

M. MARIE EUGENIE MILLERET,
A SAINT FOR THE CITY

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« Without vision, the people perish¹, » the prophet of Israel laments. We are living a moment of history when few people have vision or dare proclaim one. The situations are so complex, the problems so dramatic, the forces of destruction so powerful that people try not to think about them and concentrate on their small concerns.

In this talk, I would like not only to present the courageous vision of Mother Marie Eugénie but also show how she tried to incarnate it in her time and in her society. This is why I chose the title « A Saint for the City. » Then, in a second section, I would like to propose a few points for today, for those of us who also want to and dare to undertake building the city.

Marie Eugénie Milleret de Brou, while still far from Christ and the Church, already had a great soul. Her education had given her broad views and an international spirit. On her father's side, she had Italian ancestors; her mother came from a Belgo/Austrian family; and the family mansion was situated at the intersection of France, Belgium and Luxembourg. She read extensively in English and German as well as in her native French. Her interests took her beyond herself and the little world of Lorraine where she spent her childhood. She was also immersed in the Romantic movement of her times, which had universal pretensions.

The interest in politics that animated the conversations of her parents and their friends inspired high ideals in Eugénie and filled her with the desire to do something in the world. Her father, a banker and free-thinker, became the local deputy and she would admit later, as a religious, that she had had from her youth, a veritable passion for politics. But it was very clear for her that it was not the petty affairs of power and influence that attracted her but something greater: « ...not the vain details of the politics of the day but the future, the destiny, the moral nobility of our country. »

Concretely, we know little about the concrete content of Eugénie's ambitions. Her mother, and two men, she tells us, exercised a great deal of influence on her young mind. They were « ardent democrats » and she believed them endowed with a « social mission » She never names these « two men » but in 1844, at the time of her religious profession, she prays for Victor Hugo, Philippe Buchez and also Felicité de Lamennais

¹ Proverbs 29:18. (King James version) In the *Bible of Jérusalem* the same text reads: "Where there is no prophecy, the people get out of hand." A slightly different translation!

because « they did me good».² It is evident that she didn't know Father Lamennais before her conversion and it's worth remembering that Victor Hugo was hardly an « ardent democrat » before 1848. But he was certainly capable of inspiring ardent and noble sentiments, for early on his works glorified France and idealized her little people. He had, moreover, responded in 1830 to the appeal made to artists to support the cause of Saint Simon's socialist doctrine. We can suppose, then, that all of these elements were present in Eugénie's « passion for politics. »

Later writings reveal also that she shared the Saint Simonians' belief in progress which was common to almost all the socialisms of the times. We can suppose too that Eugénie espoused the values of the French Revolution (1789) with its cry of « liberty, equality, fraternity », and that she wanted to see more justice in society, more participation of the people and the betterment of the deplorable conditions of the peasants' and poor peoples' lives and working conditions. I believe we can say in summary that Eugénie had assimilated the values of the Revolution, the social sentiments of the Romantics and something of the socialists' program. A Democrat, a Republican and a Romantic. (Much like her contemporary Georges Sand) Eugénie was a child of her times and her republican, unbelieving and anti-clerical milieu. But she possessed qualities of intelligence, heart and character that made her not only be filled with compassion and dreams of a better world but also ready to do something for her country and – what she had not foreseen – for God.

After the bankruptcy of her father and the premature death of her mother, five years passed before Eugénie's conversion. « Five wasted years », she would later write, when she seemed to care about nothing and no one and appeared to have fun like the other young women of her age – but only to mask her pain. Nevertheless, among the few notes that we have of this time, we see that she still had a deep sense of duty and still longed to do something useful with her life.

Of her conversion, at the age of 19, we know little. That Sunday in Lent, the words of Father Lacordaire, « answered all my questions », she tells us. But we don't know exactly what those questions were. A few pages in her *Journal* or *Notes Intimes*, where she tries to explain something of what happened at that moment, intimate that it was an intellectual conversion accompanied by a sense of certitude. Everything seemed clear and coherent; she was converted, « truly converted » to Jesus Christ and the Church. Eugénie consulted Lacordaire who gave her a list of books to read and thus began what she was to call the « renovation » or conversion of her intelligence.

Lacordaire was a disciple of the prophet-priest Lamennais and through him, and later through Father Combalot and his friends, the young convert was put in contact with the school of Lamennais and of a liberal or progressive group in the Catholic Church. It was a group seeking to detach the altar from the throne, to return to the primitive sources of the Church and to more Christian times. These liberals were also concerned about the lot

² “You know, Lord, that there are souls whose malice I naturally share ; give them to me, Lord, for them, I want to bear the sufferings that unite me to them and make me feel the weight, M. de La M[ennais], V. Hugo, *Buchez...*”
N242/03.

of the poor and the scandalous social injustice, ever-increasing as the Industrial Revolution dawned in France. They wanted more liberty, democracy and socio-political change. Lamennais' aim was social transformation and moral regeneration. His took *Adveniat Regnum tuum* –They Kingdom come! – as his motto. This was the same motto that Marie Eugénie would choose later for the apostolate of her congregation, adding even a fourth religious vow: « to extend the Kingdom of God through one's entire life»³

Gradually, the one who would become Mother Marie Eugénie made a synthesis of her family education and her newfound Catholic faith, of her youthful ideals and her religious convictions – especially in the line of those discovered in Lamennais' program. « When later I came to God, the social convictions of the past gave me strength » she wrote to Father d'Alzon. For her, the Kingdom of God was now the destiny of this world, a reign of justice and liberty, of fraternity and peace. Every Christian is called, by vocation, to work toward this aim – by prayer, action or suffering. And to refuse to give oneself to this great cause was to choose the way of selfish egoism and also give up true happiness.⁴

Marie Eugénie saw « consequences for our world» in the Gospel teachings. Her ideal becomes the « realization » of the Gospel and its law, the « realization » of God's plan. It's striking how often this word « realize » and « realization » in the sense of accomplishing, incarnating or making concrete, appears in the thinking of the foundress. She states, moreover, that her job is not in « formulating doctrines but in realizing them. » Pure thought and speculation, which does not lead to action, she tells us, will not hold her attention for a minute.⁵

Her vision:

« Can you imagine the beauty of a truly Christian society? » she exclaims. « ...The reign of Christ is, perhaps, more beautiful to my eyes than the tents of Israel that the prophet speaks of, than the heavenly Jerusalem. »⁶ The tents of Israel are found in the prophecy and blessing of Balaam:

How goodly are your tents, O Jacob; your encampments, O Israel!
They are like gardens beside a stream, like the cedars planted by the Lord.
His wells shall yield free-flowing waters, he shall have the sea within reach;
His king shall rise . . . and his royalty shall be exalted.... Numbers 24:5-7

³ The fourth vow was suppressed by the Vatican but the content is still found today in the vow formula.

⁴ Letter to Lacordaire [undated] in the *Origines* vol. 1, II:9 and the *Foundational Texts*, p. 73. The letter to Lacordaire, the original of which cannot be found, is an exposé of Marie Eugénie's beliefs concerning the aim of the Congregation. It seems to have been written as a response to objections concerning the mission of her congregation, especially for contemplative women.

⁵ “... that which is not placed under the free action of man, especially under my own, never occupies my intelligence a quarter of an hour. No one less than I asks: Why is that so? How is that so? Unless I think that will follow answers that have to be modified, things to do or to prevent. I admire people who worry about the essence of things, about results over which they have no control. Their intelligences must inhabit a world that is so inaccessible for me that a profound boredom takes over when they speak to me about it.” Letter to Father d'Alzon 5 March 1844.

⁶ Letter to Lacordaire, Op. cit, p. 75.

And the heavenly Jerusalem is the holy city come down from heaven whose name means city of peace. It is described in chapter twelve of the Letter to the Hebrews⁷ and in chapter twenty-two of the Apocalypse. It is a shining City built with precious stones and has trees that give fruit, not just in their season but every month. The city is inhabited by angels and myriads of witnesses; it has no temple because God fills it and needs no sun because Christ illumines it. In this foundational letter to Father Lacordaire about the aim of the Congregation, Marie Eugénie, herself, combines the two images of the Kingdom and the City.⁸

These prophetic visions of the future are not more lovely for Marie Eugénie than the society she can imagine here on earth which she sees « not as a land of exile but as a place of glory for God. »⁹ We understand from her writings that she wants the Gospel to penetrate society and transform it. She wants the Kingdom of God to be established on earth.¹⁰ Following Lamennais' thought, Marie Eugénie rejects a Christianity that promises justice and peace only in heaven and envisages a society redeemed and regenerated by the saving work of Christ whose action continues working in our history.

But, once more, we are faced with no description in Marie Eugénie's voluminous writings, of the beautiful Kingdom or City of God as it might come about on earth. It was necessary to glean bits here and there in her writings to make the composite image below:

- Though invisible, God reigning and adored by the people. This aspect of God's glory and sovereignty, of the world's belonging to God the Creator, and then Redeemer, is very forceful and all-important, radical and absolute, for Marie Eugénie. The powerful and loving presence of God is the backdrop of her vision and all her action.
- Humanity regenerated by grace which allows humans to share in the divine life; that is to say, to participate in God's life – thus, eternal life already begun.
- Communion among men, which implies equality and fraternity, and also the end of domination or oppression of people by others.¹¹ [This is one of the major points in Lamennais' *Paroles d'un Croyant*, published in 1834]
- Liberty, first of all from sin and guilt, then, liberty from the everything in the past. Christ is the universal Liberator, absolute and definitive¹²

⁷ 12:22-24...the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and countless angels in festal gathering, and the assembly of the firstborn enrolled in heaven, and God, the judge of all, and the spirits of the just made perfect, and Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant...

⁸ It is interesting to note that the Bible begins in a garden and ends in a city.

⁹ Letter to Lacordaire, op. cit. p. 75

¹⁰ Despite many crowned heads in our contemporary world, 'kingdom' and 'reign' do not say much to us. We may understand the two terms immediately, but they don't evoke images that speak positively to us about our world or even about a spiritual reality. The terms, however, might have the advantage of evoking familiar ideas and, at the same time, inviting us to go more deeply in the understanding of the symbol. The theological question will be treated later.

¹¹ «a social state where no man would have to endure any fatality other than that of nature ; that is where Christian principles tend to remove from each one the oppression of others. » Letter to Father d'Alzon 15 March 1844

¹² « I believe that Our Lord, on Calvary, not only redeemed the Jewish and Roman peoples from their past; but that there is no instant when he doesn't redeem each person from his guilty past with the same effectiveness, if they come back to God, especially if they make the painful effort to root out bad habits and instincts which arise from this past..

- The liberties of democracy : of association, of the press, of speech, in education, etc.
- For the poor, the possibility of overcoming the constraints of their social class

It is virtue that creates the peace and happiness of the City. Social institutions should come to the help of those who were born into conditions without moral liberty and thus the possibility of a virtuous life. Moreover, Marie Eugénie categorically refused “war, the death penalty and the fatality of birth and position.” And, like the other socialists of her time, she is resolutely turned towards the future and progress. History means progress.

This young idealist cannot accept that her vision is just a Utopia. Several times, she rejects this suggestion. It is the Gospel itself that gives her this assurance: Christ said that, He, the Good Shepherd, would gather all into one and draw all to himself.¹³ Later, she does admit: « I am creating a utopia, »¹⁴ but she believes in it and to strive for it is the meaning of her religious life.

Education is her means of working towards the coming of the Kingdom on earth.

« To make Jesus Christ known as liberator and king of the world; to teach that everything belongs to him and that, present in us by the life of grace, he wants to work in each one of us for the great work of the Kingdom of God...is the beginning and the end of Christian education. »¹⁵

She found the school best adapted to bringing about a change of mentality – from rich, lazy, self-centred – as the person she had been, into a person committed to the others and to God’s project. Committed in and for the City. Everything in Assumption education will be directed to this end. For her school, Marie Eugénie will have a vision, a passion, and a project. Or, in her own words: « a philosophy, a passion and a strong character. »

Means:

-On the intellectual level, all teaching begins with the faith which is the origin and matrix of its goals. Marie Eugénie looks on everything in the light of faith and wants to teach others to do the same. Every thing and every event is contemplated according to its place in the plan of God, its capacity to humanize, its value for the Kingdom, its weight of love. Expressed in this way, education at the Assumption could conjure up all sorts of pictures: of sermons, pious talk, outrageous religiosity – even of fundamentalism. Yet teaching with faith doesn’t mean that the facts and the teaching are forced into some kind of Christian processor. On the contrary, it implies a broad vision that includes the transcendent and openness that embraces difference. It means taking things as they are, in their reality, and trying to understand their mystery. It is a Christian humanism that admires and respects beauty, truth and goodness wherever they are found. And, where

... I see in the Redemption, a work of universal yet not fully realized. » Letter to Father d’Alzon, 27 December 1843.

¹³ Letter au P. Lacordaire, op. cit. p.75.

¹⁴ Letter to E. d’Alzon, 27 December 1843.

¹⁵ Letter to Lacordaire, op. cit. p 76.

they are found, God is found, recognized as God, the foundation of all, the one who created the world, who continues his creative action in us and with us and is leading all of history to its happy term.

I was quite surprised to read in a letter to Father Combalot¹⁶ that Eugénie found much that was useful for teaching in Michelet's *History of France*, which is so anti-clerical and probably on the Index. It's all in the way you look at things.

The Assumption way in education aims to « christianize » the intelligence and its judgments, attitudes and attractions - the entire person as well as his/her action. First for ourselves and then help students do the same. It is a work of faith coming from contemplation of God's presence and action in the world.¹⁷

-On the level of personal development, Marie Eugénie put the accent on the **formation of character**, for the City reposes on individuals, the citizens and the individuals who make up its families. Each student is a person worthy of respect, even a child of five years; the student is a little person. The foundress demands appreciation for the gifts, talents, and particular qualities of each one – what she called the character of each one's grace and she encourages them in their difference. When she is told that the children from Bordeaux are superficial, « butterflies », her response is « Don't clip their wings, just guide their flight. » Each one is important for the construction of the City. On one hand, students should be given liberty to be themselves and to be known as they are; on the other hand, they need to become truly free through self-discipline and self-control. As St John Chrysostem wrote: « To educate a child is to build the city. »

The key to self-control, as for being oneself and developing character, is love - going beyond self, detaching self from the little ego-centric ego, giving of self - which leads to full growth. Marie Eugénie bases this teaching on the two cities of St. Augustine in his great work, the *City of God*. « As St Augustine says in speaking of the two cities, [there is] the city of the good or of love of God that is pursued to the point of self-forgetfulness and [there is] the city of evil or love of self pursued to the point of forgetfulness of God... »¹⁸ This is the great principle for the coming of the Kingdom, the going beyond self in love and service, [going out of self, selflessness]. This image of the two cities and two loves runs through the instructions of Marie Eugénie throughout the years. She will come back constantly to this comparison. It is her preferred way of explaining the reign of God in us, in each person.

¹⁶ Théodore Combalot, 1797-1873. The priest who persuaded Eugénie Milleret to found a religious congregation devoted to education.

¹⁷ «We are not concerned about controversy but active faith, faith dominating judgment, taste and affections. » (Letter to Father d'Alzon, 19 July 1842.)

¹⁸ Instruction of 18 June 1886. This theme runs through the Instructions throughout the years, eg. « The greatest obstacle to service, is self-love. (Instruction of 12 October 1873) « love of self which unfortunately follows us everywhere... » « Each one has her form of self-love, pride, vanity » 26 October 1873. In St Augustine's *City of God* : « two kinds of human society, which we may justly call two cities... » *City of God*, Book 14

I have known a spirituality of service and self-forgetfulness that seemed to exclude pleasure and that made of love, a heavy burden. For Marie Eugénie, it is not like that at all. It is a question of true self-love, of a sure way to happiness. It is a dynamic of joy based largely on confidence in God, in a God who is love, and who calls us into life, ever grater, ever deeper life. God is love, is goodness; therefore God loves us and wants our good. This God accompanies us constantly and can turn everything in our lives to our benefit.¹⁹ Even sin. Our love is not a duty so much as a response, a rendering of love for love. This is the basis of the « joyful detachment » which so characterizes the spirit of the Assumption. It centers us on the Other and thus helps us let go of the superficialities and petty concerns of life; it can give us the courage to face difficulties and suffering without losing peace.

-A **family spirit** is also a mark of Assumption pedagogy that Marie Eugénie considered important for young people's development. It is a mixture of liberty and trust, respect and affection, warmth and security, as well as discipline and responsibility. Reading about the first schools, one gets the impression that there was an atmosphere of energetic activity and fun.

The family spirit covers another aspect of school life and the family spirit that Marie Eugénie doesn't mention specifically but which I believe was important for the City of God. It was the very life of the mini-society constituted by the school within the monastery: the organization of life together (sisters and children), the relationship between students and teachers, the liberty which allowed the young people to feel at ease, at home, and to be known and understood as individuals. For the majority of students it was an experience of a community of work and prayer, of friendship, order and peace. This education within a monastic context endured until Vatican II – if an arbitrary date is to be fixed. At the time, the students probably found the sisters' life extraordinary, belonging to another strange and mysterious world, and they may have entertained imaginings and questions about what went on « inside the enclosure. » But that didn't keep them from being comfortable and having the confidence to speak of their difficulties and problems, even in their families. I think this was for many an un-acknowledged foretaste of the City of God. A good number of the alumnae stayed in contact with the sisters and kept a certain nostalgia of their schooldays. Families were proud to produce generations of Assumption students and loved to come back to visit the sisters and the convent.

By this Assumption education, the foundress aimed at effecting a triple change: in the student, in the family (cell of society) and in the broader society itself. It was what Marie Eugénie called the “three orders” where she hoped to extend the Kingdom of God. To bring the influence of the Gospel into the small sphere of their lives and action would affect the whole.

Do you think that it is most important for us that our students pass their exams, know more or less geography or history?...If by our teaching we produce Christian youth first of all, then Christian women and families, won't we have

¹⁹ “All things work unto good for those who love God.” Romans 8.

contributed something to the social reign of Jesus Christ ? These young people, after all, are like the roots from which will come the sprouts of Christian families and, from these families, others will come. And if generations come from our education, we shall truly have worked to bring the reign of Jesus Christ into society.²⁰

Further remarks:

-The pedagogy created for the students served also for the teachers. All that they were expected to give to the students should come from an overflow in their own lives. The reign of God in oneself and in the world was a motto specially designed for the teachers, called to live, proclaim and teach; they all went together.

- Knowing the world and milieu of the students was also a key element. Young people were prepared in the Assumption, not for the convent, but for society. It was a question of learning to take one's place in the world as a Christian without taking on the spirit of the world, a defect which Marie Eugénie reproached in the other schools – and in particular those of the Jesuits ! Conformity to society's values and criteria was the sin par excellence. She considered the education generally given to young ladies of society debasing and irresponsible. Too often, it gave priority to appearances, money (a rich marriage) and vanity.

-Besides knowing what the student's life would be once out of school, Marie Eugénie wanted the young people to know the other side of life, the misery and the grandeur of the poor, so they would be motivated to change conditions. She recommended that both sisters and students visit poor families:

...fear of not being true sisters of the poor if we cease seeing them, of forgetting the harsh realities of a life in an existence that is always exceptional, even as austere and poor as can be [in the convent]. A religious does not experience the exclusion, the worries or humiliations of poverty, nor the continual dependence on one's own work...²¹

Schools for the poor were connected to the boarding schools but the ecclesiastical authorities put an end, however, to the practice of going out to the homes of poor families.

The model Assumption alumna will be a woman, probably married and a mother, who will be simple and unaffected in her relationships, who will be more interested in the big questions and important matters than in the pettiness and superficial things associated

²⁰ Instruction of 3 December 1882.

²¹ Letter to Father d'Alzon, 19 July 1842. And in a letter of 28 July "...being poor, we had to do as much as possible for ourselves...here, given the need, we often felt that the greatest honor belonged to the most skillful. To know how to launder, iron, cook, clean the dormitories, shellac the furniture, the floors and do a thousand other things that are still more unusual, was knowledge surpassing Latin in our esteem and I hope that we shall communicate this good practical sense to our students... Those who ought to be with the poor, or educate the rich need to know also what this fatigue is, and I desire that there always be an occasion here for the sisters to experience it..."

with « ladies of high society. » She will experience the glories and misfortunes common to others from her milieu but will keep up a serious relationship with God and a commitment in the Church and/or society in the service of others. Both in the United States and in France, where I lived for many years, I have known and admired many women like this who are proud of their Assumption education. Sometimes they are not so interested in meetings of alumni but they are engaged in the City and in the service of others.

Despite her age and idealism, Marie Eugénie knew from the very beginning of her educational venture, that she would not succeed with all or even the majority of the students. In her very first instruction for the sisters “On Education” she warned them and reminded them that even Christ had not succeeded with all his apostles. The following of Christ on the narrow way is easy for no one; and, even in the ardor of her youth she understood that her work for the transformation of society would be just a grain of sand or a stone, her stone, brought to the construction of the City. She was not a revolutionary or a dreamer; she was a woman of action. The Assumption has only her part to play in the great plan of God. She is called to decisive and positive action in the small sphere which is hers.²²

It is important to remember that the school, though the main means, was not the only commitment to education at the Assumption. The monastery of Auteuil drew many people, especially but not only, women, for adoration and prayer, for conferences and « good works » undertaken on behalf of the poor. Many alumnae supported the works of the Little Sisters of the Assumption²³, whose vocation was to work directly with working class families, and also the Assumptionist men who shared her vision for transforming society and were engaged in a multitude of endeavours. When Marie Eugénie died, the Superior General of the Assumptionists wrote to his brothers: « Her life was intimately associated with that of our Founder (Father d’Alzon] and with the beginnings of all our works. » (12 March 1898). She gathered co-workers and furnished financial resources. The Assumptionists, who were few in Paris at the time, found at Auteuil, a group of devoted people, mainly women, who committed themselves to the service of the poor and the working class, to the pilgrimages and missions of all sorts. The Assumptionists provided spiritual services, taught and gave conferences. Together, religious, priests and lay collaborators responded to the needs they found in the city.

The work of Marie Eugénie’s life was not just a pedagogy and a network of schools for young people, it was a life given in the service of life as she believed God wanted it.

Marie Eugénie’s experience through the years

²² “...it is strange that no one gets upset about stupidity and many are frightened when someone shows a will to be strong and have a positive and decisive impact, even in our little sphere. (19 July 1842)

²³ Founded in 1865 by Antoinette Fage and Etienne Pernet. Marie Eugénie directed Etienne Pernet to the Assumption and collaborated with him by help and support.

In the course of the year 1843-44, the young superior would undergo a painful crisis. The origin of her troubles, «this night of my intelligence», is never expressed explicitly and seems to have come from her attachment to the ideas of Lamennais that were not accepted by the Church. She suffered from confusion and obscurity caused either by the outright condemnation of her line of thought and action or by pressure from outside to accept positions and doctrines with which she could not agree. Like the theories on expiation put forward by Count Joseph de Maistre which were quite generally accepted by Catholics as explanation, and thus justification, of many evils in society. It is also possible that she just felt herself outside the pale, in disagreement with the official position of the Church on these questions or with the majority of the Church's membership, her ecclesial entourage. Whatever the source of her malaise, it caused her to call into question her faith in the Catholic Church. She lashes out with hard words for priests and pious Catholics. In her letters to her spiritual director and friend, she lets us see that d'Alzon also refuses some of her ideas.

...I could not picture our Lord in a way that attached me more strongly to him than when I imagined him bringing a law to the world which had the effects described above. I am a woman, attached to a thousand things, but when this goal was before me and I thought I understood that, throughout the centuries, this law, which was attacked, and hindered in its development even by Christians, required [the service] of some devoted people... to help ennoble souls through education, to give the upcoming generations the strength and the detachment necessary for the future, I was the least womanly possible. But now that slowly this goal disappears from my sight, I become earthly once again. I loved the Christian law passionately as long as I believed it so.²⁴

It is possible also that there is a renewed attack against Lamennais, a new condemnation of his ideas. In 1841, he had been imprisoned at St Pélagie where he had written *A Voice from Prison*, a book that Marie Eugénie opened «while trembling.» and insisted that there is not a «hair's breadth» between his ideas and her own. What is certain is that her faith in the Church was affected and she was deeply troubled about this (This is the only time that she asks Father d'Alzon to destroy one of her letters.) Now, she considers, she has only «to take refuge in mysticism [a spirituality uninvolved with the world] and exterior matters [material matters of existence]» and she complains that it is more difficult to act when you no longer see clearly where you are going.

...when one no longer can imagine at all how to go about realizing the goal, one's action becomes more onerous, more uncertain, more timid. But like the builders of our ancient cathedrals, many laboured without knowing what they were doing for the city of the future. If necessary, I have told myself for some time that I may have to assume this role. There are many also who work

²⁴ Letter to Father d'Alzon 15 March 1844. In the same Letter: "I now know the clergy and the fervent Catholics, and I must confess that if I had a son, I would be almost as happy to see them instil their somnolence in his veins as the ideas of Villemain: that is to say, conversion even would no longer be possible. I'm sorry I was not raised by them, for then I would find in myself much less of this life which kills me until I manage to kill it. And, if ever I loved a soul, I would keep it away from their breath like that of the desert. The Italian peoples, modern Rome, are the *summum* of their ideals. They save more souls there than elsewhere, and that's all they want people to see."

without willing it, as the Romans who built their roads for the preachers of the Gospel. I have thus withdrawn and repeat often to God this prayer which is so dear to me: May your Kingdom come.²⁵

The correspondence with Father d'Alzon helped to pacify her- we have to suppose this, for Marie Eugénie does not come back to the subject in later letters.

In the light of the above, the Revolution of 1848 must have been an important moment in the life of the foundress. She was thirty when she saw the long desired change of régime. The Orleans monarchy fell in late February, after just three days of insurrection. Marie Eugénie was making her annual eight-day retreat and decided on February twenty-fourth that she had better ask news just « in case she had to prepare for an invasion of the property by the people...²⁶ On one hand, she is moved by the plight of the peasants and workers, as well as by the situation of the bourgeois who have been affected by a serious economic crisis ; on the other hand, she is enthusiastic about the opportunity offered for social transformation and a more Gospel-like society. She is overjoyed at the thought that the aim of her Congregation is in full accord with the project of the National Party (Republican).²⁷

Since Marie Eugénie is in Paris, close to the events and Emmanuel d'Alzon is far away in the south of the country at Nîmes, we find ourselves with a series of letters by which Marie Eugénie tries to keep the Father abreast of the news. The situation evolves rapidly as the bourgeois take the side of the people in the Revolution. At last the liberal Catholics see their day dawning and decide to take part in the government. Many of Marie Eugénie's childhood friends and acquaintances appear on the scene also.²⁸ Philippe Buchez, an old family friend, will become the president of the Constitutional Assembly. She both consults and counsels him.

Unfortunately, the Revolution that everyone saw coming had not been prepared by the Republicans nor had they planned the aftermath. "The Second Republic, from March to May 1848, was a generous improvisation, nourished by the memory of the first one, animated by a quasi-mystical belief in the sovereignty of the people and blind faith in human fraternity..."²⁹ The Assembly abolished colonial slavery and the death penalty for political crime, established universal suffrage, created the *Ateliers*, took measures to

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ N.206, *Notes intimes*, p. 178 and Letter to Marie Madeleine Achard, 29 February 1848.

²⁷ «No one more than we has been founded with a view to this society of the future for which our vows[desires] hasten the coming; all our efforts and our teaching are in perfect harmony with the national goals such as they proclaim them... « Letter to Father d'Alzon, 25 mars, 1844. There is a double entendre with the word « vœux » which means both wishes or desires and religious vows.

²⁸ Letter to Father d'Alzon, 9 May 1848.

“M. Imlé who is up to his neck in the world of the Revolution and the clubs, took the responsibility yesterday for getting the thing from Caussidière, who, I discovered, was one of the close friends of my older brother. The further I go, the more I find myself in a familiar land under the Republic. Jean Reynaud the secretary of Public Education, is one of the oldest memories of my childhood; I used to play, if not with him, with his brother who was my age, and his family was intimately linked to mine. As for Buchez, I don't know if I told you what a friend he proved to be in his answer to M. Hubert concerning our affairs.”

²⁹ Mandrou, Robert, Georges Duby, *Histoire de la civilisation française XVIII^{ième} -XX^{ième} Siècle*. Armand Colin, 1984, p. 275.

reduce unemployment and dreamed of obtaining liberty for the entire world. But, in the end, the government would prove itself totally inept. The old monarchists, on account of their experience, had to be brought back into the government of the Republic.

For a few months, the bourgeois revolutionaries had allied themselves with the socialist and democratic revolutionaries, but only for a few months. The fragile unity among men who were Republicans for opportunistic reasons, those who were weak or those who were violent, idealists or simply businessmen, came undone... The leaders chosen by the people had no idea about government and quickly bourgeois interests took over. « I fear that the Republicans have killed the Republic. » declared Marie Eugénie ³⁰ just three months after the fall of the monarchy.

Everyone knows the rest of the story: the unenlightened elections or rather elections overly influenced by known names like that of Bonaparte, the closing of the *Ateliers*, the brutal suppression of insurrections, the death of the Archbishop of Paris on the street barricades, the victory of fear...³¹

Marie Eugénie, who was taken up this time more by action than reflection, does not seem to have been too deeply affected by the failure of the Revolution. Enthusiastic in the beginning and terribly disillusioned little afterwards, she went her way. Or we could say that she continued her way and her work. Perhaps the crisis of the years before had prepared her for the political setback. From day to day, she observed, discerned motivations, the intelligence, stupidity or wisdom of one and another. She noted wherein lay the interests of the people, of the Republic, of France, of the Church, of private schools. She seemed to distance herself easily from politics as she saw the workings, yet all the while followed events with great interest. And, then she had her own affairs and worries as foundress and superior: the safety of the sisters, the departure and entrance of students as fortunes rose and fell, financial concerns that would pursue, trouble and distract her throughout the whole year. One of the sisters died after a long illness, another weighed on her with her bad humour and difficult character!

Certainly she lost any illusions she might have entertained about politicians and political gain, but she did not lose either her confidence or her vision. It was the will of God for the world and humanity. She will remain a democrat and a republican to the end of her

³⁰ Letter to Father d'Alzon, 5 June 1848. « I fear that the Republicans have killed the Republic. If it can be saved, it will only be by the ex-monarchists; this is quite a different opinion from the one I expressed two months ago, but everyone is obliged to concede it today, ... Never, since 8, has France been in the hands of men more incapable [of governing]. This is the general cry...

God alone is there to give us the republican government which would be like the one we dreamed of, the best form of government for the improvement of society, for the greatest possible realization on earth of the law of the Gospel. Perhaps God's Providence acts in using all sorts of men, in transforming the parties. Christians only will love the people and work for them. Unfortunately, however, the Christians in the Assembly – and there are many – are not sufficiently capable.

³¹ « Nothing is rarer than Republicans; every day their number decreases, and among the Republicans of the early days, you don't see anyone more than people running after power, they say, whose interest is not to be handed over to barbarians. » Letter to Father d'Alzon, 3 July 1848.

life. As she tells the sisters in one of her conversations, with age one grows in confidence, changing from confidence in oneself to confidence in God.

One of the very last entries in her journal will show her continued preoccupation for the Kingdom of God: «I made a vow to extend the Reign of Jesus Christ in everything throughout my life: I propose to accomplish that in myself first, then in others...»³² Especially by greater poverty.

Marie Eugénie's vision and Assumption pedagogy today

You don't need me to go back over this paper in order to draw conclusions for Assumption education today. I would like, however, to return to a few points on one subject only: the **theology of the Kingdom of God**. Today, we have the advantage of a theological development concerning the Kingdom; something that did not exist in the XIXth century. Marie Eugénie and her contemporaries generally referred to the passages in the New Testament where the Kingdom or reign was directly mentioned: the Kingdom is like a mustard seed, like yeast, like a banquet, a field... all the images that Christ used to help his disciples grasp something of the mystery of the invisible, his invitations to enter the Kingdom already present yet still to come. The petition of the *Our Father*, already cited: «Thy Kingdom come» was the major reference and foundation of their thought.

Today, most theologians and exegetes place the proclamation of the Kingdom squarely at the heart of Jesus' message. They share Mère Marie Eugénie's difficulty in explaining the relationship between the Kingdom of God and our world, but they underline not only on the supreme importance of the Kingdom for Jesus and his mission but the connection between the Kingdom of God and our world. Moreover, some find in the life and teachings of Jesus both the program and the means of the Kingdom's coming on earth. Liberation theology insists on the concrete implications.

The Kingdom of God is revealed not just in the words, but also in the person and the ministry of Christ. In him, the Kingdom of God entered into human history. The Kingdom is a symbol of the «mystery hidden in God from ages past and made manifest in our times»³³. Jesus proclaims that the Kingdom is among us and in us;³⁴ one can enter and leave at will. It suffices to accept or refuse the pressing invitation of Christ. We make «the Kingdom come» when we recognize and welcome the reign of God, when we recognize God's sovereignty, open ourselves to God's grace and do the works of the Kingdom: liberate, heal, overcome evil, refuse violence and retaliation, forgive, use money to do good and avoid being enslaved by it.

By situating the ministry of Jesus in the **historical context** of Israel, Walter Wink goes further still when he suggests that the Reign of God inaugurated by Jesus was understood

³² *Notes Intimes*, N.237/01, p. 250.

³³ Mark 4:11, and in St Paul: Ephesians 3:9-10, Colossians 1:26.

³⁴ Luke 17, 21. Two different translations of the Greek are admissible – *among you* and *in you* - and we use both as correct and complementary.

by Jesus as a reign directly opposed to the *Imperium romanum*, and offered as an alternative and challenge to the system of domination then in place. Not just a contestation of the political domination but of all the existing forms of domination in Israel at the time: religious, social, cultural, political and economic. He underscores that:

The message of Jesus has traditionally been treated as an atemporal, eternal teaching, without context and proclaimed in a sociopolitical vacuum. But his teaching and his actions are directed towards a specific context: the Domination System. The message of Jesus is a remedy for the evils of domination in a specific context.³⁵

That of the first century A.D., that of the Roman Empire in Israel, that of Herod and Pilate, of the oppressed and humiliated Jewish people with their own domination system.

What is the message of Jesus? The primacy of God and the divine Reign (*imperium*); that God is the only absolute King from whom authority comes. The authority of this God is exercised by service and not by power in lording it over others, and never by oppression. The dignity of each human being is that of a child of God, made in God's image. Thus there is equality and brotherhood among all persons and among all races for all are children of the same Father. Respect for women as children of God and sisters. Non-violence and the protection of children and the weak members of society. In the manner of the great prophets, many acts of Jesus show his teachings in the concrete. Jesus Christ brings Good News and at the same time, inaugurates a new social order. He proposes a vision; Jesus is a vision of the Kingdom, of the City of God, in act. He refuses the structures of domination at the cost of his life. His life and his Gospel offer a paradigm for all times and all dominations – of human beings by one another. (cf. Mother Marie Eugénie above)

“Without vision, the people die.” Today as yesterday, **we need the courage to have a vision**. A vision incarnates hope; it indicates decision and a sense of direction. In seizing our imagination, it awakens the desire latent in each one to do something good for the world. Pope John Paul dared to propose a vision when he asked us to work for a Civilization of Love and a Culture of Life. We have seen how young people responded to his call.

To propose a vision means that we refuse to accept that we are powerless before the excesses of capitalism, materialism, racism, war and hunger, under-development and all the different oppressions operating in our societies. It proclaims that it is not necessary to undergo the style of existence that society wants to impose on us, what is currently accepted as “reality”...

I fear the defensive attitude that many families are adopting with regard to the world, and which consists in forming youth to hide behind protective walls while loudly or silently

³⁵ Wink, Walter. *When the Powers Fall*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998. p.6. Wink borrows the thought of a Jewess, Riane Eisler, and quotes her: “...no one has formulated such a consistent critique of domination as the Jew, Jesus.”

condemning the society “out there,” and refusing to take one’s place in the City. Worse still is the openly egotistic attitude which goes along with the current, acts in connivance with it, shows no sense of responsibility and profits to amass money or whatever, perhaps creating an island of comfort for self, and thus contributing actively to the destructive forces in our societies.

Our young people are like the youthful Marie Eugénie. They aspire to give themselves to a cause greater than themselves, to become better people. This was part of the attraction of Pope John Paul II; he called them to something great and beautiful; and then inspired confidence in them as well as in their future. A vision of an alternative City can offer a point of view by which young people can understand and critique their societies. It can encourage them to take a position, to demand change, to work for change. Still better, by giving them Jesus’ vision for the world, we can create a vision and build a project with the young people themselves.

Can we envisage education as a project greater than the little individualistic projects for security and “success” so often desired by parents for their children?
Can we envisage a project that would engage the parents themselves in the construction of the City of God?

Sister Clare Teresa, r.a.
Cannes : 8 Avril 2005