

**FOUNDATION LETTERS OF  
MOTHER MARIE EUGENIE OF JESUS**

**To Abbé Gros, Father Lacordaire  
and Father d'Alzon**

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## **Introduction**

These letters are considered to be foundation texts because in them M. Marie Eugenie recounts her own history, the development of her vocation and her ideas about the new congregation just coming into being.

They were written during the period that followed Abbé Combalot's departure. The reasons that led to his leaving are known: his refusal to accept anyone but himself as ecclesiastical superior; his plan to present the first Constitutions in Rome without the authority of the Archbishop of Paris; his decision to move the community to Brittany, and his attempt to cause a rupture between the sisters and their superior.

The break came on 3 May 1841, followed by a letter in which Abbé Combalot entrusted the sisters and the work to Mgr. Affre's good will. "I hand over to you the authority which my position as father and founder gave me over this work. I was quite happy to form this community, the idea at its formation still seems useful and opportune, but my direct cooperation in it would be an obstacle to its development."

The first letters to Mgr. Gros and to Father Lacordaire are, in themselves, incomplete: they only describe what was necessary to move forward (No 1504) or else they expressed what could be said while awaiting a counsel of support (Nos. 1501 & 1502). The letter quoted from *Origines vol. I* is somewhat different (see the notes attached to this letter. It explains clearly these "ideas" which "although extremely Christian have a note of novelty in the eyes of the clergy and even upset them..." the unique aim: "Jesus Christ and the extension of his reign."

So we turn to the letters to Fr. D'Alzon, written between 1841 and Christmas 1844 (Final Vows) and 1845 (the year of the foundation of the Fathers of the Assumption) which express the life and project of the Congregation more fully and clearly. Written in a trusting openness of relationship and a sharing of ideas, they contain important developments in Marie Eugenie's thought on the orientations desired for the Congregation, on the difficulties seen in the context of the period, on the desire of fidelity to the light received and on the relations with the Church of that time.

The letters to Fr. d'Alzon are not given complete, since Marie Eugenie often covers a variety of topics in a single letter, some of which are not relevant to the historical development of the Congregation.

## **LETTER TO ABBE GROS**

**Vol. VI, No. 1504**

*Following a visit from Mother Marie Eugenie, the Archbishop appointed Abbé Gros as vicar of the community, made up then of eight sisters. On the 14 March, 1841, in his presence, M. M. Eugenie, M. Therese Emmanuel and Sr. M. Augustine pronounced their first vows for two years.*

*But a new difficulty was about to arise. In October, as a result of some malicious accusations by Abbé Combalot, Mgr. Gros seemed to believe what was said and his attitude changed. He suggested that the community should break up, each sister choosing the congregation she would like to enter, and that M. Marie Eugenie should return to the Visitation. Such a prospect was wholly unacceptable. After much prayer and thought M. Eugenie drew up her reply.*

*The rough copy of this letter is undated but it was probably written at the beginning of November 1841. Mgr. Gros' answer of 27 November 1841, testifies to his confidence and gives the "go-ahead" to the community:*

*"You have explained your ideas to me, better than ever before, ideas I already esteemed and, thus developed they seem really praiseworthy. I do not say that I agree with all your views, but they are all Christian, religious and estimable. I thank God for all the graces He has already given you and for those He surely has in store for you in the future.*

*Do not think any more about what I said to you, unless it helps to strengthen you in your holy vocation by a constant practice of humility, self-sacrifice and abandonment of self. This can lead you far. Do not be afraid of undertaking too much. The just man seeking perfection never says, "It is enough." I am speaking your*

*language here and I am convinced that in this matter you will not find me too strict.*

*To sum up: have no qualms about your vocation or about your future. Trust the Archbishop who has a real interest in you. Make progress along the path of perfection..." (MO2, 40,17)*

"Maria assumpta est"

Most honoured and very dear Father,

The other day when you expressed the wish to know what difference I see between the work of the Visitation Order and our own, and told me to think it over in God's presence so as to be able to give you the reasons underlying my conviction of being unsuitable to be a sister of the Visitation, you put me under an obligation. I ask your permission to carry it out in writing. After praying earnestly to Our Lord for the grace to express myself, I am sure I could not overcome my shyness sufficiently to explain myself clearly by word of mouth and deal frankly with personal reasons and painful subjects.

The dominant idea in the foundation of this undertaking of ours was that of an inspiration of zeal and it was this that decided my vocation. Daughter of a family unhappily without religion, brought up in a social circle which was still less so, left motherless at fifteen, and, through the workings of chance because of my position, having had many more contacts and greater knowledge of society than is usual at that age, I had been able to realize how unfortunate from a Christian point of view, had been the class to which I belonged. I own, Father, that even today I know no sadder thought than this. It seems to me that anyone who has a love for the Church and is aware of the profoundly irreligious outlook of

three-quarters of the rich and influential families of Paris must feel compelled to try every means to bring Christ into their lives.

But how is this to be done? Men never set foot in churches. Women go only at two o' clock for the crowds and fashions. Their habits and prejudices make them immune to any serious ideas. Their sons go to grammar schools, but the question of the daughters remains. Up till now these have been educated in fashionable boarding schools or by governesses. I dare not tell you my sober opinion of these, such as it is before God, from what I know of them through my childhood companions. For the rest, to my knowledge, the effects of both kinds of education have been deplored by the non-believing parents themselves.

This last circumstance offers a gleam of hope to the Christian. Unfortunately in the class to which I refer, namely the families of bankers, solicitors, barristers, etc., whom we could call a kind of liberal aristocracy, there is still a mountain of prejudice against convent education. They are indeed bitterly aware that the methods they have so far followed have not given their daughters the virtues that even society requires of them. Their mothers, absorbed in the pursuit of their own amusements, have neither the time nor the determination to try to do better, yet they demand extremely high academic standards as well as the manners of their circle.

The traditionalism of religious establishments, which inspires confidence in the pious, puts them off. The grill of an enclosure would make them flee, and I could say the same for a thousand little external details which are likely for a long time to prevent them from going anywhere near the Visitation. As for the convents specially dedicated to education, since I must tell the truth in such a serious matter, excuse me if I say that, in the opinion of the

people I know, they are sunk in three kinds of prejudice: political tone,<sup>1</sup> low academic standards and lack of good manners.

Moreover, these schools are very large and it must be said with the same frankness, that since the less good are more familiar with evil, people in society have so little confidence in the possibility of adequate supervision over a hundred girls, that the men of my family would never have been willing to see me take the risk.

I knew all this when Father Combalot first spoke to me of his apostolic project and it seemed to me to be destined to bring about a good for which I longed. He told me, with the authority of a confessor, that I must dedicate myself to working for it. I must own, Father, I found it hard, but if God was calling me, how could I one day, account for the souls that only my selfish cowardice prevented me from helping?

I felt I had been overwhelmed with countless graces, without which I could never have known God by the gift of faith which I alone in my family had received. There must be some plan of God in the experience I had acquired, in the mercy which has preserved me in the middle of it, through my independence and my varied contacts. I would be able to be useful because of all this and because of the talents which education had given me<sup>2</sup> and which I was bound to consecrate to God since so far, they had only contributed to my vanity. Besides, amidst all my shrinking, I felt a lively attraction of zeal for the work and I was well aware that once I decided<sup>3</sup> no effort would be too great in my effort to imitate

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<sup>1</sup> The word "tone" has been added.

<sup>2</sup> "Had acquired for me" : in the first version

<sup>3</sup> I was committed" : in the first draft.



Our Lord in his saving mission to the poor souls kept from him more by ignorance than by ill-will.

These, Father, were the reflections which led me to give myself to God. Similar ones had touched the hearts of my sisters. At least, they are the source of great encouragement for us all. The vocation of a sister of the Visitation has quite other foundations. The only proof I have of this, are the dispositions I was in when I wished to become one.

It was two years later, and to be candid, I was not in doubt of my vocation but of the suitability of the founder. At first I relied on the sincerity of the zeal I knew he possessed. Since I was well aware of what the world was like, I imagined all that did not belong there was super-humanly perfect. Experience was needed to teach me that the most sincere zeal does not always ensure perseverance, steadiness of purpose and patience, without which nothing can be achieved. But at the end of two years, although nothing definite had been started, the lesson of experience was half learnt and I had become aware, in the spiritual direction I received, of inconsistencies which promised us more suffering than success.

I own that I was deeply discouraged and the state of physical weakness I was in at the time also affected me. I looked back, not towards life in the world, for I had set out to *give*, not lend myself, to Jesus Christ, but towards that pleasant life of the Visitation that I had then lived. I would have liked to stay there and think only of my own salvation. Then, the spirit of the Visitation struck me as so markedly contemplative that if I entered there, I would have chosen a house where they were not engaged in teaching. Thus I would be just what St Francis of Sales had founded them to be and I would not find myself committed to an occupation foreign to all the rules and traditions of the Order and which the sisters themselves found hard, as some I know have admitted to me.

It was my confessor, the chaplain of the house where I was, who after inquiring about the state of my soul and the ways God had led me, told me to persevere and not to consider the contemplative life until I had done all I could to try an apostolic vocation, like the one to which I felt drawn. For the rest, all my confessors have, like him, seen the mark of a clear vocation in the courage of God has given me for this foundation in spite of all the good or bad reasons which might sometimes have discouraged me, and in spite of my natural cowardice.

At present Father, I am far from being discouraged. God has given me back my health. He has helped me to endure most of the things that had alarmed me in anticipation. He has strengthened my attraction and my vocation as I have gained experience from the duties it entailed and followed a rule which was adapted to it. He has given me sisters well fitted in every respect to carry out the aim of zeal which I have explained to you. They are good religious and I have seen few communities I would be equally pleased to join, from the point of view of simplicity and unity. We have the satisfaction of seeing the parents whose children we wish to educate, daily express confidence in the education we offer. Everything, even mockery, serves our ends.

They call us "blue stockings". Nothing is more likely to attract the children we want. No doubt, time will be needed, but we are young and ready to wait. As I expected, our habit is found attractive rather than disconcerting and I often find relatives who had refused to see me since my vocation, come here in a friendly spirit and say, when they see us, that it is a different matter to be as we are, than to be as they imagine nuns are elsewhere. In fact, they are mistaken and I appeal to you, Father, to recognize that we have not rejected any of the obligations or even the customs of religious life and that our rule has imposed more rather than fewer of the specifically monastic duties on us. This has even given rise

to more than one objection from people who, knowing the Rule and approving our aim, would have liked to see us seek greater liberty of action in the avoidance of specific religious obligations.

But that way of going about it, though at first sight it might seem the natural thing to do, and might have advantages to begin with as it would leave the teaching sisters more time, appears to me in the long run, dangerous to the spirit of the Congregation. I would never hesitate to choose the daily routine of religious practices which tire us and so limit our activities, since they make us continually aware of the spirit proper to our state of life, something as necessary to the real well-being of our pupils as to our own salvation.

So, Father we all prefer to go to heaven a little sooner, or to limit our pupils to what our own numbers allow us to accept, rather than give up the Office, the Chapter or the practices the rule prescribes to encourage humility. Even if other orders have been able to do without these aids, we feel our weakness makes them necessary for us, especially in an apostolic work of zeal. I think we should at least consider what the sisters will *be* before beginning to rely on what they will *do*.

As for our spirit in all that concerns community life, we have, as you know, borrowed nearly everything from St. Francis of Sales. There are some differences but these are in harmony with what is done in other orders where long experience sanctions them.

These differences are all designed either to accommodate the outlook of people outside, whose children we want to win for Jesus Christ, or else contribute to our own ability to be of use to them.

(1) We are not cloistered, but even without the grills we all know that in the eyes of the non-religious, any nun who cannot go out is a prisoner against her will. We all know they only forgive her for following a religious vocation if this involves charitable works, and that if the Sisters of Charity were to open a boarding school tomorrow they would have more confidence in them than in any enclosed convent. The people in our towns are just the same. At times of political unrest they spare only those nuns who can be of use to them and in this day and age this is perhaps worth taking into account. We could add a lot more of the need to make the children, who scarcely know the name of poverty, learn about it in practice; of the effects of works of charity as a counterweight to study; of contacts with the poor and association with the rich; of the advantages of not allowing the sisters to develop the excessive sensibility of people who are wholly enclosed, since they would then be more endangered by the contacts made necessary by the education of children, etc. I have never been able to put any of these points either to his Lordship or to you, Father, yet you yourself thought that it might have some practical justification, seeing that the Sisters of St. Maur, of St. Thomas, of the Saviour etc., have the same rule. Thank God, the experiment has not so far, led to the slightest difficulty.

(2) We have the Roman Office. All the sisters were attracted to it, and in an attraction to prayer, God must play some part. Moreover, religious engaged in education need to pray more than others. They bring distractions from the classroom which are more easily countered by the words of the Office which one understands, than, unfortunately, they may be by solitary prayer. The Office makes us daughters of the Church, in the sense that we follow its feasts, its visible activities and so the children educated by us will be more likely to acquire the habit and liking for public prayer as organized in the parishes than if we had a particular office of our own. The Church's music and

all the external ceremony involved in the Office appeals to them and draws them to God. As for being tiring, I assure you that it is no more so than the office they say at the Visitation. We are only bound to sing on Sundays and say neither the litanies nor the gradual psalms, nor the Office of the Dead nor that of Our Lady. Plenty of others before us have managed it with all that added, as well as with a lot of singing and teaching: the Augustinian sisters, the Benedictines, the Religious of the Holy Sepulchre, etc.

(3) Our beds and tableware are like those of the Carmelites, but this is no great austerity. The world does not see it. It is not unhealthy and dealing with children brought up among so much luxury and self-indulgence, we cannot have too much practical poverty, whether to impress on the pupils a degree of contempt for gracious living or to retain our own feelings for poverty and resist the contagion of worldly ideas in this matter.

(4) Our recreation is a little<sup>4</sup> shorter than at the Visitation. We have no meeting after Vespers but say Compline at once. We can work in a common room at any time. The hours for meals are different and we can always take three unless we are fasting. All this fits in better with teaching and studying. It leaves us much more time for in the Visitation, the hours of the two meals accorded them are so awkward that I scarcely knew anyone who did not take four meals.

(5) Finally our apostolic aim is emphasized in our constitutions. There are rules governing our studies, so that pursuing them as a matter of duty we may be fully aware of the obligations we have to approach them in a strictly religious spirit, and view them as a means of making Jesus Christ known, regardless of our own satisfaction. The utility of these advanced studies might be questioned if we wished only to attract Christian

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<sup>4</sup> Word omitted in the original

parents, rational enough to be content with an education really suited to women. But if it is a question of taking a little trouble, of conforming, at a superficial level, to the craze for learning, then in order to secure the salvation of the daughters of worldly people, would it not be blameworthy to refuse to do so? It is an obvious fact that unless we show that we are able to teach more and better than in their boarding schools, the parents will not give their daughters to be taught by faith.

People may object that we have not tried all this in practice. Yet, all we ask is to be allowed to do so. Up till now, we have spent all our time teaching and learning from each other. Besides, since this practical activity has always been our aim, we have differed from a contemplative order, just as the novitiate of an active order has a different spirit though it may have nearly the same daily activities. You may recall, Father, that I have sometimes betrayed in your presence a certain attraction for the austerity of the major orders, but I would like to say that I have never seriously preferred them, since in my view nothing is so akin to works of zeal as the practice of penances. They may have the same end.

I would be half-inclined to reproach myself for telling you how I feel so boldly and at such length, if I did not believe I was fulfilling your wishes. I only want to confide in your affectionate solicitude. I have done my best to make everything clear to you, but as I have spoken so freely of my family, I beg you to be so kind as to burn this letter when you have read it, unless you want to show it to his Lordship.

As for the rest, Father, you may be assured that we are well aware that we have not the sanctity needed to serve God and, for my part, I shall not be surprised at any kind of ill success. However, it is true that we have in no way made our own satisfaction the

object of our plans, that it was his Lordship's own declaration that our Rule is good and should build up our community, which has been our chief encouragement as well as our having received from his hands the consecrated habit which we wear with love and joy. As far as I know, in living this rule we have done nothing to forfeit the goodwill his Lordship has been kind enough to show us. If ever we are found unworthy and if the work we carry out cannot remain ours, forgive me, Father, if I become bolder still and assert that it is so necessary that sooner or later it will be done by holier hands. I believe that my only vocation is to devote myself to it, whatever sufferings or difficulties it may lead to.

Here, I have really spoken with a daughterly freedom, please forgive this and the very lengthy explanations in the letter. Let me sign myself once more, with respect, your very humble and obedient servant and daughter in Jesus and Mary.

**Unsigned**

## **LETTER TO FATHER LACORDAIRE**

### **Vol. VI, No. 1501**

*This letter, whose rough draft is in the archives, is dated 13 December 1841. Before it was written there must have been either a meeting or a previous letter, since on 19 November, Father Lacordaire had sent her an encouraging letter.*

*Drafted soon after the letter to Abbé Gros, this one is quite different in tone due to circumstances:*

- *The person addressed is different: In the first case it was the ecclesiastical superior whom she must confront, in this case it is a father.*
- *The situation is different: In the first case she must show the valid need for the work and the reality of her vocation in order to obtain the authorization to continue. In this case she can reveal her inmost feelings at a difficult moment.*

Maria assumpta est  
Paris, 13 December 1841

I should look in vain for an excuse, Father, for coming to bother you with my problems after all this time. So forgive me if I do not even try and simply tell you that, having done me a great deal of good in the past, you may be designed by God to complete my salvation and to conform me to Christ by extricating me from a multitude of difficulties in which I think you alone can help me. I know I am not worth the time and trouble you may spend on me and that I might be able to carry on for a long time without showing any outward signs of discouragement. However, the despair they sometimes cause in the depths of my soul may be a great evil in God's eyes and a great obstacle to His designs for me. Then, too, however insignificant His creature, I know that seen through the eyes of your charity and faith, it is important to help her to give glory to God to the full extent of the graces she might receive from Him.

So Father, I am encouraged by the consciousness both of my own good intentions and of my need. It seems to me that I could have no greater desire than to give myself, to surrender myself wholly to Christ and to live only for Him. At the same time I feel full of faults against which I cannot, and dare not ask anyone for help, for, as you said before you went away, someone who has not always



thought along the lines dictated by faith, remains burdened with a load of difficulties and anxieties which are not easily understood and which give scandal to those who have not had the same kind of experience.

Besides, since you gave me the desire to devote all my energies to the service of Christ, I have attempted once already to put myself in the hands of a priest, I forced myself to overcome all my instinctive reluctance so as to be simply an instrument and let myself be governed by his ideas which I thought must be more Christian than my own. I may say that apart from the advantage of having had to learn to give way, the experience was harsh and discouraging. It brought me only new distress of mind and great obstacles to doing good.

While I was suffering from being under the yoke of a mind with which I could not forge any link of sympathetic understanding, I often reproached myself for never having dared to turn to you, Father, whose spiritual daughter I felt myself to be before God since it was to your preaching alone that I owed my new life and my desire to share in the sacrifice of Christ. No one else had taught me to recognize its power and I must admit that I found no notion of it in the minds of most Christians. But at the same time I was not free. I was being scolded for having been too influenced by your ideas and for having modelled mine too closely on yours. I was not even allowed to turn to your writings. In addition, the first thing I learnt from your teaching was that no personal considerations should prevail when there was some good work to be achieved. Thus I made a complete sacrifice of a preference which seemed capable of damaging our unity, one of the essential conditions of the success of this undertaking, or so it seemed to me.

Today, this unity which defied all my efforts to secure it, has been finally destroyed. Our work is preceding under its own impetus and

is even regarded more favorably by our ecclesiastical superiors on that account, than it could ever have been under its first guide. I have regained the normal independence of a superior and am free to look for advice from someone I can trust. But this independence, full of dangers and personal difficulties from my point of view, calls for so much tact and firmness in dealing with those outside our community, that it would be equally dangerous to show that I was in need of support, or to invite one who might deflect us from our proper path. To search for someone whose advice might be helpful to me in the clerical world or even, as I am willing to do, among pious lay folk, (though I could not have quite the same confidence in someone not in Orders) is to run a risk I would prefer to avoid by accepting isolation. To discover what would be thought of our ideas we should let them be known, that is, to expose ourselves without any prior guarantee of sympathy or understanding, since to speak with a frankness I hope you will excuse, in such a search I should despair of finding any sympathy with generous ideals.

To explain this conviction I should perhaps give some detail, an explanation of the steps that brought me to Our Lord. I was brought up in a non-believing family which made part of Liberal opposition to the Restoration (of the Bourbons after Waterloo). My mother however, wanted to bring me up as a Christian and her strong character and high ideals led her to educate me with an indifference to selfish satisfactions. This has always seemed to me to compare well with many a properly religious upbringing. I was incredibly ignorant of the doctrine and teaching of the Church, yet I had been instructed for my first Communion like other children. I had made my first Communion with love and had even received on that occasion, graces from God which, together with your preaching, have been the basis of salvation. I lost my mother when I was fifteen and found myself in a yet more unchristian household and there I stopped frequenting the sacraments. God had always made Himself strongly present to me in them, though I

rarely sought Him there. Solitary and free to think as I liked since no one was interested, I often wondered what would one day be the fate of them all and my own too, if something of ourselves should survive beyond the tomb, and above all I pondered on the meaning of life and what obligations it demanded on earth.

But God in His goodness had left me a link of love. Though I might doubt the immortality of the soul, I instinctively rejected any attack on the Sacrament of our altars and sometimes, when in church, I saw the sacred Host in the hands of the priest, I prayed in spite of myself, to become as spotless as itself and to be drawn upwards.

All that I had learnt at school, in which there had been no word of Christ, formed an insurmountable object to those happy impulses, by its very extent. A further alteration in my circumstances brought me into contact with some very pious women and there perhaps, was an even greater danger. They bored me, they struck me as narrow and although in their company I started my yearly Easter confessions again, I was perhaps, never so worldly in my outlook nor so close to despising the things of God.

It was then, Father, that the mercy which was pursuing me, brought me to your sermons. Since I was expected to follow a course of Lenten sermons I chose yours. There grace awaited me. Your words fitted in with all my ideas, my impulses, completed my picture of reality, revived my notion of duty and my longing for goodness. All had been on the point of fading from my heart but your words gave me a new generosity and faith which henceforth, nothing was to shake.

I do not ask you Father, to imagine my gratitude for such benefits can only be discharged in heaven. But I can say that since then, I have offered no prayer or sacrifice without remembering you before anyone else. That was the last year of your Conferences. Before you left for Italy I was bold enough to ask for a few

moments of your time, and though my first ideas of religious vocation only made you smile, nevertheless I was truly converted. I had conceived the longing to devote all my strength or rather all my weakness to the Church which, from that moment I saw as holding the only key to the knowledge and achievement of what is good.

However, I knew none of its members and throughout the period when, through the study of Christianity, I was completing that intellectual renewal on which you had launched me, I imagined they were all apostles. Later I was to find that they were but men. To tell you the truth, Father this is the origin of the fits of bitterness and despair which sometimes torment me. When I look at the way things are in practice, in contrast to the way I see them in faith, I am deeply distressed. When I find in others so little consistency between feelings and intellect, so few ideas drawn from the Gospel, so much respect for what worldly prudence can urge to the contrary, such little confidence in the spiritual means of sacrifice and contradictions; when I felt obliged to rely on the support of family and connections, on friends, on manoeuvrings, having to take care to say the same thing as everyone else or approaching others by appealing to their prejudices, or even to their selfishness and ambition, then I am tempted to take refuge in a bitter and self-lacerating mockery. It is not that I cannot find the explanation for this in the knowledge of my own nature, but I cannot let myself be swept along by such impulses without realizing that I am resisting God. Though others may act in this way with an easy conscience in the service and even love of God, I cannot do so.

Yet they are better people than I am and I have always felt that from their point of view to be like that was a form of humility. Can this be why I have so little? What is beyond doubt is that the most devout and celebrated directors of conscience seem to desire to turn us from any wish or hope of useful work as though this were

something dangerous. They are delighted when we cease to be active and long only to enjoy communion with God. They often remind us to be concerned with our own conversion. If we feel called upon to make a sacrifice we have to conceal from them the fact that we may have looked outside ourselves. Indeed Father, because of the mental independence I possess, and of which I cannot cure myself, it seems to me that this is the way to make a race of children of us, as do the Romans of our day, whom I have often heard praised because of this.

Faced with these considerations, for a long time I asked myself if everyone else was right and that I am crazy. Perhaps there is some virtue in having moderation of faith. Since I have not been endowed with the gift of making these prudent compromises, I would have preferred to withdraw from my sphere of action to live only in prayer. From another angle, God has imposed on me the duty of being active. If our enterprise is in accordance with His will, I was bound to pursue it until I met a wholly insurmountable obstacle. Moreover, I could only act on lines I understood. My sisters were ready to rely on my way of seeing things in this connection. As for myself, I had no one to support me, my ideas had only once found a sympathizer and he was 200 leagues away. So I thought I could and should do without. I would give way in external things and fall in with all the ideas of my directors, never allowing anything to show that might give rise to mistrust or hindrance, counting on God for the rest. But it is dangerous to walk in such isolation that one could be tempted one day to say to oneself, "I need nobody else."

I fear my pride Father, for my nature does not like guidance and in becoming attached to good things, as the rule says, pride can become all the greater the more sacrifices there are to make. I am afraid of making mistakes, I am afraid of growing contemptuous. I am afraid of giving anyone the opportunity of recognizing my faults and therefore of having no one with authority to correct them.

Suffering is nothing, but I am afraid of not reaching the degree of holiness that Christ asks of those who belong to Him.

Whenever I have prayed about this it seemed increasingly clear that I ought to confide in you, since I trust you and since, little as you know me, I have never been able to resist applying to you the words of St Paul. I did tell myself you had little time to spare, but I need reassurance rather than time, for as God knows, I am looking for strength rather than for consolation. Providing that someone occasionally sketches out the path I should follow, I do not ask to be accompanied at every step. I have written very frankly, Father, face to face I would never have dared to be so outspoken. This must excuse my boldness in writing to you. I will add that though in conscience I am free to ask advice where I wish, I do not know how far any use of this freedom is likely to be acceptable to those concerned with this house. If you would allow me to see you just the once when you are back in Paris that is probably all I shall dare ask. And I would not like to be tongue-tied through shyness as I was a month ago.

Forgive me for having written at such length. Someone who has no opportunity to express herself is often wordy when at last she plucks up courage to do so. Forgive my familiarity and accept this assurance of my dutiful respect.

Paris 13 October 1841  
Convent of the Assumption  
Rue de Vaugirard 108

Sr Marie Eugenie of Jesus  
Religious of the Assumption  
God alone.

**LETTER TO FATHER LACORDAIRE**  
**Vol. VI, No. 1502**

***Introduction***

*We possess a rough draft of the letter No 1502 which is undated. It was probably written 4 February, 1842, since in the answer to it, written on 10 March 1842 there is this reference: "In answer to your letter of 4th February." It thus seems to follow letter No 1501 and the Father's answer dated 25 December, 1841.*

*"I am rather late in answering your letter and in thanking you for your counsel. Since I want to ask advice in various matters today I write simply and with complete confidence in you, before God . . ."*

+ M.A.E.  
(4 February 1842)  
date from the answer.

Dear Reverend Father,

I am rather late in answering your letter and in thanking you for your advice<sup>5</sup> but I waited to follow your desire that I only write when I needed definite counsel. Since I want to ask your advice on various matters today, I write simply and with complete<sup>6</sup> confidence in you before God. First of all, I ask that I may answer your letter and then I will ask your advice as I write it. I will let you know the expectations I have for our correspondence. I want you to feel completely free to answer me or not, whenever and however you feel so inclined, since I am a religious and thus ready to wait for a reply, to be corrected unsparingly and to be denied

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<sup>5</sup> This word is crossed out in the manuscript

<sup>6</sup> Word omitted in the manuscript

my wishes when these do not serve God's glory or the good of souls.

I would also like you to feel free to ask me whatever questions you wish. You can be sure I will not consider them indiscreet and I will be simple enough to tell you if I find any particular point difficult to answer.

Perhaps I am little naive to ask you to establish our relationship in such great freedom, but I see here a powerful means given by God to help realize the aim of this work. I would like to establish a great spirit of faith in our relations and avoid any other preoccupation. I would not like to lose these advantages by misunderstanding or by a hold-up of letters and I will only stop writing to you if you judge this right and tell me so. I would ask you to forgive in advance any questions that might appear indiscreet and I assure you I will await your answer in the form and at the time most convenient to you. If, Father, I should happen to be over-simple in what I write it is because I want to share with you the thoughts that come to me before Our Lord, and besides, this is not one of my failings with others.

I now allude to your letter, so kindly written. You summarise in it, much better than we could have done, the spirit we seek in the education of girls. I would like to know why people think we are anxious to extend the limits of their learning and why our methods cause so much distrust. I am well aware that M. Combalot spoke of our studies in a manner bordering on the ridiculous, but if we had accepted all his ideas without reserve we would not have changed our position in his regard.

We are not seeking to extend the scope of the studies but we want an education more in conformity with and favorable to the faith rather than one opposed to it. This will doubtless demand great efforts from us since most of the books used in the education of



girls are contrary to this spirit.<sup>7</sup> This gives<sup>8</sup> our education an unlooked for advantage since it will lead to unity and no teacher could follow it without study and reflection.

There is nothing alarming about the practical results for these will lead a woman to be more devoted to her duty rather than less so. If by chance, Father, what I wrote about Latin and the study of St. Thomas led you to believe I have accepted all the ideas of our Founder in these matters, I must confess that I have not said, nor would I say, these things to anyone else since the studies concerned were for religious. I must say, in great confidence that I have found them extremely useful in helping the sisters appreciate the Office of the Church and many other religious matters as well. They have enabled them to teach the catechism of the Council of Trent, used with the children, in a much better way.

You know Father, that among the favours St. Catherine of Sienna received from Our Lord, she considered her ability to understand the Office was one of her special graces. I love to mention this great saint of your Order since she is a special patron of ours. Our Congregation began on her feast day and she is the model of a life of zeal based on a life of prayer.

This particular subject is studied to help our religious life, as indeed was the custom in the novitiates of a number of monasteries, as is attested by Bossuet in his letters to the Benedictines of Jouarre.

The children, too, have better-formed French teachers since if one knows another language one teaches one's own better. Should the parents wish it, the pupils could learn the basics of Latin for I

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<sup>7</sup> "Are of a contrary spirit" in the first draft.

<sup>8</sup> "This brings about in" in the first draft.

have seen many a young mother troubled because, lacking this language, she could no longer help her sons and was obliged to part from them, even before their First Holy Communion, in order to further their elementary studies. Their fathers were usually too busy or too impatient to be concerned.

I can't imagine why I mention these things to you since you know them better than I do. I would just like to assure you that generally I take care not to discuss these matters, but to agree with those who mention them so it is not my fault if they are not satisfied.

Actually those who do know us are usually content, since we only speak to them of things about which we agree. This is precisely what gives me scruples which cause a certain interior bitterness. There seems almost a sense of falsehood in the approval given to trifles and the failure to perceive the fundamental contradiction of ideas. This is repugnant to my natural and spiritual dispositions. The remarks on which I based my objections were always made in friendly fashion and without being aware of the opposition of which I was conscious. It is inevitable that there should be a little formal exaggeration in what I say since the nervousness of a first communication often leads one to excess. As for the essence, I have always found myself, even if correct in relying on human opinions, believing them to be far too vague. There are exceptions. I must mention, in the first place, someone whom you know, Father d'Alzon, for having already referred to my relationship with him, I would be sorry to seem to apply any of the things recently spoken of, to him. On the contrary, my relationship with him is a source of great confidence for me and I can say that I have found we have a harmony of ideas.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The end of this paragraph replaces a more detailed text on the relationship with Father d'Alzon and the need of the growing work.

I should like your advice, should you care to give it, on the fact that we will soon have to change our Religious Superior since the one we have at present will soon be made a bishop. I wonder should we seek someone who appreciates our work for what it really is and with whom we could speak quite openly, or whether it would be better to have a Vicar General like the present one, satisfied with us because he sees no reason for dissatisfaction, who would be too busy to be too concerned with us and whose ministry would probably consist in granting our requests and attending public ceremonies. I mention this to you Father, since we cannot but praise our present Superior who acted in this fashion and who gave up his wish to turn us into Visitation sisters because of our respectful resistance.

He has always spoken of us favorably both to the bishop and to the council. I would not hesitate to choose such a one were we firmly founded, but in approximately eighteen months, the provisional approbation of our Constitutions should become definitive, if we are to be established. However, the idea that our rules would have to be decided by people who, up till now, have objected to all that is most religious in them, grieves me and makes me wonder whether, before God, it would not be better to have a Superior prepared to support us, at this time, rather than a secular priest I do not know whom as yet, named through the administration of the diocese. Perhaps the bishop would be willing to grant us the one I ask for, only whom do I choose? What do you think is my duty on this occasion? Should I trust in Providence which has supported us thus far? Must I make an effort to choose even if this might oblige us to follow the ideas of the one we asked for, even if he did not help us to achieve our end?

You are mistaken if you consider our Rule to be too austere. It is not so in reality, though it appears so to people who are not themselves living the religious life. Thus they cannot understand the need for corporal mortification, in so far as this can be

undertaken without detriment to the aim of the Institute. Thus if the Rule does not establish fasts of obligation I can understand this well, for women find it difficult to teach and fast. But to sleep on straw mattresses, to follow the customs of the poor and ordinary penances, fits in well with work in the classroom. I would be sorry to deprive our sisters of formation in Christian vigor and sacrifice, which virtues they need to teach to the children. I am quite disinterested in saying this since I am very slack and the mildest austerities cost me more than the others.

I would like to end Father, by asking what you think about receiving religious from another congregation. In the beginning subjects are needed, but is it so important that subjects are accepted who would not be able to adapt fully to the spirit of the house? I ask this because of a former superior of the Sisters of St. Joseph who has, I believe, spoken to you of her vocation? She<sup>10</sup> has qualities but in my opinion they are not those we need. This affair<sup>11</sup> requires a longer explanation and I have been too long already.

Dare I ask you, somewhat indiscreetly, if we can hope to see the Dominicans re-established in France? If it were so I would be delighted for us. I think I can say it is the only Order that attracts us. What can women in the service of Our Lord do if they cannot find the spirit needed to guide them in the sacerdotal ministry?<sup>12</sup> But I am a little afraid of what I have just written, if those around us saw it, what would they say? Even if they knew I wrote to ask your advice? What I write is between God and you. Please forgive my boldness, but you encouraged me to write so.

Accept my humble and respectful devotedness in Jesus and Mary.

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<sup>10</sup> "This young lady" in first draft.

<sup>11</sup> "More explanations are necessary here." in the first draft.

<sup>12</sup> "in their confessors" in the first draft

Sr. M. Eugenie of Jesus. DS

**LETTER TO FATHER LACORDAIRE,  
ORIGINES Vol. I, Part 2. Chapter XI**

**Introduction**

*The traditions of the Congregation relate that this letter was written to Father Lacordaire. It is presented thus in the Origines after the letter to Abbé Gros. "Another more intimate letter written by Mother Marie Eugenie to Father Lacordaire gives the final characteristics of the spirit of the Assumption showing the direction of souls; the difficulties the Foundress had to face can be felt, but far from being discouraged the aim of the work seems clearer, more visionary and more radiant than ever."*

*Unfortunately the text is undated and no signature seems to have been found. On the other hand, among the twelve letters in the archives from Father Lacordaire, written between November 1841 and January 1850, none seem to be a reply to this letter. It certainly appears to belong to the early years of the foundation in its inspiration, style and the reference to Abbé Le Saint.<sup>13</sup>*

*Marie Eugenie explains the best of herself and her ideas to the person addressed.*

Without date

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<sup>13</sup> Abbé Le Saint was confessor to the community of Rue de Vaugirard. His name is mentioned in letters to Father d'Alzon, 1841-42 (Vol. VII), 1844 (Vol. VIII) and in the sisters' souvenirs.

I am going to speak very simply, Father. It is rare I find, that Christianity is taught as I understand it. Why be surprised to find that persons, once arrived in the ways of mystical prayer are not disinterested since usually they have been taught from the beginning ways quite contrary to disinterestedness? I will say here how I understand matters. I have to admit that I have never had to do with a person so imperfect that I have allowed myself to settle for leading her by the sole fear of not saving her soul and by a constant preoccupation with her own personal destiny in eternity..

It pains me to hear this earth called a land of exile. I consider it a place of glory for God. Here He can receive from our free and suffering wills the only homage that He does not find in Himself. I believe that we have been placed here below so we can work for the coming of our heavenly Father's reign in ourselves and in others.

I believe that Jesus Christ delivered us from the past by His sacrifice so that freed, we might work for the fulfilment of the Divine Word. I believe that each one of us has a mission on earth. From the start, it should be understood that the heart of Christianity being the sacrifice of the One who, *"who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame"*<sup>14</sup> or as St. Gertrude said, "He has left his beatitude to come and seek labour," the final aim of such a religion is not just to seek our eternal beatitude but also to make us seek how God can use us for the spreading of his Gospel and for its fulfilment. This must be done courageously. using the means faith gives us, the poor and powerless means of Jesus Christ. We should be concerned only about doing all He has destined us to do, abandoning to Him whatever might be the success in time or eternity.

Can you imagine the beauty of a truly Christian society? God, Lord of minds under the shadow of our faith, Lord of wills amid the anxieties of trials and tribulations, reigning everywhere, though

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<sup>14</sup> Heb. 12:2

invisible, adored even when He strikes. All the virtues which are God's very life, preferred to those needs which make up the natural life of man.

I am both simple and daring to speak in this way to you, but I cannot refrain before this thought. This reign of Christ is perhaps more beautiful to me, more dear to my soul than the tents of Israel of which the prophets speak, more dear than the heavenly Jerusalem itself where one cannot belong to God without receiving his reward.

There are those today who say, "A lovely Utopia" I have to admit that this phrase scandalizes me, because Our Lord has said, "There will be but one flock and one shepherd. The Son of Man will draw all things to Himself." Moreover, who would dare doubt that the reign of Jesus Christ is the purpose of this world and that it is good to devote oneself to this cause which is to make Jesus Christ, liberator and sovereign of the world known, to teach that all belongs to Him, that He is present in our souls by the life of grace, desiring to achieve in each one of us the wonderful work of the reign of God. Each one of us enters into His plan either to pray, to suffer or to act. To refuse to give oneself to this end under any pretext would be to abandon the highest good in order to follow the way of egoism. I have to admit that for me, this is the beginning and end of all Christian education.

You will readily agree that the persons who have understood this are prepared to enter into the ways of prayer. But time, plus many concepts and teachings drawn from the Gospel would be required. Care must be taken to find the true Christian expressions lest anything be exaggerated. Persons thus formed and well advanced in the life of prayer, should have less difficulty than others in not seeking their own joy in prayer and in avoiding scruples at all times. They should be more ready to abandon themselves to God and to desire his hidden designs.

It is on this basis that the good M. le Saint finds in us, is established. Neither he nor our superiors nor indeed anyone, is accustomed to this way of thinking. Although these ideas are entirely Christian, they have a note of novelty in the eyes of clergy and even upset them since the same ideas have often been professed with a mixture of exaggeration and error. These ideas have often come from people, who have not always understood their perfect harmony with all that is most pure in mysticism,

That these ideas have only just appeared nowadays and are still rarely formulated, is easy to explain. There was no need and it is normal that Christian dogma becomes better and more fully understood as time develops human learning. In the saints of the first centuries, we find traces of Jewish dogma and ancient ideas concerning God. Christian action as we understand it today,, was not possible in Roman society. It was necessary to withdraw, to expiate, to pray, to learn to suffer during a period when the faith was indebted to ‘The martyrs.’<sup>15</sup> Down through the ages the types of saints have changed. They will continue to change. It is for this reason that the Church will always have need of new religious orders.

Although I myself have not always understood these ideas with the clarity I have today, clarity which has come from the effort to put them into practice and even more, from contact with all kinds of contradictory ideas, these are the ones which have always been foremost in my Christian faith and especially in my religious vocation. It was on hearing them for the first time at Notre Dame that I felt urged to bring my grain of sand to the building and the drop of blood of my sacrifice to the combat. The most difficult part for me has been to harmonize everything else with these views . . . prayer, the interior life, action in the world, thoughts and feelings.

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<sup>15</sup> The idea that the blood of martyrs is the seed of faith.



Also, since our role is to put doctrine into practice rather than in formulas, it suffices that the practical conclusions of these ideas have been highly approved by all with whom we have to deal. As long as the arrow's direction is approved and I am found to be aiming at the right target, I do not feel obliged to say where I have fixed my gaze in order to obtain success. My gaze is entirely fixed on Jesus Christ and the extension of His reign.

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## Letters to Fr d'Alzon

**Letter No. 1555 - 6<sup>th</sup> July 1842**

*This letter is important because it reveals Marie Eugenie's underlying reason for undertaking the mission of education (Para. 2): **to teach the path of unselfishness**. Pupils must be taught how to make sacrifices, as mothers of families they must be capable of teaching their children the value of sacrifice. What is important for the individual and for our society is that we move out of our natural egoism.*

My dear Father

My father is leaving for the Midi and asked me whether I had any commissions. He wants to give copies of our prospectus to certain people. I am giving him this packet for you, and he will certainly make sure you get it. Our sisters want me to write at the same time to the Bishop of Montpellier. In such matters, I normally do what they want in the hope, like Saint Anselm, that in their turn they will do as I wish when the occasion arises. So, despite my annoyance with all this politeness, I am going to set myself to write. However since Fr. Combalot has been able to change characters that are easily influenced, I would like you to look at my letter and what I am sending so that I don't do anything stupid. You have my permission to throw the letter on the fire, and I hope that that is what you will do.

I should like you to be happy with our prospectus: it is difficult. I do not know if we will manage immediately to educate many children of the class you were speaking about in your last letter. That is what we want, but for that we would need to live on the

other side of the Seine, and that has not been possible for us up to now. But we are a hundred percent with you in everything you are saying, and sometimes I would go even further than you. For as long as I have thought seriously about these things, **I have believed that girls of this class must be readied to make great sacrifices, and even to give an understanding of sacrifice to their children.** Because if in the future, this race does not leave its egoism behind and learn to make sacrifices it is going to be forced to make terrible ones. To teach this is a colossal task and too few people are working on it. As a result once it is understood it must be complied with. How successful will it be? God alone knows. Sometimes he raises up the nations that fall, and abandons those in which humanity puts its hope.

But how can I come back to these thoughts? They are dying in my mind, and I only broach them now with distaste and irony. They come and they go without my bothering about them. I am suffering what I feared when I entered this interior state where I now find myself: incapacity, tiredness, non-comprehension of exterior things, total indifference, and a thousand other dispositions which make me less and less fit to be what I am. I am becoming one of those pious women you spoke to me about: - spending several hours in prayer instead of a quarter of an hour, and you have all that I desire to do. The rest for me is like fruit that is beautiful to look at – but under the skin there is nothing but ash. Now I have reached the ashes and although I go on speaking in the same way as when I was at the peel, I don't believe in it anymore.

All this is bitter, incomprehensible. I often think that I am going mad when I find myself feeling so differently disposed towards all the objectives of human activity, or rather that I have too weak a spirit for the mission I am charged with. It gives way when I look

at things in their entirety, and being under the influence of someone I love, as is natural, I am becoming opposed to the active life, to the same degree that Sister Thérèse Emmanuel often complains to me of being. Sometimes this frightens me for the usefulness of this work; but that is for God to do. For myself, when I falter, I abandon myself to him in a way that I don't know how to describe. To do each day what I see before me as my duty for love of him, to love him in whatever state I am in, and when I understand nothing, know that he understands and he wants it, that must suffice for me.

But I am talking nonsense, my dear father, and indeed I had no intention of speaking to you about myself. I wish I had a chance to talk to you about our work. I am afraid of not giving it enough attention and of being too preoccupied with my personal spiritual life. Doubtless, God will give us this grace one day, meanwhile you know how much I am yours in Our Lord.

Sister Marie Eugenie of Jesus

Paris, 6th July 42

P.S. I don't need to tell you that I will do everything contained in the second part of your letter: that is why I scarcely speak to you about the dispositions of my conscience. They are gentler anyway of late. To borrow an expression of Saint François de Sales, I could say that for me Jesus has once again become Jesus. Oh well! I cannot stop myself missing the suffering and preferring above all the Garden of Olives, although I stay there with so little courage.

**Letter N° 1556 - 19<sup>th</sup> July 1842**

*This is a very important letter. Like many of Marie Eugenie's letters to Fr. d'Alzon it covers different subjects. The parts which refer to her own spiritual life have been omitted here. The highlighting is not in the original.*

*The letter shows the difficulty Marie Eugenie had in explaining the spirit of the Assumption to most of the clergy and religious superiors she was in touch with at this period. It is a difficulty which pushes her all the harder to be clear and exact in writing to Fr. D'Alzon. The letter shows that she realised how different was her vision from that of other congregations and how it makes the authorities take fright.*

You are very good to me, my dear Father, and I really want to thank you. I have three of your letters here which are doing me a lot of good, particularly the last: I am going to reply, but first let me ask you to give me some information about our new Vicar General of Paris, Fr. Jacquemet, the erstwhile Vicar General of Aix, then for a time honorary vicar general of Bordeaux. As well as the interest in knowing the history and the turn of mind of anyone who might eventually replace Mgr Gros, in this instance I have another reason and I turn to you thinking that you must necessarily know the clergy of the Midi.

What shall I do? Shall I hint at socialist ideas, at some tendency that would re-awaken the reproaches of our beginnings and once again set minds against us, now when things seem to be getting better? On the other hand, if he is an intelligent man, would I not be rejecting a heaven-sent possibility of cooperation by throwing him back on the beaten paths of the commonplace for which we are esteemed by the narrow minded? At the Archbishopric, Father Jacquemet will be told, if he asks, that ours is a. "good

establishment”, that most of its members have rejected “good matches” in order to join our life; that we speak English, and that we get along together. Our Superior would add that he knows we want to be good religious, that we follow the Rule of the Visitation, and that would be about all.

You see Father, knowing things as I do, I am almost afraid of a man with broad ideas unless he goes all the way with them. He would have our secret and if that does not turn out a help, it could be a major obstacle. In this matter I have become so sceptical that when I meet a Superior whose ideas I do not know, I would only risk expressing any radical idea in his presence if he had first expressed one himself. This is the reason why I have spoken at length on this. So tell me what you can find out, and in the event there is some appearance of sympathy with us, say if it would be good to go beyond the stupid reasons I generally give for our studies, our Office, leaving enclosure, etc. These are things I mention with great caution whenever I speak of them. It is strange how, while nobody is upset by stupidity, many take fright at whatever indicates **a will to be strong and to take a definite positive action, even in our tiny sphere.**

I neither like the children, nor the teaching, nor the studies, nor the outside contacts required by a boarding school. I find that the best teachers are the worst religious. and I admit that I am often tempted by the hope of spending my life elsewhere or else as a lay sister here, once I have finished doing everything to establish this house. For some time now, I have hesitated telling you all this for fear that you will forbid me this kind of thinking. I think that this is the result of the misunderstanding I have rather bitterly mentioned above.

It is not that people are not good to us: most of those on whom we should least rely are useful: the Jesuits send us people, our

superior shows us great confidence and during his last visit he formally assured me that I should not worry about the future, that we will continue under our Rule, and that our patience and moderation will be rewarded. In front of all the sisters, he asked for how long we have approval and learning that it was until the 15<sup>th</sup> August 1843, he told them they were to be congratulated on being pleased with what Mgr had granted them and putting their trust in him.

Our usual confessor is good, especially – for some little time now - with me. He is broad-minded although too old and ignorant of the ways of the world to understand all the needs of education, and too impatient to listen to what we say. The priest who comes on the Ember days also shows us great kindness, especially to me when he found me once in great interior trouble. The more time passes, the more I see that the narrow-minded become gentle in government as soon as their prejudices are allowed, or at least not countered except in difficult circumstances. Then they ask little of you and I know many who appreciate the gently absolute rule of the Jesuits. Seem to hide nothing from them, turn to them, be devoted to them and they will give a good measure of a satisfaction by their care, their goodness and their service to you. But Father, and I say it without bitterness, that is scarcely Christian and in all these sort of relationships, without even thinking about it, I feel a sort of disgust or at least apathy.

**Our thought about this work** and its principal rules is very simple. We have found by experience that the instruction given to women is ordinarily completely superficial, and consequently of no use for their children and without any link to their faith – indeed their studies, if they are prolonged, nearly always turn against their faith. Going beyond what we personally have experienced, we know that they have totally false ideas about their dignity and their duties, being ashamed of doing anything at all useful, of really attending to their home and their children. They glory in being

seen, being indecently dressed, attracting compliments that they would reject if they realised how much they dishonour them; attaching a value to their position and to their husband's fortune to a point that is degrading. In a word although they are pious, they are very ignorant of their religion, of all its truths, its history, of that which would make them understand the Christian social spirit. I add that few young women have been taught about the seriousness of life, of the importance of the smallest steps at the beginning; few have been strengthened against its reversals and its sorrows, and taught to do something about the miseries they don't see; to give way when it is only a question of their own pleasure, but never to bend when it is a question of their duty.

To put our sisters into a position to counter these various faults they must have a serious religious formation. Far from thinking that the education of women should be made up of superficialities, I believe that that is precisely what can be omitted, because they are called to have the advantages of learning rather than the reputation for it. Their great knowledge is what they are least taught: to read, to write and to speak their own language simply and fluently. This ability is very precious, you would not believe how much it eases things in a woman's life, what graciousness it brings, and how it helps this mission which, with education, seems to me to be uniquely ours – to reconcile difficulties, to be as my mother used to say – quoting Madame de Staël I think –the padding that is put between pieces of crystal to keep it from breaking.

If other studies are going to be really useful to women, if they are going to raise their moral dignity, they must be imbued with Christianity. This is our plan for every possible reason. But for that how well must one's religion be known? In which works, serious and with views that are both sound and broad, must we look for the secret of the connections between the natural and supernatural orders? Here moderns have nearly always erred,



because however outstanding they are, they make science the starting point in the search for faith.

I know that the task is so difficult that one would have the right to smile to see it being attempted by women, if one forgets that good cannot be achieved without tackling it, and that these women precisely who have no status to assert, nor literary renown to gain, can more simply seek the truth. And lastly that they would only take on this difficult endeavour to the extent necessary for the instruction they would give to other women. But whatever you say about it, I stand by my old idea, God gives to each the grace necessary to the fulfilment of the duties to which He calls them. I believe this because I have experienced it more than once.

**To make our studies Christian**, we must then make a serious study of Christianity, and the works really proper to that are the works written in the most Christian times, and at a time when the Fathers of the Church surrounded the Gospel with the most elevated human insights. We must identify with the spiritual life of the Church, understand her Office, recite it each day, enter by way of the Catholic language into possession of what we can attain of the peaceful development of the faith in matters of the intelligence. This is because we are not concerned with controversy, but with active faith, faith dominating judgment and taste as well as feelings. We will use St. Thomas, who sums it up in the clearest, least controversial way that I know, to help us understand dogma, so that afterwards when we read modern authors we will easily perceive the point at which their version of Christianity falls into error.

**This is what distinguishes our studies for me**, not to learn more, I don't think it is that, but it is to learn all that I have just said above before anything else, and to concentrate all our affections on Christian truths and Christian beauty, on works which are calmer than those written today. To study the faith and to draw

from what it teaches everything one needs to teach - one needs more simplicity than intellectual strength for that - and from that the studies will gain as much in depth as in piety. But only the study of Latin and the recitation of the Office can conserve us in that love and knowledge of the language of the Church, that habit of drawing our nourishment from the works of the Fathers, or those of the ages of faith, in preference to other pious books.

**Another reason for the recitation of the Office** is the character that our sisters need to develop. With very few exceptions, and these suffer a real martyrdom when they are given over to exterior things, the sisters quickly take on a very human and very worldly spirit when they are continually occupied with exterior things. How can they impress on others a serious idea of their duties when they are not serious about their own? But nothing is the equal of the Office for maintaining a religious spirit, which all love as soon as they understand it and recite it in choir. Suppress it: the sisters will still have to pray, and then those that will be always occupied by prayer will be a very small minority. You fall back then on that mass of pious books, of little devotions the least defect of which is their odd character. In contrast the Office gives rise to serious devotion: it can encompass every intention; there is nothing more orthodox as regards perfection, and it is this practice which dispenses us from all the others.

I could give several other reasons along the same lines; all, it seems to me would start from the vision of what we ought to try and be for the service of God and of our neighbour and for our own perfection in line with the particular aim of our work. Well, Father, I am well aware that each of these reasons which seem to me the only ones worth considering, would be the subject of mockery, of blame, of serious accusations of pride from those people all of whose objections I counter by saying to them that to abandon any one of these reasons would lose us good subjects. They are perfectly satisfied with this motive. What do you say,

Father, if that were the only reason I would be disgusted. If this way of spending time is judged useless, as they so judge it, would the sisters have enough devotion to go beyond the attraction for it? Would not the attraction itself die? Would not their mothers recognise the drawbacks of this and worry about a work that there is no reason to commence except in so far as it can accomplish good, through fear of losing subjects? Finally, can it be that a reason of which the ego is the beginning and the end should be more praiseworthy than those which are based on ideas of faith, on the needs of one's neighbour and the acknowledgment of a misery which needs the strongest and most continual supports to remedy it? I simply do not understand, which is it more humble to say: That pleases me and so I shall do it or to say: That seems good to me, even necessary and henceforth I must not turn away from it? Just the same it has happened to me countless times that at the end of a conversation where I have given all these bad and even blameworthy reasons, I have been congratulated. I see that you are not proud, as people have told me, that you are not involved in all these ideas of reform, as someone said to me, and that your house will be like all the others. I am grieved to the soul when I hear that said. If other religious go no further in their explanations than these motives of pleasing the parents, attracting postulants etc...then, Father, let me hope to be a contemplative religious, because there at least there is no need for these administrative strategies which remind me of the worst aspects of the world.

**As regards going out**, our reason is that fear which you expressed in one of your last letters, the fear of not always **being sisters of the poor** if we stop seeing them, and of forgetting the realities of life in the midst of an existence which is always exceptional, however austere or poor it may be. The religious knows neither isolation nor worry, nor the humiliations of poverty, nor the continual dependence on her own work. Normally she has continual privations, but once these have been fixed they are

definitively limited. Well! I can only excuse our outings by saying that in our times of trouble they are often necessary, and they facilitate material affairs.

Why, Father, is the most human reason the one that is least criticized? Why do the most pious people see in our way of life, in the usages that the Church has established reasons which shock me so strongly and which seem to me to bring everything down to an earthly level? Recently someone explained to me the usefulness of annual visits in the communities. It is, they said, an easing of the yoke of obedience, rest for the spirit, it calms the sisters. Remedy for remedy, I prefer opium!

My dear Father, I say all this to you without bitterness, and without in any way blaming those who talk to me. I have learnt to be grateful for their virtues and gentleness. I find that it does good to be in their hands, and doubtless my cowardly nature would feel more opposition and fear if it heard the language of M. de Bérulle saying at the start of a visit that he was coming with the flaming sword of the one who guards the gates of the earthly paradise of the Lord, to cut out all that still remains of the creature. But is our good on the side of nature or in the grace that crucifies nature? Can I give way to the self-love that promises me peace if I please? Truthfully, I am often tempted to do so, and I feel growing in me each day a spiritual selfishness that turns me away from this work. I say to myself that I cannot have at one and the same time the pains of the active life and of the contemplative life, that here I am not obliged to mortify myself so exactly, to sacrifice in such an absolute manner all that comes from the created being, and if I must do it, I say to myself that elsewhere at least I shall have peace, example, solitude, the necessity, a thousand helps, and finally as I know what one suffers to strip oneself of all, I say to myself that at least that is all one has to do there. One has one's suffering, it is what life is about, and one is finished with it once and for all, without being stopped by so many occasions for

choosing self, nor troubled by so many distractions, nor authorised, even by one's superiors, to be neglectful.

You have to be extremely holy, my dear Father, **to do exterior things in a spirit of faith.** It is on the other hand very easy to set oneself and to remain in the supernatural order, when one is physically separated from anything which could occupy nature. But to see God in all things, to act while being attentive solely to the grace in others and in ourselves, for that you need a very different sort of strength, and a much more continual and more difficult sacrifice of one's own spirit and tastes. And yet I think that the sisters of this Congregation are more called to that than anyone else, and having taken as their task to submit their mind to Jesus Christ as well as their will, they can only acquire the spirit that is proper to them by renouncing every desire, every action, even every judgment which could not have been that of Jesus Christ in their place. I have never hesitated to believe that we will only achieve our end by having the spirit of the poorest and most fervent orders, that we must have more real interior severity in so far as the exterior forms are gentler, and that we have more freedom of spirit than most religious. When I think of this, what I want before God is that in the place of such accommodations and gentleness, they would give us a bit of help to reach **that total dependence on Jesus Christ which must be the secret chain of our exterior liberty.** I find that this method of remedying weaknesses, rather than correcting them is a very great temptation for nature.

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So, dear Father, go on being good for me, as indeed you already are. I am not saying just that I appreciate this, but also that it helps me and enables me to approach you in all simplicity and in a spirit of faith. I feel that what costs me most is that you see me as head of a boarding school. I dislike boarding schools and that would constitute my greatest

mortification. It would be different if I had a more supernatural spirit. So, ask that Jesus Christ may give me more of his zeal, that I will learn see him in every soul and humbly serve him in them, and give my life willingly for that. If I am to run a boarding school all my life and activity must spring from faith, and I am able to give up my desire for solitude only because of my desire to imitate the renunciation with which Jesus Christ gave up his life alone with the Father and the Holy Spirit to come to earth to save us through his sufferings and to suffer for love.

Goodbye, dear Father. This letter is far too long and I still have a 1000 things to tell you and ask your advice. Your answers are always satisfying and fill my innermost self with calm and that is why to-day I talk of my exterior obligations and all that that involves.

I am yours more than ever in our Lord Jesus Christ.

**Letter 1557:            28<sup>th</sup> July 1842**

... To finish answering your letter of June 27th, I would like to tell you that one of the things I consider very important for our sisters to keep their love for the working class, about which you once talked to me, is **the practice of practical poverty**. In my report on Studies I also insist that even our most distinguished students should cultivate a positive attitude towards manual work, an attitude I am consoled to find in our choir sisters. This created in us a bond of solidarity with the poor, the only thing that makes us able to understand their fatigue, their pains and even the legitimate reasons for the many faults of which we often accuse them. This also led to our being loved by them and I can say that I am more and more amazed to find so much goodness in them. In spite of his present state of scepticism, Mr. Baulland repeatedly told me for a long time and without success, that today Christian

charity is incarnated in the French people. I tell you, by experience I see what he means.

For 6 months we lived with all kinds of workers sent by the owners and over whom we had no authority at all: painters, masons, carpenters, etc. All behaved perfectly with us so that we constantly felt overwhelmed by the tact and goodness hidden beneath their rough exteriors. It is very common today to find in men of high society the most impertinent selfishness or a kind of attentiveness which turns into the worst of insults. One of them will knock you down on the pavement, and if he stops to help you to your feet, it will be with a compliment that will make you blush. It is totally different with our poor people. I have always found in them a sense of respect, a deep sensitivity – always ready to leave their own work to do ours when they consider it too heavy for us. They made themselves a kind of protectors over our weakness, sparing us any embarrassment. The relationship was friendly but never did they forget that we are young women. Certainly, these were not Christians, but whenever we found ourselves in the chapel with them they would practise exteriorly the same kind of reverence as we did, and in my presence they never talked to each other as I have seen more than one man of the world do. I don't think that they consider us as great ladies, we are too good at manual work for that. But it is this skill which made us earn their respect. They would recount similar successes of their wives and daughters. In short, we became the best of friends.

To appreciate the worth of a poor man who leaves his work 20 times a day, rather than let a woman draw a pail of water from a deep well, you have to have experienced yourself the weight of a whole day's work, which hardly earns you a living. Those who must meet the poor or educate the rich need to know what this fatigue is. My desire is that there will always be occasions for all the sisters to experience this at least from time to time.

Providence has provided the first sisters with many such occasions as we have always lacked lay sisters; and being poor, we had to do things ourselves as much as we could. My desire is that our fervour will keep what necessity has given us. I know more austere congregations than ours where it would cause a revolution to ask choir sisters to take on the least work of a lay sister. For us, given our need, the greatest honour belongs to the most skilful among us. To know how to wash, to iron, to cook, to make the beds, to polish furniture and the floor and a thousand other even stranger jobs is considered by us a science superior to Latin. I hope that we will hand on some of this practical common sense to our young students.

*... (this is followed by 11 paragraphs about her soul: spiritual direction data)*

How I must annoy you with my lengthy letters while yours always remain brief, although I hope that this will not be so in the future, as you know how it does me so much good when you respond completely to all my questions. It gives me a certain tranquillity in which I find myself at the moment. Since I shall not be writing you for sure until the departure of Mr. Ferrand, I need to ask your advice regarding my 8-day retreat. Shall I take someone to direct me or what subject shall I give myself this time? I am so dry that I do not know what to do. Do you suggest a book? Lastly, what must I do to get the most out of this time? As for books, I am attracted by the mysticism of Bossuet, then Mr. Olier's Introduction to the Christian Life. But aside from Sacred Scriptures, I do not want to get hold of a book without first consulting you

Good bye... all yours in O.L.J.C.



**Letter 1590 – 27<sup>th</sup> August 1843**

*Marie Eugenie comes back to the subject of the **aim of the institute**, the importance of the **Office** and the need to study. Note the development of Marie Eugenie's thinking on the link between the **Mystery of the Incarnation** and the aim of the institute.*

It gives me so much pleasure to write to you this evening, my dear Father, that I am beginning these one or two words, even though very shortly I must be in my bed. I can hear the Office being recited, but I have been sent to bed because I am still ill, and quite seriously. For several days now I have been coughing blood, and since my last night on planks, I have a pain in my chest, which perhaps comes from these attacks of coughing blood, or which could very well be just something else. But because I am very tired, and people are saying that I am looking worse each day, I am going to look after myself properly. And unless you judge otherwise, I am going to give up for a time every sort of external mortification: sleep more than the rule allows; eat between meals. This because there would be definite drawbacks in my being ill, both as much for the internal affairs of the house where I would not be able to carry out my duties, as for the confirmation that that would give to the fears of our Superior that we want to do too much, and that we are going beyond what human nature can bear in wishing to add the duties of the contemplative life to those of the active life. Good night Father, I must go to bed. I will finish this tomorrow and give you an account of what M. Gaume said on his visit yesterday. Then I would like to speak to you in all simplicity - in the way that I spoke to you the day you left - of the intimate depth of my secret dispositions of love for God with all the originality of the way in which they manifest themselves, because I think that would do me good and confirm me in trust. If you were here today, I would be talking to you in that way, and telling you of

these secret follies that dwell in my mind and ravish my heart, excuse the expression, when I dare to admit them without fear of pride. Goodbye till tomorrow.

28<sup>th</sup> August Saint Augustine

We have been permitted exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, so I cannot be long again today as I want to go and be close to God. M. Gaume came the day before yesterday to visit the house. To speak humanly his meticulousness annoyed me, but I think I maintained a respectful attitude for all that concerned his observations on the cupboards that he opened, and the amount of space or lack of it given to the vestments therein. It was good advice for the sacristans, and it will do nothing but good to follow it – with the added benefit of humility and obedience in accepting the observations well. I could say the same about the sewing of our young pupils etc., besides I have been obliged to preach the same theme to the Mistresses that drew a smile of near impatience from them.

When he got to the noviciate, M. Gaume began to speak **about the rule**, and as I indicated that I preferred that his observations be communicated in the first instance to Sister Therese Emmanuel and me, this is what he said. The main defect of the Constitutions, for him is a lack of simplicity and of a purely religious character. In general he finds them clear (more than I do I must say) and he doesn't complain about their length. Going to details, the chapter on the Aim of the Institute shocks him, but he wants us to replace it with another, asserting the impossibility of presenting the Constitutions without one. He refused to do it himself. I am happy about that, but I am uncomfortable about having to do it myself. We are not well enough established for me to dare to express **our aim as I understand it**, in a contemplative life enlightened by religious studies and source of an active life of faith, of zeal, of liberty of spirit. For me the real aim, the real character of a work is

in the interior consecration to such and such a divine mystery, towards which it is like an on-going act of praise. I believe that we are called to honour **the mystery of the Incarnation** and the sacred person of Jesus Christ, also the adherence of the Blessed Virgin to Jesus Christ: it is the same for our views on education, and whatever you say about it, Mary seems to us very much our Mother, as the purely human soul most clothed in the life of Jesus Christ. But how could I dare to express such a thing - even with all the subtleties and explanations that I would add if it were not to you that I was writing? From another angle when it is a question of the rule, and of something that will last, to place our aim lower than God shows us, is very repugnant to me. I do not know how to explain even the purely human developments of this principle, **our aim in education**, in a way which will be at one and the same time ours and what people expect of us. I would never want to give our sisters those specious but insufficient ideas, lacking energy and impact, like those you saw in the letter I wrote in the past to Mgr. Gros and which I shared with you during your stay in Paris. That others should give us such, I can bear; but I myself, never will I be guilty of that.

With regard to Chapter 3: "Of the Distinction of the Ranks of the Sisters". He criticized the **obligation to say the Office**, and in the positive resistance I made on this point I was perhaps awkward. As he kept on saying to me that our objective was the active life, I somewhat denied this, saying to him that there isn't a single one of us who does not hold before all else to the obligations of the religious life; that education is our duty, religious life our attraction.

I fear that this may have put him on his guard against too great a disposition to turn to the contemplative life, and if it should happen that later he were to seek ways to oppose us, he could hamper us terribly and do us the greatest damage. He kept on saying to me that we were no better than others, that if we insisted on the obligations of the contemplative life with education, we would not

be able to manage. That in other communities he sees a division between those who having the charge of the studies and teaching stop saying the Office, and those who keep the rule and are useless for the boarding school. I think that that is to misunderstand our way of doing things. Our studies being more religious (the study of Latin, of the Fathers, etc.) connect us to the Office. Our teachers cannot be dispensed from it any more than anyone else, except for reasons of health, and not for study. The 7 hours that remain in the day between the Offices are quite sufficient for study. We must by our institution and the way in which we form our novices and our pupils have a greater number of capable sisters. Finally for the boarding school **we want only what we can have while remaining Assumption**, and we will no longer be so if the Office no longer has the influence over our spirit that it has today and by which it completes our studies. But among these reasons there are some that I did not dare to give to M. Gaume, who in a year's time will argue against us about another point of this sort, where he will have found that we are too pretentious.

- For the "Enclosure" he wants us to define the visits to the poor, and we will do it willingly.
- For the "Parlours" he finds things that are not too clear.
- The article on "Chastity" seems ridiculous to him, and it is.
- The first sentence "On Obedience" also seems to him equally ridiculous.
- For "Poverty", he wants us to clarify that the sisters can own property without enjoying the revenue, nor disposing of it other than with the permission of the superiors.
- For the "Daily Timetable", some minor remarks.
- "On the Office", as at the beginning; he criticises the practice of kissing the ground.
- For "Modesty", there is a phrase that is not French.

He has not yet studied the rest, and he will give us his observations in another visit. The net outcome for me is that just following his suggestions, we already have to make many modifications to the rule. Why then do we not seize the opportunity to make all the changes we judge expedient at the same time? If nothing is changed there is the advantage of stability: if we have to change a lot, to do it completely according to our ideas, will have the advantage of stability for the future and greater simplicity, energy and a unified and religious character in what we are going to use to form our novices.

1<sup>st</sup> September.

Even before seeing Mgr Gaume I had carefully reread the things on which you had made some comments, and also in rereading others, I was struck by the lack of real unity and the tenuous connection between many passages and our spirit. In speaking with Sister Therese Emmanuel, she admitted to me that she only upheld our rule as our foundation, but that she does not exactly like it, above all in its present form. I have tried to rework with her the chapter on "Admission of Sisters and the Enclosure", and we have come up with something a lot more exact, more in conformity with our practice and our spirit. It is not only we who find it so, Sister Marie Augustine, who by temperament straightaway opposes anything coming from my initiative, was very pleased with the efforts that I showed her; the other sisters also. My conclusion is that I need to work with Sister Therese Emmanuel. Unfortunately I continue to cough blood and I am very tired, to the point that I have to waste a lot of time in sleeping and looking after myself. Meanwhile I will send you what we have done so that I can have your advice.

There will be an opportunity to send you a packet of papers by the gentleman who brought the 50 francs from you the day before yesterday. He will come back in a fortnight's time to pick up any of

our commissions for Nîmes. I shall probably not have got much further with my work on the rule, because by way of getting the rest for my chest, I am planning that on Tuesday I will enter into the silence of my 8-day retreat. But if I have anything to tell you about my relationship with God during this time, he will bring it for you, plus a paper from Sister Therese Emmanuel that I promised you. Burn it, please, when you have read it as much as you want, because it is for you alone. Finally there will be the few chapters that we have managed to revise. M. Gaume will be pleased to receive a new version: it remains to be seen whether he finds in us too contemplative a tendency. We are counting on God. I feel strongly urged to do this work, and in that, look how useful to me your trip and our talks have been. For her part Sister Therese Emmanuel consults God, and when after praying, she consults her Bible following a simple custom she has, she finds nothing but magnificent promises and assurances that above all God wants to consecrate us to his Son and only by way of that to our neighbour. It is a nothing if you like, this little practice, but for me, who see this soul so led by God, it is important. I do not know what designs Our Lord has for her; but very privately, between you and me, I will tell you that since the feast of Saint Augustine when we had the Blessed Sacrament exposed, she feels the pain of the wounds of Our Lord. I think that this impression is going to develop: that rather frightens me, although I haven't said so to her so that she may remain in the greatest simplicity. But everything God is doing with her makes me think that **he has plans of holiness for this work**. I should like that to be expressed somehow in our rule, such as our consecration to Jesus Christ.

Good-bye Father. I need to go and say my Office for tomorrow because I am not allowed to say it in choir because of my fatigue. I have a thousand things to say to you, but that will be for another time. It gives me great pleasure to use your watch, but I am also a bit ashamed to see in opening it that its movement is jewelled. It

is a sacrifice that I have caused you to make; I hope at least that the one I gave you is working well.

Would you like me to get you the works of de Bérulle? I think that I could get them for you for 20/22 francs. Did I tell you that I saw Fr. de Cazalès, who spoke to me himself of his "*Precious Blood*"? He spoke to me as a friend, saying "Between ourselves". Did I say what an impression that made on me?

Again good-bye, all yours in Our Lord.

Sr. M. Eugenie de J.

D. S.

**Letter 1591:            Sept. 12, 1843**

*The first part of this letter is dated 4<sup>th</sup> September and is entirely concerned with Marie Eugenie's spiritual life. She takes up the letter afresh on the 12<sup>th</sup>.*

This letter, my dear Father, should wait for the return of your courier, and go to Nîmes with many other papers; but I just received your letter even though I am in retreat. You are the only one that can reach me at this time, and I want to answer immediately with at least a few words.

Do not worry about my health. In spite of what I said earlier, I feel much better. My lungs are clear once more and I no longer spit blood. The pains have disappeared and I no longer feel as tired as before. When the doctor examines me again at the end of the month I am certain that he will say there is nothing to worry about anymore. Ass's milk, and above all, silence and rest will take care

of the slight cough and I shall get well again. During this illness, I had some very humiliating interior desires: to ask my family to arrange for me to see a better doctor, to go to the Hot Springs next summer, all the more so because I think I would be able to see you at the same time, and to do outside the convent all that will bring me back to health. Then there is the thought that the sister we lost took better care of me, and there is the desire to change something in my diet. I gave in to some of these desires but only for a while. I am so ashamed of myself. All the more so because I don't have the same preoccupations for the sisters — Sr. M. Gonzague, for example, who, despite the doctor, is more sick than I am.

On this occasion I am sending you...

- 1) The rest of what I have to tell you about the state of my interior life and my retreat experiences. As to the feelings of love which I wanted to talk about in my last letter to you, I have now forgotten them. But now I want to write for myself what God is giving me. I think that this will do me good provided that I do not continually re-read it, nor go back at all to my previous habits.
- 2) A copy of Sr. Therese Emmanuel's work on the virtues in God, which I promised you for your own good and which I give you now more especially because she gave it to me as a gift because it expresses my attractions, and I feel that it expresses them today more than ever.
- 3) A revised copy of a draft of our Constitutions. I like what you told me about this very much. You seem to guess many of our thoughts. Just the same I don't regret my hesitation in formulating **our aim**, because I think that it is up to God to express it in the life of the sisters who are faithful to his grace, and he will set it higher than anything we can ever dare assume for ourselves. I have already thought of looking in



Sacred Scriptures for quotations and I shall try to find short and simple ones, looking for depth rather than long explanations.

Thank you for all your other remarks. You cannot imagine to what an extent you understand my thoughts. **As regards the chapel**, I was surprised to find you raising a question about which I have had for some time now a very strong interior desire drawing me to poverty and simplicity. It makes me detest these words of the old rule: *let their chapels be decorated with the religious luxury of the golden ages of faith*. Recently, I came across a magnificent passage from St. Bernard on this subject, and I am also concerned about the abuses that St. Jane de Chantal speaks of on this subject when she added to a rule like that of St. Francis de Sales: *...as long as it can be done in a holy manner*. If it is God's will, I shall lead our sisters to my way of thinking, but Sr. M. Augustine in particular loves this rule about religious luxury very much.

Thank you, above all for your Masses and fasting for me. We certainly need the help of the Spirit of God, and, lacking austerity, I would like to attract him by purity of mind and heart as much as I can. I pray a lot for you during my retreat, and I will ask Sr. Therese Emmanuel to do likewise. Up to now, all that concerns Sr. Therese Emmanuel has remained a complete secret between the confessor, myself, and the sister infirmarian (Miss de Comarque) who noticed the spasms of her hands. But I'm not sure that this can stay a secret for long. I expect physical stigmata, and even now she can hardly use her limbs. This thought and sight draw me powerfully to the love of Jesus Crucified, especially to his love for us. I owe you an apology on this subject. For the past few days I have been reading the book of Duguet on the Passion, and you are perfectly correct to say that he is admirable though a bit severe. The one I was given in place of it and which is greatly

admired by MM. Sibour and Martin de Noirlieu does not come anywhere near it..

I am also sending you the prospectus of a preparatory school which is right on our doorstep. I know the Director well – he is someone very good and very composed. I know parents who praise this school highly. Before I next write, I shall consult M. Gratry about it. I find something good in M. Philibert's ideas: that you put a young man on his honour when you ask him for nothing but the accomplishment of a rule which he knows about before enrolment, and to which he affixes his signature.

Goodbye, my dear Father. All yours in Our Lord...

Make your comments on the Constitutions when I send you them. I have left an enormous margin for that purpose.

### **Letter 1592 – 12<sup>th</sup> September 1843**

I was distracted this morning, my dear Father, thinking what I needed to reply to your letter. This evening your courier is coming to pick up my letters and I am distracted by the thought that not having had the time to add a single word, you will not understand what I mean by all these incomplete thoughts dashed off in haste.

The draft of the Constitutions which I have attached contains the little that I did with Sr. Therese Emmanuel before my retreat. You can send it back to me with your comments in the margin; but the first chapter is not at all what we hope to do definitively. All the same tell me what you think of it. It seems to me that we could keep the first sentence and develop it a bit referring to the spirit of being re-clothed in Jesus Christ in the intellectual order. I am

explaining myself badly. After the first sentence I should like to have some lines based on the following, but in simple words drawn as far as possible from Scripture:

That as Christian education is essentially the work of forming souls in the knowledge, love and likeness of Jesus Christ, the sisters who devote themselves to giving a broader education must, in the whole range of knowledge which they acquire and teach, find Jesus, go to Jesus and judge like Jesus.

- That this knowledge is given much more to humility and love than it is to natural ability,
- That it is of this that the Saviour said: “I bless you... because you have revealed these things to the little ones”,
- That it is the fruit of prayer and that it flows from the fullness of union with Jesus Christ, without which the sisters will never be capable of reaching the particular aim of their vocation,
- So that in them the religious life with all its obligations is the only possible principle of a useful action,
- And that all that maintains and strengthens the life of prayer is of greater and more lasting use to the Congregation than a large exterior expansion could ever be.

You can add if you like that the Blessed Virgin is the perfect model for the sisters in that she never thought of anything except in the context of the relationship that she had with Jesus Christ, and that in this respect she is the principle of life and of a Christian spirit. That the Incarnation is the mystery which must be their special devotion, since it is in this mystery that everything human is divinised and finds its end. That the world is made for Jesus Christ and that the teaching of history must demonstrate this... that it is in the life of Jesus Christ that we have as it were the divine judgement on all the positions, actions and things of the world, and that it is through the mystery of the Incarnation where a God has in bodily form done the works of mercy, that active charity – to

which women who are destined to live in the world must also be formed - has been divinised. But I find this last subject much more difficult to deal with, although here Scripture could furnish us with all the words.

Tell me in detail what you think of all this; you can see the grace which I find in your communications. I have not yet found an equally good formulation of these thoughts and I am going to keep a copy to use as a foundation.

For the article on Chastity I have found some phrases which seem admirable in my estimation; only do you think that I can add a sentence to it expressing contempt of the flesh and mortification of the senses? You will never guess where I found this passage that I admire so much, but which needs something to preface it. Here it is: "As they are giving themselves entirely to Jesus Christ, there is no longer any action, word, nor instant of their lives which does not belong to Him. He alone must fill their whole heart: nothing, which is not Jesus Christ, or in his name, by his command or for love of Him, can remain there without wounding that perfect chastity in which they must live".

.../...

Before finishing this letter I want to tell you also that I have seen M. Lejeune since you left... I am surprised at how much I like this man whenever I meet him, because in the intellectual order we scarcely have an idea in common. He is a zealous devotee of the Jesuits, and he seems to me to be an enemy of anything new. However he likes the Assumption a lot and, to tell the truth, he likes me a lot. Then he himself is extremely friendly, spiritual, clever and nevertheless simple and open. It is very strange how we have supporters who are totally opposed to each other. Lovers of monastic antiquities, like M. Badiche, claim that we are reviving the religious studies in use in the past in the great monasteries. They like us because of our learning and because of our respect for ancient customs,

whilst elsewhere we are liked because we are a kind of innovation. You who now know our thinking, understand that we ought to have this double character.

This brings me to two further observations about the Rule:

1. That we have already suppressed one chapter in it - the 3<sup>rd</sup> of the old Rule – on the distinction in rank of the sisters. I don't think that this is the time to commit ourselves definitively to never having a third rank. The things that are useful and necessary in the chapter we will transfer elsewhere. Rest assured that we will take all the time necessary.
2. As for the example of St. Teresa and St. Ignatius that you have put forward for the chapels, I think you should take note of what was fitting in their times. At that time heretics were attacking Jesus Christ by the destruction of a thousand adornments of the robe of the Church: cult, sanctuary, vestments, pictures, popular devotions. So love had to bear witness to its faith in the Real Presence by devotions which were the complete opposite of the Protestant spirit. For the rest, to my mind the Jesuits understand nothing of the monastic spirit; they have turned their back on all its traditions. St. Teresa, daughter of an ancient Order, is not in the same line. But in our days, what attacks Jesus Christ is a sentimental religiosity devoid of a Christian spirit, it is the sluggishness of soul of the faithful, it is pantheism, the purely artistic homage of others. It is more: the hatred of the poor classes will be against every Religious Order where they see the glitter of riches. I don't have time to develop this, you understand without me spelling it out. Moreover, only in the Orders which have chosen poverty will you find the beauty and grandeur of a liturgy which has power to move the heart. The Ceremonial of Carmel for the things of the Church is unworthy of the Order, the Visitation is a lot worse. What can

one say of the Jesuits, I dare not repeat the word of M. Quinet: they have reduced art to Sacred Hearts.

And furthermore, to reach the human heart one must go by way of the senses; but in so doing one must present to the senses precisely what one wants to imprint on the heart. So, what do we owe our pupils? Is it consolations, sweetness, intoxications of love? No, it is serious truths, robust sentiments, a strong impression of what is the spirit of the Gospel. You poor, says St. Bernard, if that is what you are, what is this gold doing in your churches? Bishops in their cathedrals are responsible for everybody; by these adornments they can arouse the devotion of a carnal people... But why do you have these magnificence?... these crowns resplendent with jewels... these trees of gold and silver? What are you looking for in these things? Is it really to give sentiments of fervour and asceticism? Is it not rather to give pleasure and distraction to spectators?

I cannot resist adding that according to the rules of the Trappists, which I have here, and the customs of Port-Royal, the liturgy could nowhere have had more solemnity in its simplicity than among these followers of St. Bernard. It is in this spirit that I should like to see our communities working.

My dear Father, with you I do not know how to stop, but I am drawing profit from telling you my thoughts in this way. I clarify them in my own mind, and then, often, your comments complete them. I have to tell you that I realize that understanding very well the religious spirit of an individual religious, it seems to me that you have not yet grasped the spirit which must result for each individual from the whole monastic setting. The houses you are in touch with have not afforded you the opportunity. It will be different, you will see, with the Carmelites. It is a propos of something else entirely than what I am talking about in this letter

that I think that. But I am so happy to be able to tell you without hesitation everything I am thinking about!

Goodnight, I no longer tell you to pray for me.

**Letter 1602:            December 18, 1843**

My dear Father,

I received your very good letter yesterday morning; and the day before yesterday I sent you the music for the Mass which was due a long time ago, enclosing a letter where I spoke only about myself, some letters I wrote to M. Combalot, which I had put together long ago so that you could read them, though that seems pointless to me now, and lastly, several chapters of the Rule.

It is about the latter that I need to talk to you today – to consult you regarding some remaining doubtful points. Having had a brief encounter with M. Lacordaire last Thursday, I used the occasion to seek his opinion on certain points. I will share his ideas with you, noting nevertheless a certain absoluteness in his spirit which has made monastic rigour his field, or even obsession. His way of interpreting things constantly reminded me of M. de Rancé as both of them say that a monk is not a human being, that he does not belong to his times but to eternity.

The chapter that gives me the most difficulty is that of **Poverty**. You will see that I have not finished it. I think that we can hardly add anything to what determines the habitual practices of poverty, but I feel we should not confine ourselves to this, that the community within itself will not have a spirit of poverty in its transactions, its possessions, etc... Furthermore, I think that the expressions used to define each sister's right to hypothetical

property, makes them too much property owners, especially this line: *If a sister does not obtain the approval of the Superior to make certain business arrangements which she believes are necessary, both of them will ask the Ecclesiastical Superior for his mind on it.*" But this sentence only gives a right acquired elsewhere, because each sister can always have recourse to the Ecclesiastical Superior. When I wrote this line, my aim was:

1. To satisfy the Ecclesiastical Superior by showing where his authority lies.
2. To determine the manner in which one should have recourse to him, so as to avoid such recourse being hidden from the Superior, or the Superior opposing such recourse.

It is certain that where the way has not been decided as to how things which are called for by modern laws and which are contrary to old practices of the vow of poverty, should be done, they are done apart from any form of poverty and this becomes a great source of abuse. The Bernardines of Lyon, formerly of Port Royal in Paris, are an example of this. The sister, who in everything that she has been taught by the Rule and by spiritual masters, has seen only total disappropriation, when she has to possess things, does not know how to do so as a poor person. Yes, but even our religious should be tending towards this total disappropriation, they should be led to ignore, even forget their temporal affairs, and when the Rule talks about legacies which a sister believes she has to make, the Rule is authorizing her, even inviting her to take an interest in them.

Without saying all this to M. Lacordaire, but presenting the will of our Superiors on this matter - of allowing us to be the named owners of property, he told me that this could be done as was determined by a recent Papal Bull for the Brothers of M. de Rosmini of Italy. Could you please get information for me regarding the details of this papal prescription? M. Lacordaire only told me that when making profession, they give general



powers of attorney to the Superior, and thereafter do not hear anything at all about their temporal affairs. I pointed out to him just one difficulty – that normally we would not want a sister to dispose of all the inheritance she would be receiving in due course in favour of the community which she was entering. To suggest this to sisters would be quite contrary to the poverty of the community. He answered me that if in future property cannot be given up legally in advance, it can be done canonically. During profession the sister should express her intentions regarding property which she may acquire and these expressed intentions should be respected. I do not have to tell you that formed as I am by French legislation I see something odious in disposing of future property and it can be foolish. We are left with two problems: one, that changes in situation which have arisen in a family, could make dispositions fixed 20 years in advance unjust, if they cannot be modified; the other, there will always be unforeseen situations. What then should be done if we accept M. Lacordaire's principle that a religious should hear no more about her temporal affairs after profession, nor be asked to give another opinion about them than that of the chapter?

If you are able to consult men whose opinions are highly esteemed in Rome, as you once suggested, I should be grateful if you would do so on this matter. But keep in mind that we are not concerned to know about what is tolerated in terms of property; we want to hold as much as possible to real and true poverty. It is this to which we are most attached, so much so that I should really appreciate M. Lacordaire's principle if I believed that it were always applicable. I am going to prove to you how we love poverty by going back to something which I have only outlined – my concern for the best means to make the community poor as well as the sisters individually.

I do not know if you recall that in the article on the reception of novices, it was stated that in principle the community should try to establish a state of financial independence that will allow it to live

poorly without financial help from the boarding schools. In the chapter on Poverty, it says that having arrived at financial self-reliance, a community should no longer build up reserves, but should there be surplus, it can only be used for construction, foundations or charitable works. Such were the two rules about possessions in the Congregation. M. Gaume though he readily accepted the first one, told me that he did not understand the second one. Before explaining this to him, I carefully weighed our spirit, our apostolate; and as far as I am capable of it, the spirit towards which, it seems to me the Church should tend in her future institutions. I admit that the first rule gave me much trouble – perhaps because of my personal inclinations. Anyway, please help me to reflect on it and if you can give me some advice. But do remember that it is a fundamental point, and that the work that we do will be greatly modified by the decision we make on this point.

I find it an extreme luxury to have one's existence assured independently of work, especially of a work that brings in as much as boarding schools. The richest people in the world are scarcely in that position. And there are very few who, independently of their employment or their diverse activities, could maintain the lifestyle which accords with their social position. For when we say that the means of existence should be poor, that is only the obligatory recognition of our position. Moreover I see that a boarding school of 50 students should leave us a profit of at least 20,000 francs. Whatever is said about not putting this sum into reserves, we would have it at our disposal every year, and, besides the temptation not to really live poverty in many ways, where, I ask you, would abandonment to Providence be? And what would be the real mediocrity, when faced with this enormous surplus we have necessarily had to add it to the reserves? On this point some sisters say that one could do a great deal of good with it, contributing to such works as the Propagation of the Faith. I gladly accept this idea, but I am always afraid that it is dangerous

if our generosity should rest on the certitude that we have enough, instead of resting on being stripped of possessions. Either I have not understood our project at all well, or I believe that I can say that it should not develop through material means, that its means of success is to have a spirit that is as much of the Gospel and of the Church as possible. And in saying that poverty is the foundation of our Institute, we are not speaking futile words, because it alone is the guardian of the spirit of faith, of simplicity, of independence from the world which we bring to education, and which blends with this spirit of stripping oneself of one's own ideas which we ask above all from our sisters so that in all things as far as possible they will have only the judgment of Jesus Christ.

On the other hand, it was for serious reasons that we adopted this system of a community life assured independently of our boarding schools. The Rule says that it is in order that we can live for God without temporal concerns; so that we should not be obliged to make the sisters teach without giving them the time to complete their studies and be grounded especially in religious virtues; in a word, so that the spiritual good should never give way to the temporal good. You know that for us, the contemplative life is the sister of the active life, or even more, that it is the source of the active life. You know how we hold to the Divine Office, that we do not want to have more students than is compatible with our religious life. I feel strongly that the Rule in assuring us that we can live poorly, independently of our boarding schools, is telling us implicitly that the schools are not our primary aim, and that before everything else, we have to be religious. I feel strongly that if we are too dependent on our boarding schools, we could sacrifice ourselves to the world, change ourselves to go along with it, and instead of forming the sisters according to what God has given them, seek only to get as much as possible out of them for the schools.

Just the same do you not think that there is no boarding school, however small, that is not able to feed its teachers? And do you

not think that if religious could own only their convent that this would suffice to avoid these latter drawbacks? Today, the income of the professed sisters pays only for the rent of our house. We only have 12 students and we make both ends meet. Imagine a nicer, more spacious house. We should immediately have more students and also, in certain respects a lot less work.

And don't you also think that poverty maintains the spirit of prayer, and when we are rooted in faith, depending only on our work and on what Providence gives us, we are also more fervent? I see that the house of Les Oiseaux who abandoned the Office, is very rich – the other houses of the same congregation which are poorer are keeping it.

This recommendation obliges us to run boarding schools but it seems to me that everything commits us to this. Although there is a lot of the contemplative spirit in the Rule, I do not believe that we should ever think of purely contemplative houses. Only if there were some imprudence in not having a house with its revenue assured, we could leave that privilege to the Motherhouse because it is obliged to have greater expenses. But in the future, what better guarantee of union between the houses could there be than the impossibility of ownership? The most flourishing might be shown to need the surplus of the other houses, and discussions about property cannot be separated from this. I also said (to Lacordaire) that I had considered the thinking on ecclesiastical property. You know as I do the opposition that modern political economy and even the legislation have towards property in mortmain. They will reproach the Church for all that she has, or they will repossess it from her, except perhaps a residential property where most politicians permit some activities. For us to own property individually is to live from case to case. Each estate will pose difficulties, and by a defect of form, we could one day be deprived of a property which we have come to depend on. What cannot be taken away from us is our industry. When we are used

to counting on it, to living from it, we are almost invulnerable, and we impact little on governments which are only concerned with major material goods. I say this of women's congregations as the intellectual orientation of a male congregation could give rise to anxiety. Finally, I think that such a situation will be edifying for the world if it is possible. St. Thérèse is forever saying that the temporal goods of religious congregations are the wounds of the Church. I understand this in a more modern sense, not that it is yet like this, but that it will be in the future. If we could get this idea which I am putting to you accepted, an idea which to our Superiors seems the most foolish of all follies, that would be in my opinion a definite sign that God is inspiring it. If it is a good idea, you will see that we shall get there with great patience. Then, there would be no poorer religious in France than we are, as mendicant Orders are obliged to possess what is necessary for their subsistence. I admit to you that this would give me great pleasure, although we are risking little by it. This seems to me what St. Bede said on the text: *Do not be afraid*. that the most generous poverty, after having despised everything for the Lord - all that one owns - is to work for one's living and practice almsgiving. *So we ought to support the weak by our work.*

These are the prescriptions, which should limit the property of the community, help us keep our distance from legal cases and our moderation in business affairs, which I left blank until we are decided on the fundamental principle. It is very difficult not to say either too much or too little on these things the moment we have property. One more observation: this does not directly suppose that during their lifetime the sisters may not if necessary own some property or have some income, provided that they do not leave this in their will to the community. Someone has pointed out to me that, with our revolutions, it could be imprudent to oblige a sister to disappropriate herself now when later she may have to return to secular life. I have difficulty in accepting this thinking, because one makes oneself poor so as to be so even in such a

situation. But if the sisters do own property and are called to give their opinion on their temporal affairs, we also have to prescribe disinterestedness so that the spirit of poverty may never be despised, as is too often the case when one only acts from avarice. Give me your response on all this after reflecting on it as much as you can.

I have only one thing to say about the chapter on Obedience. I think that it is here that we should add the use of the discipline on Wednesdays and Fridays which is allowed in our Congregation. Fr Lacordaire said that that way it would be part of the Rule, where otherwise there would be nothing to give religious a taste for their way of life which is one of penance. I fear also that the practice will be lost if it is not written down. On the other hand there are some excellent sisters for whom this word is an obstacle, and I have been happy more than once to be able to say: "There is nothing like that in our Rule". And for myself, I admit, that when I left the world, the absence of this obligation was a reason for preferring an order. I will soon have to do the Article on Studies which seems very difficult to me. I do not know if we must enumerate some specific subjects – Latin, Religious Knowledge, and indicate the spirit of engaging in studies, or limit ourselves to vague prescriptions on the religious spirit that has to be brought to study. It is another important thing for us.

Now, Father, I will answer your letter briefly. All that you said in it gives me much pleasure. Oh, yes, you are right in counting on me, and I thank you all the more as I thought that the good God was perhaps doing the same, and that in spite of my worries and concerns, perhaps He did not know that I am devoted to him, more than my lack of generosity leaves me the right to believe. I am relieved that you are better now. I assure you that I am very well myself, but I have willingly given up rising earlier than the sisters. As currently you do not want me to do more than the Rule demands, behold my obedience which I could hardly make total

before. Since I made the resolution, I have almost never got up earlier than 5.30.

I am happy that you have been told to take care of yourself. I wanted to say the same thing to you, as neuralgia when neglected sets in forever and is a great handicap. Allow me to say something about your preoccupations, that thinking back over what we discussed together, I have often thought of saying to you: Be careful about diocesan works. It is a temptation that always comes to members of diocesan boards. But you are too Roman not to perceive the danger. Diocesan works do a lot of harm in France – posing obstacles to general works. They cannot have the same impact, the same independence. Did I not tell you already: the Council of Trent and the whole reform movement which followed had as their sole aim to restore the authority of bishops in order to repress some abuses. Today, so that everything in the Church is not diminished, we have to act on the contrary sense. The pendulum has swung too far. The freedom, the independence of religious Orders are necessary today so as to give some leeway to studies, some energy to education, to preaching, to the religious spirit. So I am daring to say to you then: guard yourself against any desire too narrowly confined to your diocese, and I would go even further and say: be wary of the spirit of the Council of Trent. It is an admirable spirit, but I do not think that a Council today would go in the same direction. I would say the same of the great saints of those times: St. Charles Borromeo, St. Francis de Sales... And then I say to myself what am I meddling in, the more so that for the last few lines someone has been talking to me and I don't know what I am saying.

Since I made the pilgrimage to Betharram in the Pyrenees, I have had much more devotion to the Blessed Virgin. She seems to have granted me many things I asked from her. I have also done a lot more to draw our sisters to Mary. I thank you for what you said to me on this subject: the thought seemed very beautiful to all of us, and fits marvellously into our project.

Goodbye, Father. Believe that I often pray for you.

**1Letter 1603: 27<sup>th</sup> Dec. 1843**

In the few moments I have before prayer, my dear Father, I would like to say something to you on a subject that we have already discussed and which I think that I have now sorted out in my mind. Do you remember my criticisms of the philosophy of M. de Maistre on the subject of expiation? It came back to my mind just now on hearing a stranger say to me that it seemed to him that no-one was more or as much imbued with the ideas of Lacordaire as I.

Recalling my last meetings with him, I asked myself how it could happen that the feeling of being like-minded never showed itself when we are face to face. How, while from the outside we are judged to have the same ideas, we, both of us I think, feel that we have very different points of view? I come back to the same reason, and although M. Lacordaire may be called to be a Tribune, although in politics he has very liberal tendencies, I felt that in principle I go further than he does. Leaving aside a few Republican ideas, no one has adopted M. de Maistre more than Fr. Lacordaire. You know that in the works of M. de Maistre "expiation" is the principle from which he deduces his ideas on "war", "torture" and the "death penalty", on "race", on Religious Orders", etc... more or less all the social ideas which despite all the enthusiasm of his speech, shocked the men of our movement so keenly, because, it must be admitted, more than one thing, when you take away his personal prestige, offends against the hopes of earthly progress of our nature. I know that his books have contributed more than anything else to making me understand that for which I dare to blame them; I know all that



there is besides to redeem certain principles, but in any case I am writing more so that you should get to know my thinking in this than to aspire to offer you my opinion.

You know that I have a terrible tendency to generalise. I have never spoken about these big questions with Fr. Lacordaire, but in sounding him out on those which were within the sphere of my activity, I found that his answers started from principles which were the opposite of mine. This is what I mean: As M. de Maistre is to punishment, so Fr Lacordaire is to the payment due to the fault. For me, as I understand it, punishment is only the educative means which redeems from the consequences of the fault. (Redemption from the fault itself is by the blood of Jesus Christ). I believe that Our Lord on Calvary not only redeemed Jewish and Roman humanity from its past; but that there is no instant when he is not redeeming with the same efficacy each person, each people from its sinful past, by means of a return to Him, above all by means of the painful effort of detaching oneself from the habits and instincts which were born out of that past. Our good Lord does all that He can for the person who implores him. He leaves them only the least possible, the inevitable. Everything that He can carry, He takes. He throws these past acts to the bottom of the sea, He whitens like snow the book where the actions man has left behind are written, and which it is no longer in his power to regain possession of in order to right them. For that contrition suffices. ("He forgave her many sins since she loved much"<sup>16</sup>). But what Our Lord cannot prevent is that after many acts of pride, I should be very inclined to producing more, that after having let myself become weak, my soul and even my body should produce only indolence. For me that is the great work of penance, to straighten out the inclinations energetically, to strip the person of egoism and what remains of their past forcibly so as to make them

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<sup>16</sup> Lk. 7:47

capable of doing good. Consequently any penance which makes no contribution to the future, is not at all good, and that is how I differentiate Christian penance from the penances of the Hindus. Having been forgiven, one must begin to suffer so as to become capable of prayer and action; and there you have what I see in St. Mary Magdalene who was pardoned by mercy, but who was transformed only by suffering.

Generalising these principles, you will understand that the ideas of M. de Maistre on the death penalty revolt me. Without my having to go into detail you will see that the social consequences just as much as the consequences for the individual, are different. If on the one hand that gives you the key to more than one of my past resistances, it will also make you see that I fully accept that every person must be redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ from the fate of their birth; that I see in the Redemption a work of universal deliverance which is not yet accomplished, and that **Religious Life is for me today precisely the work of the Redemption of captives**. I am not going into details. These ideas are so familiar to me, that it seems to me that everyone should immediately understand them. Just the same as I nearly always shroud my thoughts when I touch on this subject even with you, I will explain what I want to say by 'redeem men from the fatality of their birth and the fate of their past'.

What I want to say is that Social Institutions must come to the aid of those who unhappily are born without the conditions which assure moral freedom, of those who do not find a Christian education in their families, nor the freedom of an honourable state in their misery... By 'redeem from the fatality of the past' what I want to say is that it is a Christian duty to show the person who is blameworthy the possibility of being virtuous, and give them the means of doing good, under conditions which protect them against the habits and inclinations of the past. These bonds are part of the useful penance which comes from suffering as a means of education. They should be a strength imparted to this person

against the results of their past. I know that I am dreaming up a utopia but in place of the death penalty it would be mine. And as the only means I know of bringing it about and of giving the education which assures for everybody the moral freedom won by Christ are the Religious Orders, I am a religious and I compare our vocation to that of the Redemption of captives. For me the aim of Religious Orders is to assure that every last effect of the Redemption reaches the whole of humanity. It is not, as M. de Maistre says, to replace the sufferings imposed by society on its offenders, in bringing to it an equal weight in the balance of time.

I throw down these ideas for you in a very unfinished way. Is it necessary to add that I understand very well that our Lord takes religious souls to bring them into his own mission and to unite them to Him in suffering, but that itself is the occasion of high virtue, great example and of great efficacy. Am I in the clouds? You will tell me and in that way you will help me to understand myself better. I assure you that I no longer feel the slightest hesitation in expounding my opinions on this subject to you; and I really must tell you that that is what I have gained from your journey, despite the horrid things that I said to you. I am no longer at all afraid of you; but, Father, without being afraid of telling you anything, nor even being able to stop myself telling you everything, I want to become as obedient as a child, and to have a great respect for your authority. I have suffered in my mind these days of Christmas, but I will tell you about that at length another time. I will stop on the subject of my philosophy. I will only say, because I think that I forgot it that your last Mass only cost 10 francs, instead of the indicated price of 25 francs. The first is definitely on the 27<sup>th</sup>.

Pray for me, I have the desire to be good, but I scarcely am. To make my Communion costs me a lot. Above all I had a lot of difficulty in going to the Holy Table on Christmas Night. Fr. Lacordaire said Mass for us, and the crowd that came distracted me to the point of impatience. I had a thousand little things to tell

you, they will come back to me when I speak to you about my soul which has again been in desolation... Meanwhile I wish you a good year with a very filial heart and I am always yours in Our Lord Jesus Christ.

What kind of man is M. La Bouillerie? The Bishop is beginning to put him in charge of communities. Do you think he would suit us as Superior if M. Gaume – who is overwhelmed by this work - leaves us, as he has left others? When you have the time give me some information about him.

#### **1 Letter 1610: 27 February 1844**

#### **(Reply of Fr. D'Alzon 18<sup>th</sup> March)**

I cannot decide to write you, my dear Father. I am wasting a whole afternoon doing a thousand useless things, I find it so difficult to begin. Doubtless I will have no less difficulty in finishing. What shall I say to you? Where shall I stop? When I am before Our Lord and when I enter a bit into prayer, I seem to have a thousand things to tell you. And now I cannot find anything in my thoughts except this terrible confusion which I fear to dwell on and from which I do not know what to draw. Nevertheless I have not been without comfort in this painful state. A week ago our confessor wanting by chance to talk to me did me quite a lot of good.

#### **5<sup>th</sup> March 1844**

At last I am picking up this letter again after some days of being in better dispositions towards you, when unfortunately I couldn't find an instant to write to you. I am going to try and speak to you a bit about what I have thought, about what people have said to me, about the feelings which I have about the will of God with regard to

the profit to draw from my state, from my faults and weaknesses which, I believe, have added to my sufferings, then in conclusion, I will be better able to answer the question that you have put to me and which you are even addressing to God in asking Him what you can do for me. If you agree with me about what seems to me ought to be useful for me, I am quite certain that you will do it willingly: if not what I am going to try and tell you will, perhaps, help you to act better than anything I could suggest to you.

It is true enough that the effort that I made with regard to your letter to detach myself from my own opinion contributed to the trouble which followed. There is nothing to which I hold so strongly as the order of ideas to which this particular thesis is attached. I could have given way on this point without great emotion, apart from the long-term consequences to which I remained attached, except for slight modification. But when I wanted to strip myself of everything but faith alone, I found myself fighting on all fronts. Perhaps in this sort of situation I am too ambitious for perfection. I am not content with what I can simply do, with the exterior gentleness which would not cost me. Remembering the pain I have felt at not having taken advantage of other occasions of sacrifice, feeling great regret at being so little advanced, I want to sacrifice even the depths of my resistance, and I cannot, and that irritates me against those who are the cause of it. You remember that I have said to you before that most Catholics do not seem to be like me, and that my faith would be troubled if I had to give up certain ways of understanding. These are the ideas I am talking about. I thought then that you were in some respects sympathetic to them, but perhaps less so than for me to risk speaking to you of them except in terms so conventional that you could not forbid them.

On this last occasion I took more liberty, because – I have to tell you – I feel much less disposed to worry about your opinion or to

submit myself to it. That is to say, I do not know whether you have noticed, but for some time now I have been quite independent in your regard. It was not by obedience that I even wanted to try and accept your advice, but because I have been frightened since I said to you: "They understand nothing", by the thought that all the pride of M. de La Mennais was just that. One thing is certain: the further I go, the less sympathy I have for priests or pious lay people. I find that they do not understand, they do not feel. Their hearts do not beat for anything broad, and I find it a thousand times easier to make myself understood by a man of the world and to tell him my thoughts clearly.

To say a word about the essence of the question, I should warn you that whatever does not come under the free action of man, under mine in particular, does not occupy my mind for five minutes. Nobody is less concerned than I to ask: Why is that? How is that? unless I believe that as a result I have to modify things, to act or not act. I admire those people who think about the essence of things, and the effects about which no-one can do anything; they must have in their minds a whole world of things of which I am so incapable that the deepest boredom overtakes me when they talk to me about them. Sr. Marie Augustine is like that, and that is why, whatever I do, her whole mindset is a nightmare for me, and I cannot find in it one ordinary thing.

That man should make reparation, that all the sufferings of the earth should or should not be necessary to save him, that his merits should be applied in one way or another, dare I say it, really doesn't matter to me. Let the good God do what He wants with all the past deeds of human life, either in reparation for the past or as a preparation for the future, although the latter would give me more enthusiasm. But what I do mind about is this corollary: Should man orientate himself to reparation or to production; towards the past or towards the future; towards virtues or towards sufferings? I tell you that for me that question is resolved as soon as it is posed. So let us keep two things quite distinct. Every life

has its active part and its passive part. How far the passive part should go in holy souls, I have nothing to say. God knows what He is doing. When He calls to death, one leaves behind the holiest works to obey Him, and that is as it should be. When He calls to sickness, one passes thirty years in bed and that is what is best. When He employs a soul in suffering, a true interior death, it is absolutely the same thing.

### **12<sup>th</sup> March**

I am picking up this letter again after a long time and I hope at last to finish it. I find that I was once again sustaining my favourite thesis with the help of my prejudices and my very imperfect impressions. I have a natural instinct which makes me, I believe, always defend arguable opinions with the help of those which cannot be contested. And as I cling to arguable opinions with such a strong will only because they harmonise with things which have all my inner sympathies, it is difficult for me to separate them from points which are certain and admitted by everybody. To tell you what I myself think at certain moments, it seems to me that I have allowed opinions which exaggerate the earthly consequences of the Redemption (such as those of Buchez) because these are the ones which offer the greatest promise to the opinions, let us speak the word, to the political passions that are mine. To my mind the ones are closely linked to the others. If the doctrine of expiation, as it is set out by M. de Maistre, is the height of the Christian law, it sanctions, as moreover he does himself, all the acts of social expiation that my sympathies had rejected: the death penalty, war, the fatality of birth and of position etc.

I am not engaging in politics, my dear Father, do not laugh at me, because I am not going to go on and explain for how long and under what circumstances, I believed that the realisation of the will of God by the law of the Gospel and by the Redemption was a social state where nobody would have to submit to any other

fatality than those of nature, that is to say where the Christian principle tended to avert the oppression of each one by the others. I feel that I am expressing myself badly. If you can get hold of my meaning through what I have said, all the better. If you do not understand it, do not use my expressions against me, because they are betraying my will. As for the irony which it is easy to use against these thoughts, let me tell you that the things of which I speak stir every fibre of my soul. If it were possible for me to open this soul to you so that you could perceive there the strength of the feelings of which I am not myself conscious, you would perhaps understand one cause of my interior struggles which I had perhaps suffered without being aware of it, until just now these few words which I have just written to you made my whole being resonate.

Will you please burn this letter, so I can tell you that, in truth, three minds have had a seminal influence on my action that I still feel: my mother, and then two men for whom I experienced the feelings of which I have spoken to you on other occasions. And whatever may have been the other qualities which made them attractive, it is clear to me that what I passionately loved in them was the social mission that I believed was theirs, the idea of which they were in my eyes the representatives and the champions. Since then I have become less credulous about their mission, I do not attribute it to them so easily. But if the same doubt had come to me then, it would have already stripped them of their reputation. It still seems to me that these two minds were outstanding, as also that of my mother; the two of them were ardent democrats, not for the empty political details of the day in which I could not have taken a serious interest, but for the future, the destiny, the moral nobility of our country.

When, later, I came to God, their ideas gave me strength, and I will admit it to you, I could not imagine Our Lord in any way that drew me more strongly to Him than when I saw Him bringing to the world a law whose effects were such as I have tried to set



them out for you above. I am very much a woman, very attached to a thousand things, but when this end was before me, when I thought I understood that across the ages, this law, ever-contested, this development always strewn with obstacles, even by Christians, required the commitment of some people to prepare souls for Him, to contribute to future development through teaching, to help form noble hearts, give strength and detachment to emerging generations, I was the least womanly possible, whereas since this aim has slowly vanished before me, I have become again as earthly as possible. I loved the Christian law passionately, as long as I believed that that was what it was. I was probably wrong, but is it my fault if then I have no more love, but only fear of the efforts, and the feeling of duty bound by my rule and my vows?

There is nothing so stupid as an emotional person speaking under the influence of their emotions, so probably you can scarcely understand me. You will find that I link things together that in your eyes are separated, that I draw conclusions which you reject. What do you expect? For me it is a question of principle. It is my way of understanding. It is of little importance; only I must put my mind and my soul on one side, withdraw into mysticism and outside activities without hoping to find henceforth any interest in general Church affairs. For example, what does this famous question of education matter to me? Now I know the clergy and fervent Catholics and I assure you that if I had a son, I would experience about as much joy at seeing them instil their somnolence into his veins as even the ideas of M. Villemain: that is to say, even conversion is no longer to be hoped for. For myself, I should like to have been brought up by them. Then I should find in myself much less of the life which kills me until I manage to kill it. But if I loved a soul I should keep it from their breath as from the desert wind. The peoples of Italy, modern Rome, that is the greatest of their achievements. They save more souls there than elsewhere and it is there that they want one to look.

But I had no intention of saying all that to you. I started with the best of intentions. On the contrary I wanted to say to you that in the first part of my letter and in that which edified you, I safeguard, in a way which is perhaps not completely frank, my fundamental ideas under those to which they are attached in the first place in leading souls devoted to Jesus Christ in mysticism. In this one I was going to get to something where undoubtedly you would be seen as wrong in the eyes of all directors, namely: in spiritual direction you lead people to tend more to suffering than to union. That is something other than the things I have just said to you. So Sr. Therese Emmanuel, to whom I do not mind saying what I have expressed above, is altogether of this latter opinion, and has often blamed you for the way you have dealt with me in this matter. I am going to explain it because I think that it is a wrong which does harm to you yourself; and here I am speaking no longer with the independence of a moment ago, but saying what everybody thinks.

It seems to me, you have taken such a liking for the saying of St. John of the Cross: *incline towards the most painful*, that you have nearly lost its true meaning. He applies it to himself only so as to detach himself more completely from visible things and attach himself to God alone. I think that you take it so as to suffer, at the risk of being occupied by the suffering itself even that which, following M. de Bérulle, is not the least hindrance to union. I can come back there to what I said to you at the beginning about the division of every life into an active and a passive portion, in the sense that there are things to which...

*(Text incomplete)*

**1Letter 1611** 15<sup>th</sup> March 1844

I received your letter of the 9<sup>th</sup>, my dear Father, with your advice on our vow of poverty. Allow me to write a word in reply, although the day before yesterday a long letter left here from me. I want to tell you how I am touched by your goodness. I hope that God will not make you bear my faults too harshly. I am by nature so proud that I am almost amazed that anyone should speak of taking on my sins, but this time, at least, I hope that the state I am in is going to convince me of my pride, make me perceive it where I do not see it, and also to make it less. At least can I say that this time your letter was far from irritating me. I was so grateful seeing you condescending to my weakness, treating me so gently that I had no natural resistance to overcome. Then you request me to do something which you had a thousand reasons to command, that which you should really be scolding me for having neglected: exactitude in keeping my rule.

I am going to try very faithfully to respond to your charitable request, because I do not know how it is that having in many things a certain amount of will power, there are others that I can only do if I am asked and asked again. All the same I know perfectly well that I must keep my rule, mortify myself etc., and it is odd that I have more need in direction to be helped in the accomplishment of the duties of which I am well aware, than to receive new lights. I often fear that this is a sign of my little love and fidelity, because they say that one only has to tell a faithful soul once. But perhaps also God means my weakness to make me feel the greater need to submit and humiliate myself, for I am very ashamed by the thought that I am boring you in obliging you to be always repeating the same things, and always going into the same detail. At times I stop asking you, but then I have to ask again because I fall once more, against my will into my negligence: that is the reason for my request to you in my last letter. I am fairly calm since I wrote it to you. It is odd how often to

express these not very good thoughts re-assures me, more than to feel them silently without explaining them to myself.

Only yesterday somebody brought me the "*Voice from Prison*" of M. de Lamennais: there is more than one thing, as you know, which made my heart race on opening this little volume, but I was calmer. In the end it is not possible that the earthly regeneration of humanity, of the social law, should not come from the word of Jesus Christ. The accepted notions and the mind of the Catholics of our days can obscure this certainty in my eyes; I cannot myself understand it, but this poverty, this night of my mind oppressed by the ideas that naturally it would reject as opposed to it, do not stop it being so, and that my faith should welcome it across my darkness. Without doubt there remains a bitterness; it is when one cannot conceive at all how this outcome will succeed, that action becomes heavier, more uncertain, more timid. But like the builders of our old cathedrals, many work without realising what they are doing for the city of the future. For a long time I have said to myself that one has to accept this role. There are even so many who work at it without wishing to do so, like the Romans building their roads for the preachers of the Gospel.

So then I fall back on repeating to God more frequently the prayer which is so dear to me: "May your Kingdom come", trying to sanctify his name by striving for a greater charity which makes me more really the bearer of his divine goodness to our sisters; trying to accomplish his will through greater trust in him; tending more to union with him in humility and submission, and making progress in virtue. I feel deeply that I do not have enough charity and that in some way there is no forgiveness in the depths of my soul, in the sense that my heart once alienated, remains so forever. I do not desire to hurt, I render services, but my coolness, my judgment, silent in its severity, and my repugnance are things which a thousand compensations do not change. It seems to me that I must be doing wrong in these things, and without excusing Fr.

Combalot (I am not there yet), I find that in this regard I have been very wrong, as when putting up with what he did wrong towards me, I thought we were even, and I picked myself up interiorly all the more because I was attributing to myself less exterior wrong. I did not then have the secret of Jesus Christ, and doubtless it is my fault, I was too occupied with my wounds and in excusing myself, I was too keen to possess in pride what I was giving in passive obedience. I was too delighted to feel I was above him and to show him that he could not reach me. Ceaselessly now I come back to the sight of Jesus Christ abasing himself so profoundly beneath each insult so that they passed right over him so that he could not have felt them, for he accepted them in love as a mercy, as if he were being treated a thousand times more gently than was his due.

But what I feel above all, is that it is only possible for me to enter into any of these dispositions if Jesus Christ gives them to me and that where I have most let him down has been in not asking for them with enough trust and care. That is what seems to me to be important now; because you write the same things to me either with goodness or severity, that in accordance with my dispositions at the time, willingly or unwillingly, I feel either full of irritation or grateful and at peace. If Our Lord wants to see me enter into his abasement of love, he must give it to me, and so I feel confident in asking him for it, for my own part nothing further prevents it. A week or two ago after having spoken to M. Le Saint who had stressed the importance of trust for me, I made an effort to find that trust once more, going to God as a daughter broken-hearted by my faults and foolish affections throwing herself into the arms of the most serious of fathers and finding once again his indulgence and a greater affection than for his other children, because he feels that it is a broken heart. So do you think that I dare say to God that earthly affections are a sacrifice for me, and that is true, because those I feel are so different in kind that they

never have the same effect. Certainly if they became natural, I should renounce them on the instant. I am an odd girl, always embarrassed by my intelligence or my heart, perhaps without having either the one or the other. What is certain is that I have received them from a nature devoid of all measure and every limit, and that from time to time this primitive disposition feels to my eyes like a blow, seeing that by the grace of God I have used them so differently.

I am very happy about what you tell me of your relationship with the person in question. I also thank you sincerely for your relic: the person who spoke to me of Gaspard Buffalo has grown in my esteem since his departure because all that I have been told about his austerity, his love of poverty and his charity for souls. So I hope that he will succeed.

I am so sorry that your throat has put a stop to your preaching successfully, which you do so well. As you say, may God permit the same good to be done differently, and I am thankful that you are keeping your soul in peace. I see that you will be preaching to us instead of to the people of Alais, and so you will help us to make the offering of our lives to God with greater fervour; because if you are going to be in Paris at the time of our Vows, you must preach us the retreat which precedes them. While waiting for this beautiful future, pray for me, I am more yours than ever in Jesus and Mary.

Do you find that I am overwhelming you? I thought that, on the contrary, what I had to say to you in this letter would please you. The marriage which I have spoken to you about remains a secret. My father does not say a word to me. I must tell you that while somewhat unwell a month ago during my journeys, I am now in very good health and I am keeping Lent very well without even taking advantage of all the permissions granted - which had kept me in a state of doubt, not knowing whether it was better to follow

the community, or to do as much as possible going beyond what I am authorised.

**Letter N°1627: 5<sup>th</sup> August 1844**

**A Philosophy and a Passion**

*It is in the context of intense prayer, thought and work on the charism of the new Congregation that this letter finds its place. Marie Eugenie is 27 years old. Preliminary constitutions had been written for the new congregation in 1840, which made possible the clothing of the first sisters in 1840 and their temporary profession in 1841. In 1842 a new ecclesiastical superior was appointed to succeed Mgr. Gros who had been appointed as a bishop. Mgr. Gaume was anxious that the sisters should have more developed constitutions before they made their final vows. Throughout 1843 and 1844 Marie Eugenie is in constant touch with Fr. d'Alzon on the subject of the constitutions. In August 1843 he was in Paris and had long conversations with Marie Eugenie. In October 1844 she will go to Nîmes to work with him on the constitutions and stay there until the beginning of November. Finally, on the 16<sup>th</sup> December, Mgr. Gaume gives his permission for the sisters to make their final profession on Christmas Day.*

*Ostensibly, this letter is concerned with the development of Fr. d'Alzon's vocation as founder of a religious congregation for men, the need for such a congregation in the France of the 1840s and the character with which she thought it should be imbued. Implicitly, Marie Eugenie also reveals her aspirations for the educational apostolate of the Religious of the Assumption.*

My dear and very dear Father, at last I hope to have a morning to talk to you about the matter that has been uppermost in my mind for some time, even though I have not yet said a word to you about it. I want to speak now of what you were kind enough to write to me about from Turin concerning the reawakening of your thoughts of foundation. I confess that while wanting to say a whole multitude of things to you on this subject, I am having difficulty in writing, because among the host of thoughts and feelings that well up in my soul about this, I am having difficulty in choosing and even in knowing which ones God approves of. You ask is that so important? Yes, Father, in this matter yes, and here considering myself simply as a circumstance, as a voice placed on your route, I fear a false note which will trouble the harmony of the plan of God, because certainly there is no circumstance, no relationship which has not profoundly influenced each founder of an Order, in the very work that the Spirit of God seemed to dictate to them in the most minute detail.

I think I must first of all make you aware of my attitude and personal desires, so that you can better judge the impulse that dictates my letter. You know that you have the right to read the depths of my soul. If then there is anything ridiculous in the personal impulses of which I am going to speak, don't think, Father, that I want to force them on you. Nothing is further from my mind, I only want to show you them in all simplicity, and that not without a certain embarrassment.

Since we founded this work, and above all since I have better realised through contact with others that our spirit is not at all the same as that of other Religious (male and female), I have desired with an ever-growing ardour that it would please God to found in his Church orders of men with a similar spirit, perhaps even with a comparable style of life so as to give to young Christian men and above all to young priests a character at once stronger, broader, and more intelligent, in one way more Christian, and in another



way nobler and freer. This has gone so far that often I am bitterly distressed not to be more holy, thinking that if I were, I could have done something to inspire this desire. I feel this with great regret, that I dare not express these wishes, and that you, or any other creature on earth who seeks God, doesn't pay attention to this, because of what I am. Believe me, Father, I feel the invincible strength of this objection with greater sorrow and with greater force than anyone else. It does not leave me the right to speak of my desire, except to God who accepts all the pious hopes for his Church, however impure the source from which they spring. That is one of the reasons, and the most serious why I was so reserved when last year I simply questioned you about the attractions you might experience about founding a religious community. With the same frankness I will tell you that in addition, I did not think that I saw in you the understanding necessary to the degree that I would have wished it. I thought you were a bit lost in your own notions of perfection. I would find it difficult to tell you exactly what discouraged me in you, and today it seems to me that it could very well have arisen from my own fixed ideas. What is certain is that I said to myself: "He doesn't understand these things well", and I completely abandoned the thought. Just the same before you first brought it up again in your letter from Turin, a reversal had already been worked in my mind, in the sense that I had said to myself that after all, you understood better than the most famous of the great minds with whom I had been put in contact; that you were more sympathetic, simpler, and above all that you were less inclined to lose yourself in a branch of Catholicism at the risk of scarcely bothering yourself about the trunk, or at least of seeing the whole trunk in the branch. I insist on this last fault: it is what I so dislike today about M. Lacordaire, he who is in everything and above everything else a Dominican, as M. de Cazalès is a mystic and the followers of M. Bautain, Bautinians.

Why have I said all this to you? It is to make you understand to what an extent it could be a natural ardour that makes me

forcefully entertain the thought of seeing you found a religious association, if it is of the kind that I am so praying for. You have not said this to me, and you know moreover that if it is something else, a work of preaching or mission, I shall take the interest in it that will always bind me to all that you do for the glory of God, but I confess to you that it will not be the same thing at all.

I should have liked you to explain to me the superb plan that you have in mind, while awaiting the lights of supernatural feeling. But because you remain silent, I am going to tell you what motivates my reason as much as my feelings, while at the same time asking you to bear in mind that we are not asking God for fathers, or brothers, but only for men who will serve him on their side as we do on ours.

In France today, what is quite clearly lacking for men, are religious orders in touch with the character, the spirit, I would even say the physical forces of our time. If men called to the Religious state lack these, the action of these orders will be no less lacking in the different fields of work, but above all and particularly in education. Between you and me, and without excusing the passionate and vicious attacks on them, in the present struggle isn't it a very strange pretension on the part of Catholics to want to get the Jesuits accepted by the world, while most of us don't think that we should accept them? If our code of honour did not unite us round them (and I think this code of honour is completely stupid since it denies the real sympathies of most of us), if this code of honour did not exist, would not these men quickly become a subject of division among Christians? If they were here, if they had full authority, would we not think that we had to pray God to do something different for Himself? How then while God is rejected because of them, is it not seen as the first of duties to raise another banner behind the Cross? You will tell me that it would not be allowed: and I tell you that yes it would. As long as the head is in France, and the Constitutions are characterised by

learning and openness; as long as the members are qualified and that they have the diplomas, they will be authorised.

What is more I am convinced that one of the things about the Jesuits which harms them most in the minds of people in the modern world, (because for the worldly society they are the best) is what prejudices them in my eyes too: the lack of an Evangelical spirit in certain areas, and an inferior formation – and I should like to have a long conversation with you about what I perceive to be the reasons for this. This is of course just between the two of us. Intellectual formation is not a question of the quantity of things learnt; it is if I can put it this way the development of intelligence and character through the possession of the truth that an extensive knowledge presents under many facets. Now, I am going to use very inadequate expressions, and I do not have the time to improve on them: What is it in studies that develops the character and the mind? What is it that so powerfully co-ordinates all the things that are learnt, serves as their aim, their link, their reason? In one sense it is **a philosophy**; in another more important one, it is **a passion**. But what passion should one give to Religious? That of the faith, that of love, that of the establishing the law of Christ, etc. All the great Orders, diverse in their unity, have been characterised by them: love for St. Francis of Assisi, faith for St. Dominic etc.. They have all had a philosophy, because you will note that most of the great orders started in their learning from realities that in another sense I have called passion. St. Francis of Assisi said to his brothers: “instead of seeking whether God exists, make acts of love about his existence”. This statement is for me the principle of the philosophy of St. Bonaventure and of the entire order. The Dominican studies in order to find the truth, to co-ordinate it, and to defend it: faith is his philosophy. And however little you have read of M. de Bérulle, you will have realised that he engendered a Malebranche. I know of nobody else who takes you to higher principles, to more divine truth in order to teach you the simplest thing.

The Jesuits, you realise, kill these two, or this double faculty, which thrives on air and light, because their motive for study is only to do the will of the Superior. And their spirituality is full of ideas in this area that are very strange to me. It would seem that it is a rash and proud undertaking to take each of the souls God sends us so as to raise it as high as possible in the sphere of intelligence and of love, to attach it to God alone, to leave it free to go to God, and to exercise no authority except to prevent it falling back into the lower sphere, into human views, into seeking things of this present life.

But where was I? What I wanted to say to you was that I am convinced that we will not reach the real superiority of learning necessary today for Catholics to triumph, except by way of the superior character imprinted on both teachers and pupils, by **the passion that must animate them**, and **the philosophy that must direct them**. But it is exactly this that generally is killed by religious education, so that taken all in all lay education that has these three strengths in a human and even bad order, has an intellectual advantage over the education that destroys them. Equally it will clearly have a certain inferiority compared with the education that finds these three strengths in the divine order. I do not know if I am clear; but what I want to say is: better a character tempered with notions of human and worldly honour than one that is broken and has no stamp<sup>17</sup> at all. The deceitful enthusiasm of natural passions and the flame of a bad philosophy are better for the development of the intelligence than the absence of any emotion in the soul, and study done solely so as to know facts, one after the other. But what would be their superiority if these three elements of life were taken from the source of life and not from the broken cisterns of which the prophet speaks; if characters were forged according to the strength of the Gospel; if souls were

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<sup>17</sup> In the sense of a mark branded into it

afire for the truth of God and for his reign; if the Wisdom revealed by the Son of God himself and the knowledge of the relationship of all beings with Him became the philosophy, the beginning and the end of our Studies?

But yet no one is concerned about this. The Bishops are beginning to think about having their priests get diplomas; but underneath the cassock there will be nothing but human knowledge. Would that God would unite the man who thinks of knowledge with the one of Christian education, joining them one to the other, in mutual support. You will say to me: I am not that man. My very dear Father, I should like to respond with the saying that my mother used of my father during the 15 years that he stood as a candidate and failed to win an election. When the liberals are successful, she said to those who proposed other candidates, my husband will willingly give up his place, but while there are nothing but blows to receive, he will continue to step into the breach, and he will always dare to proclaim that he is the fittest person to do so. This word has often helped me. The beginnings of a foundation, the care of the men who join it, business affairs, even the material things on which they live, the struggle against obstacles, all take time that it would be a pity to heap on superior men. When we have built the nest, God will put them in it, and make them walk along the road that perhaps it is our mission to cut like humble road builders. I know nothing more appropriate than this thought to encourage a sincere heart that loves both God and his Church. I think that at this moment what is needed is less someone very erudite than someone who knows how to let people study and to get them to study, and above all someone who can lead in the direction that I have described. The only deadly thing would be the sort of mysticism that crushes the spirit. It is on this point that you would have to examine yourself. M. Vernières could well have taken you in that direction, and it is because of that that M. Bautain should be considered completely useless. Moreover you have the prerequisites – age, position, fortune, even

experience – that very few others have together. It is for you to see before God whether this secret instinct that is not yet clearly developed and this interior reproach that you have not yet done anything, are not saying to you that God has given them to you for his work. I say His work: in my eyes it is the most important thing for his present glory and for the salvation of the Church.

If it is towards this that God is leading you, you will allow me join you in it, starting now, by way of my communions, prayers and mortifications. Our sisters also will willingly do so, for we have often spoken of the education of men with pity for them. For this cause, I should like to give you everything I do one day per week: Tuesday or Friday as you wish... But is this where God is leading you? Oh, how I wish I were holy so as to support you if it is something you can do, and that I had the zeal to offer for this intention the sacrifices that I do not undertake generously enough.

You know only too well how in our foundation everything seems to me to be tightly linked together, for me to have much need to tell you that for men just as much as for us, I see in the bonds of religion and in the austere practices that are not harmful to health, a necessary guardian for spirits to whom one has given their wings, and whom one must never allow to fall down to the ground. All the same I think that we need less exterior discipline to succeed, and as Roman<sup>18</sup> as we both are, I find it legitimate enough that the French should be mistrustful of handing the education of their children to a congregation whose superior is not living among them.

These thoughts, moreover, are the only ones that have reconciled me to your vow. In my opinion to make it so quickly and without taking advice is, once more to take a short cut. The right way would have been to disown human sentiments, to die to them and

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<sup>18</sup> Ultramontane

to remain under the hand of God while waiting for his plan to become clear through circumstances. You cannot place vows between you and all your bad thoughts. The great road of perfection is to stay still, vowing to move only for the greater glory of God, instead of agitating as you do. I call that to act. Not that you do not take a decision; you only know how to refuse them (the ideas) under the pretext of a greater mortification. So, if God is calling you to found for him, he will have to take you by the hand: and yet God does not often work this miracle. He lets man know that he has need of such and such a service, and then it is for man to take the means. So do not say to me: one should stay where one has been placed, because if God is putting it in your heart to gather a group of servants for him, you have to do everything that would render you better able to do this. If conversation with me can help you to do something, you must seek me out; if Paris is going to be more suitable for you, you have to ask permission, even resign if that is necessary, and come here at least for a time. If they refuse you, ask again; pride does not come into it when it is question of a greater service of God. Bishops are not Superiors of Religion and none of the greatest saints has thought in an equivalent matter that he had to submit to the person in whose diocese he found himself, and there is something impertinent in playing heads or tails with God, in saying to him that one is expecting a sign of his will in the first word of a man with whom one has no relationship of conscience, and whom one does not consider au courant with God's plans for us.

Besides, my dear Father, if you believe as you have sometimes told me that our work can bring about the glory of God, I hope that you are convinced by it that the most cowardly and wicked faults do not always stop God from using persons who have only understood something useful to his service, even if only partially at first. Since I last wrote to you I have tried to correct the wrongs that I accused myself of: I was ashamed in telling you of them, and while asking God to inspire you not to put up with them, and that

he will give me the grace to be really humble and really submissive in punishing them as much as you want, I have begun by trying to resolve things by myself. I have restarted with some austerities, and a great fidelity to the Rule, for the things I had let slip. This has put me into a disposition closer to the total spirit of sacrifice that God is asking of me and which I have not yet reached. These two words often come into my mind: "Behold I come", because I ought to be able to say it with complete abandon, and a sincere spirit of immolation and of penance, and second: "Have this mind among yourselves that was in Christ Jesus"; but I have not yet been able to gain over myself a deep and sincere consent to this generous disposition of victim, on which alone I could establish a new relationship of love between God and me. So, I remain a long way from Him.

M. Gabriel, who leaves in a week's time for the Midi, will ask me for a letter for you, and I shall give him one in which I want to put another picture that for me expresses very well what God is asking of me. You will put it in your Breviary just as I have it in mine: it ought to remind me to be the Lamb and you to want this for me and to help me to imitate the docility and the abandon of the infant Jesus. M. Gabriel knows that I am on close terms with you, he heard it spoken of when joking with our sisters, and I have preferred not to make a mystery of it. Nevertheless he does not know explicitly that you are my director. If he becomes my confessor, I shall have real problems in submitting to the direction he will want to give me as such. When you see him, decide whether, given the sort of character he is, you prefer that I remain somewhat reserved with him, or whether I crush my pride and submit to what he will want.

Good bye I remain a thousand times yours in Jesus and Mary.

**1No. 1630: 28<sup>th</sup> August 1844**



*A reflection on the character of Fr d'Alzon, following on from the preceding letter. On the spirit of a foundation in general: "it is pretentious today to be too general – to want to be the trunk, or at least to make oneself universal. Be a branch if you want to be anything"... Reflections on formation: the practice of very great renunciation to make the religious capable of a certain liberty.*

I have just come in from Mgr. Gaume so tired that I would think that I was quite right to go and rest for a while: so I certainly have the right to give you this time of rest and to put at your service my mind brought low by fatigue and sleepiness. I hope that I will find in my humiliation from the heights of the other day and in my desire to do you a bit of that good for which you were kind enough to thank me so profusely, the grace and the strength to speak to you a bit better than the last time of the thoughts which are preoccupying you.

How my mind, my dear Father, finds it difficult to be charitable! It seems to me that I am far from lacking in friendship for you, and nevertheless, I see clearly, it is not that which will make me bow to your thinking, and teach me to put mine at your feet. On the contrary, if I remain in the natural order, the very frankness of my friendship doubles my harshness, in being direct I become stiff, in being sincere I am condescending: so as to hide nothing, I blame to the point of wounding, and so that I do not win your conviction other than in complete freedom and without ever manipulating it, my mind concedes nothing to yours. I will not even condescend to take your paths, so as to establish in your eyes the value of my convictions. Only God, by removing all that is bad to the very depths of my soul, can combine in me the humble sweetness which gives way, with the absolute frankness that I will always keep in your regard. But since no-one more than I understands the gentleness of Jesus Christ, or is more moved to demand it, I can scarcely be excused for lacking it. Also, which is nothing less than

a miracle, my confessor - he who lets everything pass - has scolded me a lot, and he did not know the least thing about it, in such a fashion that I took his words doubly as coming from God.

But coming to you, my dear Father; despite the fact that I received them so badly, nevertheless in what you said to me there are many ideas which I embrace wholeheartedly. I think I understand all that you say about Catholic liberty, about the absence of a spirit of exclusion, and of Jesus Christ as the object of your philosophy, your mysticism and your action. I agree with that with my whole soul, but allow me just the same to submit some observations about this, after which I will tell you all the things in which I differ from you and which stem for the most part from the way of beginning such a work and its means of success.

Up to a certain point the exclusive character, well understood, is an element of life, and I think that for you personally, your fear of being exclusive has not been good for you and has hindered you up to now from consolidating your character and your whole personality in a unified relationship with the special plan of God for you. You seem to recognise this in what you say to me at the end: of the detachment which is operating in you, and which snatches you in the end from the influence of contrary opinions so as to bring you back to yourself. I do not say this from any pretension of understanding, nor even of glimpsing the divine plans to which you should submit. But *a priori* it is certain that in imprinting on each of us such diverse characteristics, in endowing us with particular faculties, in surrounding us with circumstances, teachings, feelings whose influence joined to those of our own organisation makes us invincibly sympathetic to some things and antipathetic to others; capable of understanding some and incapable of understanding others, God has willed to create our personality, our particular vocation. By all these means he has made us what he wants us to be so as to hold a certain place in his plan, to be a certain cog. I believe humbly and simply that we should stop there without

rushing to give ourselves the characteristics of other cogs, busying ourselves only with removing all the rust, all which comes from evil, all which hinders us from giving all our own power and from making it useful for the cause of God. I do not think that you have always understood this, and I don't even know whether you yet understand it clearly enough. So it appears to me that you have accepted, almost chosen, positions directly contrary to your character, not - understand this well - to the bad side of your character, but to that which is good. You seem to me often to take yourself the wrong way, not to open to a legitimate development even the most innocent of your tendencies. You have as your principle to try out the states, the systems, the practices of others so as to judge by them and direct yourself surely, which seems to me so much more an error in that in acting thus you judge awry, as your structure and your destiny from on high do not have the relationship with these things that the structure of others has. So you lose your way, which confuses the mind and makes it incapable of reacting quietly according to the truth and the law of God.

So I should like you, instead of taking for principle: "the acceptance of all that is Catholic", to put the respect for all that is Catholic. Honour, respect, esteem, one must have: acceptance, no. The Sage says: "He who does not keep to his way will be killed". One must, if you will permit me to enter into your mysticism, attach oneself to Jesus Christ according to the lights he gives us. We must create freely and boldly the religious Institute to which he calls us in accordance with the holy sympathies which he gives us and to the first companions whom he sends us. We must only attract vocations by the expansion of this spirit, then take it that our Order is made for structures like ours and be careful not to introduce what is more perfect elsewhere for other structures, when that is not appropriate for us - which in no way stops us respecting it and honouring it in its proper place. Jesus Christ is the principle, the trunk of all; the more you love him, the more you

will love in him the other branches: you will see and you will value the different degrees and the different expansions of his grace and of his life, in the priest, and in the poor, in religious men and women of all kinds, but be careful not to participate there except through the general communion of the faithful: the sap which nourishes one would weaken the strength of the sap which ought to be nourishing the other. Only the trunk can support all the branches: It is too general a pretension today to want to be the trunk, or at least to make oneself universal. If you want to be anything, be a branch, and believe that you will never be better disposed to charity towards all, than by being humbly in your place what you ought to be in Jesus Christ. The Order which would accept everything which is Catholic would in a short space of time believe that it summed it all up, contained it all, and if it were powerful, would believe that it was sufficient unto itself, "the be all and end all."

Nothing is so difficult, you feel it doubtless in advance, as harmonising respect for the spirit of others with the energy of one's own spirit, and freedom with obedience. I have recently read a long passage written on this last point for the religious of St. Peter of Fr. de Lamennais. It was written not by himself, but by someone he had asked, and although there were good things in it, just the same I found too much for my taste the man who wants to assure the liberty of his own studies. It is one of the points on which I wanted to talk to you most, not for us, our line seems to me to be well laid out in this respect, but for you. I should like to get you to read four or five works on this subject which have struck me a lot from different points of view, and which also contain very different things to which I wanted to draw your attention: unfortunately I cannot lend them to you since most of them do not belong to me, and also because we need to talk about them while you are reading them, or at least I need to give you the reasons why I esteem certain passages so highly. These books are: *The Life of Fr. Faure*, Reformer of the Canons of St. Augustine in the

16<sup>th</sup> century; *The Duties of the Monastic Life* of Rancé; *The Direction of the Superiors of the Oratory* by M. De Bérulle, together with what he has written for the Carmelites; the Rule of the Lazarists, and a review of Piel, one of Fr. Lacordaire's Dominicans. There are other things as well, but I forget them for the moment.

Is it by the practice of very great renunciation that one should make a religious capable of a certain liberty? Generally speaking that is my opinion, and it is above all for this reason that, except for a very small number of exceptions, I think that you should not look for your subjects among the clergy. The young man who leaves the world to enter the cloister is generally prepared to adopt a quite different religious spirit from the priest already formed in the seminary to a perfect life, which is nevertheless completely opposed to the religious life. The former brings no particular spirit of his own, no judgments about the life which he is embracing; most frequently he wants to be fervent and generous. On the other hand the priest easily returns to his own ideas, and with difficulty adds a new spirit of sacrifice to that which has made him a priest. Without the details which I spared them, both Fr. Lacordaire and Dom Guéranger have both avowed the same thing to me. Without doubt a teaching order offers more occasions for rivalry and self-will than do theirs. I still have a thousand reasons to give against the vocations of priests, taken in general, and not the least of them is that one has to be very strong to treat them as novices the same as the others. But one cannot go too far in treating them as novices: it does good to everybody, the perfect as much as the imperfect. But for all that I have always asked for a great practical renunciation in principle, I would not want you to understand by that the abdication of the will; no, much rather a great strength, a great aptitude given to the will to struggle against the inclinations of nature. So I believe that one must lead the novices to overcome themselves, and send away those who are not capable of doing so, because later on they will have freedom

and influence. If of themselves they do not embrace obedience, poverty, mortification, even in hard things, in the midst of the active life you will have scarcely any resources against them.

But in dwelling at length on these, perhaps useless, details, I am so stupid that I don't know how to get to some conclusions that I most wanted to draw out and that I perceive better than I can express. The first is that it seems to me to be dangerous to set up an Order of this kind in the midst of a boarding school. That way the religious spirit becomes more or less impossible, and the strength of the studies is enormously reduced. In fact to keep the boarding school going you have to accept firstly men who are already formed, capable of teaching, who have aspirations the opposite of obedience, humility and poverty. The example of just one such would put a false note into the education of candidates who would be coming with good intentions. Moreover, the active life open immediately to each with its exterior rivalries, would destroy the foundation of absolute self-denial in most candidates, at least without a miracle. You would not be able to send a novice here or there, to send him to the kitchen or to study: the needs of the school would dominate and impose on you the obligation to use his talents, if he has any, and then, however perfect he is, instead of being in the hands of the Order, he will know that the Order is in his hands. Then how do you want all those young men whom the hand of God stirs and who want to be religious before anything else (these are the best vocations) should go into a school and await its slow transformation into a religious house? The only people who will come to you are those already decided on teaching as lay people as much as a religious, and they will be poor religious, and besides rarely talented people. Do you know that there is nothing more difficult than to make religious out of teachers and academics? Pride, love of ease, his own ideas, eccentricities, they have them all! Don't add to your difficulties.

As for studies, future teachers must follow top level science

courses and become graduates. Will you find resources for that in Montpellier? They are deemed to be inferior to those of Paris. Further, it is very important to receive men already qualified, and I can tell you that among the young men who are finishing their classes here, even among the students of the École Normale, there are plenty at this moment who are undecided about their vocation. Still it is difficult to sympathise much with the Jesuits. Fr Lacordaire is too austere for the health of many, and the young men themselves are complaining about the lack of Orders which suit them, just as they complain of the lack of confessors who understand them. If you were here, you would be hearing many of their confessions, and that way you would find a mass of vocations. You could bring them together as laymen in your own lodgings to continue their studies without saying a word to anyone. Then when you had a whole lot of "Doctors", you would make your foundation where Providence would open the way for you. Being simple, prudent and not at all Jesuitical, the Government itself would authorise you, if you knew how to seize the favourable moment. Today Paris brings together all the young cultured men of France: in previous ages the Midi was the more learned. It is quite different for women, since there are more vocations in the provinces than in Paris.

I still have a lot more to say to you, but I am tired of writing. The good doctor Ferrand (totally Jesuit) who leaves the day after tomorrow will bring you this. I am taking the opportunity of sending you also the Rule of the Lazarists, on condition that you send it back to me by M. Duvergier who is returning very shortly. If you do not know it already, you will admire its evangelical spirit. One needs something else for a teaching order: all the same this should be consulted frequently and imitated without being copied. One must, I find, like St Vincent, take Jesus Christ as the model in each recommendation, considering him in what relates to the kind of life of a man who is teaching, one who is studying and who knows; in his truth, his doctrine etc.... The book does not belong

to me.

I pray much for you, but if this prayer were not too indiscreet, I would beg you as I have never done to give me some more days this year. I see that M. Gaume would like to have the Rule without too much delay and I despair now of completing it alone. I no longer have the courage to work at it: and neither have I the courage to take a decision about each point, so that his objections are going to find me without strength. I do not know what I ought to want, to what point and over what I dare and I must hold firm. Scepticism is taking hold of me, I feel it taking hold of me and saying yes or no, what difference does it make? Moreover fatalism tells me also that there is nothing I can do. I need someone who will revive my will and conviction, and if you don't do it, there is nobody I can turn to. I no longer have the confidence in M. Lacordaire which I once had in him. Alas! How imperfect I am! The fatigue of waiting a week, the interruption of the work during this time has been enough to make me fall right back into that dejection full of self loathing that I had resisted up till then, and although I can put myself right with God, it is finished, my mind cannot pick itself up from there.

If I had managed to reply fully to your letter about yourself, I would have wanted to say to you that the defects that you find in the Jesuits seem to me to come solely from the fact that they have not set their principle high enough; that I would have liked you to know a congregation of Polish priests founded here in Paris where marvellous things are being practised. Their Rule is of no great merit. That every Tuesday I will offer my communion and my day for you; that you should never think that I criticise in public what I criticise to you; that as regards M. Bautain particularly, he has the fault of having a "strange" mind; that at this moment we have for Mass the Abbé Aouste who has spoken to me of your boarding school, and he who knows the area thinks that it will be very difficult for you to raise the studies to university level on your own.



You can well imagine that I let him speak without letting on that I know you better than M. Sibour or M. Thibaut. (He said) that the University must leave hardly any possibility of modifying and improving the pedagogy and methods of teaching, that you are studying this subject. Read the work of P. Girard on education, a work that the Academy is honouring, today I think.

Goodbye Father, you are quite right to think me independent. How I would like to have someone who would take on these difficulties, who would write the Rule, who would take responsibility for everything and even for my liberty.

All yours in Our Lord.

Sr. M. Eugenie of Jesus

I have received your letter of the 18<sup>th</sup> about the authority of the (sister) Superior. This time what I was discussing with M. Gaume was not the Rule but a contract of partnership between us. The Rule came in indirectly and he said to me that we would do better to draw up the Rule as if for a single community and to leave the Rules of the Congregation for later. I am against that because I detest changes in existing customs: however to go in this direction may be the only way to avoid a (priest) Superior General. Oh! If only I knew what I ought to want!

Sister M. Eugenie of Jesus

**Letter 1648: undated, 1844**

*Important – on the Catholicism of her period and her own apostolic vision*

Although I find it difficult to summarize what we have presently talked about and for which I feel such repugnance, I am here after having prayed before Our Lord, to submit myself in obedience. I think that I can do it without much trouble.

While you were reproaching me for my distaste for studies, I think I told you, when you invited me to study Catholic opinions in order to have solid foundations, that I was not interested because I had ideas for their practice, and if I couldn't carry these out I cared little. I sincerely believe that Catholicism is the source of my opinions, and that they are an expression of Catholicism in day to day life. But I said to you that if it could be proved to me that Catholicism must produce different consequences, I personally would accept them, because we must remain in the order of obedience so as to remain in the order of piety, without wanting in any way to promote these consequences in the world. As a consequence in my relations with you as soon as I have had to sacrifice some part of my convictions, I feel myself less able to act, and, as it were, exhausted and disgusted about what I could do, learn and teach.

I think that this is the explanation. I see an order of development and moral rehabilitation necessary in this world. I have a clear intuition of an exact correlation between this need and the activity of Catholicism as I understand it. On the contrary I see that the thinking of many Catholics, of all perhaps, has general consequences which are opposed to the good I desire, and they differ from me in the way they understand the same truths. Things are so much intertwined in my mind that when any principle is modified, the whole concept seems incapable of bringing about the good. (Notice that my problems never come from the

mysteries, the details, the supernatural facts, (in so far as they have a consequence, all Christian dogmas have the most admirable consequences). It is the application of the principle that seems to me retrograde or harmful.)

Oh, well! If there were serious reasons to believe that I were mistaken, I could not, I would not, try to bring about what I consider harmful. I think that a little later they will see things as I do. But as I cannot risk acting wrongly in following my own principles which could incur serious condemnation, I shall abstain from all "action", confining myself to material tasks and to a life of prayer where I shall ask God, who cannot make a mistake, that his Kingdom may come in this world. And perhaps he knows that this cannot be done by ideas opposed to mine, and perhaps he will modify things in such a way that people who do not understand or those who condemn me will later do all I hope for. This is what is happening to the bishops with regard to Mr. Lamennais... Meanwhile, as the reason that God has given me only sees good from one point of view, I can't switch to the opposite; I am suspending my judgment. But then what study, what action do you want me to undertake? I know both sides, and when the one that I brushed aside is taken up by ten authors, I can only suspend my judgment because I continue to have the intuition of the practical necessity of other principles or of another interpretation of those principles.

Unsigned.