless it is borne with love for only love, perfect love, remits even the consequences of sin."

Academic discussions on whether the acts of a man repaired the sins of the past or contributed to the building of the future did not interest Mère Marie Eugénie. Persons like Sr. Marie Augustine who did not go beyond the level of ideas were for her a cause of disillusionment. What concerned her was the dominant orientation of life. Should a man primarily look backwards to the past or forward to the future? Should he focus his attention on suffering or on virtue? For herself the answer was clear.

That there is tension between action and passion in a Christian life, she knew from her own experience. She was not rebelling against resignation to God's purifying action as necessary in the spiritual life of a Christian but against the culpable apathy of many Christians that was nothing but a mask for egoism, a turning away from the call of duty for immediate action.

The essence of Christian education was for her no other than redemption extended even to the earthly and temporal dimensions of man. In the words of Vatican II it is the full development of man and the building of a more human world. A moral renewal was necessary and Mère Marie Eugénie saw that Catholicism had the power to bring about this renewal. She could not doubt that down the ages, despite the difficulties and obstacles sometimes coming even from Christians, Christ continues to call men and women to commit themselves to the task of education so that the knowledge, fortitude noblesse and detachment communicated to the Younger generations can make the Christian future come true. For her "the earth cannot be a place of exile. It is the place of God's glory." What she believed could be summarized as a profession of faith in the absolute future of mankind.

"I believe that we are here on earth Precisely to work for the coming of the reign of our heavenly Father over us and over all men.

"I believe that Jesus Christ has delivered us from sin to make us free to work so that the Divine Word he brought to us might become a reality. "I believe that everyone has a mission on earth. To be a Christian is basically not to seek only our own salvation but to seek how God can use us for the spreading of the Gospel and its incarnation in the lives of men. "There are some who say: a beautiful utopia. This remark scandalizes me. For who can dare to doubt that the goal of the world is the reign of Jesus Christ? "To make Jesus Christ known as liberator and king of the world is for me the beginning and the end of Christian education."

Chapter 8 This night of my mind...

“Throughout the course of centuries, men have labored to better the circumstances of their lives through a monumental amount of individual and collective effort . . . such human activity accords with God’s will.”

The Church Today, 34-1.

“I can see perfectly the relationship between the need for a social regeneration and Catholicism.” This perspective defined for Mère Marie Eugénie the course of action to be taken.

“Before God I have the obligation to act,” she wrote to Père d’Alzon in 1841, “and I shall do this as long as it is possible.”

Difficulties were mounting and Mère Marie Eugénie was well aware of them. A new perspective joined to a broad plan of action could not fail to meet with opposition from the established order. To explain to the Archbishop and to their ecclesiastical Superior what was exactly in her mind would not be easy. It was clear that all she could expect from the most pious would be a warning to keep out of dangerous ground. To desire and to hope to be able to change society . . . no, not this!

From the highest ecclesiastical authority the advice was to conform to the traditional view of religious life: seek divine intimacy in prayer and personal salvation.

Above all, do not get involved in social action as an apostolate. The advice was given in the name of tradition, misunderstood, no doubt, and serving as an excuse for doing nothing to correct social ills. Mère Marie Eugénie revolted against all this. Fear to take risks would eventually turn her inward, preoccupied with herself and finally make of the Religious immature women.

Nevertheless her own thinking, so different from that of her ecclesiastical Superiors, alarmed her. Perhaps they were right and she was wrong. . . even foolish. The limitations they put on her vision - were they not limitations on her faith . . . living faith and therefore active? Would it be virtue on her part to conform to the dictates of her Superiors? But how could she act against what she personally saw was the right thing to do? Moreover she was not responsible only for herself. The Sisters relied on her judgement. At this time she was practically without a guide herself. Père d’Alzon was at Nimes and communication by mail was slow. Hardly had she explained to him by letter what was troubling her when another wave of doubt would assail her. She asked him to burn her letters. The temptations against faith, her pride and arrogance these were not for others to read.

Père Lacordaire could not take charge of the spiritual direction of the Assumption nor of that of the foundress. He was too busy with the re-establishment of the Order of Preachers in France. Moreover, Mère Marie Eugénie saw in his ideas some similarity to the ideas of Joseph de Maistre. She could not in conscience accept the current social theories accepted by Catholics because for her they were contrary to the Gospel. Why was there so little harmony between the mind and the heart, so much reliance on earthly

means and so little trust in the power of Providence and self-sacrifice? must one do violence to oneself in order to say what everybody says and end by Praising the prejudices, egoism and ambition of worldly men? She felt strongly tempted to jeer at them, but she knew she should not do that. They were acting as they did with untroubled consciences and even for the service and love of God. Why, then, was she so different when she was surely not better than they? Was she lacking in humility? Or was it zeal, as indeed it was, that was driving her to pursue a goal that others called utopian? “There is danger in walking alone,” she concluded. “One can be tempted to say at the end: ‘I did it all by myself.’”

Despite the distance and the inadequacy of the mail service, Mère Marie Eugénie tried to keep up her correspondence with Père d’Alzon. He was the only guide she could turn to. In her letter of July 1842, she described to him the exact orientation of the Congregation:

“Our idea on this apostolate is very simple. The instruction given to young girls is ordinarily superficial and without any relation to their Faith. For this reason, they cannot exercise in their own homes the influence that can give a new life to society. Intellectually unprepared for this task, they will not be able to cope with the studies of their Sons who may gradually lose confidence in the judgement of their mothers at the time when they will be needing it most.

“Women of the upper class often have wrong ideas regarding their dignity and duty. They despise work. They are not obliged to do it because they can afford to hire servants. What they value are social status and wealth- the wealth of their husbands.

“No doubt, they are Christians and even practicing Christians. But are they not Christians only because to be a Christian is a status symbol or a family tradition? Are they Christians by personal conviction? This is collective formalism and nothing more. What do they know about Christianity, its doctrines, its history, its social teachings? Has religion made them aware of the seriousness of human existence? Has it awakened in them a sense of justice in the face of misery they do not see? More often than not, are they not motivated by pleasure rather than by duty? “In the light of this perspective, can education not start a radical conversion from the most deeply rooted habits and mental attitudes of present day society? Selfishness and dedication are the sources of evil and good. What did Our Lord come to accomplish in this world? Did He not carry out His mission by a total dedication to the Father and to man that no Mère self-interest can explain? The purpose of education is to continue the mission of Jesus Christ.”

From these premises, the conclusions were clear, demanding, ineluctable. There was no longer any question of preparing children or young girls for a society that was Christian in name only. There was no question of forming just simple women of the world. No. The question was to form women, wives, mothers so filled with the spirit of Jesus Christ that they could act as leaven in their milieu. To the young educators whom she was preparing, Mère Marie Eugénie gave this warning: “What Saint Teresa asked God to do if ever her daughters abandoned poverty, that she would ask God also to do if ever they should abandon the teachings of Jesus Christ for the professional competence of the world.” Mère Marie Eugénie alarmed her contemporaries when in warning to them she said: “If people do not come out of their egoism and learn self-sacrifice, terrible things will happen to them . . . in a few generations’ time. The daughters of this social

class-the most favored by wealth must learn to make great sacrifices and must teach this to their children.

“But only an authentic Christian attitude could give meaning to sacrifice and see in it a positive, enriching value. Only this attitude could make the upper social class turn away from its deep-rooted egoism and direct its vision to the final goal of mankind redeemed by Christ and called to eternal life.”

To pursue such a vision was indeed a colossal task . . . “too few pursue it and yet no one who has had this vision can be excused from following it.” The formation of the members of the Congregation must be resolutely directed towards this objective. But Mère Marie Eugénie could not reveal all her ideas to her Superiors for fear of adding weight to the suspicions that her innovations were arousing. Complete openness would endanger the existence and development of the Congregation.

Mère Marie Eugénie wanted the Sisters and their pupils to come in direct contact with the world. This was necessary for the social apostolate and the material needs of an educational institution. She could see how a rigid endosure would block the way for educators to feel the pulse of the times and limit the possibility of a wider and more genuine apostolate.

The studies she required of the Sisters would give them not only professional competence but also a personal attitude centered on the knowledge of Christ. The study of Latin was necessary for them to understand the liturgical texts of the Office and the Mass and to draw from them “food” for a serious and doctrinally sound spiritual life open to the dimensions of the world. This would also permit them to study the works of the Fathers of the Church and of St. Thomas Aquinas.

“So that our studies can be impregnated by the Christ- With spirit, we must live the spiritual life of the Church. Our faith must continually grow. It must guide our judgment, our likes and dislikes, our affections.” Hence, the importance for her of theological and Scriptural studies. “It is necessary to know the exact teachings of the Church as to be able to pass a sound judgement on the works of contemporary writers.” In requiring her daughters to follow such a religious and cultural program she had no intention to make them learned Women. “To be able to see all the sciences and human disciplines from the level of faith requires more simplicity than power. The light of faith, moreover, adds power to these sciences. It is not a question of opposing science to faith but of seeing God the Creator in all that exists both visible and invisible There can be no contradiction between the human sciences, culture, the arts and the uncreated wisdom of the Word. Far from limiting the human spirit, the light of Christ reveals the true meaning of human values because “without Him nothing was made that was made.”

Mère Marie Eugénie also wanted the Religious to know other languages in view of missionary expansion in the future.

Both her objective and the means to attain this objective appeared to her contemporaries as utopian and dangerously presumptuous In summer of 1842, she wrote to Père d’Alzon: “I usually give stupid reasons for our studies, our Office, our direct contact with the outside world. Would it be prudent to go beyond this now? It is a strange thing that no one is offended by a stupid mistake but many are afraid when someone shows determination to follow a positive and clearly defined action even in our

own little sphere. What vexes me is that after I have somewhat expressed my real reasons, someone congratulates me by saying: 'I see that you are not as proud as I have been told. You are not thinking of reform . . . and you will be just like all the other religious orders.'

Mère Marie Eugénie could not as yet explain fully how she envisioned the true character of the Assumption. "The character of an apostolate is defined by the divine mystery it honors. I think that we are called to honor in a special way the mystery of the Incarnation, the Person of Jesus Christ and the Blessed Virgin who is most intimately united to Him. Our views on education hinge on this mystery of the God-Man."

This perspective, unifying and broad at the same time, aimed at nothing less than a fundamental revolution in the minds and the hearts of the young who would form the society of tomorrow and whose mission, if truly Christian, would make society more just, more human because more in harmony with the spirit of the Gospel.

But the words, "social revolution," were forbidden words. They were used during the Restoration movement and evoked distrust. Yet how could she refrain from using them when defining a matter as important as the orientation that would inspire and give life to a new Congregation?

How could she place their objective lower than where God wanted it?

Nothing in her plan was an isolated part. The fundamental principle in her philosophy of education would determine its application even on the human plane. Secondary principles have meaning only in reference to first principles.

"I do not know how I can express it so that it would be according to our view and their view at the same time. All this confuses and embitters me. Often I think I must be crazy to feel so differently about the things men value so much or else I think I am too weak for the mission given to me."

This mission she could fulfill only according to the insight she had received. It was not natural attraction to the apostolate that had determined her choice. It was zeal. "I do not like children, that is, in a special way nor studies pursued as ends in themselves . . . nor direct contact with the outside world that a boarding school requires." Her personal inclination was towards a purely contemplative life, without the administrative work which in the eyes of some minimized her fidelity to her own proper vocation and that of the first Religious of the Assumption. A radical separation from the world would be easier for her. "To be able to fulfill the tasks of an apostolate in the spirit of faith one must be very closely united to God." More than once she expressed the hope of finishing her life as a simple Religious in a contemplative monastery. If she were asked whether she would accept the mission that was evidently hers, she would say yes, but on the condition of being true to her light which disturbed the clergy although it was truly Christian.

Mère Marie Eugénie understood the movement of society as irreversible. That her ideas could not be accepted in her own time was understandable. They were ideas that had been defended by the Liberals with a mixture of exaggeration and error and this threw some suspicion on her. She did not, however, give up her own stand on the matter.

"It is part of the development of Christian dogma to become better and more fully understood as time goes on and history completes the education of mankind." What could be surprising or disturbing about this? "The type of saints will change from age to age and it will continue to change. That is why there will always be a need in the Church for new religious orders." There could not be for her any contradiction between divine, unchangeable truth and the ever-changing forms of

expressing fidelity to God. One had only to open the Old Testament to see the suppleness with which God prepared His people in the course of their history for the coming of Christ.

No, it was not the Gospel that was in question but the way it was translated into action according to the evolution and progress of human society. What was viable in preceding centuries could no longer meet the legitimate needs of a changing society. To confront the message of the Gospel with the needs of man was to remain faithful to it. To cling desperately to the past was to betray it.

Her prophetic vision put her a century ahead of her time. But she was only a woman of twenty-seven years of age, living in a milieu of Catholics filled with the spirit of the counter-revolution, like an explorer in a subterranean cavern who alone tech through a faint gust of wind coming from a hardly risible fissure the existence of a new passage It must be towards this fissure that one must move if there was ruing to be any progress. Not to have the audacity and the courage to leave the tunnels already passed and those leading to dead-ends would be to engage in a sterile search. This the Superior at “l’impasse des Vignes” could not do with a good conscience.

“One thing is certain,” she wrote to Père d’Alzon. “The farther I go the less sympathy I feel for the priests and the pious laymen. They do not understand. Their hearts are so narrow. She was unaware of a ‘fire’ in the depths of her being until the moment when, as she was writing these words, her whole being vibrated to them. “I am truly a woman but when confronted by the purpose of our mission and the dedication it demands so that future generations may he imbued with a truly Christian social sense, I feel less womanly.

As the battle For freedom of education raged in 1844, a storm was also raging in the heart of Mère Marie Eugénie. What her contemporaries called Christian education was Christian in name rather than in fact. Victory for the Libreals would just be an illusion if the whole educational process was not renewed in its depths. “What does this freedom matter to me? I now know what kind of men the priests and the pious Catholics are . . . and if I had a son I should be happy to see their somnolence or the ideas of M. Villemain injected into his veins. Would that I had been brought up by them. Then I should feel less of this life that is killing me until I shall have killed it myself.” What was this life that was killing her? Was it not zeal driving her on without respite? It would have been easier to follow the mentality of the times to ease her conscience by doing “like everyone else.”

But . . . there was a but and it had to be expected. “But if I loved anyone, I would shelter him from this ‘breath’ as I would from the desert wind.”

Was she the only one who heeded the cry of alarm sounded by Frederic Ozanam: “You who take pride in calling yourselves Christians what are you doing? Where are the works that prove the reality of your Faith, and make her respected and loved?” During the month of August in 1844 she wrote again to Père d’Alzon: “There is only one way to arrive at a true superiority of mind which Catholics today must acquire if they are to transform society. They must acquire a superiority in character, in passion and in philosophy which they can in turn develop in the young who will form the society of tomorrow. Unfortunately this is what religious education very often kills. Because of fear to adopt new ways, there is no concern to form women with strong characters and personalities fully aware of their responsibilities. Secular education today develops in man a passion and a Philosophy directed towards the secular field. It leaves a lasting character in his life. In this it is superior to the religious education now given which very often kills

the vital principle for human action. Yes, a person with a passion for worldly fame and honor is better than a person with no passion at all for anything. What can be expected from a man without enthusiasm? Enthusiasm for something is better than apathy. A drive towards evil can be turned towards the good as in Paul of Tarsus, or Mary Magdalen. But what response can one hope to get from a man sunk in somnolence? He cannot see; he cannot understand; he cannot act.”

Somnolence could never be a Christian attitude or a human attitude. People might say it was and justify it from the Gospel but she could never accept it. She could suspend her judgement and submit but she could not be expected to participate in an action that her Conscience could not accept.

As the darkness in her mind deepened and the inner conflict increasingly weighed down on her, another direction seemed to open to her.

“No one can force her convictions on others. What does my Faith ask of me?” The recent condemnation of the founder of L’Avenir alarmed her. “I was frightened when I said, ‘They do not understand’.. . because the pride of La Mennais was nothing else but that.”

Was her way of seeing, judging, and hoping nothing but temptation against faith? If it was, then she must give up her own judgement. “Because I have a strong influence on the Community, I should not say anything that would be in the least un-orthodox. But suppose the ideas of La Mennais are right and only his exaggerated and disproportionate way of presenting them was wrong?”

Sometime during the year 1844, she received at “l’impasse des Vignes” a copy of the book, *Voix de Prison*. * (* Voice from Prison.) Writing about it to Père d’Alzon she said: “As I began to read this book, more than one idea in it, as you well know, made my heart beat but this time more calmly. In the final analysis the social regeneration of humanity in this world is a necessary consequence of the word of Jesus Christ. The current ideas and the mentality of Catholics today may obscure this light in my mind I can no longer grasp it. . . but this poverty, this darkness of my mind, oppressed as it is by contradicting ideas, does not make this future less real. *Across this darkness, I salute it. . . in faith.*

No, she could not believe that Christ’s redemption was not the vital principle of a new order and development in the world. But why did Christian teaching not bring about wonderful results? Was it perhaps due to the fact that its application to concrete reality tended to look backward rather than forward to the future? Or was she allowing herself to be misled, confused by an insight that was drawing her like a magnet? “There are strong reasons for others to think that I am mistaken,” she concluded “I cannot and I would not want to work for something now considered harmful but which I believe some time later others will understand as I do.”

Then if she had to refrain from immediate action, all she wanted was to retire to some contemplative order where she could lead a life of prayer interrupted only by material tasks.

“Leaving for the moment all care and discussions, I shall ask God who does not deceive that His reign arrive in this world . . . and perhaps, He will so dispose events in the future that those who do not understand me or condemn me will come to see as I do.”

These hopes which dominated her deepest anxieties the second Vatican Council supported clearly and firmly. 1844-1964. More than a century will have passed. But

the correctness of her insight, then mistaken for foolishness, broke through like the dawn of a new day.

Chapter 9

An impulse of passion...

“Men are not deterred by the Christian message from building the world, or impelled to neglect the welfare of their fellows. They are, rather, more stringently bound to do these very things.”

The Church Today, 34-3.

Thus it was that although the goal to be pursued by Mère Marie Eugénie was clearly the truth, the road towards it was obscure. The darkness was necessary to remove any trace of egoism and self-interest that could still be present in her motives and thus block the way to divine union.

She hoped ardently that some day her ideal would be understood as realizable and pursued by others with enthusiasm and generosity. She could not, however, help feeling bitter about the situation she was in. “If the goal is not considered possible,” she said, “then action becomes more difficult, more uncertain, more timid.”

Since Providence did not seem to intend for her retirement to some purely contemplative monastery, she would accept the responsibility of leading a religious community even against the mentality prevailing among Christians of her time. She must move ahead. There was no question of going back for her. “Like the builders of the great cathedrals,” she wrote to Père d’Alzon, “many work without realizing that they are building the city of the future. This role is necessary at times, I have often told myself. There are even builders who, without wanting to work for the future, actually prepare the way to it—like the Romans who, in building roads, did not intend to prepare the way for the preachers of the Gospel.” It seemed to her that all she could do for the time being was to repeat the prayer she loved so much: “May your Kingdom come.” To hasten the coming of this Kingdom she would be for the Sisters more truly a “sign” of God’s goodness towards them; she would strive to be more closely united to God, more confident of His goodness and power.

Two years had now passed since she brought together the first members of the Congregation. In the mission of guiding the Sisters she found it impossible to follow the customary way and do as “the others” did. A spiritual direction that stressed a voluntaristic approach to asceticism, as though one attained perfection by force of “blows,” did not have any attraction for her. Neither did she find constant self-examination helpful. Was this a reaction to the authoritarian way of the Abbé Combalot?

Not likely, although it is not impossible to think so.

In her mind, asceticism had one clear purpose and that was to render the spirit supple and ready to do God’s will—today we would say to enable the redeeming power of the Cross to penetrate the deepest center of one’s being and liberate the dynamism of the Spirit. Of course, self-denial was necessary for her; but it would not be an end in itself, an experience to be relished for its own sake. It was to be a means of emptying herself for the influx of the divine life. She must do nothing, allow nothing in her to remain that would hinder the free action of Christ. She did not deny the necessity of penances freely

accepted and practiced but she would leave to God the choice of the trials and purifications she needed rather than choose them herself. What God willed was prompted by His love and suited to her weakness. Daily life with its difficulties, contradictions and frustrations, the events that were beyond her control-these occasions enabled her to participate in the Passion of Christ. Some practices in the religious life she found cumbersome rather than helpful. "I am not used to keeping my eyes down," she admitted frankly. "In my external behavior, in my manner of speaking there is nothing of the external form existing in many religious orders." Such an attitude, she said, "neither inspires confidence nor makes apostolic contacts with the world easy." What then should she choose? An artificial gravity of manner? Or a "supernaturally natural" attitude flowing spontaneously from the affection she felt for the Sisters and the joy-even in the midst of deep anxieties-she found in belonging to God?

Knowing that there are different stages in the spiritual life and also basic differences in temperaments, she understood that she could help the Sisters whom she was called to guide only by respecting the specific rhythm and phase of their interior life. She must understand them, listen to them. But to be able to help them advance resolutely there where the only guide could be God, it was necessary for her to experience the difficulties of the way. "It is strange," she said, "that God seems to make me experience the most contrary states, to make me taste enough of each so that I can feel the evil and see what hinders me from drawing good out of it." The practical knowledge she gained helped her in guiding the Sisters. She was grateful for this: "I thank God for making me capable of fulfilling my mission. What is hard to endure is that I feel like one who learns to keep the gifts of God for others by losing them herself, I who am so avoid of these gifts that I want to keep them all for myself."

Contrary to the custom then observed in religious communities-that of not speaking about oneself-and also against her own independent spirit, she shared her spiritual experiences with the Sisters. She felt that God was asking this of her. Her own experience of God was not meant to be hers alone. It should be a source of light and encouragement for the Community too. Together they would walk towards God, sharing one another's gifts in true brother hood.

In fact, the young Community at "l'impasse des Vignes" was finding in this communion of life, this common search for the essential, a new vitality. "The Sisters love me very much," Mère Marie Eugénie said frankly, "and I love them too and show them my affection on many occasions." The more she loved each one in particular, looked for the consolations she also needed from them, the more easily she found Jesus Christ in them. It was thus that she won their confidence and affection. "When love is spiritual," writes St. John of the Cross, "love of God grows with it." And so it was that Mère Marie Eugénie found in community life a force that helped her to be more simple, more humble, more gentle, more selfless in service.

What she did not, however, share with the Community were the anxieties, the misunderstandings that at times almost crushed her. Not one of the Sisters except perhaps Sr. Thérèse Emmanuel suspected the storm that was raging in her.

For a long time now she had been troubled by a problem she could not solve. That God was asking her to surrender to His will totally, she had no doubt. But how far ought she to abandon herself to the will of her ecclesiastical Superiors and to Père d'Alzon? Ought she to allow them to lead her according to their own views? Ought she to follow

them blindly? Did striving for religious perfection demand that she allow herself to be led by people who did not understand her and were so different from her? Should she present her reasons clearly to defend her position? Or should she abandon the foundation for which Providence had made her responsible? “I am beginning to doubt my own motives, to mistrust my own ideas,” she said, “and this fills me with bitterness. I feel like laughing at myself in mockery . . . something of the mockery I have read in Faust seems to take hold of me. What does it matter if the work I have never appropriated for myself dies? I feel more and more drawn to seek God for myself alone and to turn away from the task set before me. I rationalize. I rebel. There are certain ideas that stir me up easily. Between the ideas of La Mennais and my own there is hardly any difference-not even a hairbreadth. What I question is Catholicism. I question it with a certain cold deliberation and incredulity that hides an impulse of passion I cannot explain well.” Mère Marie Eugénie had read the book of La Mennais, *Voix de Prison*,* (*Voice From Prison.) the only book of his she read, despite fri sympathy with his ideas. Then there was Père d’Alzon himself. How far ought she to conform to his way of thinking? How much ought she to obey him? What she had asked at the beginning was “a little help so she could arrive at a total dependence on Jesus Christ.” What she wanted was to be able to live the religious life as an adult personally responsible for her decisions. Submission she thought could be misunderstood and used to hide cowardice or laziness to face reality or assume responsibility. If submission was at times necessary she would submit not by doing violence to her convictions but by an act of real humility. This alone brought peace . . . Thus, she gradually learned to differ in opinion with Père d’Alzon without losing her peace. This she told him in all simplicity.

That she could do so without becoming rebellious could be explained by her strong personality, the depth and breadth of her vision. But more than that, perhaps, it was her extraordinary insight into the future that pushed her ahead of her contemporaries, like a ship driven by the wind into the open sea.

To be the guide of such a woman was certainly not easy. Often without realizing it she was discarding old views and customs. Even of Lacordaire she would say: “Père Lacordaire absolutizes certain things. He has definitively settled for the monastic life . . . His way of thinking reminds me of M. de Rancé because both say that a monk is not of his time but of eternity.” No less absolute than Père Lacordaire, she saw implied in this the practice of religious poverty, on which she agreed with St. Teresa of Avila who said: “The wealth of Religious are the wounds of the Church.” One would be inclined to think that she could see the future expulsion of Religious in France and the confiscation of Church property by the government under Emile Combes or even the aggiornamento of the religious life begun by John XXIII.

For Mère Marie Eugénie religious poverty in the concrete meant a total dependence on work for subsistence. “Not to depend on work for subsistence implies a tremendous amount of wealth. Only the most wealthy can afford not to work. It is not that we do not need material means to carry out our mission but the secret of success for us is in keeping the evangelical spirit as much as possible. Material poverty and spiritual poverty must go hand in hand to help us reach that state of abnegation where we no longer judge things except in the light of Jesus Christ.” The idea of religious life as essentially a close following of Christ was the fundamental principle on which she wanted the Congregation

entrusted to her to be built. Its foundation must be strong enough to stand the necessary changes that the passage of time would bring. Those who did not understand the full implication of St. Paul's words. *Instaurare omnia in Christo*, somewhat mistrusted her. "There is something I find strange," she wrote to Père d'Alzon. "Those who are for monastic traditions say that we are reviving the religious studies, once the practice in monasteries. They like us because we know and respect ancient customs. On the other hand, those who call themselves progressive like us because we are innovators. There need not be any contradiction in this. In fact it is clear that we should have this double character."

Writing a week later she continued: "Shall I go as far as to tell you to challenge the spirit of the Council of Trent? It is an admirable spirit but I think that a Council in our time should be conducted differently."

Chapter 10

What passion to give to the Religious...

“For the force which the Church can inject into the modern society of man consists in that faith and charity put into vital practice . . .”

The Church Today. 42-3.

Since that day in October of 1838 when the Abbé Combalot had presented to him his foundress, the Abbé Emmanuel d’Alzon had not seen Anne Eugénie Milleret again.

Many remarkable personalities often came to “l’impasse des Vignes”: Dom Gueranger, Monseigneur Gay, Peré Boulanger, Provincial of the Society of Jesus and Peré Lacordaire, the friend of the first hour . . . But, strange as it was, Mère Marie Eugénie held on to a spiritual direction by correspondence with Père d’Alzon for almost five years.

Outstanding contrasts between the Superior of the Assumption and the Abbé d’Alzon that could have made rapport far from easy were plain enough. She was more than a typical woman of Lorraine. On her mother’s side she inherited the rationalistic and positive thinking of the people of eastern France. This was accentuated by her education. Combined with this was a certain romantic air characteristic of the people beyond the Rhine. He was a Meridional, lively, spirited, with caustic verve and effervescent enthusiasm. Anne Eugénie had always been a reasonable child. She was brought up in a milieu without faith. As an adolescent she was made mature early by suffering. Emmanuel, on the other hand, was mischievous and even unbearable as a boy. Yet he always manifested a love for God from childhood. His parents loved him with a tender but possessive love. At the age of twenty-one he had to run away from home at night in order to enter the seminary at Montpellier. The escapade did not in any way diminish, however, the love of his parents for him.

He finished his theological studies in Rome and was ordained priest in December of 1834. His fiery and impulsive temperament often pushed him into projects without due deliberation. As a young priest he at one time thought of entering the monastery of Chartreuse. He spoke about it to the curate of Beaucaire whose answer was: “You a Chartreux? That would be like putting a locomotive in a cell.” The Abbé d’Alzon did not protest but the dream of a religious life he thought suited to his temperament never left him. Times would change. La Mennais of whom he had been an enthusiastic disciple had insisted on scanning the widening horizon for signs of the future. Why could this future not give rise to new religious orders where the vocation of an Emmanuel d’Alzon would find its true place?

In the meantime he was named grand vicar of Nimes. The Bishops had a high esteem for him although they considered him somewhat eccentric. Since his nomination in 1839 two projects were forming in his mind: one was to establish a Carmelite monastery in Nimes and the other, to open a college for boys. The College of Notre Dame de l’Assomption founded by the Abbé Vernot was already existing, but as the number of students decreased each year, it became necessary to close the College in 1842. The Abbé d’Alzon thought of buying the place for the Carmelites but, rather than sell it, the owners

of the College decided to reopen it to new students in October of 1843. By January it was necessary to close it again and offer the property for sale to the Abbé d'Alzon. He had already bought another for the Carmelites. But, perhaps, he could exchange it for the school if the directors agreed. If they did not, he could carry out his two plans at the same time. Why not take charge of the College himself and direct it along new educational principles?

To settle the matter he had to go to Paris in August of 1843. As soon as he had some free time, he rushed to "l'impasse des Vignes." He was amazed at what he saw in the boarding school of the Assumption in Paris.

He remembered having met a simple, reserved and remarkably intelligent young girl. Now he met a woman, a Superior and an educator of exceptional caliber. The joy of seeing each other again was mutual. The priest was struck, too, by the joyful and evangelical atmosphere radiated by the Community. For at "l'impasse des Vignes" the austerity of poverty actually lived and freely accepted did not stifle community enthusiasm or personal initiative.

The Abbé d'Alzon was fascinated by the personality of the foundress. Her deeply theological and Christo-centric spiritual life struck him with wonder: This religious of twenty-six years of age who had placed herself under his direction was ahead of him on the road to authentic union with God. And she was already doing for the education of girls what he had been thinking for the last ten years of doing for the education of boys.

Something also changed in their relationship. Hence forth, there would no longer be any question of submission but rather of willing, confident acceptance of his guidance in the service of the Lord. Without doubt she would always consider obedience to Père d'Alzon not only a duty but also a source of strength for her. But it would be an adult obedience and not an escape from her own responsibilities as Superior and foundress. "I do not ask you to accompany me on every step I take on the way," she told him.

The Abbé d'Alzon on his part foresaw the good as well as the difficulties that would arise from this spiritual friendship. "I thank Our Lord every day for having made me undertake this trip to Paris. I see in it a sign of His goodness. Our conversations have done me much good and if, as you say, they have also done you as much good, I see in this a sign that God wants us to support each other."

But on more than one occasion he was baffled by her personality her breadth of vision, her certitude regarding certain views. "You have some ideas that I find difficult to follow," he wrote to her. To this Mère Marie Eugénie replied: "I do not feel at all that God reproaches me for my frankness to you or my boldness in giving my opinions or showing my independence regarding my views on certain questions."

"You are a woman in whom I see the most peaceful self-possession combined with the greatest capacity to feel," he said. "Directing you is in a way difficult because the qualities you have developed to accomplish a life-long mission implies a certain independence of mind and opposition to the will of others . . . You cannot be explained."

What then would be his role in guiding her? Should it not be limited at times to recognizing and confirming the graces given to her? Like St. John the Baptist, should he not find his joy in being just the witness of something that transcended him.

"What am I?" he exclaimed one day. "Friend of the Bridegroom." Many years later when Mère Marie Eugénie learned that Père d'Alzon was dying, she expressed in a few lines what their friendship which had lasted for nearly half a century meant: "I have developed the habit of seeing in others only the good that I will see in eternity. When the

temporal will have passed away, I shall see for all eternity in Père d'Alzon only his love for Jesus Christ, his dedication to the Church, his zeal. He has loved me and done me good; his strong direction was a great help to me in my youthful years. He sustained our work at its beginning and we owe much to him."

Père d'Alzon knew how much he owed to the foundress of the Assumption. The Assumptionist Fathers would, perhaps, never have come into existence were it not for Mère Marie Eugénie. That was the reason why both would look back to the meeting in 1843 as a sign of God's Providence.

On June 24, 1844 Père d'Alzon wrote to the Superior of "l'impasse des Vignes": "An idea that I once had comes back to my mind with greater insistence. It is that of consecrating my life to the formation of a new religious community." What this community would be exactly was not yet too clear in his mind but he was ready to sacrifice all to give it existence. Was this God's will? He needed to be assured.

Mère Marie Eugénie's reply came on August 5th: "Since we have begun to exist as a Congregation with a spirit distinct from that of other religious orders-others too, recognize this-I have desired with increasing ardor that religious orders for men imbued with a similar spirit be founded in the Church so that young men and, above all, young priests could be given an education that would strengthen their character, broaden their vision and deepen their minds. Such an education would be in one sense more Christian and also more ennobling and liberating."

Because new times demanded new forms of religious life and of the apostolate, Mère Marie Eugénie insisted that "what is lacking for men in France today are religious orders whose members understand the temper, the spirit and I would say even the physical forces of our times." Seized as she was by the Divine Person of Christ, she spontaneously made her own what de BCrulle said: "For the Capuchins, the emphasis is on poverty; for the Chartreux, solitude; for the Jesuits, obedience. What he wants for the Oratorians is the particular care to love intimately and singularly Jesus Christ."

"But what passion ought to be given to Religious? Asked Mère Marie Eugénie. Her answer was: "that coming from faith, from love, from faith in Jesus Christ."

The answer of Père d'Alzon was not long in coming. Yes, the thought of becoming a Religious had been pursuing him but no existing religious orders attracted him. If he were to found a new congregation, it would have this objective: "to help Jesus continue His mystical Incarnation in the Church, in each one of her members." As to the passion that should animate it, he had no doubt: "My passion will be to reveal the God-Man and to divinize men by the power of Jesus Christ."

From this passion of the Abbé, from his friendship with Mère Marie Eugénie and from the College of Notre Dame de Nimes which, under his direction flourished anew, would be born in 1845 the Congregation of the Augustinian Fathers of the Assumption better known as Assumptionists.

The role that Mère Marie Eugénie played in this foundation was not a minor one. Her influence in shaping its spirit, the care she took to find good professors for the College at Nimes, the astonishing intuition she showed in choosing some of its first members who became with the vicar of Nimes the foundation stones of the new Congregation-all these were not insignificant in the history of the Assumptionist Fathers. On the other hand, Père d'Alzon helped in drawing up the Constitutions of the Sisters and in

obtaining the approbation of Rome. This collaboration did not in any way diminish the autonomy of Mère Marie Eugénie and her daughters.

From the Assumptionist Fathers would come another religious family, that of the Little Sisters of the Assumption. Mère Marie Eugénie had herself guided its founder, Père Pernet to Nîmes. She welcomed into the Mother House in Auteuil Mlle. Fage, the co-foundress, for her religious formation. With a contagious enthusiasm, she awakened in the first “Old Girls” of the Assumption a real interest in the work of the Little Sisters which was directly for the under-privileged. Her constant desire was to open their eyes to the great social problems of their time, to awaken in them a desire to work for the social regeneration of their country in a truly Christian spirit.

Evidently neither Mère Marie Eugénie nor Père d’Alzon could clearly see in 1844 to what concrete reality God was leading one or the other and often one by the other. Both were still searching for their true objective and the means to reach it.

From this common search came a clearer and more precise direction to take for both Congregations. Mère Marie Eugénie explained her idea to Père d’Alzon in August of 1844:

“Jesus Christ is the source of life, the trunk to which all religious institutes are united. The more you love Him, the more you will love Him in all the different branches, the more you will see and revere the different degrees, the different expressions of His grace in the priest, in the poor, in religious men and women of all types; but beware of wanting to be all-except in the way the faithful participate in the universal life of the Church. Only the trunk can carry all the branches: it is presumptuous to want to be the trunk or to want to be universal, as often happens today. Be a branch, if you want to become useful in the Church. And believe me, you will never be able to relate with the others unless you take your place humbly and be what you ought to be in Jesus Christ. The order that aspires to be universal will soon think it is sufficient for itself and that it has become ‘all things to all men’ for all time and at the same time.”

In the same letter she explained her understanding of renunciation as primordial in a life tending towards union with God. “It is not a question of giving up one’s will but rather a force, a habit to fight against the evil inclinations of human nature in a condition of sin.” It was to this personal and mature struggle with oneself that the novices must be led. “Those,” she concluded, “who are not capable of this must not be accepted, because if they do not freely accept obedience, poverty and self-denial during their novitiate, what kind of Religious will they be in the midst of the active life when they will be on their own to carry out their mission?”

Such a stand, unusual in that epoch, was viable not only for religious men but for religious women as well. Through the advice she gave to Père d’Alzon, Mère Marie Eugénie gained a clearer vision of the future of the Congregation and a stronger assurance of the direction to take for its growth in the years to come.

“God has made us to support each other,” Père d’Alzon had said after his short visit to Paris in 1843. He was right. The friendship, both human and supernatural, that deepened with the years became for each a source of strength despite the inevitable disagreements that occasionally arose.

Mère Marie Eugénie was not to be alone in steering the Congregation during its beginnings. Sometimes during decisive hours in a foundation, the words of Ecclesiastes would ring true: “Where one alone would be overcome, two will put up resistance; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken.” (4, 12)

In the Community of “l’impasse des Vignes” the young Superior found among her daughters a friend of exceptional worth. That was the once independent and proud Kate O’Neill. Since 1839 God seemed to be preparing Sr. Thérèse Emmanuel for a special mission in the Congregation, that of co-foundress. Mère Marie Eugénie appointed her Assistant and Mistress of Novices. Her docility to the grace of God struck the foundress with awe. It was not that the young Irish woman had lost her personal charm: her simplicity, the Spontaneity of her repartees colored by a certain British humor that was peculiarly her own. For “grace,” St. Thomas tells us, “does not destroy nature but perfects it.”

Grace, indeed, had taken hold of Sr. Thérèse Emmanuel in an extraordinary way. And having surrendered herself totally to the Divine action in her, she was now free to follow the impulse of the Holy Spirit. From that time on, she wrote: “She belonged to God alone. It was He who purified her like a consuming fire . . . This suffering was no longer of earth. It was a communion with God . . . the hand of God touching her.”

The Lord was leading her towards mystical union which is nothing else but the consummation of the life of faith of every baptized person lived fully. “I understand,” she noted down, “that this is the way I must walk in faith towards the light of eternity . . . It is a struggle in obscurity between Christ who draws me to Himself and myself wanting to remain my own master. Instinctively I protect myself as I would protect a bird to keep it from flying away.”

But God was demanding from her an ever greater fidelity and docility so that He could give Himself more fully to her. For this she must be, as it were, “crucified.” She must be dependent on the Word in all her activity, becoming for Him an “extension of His humanity.” At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Carmelite of Dijon, Sr. Elizabeth of the Trinity, used the same expression and lived it.

Monseigneur Gay was the sure guide of Sr. Thérèse Emmanuel, or, more exactly, the witness to the divine action in her, sustaining her as a friend in times of the greatest and most painful obscurity. She must share in the suffering of Christ if she would be one with Him. But she knew that the suffering would someday end in ineffable joy. “Mary is the mother of the Risen Lord,” she noted in Easter of 1843. “The Passion is lost in the Resurrection; it is the transformation of sorrow into divine joy: suffering has become glory.” In 1856, she could in truth say with the Apostle: “I live, no, not I; but Jesus Christ lives in me.”

There was, though, no contradiction between her mystical experiences and the ordinary course of her life. Far from cutting her off from others, or keeping her away from external occupations, her union with the Lord drove her to show greater love to the Sisters.

As Superior at Richmond in 1850, she impressed the Sisters by her capacity to attend to business matters and material constructions at the new priory with utmost efficiency. Eagerness to work and to render service is the authentic sign of a mystical life that is genuine. She did not shrink from the ordinary household tasks; on the contrary she graciously and discreetly assumed the heaviest and the least gratifying.

What Mère Marie Eugénie could see in Sr. Thérèse Emmanuel since 1843 filled her with wonder, all the greater as she had known Kate O’Neill intimately at the beginning of her religious life. “Sr. Thérèse Emmanuel is admirable,” she wrote to Père d’Aizon. “Although she would rather be occupied with God alone and, in fact, she has no thought

for other things, no one is as busy as she is. She has several lessons to give . . . she does more than half of my work, always ready to help and replace others, putting her skill and her pain at the service of all in the house.” And on another occasion she made a remark that almost sounded like yielding to envy: “Sr. Thérèse Emmanuel has now reached that state of oblation for the Church which I have aspired to reach myself.”

Mère Marie Eugénie knew that she could confide the formation of the young novices to her. Through the graces that the Lord was giving Mère Thérèse Emmanuel, it was the whole Congregation that He seemed to be leading to a life of intimacy with Himself.

Open and docile to the movements of the Holy Spirit, the Mistress of Novices received divine insights into her mission to the Religious of the Assumption:

“In each one of them the particular, personal grace must be respected. Avoid making them fit into one mould. Enlighten, guide, correct, yes. But scold, never. Can this word have any sense in the matter of guiding Religious to answer freely the call of the Lord? What is important is to help them attain the double objective of personal union with God and the glory of God through their apostolic work. In the spirit of total detachment to experience God and in a spirit, large and universal, to bring into the world the light and knowledge of Christ. They would not be able to communicate to the children whom they will educate the life of Christ unless they themselves allowed Christ to live His life more and more in them.”

To transmit this message became for the Mistress of Novices a vital need. Hearing one day from a former Master of Novices that he was glad he was no longer one, she expressed surprise.

“But this is the most beautiful mission,” she said. “Oh,” he replied, “it is too tiring. One must repeat the same thing over and over again.”

“But these things count for eternity,” she argued. For the Religious she was forming as well as for herself, there could not be any substitute for obedience. Not a childish obedience but an intelligent and free surrender of oneself to the authority of Superiors who ordinarily expressed God’s will for the Sisters. Her own filial obedience to the foundress was marked by great simplicity in their rapport. Each (lay their affection for one another deepened. They carried the burden of responsibility together. They knew they were accountable for the Congregation that was so fragile because just beginning.

“A religious order is a divine thought for the salvation of men, realized by weak men who leave all, their life, their past, in order to dedicate themselves to this unique purpose,” the Mistress of Novices once said. “We are at the source of the Congregation, at the origin of all.” She could not forget what the Lord had made her to understand: “If she is a channel, it is for the purpose of bringing the life-giving water to others.” She knew the gifts the Lord had given to the foundress, better than any other Sister in the Community did. She also knew her weaknesses “Sometimes,” she wrote about Mère Marie Eugénie, “I thought that her judgement, so clear and decided for others, could give her the answer to her own problems. But it was her conscience not her mind, that was perplexed. It was her moral sense that was so delicate and never at rest. This explained why she was so firm and decided for others. In that case it was only her mind, not her conscience, that was involved. When she became aware of herself, the least doubt troubled her because they were related to God.”

On many occasions, Mère Marie Eugénie liked to emphasize the fact that Mère Thérèse Emmanuel lighted the way for her.

Chapter 11

It is on Jesus Christ as foundation stone that the Congregation is built...

“The work of redemption which essentially concerns the salvation of men also embraces the renewal of the temporal order.”

Apostolicam Actuositatem, 2-5

The Abbé Gaume succeeded Monseigneur Gros as ecclesiastical Superior of the young Assumption Community. As he was not in complete accord with the foundress on certain points of the Constitutions, he asked Mère Marie Eugénie to re-examine them. “M. Gaume finds that we have a too contemplative leaning,” she wrote to Père d’Alzon. “He has told me many times that if we try to combine the rigours of the contemplative life with the work of education, we shall find ourselves unable to do it” Her reply was: “Among other things, education is our duty; but it is the religious life that attracts us.”

What Mère Marie Eugénie found difficult to explain to M. Gaume were the insights that Mère Thérèse Emmanuel received in prayer: “God wants before all other things to consecrate us first to His Son and only through that to our neighbor.”

It was certainly necessary to find the delicate balance between contemplation and action. Without this the existence of the Congregation would be compromised. Mère Marie Eugénie herself learned through experience how an imprudent practice of penance had undermined her health and rendered her at the present time incapable of revising the Constitutions while directing the Community and the school at the same time.

The experience taught her a lesson for the future. But for no prize at all would she reduce the intensity of the prayer life, the choral recitation of the Office under the pretext of finding them obstacles to the work of education. She saw very clearly that charity at the service of man could not become Christian charity unless it was animated by a life of union with Christ.

In a letter dated 1844, she tried to express herself clearly: “Because Christian education is nothing else but the mission of forming persons in the knowledge, love and imitation of Jesus Christ, the Religious who consecrate themselves to teaching ought to be able to find Jesus Christ in the sciences which they acquire and then communicate to their pupils and to evaluate them according to the mind of Jesus Christ. This science is more readily given to those who are humble and accustomed to prayer than to those who rely only on their natural power. It is the fruit of prayer and flows from the fullness of union with Jesus Christ without which the Sisters will never be able to fulfill their particular vocation.”

With such a conviction, it was impossible for her to accept the reasons of those who opposed her. How was it possible to separate the contemplative life from the active life since it was in contemplation that the apostolate found its source? It would be like watering a garden with out channeling water to it from a well or a river. Was not that plain and simple reason?

So important was this key idea to her that the foundress wanted it expressed in the first lines of the Constitutions. “Whatever maintains and strengthens the life of prayer is

of greater value to the Congregation than any external success, great though it may be. The Blessed Virgin is the perfect model for the Religious. Whatever she thought and did flowed from her relationship with Jesus Christ. In this respect she is the source of life and of the Christian spirit also.”

There was one more reason that the foundress could give for her position, one that would eventually unify her entire life: “The Incarnation is the mystery to which the Sisters must continually return because it is in this mystery that everything human has been divinized and has found its ultimate meaning. It is by the mystery of the Incarnation that God through His humanity performed works of mercy and thereby divinized active charity.” This is the vertical dimension that alone gives meaning to the horizontal. And Mère Marie Eugénie concluded: “It is to this kind of charity that women destined to live in the world also ought to be formed.”

On the feast of the Annunciation in 1843, Mère Marie Eugénie offered herself to be forever this “added Humanity of the Word.” Her whole desire was to be an extension of the Incarnation for all to whom it would please the Lord to apply her oblation.

Admirable unity in the personal life of the foundress and in the objective of the Congregation that God had entrusted to her! “You know how everything in our foundation seems to be closely linked,” she wrote to Père d’Alzon. “Because of this, it is necessary for the Religious to acquire habits of austerity, not as an end in itself or an imitation of outmoded monastic customs but as necessary safeguards for ‘spirits’ whose wings have not been cut and in flying can gravitate back to the earth.”

The revision of the Constitutions was urgent, so Mère Marie Eugénie went to Nîmes in October of 1844 to work on it with Père d’Alzon. In the boat she met seven Religious of the Good Shepherd of Angers bound for the different houses of the newly established Congregation. Sailing down the Rhone took some time, so Mère Marie Eugénie, who was thinking of adopting some rules elaborated by Mère Marie Euphrasie Pelletier, took advantage of the opportunity to talk with the Sisters about their religious life. She was surprised and happy to hear that the Congregation already counted thirty-five foundations established as far as Germany, Rome and America after only fifteen years of existence. From the Foundress she learned later that it was difficult to found in France a religious Congregation with Pontifical rights. Many bishops still retained much of Gallicanism in their minds and considered it their unquestionable right to exercise sovereign power over their diocese. Consequently any Congregation with the Mother House in France had to pay a heavy price to escape from such jurisdiction. Mère Marie Eugénie, too, would suffer from this attitude.

At Nîmes Mère Marie Eugénie worked on the revision of the Constitutions and then made her retreat under Père d’Alzon. Back in Paris she prepared to pronounce her vows on Christmas Day of 1844 together with her first companions: Sr. Thérèse Emmanuel, Sr. Marie Augustine, Sr. Marie Thérèse and Sr. Marie Catherine. It was a day of grace joining through fifteen years the grace of the first encounter with Christ on the twenty-fifth of December 1829.

The following Spring Père d’Alzon had to come to Paris for matters concerning the foundation of his Congregation. He celebrated Mass every day at “l’impasse des Vignes” and from the twenty-third to the thirty-first of May preached the retreat to the Community. He had long talks with Mère Marie Eugénie and from “their

common views, their common ideas both gained a better understanding of the great questions they were discussing.”

“Live as all seeds in the ground have to live, humbly, slowly,” had been the advice of Père Lacordaire to her in 1842. “A few persons strongly united are more powerful than a thousand half-united.”

It had been like that for the last three years. By the time it was necessary to leave “l’impasse des Vignes” for a bigger place to accommodate the increasing number of children in the school, this deep and solid unity among the members of the Community had become a characteristic note of the Assumption.

Thanks to M. de Franchessin whose concern for Anne Eugénie had never diminished, the Religious and their pupils were able to move to a bigger property at “rue de Chaillot.” Besides a house it included three hectares of grounds on which new buildings could be erected. The best parts of the house were used by the pupils while the Sisters occupied what was left.

“During those good old times,” recalled a novice of this period some fifty years later, “all the Religious were young, full of enthusiasm and life . . . the oldest among the Superiors were not more than thirty years of age. . . obedience was simple. The Assumption was really one united family. Persons who came to see us were surprised by your unity and would say: ‘They seem to have only one heart and one mind.’” Another Religious, recalling their installation in what resembled Noah’s Ark, said: “There was joy in that life of poverty. What bursts of laughter resounded in the gloomy rooms of that old house! How well we slept in the improvised dormitory! And the refectory which was in the basement-it was as dark and ugly as it could possibly be.”

There was only one thing of artistic value in the house. That was the Virgin carrying the Child Jesus carved out of stone by an unknown sculptor of the Middle Ages. The statue was in a niche facing the garden.

“But a boarding school that looked too poor would drive away the parents,” Père d’Alzon remarked one day. “A magnificent school would soon degenerate into a hotel de luxe,” replied Mère Marie Eugénie.

Thank God it was not like that at hotel “trois étoiles, rue de Chaillot.” As a matter of fact, it required all the ingenuity of the Superior to make the boarding school look acceptable to the parents.

It was not, however, the building that was the attraction of the Assumption but the high quality of the instruction, the competence of the educators, the dynamism of the Mistress of Studies, Mère Marie Augustine, and above all, the exceptional personality of the Superior and Directress. These were becoming the topic of conversation in some circles in and outside Paris.

Several families from the nobility began to consider it an honor for their daughters to be educated by the Religious of the Assumption. What did Mère Marie Eugénie think of this? “We allow them to come without attracting them,” she said. “But I see to it that they do not drive away from us any family from the middle class. Their presence does not in any way change the spirit of simplicity that should be preserved. Why then should they be rejected a priori? They are children who, more than any other, would have important roles to play in society. Because of their wealth and prestige they would be more exposed to the evils in the world. Into this milieu, often more Christian in name than in fact, is it not urgent to bring also the message of the Gospel?”

In cases like this, Mère Marie Eugénie sought the advice of the oldest in the Community—no one was more than thirty years of age—to help her find the proper solution. The mastery she showed in keeping the original direction of the Congregation while making the inevitable adaptations that the concrete carrying out of a project called for aroused the admiration of many famous personalities of her time.

Dom Gueranger did not hide his admiration for this Religious of high calibre who, like him moreover, understood the value of liturgical renewal. He spoke highly of her to the Benedictines in France. They had already often come to “l’impasse des Vignes.” Now they were frequent visitors at “rue de Chaillot.” One of them said to the Sisters: “Mère Marie Eugénie has a gift of getting from all Congregations whatever would be valuable to your Congregation. One finds in your rule as in that of St. Benedict, the simplicity of universal guiding principles.” Another from Solesmes said candidly: “Your Mother General has truly the mind of a man. Her appreciations are enlightening.”

From Munich Leon Bore already gave the following testimony in 1843: “If I feel at home with you, it is because I see you working intelligently and with generosity for the type of education that is appropriate to the needs of our times. . . . It is so because you have no fear of philosophy or of poetry or of mysticism or of German literature; in a word, neither of science nor of art. . . .” He cited to her what Ozanam wrote of the apostle of Bavaria in the VIIIth century, de Ruprecht: “He also had the profound insight of starting the education of peoples by educating women.”

Some years later Monseigneur Dupanloup would often come to the convent and discuss with Mère Marie Eugénie the problem that preoccupied him, that of education.

For her the problem remained dominated by the same key idea. It was not a question of forming learned women but of forging strong personalities in order to prepare for the society of tomorrow—Christian women capable of freely maintaining their faith and living it.

“What makes for superiority of personality is the particular attitude of mind and habitual disposition of heart that a person has made her own.

“It is necessary in education to discover the specific talents and grace of each one. It is not a question of artificial restraint but of respecting a certain liberty of spirit. Nothing is to be destroyed in nature except that which proves an obstacle to grace. Everything else is to be directed, channeled, allowed to unfold and to develop. Keep always in mind the same ultimate objective: to help the young discover personally according to their own experience of life, ‘the eminent knowledge of Jesus Christ.’”

Today we would say to know by experience what is the breadth, the length and the depth of the love of God in Jesus Christ. An arduous task that could be pursued only slowly and with due respect of persons.

From the very start, Mère Marie Eugénie was on her guard against an education that stressed functional discipline rather than awakened in the young a sense of personal responsibility. She did not want the discipline of the barracks in the school.

“The formative years,” she said, “are a privileged time; they leave a permanent mark on one’s entire life.”

There was no reason for imposing a discipline that had no *raison d’être* after school. A certain degree of external order was necessary but this could never be an end in itself. She made clear to all the real objective she was pursuing: “Out in the world, the pupils of

yesterday are the Christian women of today, capable of bringing into the heart of a family Christian principles and habits.”

It was then important to aim at the development of the mind in order to Christianize it and at the formation of the will to make it capable of sacrifice, of self-denial. . . The work might be long and arduous, sometimes ungrateful, but the good that came from it could affect many generations to come. “A Christian woman will bring up Christian children and can you see what glory this will be for God and what blessings it will bring to you?” Mère Marie Eugénie assured the Religious. But, she warned them, “it cannot be by rote that one prepares women and future mothers of families to be Christian in fact and not only in name.”

As new foundations were made, Mère Marie Eugénie would again and again remind the Sisters to make necessary adaptations according to differences in temperaments in different regions. “If the girls from Bordeaux are ‘butterflies,’ let them fly. Do not clip their wings, do not try to reduce to one color the thousand different hues in them. Let us limit ourselves to re-directing their flight if they go wrong.”

The child should never feel misunderstood or “held in reins.” More effective than external discipline is confidence which builds up the young and draws the utmost from them. “Great principles make great personalities,” she would often say-an idea she incarnated in herself.

Fundamental in this work of character building are the great human principles which cannot be by-passed. For is it not from these human foundations that grace brings out marvelous effects?” To call oneself Christian and make little of natural virtues is an absurdity against which the non-Christians react strongly and with justice. Mère Marie Eugénie knew from experience that among people who did not have any religion, human qualities sadly lacking in some Catholics could be found. “Our witness,” she stressed before the Religious, “is to make every one with whom we come in contact understand that she is for God, she belongs to God, she comes from God.” And this witness that is in reality the witness demanded of every baptized person should be the witness that pupils formed according to these great human and supernatural principles ought in their turn to be capable of giving.

To help the young to unfold and to blossom, each according to her native temperament, to awaken in them a sense of personal responsibility rather than to force them to comply with external regulations, to develop in them faith rather than piety - that was the spirit that the foundress of the Assumption wanted to make the foundation of her pedagogy.

Faith-that was the keystone of the whole edifice. Because it is faith that can give to educators the needed light and strength to accomplish their mission. It is a difficult mission. But if even in the most difficult child there is always the possibility of change, how much greater is this possibility if one believes in the power of grace, in all who are baptized. “Jesus Christ is present in every child to do this work,” she reminded the Sisters. “It is enough to be attentive, to His action and second it. Why should we fear to build on Jesus Christ in the child?”

One can truly say that Mère Marie Eugénie pursued no other goal but education of the faith and in the faith. “To make Jesus Christ known as liberator and king of the world, that is for me the beginning and the end of Christian education,” she wrote to Lacordaire

in 1842. She admitted that this was a colossal task and added: "There are too few engaged in this work. And yet no one who knows its necessity and urgency can be excused from getting involved in it." For Anne Eugénie this was the most important and the most urgent need of her time.

And yet...

In Spring of 1866 when the foundress of the Assumption was asked in the presence of Cardinal Quaglia, prefect of the Congregation of Religious in Rome: "What is the purpose of the new Congregation?" Mère Marie Eugénie answered without hesitation: "Our objective is prayer, the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, the Divine Office of the universal Church, the education of children."

What had happened in the course of twenty years? Had the Revolution of 1848 killed the apostolic élan of the Congregation? Destroyed the works that were then emerging so full of promise for the future? No. The houses of the Congregation were flourishing and increasing in number.

Had the spirit of the Institute taken a new direction under the impulse of a new inspiration? No. It was rather a process of stabilizing the central axis of the Congregation. Jesus Christ had taken the central place and the apostolic work became the inevitable overflow of a life of faith centered on the Person of Christ. It did not thereby lose its importance and value for the Congregation but rather gained in vigor.

Because apostolic action has no real fecundity unless the apostle is sensitive and responsive to the movement of the Holy Spirit, the works in themselves alone would not do for Mère Marie Eugénie. No one may be capable of educating someone in the faith unless she herself has given up her own life and allowed Jesus Christ to live in her. "You are apostles," she told the Religious. "Your mission is to forge persons in the fire of truth.. . You are the witnesses of Jesus Christ. This should urge you to be holy at every moment of your life. Do not be deceived. To be able to give light, you must nourish yourself with light."

No, the works, the institutes, even the new foundations -these were not of the greatest importance. For those who want to spread the truth of the Gospel, what comes first is the capacity to make it radiant. During the year 1850 Mère Marie Eugénie expressed her fears about a rapid expansion. "I fear an expansion that will prevent us from attending above all to the solid formation of the Religious. The Congregation is doomed if the voting Sisters do not have the spirit that should animate them. And what is this spirit? There is only one foundation stone: Jesus Christ. It is on Jesus Christ that we are built, that everything is built."

Admirable linking in faultless logic: Only the love of God urges us to make Him known and thereby glorified. But only union with God enables us to serve Him as He wants and this Union is possible only in and through Christ.

In 1889, the foundress in full possession of the spirit that she had received from the Lord in order to communicate it to her religious family summed it up in a few lines packed with meaning: "In telling you that the Religious of the Assumption ought to be adorers, zealous for the rights of God, I should make you understand that the glory of God is our first objective. Our zeal for the salvation of men can be motivated by their need for salvation; but it can also be motivated by the consideration of God's rights over men, His glory and His love for them. In this way the good of the creature is taken up and identified

with the glory of the Creator. Men do not lose anything when we work for their salvation for the glory of God.”

And commenting on the words of St. Paul which had always lighted her horizons: *Instaurare omnia in Christo*, she concluded: “What should always be your concern in the education of children is to make this truth sink into the depths of their being: that every man comes from God, belongs to God and is for God.”

It would seem evident that the discreet and illuminating influence of Mère Thérèse Emmanuel was not absent in the process that gradually unified Mère Marie Eugénie’s life as the years passed. It could also be truly said that Mère Thérèse Emmanuel providentially realized in her own life—a life that unified divine intimacy with constant apostolic activity—what the Assumption was called to live as a Congregation according to the particular call of each one of her members.

But the influence of her Assistant did no more in the final analysis than sustain the Foundress in the line of her own personal charism and at times confirm it.

On Christmas Day of 1829, Anne Eugénie Milleret had been seized by the infinite grandeur of God, transported, as it were, to His presence there to give God through Him whom she had just received for the first time a homage that she was incapable of giving on her own.

“The encounter was short,” she said in 1836, “but I have never forgotten it.”

Whatever roles M. Combalot and Père d’Alzon might have played as instruments of God, that first grace would gradually reveal itself as the personal grace of Mère Marie Eugénie Milleret. The grace of her life. The grace of the foundation God entrusted to her. In the dazzling light that seized the child of twelve was already contained the seed of the true spirit of the Assumption.

Chapter 12

This call to the missions.

“It is the mission of the whole Church to make men capable of constructing the temporal order and of orienting it towards God through Christ.”

Apostolicam Actuositatem, 2-7

While striving to remain faithful to the grace of Christmas of 1829, Anne Eugénie Milleret did not lose the fire and ardor of her own temperament. One could perhaps say of her that she was passionate by nature and passionate by reason. Apathy, somnolence—these were, in her eyes, attitudes to be feared because they were destructive. She preferred at all times a constructive enthusiasm, even one bound to end in disappointment.

The foundress of the Assumption kept all her life the vibrant nature which intensified her sufferings as well as her joys in times of great expectations and in times of discouraging failures. Under the action of God whose grace does not destroy but perfects nature, the eddies and storms of life gradually purified the passion that finally remained the only passion of Mère Marie Eugénie: the glory of God in Christ and through Christ.

What did the Revolution of 1848 mean to this woman who was haunted since adolescence by the hope of a social change in her country through the power of Catholicism better understood and freely accepted?

Despite alarming signs in the month of March, she still hoped that the cause she supported would not be totally lost. On the feast of the Annunciation she wrote to Père d’Alzon: “No other Congregation has been founded with this society of the future in view as we are. Our desires hasten the coming of this future. We want the happiness of our people and we sympathize with all that is reasonable and Christian. If men well aware of this truth reject us, that is their problem. It has been a long time now since men exercised their power to reject the truth they heard. But I would not have any scruple to see our work recognized as a task for the nation. There will be a number of Buchezians in the government and it would be unfortunate if there should not be among them also true Catholics capable of pursuing in a perfectly orthodox way in the Republic the ideal of a Christian society.”

With the June uprising, her illusions crumbled down. No, it would not be the Second Republic—nor the Second Empire—that would fulfill her hopes. Were all who, like her, hoped for a better future mistaken? The coming of a new society with a more just and happier condition for all men, firmly established on the principles of the Gospel was this nothing but a vain illusion?

Utopia? It would seem that Mère Milleret believed she would live to see the coming of this society. Perhaps, carried away by her vehement desire to see the coming of God’s reign on earth, she had forgotten that God’s hour is not ours. The cockle sown by the enemy, always on the look-out, continues to grow with the good grain—the Gospel reminds us. And it will be that way until the end of time. If the good grain buried in the earth does not die, it cannot bear fruit.

To this hard truth, this condition placed by Christ for the coming of his Kingdom, the archbishop of Paris, Monseigneur Affre gave witness when he died in the barricades

at Faubourg Saint-Antoine.

The terrible days in the capital which shocked the whole nation affected Mère Marie Eugénie deeply. It did not diminish her zeal. It added fire to it. For the more unaware men were of the liberating message of Christ, the greater was the need for others to work untiringly for the coming of the Kingdom. That was the strong conviction of Mère Marie Eugénie.

The year 1849 brought a new development. "Do you know that we are invited to go to China?" she announced to Pere d'Alzon jubilantly. "Sr. Marie Gertrude is burning with the desire to go there. I confess that this tempts me." The project, however, did not look realizable at first and had to be abandoned. Some months later a new call came. The foundress was fascinated because, she said, "nothing awakens fervor, zeal and detachment from all that is not God in and around us more effectively than this call to the missions." The invitation came from Monseigneur Aedam Devereux, apostolic vicar of the Cape. He was asking for four Religious of the Assumption to take charge of the administration of a school for girls in the city of Grahams town. "The good to be done is immense," concluded Mère Marie Eugénie.

The message transmitted to her was: "Many young African girls baptized in the Church fall away from the Faith because there are no women who can give them the solid religious education they need. They are not prepared to live a Christian life in their own homes."

Four Religious prepared to leave for the Cape to work with Monseigneur Devereux. His own sister wanted to join the missionaries and it was planned that she should come to Chaillot to begin her novitiate immediately.

The whole Community at Chaillot rejoiced at the prospect of a missionary undertaking. From Nimes Père d'Alzon also sent his word of encouragement. In Paris, however, Monseigneur Sibour, the ecclesiastical Superior, was more reticent while Monseigneur Darboy vetoed the project, judging it premature for the Congregation to venture out into the missions. By force of insistence, the necessary authorization was obtained from him. Sr. Marie Gertrude was sent to England to try and get through Monseigneur Devereux a subsidy from the government for the mission in the Cape. The feverish activity she displayed on this occasion and the initiatives she took which seemed lacking in good judgement at times made Mère Marie Eugénie anxious.

The fact was that a foundation in the missions on the other side of the world made by a Congregation in Paris with only ten years of existence would create problems

Problems, diverse and delicate, that those in authority in the middle of the 19th century could not possibly understand because they had no experience of life in the missions. What could they know about mission lands, the temperament of the natives, their real needs, the rhythm of their life, the unforeseen but necessary adaptations that had to be made? Very little or nothing at all. Modern means of communication had not yet cut down distances and made it possible for the whole world to know what was happening in other places every day. It took months to travel from Paris to the Cape in 1850. Between sending letters and receiving answers, a year would pass at times.

This condition could lead to difficult situations. A slight change in direction could lead to a catastrophe. For a Superior or even a Superior General to believe in good

faith that rules made for a religious community in Europe could be followed with equal simplicity on the other side of the world would cause conflicts. For necessary adaptations, sometimes fundamental in nature, could not be foreseen but must await experience.

It was utopian to impose rules that were not applicable eight thousand kilometers away- utopian hope in which Mère Marie Eugénie, like many of her contemporaries allowed themselves to be carried away. Driven by the desire to see the realization of the impossible, not only women but also men embarked on adventures whose end they could not foresee.

One proof was provided by the French Sulpicians who went to America in the first half of the 19th century. Three of them, Dubois, Dubourg and Brute de Remur, became titular bishops of the first Catholic dioceses created in the United States. Seeing the incompatibility of the rules laid out for Sulpicians by M. Olier in France and the way of life on the other side of the Atlantic, they had to break with the Society if they were to face in its reality the missionary tasks before them.

These facts, known in Paris since 1834, surprised the Superiors but did not enlighten them. What echoes of it reached the Archbishop of Paris, it was hard to tell. That Monsigneur Sibour had no knowledge of it could be gathered from his address to the missionaries of the Assumption on August 14, 1849:

“To remain faithful to the grace of their vocation, the Religious who are leaving for the Cape have only to remain faithful to their Rules, to the spirit and the letter of their observances and Constitutions. If some changes or modifications are needed because of regional differences, the Superior should let the Bishop know. She will then follow his advice and decision and write to the Superior General for the authorization to make the changes.”

It was evidently a wrong directive because coordination between the African Community and the Mother House in Paris soon became impractical.

The Sisters arrived at their mission post after three months of tiring sea voyage. No sooner had they arrived when they found themselves confronted by new and urgent tasks. To wait for word from Mère Marie Eugénie was impractical. Sr. Marie Gertrude thought it wise to make the necessary changes after consulting the Bishop. For the other Sisters of the Community, it was a hard reality to face. The religious life now proposed to them and the religious life of the Assumption in Paris no longer had any true cohesion. Ought they to give up the observance of the Rule which until then was presented to them as essential so that they could be available day and night for the tasks of the missions? Or ought they to excuse themselves from following the directives of the Bishop in the name of fidelity to the spirit and the letter of their observances and Constitutions? A conflict was arising and political troubles in the Cape in 1851 intensified it. Fatigue and a sense of psychological and moral separation from the Mother House soon made the situation unbearable for the Community.

In Paris Mère Marie Eugénie was becoming aware of the danger that threatened the small Community, but delay in the mail kept her from judging the situation objectively.

“The state of affairs in the missions is becoming for me something too heavy to bear. I do not know what decision to take but I hope that God will finally help me to see what I can do,” she wrote in November of 1851. Two more Sisters were sent to the Cape. but this did not solve the problem. It made the situation worse. It added to the dissatisfaction of the Bishop who misinterpreted her action and called it the “meddling of

the Superior of Paris in the affairs of the missions in the Cape.” On December 10, 1852, the Sisters of the Assumption who had been sent to Africa were recalled to Paris.

Sr. Marie Gertrude, by vocation and by temperament, had already entered fully into the views of the Bishop. Certain that her place was at the missions, she wrote, not to the Superior General but to the Archbishop of Paris, asking him for the authorization to change Congregations. On his part, Monseigneur Devereux accused Mère Marie Eugénie of having done harm to the missions in the Cape by her authoritarian action. These proceedings, conducted with little delicacy, hurt Mère Marie Eugénie deeply. It was already a sacrifice for her to give up the missions. To abandon it under such Conditions was a painful disappointment. She would have wanted so much, she wrote to Sr. Marie Gertrude, to remember only her devotion, her efforts and the affection that, despite all, would bind the Assumption to Africa with ties that could never be broken: those of prayer and zeal.

The disappointment was as brutal as the hopes had been great and enthusiastic.

A more promising foundation was also initiated before the departure of the first missionaries for the Cape. Mère Marie Eugénie wrote to Père d’Alzon in 1849: “Can you believe that we are asked to make three foundations at the same time: the Cape, Richmond, and Bordeaux?” Among the three, the mission in Africa seemed then to demand the priority.

The following year, however, the first house of the Assumption was opened in England. The Duchess of Leeds wanted to establish in Richmond an orphanage for abandoned children. She wanted to entrust this orphanage to Catholic Religious. In due time a boarding school for another type of children would also be opened in Richmond.

The prospect of a foundation in the British Isles attracted not only Mère Marie Eugénie but also Mère Thérèse Emmanuel who watched the development of the project with deep joy. No one could give better advice to the Superior General than she because of her nationality. And no one was better equipped to begin the life and work of the Assumption in Richmond. Though the separation would be keenly felt both by Mère Marie Eugénie herself and the novices who would lose their Novice Mistress for a time, the decision was soon made.

Mère Thérèse Emmanuel felt keenly the heavy responsibility of establishing in a non-Catholic country the third house of the Assumption. But God assured her in prayer of His continued presence. In May of 1850 she embarked for England with her companions. During a short stop at London she saw Cardinal Wiseman but was unable to talk to him. From the Bishop of York, the small group received the warmest welcome. They arrived at Richmond on the last day of May.

The country-side was magnificent. The quiet and solitude captivated Mère Thérèse Emmanuel. She wrote to the Superior General about her first impressions: “The house is situated on an elevated piece of land which slopes down rapidly to the river below whose cascades we can hear from our cells. We can easily imagine ourselves a hundred leagues from the city.”

But well situated though it was, the house was in no condition for any one to live in it. There was hardly any thing in it, not even straw mattresses; these had to be made as quickly as possible. The best part was at once turned into a chapel. But there was no regular chaplain, so the Sisters went to the Parish Church for Mass daily . . . when the old and ailing curate could celebrate it. When he could not, there was no Eucharistic

celebration, no Communion. It was a sacrifice for all but Mère Thérèse Emmanuel did not want this deprivation to dampen the spirits of the Sisters in any way. Were they not living in the immense ocean of God's presence? It was the will of God and the best for each one of them. She herself lived this reality and radiated it to others. At times, lost in the presence of God, she would remain absorbed in prayer long after the community hour of prayer had passed. Then Sr. Marie Caroline would discreetly bring her back to the earthly reality of getting the house ready for occupancy. Without delay she would go to the place of work, taking for herself graciously the most tiring and ungratifying household chores. As each day passed the Community marveled at the transformation that was giving the old house a new look.

Soon it was ready for twelve orphans to live in. The Sisters welcomed them warmly as well as the pupils of a small school who came daily to take their meals. The school was run by Miss Burchall. Her daily contact with the Sisters awakened in her an admiration which finally led her to ask for admission into the novitiate in Paris.

Work was the only thing that was not lacking in Richmond. The regular life was resumed and work filled the rest of the day. Nevertheless they could not long remain unconcerned about the women workers in a paper factory who came across their way every day. The working conditions in the factory were sub-human and the moral life of several of the women was questionable. Some Irish women were often the object of mockery directed at their Faith. To defend it and themselves, they resorted to insults and blows. There was a name that always provoked a burst of deriding laughter and fist fights. That was the name of Sarah Thompson.

Should the Sisters living in the convent on the hill come to the aid of these women? Should they answer the cry of distress reaching them from the factory? Mère Thérèse Emmanuel and her Community could not evade the question.

One day, on their way to Mass, they met some fifteen of these women. With them was Sarah Thompson. The Sisters greeted the women cordially and that seemed to have been all. No one could tell whether Mère Thérèse Emmanuel said anything to Sarah Thompson. For some thing happened to her. As if drawn by an irresistible force she came to the convent to see Mère Thérèse Emmanuel. Once was not enough. She had to see her again and again. "She changed me, my inside," she said naively. Thus, little by little Notre Dame de la Paix, under whose protection the convent was placed, transformed this woman who now repeated silently Ave Marias instead of the licentious language she was accustomed to use when laughed at. She felt she had to bring her children, a boy and a girl, to the convent and also the other Irish women for religious instruction.

So, every Sunday a happy group of women and young girls climbed the hill to the priory to listen for one hour to a Sister speak to them about God and the Church. They would leave full of joy and say to one another: "We shall tell all this to our husbands and children; they have more need of it than we have."

The news went around that there were no more fights at the factory. God's light had passed through the look of a Religious and had conquered hearts. Mère Thérèse Emmanuel was in fact becoming more and more transparent to the divine light in her, allowing it to pass unimpeded to all who approached her. She would be for Christ an "added humanity"

The joy at Notre Dame de la Paix was great on the 7th and 15th of August when Sarah Thompson and her daughter were baptized and received their first Holy Communion. The Superior of Richmond knew how much these graces had cost her. They meant entering more deeply into the mystery of the Crucified and Risen Lord. In the depths of her heart the Virgin was urging her to say to them:

“I am the Mother of God and I lead to my Son all who give themselves to me.”

The letters from Richmond brought joy to Mère Marie Eugénie. They were for her new occasions for thanking the Lord, believing in Him and trusting Him more than ever. But the Sisters in Richmond had one difficulty. There was not enough water. Each morning it was necessary for a Sister to get water from a river on the other side of the highway. It was very tiring and the Superior thought of having a well dug in the property, once the construction was over. She called the workers and the digging was begun. But there was hardly any sign of water and when the money to pay the workers with ran out, the work had to be stopped.

“Let us pray,” Mère Thérèse Emmanuel said. “Did the Lord not make water spring out of rock to quench the thirst of His people in the desert? . . . If you have faith as big as a mustard seed. . . For nine days the Community prayed to Him “whose arm is not shortened,” as Scripture says. If He gives to anyone who believes in Him the water of eternal life, could He not give to the Community the water they so badly needed? After Mass on the ninth day the Community went out to see the unfinished well in the garden. They bent down . . . the well dry the day before was now filled with water, water that would never fail. There was an explosion of joy and thanksgiving. Then Mère Thérèse Emmanuel asked for a pitcher. She filled it with water and hurried to the bedside of a sick Sister. “Drink this water with confidence,” she told her. “It is the good God who sends it to us.”

In Paris Sr. Marie Augustine fell sick and had to stop working for a time. Mère Marie Eugénie who had already taken the place of the Mistress of Novices had now also to take charge of the studies and of the children in the school. She wrote about this to Mère Thérèse Emmanuel. “We have to ask much from Jesus Christ. I believe He will give us much because we are powerless.” To her Assistant she also spoke about the storm raging in the African mission. The answer of Mère Thérèse Emmanuel was: “What is important after all, even in the missions, is not that we do all that can be done but that we do the will of God. He takes away all from us so that we may realize that He alone is our support.” She knew Mère Marie Eugénie intimately and could understand her anguish. From Richmond she tried to sustain her by her friendship: “It is right that I should not share your difficulties when I share your authority?” she wrote to her. At least she could assure her of the unity among the Sisters in the convent of NotreDamede la Paix, and between the House in England and the House in Paris. “We are the branch of a tree that draws its life, its growth from the trunk standing firmly with its roots deep in the earth. It is not mere fancy when we say that the root that gives us life is buried in the soil of Paris and it is there that it draws the power we manifest.”

Mère Marie Eugénie gave her full approval to all the initiatives that Mère Thérèse Emmanuel had to take, merely advising her to see that everything was marked by the spirit of the Assumption.

“I like to hear you say that you are the witnesses of Our Lord,” she told the Sisters.

To the confidences of Mère Thérèse Emmanuel about the graces she was receiving from Our Lord, graces “that were always related to Jesus Christ, His cross, His action and power in her and through her inspite of her misery,” the Superior General answered by telling her also of the graces she was receiving: “I have received an increase of fervor in my devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary,” she wrote to her in the beginning of June of 1851, “and I am very happy . . . You know that she is for us what St. Teresa is for her daughters, Mother of the Congregation besides being Mother of all Christians.”

As the end of autumn was approaching, she thought of the convent on top of the hill, open to the winter wind and storms, and could not help writing to Mère Thérèse Emmanuel: “I fear the winter; the wind of Richmond cuts through my heart.”

No one, not even Madame de Sevigny, could have written with so much tenderness and delicacy to her daughter.

Has it ever been said at any time and in any place that the love of the Lord preferred above all things has dried up a human heart? And is there anyone who can say that religious life understood rightly and lived fully ever broke a friendship, destroyed personality, killed all human passion?

No. These two women could not have endured the religious life if it produced such mutilations.

On the contrary, “love which makes a person die to himself, detaches him from all that is evil,” says St. John of the Cross, “and leaves him with no other knowledge but love.”

Chapter 13

The responsibility I bear...

“Through each one of her members and through the community that she forms the Church believes that she can contribute to the progressive humanization of the family of mankind and its history.

The Church Today, 40-3.

“I believe that it would be best for me not to allow myself to be re-elected Superior in 1850 when we shall have our elections,” Mère Marie Eugénie wrote to Pèr d’Alzon at the end of the preceding year. “I feel that I am losing the habit of obeying... of living as a Religious.”

“I forbid you to be preoccupied about whether you will be elected Superior in 1850 or not,” Pèr d’Alzon replied. “I am more convinced each day that you should be Superior for life.” Some time later he told her more categorically: “For a long time now I have forbidden you to resign from your task as Superior. This is for me a question already resolved once and for all. No one can change my mind on this matter; I believe that God wants it. He wants you to communicate your spirit to the Congregation that you have founded.”

“*You have founded.*” Pèr d’Alzon wrote and underlined these words in his reply to Mère Marie Eugénie. But to be foundress did not mean to be proprietor. “You should be the instrument, not the driving power,” he explained more precisely in 1856 after he himself had been Superior for some years. “The driving power is Our Lord, it is the Holy Spirit; you will spoil whatever you do, even the best, if you take His place.”

It sounded like preaching to a convert.

“I look for means to help me remain in the presence of Our Lord,” Mère Marie Eugénie noted down in 1850. “to be faithful to the Holy Spirit, to allow myself to be guided by Him. And since I rely little on the best of my means, I have to count on His love and mercy and to expect all things from Him.”

This attitude of trust, simple and lucid—which is, in fact, the essence of humility—saved the foundress from the danger of authoritarianism. It soon became evident to all—in and outside the Community—that leaving her at the helm of the Congregation could not be anything else but beneficial for the stability and expansion of the Institute as well as for the deepening of its spirit.

When the first General Chapter was held in September of 1858 with Monseigneur Darboy presiding, the foundress was unanimously elected Superior for life. There were then four Houses depending on the Mother House.

Since 1850, the Congregation had been developing, its members increasing in number. At Rome, however, the proceedings for the decree of approbation of the Institute were taking their customary slow pace.

It is not possible in this book to follow day by day the growth of the Congregation. The writer can only take the principal stages of its development, take hold of the most striking events and with a flash of light, fix them as it were, on a photographic plate.

Mère Thérèse Emmanuel was replaced as Superior of Richmond by Sr. Marie Ignace in 1852. Her return to Paris coincided with a call from Père d'Alzon, Superior of the Assumptionists, addressed to Mère Marie Eugénie. He was asking for the establishment of a religious community essentially dedicated to the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament in the city of Nimes. The adoration of Christ in the Eucharist was always in the heart of Mère Marie Eugénie, although it seemed for the time being somewhat difficult to reconcile with the life of teaching. The small Community at "l'impasse des Vignes" had already obtained in 1843 permission to expose the Blessed Sacrament for some hours on certain feasts. The proposal of Père d'Alzon did not seem realizable at the time. It was not, however, rejected for good.

In due time, the project was carried out in Nimes in 1855 through the establishment of a new Community entirely dedicated to the contemplative life. Was the foundation destined to become in the Congregation like a second branch requiring a distinctly different vocation and formation of the novices from the time of their entry into the religious life? No. Though it might have been considered a possibility at the beginning. The foundation at Nimes was followed in 1856 by the establishment of a school in the same city. This was assuredly a sign from Providence that the priority of the contemplative life would always be safeguarded in the Assumption. Today we would say: It gave to the vertical dimension of an apostolate carried out in the concrete reality of the active life such stability that the urgency and the extent of apostolic tasks would never be able to diminish it.

"Why do you remain in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament?" Mère Marie Eugénie asked her daughters. "Is it not so that He whom you adore can live more fully in you?"

The adoration of the Blessed Sacrament would finally be established wherever possible—at least for some hours daily—even in the houses of education. On the other hand, small Communities no longer able to carry out the task of education would become in the Congregation like little islands of more intense prayer life where the Religious could stay for some time to renew themselves or make their retreat in solitude and peace. The Superior General liked to emphasize: "Prayer in faith leads to true union with God." On this matter she could not be too insistent: "There is no instant in our life when we do not have to seek God. Even if we do not see Him, we have at least the complete certitude that He is in our midst, He is in us, in the depth of our being, possessing us, knowing us, loving us and wanting to be known and loved by us..."

The future Monseigneur Gay who was named in 1853 the confessor of the Community in Paris guided the Superior General and the Religious of the Assumption along the sure road of pure faith towards union with God. Writing to Mère Thérèse Emmanuel whom he had already been guiding for several years, he said: "You are right in saying that faith is above the lights and impressions you are experiencing, even if you are absolutely certain they come from God . . . which we are never sure of. It is faith alone that cannot deceive us."

In 1853 Cardinal Gousset, Archbishop of Reims and former Bishop of Bergerac, asked for the foundation of a house of the Assumption in his diocese. He would like it he said, to be established in Sedan. At the same time a similar call came from Newcastle in England while a pro-position was made to Mère Marie Eugénie to buy a property in Preisch for the establishment of a school.

It was asking too much at one time and wisely Mère Marie Eugenie decided not to disperse the still fragile forces of the Congregation. Only one foundation was actually made. That was the one in Sedan in October of 1854. Sr. Marie Thérèse, Josephine de Commarque already known to Monseigneur Gousset for a long time, was sent with Sr. Marie Bernard. They left for Sedan in June to prepare the place for the coming school year and to meet the parents of the future pupils.

When they arrived in Sedan they found themselves faced by a task completely different from what they had expected. A cholera epidemic had suddenly broken out in the district. Day and night the Superior of the Daughters of Charity who had received them into their convent ministered to the sick. Could Sr. Marie Thérèse hide from the danger of contagion behind the excuse of observing the Rule? She wrote at once to Paris. But no immediate answer came. She wrote a second time. Mère Marie Eugenie needed time for reflection for her consent would mean exposing the life of the future Superior of Sedan. She could not, however, in conscience refuse Sr. Marie Thérèse the permission to care for the victims of the epidemic. Her answer came on August 9th, not only giving her permission but praising and encouraging her. Without delay Sr. Marie Thérèse took her place beside the Superior of the daughters of St. Vincent de Paul, ministering untiringly to the sick and the dying. When the epidemic was finally put under control and gradually died out, Sr. Marie Thérèse at once began the preparations for the opening of the school. The care of the sick had surprisingly not drained her of strength. Having accomplished her mission, she went back to Paris, passing by Reims on the way to pay her respects to the Bishop who had helped her enter the Assumption some twenty years and more ago. The meeting was a joyful one for both the Cardinal and the Religious. He thanked her for the devotion she had shown during the epidemic at Sedan.

The school at Sedan was opened in October. The convent was placed under the protection of St. Joseph. This pleased the Sisters very much and one wrote to Mère Marie Eugenie: "I thank you, dear Mother, for giving us the book of the Foundations of St. Teresa. Reading it does us a lot of good. The only regret we feel is that we find ourselves so little like the first daughters of Cannel and we envy them. If only our Lord could say of us what He told St. Teresa about the monastery of St. Joseph, that it was His paradise on earth . . . that is our sole ambition."

In the meantime Mère Marie Eugenie followed with the interest her friendship dictated the foundation of the Assumptionist Fathers. On more than one occasion, Père d'Alzon sought advice from her. "In the past I did you good," he said; "now it is you who does me good." That was in April of 1856. He had just received a proposal to establish a house at Fernay in Switzerland and another at Mans. What seemed to him more important was to establish a house in Paris.

The Superior General of the Assumption had also received an urgent call from Rome. Cardinal Wiseman is also asking us to come to London, and Monsignor de la Bouillerie, to Carcassonne. Geneva has more attraction for us especially since you are going to make a foundation at Fernay."

Problems connected with the house of Nimes during the years 1856-57 prevented Père d'Alzon from making the foundations at Femay and at Mans. Mère Marie Eugenie on her part wanted first to assure the installation of the Sisters and their pupils in Auteuil.

Auteuil was then more than just the great suburb of Paris. It was the Countryside at the door of the capital. The Congregation had just bought the châteaux of the Thuilerie.

Because of its extraordinary situation, hidden from view by magnificent trees which surrounded it, it had been given the name of “invisible châteaux” - (the first Consul, Napoleon, had often frequented the place.) It was necessary to make certain adaptations which we would call functional today. But at least there were spacious halls and one of these could be transformed into a chapel.

The visitors who now came to Auteuil to talk with Mère Marie Eugenie were different from those who came to the Salon of the First Consul when the Thuilerie belonged to the de Brienne family. They were not, though, of a lower quality. Monseigneur Gerbet, Monseigneur Dupanloup, Monseigneur Gay, Monseigneur de Segur, Monseigneur d’Hulst came as visitors. Also Dom Gueranger and Père Lacordaire as well as Père Jandel and Père Mon-sabré of the Dominican Order. M. de Cazalès, M. de Montalembert were equally welcome as well as the director of the newspaper, L ‘Univers, Louis Veillot. These men and many others came to Auteuil, drawn by the strong personality, the simple charm of the Superior.

In the historic hail where the elegant Parisiennes of the Directoire gathered to listen to talks by unbelievers and where the ladies of the First Empire often met to talk of futilities and trivialities, the consultations and deliberations leading to the decision to found the Congregation of the Little Sisters of the Assumption were now held by Père Pernet, Père d’Alzon and Mlle. Fage with Mère Marie Eugenie.

On April 14, 1856, the cornerstone of the new building was laid in the grounds of Auteuil. On August 10th of the same year, the Sisters and their pupils left Chaillot to live in Auteuil. The buildings that were then constructed have now been replaced by new ones. On the plan of the City of Paris, however, “rue de l’Assomption” and “avenue Milleret de Brou” still appear.

The year 1857 saw the foundation of the second House in England. Cardinal Wiseman himself came to Paris to ask for the establishment in London of a Community specially dedicated to the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. On October 2nd, the chapel occupying one room in a small rented house in Brompton was blessed. Mère Marie Eugenie would have gladly given up her responsibility as Superior General to be one of the Sisters designated for the new foundation. Some months earlier she had written: “I now feel the need to occupy myself only with Jesus Christ for the rest of my life. When I begin to search for a mystery that I should think about, I always return to the Blessed Sacrament. There is no other mystery of Our Lord that touches me so much and at all times as the mystery of the Eucharist. It was in this mystery that Our Lord showed His love for me. He made Himself known to me; He came to seek me.”

This second foundation of a Community solely for the contemplative life struck with a new fire and light the minds and the hearts of Mère Marie Eugenie and Mère Thérèse Emmanuel. Far from being a burden or a supplement to a teaching Congregation, the Houses of Nimes and London were on the contrary the foundation stone. The Sisters of Auteuil also asked for daily exposition of the Blessed Sacrament during a specific part of the day. The ecclesiastical Superiors at first hesitated to give the permission but Mère Thérèse Emmanuel gave her own reasons and won: “It is necessary,” she said, “that I form my novices according to their double vocation of adorers and apostles.”

The foundation of schools of the Congregation continued. In August of 1869, the Assumption Sisters the administration of a school in Bordeaux that the Dominican Sisters

were obliged to close. The Archbishop of Bordeaux, Cardinal Donnet and the family of Sr. Marie Caroline helped to ease many a difficulty.

Père d'Alzon also came to assure the happy launching of the Bordelaise House. Père Monsabré, the celebrated preacher of Notre Dame made everybody laugh by pretending to play on the piano with a little girl of seven a piece for four hands. Everything seemed to promise a lasting success. But the health of the Superior, Mère Marie Catherine, obliged her to go back to Auteuil and the development of the school slowed down for some time.

Another task as delicate and difficult as that of Bordeaux was offered to the Religious of the Assumption in 1862 by the city of Lyons. Would they assume the direction of a boarding school till then run by lay people? It was necessary to change the location. Fortunately a building suited for a school was found, situated on a slope not far from Fourvière. As far as recruitment of pupils was concerned everything had to begin from zero. But on new foundations, the school soon became alive and flourishing.

The following year saw the first foundation in Spain. A boarding school was opened in Malaga and near it, according to the custom of the times, a free school for the children of the less privileged class.

The Abbé Gay had been named coadjutor of Cardinal Pie. He expressed to Mère Marie Eugenie his desire to see established at Poitiers, close to the tomb of St. Radegond, the ninth House of the Assumption. It would be dedicated to the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and open to groups of retreatants, but it would not start with a school. In May of 1866 the foundation was made as Monseigneur Gay desired.

Monseigneur Landriot who succeeded Cardinal Gousset as Archbishop of Reims also asked for a House of the Assumption in Reims. Of course he could not be refused. The transactions were begun but due to some opposition from the Archbishop of Paris, the school could not be opened until late October of 1868 in a building located at "rue de la Belle Image."

At the same time two other Houses were opened simultaneously, one at St. Dizier and the other at Nice. The foundation at Nice was the realization of a plan personally carried out by the Superior General herself. Mère Marie Eugenie was concerned about the health of the Sisters. Tuberculosis in the 19th century was not as easily cured as it is today. A severe winter in a house not sufficiently heated, over-fatigue due to some urgent work . . . and a simple case of fever could easily degenerate into a pulmonary infection. Without hesitation the foundress would spend money to send a Sister who needed it to a health resort or hot springs whose water was then considered almost miraculous, but she wanted another way of helping the Sisters regain their health and, whenever possible, even to prevent illness by making a stay in a mild climate possible. From this desire was born the idea of acquiring a property in Nice which would allow at the same time the establishment of a boarding school and a separate house where the Sisters could regain their strength without being obliged to stay far from their own Congregation. The serious sickness of a young Religious in 1868 hastened the realization of the plan.

The three foundations made in the month of October raised to ten the number of Houses dependent on the Mother House at Auteuil.

The war of 1870 and the strong swirls set up by the Commune interrupted for six months the steady rhythm of expansion. As soon as peace was restored, the same pace was resumed with the same élan and success, except for the second missionary attempt.

In 1872 Monseigneur Vitte, a great friend of the Assumption, was named Bishop of New Caledonia. He asked Mère Marie Eugenie to send some Sisters of the Assumption to help him in his pastoral work among a people who, he said, were “among the least developed in the human family.”

The Marist Fathers had just begun their work among them but it was the presence of women that was needed most urgently: some one hundred young girls lived in physical misery and moral degradation. To the future missionaries he had nothing to offer but the sharing of a life of poverty with the poorest.

To mention the poorest was to touch what was most sensitive in Mère Marie Eugenie. Moreover, Monseigneur Vitte said, the island was a penitentiary. Once released, the prisoners preferred to settle on the island rather than go back to France. They settled down and founded new homes. But who would take care of the education of their children?

Mère Marie Eugenie was moved to say “yes.” Three Sisters left in 1873 for the island of the Pacific, without any illusion about the work awaiting them and the hardships that could break them, whatever their dynamism and devotion. As it turned out, the work surpassed their strength and capabilities. Two of the Religious died on the island and the third abandoned the work.

It was not yet time for the Assumption to carry out as missionary dreams. The grain of wheat thrown into the ground had yet to remain buried in the ground for more than fifty years before the first shoots appeared in the mission field that the twentieth century opened, unsuspected in 1873 but already foreseen by Mère Marie Eugenie when she said: “The world is too small to contain my love.”

In 1874, a third House like the one at Poitiers and London was established in Montpellier at the request of Monseigneur Cahrière. In 1876, the King of Spain, Alfonso XII, asked the Sisters of the Assumption to take charge of the direction of the Colegio Real de Santa Isabel in Madrid. The infanta, Mercedes, was then among the day students of Auteuil.

By 1877 the increasing number of novices and students in Paris made it necessary to separate the externs from the boarders. The day school moved to the heart of the capital at “rue du General Foy.” Later on it was moved back to the XVIe, “rue de Lubeck.”

In 1879 a house, opened in Cannes, became, as it were, the synthesis of the objectives pursued by the Congregation. The Community was big enough to carry out the double work of teaching—there was a boarding school and a free school—and the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. A part of the building was furthermore adapted to receive lady boarders without inconvenience to the groups who came to spend a few days of closed retreat.

In 1880 the laws passed by the Third Republic threatened the schools now in the process of full development. Mère Marie Eugenie saw the storm coming and thought of preparing a place of refuge close to the frontier, should the expulsion take place. The relations that had been established with the Spanish Court made her look beyond the Pyrenees. In 1880 the foundation of the Convent of Mira-Cruz in San Sebastian was made. In London, too, a boarding school was opened joined to the house of adoration that had been established twenty years earlier.

Since 1858 Lourdes had begun to attract great crowds. As soon as the Church officially recognized the authenticity of the apparitions of the Blessed Virgin to the child, Bernadette Soubirous convents began to rise on the plain facing the Grotto of Massabielle.

The best situated was, perhaps, the one built by the Benedictines. But hardly had the convent been finished when the Community decided to leave and the monastery was put up for sale. Mon-seigneur Langenieux Bishop of Tarbes suggested to Mère Marie Eugenie to buy it. She hesitated. It was not likely that a school could be established at Lourdes in 1880. What did Mère Thérèse Emmanuel think of it? Her answer was: Accept it without any hesitation. "Our place is there. The Immaculate Conception and the Assumption are two mysteries of glory of the Blessed Virgin; they complete each other." Assured by this, Mère Marie Eugenie agreed to buy the property. "Lourdes" she liked to say, "is the foundation of Mère Thérèse Emmanuel; without her I would never have undertaken it." The convent of Lourdes received at first a limited number of pupils until the time of the expulsion. After this, it opened its door only to groups of retreatants, to the young Coming for a short stay at the Marian city, to lady boarders who wanted to stay for a Considerable time. For the Religious it was a privileged place of quiet and prayer in front of the Grotto of Lourdes.

1888 saw the foundation in Rome at last carried out. One of the first pupils was the niece of Pope Leo XIII, Anna Laetizia Pecci. The school was another intimate link between the Congregation and the Sovereign Pontiff. At all times, no matter who he was, the Assumption would always recognize in the person of the Pope "Christ on earth," in the words of St. Catherine of Sienna. It would always manifest the most faithful attachment and he most filial submission to him.

1889. Another house of education came to existence in France: that of Rouen.

1892. The mission field again opened its vast horizons to Mère Marie Eugenie and her daughters. Real difficulties, fatigue and sacrifice marked the road that led to two foundations in Central America: that of Leon in Nicaragua and that of San Salvador. The experience gained at the Cape had not been in vain. All possible precautions were now taken to guarantee as much as possible the success of the mission.

1892. At the request of Queen Maria Cristina of Spain, a Superior Normal School for the training of teachers was opened in Manila. The School sent out its first graduates in 1898. At the outbreak of the Revolution which ended the Spanish rule in the Philippines, the School was closed and the Sisters, repatriated.

In 1892, the second house in Italy was opened in Genoa. In the same year the Congregation was asked to take over the administration of the Orphanage of St. Joseph in Boulouris-sur-Mer near Cannes.

In 1893, the King of Spain, Alfonso XII, asked the Superior General to take over the direction of a school very dear to the heart of the royal family. To refuse was not possible and soon the Religious of the Assumption found themselves in charge of the Coiegio Real de Loreto.

In less than fifty years twenty-three Houses had thus come into existence in and outside France.

Had Mère Marie Eugenie agreed, some Houses would have been established close to the Near East. From Constantinople the founder of the Assumptionists had already asked Mère Marie Eugenie to come to Bulgaria. Had she followed the dictates of her heart, she would have accepted the invitation. But the souvenir of the thorny situation brought about by the first missionary foundation in South Africa and its consequent failure together with her own experience the previous twelve years made her more clear-

sighted. Judging from the particular conditions in which she was asked to make the foundation, all of them outlined by Père d'Alzon, Mère Marie Eugenie saw that she could not in conscience accept the reiterated propositions.

"It is necessary to say with M. Olier," she affirmed. "That it is not the greatness or the excellence of the work that should determine our decision to give to it our time, our dedication but only the will of Our Divine Master."

Since the will of God for the Congregation did not seem to go hand in hand with the projects of Père d'Alzon. Would she close her heart to them? What she could not refuse to do was to send temporarily two of the most experienced Religious of the Assumption to help in the foundation of a new Congregation: that of the Oblates of the Assumption.

While the foundations thus multiplied, the proceedings leading to the definitive approbation of the Congregation in 1888 went on, but at a much slower pace, in Rome. The two imperial decrees officially recognizing the legal status of the Congregation – March 5, 1856 and May 6, 1858- were issued between the arrival from Rome of the Laudatory Brief in 1855 and the signing of the first Decree of Approbation in 1867.

The Brief was signed in February of 1855 and handed to the foundress at the beginning of April by Monseigneur Sibour, the Archbishop of Paris. Père d'Alzon was overjoyed when he heard the good news. He was himself preparing to leave for Rome the next day. "One step has been made. Providence will do the rest," he exclaimed. "Send me your documents; I will try to get something more."

The year of the proclamation of the Immaculate Conception was a jubilee year extended from December 8, 1854 to December 8, 1855. "This year is a year rich in grace for us," Mère Marie Eugenie said to her daughters. "We have the approbation of Rome; in three months we hope to get the official recognition by the government. Oh! How I wish we would be able to lead a holier life in the new convent Providence is giving us!" The house at "rue de Chaillot" had been sold and the Community looked forward to their proximate installation at the Thuilerie of Auteuil.

The Congregation now recognized by Rome, Mère Marie Eugenie hoped to go to Rome herself and place in the hands of the Sovereign Pontiff the Constitutions of the Assumption and to ask for his blessing and his counsel.

More than ten years would have to pass before her hopes were to be fulfilled.

The trip to Rome became necessary in 1866 and Mère Marie Eugenie decided to take the first opportunity to go there. She chose to leave Mère Thérèse Emmanuel in charge of the Congregation in her absence, so she took a young Sister who knew Italian to accompany her. The Sister was overjoyed by the unexpected grace and she certainly knew how to profit from it.

Mère Marie Eugénie and her companion left Nimes on the 16th of May and took the boat at Marseille for Civita Vecchia. On the 19th they were in Rome. The next day, the feast of Pentecost, they had the great joy of assisting at the Mass celebrated by Pope Pius IX in the Sistine Chapel.

The following days were filled with official visits. In one of these, Mère Marie Eugénie met the prefect of the Congregation of Bishops and the Regular Clergy, Cardinal Quaglia, who gave her encouragement.

At last the day for the private audience with the Pope came. It was the feast of Corpus Christi and there was a magnificent procession of the Blessed Sacrament in St. Peter's Square. When they had moved some distance away from the crowd, Mère Marie

Eugénie confided to her companion: "I need to pray very much today. Before seeing the Holy Father I should like to pass two or three hours before the Blessed Sacrament."

Finally, as she entered by the bronze door into the hall where the Pope was awaiting them, Mère Marie Eugénie felt in her heart a sense of inquietude mixed with awe. She was deeply moved by the voice of the Holy Father welcoming them with the words: "Oh, here are Religious. And Religious ought to be saints. Is it not so, my daughters? You are saints?" Mère Marie Eugénie kept her eyes reverently fixed on the Pope.

While waiting for the affairs of the Congregation to be completed, Mère Marie Eugénie took advantage of her leisure hours to make a pilgrimage to the Roman basilicas and the catacombs where the remains of witnesses of the Faith reposed. "One can follow in Rome, step by step. The footprints left by St. Paul and St. Peter," she remarked. "Is it not a consolation to ask them to help us walk in the way of faith and love which they had opened for us?"

Her broad culture, intellectual and artistic, enabled her to appreciate the value of the masterpieces accumulated in Rome down the centuries . . . precious jewels treasured and shown to all who came to the "eternal city." All these works of beauty made by man carried her, as though instinctively, to the transcendent Beauty. She admired them, valued them, found joy in contemplation of them. But she treasured above all the memory of the saints who had come to kneel and pray at the tomb of St. Peter, and to receive the blessing from his successor to whom the same power and the same responsibility had been entrusted by Jesus Christ.

She assisted with real joy, on June 11, at the Mass celebrated in the room where St. Ignatius of Loyola died. "St. Ignatius," she said on this occasion, "had known all the difficulties that accompany the founding of a society; he knew by experience that the works of God are founded on suffering." Then, following her thought: "I am not a foundress but I am the first stone in the edifice placed here by the Hand of God and even this is not an easy task. I often ask myself why God has placed me at the head of a Congregation. I do not have the qualities of a foundress and I never thought of founding one. Sometimes I think that, perhaps, I have a certain ability to handle administrative matters and this is necessary for beginnings. I hope that I will be allowed one day to retire and then I will have only one concern, that is, God. How I long for this day to come. No one realizes how heavy the responsibility I bear is."

Mère Marie Eugénie experienced the weight of this responsibility acutely while she was in Rome.

She discovered that among the members of the Curia and among those close to the Pope, she had enemies who wanted to put her out of the way and to block the approbation of the Congregation.

On her second visit to the Pope, in spite of the paternal affection shown her by the Holy Father, she felt an attitude of mistrust in one and the other prelate present. The private letter from the Archbishopric of Paris to the Congregation of Regulars never arrived. And without this document, the approbation that she hoped to bring back to Paris could not be signed.

From Paris she also heard that Mère Thérèse Emmanuel was not well received by M. Véron, their ecclesiastical Superior whom she was asked by Mère Marie Eugénie to see in private. The confidence that M. Véron had shown to the Community in the past had suddenly turned into suspicion.

Mère Marie Eugénie understood that she had to return to Paris as quickly as possible to clarify a situation that seemed irrational. Some one, she was now sure of this, consciously or unconsciously had for some weeks been throwing confusion into the affairs of the Congregation.

She left Rome for Marseille on the 4th of July. As soon as she arrived in Paris, she saw the cause of the hostility-one she had never suspected. Monseigneur Darboy and M. Veron had looked at her departure for Rome with disapproval. Traits of Gallicanism still remained embedded in more than one bishopric or arch bishopric in France. In these places an instinctive mistrust of new Congregations with Pontifical rights prevailed because it meant less dependence on ecclesiastical Superiors and almost limitless freedom for the Superior General to send the Religious to any House of the Congregation in any diocese whatsoever.

To touch this sensitive point was to provoke a tempest. Someone began to throw suspicion on the motives of the Superior General's departure for Rome.

The disillusionment she had experienced in her youth involving members of the Church came to mind: "I dreamt to see apostles; I found only men!" Mère Marie Eugénie saw only one possible solution, and that was to convoke a General Chapter and to tender her resignation. A violent protest came from the bishops, archbishops cardinals of the other dioceses where the Houses of the Assumption had been established. Such a call to arms could not but trouble Monseigneur Darboy. It only seemed to exasperate the vindictive spirit of M. Véron.

"The Superior General should not delude herself," he said. "He had been flamed and still is the Superior." If she did not recall to Paris some Religious whom she had sent to another House without his permission, he would place an interdict on the chapel of Auteuil and remove the Blessed Sacrament from the Tabernacle.

Mère Marie Eugénie reacted calmly to the anger of M. Véron She protested with dignity against his abuse of power and clearly defined her own right.

From Nimes the Superior General of the Assumptionists and Monseigneur Plantier followed the course of the storm. "It is necessary to give the confusion time to disentangle itself," Père d'Alzon wrote. "After this, everyone will say amen to all that you will say. Much is gained by remaining calm and maintaining distance. It seems to me that you are admirably calm and the affairs of the Congregation are going the right way. Why be in a hurry about the affairs in Rome? Let the troubled waters subside. The Romans are always true to themselves: Time does more than anything else." Another message from Père d'Alzon revealed his paternal and friendly solicitude. He also knew now from I experience at what price in suffering the works of God were clone: "I suffer with you and I ask God to bring out in you the transformation that by this suffering He intends to make . . . Monseigneur is furious about the proceedings your letters reveal; but one must learn to accept the suffering that God permits to purify apostolic works of selfish motives. I discovered only today how much he has made your apostolate his own."

This letter dated December 31, 1866 had not yet arrived when Mère Marie Eugénie learned that M. Véron had suddenly died of cerebral congestion some days after his nomination as curate of the parish of St. Vincent de Paul in Paris. She was stupefied.

The year 1867 finally brought to the Congregation the Decree of Approbation from Rome, signed by Pope Pius IX on September 14, 1867.

There now remained only the final confirmation which could not be granted until after ten years of living under the Constitutions, *ad experimentum*. It was Pope Leo XII who granted it on April 11, 1888.

The Way had now at least been traced clearly. The way of the “*Sequela Christi*” in the specific direction clearly defined for the Assumption.

“A Religious of the Assumption ought to die in order to live; her life is Jesus Christ,” Mère Marie Eugénie liked to repeat. “To arrive at Union it is absolutely necessary to begin by imitation. To want to arrive at union without passing through imitation is a pure illusion.” Such an illusion posed no danger to her. She knew hard moments of physical suffering, she knew the troubles and anxieties of making foundations, she knew the pain of loss of dear friends-M.de Franchissen, several of her daughters-she knew the trials of opposition and defamation.

More than ever now, she could repeat to Our Lord: “Yes, my God, I adore Your will, I accept it, I love it, I like it.” A thought of her youth expressed an attitude that would be hers all her life: “My gaze is all on Jesus Christ and the extension of His Kingdom.”

Chapter 14

The Spirit of the Assumption as I understand it . . .

“The Church is moving towards one goal: the coming of God’s reign and the definitive salvation of the human race.”

The Church Today, 45-1

On the back of a picture of St. John of the Cross, Mere Marie Eugénie wrote in large and clear letters the following lines: “My dear daughter, I ask you to read and to copy what St. John of the Cross has written under the title of *Spiritual precautions against the world, the flesh and the devil*. Do not think him too severe. There is no happiness and no security for the Religious except in giving all to God. The more you walk along this way, the more joy you will find. Do not be afraid to aim high. Remember what M. Mermillod told us at the end of the retreat: The perfect Religious should be detached from all that is not God, always poor in His presence, empty of self-interest, an enemy to her evil inclinations, a friend of solitude and silence, totally given to God. Try to be in all things the faithful image of Jesus Christ and live only for Him, with Him and in Him.” This was written on September 8, 1858.

Mère Marie Eugénie urged the Sisters, each according to her particular aspiration, to draw from the spirituality of all the saints in the Church, and she herself did so. Often for her, as well as for Mère Thérèse Emmanuel, St. John of the Cross was the guide along the way of pure faith through which God was leading them. She found in the pages of his works which describe the arduous road to personal encounter of the Lord as in the pages which sing of the joy of consummated union with Him something like an amplified echo of her own aspirations.

“Recollection is absolutely necessary for prayer,” she said, “and the truths which help us to be recollected we find in our Faith. It is important for us to enter frequently into ourselves with faith and in the presence of Our Lord allow the Holy Spirit to lead us. The prayer of faith is the sure road to authentic union with God. I ask God to give me the grace of continual prayer, the grace to depend no longer on myself or on any human support but only and totally on Him.”

The implied references to St. John of the Cross found in her “*entretiens*” and letters make clear that she was familiar with his writings and that she not only knew his doctrine but also lived it.

Faith, silence, prayer, union were words that naturally came to her lips during intimate talks and spiritual direction. The self-emptying that she often spoke of should not mislead anyone; it was only the negative aspect of a transformation to be desired, indeed, for it is the way by which a finite, powerless creature may be filled by the infinite, the eternal, the divine: the life of Christ.

As the years passed, through sufferings and joys, discouragements, failures and successes, the transforming power of the divine life in her gradually unified the multiple dimensions of her life and shone through her.

Because the Lord wanted her to be foundress-and almost in spite of herself-Mère Marie Eugénie knew that it was her duty to communicate to the Congregation her spirit or rather the spirit of God giving out through her a particular note which must be that of the Congregation. A clear, correct, unique, irreplaceable note in the symphony of all the religious families.

“It is not easy to define the spirit of the Assumption as I understand it,” she said. “It is easier to grasp by intuition the unifying spirit that gathers all the varied aspects of our life and binds them together than to explain it. When I try to look for what is most characteristic of our Institute, I arrive at only one thought: We ought to be adorers filled with zeal for the rights of God. You are daughters of the Assumption. This mystery is a mystery of adoration. Mary, lifted up from the earth, goes to render sovereign honor to God. If there ever was and ever will be an adorer in spirit and in truth, it is the Blessed Virgin.”

That which she believed to be the special mark of the Institute entrusted to her by the Lord, Mère Thérèse Emmanuel confirmed-“it is a supernatural spirit, a spirit of faith” that would enable one to see things in the light of God, to live the Gospel and to be its visible, living and luminous sign. What should the Assumption be in the Church? Simply what Mary was after the Resurrection and her own Assumption: living for Christ, helping the Church, forming the image of Christ, safeguarding it in the members of His Mystical Body. Thus the mystery of the Assumption is a “mystery of light and glory.” The mystery of the Passion and Death on the Cross precedes it and is its first condition. It is a passage through the night of purification into the dazzling light of the Divine, bringing joy that cannot be taken away because it is the joy of the Son of God who is also son of Mary, crucified but now risen and alive. Such is the joy that comes from true union with God that the apostle is sent to communicate to the world.

What does it matter if the disciples of Christ meet a thousand vicissitudes? Serene and strong, his zeal cannot be diminished by difficulties but rather purified since it relies on love which, as Scripture says, is stronger than death. “The first right of God,” Mère Marie Eugénie insisted, “is to be believed when He speaks. From this it follows that we should allow His words to sink into the deepest center of our being so that our thoughts are governed by faith rather than by our natural reason alone. In this way the sure, unchanging light of divine truth gradually penetrates and fills our entire being.”

On another occasion, going back to the incomparable riches of revealed truth accessible only to faith, she said: “You know from Scriptures that the Blessed Virgin kept all these things-the mysteries of Our Lord-and pondered them in her heart. Do as she did . . . Desire to know the divine truth. The more you drink of it, the more you desire to be instructed in the doctrine of the Saints, in the teachings of the Church, what she approves, what she counsels, the more you become Religious of the Assumption.”

But what was the spirit of the Assumption, its distinguishing mark? “Nothing singular,” said Mère Marie Eugénie. “It consists, principally, in being rich with the spirit of the Church. There is nothing that is specifically ours. It can happen that love which is the essence of the religious life can be expressed by a religious Institute in a particular devotion. This is not so with us. Our love should be that divine fire which Our Lord lighted in the Church from the very beginning. From this point of view, all the Doctors, all Religious, the Saints of all times have something to teach us; we do not limit ourselves to learning only from one particular Order. This is one of the admirable traits we find in St.

Augustine. He had a heart as large as the Church nothing particular or exclusive in his love. This, my Sisters, should be one of the characteristics of our Congregation One of our friends, Monseigneur Gay, said of us that we are a catholic Congregation, *par excellence*. This characteristic we should always preserve.

Trying to express her thought more precisely, she continued: "When you sought admission into the Congregation, each one of you dedicated your life to Christ, to know, love and serve Him perfectly and to make Him known, loved and served by others. In the final analysis, the difference between the Christian life-in the fullest sense of the term-and the religious life lies in the word perfectly. There are not two Gospels. The Gospel given to all Christians is also given to all Religious, but these accept it with greater love, finding nothing too difficult, too painful to bear in the service of the Lord."

Universal call to holiness, exigencies of a more ardent love -nothing else- required by the "*sequela Christi*." In almost identical words, Vatican II would bring to the light some one hundred years later the same fundamental truth that erroneous interpretations and juridical applications of some doctrinal texts had deformed in time. Now everything is clear. It is by Baptism that all Christians are called to union with God, that is, to holiness. The religious vocation makes this call more demanding. "As Religious of the Assumption," Mère Marie Eugénie concluded, "you have to tend towards the perfection of your state of life which is union with Jesus Christ-a real and intimate union." This union is always a gift of the Lord but requires a personal response generously and freely given with the knowledge of the price to be paid. "It is not possible to arrive at union without effort"-effort to empty oneself so that the Lord may be free to give Himself in infinite measure. Indeed, happy are those who have not refused to accept the pain because now they have reached the state where the Lord is sovereign and absolute master! Whatever He asks of them is given to Him and like Magdalene at His feet, they remain in the inner sanctuary where God dwells, ever ready to do His will." One should not forget that it is not to nuns living a purely contemplative life that such horizons were opened and proposed as a normal experience, but to teaching Religious who had fully assumed the colossal task of the education of the young. For what is Christian education but the task of pursuing through the disciplines taught and the motivations given only one aim: "To form human persons to the likeness of Jesus Christ? . . . Resemblance to Jesus Christ is supreme glory."

Mère Marie Eugénie would never admit that the life of prayer was incompatible with the life of teaching. That there could be division, yes. And often. That adaptations were necessary to preserve human equilibrium certainly- an equilibrium not easy to maintain. But let no one tell her it was impossible to join the active and the contemplative life in practice. "The cult of the Blessed Sacrament," she insisted, "one of the objectives of the Congregation, is the flowering of our spirit because the homage we render Jesus Christ in the Holy Eucharist is only the expression of our need to know, serve and love Him perfectly."

Thus, there was no longer any reason to be afraid one was pursuing a Utopia.

However, the concrete results of Christian education - even when a lifetime had been consecrated to it-might be disappointing. It is true that Christians have the duty to work with all their strength so that a society built on the Gospel might be established. But the Evil One, possessing the intelligence of a pure spirit, also works to delay, if he cannot prevent, the coming of God's reign on earth. And before God a thousand years is as one day.

A Council began in Rome in 1869 but it could not accomplish its mission because of political troubles in Europe. Aside from defining Papal Infallibility, it failed to answer the burning questions of the times. The great social problems which Lacordaire, Ozanam, Montalembert La Mennais and the editors of *L'Avenir* had brought to the public eye did not seem to have caught the attention of the Council Fathers in the First Vatican Council.

A century later, the Second Vatican Council would take up these problems and study them in all their aspects. It would affirm without ambiguity that the effort to bring about a universal brotherhood among men is not in vain, because “Christ, appointed Lord by His resurrection and given plenary power in heaven and on earth, is now at work in the hearts of men through the energy of His Spirit. He arouses not only a desire for the age to come, but, by that very fact, He animates, purifies, and strengthens those noble longings too by which the human family strives to make its life more human and to render the whole earth submissive to this goal.” (The Church Today, 38)

“Christians, on pilgrimage toward the heavenly city, should seek and savor the things which are above. This duty in no way decreases, but rather increases, the weight of their obligation to work with all men in constructing a more human world.” (57)

How much Mère Marie Eugénie would have rejoiced to hear this statement of Vatican II.

Thus, at last, all her intuitions would be sanctioned, joining, as it were, the mind and the expressed will of this “Church who alone in her mind possessed the secret and the power for good.” The voice of the Church would make her own voice heard all over the world proclaiming the truth that had given to her apostolic zeal its direction and unconquerable dynamism.

“In order for individual men to discharge with greater exactness the obligations of their conscience toward themselves and the various groups to which they belong, they must be carefully educated to a higher degree of culture through the use of the immense resources available today to the human race. Above all the education of youth from every social background has to be undertaken, so that there can be produced not only men and women of refined talents, but those great-souled persons who are so desperately required by our times.” (The Church Today, 31)

Mère Marie Eugénie would not have the joy of seeing these results. She would walk until the end in the darkness of pure faith. God’s will was all that mattered. “He is the Master,” she said. “He has the right.” More and more the will of God polarized her life. Often it was her sole guide in the darkness. “There are circumstances in life,” she confessed, “when this is all one can do, to lift up one’s mind and heart to God who knows what is best . . . and to render Him homage by this act of simple acquiescence:

Thy will be done. The type of holiness that I ardently desire for all of you is that you become so completely surrendered to God that in all things and at all times you love, seek and bless His divine will. This is abandonment into the hands of God: it is the surest, the fullest and the most perfect union that is possible between God and His creature. God can then apply this word to you: My will in her.”

Union of wills. Fruitful apostolate. Mère Marie Eugénie understood this better each day.

“I believe that one of the characteristic marks of the devotion of our Institute is our zeal for the glory of God. I should like to take as the motto of our active life: Your Kingdom come. For our interior life, it should be: Praise God.”

She also said, “There is no peace for man except in giving glory to God.” God did not expect this glory to be given to Him through actions that called the attention of men. Or from those consecrated to Him, by a show of power that would make them appear like “stars” of sanctity. Everything is much simpler, much more within the reach of all. “What draws down the grace of God more surely is a life woven out of the most ordinary acts. It is work, humble, physical work; it is the effort to do it well in the spirit of obedience; it is self-forgetfulness, charity, humility, simplicity, perseverance in prayer.”

More than anything else the reading-better still, the contemplation-of the Gospel would light up her way through life day by day, step by step. Mère Marie Eugénie liked to comment on the Good News in her “*entretiens*” with her daughters: “They are the life and the words of Christ to whom one must continually return like a magnetic needle seeking its North Pole.”

“It is not possible for someone who has not passed through trials herself to do good to another,” she explained. “There is strength in knowing one’s weakness and accepting it.” This conviction determined her relationship with the Sisters, whatever their responsibility, function or age. She made herself available to all. “Come to me as often as you want to tell me how heavy authority is,” she told the Superiors. “It seems to me that I understand you better than any one else. But I can also show you the other side of authority: it is the condition where, at the expense of your own peace, you can contribute most to the happiness and peace of others.”

She wanted this happiness for each and all. A happiness that excluded neither pain nor difficulties. Trials no longer troubled her after Our Lord had made her understand that they led to eternal peace.

Troubles and painful misunderstandings were not lacking at this time when plans were being made in Constantinople to which she believed she could not give her active support. But more painful than these divisions was the final separation on November 21, 1880. Père d’Alzon died in Nimes at the age of seventy. During the past few months there had been disagreements made more acute by differences in temperament and character. Divergence of opinion did not, however, diminish the limpidity of a friendship half a century old. Mère Marie Eugénie felt most keenly the death of Père d’Alzon as well as the difficulties that followed it.

More heart-aches followed his death. On April 18, 1882, the first postulant of the Assumption, Josephine de Commarque, left for the House of the Father. Mère Marie Thérèse died in Auteuil after forty-two years of untiring devotion to the Congregation.

The following year the health of Mère Thérèse Emmanuel began to fail. She left for Cannes hoping to regain her strength there. She was no longer young. She was sixty seven years old. Determined to be on duty at her post, she appeared stronger than she really was. When she came back to Auteuil at the beginning of summer in 1884, she found the unity that had always characterized the Congregation from the very beginning at “rue Férou” threatened. Père Picard who had succeeded Père d’Alzon presented before the Congregation an important decision to make: Should the Religious of the Assumption keep definitively their juridical autonomy and remain independent of the Assumptionist Fathers? Should they choose to depend on the Assumptionist Fathers there would be need of

regrouping the Sisters of the Assumption and the Oblates of the Assumption under one authority. The daughters of Mère Marie Eugénie were divided on the question. Hence, the inevitable tension.

Approve? Reject? The reasons for either side were viable. The heated discussions for or against could have led to a confrontation and confrontation without the possibility of dialogue on all levels, as we would say today, could end in conflict. Mère Thérèse Emmanuel sensed the danger. Without doing violence to any one she made a move to restore unity. Mère Marie Eugénie, she said, was in conscience bound to preserve the autonomy of the Congregation. The Lord gave to her, as He did to all foundresses, the grace of lighting the way and guiding the Congregation. Did right reason and supernatural faith not call on all to affirm once more their confidence in her? Mistrust could only lead to division, On the other hand, was it not the duty of the Superior General, be she Superior for life or Foundress, to consult all who shared with her the government of the Congregation on a question that concerned all the members?" Only the convocation of an extraordinary General Chapter would make possible an effective exchange in a climate of peace.

The Chapter took place in the month of August 1886. Monseigneur d'Hulst, a man of experience and good judgment, agreed to preside. The Chapter ended in peace, sealing by a unanimous "yes" the unity happily recovered.

The autonomy of the Congregation was definitively adopted. The Constitutions were then carefully revised in the light of the experience gained from living under them and the necessary modifications made.

On February 1888, Mère Marie Eugénie took the Constitutions to Rome for final approval. All the proceedings were finished in a few weeks. On April 11, the Decree of approbation was duly signed and placed in the hands of the foundress whose joy would have been complete were it not for the alarming signs of the failing health of Mère Thérèse Emmanuel.

In fact it was obvious that only an extraordinary return of strength could make the Assistant hold on until the arrival of Mère Marie Eugénie to whom she had been for half a century daughter, friend, surest counselor, "How good Our Lord is," she said on the 1st of May, "to bring Notre Mère back just for this moment." Then she added serenely: "I belong to the Assumption. My life had been entirely dedicated to her; I do not leave her; I go to the Assumption of eternity." On the 2nd of May, the Lord called Mère Thérèse Emmanuel to eternal union with Him. It was her 72nd birthday.

Some days earlier she had made a spontaneous remark that revealed the old Kate O'Neill, sparkling with humor, jealous of her independence, and the Religious totally surrendered to Christ: "When one offers herself to Our Lord, it is not in the manner of a French compliment. He takes you at your word; He breaks down all." That is, all that impedes the influx of His divine life.

In the heart of Mère Marie Eugénie joy and sorrow met and became peace that transcended her pain.

The approval of the Constitutions and the death of Mère Thérèse Emmanuel these were among the last landmarks in the life of Mère Marie Eugénie.

The Jubilee Year of 1888 was a joyful one. The Congregation now had fifty years of existence and Mère Marie Eugénie, too, was celebrating her golden jubilee. In joy and thanksgiving the double jubilee was celebrated on August 28th, the feast of St. Augustine.

The Archbishop of Paris, Monseigneur Richard, insisted on presiding at the ceremony together with Monseigneur d'Hulst. From Rome, Leo XIII sent a special blessing.

On April 30th 1889, alumnae and students came to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the first boarding school. Among the one-time boarders were now many grandmothers.

The foundress felt the hour of dusk was coming for her. To family sorrows, to the fatigue that at times over-powered her, to the solitude she felt profoundly since the death of Mère Thérèse Emmanuel and Père d'Alzon, there was going to be added a deeper and heavier solitude. "To do the work of Jesus," she said at this time, "one must be detached, stripped of all." It was to this final "stripping" that God was leading her.

Before penetrating into the darkness of this final purification, another grace was given to her. The visitation of two houses in Italy brought her to Rome and then to the Vatican in the Spring of 1893. Leo XIII received her in audience. With her were the Sisters of the Community of Rome among whom was one of German nationality. Mère Marie Eugénie was from Lorraine. The Pope was surprised. France, Lorraine, Germany: that recalled the defeat of 1870.

"Oh! Germany!" exclaimed the Pope, "but that means war!"

"No, Holy Father," the foundress replied. "In the Assumption it is always peace!"

"Well, very well," he added, "let it be always peace." When the small group was about to leave after the last blessing, he turned to Mère Marie Eugénie: "Courage, Mother, courage. Continue your beautiful work: the education of young girls. Go. Increase, multiply, grow. Make Jesus Christ, the Church, the Pope known and loved everywhere."

The genuine and simple goodness of the Pope touched Mère Marie Eugénie deeply and compensated for the trials and disappointments she had to bear during the last fifty years. The date of the seventh General Chapter was approaching. Mère Marie Eugénie would soon be seventy six years old. Her strength was failing. Lapses in her memory were becoming frequent. Events, situations were no longer as clear in her mind as they used to be. Moreover, the expansion of the Congregation was making its government harder each year. It certainly exceeded her present possibilities. But Mère Marie Eugénie had been officially recognized in 1856 as Superior for life. In 1894 a delicate and urgent problem presented itself. The help of an assistant was no longer sufficient. It was necessary to name a vicar general and for the nomination to be made, the foundress must tender her resignation.

The local Superiors assembled in Auteuil on the eve of the General Chapter asked the advice of the ecclesiastical Superior, Monseigneur Odelin, and also of Monseigneur de CabriCres who had just preached the retreat to the Community and would preside at the Chapter. Their advice was: With great delicacy but without any ambiguity place before the foundress a decision that would be for the good of the whole Congregation.

Mère Marie Eugénie involuntarily expressed surprise when told of it for the first time.

"Am I gone so far?" she asked.

"It is the desire of the Archbishop Monsignor Richard," they told her.

"Oh!" she continued. "If it is the desire of the Archbishop, then I have nothing more to say... I will ask Mon-seigneur de Cabrieres himself to tender my resignation. That was all. No words. No comments. Only acquiescence, total, spontaneous, simple.

Had she already thought of this before? Her confidential remark to Mère Marie Marguerite after the nomination of the Vicar General seemed to indicate she did: “If I hesitated to have myself replaced, it was because I felt I was a bond of unity among the Superiors. I was afraid to give them pain and I thought that once the bond is broken, unity will no longer be as strong. But,” she added, “Mère Marie Celestine will know how to rally all hearts around her.”

Chapter 15

Firmness in the Faith . . .

“All are called to one and the same end which is God Himself.”

The church Today. 24-1

A new leaf had been turned in the life of the foundress of the Assumption. The burden of responsibility for the new Institute that had been placed on her young shoulders almost by force and which she had assumed with all her human competence and spirit of supernatural faith, she was now asked to pass on to another. She did not hesitate an instant. “Does God not have all the rights?” The moment of complete detachment had come for her. In reality the Lord was now answering a desire she had expressed in 1841:

“I have a desire to become a saint; this is my whole pre-occupation . . . Alone with my God, I begged Him to crucify me and I repeated without ceasing: To suffer and be counted as nothing for You.

“Seeing nothing good in me, I asked Him for that passionately: yes, all the sufferings of soul, of body, of my will, humiliations, bitterness, in exchange for You.”

Was that nothing but youthful ardor? The foundress was then only twenty-four years of age. Perhaps the expression was hyperbolic but certainly not the profound yearning that more than fifty years did not in the least diminish. By 1854 the certitude that God would answer her prayer had grown into a quiet assurance:

“God wants that everything around me crumbles... I see dimly something stripped, simple, a state where there is nothing any more but only love. I can picture to myself, without feeling any repugnance, the kind of death contained in a permanent condition of infirmity and powerlessness. I feel somehow confident that the exterior and interior sufferings can make up before God for my lack of perfection . . . “ That was not pessimism or a morbid desire for suffering but a realistic desire for consummated union with God. “If ever I arrive through humiliation to be less sought after by creatures, that will leave more place for Jesus in my heart. Being nothing would be good for me so I can get there.”

In 1886 when Mère Marie Eugénie was already seventy years old, the same desire still burned in her heart, and shone in her limpid gaze:

“I look upon all the sufferings that have enlightened me and, I hope, purified me as a grace; and the pain that still awaits me, I want, O my Jesus, to embrace as a cross that unites me to You... I want to seek You alone, to speak, to act for You, and may there be nothing but You

in my relation with others and in all that I do for the Congregation. May I be nothing to all and may no one be anxious about me any more!”

In 1894 God answered her prayer. From then on God would lead her more and more deeply into “the way of the cross that leads to eternal life.”

Her resignation in 1894 was only the first step into the last phase of her life. It was not the most painful. She had still to experience the “state of infirmity and continual powerlessness” breaking her body, her heart, her spirit day by day. It was a progressive decline of her forces, of her faculties that, however, left her aware of what was diminishing

in her bit by bit. The growing incapacity to express herself deceived those around as to her capacity to understand and her sensitivity, not in the least diminished but rather heightened, to react to the smallest attention as well as to the slightest hurt. One day she asked her infirmarian to wheel her to the grotto in the garden. "I want to pray for the person who hurt me this morning," she said.

"I have nothing more to do but to be good to all now," she also said the next day after her resignation. She re-doubled her delicate thoughtfulness for each one. In August of 1895, she wrote to the Vicar General from one of the Houses in the south where she was: "I am sending you a little souvenir; in the country we have nothing but flowers so I am sending you some 'forget-me-not.' I know that it is not necessary to remind you because you do not forget me, but each one can give only what she has."

Two months later another note, more brief this time but full of true friendship: "May God bless you, dear Mother. You help me so much. I thank Him every day for all the services you render me."

At the beginning of the same year a Sister was actually dying in Montpellier without being aware of the gravity of her condition. Mère Marie Eugénie at once sent her a long message: No, there was no question for her to go back to the Mother House to resume her work, at least not in the near future. "The news that I receive about you is not good. It seems to me that the moment has come for you to receive the Sacrament of the Sick. Abandon your- self to God; do not even ask to be cured but rather ask that the will of God be done in all that concerns you... Whether life is short or long, one must always be ready... Do not worry about resuming your work for you cannot do it . . . Pray also for me, I have need of it." For was she not in the same condition, no longer active, with no hope to ever recover her strength? But she had found the secret that sustained her in her old age: "I have the habit to make the Way of the Cross every day." To express her tender concern for the Sister, she added: "If you only knew how painful it is for me to speak to you in this way! I had hoped to see you again in Spring. May the Lord sustain you! May He give us the happiness of eternity!"

One after the other, the different Communities where it was possible for her to rest, claimed the presence of the foundresses, even for just a very short time. In summer of 1895 Mère Marie Eugénie was at Andecy where a vacation camp was being organized for the children. From there she wrote to a Sister whose eyesight was failing: "I think yesterday was the feast day of Baye so today a High Mass is being celebrated for all the deceased in the place. Our children are going to the Mass with the intention of passing by the candy and pastry shop on the way home." Assisting at a Mass for the dead was certainly not something gay for children to do but . . . the pastry shop on the way back, that made all the difference. Perhaps, we can surmise, her eye twinkled as she thought of it.

Concern for others, a feeling for children - Mère Marie Eugénie had them all her life. They had become, as it were, second nature to her. Even during the obscurity of her last years, they would spontaneously appear now and then.

"How well this great woman knew how to come down and surrender all-s he who held so much in her hands!" remarked one of her friends. "And do not think that she did not feel it. She was aware of everything. But she accepted all with great gentleness and humility."

Yes, she was aware of the progressive decline of her physical and intellectual powers. Yes, it cost her something not to be able to do anything without help-she who had

to take so many initiatives all her life. It was the continual dependence on others that at times became painful because of the clumsiness of the Sisters. She was no longer asked where she wanted to be wheeled in the garden. One day it would be on this side, another day it would be on the other side to avoid the sun or the cold air. Mère Marie Eugénie, who had her own preferences, was content to smile and say wittingly: "Let us go. I see that I have only changed masters." Little by little her natural independence gave way to a total dependence in the thousand nothings that still hurt her sensitive nature vibrant to the least touch. Should she allow herself to be embittered by them?

No. She abandoned herself to all. To God, whose merciful action she discerned in the slow progress of the disease. No longer to be able to walk . . . not even to walk with the help of a Sister, to go to the chapel, to make the Way of the Cross . . . to say the Office in choir . . . then not even in private. No longer to be able to express her thoughts, her feelings, her gratitude -it was a total dying of self. Unless the grain of wheat dies...

Progressively everything was taken away. All except the lucidity of her mind that enabled her to follow the progress of the disease. She acquiesced in it. She offered herself in unceasing prayer, poorly, saying no other word but "Yes."

Sometimes a state of torpor would take hold of her and she would appear as though unconscious. Then suddenly she would open her eyes. They would become alive again sometimes even sparkle with humor but always serene. The Sisters would on these occasions gather around her, avid for her last words.

Where did she get her patience? They would ask her. She would smile and say with great effort: "From meditation on the Passion of Our Lord." On the 28th of June, the vigil of the feast of St. Peter and St. Paul, another asked her: "Mother, what will you ask St. Peter for us?" "Firmness in the Faith and a great love for the Church," she answered.

On the 13th of December she wrote with a trembling hand two lines for Sr. Lucie whose feast day it was.

She liked the young novices to come to her. She liked to call them her "little torment." What, however, she disliked was to see them arrive looking sad and depressed.

"I have always observed," she had often said in the past, "that cheerfulness is a great help to holiness. Simplicity is the characteristic virtue of the Assumption. I want to see this virtue in the novices. I see they are happy and this helps them to grow in virtue."

Because the foundress was now close to the end she had long desired, was no reason for joy to be banished from the convent of Auteuil.

Winter came. The year 1898 was soon to begin. The Sisters asked her what she should like. She answered: "I desire nothing. I have the love of all my daughters."

On the eve of the feast of the Holy Name of Jesus, she was wheeled to the big hall where all the Sisters were gathered. After a slight attack in November she could no longer talk except with great difficulty. But she could still smile and her face was radiant that day. She looked tenderly first at the Sisters, then at the statue of Christ, the last gift of the Community to her. For a moment she seemed absorbed in contemplation. Then, gathering all her strength, she pronounced these words: "I look at Jesus Christ." Some weeks earlier she had said: "How one learns to love by looking at Him."

Then she was taken back to her room. For two months more she awaited the final call of the Lord. She received the Sacrament of the Sick on February 13th. All who saw her were struck by her serenity. "Her face radiated a supernatural light," one Sister said, "and her gaze reflected peace and joy."

The next day two Superiors from England arrived and the 28th Monseigneur Richard came for the last visit. Dom Logerot from Solesmes also came and gave her the last blessing. "I have seen your holy foundress," he wrote to the Superior of Bordeaux. "She could not speak any more but her big eyes opened and showed she still understood. I brought her Holy Communion three times. She understood the great gift she was receiving. Her state is mysterious. She is supple, docile and gentle as a little child. I believe that she draws down on the Congregation great graces by her admirable submission to the will of God. She adores this will without uttering the least complaint. She is thus putting the seal on her work and preparing it for the future."

On the 7th or 8th of March, her condition no longer left any doubt that the end was near. A sentiment of peace filled all who approached her bed and looked at her who was now so close to the last sleep, now gasping for breath, now fully conscious and gently pressing the hand extended to her by a gesture full of affection.

On the 9th of March Mère Marie Celestine, noticing that she was rapidly sinking, asked her: "Mother, if you still think you can receive Our Lord, press my hand." And Mère Marie Eugénie immediately pressed the hand placed in hers. It was the Last Communion. The last before the ultimate encounter in the light of eternity.

Before dawn of March 10th, the foundress of the Assumption gently fell asleep in the Lord.

Some years earlier in the month of May she commented on the words of Christ in St. John's gospel: "Father, I have made them share the glory I have received from you." "Glory," she explained to the Religious, "is nothing but grace coming to its plenitude, its perfection, and revealed in eternity."

The moment of this revelation in Christ, with Him and by Him, had come for Mère Marie Eugénie.

That was in 1898.

Almost a century has passed. The Church speaking through the Bishops assembled for the Second Vatican Council proclaimed:

"We can justly consider that the future of humanity is in the hands of those who are strong enough to provide coming generations with reasons for living and hoping." (*The Church Today*, 32)

APPENDICES

THE SUPERIOR NORMAL SCHOOL FOR WOMEN TEACHERS IN MANILA, 1893-98

Sister Maria Carmen A. Reyes, R.A.

A survey of studies on educational development in the Philippines reveals an occasional and, very often, a vague reference to the Superior Normal School for Women Teachers in Manila at the close of the last century. Was the school actually established? How and for how long a time did it function? Can it claim a place in the history of education in the Philippines?

The political disturbances during the closing years of the Spanish regime and the subsequent establishment of American rule in the Islands account, to a large extent, for the existence of diverse views and opinions regarding this educational center. The first attempt at an inquiry about this institution was made by the First Philippi Commission in 1899. In later years, Dr. Encarnación Alzona and Father Evergisto Bazaco, O.P., both historians of note in the Philippines, tried to investigate the matter further. However, in the Report of the Philippine Commission as well as in Alzona's and Bazaco's histories of education in the Philippines, the information given is, as a whole, limited to citations from the Royal decree that created the School and the Regulations by which it was to be governed. No attempt has been made to inquire into the actual implementation of the afore-mentioned legislation. Blair and Robertson, too, give the translation of the Royal decree of March 11, 1892, the Royal order approving the Regulations, and the Regulations of the Superior Normal School for Women Teachers in Manila with some footnote explanations in *The Philippine Islands*.

Aside from these passages, very little, if anything, is known about this school. It is the purpose, therefore, of this study to bring to light one of Spain's last efforts to respond to the appeals of Filipino leaders for educational reforms in the Islands, and to give to this institution its rightful place in Philippine History.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Why was the Superior Normal School for Women Teachers erected? On December 20, 1863 a Royal decree was promulgated ordering the establishment of separate primary schools for boys and girls in every town of the Philippines. Hence, there arose a need for women teachers. The Royal decree prescribed that these schools be conducted by certified teachers. Since there was no normal school for women as yet, those who aspired to teaching positions had to pass an examination before a board of examiners on the subjects taught in primary schools. The majority of the candidates for this examination were prepared by the Municipal School for Girls in the City of Manila and by the various convent schools, such as La Concordja and Santa Rosa. In 1875 a normal school for women was established in Nueva Cáceres. But it was exclusively for the young women of that diocese. However, the advantages offered by this normal school

in the training of women teachers decided the Spanish government to open a similar institute in Manila to prepare women teachers for girls' primary schools all over the country. Thus, on the 11th of March 1892 a Royal decree was issued creating the Superior Normal School for Women Teachers in Manila under the direction of the Augustinian Religious of the Assumption established in the Royal School of Santa Isabel in Madrid.

Why was this institution confided to the Religious of the Assumption? The Congregation of the Assumption was founded in Paris in 1839 by Mother Marie Eugénie de Jesus (Anne-Eugénie de Brou), who died in the odor of sanctity in the monastery of Auteuil, Paris, on March 10, 1898, and whose process of beatification is actually under examination before the Roman Curia. The main work of the Religious of the Assumption is the Christian education of young girls. The foundress saw in the society in which she grew up that the great evil of her times came from a learning in which faith had no part

As long as the scientific and literary education of a young girl is not permeated by Catholic dogma and by the teachings of Faith, and if Christian life does not become the nourishment and the very atmosphere of her soul, she will be the scourge of the family and of society, and the fruit of this false science for her will be death.

The realization of the urgent need of rebuilding in Christ this portion of society that was sadly drifting away from its God inspired her to form a teaching congregation of nuns who, by means of an enlightened and a profoundly Christian education, should seek to introduce the seeds of a spiritual rebirth into society and family life by implanting in the minds and souls of young girls the know- ledge and the love of Jesus Christ.

In 1876, at the request of King Alfonso XII, the Assumption Sisters assumed the direction of the Royal School of Santa Isabel in Madrid. The Queen, Maria Cristina, was the staunch protectress of all the houses of the Assumption in Spain, but very particularly that of Santa Isabel, of which she was mother, benefactress and friend. The royal family had a special affection for Mother Marie Célestine who was the Superior of Madrid from 1877 to 1894, and who, at the death of the foundress, became the second Superior General of the Congregation. The queen regent was a frequent visitor at Santa Isabel, and it was during one of these visits that she first broached the project of a normal school for women teachers in Manila to Mother Marie Célestine. The Spanish government had for a long time contemplated the creation of this school, and now that this project was about to be realized, she wished the Religious of the Assumption to assume its direction. Mother Marie Eugénie saw the immense possibilities for good in this distant mission and readily acceded to the queen regent's desire. As early as September 1890 negotiations began for the foundation in Manila.

FOUNDATION AND GROWTH

On November 13, 1892 a group of Sisters composed of Mother Marie du Perpétuel Secours who was the Superior. Sr. M. Alipia, Sr. Maria de la Cruz, and Sr. M. Celedonia sailed from Barcelona on board the steamer *Isla de Panay* for the Philippines. After a comparatively short voyage they reached Manila about the middle of December. A small house in the district of San Miguel had been prepared to receive them, and a few days afterwards. December 18, Mass was celebrated for the first time in their temporary convent. They remained in this house until May 1893 when they transferred to a rented three-storey building on Anda Street behind the College of San Juan de Letran. Another group of Sisters

that left Barcelona on March 31, 1893 on the same vessel, *Isla de Panay*, arrived in Manila on May 4: Sr. M. Antonia, Sr. Ana Teresa, Sr. M. Inés, Sr. Loreto, Sr. M. Florentina, Sr. M. Angelica, Sr. M. Juana, Sr. M. Guadalupe, Sr. M. Nieves, Sr. M. del Carmen, Sr. M. Odilia and Sr. M. Custodia. A Te Deum was solemnly sung at the Cathedral upon their arrival, after which they were received by Archbishop Nozaleda in his palace. With the personnel almost complete and with a fairly adequate house in which to start their work, the Sisters began the immediate preparations for the opening of the Normal School. From the very start, both the ecclesiastical and the civil authorities lent their valuable cooperation to this undertaking. They did all that was in their power to minimize as much as possible the innumerable difficulties that generally accompany any foundation.

On July 2, 1893 the school opened with an approximate enrollment of a hundred students, most of whom were from Manila and the nearby towns. This was the first official superior normal school for women authorized to prepare and to graduate teachers for the girls' primary schools of the whole archipelago. In view of the fact that there was a pressing need for women teachers, the General Division of Civil Administration empowered this Normal School to give examinations to students who had taken liberal courses elsewhere and who wished to become elementary teachers. This permission, however, was limited to the first two years of the school's existence, that is, the academic years 1893-94 and 1894-95. Thus, even before the end of the third school year 1896-97, the Superior Normal School for Women Teachers had granted several Elementary Teacher's certificates, mostly to students from the different schools of the Sisters of Charity. Elementary teachers who wished to become superior teachers had to take the fourth year course in the Normal School. The first recipient of the Superior Teacher's Certificate granted by this school was Susana Revilla, who not long after opened a school of her own. The Normal School was first housed in the building on Anda Street during the years 1893-94 and 1894-95. But the steady increase of students called for a better school plant. Early in 1895 the present site of the Convent of the Assumption on Herran and Dakota Streets was bought by the Congregation from a Filipino priest, Father Tico. Plans for the construction of a suitable edifice that would house both the Normal School and the Boarding School were immediately laid out. On the 19th of March 1894, Msgr. Bernardino Nozaleda, Archbishop of Manila, laid the cornerstone of the future convent and school at a solemn ceremony attended by representatives of the ecclesiastical and the civil authorities of the city. The building was completed the following year, and on May 30, 1895 the Sisters took up residence in their new convent in Malate

The School continued to grow until the year 1896 when it suffered a setback with the outbreak of the Philippine Revolution. Almost all the students went home a few days after the Cry of Balintawak. Only a handful remained in each class. To cite an instance, the third year class which had started out with one hundred and fifty students in 1894 was reduced to seven. These seven were the first and the last graduates of the four-year normal course at the Assumption. They were Florentina Arellano, Dolores Guerrero, Margarita Miguel, Emilia Sacramento, Maria Santillán, Rosa Sevilla and a Spanish girl whose name cannot be recalled. Their graduation was advanced a fortnight, about the middle of March 1898, on account of rumors of a possible war between Spain and the United States. A month later, the Spanish American War was declared. The hostilities that followed the Battle of Manila Bay, May 1, 1898, made reopening of classes impossible. Early in June of the same year, the Religious of the

Assumption were recalled to Europe, and thus, the Superior Normal School for Women Teachers in Manila came to an abrupt end.

ADMINISTRATION

Although the Superior Normal School for Women Teachers in Manila was conducted by the Assumption Sisters, it was a government institution, and as such, its administration and the instruction given therein were subject to minute regulations and close supervision. The members of the faculty were all appointed by Royal order through the Minister of Colonies. With the exception of the professor of religion and morals who was a priest, all the professors were Religious of the Congregation the Assumption and graduates from the normal schools of Spain. Their annual compensation was fixed according to law. The school equipment, the admission of students their attendance, the examinations, the awarding of prizes the maintenance of discipline, and the school finances were likewise regulated by the State.

This Superior Normal School was created for a double purpose. It was to serve as a teacher training institute and as a model school. Upon graduation, its students were expected to be adequately prepared to assume the direction of girls' primary schools. Consequently, the program of studies was calculated to provide the future teachers with an ample cultural background as well as with a knowledge of and experience in the use of the teaching methods most conducive to the all-round development of the child. Two kinds of teacher's certificates were granted: an Elementary Teacher's Certificate on the completion of three years, and a Superior Teacher's Certificate on the completion of four years.

The plan of studies adopted was that of the normal schools of Spain with the necessary adaptations. For the first and second year, the curriculum included the following subjects: religion and morals, Spanish grammar, elocution, arithmetic, penmanship, general geography and that of Spain and of the Philippines, history of Spain and of the Philippines, hygiene and domestic science, needle-work, geometry, physical education. The same subjects were given a further development in the third year with the addition of courses in pedagogy, the natural sciences and practice teaching. The fourth year was devoted to a more extensive treatment of all the subjects studied during the three previous years with two slight modifications- elementary literature was added, and geometry was eliminated; in its place, the students were given a course in designing for needlework.

A study of the program for the competitive examinations for teaching positions in the primary girls' schools of the first class reveals to a certain extent the scope given to the aforementioned subjects.

<i>Subject</i>	<i>Scope</i>
Religion and Morals	Christian doctrine, elements of Sacred Scripture and ethics.
Spanish Grammar	The parts of speech - their use and relation to one another, Syntax, sentence structure, spelling.
Arithmetic	The fundamental operations, the metric system, fractions, the decimal system, ratio and proportion, interest.
Geography	Elementary astronomy, physical and political geography.

History	Political developments in Spain from its earliest days to the Bourbon dynasty; Spanish exploits in the Philippines.
Needlework	Hems, seams, backstitch, hem-stitch, mending, patching, cross-stitch scalloping embroidery in <i>batiste</i> or <i>pina</i> .
Geometry	Lines and the figures they form, with a view to designing them and to determining their area and volume.
Pedagogy	A resumé of general psychology, educational psychology, principles of education, principles and methods of teaching.

The teaching methods employed discouraged the traditional rote memory system prevalent in almost all the girls' schools of that time in the Philippines. Lectures, discussion, and laboratory work were extensively used. Every effort was made to develop the students' power of thinking, reasoning, and organizing, and thereby enable them to deepen and enlarge their knowledge by themselves in later years. The value of material aids to teaching was recognized. The school had a well-furnished library. The geography and history classes were provided with globes and colored wall maps and charts. There was a complete collection of zoological, botanical and mineral specimens for the study of natural history, and a well equipped physics laboratory. The government provided funds for this purpose. Each year the directress could petition the government for the amount she deemed necessary in this regard. For example, on June 27, 1894 it is recorded that the *Intendencia General de Filipinas* authorized the release of the amount of P2, 000 solicited by the directress of the Superior Normal School for Women Teachers in Manila to complete the equipping of the said school.

Being a teacher-training institution, the third and fourth year students were given an opportunity to acquire teaching experience in a Municipal School for girls attached to the Normal School. This municipal school, generally referred to as the *Escuela Práctica*, was opened only in 1895 when the Normal School was in its third year and had transferred to its new establishment in Malate. There were about sixty pupils in this school. The third and fourth year students practiced teaching under the supervision of either the Directress, Sr. Maria de la Cruz, or the Secretary, Sr. M. Alipia, during the last five months prior to their graduation. It is interesting to note that the lessons given by these student teachers were supplementary; the municipal school pupils had their lessons with their regular teachers as usual. The students' achievement during the school year was closely followed up by the professors. There were no weekly or monthly texts, but a certain period of each lesson was set aside for recitation. Professors were required to submit a monthly report of their students' progress both in studies and in conduct. This report was posted on the bulletin board, thus rendering the pupils responsible for their scholastic standing and their deportment.

The general appraisal was made at the end of each school year. The students had to pass an examination on each of the subjects they had taken during the year. The greater part of these examinations was oral. After each examination, the Board of Examiners graded the students: *Sobresaliente*, *Notable*, *Buena* or *Suspensa*. In spite of having been examined every year, students had to take the rethlida on the completion of the elementary and the superior course to obtain their diploma.

Prizes were awarded annually for outstanding scholastic achievement: for the undergraduates, a *matricula de honor* which entitled them to a full scholarship, and for the graduates, a *Titulo de Honor y de Gracia de Maestra de Primera Ensenanza Elemental* and a *Titulo de Honor y de Gracia de Maestra de Primera Ensenanza Superior*. Aspirants to these prizes had to pass a competitive examination. Only students with a grade of *Sobresaliente* in all the subjects were eligible for the competitive examination for the *matricula de honor*. The examination was oral; the questions were written on the blackboard, and the contestant who answered first and correctly was awarded the prize. In the case of the *Titulo*, the aspirant must have had completed the *revalida* for elementary or superior teacher with a rating of *Sobresaliente* in all the examinations. This distinctive title was awarded to the best contestant. An exception was made for two of the graduates of 1898, at the request of the directress. Florentina Arellano and Rosa Sevilla were both awarded the *Titulo de Honor y de Gracia de Maestra de Primera Ensenanza Superior*, because both completed the four-year normal course with the grade of *Sobresaliente* in all the subjects of the four courses and in all the exercises of both *reválida*: for the elementary and for the Superior Teacher's Certificate. Soon after the American occupation of the Philippines, when General Antonio Luna put out his revolutionary paper *La Independencia*, Florentina Arellano and Rosa Sevilla were the only two women included in its staff which counted such literary figures as Fernando Maria Guerrero, Joaquin Luna, Cecilio Apostol, Salvador V. del Rosario, Mariano V. del Rosario, Clemente José Zulueta, José Abreu, Epifanio de los Santos and Rafael Palma.

CONCLUSION

It is difficult to evaluate the contribution of an educational center whose life span was limited to five years, and whose sphere of influence was restricted to a few by reason of distance and of political developments in the country. However, it can be said that in spite of these adverse circumstances, the Superior Normal School for Women Teachers in Manila played a pioneering role in the field of women's education in the Philippines.

When the Superior Normal School began to send out its graduates, teaching came to be considered as a dignified profession for women. Graduation from the normal school was deemed a social distinction . . . She (the teacher) was looked upon as the best educated woman of the community. The Directress, Sr. Maria de la Cruz, sought to instill in the minds and hearts of her students a deep appreciation for the teaching profession and a keen realization of their responsibility as future molders of the youth of the land. She quickly saw in the Revolution of 1896 something more than a Mere rebellion. Eventually, Spain would have to relinquish its hold on the Islands.

Who knows whether this war that is fast assuming national proportions will change the political status of your country? If that should happen, I shall be obliged to go. Bear in mind, therefore, that it is you who will take our place. Be ready to shoulder with your Countrymen the new responsibilities you will have to face.

Yours is the primary task of forming the character of the young girls so that the Filipino women of the next generation, imbued with a deep sense of nobility, may be fired with an enthusiasm for higher endeavors and a firm determination to carry through their lofty ideals for God and country.

As Normal graduates, you should initiate this movement. Stay together, unite and help each other in Propagating the true Faith and the virtues essential to the advancement of your people.

Set up a high ideal for the future of your country, and prepare yourselves to do au that is within your power to open up a new path that will lead to the happiness and glory of your race.

Ward off that excessive shyness and timidity that hold back the full realization of your ability and Strength.

As long as your women remain indifferent or resigned to what they deem as inevitable, your progress in the fulfillment of your national aspirations will be hampered Intensify your endeavors and give all that you are capable of for the good of all that you hold dear in life.

These timely counsels given at a series of conferences to the graduating class by Sr. Maria de la Cruz some months prior to their departure, were carried out, almost to the letter, by the class of 1898. In the words of Mrs. Rosa Sevilla Alvero, “they took root, blossomed, and bore fruit.” As early as 1900, even before peace had been completely restored in the country, Dona Rosa launched the Instituto de Mujeres, the first Filipino school for women. Among her first collaborators were four of her companions at the Normal School: Florentjna Arejlano who became the Instituto’s Vice-Directress, Emilia Sacramento, its Dean of Discipline, Susana Revilla, its Secretary and, later, Acting Directress during Mrs. Alvero’s absence, and Dolores Guerrero. Two years after the establishment of the Republic of the Philippines, July 4,1948, our government officially acknowledged Mrs. RosaSevilla Alvero’s invaluable service to the country by awarding her the Medal for Merit as Pioneer educator, indefatigable social leader, ardent lover of Filipinism leader in the feminist movement, patriot. Established in 1893, the Superior Normal School for Women Teachers in Manila witnessed during its five years of existence two of the most momentous movements in the annals of Filipino struggles for freedom-the Revolution of 1896 and the American invasion of 1898. These political circumstances prevented it from rendering greater service to the country. Nevertheless, it succeeded in preparing and inspiring a chosen few to initiate the noble task of educating our young women for a free Catholic Philippines.

THE ASSUMPTION IN THE PHILIPPINES SINCE 1904

In 1904 a group of English-speaking Sisters with Mother Hélène Marguerite as Superior was sent to re-open the school which was closed at the outbreak of the Revolution in 1898. Instead of the Superior Normal School for Women Teachers which had been established in the Spanish era, an elementary school and a secondary school were opened. In 1940 a College Department was added to the school.

The convent and school were completely burned down during the Liberation in 1945. At the request of the Alumnae, the Grade School and the High School were re-opened in June of the same year. Most classes were held in Quonset huts built on the ruins of the school, since only one building remained standing after the Liberation of Manila by the American Army. In 1947 the work of re-construction was begun by Mother Rosa Maria and the College was re-opened in 1948. As the number of students increased, it became necessary to move to a new site, bigger and more conducive to serious study. In 1958, a second Assumption School was built at San Lorenzo in Makati, Rizal, and the College moved into it in 1959. In 1973 the two schools were fused: the High School of Herran moved to San Lorenzo and the Grade School of San Lorenzo moved to Herran. In 1974, Malate fast becoming a commercial center in the tourist belt, the property was sold and the Grade School moved to Antipolo along the Sumulong Highway.

The Assumption has extended her apostolate beyond the confines of the Manila area. In 1910 the Assumption School in Iloilo City was established and the College Department added after 1950.

In 1974 a Community of Prayer was joined to the school. The College Department, no longer needed in a district proliferating with well-run Colleges, started phasing out.

In 1955 Sari Jose Academy, a school for boys and girls, was opened in San Jose, Antique and in 1968 Sta. Rita Academy, an elementary school for boys and girls, was opened in Sibalom in the same province. In 1965 Mt. Mary Primary School, a school attached to the Summer House of the Sisters, moved to Assumpta Hill, Crystal Cave Subdivision, Baguio under a new name: St. Martin de Porres Grade School. A Retreat House and the Novitiate were also established in the new site.

In 1968 a socio-educational center was opened in Barrio Obrero, Iloilo.

In 1969, the Maryville Housing Project and the Sari Juan Nepomuceno Grade School were started in Malibay, a slum area in Pasay City. In the same year, the Assumption Grade School in Passi, Iloilo was opened. In 1970 the Assumpta Technical High School for boys and girls was opened in Barrio Sta. Monica, San Simon, Pampanga. The Mother Rosa Memorial Foundation established by the Alumnae is partly responsible for its financial support, as well as for the San Simon Rehabilitation and Development Program jointly carried out by the Family Council and the Alumnae.

In 1974 the Assumption Sisters took over the administration of the La Salette College and High School in Santiago, Isabela. This college, with a co-educational enrollment of over two thousand, is the northernmost school run by Assumption Sisters in the Philippines.

In line with the spirit of Vatican II and in answer to the needs of the country, the Assumption in the Philippines has been moving towards the rural areas and the under-

privileged sector of society without abandoning the education of the upper class. Wherever the Assumption is, her main apostolate is education, formal as well as non-formal, her gaze “fixed on Jesus Christ and the extension of His Kingdom,” as her foundress Mère Marie Eugénie Milleret willed it, - “fixed on Him who alone frees and transforms society.”