

RELIGIEUSES DE L'ASSOMPTION
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10 March 2017
Feast of Saint Marie Eugenie

«When a person has passed entirely into the will of God, there is nothing left to desire; God possesses her and she possesses God. »

Our vocation as an encounter

Dear brothers and sisters,

This year the feast of St. Marie Eugenie has a jubilee look, because we cannot speak of the Bicentenary of her birth on earth without linking it to her birth in heaven, or with the 10th anniversary of her canonisation which we will be celebrating in a special way on this coming 3rd June. When God gives, it is always abundantly. In contemplating the route taken by Marie Eugenie, whom we understand a little bit better each time, a feeling of thanksgiving arises in us for this woman whom the Lord has given us as Mother and eldest Sister of the whole Assumption.

The announcement of the Bicentenary on the feast of the Foundation in 2015¹ set us decisively on our way. Then we invited you to celebrate our own vocations, first as a gift, then in 2016 as a pathway before receiving them as encounter in this final stage. So it is under the aspect of an encounter that I would like to invite us to reflect and then to meditate during the time which remains before the closing celebration of the Bicentenary, which is addressed primarily to the young people who will gather from all over the world.

Born into life thanks to the encounter of our parents, we discovered our vocation through encounters with witnesses who encouraged our desire to belong to God, and in our turn to live our faith to become witnesses to his love. Our very lives and days are punctuated by encounters which make us discover the joys and the difficulties of our option for God. The path of humanity, that of Marie Eugenie and our own, is a history of more or less successful encounters through which we learn life.

1. A life woven from encounters

Each of our lives bears the mark of the education we have received from our parents and relatives, with its graces and gaps. In the best of what Marie Eugenie received, in what she received from her childhood, we can already trace some characteristics of what was going to be the Assumption. It is a gift which we are going to celebrate yet again in giving thanks for her parents, for the education which she enjoyed, with its successes and failures. The shortcomings she experienced did not prevent her living her life, growing in humanity and daring to be holy. It is a sign that even our wounds and our weaknesses are breaches where grace can pass. Saint Marie Eugenie accepted her personality, with its lights and shadows, in great lucidity. She could look at herself truthfully, let herself be helped and accompanied on the path towards the realisation of her vocation. How many people, in our different

¹Message of the General Council 30th April, 2015

countries, have discovered themselves in her experience, and drawn from it resources to live their own lives.

Apart from her family life, where Marie Eugenie lived so many human encounters, the first foundational encounter of her vocation took place with the Lord, at the time of her First Communion, at Christmas 1829. She had an experience of the greatness of God and of his love for her, a prevenient love which supported her throughout her life.

As an adolescent, while she was asking herself questions about the meaning of existence, she finds in the words of the Père Lacordaire a dazzling light which opens the door to a deep, personal relationship with Christ. Then comes the Abbé Combalot – a gift of God² - with the mission of setting up the Congregation, which he very quickly put into the hands of Marie Eugenie and the first companions whom he had found for her. It was the Abbé Combalot himself who introduced her to his friend the Père d'Alzon, upon whom she will rely later, after the rupture with the founding Father. This particular encounter, one of those which marked her most, will remain with her right up to the death of Fr. D'Alzon in 1880.

The experience of Marie Eugenie with the Benedictines of the Blessed Sacrament, then her stay with the Visitation of the Côte Saint André, are so many moments which left their mark on the young Foundress; they each had a real impact on the life of the Assumption. The Congregation was also able to begin thanks to the arrival of other sisters, among whom was Mother Therese Emmanuel whom we are celebrating jointly with Marie Eugenie this year. Through this celebration, we want to let ourselves be inspired by the sisterly journey which united them down through the years and was strengthened in friendship, thanks to their persevering apprenticeship of love. There was a real friendship among these first sisters, as is witnessed by these words of Marie Eugenie to Sister Marie Augustine: *“Dear daughter, it is your friendship which tears all this from me³, I feel that you are concerned about me and I happily let myself rejoice in this. If you only knew how much all these expressions of your friendship and of the friendship of our sisters touch me profoundly here”*. So from Sister Marie Augustine to all those who came to the Assumption after her, a series of encounters have enriched the life of Marie Eugenie, sustaining her in her long mission as Foundress of the Assumption. This short and selective reminder of our history is an invitation to take into our thanksgiving the great network of relationships which made of Marie Eugenie the woman whom we love, admire and celebrate on this day.⁴

Her life witnesses to her great capacity for relationships with all her sisters and with people of the world outside. She brought the richness of her being to all and knew how to let herself to be enlightened by them.

2 Each encounter is a light...

All day long, the Lord gives us the grace of coming into contact with a multitude of people. With some the relationship is good, but with others we can have the temptation to hide from them. In our life circles, we are called to create bonds, however minimal, with everybody, as we are called to do also with the most distant, whom we only meet occasionally. Just relationships towards people, Pope Francis tells us, *“consist in recognising their value with gratitude... Because every person is a gift, our neighbour as much as the poor person we do not know.”*⁵ Every encounter lived in truth can prove to be a light for us. We always learn in approaching others, in listening to them and their school.

² She writes to him, 4th October 1838: “Also, you have certainly been given to me as a gift of God...”

³ MME, Letter to Marie Augustine, 6 July 1843

⁴ I invite you this year to mark also the 3rd May, the birthday of Mother Therese Emmanuel.

⁵ Pope Francis, Message for Lent 2017

Encounters are the places where God speaks to us, revealing an aspect of his being, a feature of his face.

Real encounters, those that build up, demand a going out from self to move towards the other, a quality of presence and a readiness to let oneself be dispossessed of our “knowledge”, of our received ideas about people. The other needs me to welcome them in the today of who they are, being ready to be surprised, and confused, like Nicodemus who *“let Jesus enlighten the night of his knowledge”* (Cf. Jn.3:1-21).

Discovering and recognising the identity of the other can also lead us to recognise something of ourselves in them. For our questions about others often correspond to the questions we have about ourselves. Like Mother Marie Eugenie and Mother Therese Emmanuel, we need another, a witness, to reveal us to ourselves, to lead us to God and to others.

Above all, the Word of God invites us to relationship, so indispensable to the encounter. A life which is not nourished by true, solid, deep and lasting relationships, will not hold together. For, as Ben Sirach the Sage says, *“...of those who are friendly with you there are many, but let your counsellors be one in a thousand. ... A faithful friend is an assured refuge, the person who finds one has found a treasure...”* (Sirach 6: 5-17). Such was the relationship between our two Mothers.

The Pope, for his part, urges us insistently to *“the culture of encounter”* which consists in going out to meet the world of today, the world of our brothers and sisters, to whom Christ is sending us. The relationship with others enriches us, like the encounter with our Creator which leads us to the light and to the growth of our humanity.

3. At the source of our vocation: the encounter

Our God, the Trinitarian God, is relationship. In his Son, he came to meet us to reconcile us with himself and to connect us with one another. And when he sends us, it is so that we may live fraternity. But to meet, we often have to seek, to start out on the way, a way that can be, almost by surprise, that of our vocation. In the Gospel, when John the Baptist points out Jesus as the Lamb of God to Andrew and his companion, they immediately set out in pursuit of him. And, turning round, Jesus asks them: *“What are you looking for?”* (Jn. 1:38) This conversation takes place on a path. It inaugurates the encounter between Jesus and his first disciples in a personal contact, the beginning of a relationship that binds them forever to their Lord... and which binds all of them around this same Lord. But they had to choose and re-choose to follow him wholeheartedly, in a personal and free commitment. When, thanks to the witness or the word of another person, we have followed him, one day Christ will put us face to face with our choice to follow him: *“But for you, who am I?”* (Mt. 16:13) *“Do you also want to leave?”* (cf. Jn. 6:60-69). When we lose confidence, Pope Francis advises us to ask ourselves: *“From when does my encounter with Jesus Christ date? This meeting which filled me with joy? And come back to that encounter, come back to the first Galilee of our meeting... Go back there! Meet the Lord again and go forward on this road which is so beautiful, on which he must increase and we diminish.”*⁶ This is where we can recharge our batteries, get back on track and continue on the way with him.

So Jesus allows himself to be found and encountered, but he is always inviting us to go further: *“Let us go elsewhere, into the surrounding villages, so that I can proclaim the good news there also: for that is what I came out to do.”* (Mk. 1:29-39) He is always sending us again, and this movement towards the other is like an expression of our vocation. At the same time, he is opening for us, by his deeds, a school of encounter.

⁶ Pope Francis, 7 February 2014

Indeed, Jesus met different types of people, in the society and the religious world of his time: the Pharisees who believed that they were just; and the Publicans who knew that they were sinners; men and women of all sorts; the sick and the healthy... He welcomed them all without exception, recognising in them the children of the Father. He let himself be affected, upset, amazed and shaped by all these human encounters. He lived through compassion and showed tenderness, he knew how to speak the right word in every situation. He knew how to put himself into the shoes of everyone, to understand their suffering, their quest, their supplication, their desire... In the encounter with Him through his Word, we can also learn from him the proper way to go to others in the banality of life just as much as in the unpredictable or difficult situations which are presented to us. Through everything, he educates us for the mission.

Our vocation sets us on the way towards others. In going out to meet them we learn to know ourselves better and to become truly the person we ought to be. This is how God traces out the road with us and leads us, as he did our two Mothers. He united them forever in the friendship which grew between them in the light of daily life and of the significant events of the life of the Congregation.

Each encounter is an invitation to continue on the path with the other. In Assumption Together, we are moving forward in communion with the same values and the same passion, transmitted by our Mothers from generation to generation. We mutually enrich and strengthen each other in our specific vocations. The celebration of the Bicentennial is a great opportunity to go deeper into our heritage, by way of the experience of our two pioneers.

The CGP in Madrid will be the occasion for the Province of Spain to meet as Assumption Together and to celebrate the Bicentenary as a Province. It is there that as a Council, we will keep the feast of 10th March before beginning our work on the 12th March. The same joyful outburst will resonate in many places. May all these strong family moments and new encounters strengthen us in the faith and strengthen the bonds of fraternity and communion among us!

May we cherish the gratitude for our different vocations and our common call to the Assumption; return to it as a source, so as never to lose sight of him who is our guide and our light, he who gives fecundity to our lives!

In communion with the General Council, I wish you a happy feast and a joyous advance towards the closing of the Jubilee of the birth Mother Marie Eugenie and Mother Therese Emmanuel!

With my sisterly affection,

Sr Martine Tapsoba
Superior General

Paris, 3rd March 2017