

RELIGIEUSES DE L'ASSOMPTION
Maison Generalice
17, rue de l'Assomption
75016 PARIS

31 July 1985

Very dear Sisters,

We are in the midst of the session on Education. I know you are expecting a letter, and indeed I have been preparing one for several months.

During the visits, sisters have commented that I speak often of the Kingdom. That has not surprised me really, but it has made me stop and think. The result is that today I want to write about the Kingdom, the central theme not only of Jesus' Gospel but also of our spirituality at the Assumption.

The Congregation was founded for the Kingdom: an inspiration of zeal was at its origin, an inspiration of zeal for the Kingdom of God. There are expressions hallowed both by time and by our hearts:

“My gaze is wholly on Jesus Christ and on the extension of his Reign.” (1)
“Extending the Kingdom of God in ourselves and in the world.”

Our first sisters used to make a fourth vow:

“... to extend by the whole life the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ in souls.” (2)

And after forty years' experience as foundress, Mere Marie Eugenie summed up our spirit in a Chapter given to the sisters: “Above all, Jesus Christ, King of eternity, living in souls and living in his Church, and the extension of his Kingdom in us and in others” (“The specific character of our Institute” – chapter 2/5/1884).

We will never give too much importance to the prayer that Christ gave his own: “**Thy Kingdom come**”. With “**God Alone**”, it is the motto of the congregation, and that of the congregations of the Assumption.

The Kingdom appears in every Chapter of our Rule of Life, at least twenty five times in all. It is found also in our congregational texts, at every turn.

I began to ponder over this experience. I reflected, prayed, meditated and studied. I would like to share a little of my itinerary with you and at the same time, invite you to follow your own, individually and in community.

Spontaneously, I turned to the Word of God, to Christ and to what the Kingdom meant to Him. This led me to a period of Bible study and meditation, trying to penetrate more deeply into this great and mysterious Reality. I share with you some of the points which struck me.

THE KINGDOM IN THE BIBLE:

This is not the place to develop a theology or propose a doctrine of the Kingdom. It is impossible and useless: on the one hand, the subject is too vast, too powerful for me; on the other hand, I do not want to limit you to one point of view, so called “of the Assumption.”

(1) Origins I, 2nd part, chapter 11 – Letter to P. Lacordaire: one of the foundation texts in which M. E. speaks of the Kingdom.

(2) Today, historians and canonists emphasize the importance of the fourth vow, as expressing an essential feature of the charism of certain congregations.

- Even if the words King, Reign, Kingdom are not a problem for us, they can sound strange to our

contemporaries when one wants to speak of God.

The notion of Kingdom is rooted in the history of Israel: a long experience developing over centuries. It is an experience of God as Sovereign, above every cosmic or human power: it is the experience of God who not only rules the universe but who also cares for his people, takes their side and intervenes on their behalf. "I have heard the cry of my people... I myself will come down." Creator and Savior, the Lord also bound himself closely to his people by a covenant of love.

The expectations at the time of Jesus were varied: that is to say, the form the Kingdom would take, the way it would be realized. This is true even today.

- God intervened on behalf of his people in a definitive and complete way in the person of Jesus. In Jesus, the Kingdom approached, was manifested in the Good News of salvation. His life, his teaching and his actions, his community, his death and resurrection are proclamation and realization of the Kingdom. Jesus never defined the Kingdom. But it suffices to contemplate Jesus; nothing of the Kingdom can be separated from Him. His person is the entire content of his message. The source of this message and of its praxis was his deep communion with the Father, his "Abba".

The Cause of God is what matters for Jesus, for this he lived and he died. Since the sovereignty of God is Salvation for mankind, God's Cause is also man's cause.

- In His Kingdom, love is the law, is holiness. It is an absolute love, impossible for humans. But God gives it freely and is pleased to pour it into the hearts of the poor, those who expect everything from him, who ardently desire God's justice, who gladly receive the power to love and who live that love in gratitude, service and pardon. The Kingdom is given to those who have taste and courage for the absolute: namely children. There the last are first. Those who were excluded and marginalized are pressed to enter and are given places of honor.
- The death of Jesus is the final fulfillment of his service and mission for the Kingdom. He won the Kingdom and became King forever through the total gift of his life and his trusting abandonment to the Father in his Passion. Henceforth, all can have life in Him.

His death and Resurrection testify that the Kingdom is victorious over the hardest and most terrible realities of this world. Jesus' disciples have to pass by the same way.

- The Kingdom of God is among us, but at the same time it is constantly being realized in history. It is both present and to come at the same time. It is hidden but it is also growing.
- The Kingdom does not correspond to any territory; it is not of this world. But it is not outside this world either. On the contrary, it summons each one to a commitment in the "here and now" of his life. All are invited, and thus free, but are invited with insistence. One must take a stand before the Kingdom, let oneself be challenged, decide for or against, enter it or not. To enter, one must be born again.
- Jesus made the prayer of his People his own: "May he establish his Reign in your life" (1). The coming of the Kingdom is and will be the personal work of God Himself. Jesus therefore makes his disciples pray: "May Thy Kingdom come".

(1) May His great Name be glorified, Amen, in the world that he created according to his good pleasure. May he establish his Kingdom during his life and also during our days and the life of the whole house of Israel. Both now and forever, Amen." A prayer from the Jewish Quaddish

- There is no pastor without a flock. Jesus gathered together those who had received the message of the

Kingdom into a new People of God; it is a community of believers, of converts, of pardoned sinners – all called to a new life. Word and Bread, Jesus hands himself over to the world in His Church – a gift which will never be taken back. Saint Peter is named the rock and he receives the keys. The Church, throughout time and history, is sacrament of the Kingdom, a visible part of the Kingdom and at its service.

- To sum up, the Kingdom is found where God is recognized and praised as God, the unique Absolute in his world and in our lives; where Salvation is welcomed, where the Kingdom is received and lived as Jesus lived it; where Jesus is King, where the love of God is experienced, accepted and shared. “The Glory of God and Happiness for men” (R.L.).

These are points which called my attention. You will certainly find many others like the Beatitudes, Pardon, Patience. I just want to invite you, as Religious of the Assumption to read the Scriptures with reference to the Kingdom, to try to penetrate more deeply into its mystery.

The question is simple: What does the Kingdom mean for you?

Your biblical study, however, does not end there; it will become contemplation. And this biblical contemplation is completed by the contemplation of the Kingdom in the life of the world today. Contemplation is life. This understanding of the mystery cannot be acquired by hurried, superficial reading. But if we desire it, little by little, the Beauty and the Urgency of the Kingdom will seize hold of us and lead us along a path of conversion, without return. With M. Marie Eugenie, and in her way, we will share her passion for the Kingdom of Jesus Christ.

1. EXTENDING THE KINGDOM OF GOD WITHIN US (1) :

Loving the Kingdom and taking on its ways.

It is for each one to experience the Kingdom in her life and to enter in. The Kingdom attracts us and calls us to be “**Children of the Kingdom**” (Mt. 13). We adjust to its atmosphere, assimilate its values, and become immersed in it. We must acquire a taste for the Kingdom and take on its ways; this means, in the words of Marie Eugenie and Emmanuel d’Alzon, to allow Christ to reign in us.

I am writing from the heart (and in a style you are beginning to recognize) some thoughts on what I believe to be important for us today so that Jesus Christ may reign more fully in the Congregation.

- **Prayer and the Kingdom.**

“May your Kingdom Come”. In giving us the Our Father, Jesus has clearly told us what to do. Pray. Moreover, this prayer places us directly in our correct relationship before God: “Our Father”, Jesus says. At the very centre of Jesus’ world which is the Kingdom, there is a Father, infinitely close and full of tenderness. He alone can establish the Kingdom; it remains to us to welcome it. This prayer expresses a desire; at the same time it creates a desire and makes it grow deeper. Let us pray with Jesus, in Jesus, with out brothers and sisters and in their name, “May Your Kingdom come”.

There is another Jesus prayer: the Psalter. There, day after day, and several times a day, we are in presence of the Kingdom. We praise the sovereignty of God and call unto Him.

(1) When I arrived at this point, I realized that once again, this letter was becoming too long. Because of this, I decided to write about the Kingdom in two letters: 1. Extending the Kingdom of God within us. 2. Extending the Kingdom in the world.

“The Lord reigns: Let the earth rejoice”... Ps. 96.

“Proclaim to the nations: “God reigns.” Ps. 5.

“O God arise above the heavens...

“Help with your right hand and reply!” Ps.107

“I will give you glory, O God my King,...

Age to age will proclaim your works...

They will recall your abundant goodness;...

They shall speak of the glory of your reign,..." Ps.144.

We recall his abundant goodness for the whole of his creation and his presence in our history, we remember his mighty deeds.

We mourn his absence, and also our doubts when confronted with evil. We express these sentiments “as Church” and we allow ourselves to be transformed to confidence and peace. Praise, intercessions, thanksgiving and rapture punctuate the hours.

If you do not have time to study Scriptures, be attentive to God’s Kingdom, to his Kingship, his Reign and to his concern for his People, when you pray the Office. This will suffice to educate your heart, focus your gaze and help you to become aware of the Kingdom both in your own life and in the world.

Prayer is the life-giving air of the Kingdom within us. It links Heaven and Earth, the visible and the invisible, the Creator and his creature. It forms and shapes our activity in service of the Kingdom. We “undo the folds” of our heart before the Father so that He may fill it and reign there. In prayer we cry out for the Kingdom of God and for his Christ; we become desire, consent, availability.

- To enter into the dynamic of the Kingdom

The dynamic of the Kingdom commits us to a journey in this world which knows no horizon, which lies between “already here and not yet present”. Its demands are absolute in the sense that it calls, not only for everything, but also for the impossible. However, the Kingdom commits us to a way of life of absolute hope as well. What is impossible to men is possible to God. Jesus shows us with insistence that neither our past nor our weaknesses (psychological immaturity!) nor even our sins can bar the way. On the contrary, Jesus shows us constantly that he invites to the Kingdom, - today and now – those who are the farthest away, the most lost, the most “unacceptable”, the least ready. The love of Jesus urges us to follow Him without looking back, without conditions. He calls us to be with Him; that is enough.

This being said, efforts must be made along the way. However simple it may be, I do not mean to say that it is easy. Facility in important matters is of no value. To embark on the following of Jesus means, as it were, overcoming a series of hurdles. I even dare say that it means working at our perfection. If you are over forty, you may perhaps be shocked that I use such an antiquated term; if you are under forty, it is probable that the expression will sound new. To work at our perfection: this is the asceticism necessary for all contemplative and apostolic life, the bed rock of any life of holiness, so that the Reign may be established in us.

The perfection Jesus demands of us is however directly situated in the loving Fatherhood of God: “Be ye perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect”. The sole perfection asked of us is that of love; to love God, to do everything out of love for God alone, to love one’s neighbor – every neighbor - to become oneself a neighbor.

With this perfection in mind, I draw your attention to three points:

- We are creatures of desire. If we want Jesus to reign in us, more than a mere wish is needed. The Beauty and the urgency of the Kingdom attract us. We really desire them but a heap of little desires spring up and solicit our hearts. These paltry little desires can distract us and finish by stifling our

abiding hunger and thirst for the Absolute. We satisfy these little desires and remain starved without even being aware of the fact, save on rare occasions. First of all we must have the courage to give up those desires which are in conflict with our fundamental life option. We must also know how to become detached from this particular work, that friendship, this comfort, so many things.... which are lawful and good but if sought after, disperse the attention of our heart from the One whom we have chosen to be the All of our life.

Through the decisions of each day, the choices and renunciations, our desires for God is deepened, is nourished and takes more and more place in us, allowing us to meet God's boundless Desire of us.

- What I have to say of the intention is similar to what I have just written on desire. It is another way of looking at the same reality of our heart. Why do we do what we do? For whom do we act? We could work miracles, convert multitudes, delight in ecstasy, but I assure you, that Jesus will not reign in us if we are not single-minded. To teach to write, to meet others, to do the housework or any other activity can be accomplished for God or for self. Our aim must always be verified and improved. It does not matter if the action is easy or difficult, painful or pleasing; what is important is the orientation of the heart, the motivation. It is not sufficient to leave this essential aspect, this purity of intention, to the general direction of our life to the fact that our life is "consecrated" to God. It is the person, the whole heart that must go straight to God – and more and more directly. We have to work at this. What is not for Him is for self, the aggrandizement of our great little me. It is a matter of yes or no. It is normal that we love ourselves very much; it is also normal that we do not love ourselves very well. In any case, we are created to love Another, to find our life by no longer having ourselves as centre. Blessed are the pure of heart!
- As regards love of our neighbor, I do not think I need to speak of this to you. I will just point out the continual effort required not only to be generally kind, to pardon, to respect others – but also the thousand little efforts needed to make us more gentle and easy to live with, more attentive and ready to listen, more patient, humble, smiling, more orderly or punctual, etc. – all those small details of fraternal and friendly relations which give witness to the seriousness of our desire to be a reflection of Christ for Him and for others. We are all too much this or that and not enough the other, we will never manage to correct all our failings. But this kind of perfection is not asked of us; it is the effort that counts. Nor do I mean an effort which makes us tense and anxious. The effort I am speaking of is wholly Christian; it springs from desire, is assuaged by communion with Christ, and is fulfilled in poverty and abandonment through which all is given to us freely.

- **To like what we do not like**

To love what we do not like: the cross. I should like to propose that the cross become a normal aspect of our life. Whoever begins to travel the road with Christ needs only a short time to begin to understand something of this paradox and of this mystery. The apostles were very quickly confronted with the reality of suffering and its divine necessity. ("It is necessary" ... "Was it not ordained?" ...) The disciple is not above his Master, he will have the hundred fold with persecutions; this is to share in the mission of Christ.

We should expect a number of difficulties and sufferings in our personal life and in the mission. We resist; we are not exempt from the fear, from that "slowness" or the hardness of heart of the disciples. But it is a good thing to have been warned.

I believe each one of us understood that she was committed to the cross when she answered Christ's call to follow Him in religious life. We made our profession for the sake of the Kingdom, we have undertaken this adventure through a triple renunciation. The vows lead to Life; but anyone who has not considered the radicality of this choice and the separations that this implies does not realize the greatness of the Promise.

Spiritual writers have become somewhat timid on the subject of suffering but for all that, it has not disappeared. There are certain sufferings which are foolish and useless, which we have made for ourselves or into which we have rushed headlong; these we can learn to avoid. But in fact, this knowledge simply teaches us the true meaning of suffering, how to suffer.

The cults of “sacrifices”, dolorism, and masochism, have been unmasked in our time. We have acquired the ability to analyze everything in ourselves and in others and we have become experts in what were once called “secondary causes”. All this has created in the religious milieu (in our western culture, especially, but a little bit everywhere) the illusion that every problem or anything that is painful can be remedied or avoided - or it has become simply unbearable. Without wanting us to invent occasions of suffering, or worse still, magnifying our hurts into crucifixions, I think we should examine ourselves on our theology of the cross. The daily cross of our anxieties and failings, of our incompetence and illnesses (age), of all that comes from others, - this cross which is ours – is acceptable since it is illumined and transformed by the Cross of our Great King (1).

- Allow God to be God

The sovereignty of God means ultimately, that it is He who rules the Universe and guides our history. Israel has read its history over and over again in the light of the saving action of God and of his fidelity to Himself in his Covenant with his People. (This re-reading is always made after the event!) The meaning of our life is to be found in God and not in ourselves. It does not result from our reasoning but from our recognition of his Presence and the trusting acceptance of his Love.

The proverbs of the Kingdom like “let the dead bury the dead”, are not prescriptions of obedience but demand a total openness to God. He shatters our human logic; he challenges our self-sufficiency which makes us think it is we who direct our lives.

To encounter the Kingdom is a shock. As the parables and proverbs of Jesus show us, human wisdom and justice are overturned and surpassed.

The action of the Lord in our life, or quite simply in life itself, often seems nonsense to our way of thinking. It upsets our illusions about the well-established order that should reign there and contradicts our pretensions to prescribe the course of events. If we are open, attentive to His Presence, we are obliged to look anew at our usual situation, to examine our normal values and to call even ourselves into question.

God can neither be measured nor explained, nor “understood” by us, in his being or in his “ways”. His ways are not ours. In other words, He has the right to enter our life when and how He wishes. There is no reason at all why He should correspond without ideas and plans. On the contrary, He tries to teach us to let go, not only of our possessions, - of all kinds – but even of our very life so that He can fill it with his Life. We are “capacity for God”. And our faith – trust “consists in letting God be God in our inmost being”, of allowing Him to establish His Kingdom there.

God takes us seriously; the whole of the existence of Jesus is a proof of this. He has confided responsibilities to us; He respects our liberty. But His Goodness and Power are not limited by our human capacities nor by our sins.

(1) From my own experience, I found that the cross sometimes the most difficult to recognize and to assume, is failure. Let us lift up our eyes and contemplate “the failure” of Love. Let us learn from the Crucified One the meaning of that “lifting up” which is the exaltation of the Son. cf. Jn12)

Even if the forces of evil (the cockle) are at work in the world, they can never conquer Life. Wars, famines, conflicts and conflagrations cannot set aside his Blessing or his Promise. Our world, the universes, are held in existence by his Love; the Spirit of Love guides us towards Him. The Hindus have been bold enough to name the world and all it contains the "Play of God". I see therein (without accepting their philosophy) a profound intuition. We are but children, his children. He finds his pleasure in us, in His Son.

God is God. Let us leave room for adoration in our life (the space between Him and us), there let us find our joy.

RENDEZ-VOUS

I will write at length about the Church in the following letter. But in ending this first part on the Kingdom of God within us, I cannot refrain from emphasizing the sacramental life. Above all other means or practices, the varied spiritual ways and different gifts of nature and grace, Christ is present to us in a special manner in the sacraments we receive in His Church. The Kingdom takes shape actually in us through a frequent, assiduous, faithful (i.e. full of confidence and faith) encounter with Christ in the sacraments, especially in the Eucharist.

The habit of living according to the dynamic of the Kingdom, of being constantly in search of the Kingdom is to be acquired.

As I have just written, the Kingdom can never become a routine nor can we become too accustomed to the Kingdom. The habit I speak of is that of being on the watch, attentive, in a process of conversion.

Father de Montcheuil wrote that "there is no definitive settling down in the Kingdom of God; if we do not seek to go in at every moment, we find ourselves outside without being aware of it."

I fear lest our ideas of the Kingdom remain somewhat vague. If we fly too low our vision of the Church, of communities, our life or a certain manner of understanding justice, liberty and the peace of the Kingdom, will be shallow and insipid. If we fly too high, our vision will be found in an eschatological ideal in the sense of a Utopia.

May the Kingdom become an experience of love for each one: of knowledge and intimacy – communion with the heart of Jesus, with his Love for the Father and of the Love of the Father for mankind.

"To you is given to know the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven" – "Have you understood all that?" - yes we have, they answered". (Matt. 13: 11, 51) (1)

Lovingly yours in Christ,

Sr. Clare Teresa, r.a.
Superior General

(1) A note of the TOB (Traduction Decuminique de la Bible). Shows the importance in Matthew, of understanding, which means attention to the teaching of Jesus and a commitment to a new way of life