

FUNDAMENTAL VALUES OF THE ASSUMPTION

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I need to speak

- 1) of the fundamental Assumption values
- 2) how these were lived in the past
- 3) then, open up a way to live these values today
- 4) give a methodology... in 30 minutes!

I would like to start with a proposal which will be a key for our work and a **method** at the same time. I shall go far – the world of M. Marie Eugenie and the Assumption, her vision of the universe and her way of situating herself in it were very different from our vision of the world and our way of living today. I think, therefore, that we need to **think first** of the world today, of our universe, of our way of situating ourselves in the universe and in society as well as the values of our times. What are the values of a young generous and ardent Catholic of the 21st century?

Then we can look for the **connection between these values and those in our Assumption tradition.**

I think that it is necessary to find the connection in the following sense:

- 1) what is the same today and yesterday
- 2) what we should not lose of the past but which seem not have connection with actual values
- 3) what of the contemporary values and expressions needs to be incorporated in our tradition in order to be truly faithful

Then, we need to look for new ways of formation to these values.

Let us be concrete. Now I speak about concrete young people in the United States and Europe, about the affluent bourgeoisie here and there, whose lifestyle is influenced by our countries. You need to talk about young people in your countries and your cultures.

The young people that I know do not live beyond the present as did our ancestors. They live in the present moment, in the immediate present. They do not think much about heaven (or about the final judgment, or about hell) or about long-term commitments. It costs them to imagine what is not visible and tangible, as well as what is far or in the future. Their language, concepts, vision of the world is cut into two: material/spiritual, body/soul, earth/heaven; even the interior and exterior are almost unknown to them. Today, they are capable of radical and unlimited giving. The duration is another question.

Like young people of all times, they are idealists and like to take up the great causes. The great causes of today are not the salvation of souls, conversions and the extension of God's reign through the Church. The spiritual world into which M. Marie Eugenie entered at her conversion no longer exists.¹ They do not seek God in the private domain, but outside – in the world, in social structures, in others. They are sensitive to the great causes of humanity and understand that these are causes of Christ: the works of mercy. In the poor, they do not see a soul but see a child, a man or a woman. As their universe is vast and present through mass media, through their

¹ There exists a spiritual world that includes aromas, yoga and other practices, angels, self-help books, New Age

possibilities to travel, through the achievements of science and technology, they are also concerned about hunger in the world, about peace, about the conservation of the resources of our planet. In our countries, authority is suspicious and the experience of parents has nothing to do with theirs. Their parents' generation, above all in the world of ideas and education, is revisionist and iconoclast. There is nothing sacred in it. What they did in the past, what they thought, taught, valued...is false. Individual liberty is of supreme value, and the more fragile the ego, the more it has to be defended. They recognize a desire for the spiritual but they do not think of finding it in the traditional and institutionalized Churches. Their religious instruction is minimal and those who have received it remember very little. They do not consider it to be of great importance. What counts is the heart. One has to love one's neighbor. There is a totally other group in the Church who are firmly attached to the past.

Values for these young people are: giving oneself for causes, authenticity, dependability (to be counted on), fidelity in friendship. They lack very much the basic education which was once provided in the family -- neatness, order, respect for the space of the other, proper bearing and good manners.

I chose the following **values proper to the Assumption** to which we want to give a particular attention in formation:

- 1) **faith and adoration**
- 2) **freedom of spirit**
- 3) **humility and obedience**
- 4) **goodness and straightforwardness**
- 5) **community and joy**

Values is a word that can cover all kinds of realities: virtues, attitudes, integrating elements of our life, even things...

There are other values that Marie Eugenie proposed to us as important to the Assumption. There are values of religious life and particular aspects of the Assumption that she underlined -- big and small --: obedience or conformity to the will of God for her came first, it seems to me; all the virtues of the Chapters on the Spirit of the Assumption (1878) are treated in the context of our religious life. Prayer, liturgy are some values. The weight of the cross stopped me for a while.

Anyway, I made a choice with the following reasons:

We find the triad in the Introduction to the Rule of Life: **faith, freedom of spirit, zeal** that come from a letter of M.M.E. and that we consider fundamental.

Adoration takes second place in the Chapters on the Spirit of the Assumption. In my opinion, it is an attitude that gives weight to the whole of our life and I cannot but mention it. I shall come back to it.

In the first Constitutions and in the Rule of Life today, there is a chapter on **humility**, something that was not and is not common in other Rules of Life. In the chapters on the spirit of the Assumption of 1878, there is a chapter on faith (given first place) and the chapters on humility and on obedience which were indeed very particular for her. For M.M.E., obedience is the foundation of her own spirituality of religious life. Furthermore, I think that for **humility and obedience**, a very personalized formation entirely adapted to the individual, is necessary, a real spiritual direction.

When she speaks of natural virtues, Marie Eugenie declares that one cannot belong to the Assumption without being **kind and straightforward**.

Community is a value about which she did not speak but came by itself during the time of M.M.E; it has always been important for us and today it distinguishes us among the majority of active congregations. It is a characteristic of our religious life that is noticed by our friends, and today it is an important value for many young people. **Joy** is the result of our life fully lived, but today we also realize that it is an attitude that we need to cultivate.

Some general remarks:

I would like to come back to the enormous change in our modern context.

*We need to point out a very significant slip in contemporary vocabulary and language. In my youth, as in the time of Marie Eugenie, one spoke of **virtues** and rarely of **values**. I have already remarked about a very general aspect contained in the word *value*. We can say that *value* is in the order of ideas, of judgment. A *value* is judged by its price, utility and importance. In addition, a *value* is relative. What is of value for one person is not necessarily the same for another. The values of a society or a group can be counter-values or non-values for us; can be harmful for the human being. This change seems significant for me and can make formation*

difficult, need more explanations, more negotiations. Virtue is an acquired habit; it is generally judged as good; it is in the order of action, to some extent, written in the flesh.

What can we conclude for our study? Perhaps our contemporaries depend more on the intelligence, judgment of values than on acts of the will that follow the acquisition of a virtue. They admire a value but do not immediately think of living it, neither of the price of living it nor of the necessity of changing something in them. As counterpart, what one esteems, what one judges as of value attracts and one is further motivated to acquire it. Virtues have to be values for young people.

*Religious life puts forward the acquisition of virtues, the change or conversion in the person. Our young people are not really formed to make these efforts. Virtue is hardly found in their vocabulary. We need to hope that it is esteemed, that a given value will lead them to acquire it. If they do not understand the importance or the value, if they do not esteem the value that is asked of them, they are not capable of acquiring it. In the past it is said, "It is good; it has to be done." Such an attitude can no longer pass. It has to be loved or esteemed before being able to arrive at concrete results. We address the **desire more than the will**. (Very Augustinian)*

*In the past, religious life meant **a life of perfection**, an ideal of moral perfection. One made a lot of efforts and spoke about the spiritual combat. I don't think that this ideal of perfection attracts many, has a lot of meaning. But I believe that young people are ready to make great efforts to struggle. We need to know how to propose, to get into concrete and realistic objectives and take care of the motivations.*

Let us remember that the young of our times have less formation of the will and more of distractions. At home, one does not really care for putting things in order, for meals, for sleep. There are less rules for etiquette and self-mastery. Elsewhere, life is so dispersed and stressful that young people have difficulty to give importance to "details" of the moral life, to extra efforts that asceticism demands. They don't see things as good or bad in themselves, but see them in terms of the harm they can do to me or to others.²

² A **virtue**: a capacity to do good with a certain ease and in a habitual manner even before an adversity or in difficult situations. The key word is habit which demands practice, making efforts during a period of time in order to acquire it. It seems important to me that those who are in formation understand that there is work to do, that they have to make sustained efforts. It is like practicing the particular examen.

THE SPIRIT OF FAITH

The ideal for Marie Eugenie was to make faith the "atmosphere of the soul", such that the intelligence itself is "altered". The Ignatian expression "Seeing God in all things" seems to express her thought, but to my surprise, it does not appear in her writings. But I think that the Jesuits themselves discovered and gave importance to this Ignatian phrase quite late (50 years ago)³

Means and expressions: the practice of the "presence of God" learned from the Visitation Order; the Divine Office, the long hours of prayer in choir, all the prayers and the biblical and patristic readings of the liturgy; spiritual reading. All these words and ideas should nourish the faith by penetrating the heart and the intelligence.

Custody of the eyes, the absence of profane literature and rarely leaving the monastery fostered recollection which helped the person live in the presence of God. One lived inside the monastery, a small space with few distractions and one guarded the interior space from impressions that could come from the world outside. The importance of the cloister, the absence of distractions, the great silence... One found God inside through an intellectual effort and the imagination

One tried to form a habit of receiving all from God and not look for secondary causes.

To adore God in all, "elevate" one's thought, one's gaze towards God. To form oneself to speak to God, for God or of God.

All that put the accent on the intellectual aspect: "a great idea of God", fill one's intelligence with God, ideas of the faith.

As a researcher in Chemistry would have a scientific mentality, a religious would have a faith mentality (an altered intelligence).

To live this way implied a lot of renunciation: "empty oneself" of oneself. Marie Eugenie gave a lot of importance to interior mortification. (The sisters could not take on too many corporal penances because of the work of education, but Marie Eugenie did not put a limit to mortifications of the spirit – interior mortification.) Get rid of all that is neither of God nor for God. Instead of speaking in the spirit of the *nada* of St. John of the Cross, Marie Eugenie proposed the all of God.

Today the accent is on "Contemplation" of the presence and action of God in the world, in others – in all that is. A look that seeks God, that purifies.

ADORATION

I wouldn't know how to tell you how to form people for adoration. It is not the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament in the chapel which came first for M.M.E. It is an attitude that accompanies faith, which corresponds to the great idea of God that Marie Eugenie proposed to us. It is a quality and a degree of love.

With faith, adoration marks and distinguishes the élan of our life, its dynamics. For me, all the rest flow from that. This constellation – God, rights of God, adoration, spirit of faith – are all one and gives to our life the tone of absolute gift. It is what made Marie Eugenie say that our life

³ "Our faith illumined by love gives us the certitude of finding God in all things and him whom He has sent us..." 7/14/78

demands more virtue than anything else.⁴ It is the basis of our asceticism, of renunciation of good and legitimate possessions but which slackens the spirit.

FREEDOM OF SPIRIT

I see much less changes between the past and the present in this area. But a right understanding is perhaps more difficult.

First of all, freedom of spirit described a climate, an attitude in the Congregation as much as in the sisters. Superiors should recognize and esteem individual differences among persons: their characteristics, temperaments, talents and consequently, sisters did the same. In education, one had to take the children there where they were.

The sisters and the students were encouraged to be themselves, to show themselves as they were which demanded certain courage. Efforts to be made in order to acquire it as a habit were: not to dissimulate or hide behind the façade of good behavior, to live in the presence of God and to follow one's conscience instead of living in the eyes of other sisters, superiors or friends, not to conform to the opinion of others but to risk and accept the disapproval of others (very connected to straightforwardness that we shall see later), to make oneself known.

There was a presupposition that the person seeks what is good. And there was a call to live in this level. During the 19th century, a time of conformism, of conventions and models to imitate, numerous and strict moral rules, of Jansenism – it was not the normal way in the convent.

For Marie Eugenie as for St. Augustine, **freedom was for doing what is good**. "Our liberty, following the word of St. Augustine, is that which places itself in the light and the good and for which error and evil are hindrances", M.M.E. said. One sought the good and everyone knew and agreed on what was wrong and evil -- very little relativism, another world.

But this freedom to be oneself, to follow the bent of one's nature is certainly inscribed in contemporary culture. Furthermore, freedom is uniquely considered as a right, not a task. Personal liberty is sacred and knows few rules. For many, the actual idea of freedom is very deconstructing. It is difficult to accept rules, which in the long run help the person grow, strengthen and give oneself a backbone. To understand freedom, to liberate one's freedom are challenges and objectives to value. (Conformism was and always remains however a risk for a person in a group.) In short, to understand true freedom and to become free in the evangelical sense is an absolutely necessary task.

HUMILITY

The subtle foundation of the virtue of humility for M.M.E. is an attitude born of love: a sense of gratitude for being loved with a great love (as a peasant is loved by the king) and a desire to be like Him who chose humility and obedience as a royal road to the Kingdom. It is a virtue practiced by one whose heart is dilated by love; it is a virtue that expands the heart, a virtue that makes us happy and full of life, makes us fearless, full of energy. It is this virtue that Marie Eugenie stressed in her Chapter of 1878. "Penetrated by light (faith) and love, you should not want to keep the miseries of pride and self-love."

⁴ "What I will tell you may seem very strong; but I believe that this spirit, in whatever form we may take it, demands more virtue than anything else... The spirit of the Assumption needs great self-detachment; one must seek only God, desire only God and his service, seek only his law, his empire, seek only him in all others, him in our life, him in all our relationships. And for this, one must be strong, sincerely go beyond oneself..."

Thus it is the motivation or the source of the virtue (value) that was special to her. M.M.E. multiplies the describing words: simple, sincere, joyful, real and frank (in the following chapter, she adds deep and generous).

Self-love is its big obstacle. It shrinks and locks us up to ourselves.

Again, she invokes the authority of St. Augustine: the life of the "citizens of the holy city (the City of God) is love of God pushed to contempt of self."⁵

The principal work therefore is the effort to uproot self-love, the desire for praise, esteem and success, making oneself the center of the world.

The great means is the love of God: "Our heart giving itself wholeheartedly, receive Jesus Christ who gives us his humiliations as proofs of his love." Respond to this love through self-contempt and adoration. "We need to work at it all our life; without this we will never be humble."

The indicators are the positive effects: Joy and freedom, peace, intimacy with Our Lord. The whole Chapter of M.M.E. on humility is a call to love and a response to love. She does not give little means in the Chapter. The accent on the value of humility, its blessings on the person go with the modern meaning of values. Frankly speaking, I do not think that in the past we formed ourselves to humility according to M.M.E. It was more of the times, even in the other teachings of M.M.E. herself.

MEANS AND PRACTICES:

Accept humiliations. We need to meditate a lot on the love of Jesus, humiliated by love. Not to talk about ourselves, about our family, take the last place, not to excuse ourselves, make the "coulpes", not to do things for ourselves (this practice and many others flow from the practice of poverty and obedience), submit ourselves to the officers-in-charge, respect our elders.

In spite of the very positive attitude of M. Marie Eugenie, the proposed practices did not always help. One has to know the person in formation and adapt the means and practices for her situation. We have been formed more in all the practices of the time but we learned something useful for the spiritual life.

OBEDIENCE

Here is the great virtue of M.M.E. Because of love, she wanted to do the will, the desire of her God – and not her own (strong) will.

In the Chapter directly on Obedience, in the 1878 collection of Chapters on the spirit of the Assumption, we find a thought really belonging to another time, a past era; but not without its truth and its value. It goes in the same line as perfect service.

In this Chapter, as in the Chapter on humility, M.M.E. is again Augustinian and modern, putting the accent on desire, on attraction more than on prescription. Furthermore, she stresses the benefits of obedience rather than duties. This virtue embraces and sanctifies the whole life of a religious. Love is the motive; it makes us say to God, "I do not seek the perfection of **my** own mind." We have to renounce "our own concepts, our own particular ideas" on a particular assigned task "if we are not charged to propose or to think of the whole. To obey in this way is to

⁵ "To draw us to him, Jesus did not hesitate to show us that he loved us even to the point of despising himself."

Mary is "brought to heaven by an unequalled humility on earth." She is the humblest of all creatures. "God has regarded the lowliness of his servant, and for this has highly exalted her."

serve perfectly. We must not seek personal gain or success but try to accomplish all with disinterestedness (a very necessary virtue in the Assumption).

Marie Eugenie continues to speak of daily life, of little things of the rule and of life, "The perfection of ordinary activities is the trait of a person who serves perfectly."

Here, we are in a world that on one hand is largely ignored today, and on the other, no longer exists. Largely ignored: the obedience of a religious is actually a life devoted to the will of God, given to God in a way that we receive our work, that we take on the yoke of the rule and that we accept that others intervene in our decisions. And, like all who work under the orders of other people, we **serve** (carry out) a project as it is given to us; we obey an employer. We can and should do all as a service to God.

A world that no longer exists: The tiny sphere of the cloister in which religious life of the past developed, with always the same tasks and duties, everything foreseen and regulated – is no longer our world nor the place of our life and our work. In the world of the cloister and boarding school, of little rules, the expression of obedience was often paying attention to details that religious took as the will of God; our employers (in our work) were our own sisters. All tasks, all orders were the expressed "will" of God.

Modern theology no longer accepts this view. God **has a will**, which is universal salvation (the project of God) and we believe that he leaves us a lot of room in to participate in it in our own way. Neither we nor our superiors are sure what the will of God is. Does God have a hand in the details? (There are those who think yes, other theologians say no.) Does the vow of obedience have a role in discernment? In the end, yes.

But there are also psychological factors to consider: individual factors, the growth and maturity of the person, the attention one can give to a lot of details in a vast field of work, with a lot of unforeseen circumstances, etc. This Chapter can be completed by many others. Anyway, we need to take it with another Chapter of the same 1878 collection, *Abandonment and Conformity to the Will of God*. Curiously speaking, in this Chapter, which is one of the most beautiful writings of M.M.E. and in which she reveals, in my opinion, the fine depths of her soul, she does not use the word "obedience" but once in order to name the virtue. I do not think of cheating with her ideas or texts in treating them together under the term "obedience". The Chapter on conformity to the will of God and abandonment complete that of obedience and give it its foundations. One more time, the practice flows from love and the virtue produces peace, freedom and detachment. The Chapter gives a portrait of M.M.E. The expressions and practices are mainly interior attitudes.

STRAIGHTFORWARDNESS

Definition: To be sincere, say what you think and think what you say. Have the courage to go straight to persons concerned, do not look for intercessors, do things diplomatically and neither practice half-virtues nor flattery. Avoid looking for the "good moment" to ask permission...

Marie Eugenie goes farther and gives a theological bent to the virtue: we **go straight to God** in this way. In everything, we need to go straight to God. She adds a note of simplicity. This goes with what we said about adoration and the spirit of faith.

The value of **COMMUNITY**

In the past, community was a given. It was part of the structure of life, of the lifestyle. It consisted of the presence of all the sisters in the same place, at the same time and to do the same things. It was a place for practicing virtue: fraternal charity, humility, sanctifying oneself for others.

The means:

For this, we have several means: render service, do not do things for yourself (according to the Rule of St. Augustine, be present at the exercises). During recreation: do not discuss nor speak about yourself, your family; contribute to the conversation, recall the presence of God by a pious word.

Today, community is very dependent on each member...

JOY

We cannot find anything on joy in the past. But joy is the fruit of a life lived for God alone: faith, renunciation of all that is not for God or for the Kingdom. In the Rule of Life, the chapter on Joy points out decisions to be taken.

For today: refer to the Rule of Life.

In the formation to these values, I want to point out the importance of the following –

1. **Accompaniment:** take each young person there where she is and walk with her. We give the same formation by taking different means according to different personalities, maturity and individual needs.
2. A happy **community** that witness and help live (experience) these values.
3. The way you present these values, make them livable and render them **desirable**.
4. The responsibility of each person in formation for her own formation (help through dialogue, decisions, etc.) Give her the program of formation, show the stages, the expectations...