

OUR SOURCES

Vocation – a meandering path...

SOME ASPECTS OF THE VOCATIONAL PATH OF MARIE EUGENIE

Through her letters to Father Combalot, between 1837 and 1839

Most of those who come to work in the mission of the Assumption, came because, one day, they may have felt in one way or another, called. One can call this “chance” experience, some kind of a Providential call, that allowed them to discover that they had a place in this project. As educators, all of us have a mission to accompany others in their vocational paths, at times meandering like theirs ... This demands that we accept to move forward at the pace of the other, to read with him/her the signs of God in his/her life, to help discern the calls ... On this road one must accept that we do not know, that we hesitate ... before finding the sliver of light at the turn of the road. In fact, our paths are not all straight. The constant back and forth between the source of this mission in the Assumption, the path of Marie Eugenie, and the streams flowing from it, our own existential paths, is one fruitful act. It is thus interesting, among thousands of other possibilities, to explore the letters that Marie Eugenie wrote to Fr. Combalot from 1837 to 1839, while her future was taking shape, step by step, to see what they say about her vocation, her journey... a path that undoubtedly can help us to accompany other vocational paths while assuming our own ...

We know the account of the meeting between “Mlle. Eugenie” and Fr. Combalot, during Lent of 1837, the immediacy of which makes us smile sometimes. Having asked Eugenie if she loved the Blessed Virgin, Fr. Combalot tells her that he can do nothing more; then he changes his mind ... He becomes her confessor and while he speaks to her of his project to found a Religious Congregation for the education of young girls, Anne Eugenie brings up, without convincing him, her lack of experience, her youth, her lack of knowledge of religious life... Despite a certain originality, which escapes our human reasoning, Eugenie quickly recognizes in this encounter a way that echoes her own search. She finds therein a possibility to find the “source” and she writes to Fr. Combalot: *“Was not my soul broken with dryness when God sent me to you? (...) It is you who led me to the source of life. You gave me the nourishment of your tender and strong affection ...”*¹ In the same letter she insists on the fact that if she had not met Fr. Combalot, she would have undoubtedly gone to look elsewhere, on more or less idolatrous paths, for the answers to these questions.

So... what happened between these first moments and the 30th of April 1839, the day when Mother Marie Augustine and Mother Marie Eugenie met to form the first « community » of the Assumption? Was the “interior journey” of Anne Eugenie easy?

1. A path of personal responsibility

a) Re-reading of the important stages

We can immediately say that one of the characteristics of the journey of Marie Eugenie is that it was not a straight path, but be that as it may, it was one that did not allow her to lose her way. In her letters to Fr. Combalot, as in her Intimate Notes (Notes Intimes), we find the traces of the meanderings that characterized this journey.

¹ MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot of 4 April 1837, n°27

We can recognize 3 important moments in the vocational path of Marie Eugenie: her First Communion, her conversion and her Confirmation. There is like a gradual path, an “*ascent*” towards accepting the call. In a conversation with the Sisters regarding the beginnings of the Congregation², Marie Eugenie describes the strong impression left by her First Communion: “*it was the first vocation call*”, she concludes. She also writes to Fr. Picard that “*the first movements of (her) vocation came to (her) under the vaults of Notre-Dame during the conferences of 1836*”, referring to the moment of her conversion. She adds that “*it was still something vague, undecided, the desire to consecrate (myself) to God’s and the Church’s cause without knowing where or how*”³. Regarding her Confirmation, in the previously quoted conversation, she says: “*on that day my vocation was set*”. She often returns to the moment of her Confirmation, as to the moment when her vocation took root, speaking of it as “*the door to a new life*”⁴.

This capacity to reread her life and to name the essential turning points is striking in the young Anne Eugenie. It is a key for our own vocational itineraries. How do we re-read or help ourselves to re-read? How do we set the pillars of the moments that have marked our life?

From the moment of her Confirmation, despite her resistances, Eugenie regularly evokes a desire which, in some ways, becomes more and more certain. In June 1837, she writes to Fr. Combalot: “*I hope more and more every day that nothing will hold me back ...*”⁵ Then in August 1837, when she saw her vocation put to the test by her family: “*As for me, I trust my energy more. I see that neither scorn, mockery, coldness, reproaches from neither my friends nor the world with its successes and pleasures have seriously shaken my vocation.*”⁶ And even if she took time to rest a little in Lorraine during the summer of 1837, she affirms that same summer: “*I will entrust myself to His goodness upon my return to Paris and I will begin boldly to do what is necessary to finally belong to Him totally.*”⁷

b) Attractions, aversion, indifference in the face of the work

We must not think that Marie Eugenie, the strong and determined woman that we know, had a simple vision about the work that Fr. Combalot wanted to begin, from the start. She incidentally writes later to Msgr. Gros, evoking the moment when Fr. Combalot spoke to her for the first time of his project that she feels a “*very lively zeal*” despite her aversions and she explains herself: “*It (the work) seemed to me to be destined to bring about the 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 admit, Father, that 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 through it all, through my independence and my varied contacts. I would be able to be useful because of all this and because

² MARIE EUGENIE, Conversation sur les commencements de la fondation, 30 avril 1881, cf. TF2

³ MARIE EUGENIE, Lettre au Père François Picard, date, n°1509

⁴ MARIE EUGENIE, Lettre au Père d’Alzon du 28 juillet 1842, n°1557

⁵ MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot du 21 June 1837, n°2

⁶ MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot du 18 August 1837, n°4

⁷ MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot du 14 juillet 1837, n°3

of the talents which education had given me and which I was bound to consecrate to God since so far, they had only contributed to my vanity.”⁸

From July 1837, she confirms her attraction, to Fr. Combalot: “*Our Lord has given me much attraction for your work.*”⁹ and a bit later during that same summer: “*I am afraid to lose, through this kind of lukewarmness, and through this continuous self-centeredness, the grace of my vocation of which I begin to understand all the grandeur better. Because, if as I believe, your work can be useful, I do not see any greater benefit, any more amazing grace that God can grant us, than that of making use of us to do this good, to associate us in a way to His merciful Providence, and to consider it as a merit for us, a cooperation that He did not need.*”¹⁰

She keeps herself, however, from being too attached... « *Your work will or will not happen, God knows. Do not worry for me. I have not attached my happiness to this or that. I see myself as belonging to you and this idea pleases me. I will not seek to serve God and the Virgin in one of the existing orders, even if it seems to me very holy. It is not from that angle that I would turn my efforts, but towards the virtue of indifference so recommended by St. Francis de Sales. No, I shall try to really uproot from my heart any preference for one thing or another, that I may as well be the last Sister of your order or the first, indifferent to the tasks that will be given to me, and equally ready to serve God as a lay person in any position, or as to enter into the most contemplative life, if that is how your Institution would become, which I do not think it will, whatever happens.*”¹¹ In other words, she leaves the work “*entirely at the disposition of (her) God*”¹² and she gives us a beautiful example of indifference!

She knows however, that determination, a consequence of zeal, is her strong point: “*...I know that once decided, nothing would cost me to try to imitate Jesus Christ in His mission as Savior of these poor souls that ignorance separates from Him even more than ill will.*”

c) Strong Initiative

The determination of Anne Eugenie led her to assume responsibility for her life. It is she who takes the lead and lays the groundwork for her own formation: “*I would really like, she writes to Fr. Combalot, that you consent to let me make my Novitiate in one of the existing convents if it is possible to enter therein without the obligation to stay. That would teach me a lot of things and the separation from my family would begin, which I really want, whatever it may cost...*”¹³ And her letters witness to the time she spent looking for a convent in Paris that would accept her to begin a life “separated” from the world ... the first step will be taken when she enters the Benedictines of the Blessed Sacrament. They are not the community that appeals most to her but Anne Eugenie is in a hurry to commit herself in the religious path, thinking also that this would gain for her the merit of “protecting” her from her family.

Once again, she has the initiative when it comes to envisaging real formation, suggesting even the places: “*This novitiate project which you have always pushed back so far, that was only held with*

⁸ MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Gros, n°1504

⁹ MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot, 14 juillet 1837, n°3

¹⁰ MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot, 24 August 1837, n°5

¹¹ MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot, 21 November 1837, n°11

¹² MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot, 21 September 1838, n°42

¹³ MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot, 19 September 1837, n°7

this sense of impossibility, that I, myself felt, to break away without any reason. *If your will remains the same, I do not see any other means to make it possible except through that, at least in appearance. See, while you are in Bordeaux if you can obtain through the Archbishop, or through your influence, if I could be received in any convent without staying in it, or take the postulant's habit there, with freedom regarding my studies and my interior life. Say that it is a young girl who, for her honor, for her piety, needs to break with the world but does not however want to become a religious. It is better that it not be in Bordeaux because of your Lent.*"¹⁴

Other places emerge later and it is still Marie Eugenie who gives the pace when she talks about Côte Saint André in May 1838, in a letter to Fr. Combalot: *"These past three months, we will choose between the convent of the Augustinians and that of the Côte as a boarder in either."*¹⁵ She even has concrete ideas on the choice of the place: *"I confess that if we could make it possible regarding my family, I would prefer Paris to establish this novitiate of which you speak about, after Easter."*¹⁶

We can highlight the important place of the will and determination, which is the foundation of her perseverance, even with some hesitations...

2. Determination does not preclude questioning

Indeed, despite these desires to move forward and the confidence she shows in this sense, questions remain constantly in Anne Eugenie as evidenced by this excerpt from a letter of November 1837, when she will go to the Benedictines of the Blessed Sacrament: *"I can not still be sure of my vocation as you are. It always amazes me to see you speak about it so decisively as if God had instructed you about it face to face, and above all this time that you do not want to see as pitfalls the fulfillment of family duties and the suitable life that was offered to me. For the past days my soul is very agitated - regrets, sadness, concerns, indecisions, fears of the future. Everything goes by turns. I am irritated by your authority, then I quiet my reasoning to submit myself..."*¹⁷

In her Intimate Notes (Notes Intimes), we find even this passage (visibly addressed to Fr. Combalot): *"You believed me capable of belonging to God, of serving Him in the state of virginity and you spoke to me of an educational institute. This is great, I know, yet it is not that to which I feel called."*¹⁸

In addition to the fact that she saw herself rather at the service of the poor, other objections sometimes came up.

a) The attraction of the world

In June 1837, she writes that there are *"astonishing"* reasons¹⁹, *"that they owed to themselves, that oblige myself to give myself entirely to Him. But instead of that, she adds, I am very unfaithful. I regret a thousand things that serve only to separate me from Him: friends who do not know Him*

¹⁴ MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot, 22 March 1838, n°25

¹⁵ MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot, 13 mai 1838, n°36

¹⁶ MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot, 29 September 1838, n°45

¹⁷ MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot, 3 November 1837, n°9

¹⁸ MARIE EUGENIE, Notes intimes n°154/05

¹⁹ The beginning of the letter is missing and it is impossible to know what the question is

and who keep me from serving Him, all the ease and commodities of life which unceasingly bring me back to myself and make me lose a lot of time."²⁰

In 1838, she writes with much lucidity: *"My love for pleasure, for absolute freedom of mind was so great that I needed great graces and even a chain of marvelous circumstances that began after the death of my mother, perhaps even after the bankruptcy, to lead me to the two vows Our Lord made me make and which He will give me the strength to keep faithfully all my life, I hope."*²¹

We could multiply the citations which show that the young girl is constantly struggling against the attraction of the worldly life that her family proposes with the feeling that that these could make her hesitate. It is a struggle that is engaging as seen in this other letter: *"This time, I found myself very courageous when your letter arrived, because I was resisting, with a stiffness of which they knew me, the nights of dances that they wanted to multiply for me and which I greatly desired"*.²²

She sometimes reproached Fr. Combalot of being too harsh with her on that point.

b) The opposition of her family

In her correspondence, Anne Eugenie evokes several times her difficulty of losing the affection of her family, as in this letter of 18 August 1837: *"It is not for myself that I am afraid. Everything is the same to me. ... my reputation... would cost me less to lose than their affection."*²³ There again we can multiply the examples of this suffering which does not, however, remove anything from her resolve: *"See what you want me to say, to do. I will do it point by point."*²⁴

What seems to cost her a lot is to see her own (family) suffer. She even asks herself if she should not put first her love for them and the care she could give them: *"Should I not sacrifice my desires, my hopes, my vocation even to make sure that my brother, who is still young, and who could receive new impressions, a more agreeable family life? – Should I not sacrifice even the joy of seeing you, of serving a useful work, and the hope of entering in an order more to my tastes, under your direction, and which, at my age, I myself would easily adapt to its customs? If at my father's last hour, there are, only people by him who will not think at all of procuring for him the help of the Church, and that he dies without the Sacraments, would I not experience much remorse on my conscience? And despite all your promises, as a religious occupied perhaps at the other end of France, will my family ask me on time to be by him? And shall I myself guess the moment? - I am still his daughter and nothing can stop that. My father hardly sees anyone. He would be very embarrassed to take me to social gatherings having isolated himself from them since his difficulties. and after having served and cared for him, if I survive him, and he is nearly 60 years old, devote myself to God?"*²⁵

As usual, obedience being her recourse when she does not see clearly, she asks Fr. Combalot what she should do and he having answered that she should resolutely enter the convent, she responds,

²⁰ MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot, June 1837, n°1

²¹ MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot, 21 September 1838, n°42

²² MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot, 18 August 1837, n°4

²³ MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot, 18 August 1837, n°4

²⁴ MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot, 18 August 1837, n°4

²⁵ MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot, 1^{er} October 1837, n°8

at the moment of going to the Benedictines: *"I feel like I am taking a decisive step. My family leaves me free, while blaming me, but the truth is, they are hoping to see me soon enough disgusted with my projects."*²⁶

However when the time came to join the convent, she feels resistance: *"When I wrote that I was carefree regarding your decisions, and ready to enter here or not to enter, following your judgment, I believed it with the best faith in the world and I congratulated myself that God gave me back two things one as easy as the other. But when it was time to act, it was no longer the same. I had a heavy heart, was greatly troubled, and another word would have perhaps kept me away. Finally, God did not allow this word to be said, and I could catch my breath again since I left those whose reproaches or sadness I feared much more than absence."*²⁷

The place of her family will be important to the end:

*"Today I received a great encouragement, my tutor and the cousin with whom I was staying They have not yet forgotten me, alas, my God, it will come, and whatever Mrs. C. says that one should not regret such transient affections, human nature is weak, and when she had given everything that was possible to her, it was nevertheless worth something."*²⁸ Or... later... *"If I pretend the need of taking distance to test my vocation, I am told that if I am not decided, I am crazy and absurd, and worse, to sacrifice my friends to being in a cloud - and if I say I am, I am asked the Order I have chosen and then I am forced to silence."*²⁹

To her father who resists, she will always, in any case, put in opposition her total freedom, claiming that Fr. Combalot has no excessive influence on her. *"I have always assured myself that you had not pushed me to the decision I took, and that you had told me about all the sacrifices involved. If in this I have lied, God will forgive me, for it is at least certain to me that it is not your influence that made me decide. Today, I am free, free as the wind before men and before God, because I can, without failing in my vow, renounce to continue. But if I like to talk about my freedom, it is to put all into your hands."*³⁰

c) Her personal weakness and the strength of the community

Conscious of her contradictions, Eugenie never saw herself stronger than she was... and she bore with sorrow, for example, the responsibility of being Superior, having always doubted her skills to exercise this charge: *"I will surely never be good at being a Superior, though you would hope I would."*³¹

And at another moment: *"We will talk about your new acquisition, of my daughter, as you say; but I hope you did not tell her that. She can only be my Sister, until you are assured that you cannot find anyone better than me for this corner of your building, and until you know if I am as good at the work as you hope. It is not so much my inability as the flaws of my character that make me doubt it, my negligence, my lack of the spirit of order, of the rule."*³²

²⁶ MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot, 3 November 1837, n°9

²⁷ MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot, 14 November 1837, n°10

²⁸ MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot, 18 November 1837, n°12

²⁹ MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot, 21 March 1838, n°24

³⁰ MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot, 18 August 1837, n°4

³¹ MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot, 18 August 1837, n°4

³² MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot, 30 December 1837, n°15

This feeling of weakness led Marie Eugenie to often ask for the help of Fr. Combalot: *"I need you very much for my spiritual advancement"*³³, *"Father, you must help me, I cannot do anything by myself."* She is aware of not being able to advance alone.³⁴

It is undoubtedly this feeling that makes her repeatedly mention the moment when she will have Sisters. In an undated fragment of a letter, Eugenie writes: *"What dries me up now is not having an outpouring of fraternal charity. Also, it is pleasant for me to think that one day, with you, my beloved Father, and with the Sisters that you will give me, I will be able to speak of the mercies of the splendors, the wonders that delight the intellect and the mercies that touch the heart. When I am sad, shaken, I will find refuge in their Christian love, in their strength and in their charity, and in your heart, where I will always dare to seek refuge. And in my turn, when I shall be rich, my treasures will not be for me alone, but my Sisters in Jesus Christ will rejoice with me."*³⁵

A very present desire to live in community and to lean on others...

At another time, evoking Josephine de Commarque (Mother Marie Therese), that Fr. Combalot had "recruited" in Dordogne: *"Since I last wrote to you, my dear Father, I have received many letters, yours first, and then the replies of Miss de Commarque and of Fr. Sibour. I read them all, so I may talk to you about them. Our Josephine is very deeply attached to you and to your work. She writes to me with much warmth and with this fervor of faith and love that always seem to fill her. I love her very much, this dear Sister. What I did not bring to you at once, is the virtue she promises us, and of which she speaks as a small thing: perfect obedience? – Regarding the rest, she says that she knows nothing, that she is worthless, but she does not however hesitate to believe that God calls her."*³⁶

It is important to note that, from the outset, the community is present in the thought of Marie Eugenie, as an essential condition of the work to come, as a richness which she cannot do without.

It is interesting, from the point of view of our educational mission, to see that Marie Eugenie's vocational path leaves room for doubt. In this sense, she is close to many young people whom we accompany – and to ourselves - the many attractions of our society, the family resistances, the personal feeling of our inadequacies, do not spare us either... We can rely on her experience to accompany the young or the adults whose journey is entrusted to us today. It joins the path of our hesitant quests, our winding paths and reminds us that, whatever the obstacles we encounter, we are responsible for our existence.

3. Leaning on God and on Christ

a) The "long work of God's hand"

In a letter dated 21 September 1838, Anne Eugenie traces her journey and rereads it in faith: *"because since my First Communion, made with fervor and good faith, although a little lightly, I think that the grace of Jesus Christ has kept me, despite my being so distant, and that I have hardly*

³³ MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot, 6 December 1837, n°13

³⁴ MARIE EUGENIE, Lettre à l'Abbé Combalot, 19 septembre 1837, n°7

³⁵ MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot, undated fragment, n°23

³⁶ MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot, 10 November 1838, n°52

called upon it by prayer and merited by works. Since that time, it seems to me that I have always had a background of faith, of attention and respect in the few acts of religion that I practiced and a great desire to live better as a Christian. All this, it is true, with great ignorance, so much lightness and independence that I might have lost that desire, if I had understood how far it went."³⁷

In the same letter, she adds, *"I am forced to confess, when I think about it, that everything was possible if I had been abandoned to my first tendencies at the ages of ten or eleven." (...)* It is to that point that I have to go back to find the chain of the mysterious acts of Providence..."

And she is able to reread without bitterness the unfortunate episodes of her life: *"I noticed these days, in my meditation, that God had given me this great grace to always take away from me what I was attached to in the big as in the little things. This is what made me supple and flexible. Again it was only on the outside, and it was to you, my dear Father, that I had to submit this virtual independence where I completely took refuge. If I consider this long work of the hand of God on a rebellious soul, do I not find an amazing quality of love as well as a kind of proof of His designs in me?..."*

Eugenie builds everything on her trust in God which she says is even perhaps too big! She considers Him as a friend, listening to all her thoughts... It is before Him that she can present her feelings in a sincere way.

She recognizes what He has already done: *"God is too good to me, He has spoiled me, He has given me more than I would have ever dared to ask."*³⁸ And she asks Him for what she needs: *"For me, as soon as I am in the convent, I will ask Our Lord for perseverance and calm..."*³⁹ *"I ask God for the grace to never allow my constant will to fail in a work that can only be difficult."*⁴⁰

She is sure that God will support her in everything - *"I must have all the more confidence, that as I separate myself more from my natural support, God will support me, as I have always felt it so far"*⁴¹ - and it is the Father whom she recognizes in Him: *"It seems that I have experienced a kind of joy to enter here in the House of my God which already seems to me more than any other the Father's house."*⁴² Thus her desire to live in him grows ever more: *"I would now like the fruit of our efforts to be the interior spirit, the attention to the presence of God, the habit of the intimate prayer of a soul attentive to the grace of the Holy Spirit that dwells in us."*⁴³

She precedes us on this path of learning confidence and abandonment. At her school, we can also learn to enter into this act of faith.

b) Christ... "It is Him alone that I want to love"...

³⁷ MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot, 21 September 1838, n°42

³⁸ MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot, 8 February 1838, n°16

³⁹ MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot, 3 November 1837, n°9

⁴⁰ MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot, 29 March 1838, n°26

⁴¹ MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot, 7 May 1838, n°33

⁴² MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot, 15 August 1838, n°40

⁴³ MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot, 8 November 1838, n°51

At the same time, the love of Christ marks the "vocational journey" of Marie Eugenie. It marks her spiritual experience and consequently that of the Congregation. We know it. She was first attracted by the humanity of Christ, which remains in the spirit of the Assumption through its rootedness in the Mystery of the Incarnation.

In the letters of Marie Eugenie to Fr. Combalot, from 1837 to 1839, and her Intimate Note (Notes Intimes) of that same time, she speaks much of God. But when she speaks of Christ, these are always key moments, moments of passage. Very soon after her conversion, we find in her Intimate Notes (Notes Intimes): *"But as for what is of Jesus Christ beyond these things, I would still desire something, my senses would like to see, touch, revere His holy Humanity, my to kiss His feet and to shed tears on His wounds."*⁴⁴

In Marie Eugenie we perceive the desire for a perceptible/sentient connection with Christ, with the crucified Christ. The abasement of Christ, His humility, touches her deeply. In the text quoted above we find: *"In coming to us by an ineffable abasement, He sanctified our materiality, it is also ignited by holy desires which can only be satiated by an equally sensitive union as the heart desires it to be intimate and the mind spiritual."* Note, however, that this attachment to Christ will not always be sentient. The spiritual life of Marie Eugenie will also go through deserts.

Very early on, she differentiates attachment to Christ, which can fill us, and attachment to other men and women which is always incomplete, unfinished, inconsistent (they often feel weak in front of this attractiveness of the world). Having done this, she feels called to being united with Christ at every moment: *"Turn towards God who loves you by knowing you, who loves you despite all your miseries to the point of offering Himself and dying for you and ordering you to unite yourself to Him. He only asks for your love. You pretend to have a loving heart, fill it then with this love, dedicate it, and may it not be separated even for a moment from Jesus Christ."*⁴⁵ She aspires towards a permanent union.

In the meanderings of her questions, when she hesitates between staying in the world and entering into this project of God, when she is afraid to hurt her father, it is the love of Christ that is stronger... *"When I think of the pain that I cause mortal men (her family),⁴⁶ I ought to rather think of the pain I give to Jesus Christ if I leave Him. For Jesus Christ loves me, He calls me, He draws me by the sweet odor of his perfumes."*⁴⁷

The love of Christ is what she comes back to when she is tempted by other paths. Despite all the temptations she experiences, that of entering into the habits of the world, in its consolations, that of not feeling being an "educator" and seeing herself more as a Little Sister of the Poor⁴⁸, her spiritual experience will lead her to see that everything is possible, despite her doubts, if she gives herself to Christ: *"And yet this is so, because if my humble sacrifice is complete, God will bless it, like their grandiose thoughts. Perhaps I will do great deeds, perhaps I shall have saints for children, and perhaps they in their turn will have great influences of salvation. All this is possible, if I only know how to die quite perfectly to myself so that Jesus Christ may live*

⁴⁴ MARIE EUGENIE, Notes Intimes n°153/01, Paris, April 1837

⁴⁵ Ibidem

⁴⁶ In the summer 1837, Marie Eugenie goes to Lorraine...

⁴⁷ MARIE EUGENIE, Notes Intimes n°154/04

⁴⁸ Cf. MARIE EUGENIE, Notes Intimes n°154/05

therein, the God who deigns to descend there. Then He will put there what he deigns to reward, what wonders of love! Before that, one only has to abase oneself and adore."

To the point of saying... "*(...) O My Jesus, it is your holy madness that saves me — one must be foolish for God. That I may only have more merit, a better will, a better intention. O My Jesus, I want to be crazy for you, I want to do everything for you. Blessed are you because you have been so foolish for me, and that you have come to become a scourge to save me, bread to feed me and to listen to me.*"⁴⁹

Just before the foundation, as she prepares to tell her father the next day that she will leave for Savoy, to the Visitations of the Côte Saint Andre, she writes to Fr. Combalot:
*"Christ is the Spouse of my soul. It is Him alone that I want to love. I would like to learn to please Him and to try to render my soul worthy of His divine love. Do I then need to always live in contact with these things and those people of the world that a natural attraction and the sad customs of my past life render still more dangerous for me?"*⁵⁰

And a few months later, when the date of the foundation approaches, she explains how the love of Christ allowed her to overcome her resistance to found the work that Fr. Combalot was talking about. It was Christ who seduced her: *"For me, my dear Father, I felt that the love of Jesus dominated everything in my soul and that this was what attached me to a work that I still felt willing to pursue without any charm of trust or affection. I felt terrible struggles at the thought of those whom I love in the world. Just remembering them makes me experience so much strain, but I believe however that Jesus carries it, and I like to be able to tell myself that it is Him alone. Perhaps finally, I have learned not to demand too much, since the best soul for me, the one I love most sincerely and deeply, also seemed to me to fail for a moment."*⁵¹

The Christ she reproaches herself of not loving enough – *"Because, I don't love the Cross of J.C. enough to have all the peace that His love gives"*⁵² - is also the one she wants to give and attach herself to: *"I entrust my heart into the hands of Jesus Christ and I calmly trust that He will make it better. I feel so happy, that I believe I truly have love, and that I reassure myself of all my imperfections. What dries me now is not having an outpouring of fraternal charity"*⁵³ ...

Thus, she offers herself at the moment of her arrival at the Visitation: *"I offered myself to God as a true novice, begging Him to no longer allow that there be in me anything that is not from Him and for Him, to give me the heart of a true spouse of Jesus Christ."*⁵⁴

And it is in her love that she draws the strength to follow the path of her vocation: *"It seems that my love for Jesus Christ has been enlarged to facilitate the execution of the promises of which I have made you a guardian." At the same time, I have more freedom of spirit than I have perhaps ever had. I no longer want to torment my soul, nor plunge it into confusion, but I want to make it walk calmly in the path God traces for it, though your lips.*"⁵⁵ And again: *"I give all of myself to*

⁴⁹ MARIE EUGENIE, Notes Intimes n°154/13, [Petit billet, un peu plus petit que le précédent, écrit recto verso.]

⁵⁰ MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot, 1st May 1838, n°30

⁵¹ MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot, 28 February 1839, n°79

⁵² MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot, June 1837, n°1

⁵³ MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot, fragment undated, n°23

⁵⁴ MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot, 15 August 1838, n°40

⁵⁵ MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot, 18 December 1838, n°55

the Beloved. I ask Him forgiveness with all my soul, then, at your word, I will go, without any other disposition, throw myself with full confidence in His arms (...) There I renewed my vows, my resolutions. I asked Our Lord to transform me into Him. I really threw myself on the adorable bosom where the blessed disciple had rested."⁵⁶ He is finally the source of her desire to live with God: "Let us live all for God but joyfully and sincerely."⁵⁷ One can imagine that this first attachment to Christ calls Marie Eugenie to desire with all her heart His presence in her, the extension of His Kingdom in her and in the world. He is the fertile ground, the base of this desire ... Christ is like the source from which springs her way of being even in the concrete choices of her life.

This same desire of Christ will pursue her after the foundation: "*Quasimodo April 26, 1840. I strongly felt in this retreat that I do not contain myself enough in the peace and presence of Jesus Christ (...) Keep my joy through inner fidelity to Jesus Christ and confidence in him. To think more often of the consecration that makes me like one of His sacred vessels, totally anointed by the Holy Spirit of which I had received with such a great impression on this day: to better enjoy, better appreciate the great treasure that I have in Jesus Christ who calls me to be all His. To make myself faithful to this vocation which draws me to remain always at His feet to adore Him, love Him, serve Him, thank Him.*"⁵⁸

Later, in 1862, we find her speaking of Jesus Christ as the "end" and the "means" of the spiritual life: "*Jesus Christ is my way as well as my life. He has given me all that He is and there is no time when he does not want me to use Him, His merits, His[642] virtues, His thoughts, His prayers, His strength, His heart, to fill in for my infinite weaknesses and failures.*" A bit further: "*Go to Jesus Christ through Jesus Christ; that should be my life so that it may be as God wants.*"⁵⁹

In rereading this path of Marie Eugenie, we discover that by the strength and the power of attention and contemplation, we come closer to Christ. He gradually becomes the means, the one we look at and fill ourselves with, and the end, Him to whom we come closer and closer, the one towards whom we walk.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we note that the path of Marie Eugenie, with its meanderings, echoes many paths of our times. She can be close to us. She can be close to the young in their hesitations, their questions, until the moment of a definitive choice.

One can say that through the experience she had of God – Providence and that of her desire to love Christ, Marie Eugenie passes through all the stages of the spiritual life:

- Experience of being led, of contemplating in her the work of the Other
- Experience of freedom, of choice... she said "yes" to what was going on in her, to the work of someone else

⁵⁶ MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot, 27 December 1838, n°58

⁵⁷ MARIE EUGENIE, Letter to Fr. Combalot, 18 December 1838, n°55

⁵⁸ MARIE EUGENIE, Notes Intimes 156/01 [Suite du cahier]

⁵⁹ MARIE EUGENIE, Notes Intimes 224/01, Retreat in June 1862

- Experience of doubt and of uncertainties, in a day to day path, rooted in the present
- She experienced that He to Whom she said “yes” to is with her in all the aspects of her life... He gives meaning even to things she did not see the meaning of.
- Finally, it is an experience to which she put words. What is striking with her is that she can talk about this experience... there are moments in which she speaks of her experience as she rereads this years later, but she is also capable of naming the experience when she actually undergoes it. It is perhaps a sign of a settled/balanced spiritual life, able to put words to it, or in any case, to be able to share it.

Sister Véronique Thiébaud, RA