MARIE EUGÉNIE MILLERET

Marie Eugénie Milleret

1817- 1898

Foundress of the Religious of the Assumption

Hélène-Marie Bories, R.A.

To the friends of the Congregation who would like to know the first Religious of the Assumption

PREFACE

The nineteenth century was a time in search of balance. In France, as in much of Europe, it saw great revolutionary upheavals, as the nation passed from being a republic to an empire, to a restored monarchy to a second republic to a second empire and then back to a republic once more in the space of less than one hundred years. A century of great extremes of hope and despair, violence and romanticism, it witnessed the lives and work of Chateaubriand and Lamartine, Hugo and Musset, Beethoven and Chopin. It was the era of inventions: the railroad, the telegraph, the electric light. In the period with which this book is most concerned, the middle and later years of the century, the steam engine was accelerating the industrialization of Europe and widening the gap between the social classes. In addition, as Europe became more industrialized and less agrarian, the exploitation of women and children was becoming more and more a fact of life. Their smaller hands and bodies provided mill owners with the perfect tools for handling often dangerous machinery at a far smaller wage than a man would receive. Such conditions created fertile ground not only for Marx's analysis of but also for his solution to the problems of oppression and injustice revolution.

The Church of that century, exposed to the combined attack of atheistic humanism, revolution, and materialism, often turned inward out of fear. Having lost almost all its traditional privileges, it had begun to experience itself as wounded and in danger, and responded accordingly. Thus, a large segment of the Catholic world refused to consider ideals of social justice Is whatsoever; the ghosts of Voltaire and Rousseau still haunted many bishops and clerics, causing them to hold fast to deeply conservative not to say reactionary, ways of thinking and acting. A few prophets like Lamennais did arise during this period, but they remained on the fringes of the Church or were banned entirely.

Still, God was preparing some unexpected witnesses to do what the seemingly more powerful people in the Church would not or could not do; his Church, although

wounded, was still a living Church Within it were the Seeds of renewal sown by founders and refounders of religious orders, men and women like Henri Lacordaire, refounder of the Dominicans in France, Emmanuel d'Alzon founder of the Assumptionists and Euphrasie Pelletier foundress of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd. And it was not only religious who took up this work; these years would witness the development of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society by Frederic Ozanam who set his association the formidable task of serving poor and working class people, and the rise of many Third Order groups, who also combined spirituality with service .

It was a time of trial for Catholic education with many laws in France and elsewhere in Europe mitigating against it. As the century progressed however, this situation began to change because of the work of educators like Madeleine Sophie Barat, foundress of the Religious of the Sacred Heart, and Don Bosco, founder of the Salesians Demonstrating the link between culture and faith, their work put the lessons of the gospel into the minds and hearts of generations of Young Catholics.

Other Catholics were also living in ways that pointed to Christ: humble yet powerful saints like John Vianney, the Curé of Ars, and Thérèse Martin the "Little Flower"; converts like John Henry Newman and Archbishop Affre. Still others were bringing the Word to the world through writing and Preaching. Lenten conferences at Notre Dame, inaugurated by Lacordaire in the early years of the century, continued to take place year after year, while Catholic publishing also got underway and prospered with such newspapers as **I'Avenir** and **I'Univers** in the early days, and much later, **la Croix**. It is good to remember, too, that two apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary took place on French soil during those days, to Catherine Labouré on rue du Bac in Paris and to Bernadette Soubirous at Lourdes.

As temporal power was being wrested away from the Church during this century, six popes carried the burden of responsibility for the Body of Christ, with one, Pius IX, having the longest term in history (32 years). The first Vatican Council, held in 1876 during his pontificate, was marked by the conservatism mentioned earlier; it was the council which declared papal infallibility in matters of dogma and doctrine. Several sears later, in a marked change of papal attitude on social issues, the first social encyclical, **Rerum Novarum**, was promulgated by Leo XIII, his successor.

During much of that century, connected both in thought and friendship to many of the people already named, a woman whose influence was going to extend long beyond her lifetimealso used her life and work to point to Christ. Marie EugenicMilleret, foundress and saint, loved the times in which she lived and sought to understand their pursuits, problems, and conflicts in the light of the gospel. Face to face with a world in transition as it labored to bring the modern world to birth, she responded with her own prescription for its pain:

God is sovereign; He is Truth, Beauty, Goodness. His love draws forth love. He must be given first place in hearts, in society, in history. Christ is our King! To make Him and His inseparable Church known and loved will beaccomplished through education and, in particular, the education of women. The Gospel must penetrate society in such a way as to transform it, so that the Kingdom of God may be extended.

Marie Eugénie experienced the persecution promised to the disciples of Christ, but, believing beyond her own doubts, she undertuok a work of faith for the Kingdom with the poor means of Jesus Christ, as she was later to call them. That work of faith was the birthing and nurturing of the Religious of the Assumption, a congregation to whom she gave an intense contemplative life which invites the sisters to go ever deeper into relationship with God, a missionary fire which impels them to go out and "make disciples of all nations," and a community life -- Augustinian in character -- which leads them to reach out toward God, their only good, through their life with others. To some observers, her Vision seemed like madness, but it must have looked like wisdom to God, for her congregation is alive today, working for the extension of the Kingdom on five Continents

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At the outset of this work, it is necessary to speak of its limits and its possibilities Our archives hold a great deal of primary source material; these include nearly 12,000 letters of Marie Eugénie herself, a volume of personal notes, and chapters given to the sisters each week for twenty-five years. It would be difficult for even the most competent person to claim to have read everything and I am far from making such a claim. That being the case, I have used especially those texts which we consider foundational. I have also drawn some of my inspiration from other recent studies by Assumption Sisters. For the most part, the quotations come from Marie Eugénie's letters; some come from her personal journal, however, and others from her chapters. I have gleaned here and there, begging God to lead me and trusting my own experience of Marie Eugénie that nearly forty years in her congregation have happily revealed to me, day by day. I have not written this book for my Sisters because they know "our mother foundress" as well, if not better, than I do.I have written it, however, for the sake of our friends, those friends of the Assumption who complain, and rightly so, that they don't have much information about the simple and beautiful life of Mother Marie Eugénie. This book represents my attempt to gather up for them the substance of her spirituality, already present in them more than they think. Covering the span of Marie Eugénie's life from beginning to end, it tries to express the inexpressible: the form that the grace of God took in her, both for us and for the Church.

Sister Hélène Marie Bones, R.A.

A Note to the English Translation

As in the original, all the quotations from Marie Eugénie are indicated by the use of italics. Additions to the text at various points are meant to help the reader who may not be familiar either with French history or with Church Custom; occasionally, too, it seemed appropriate to make explicit what the original had left implicit

Joan Weber and Nuala Cotter, R.A.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

1817-1832
METZ, PREISCH, AND PARIS

"That upbringing in the country leaves a strong imprint."

Anne Eugénie Milleret was born in Metz during the night of August 25, 1817, on the feast of St. Louis, king of France. One of her distant ancestors, an Italian condottieri named Miglioretti, had served another French king, Francis I. To his French descendants that gentleman-soldier had left a coat of arms which bore a fortress, an eagle, two stars, and a stalk of millet -- from which the name most likely derived. He also bequeathed them a motto which even the most casual observer has to admit is apt: "Nihil sine fide," that is, "Nothing without faith."

Anne Eugénie's father, Jacques Milleret, had met Eleonore-Eugénie de Brou in Luxembourg around the turn of the century. Struck by her grace and charm, he asked her to marry him when she was 19 and he 22. Five children, three boys and two girls, were born to them. Their marriage, a union of opposing temperaments and cultures, had both positive and negative effects. Certainly one of its best results was the unusual degree of open-mindedness concerning the education of the children. Anne Eugénie was to benefit a great deal from this attitude.

The second to last child, Anne Eugenic was baptized on October 5, 1817 in her family's own chapel at Preisch, where the Millerets spent about half the year, with the other half spent at their house in Metz. Preisch is a kind of crossroads, a place where the borders of France, Germany and Luxembourg all come together; in fact, all three countries can be seen from the windows of the chateau. It is part of a land that had often been fought over and would be fought over again before the end of Marie Eugénie's long life. But during her childhood, the guns were silent and the air was filled only with the sounds of everyday life. Approximately 500 acres of woods, fields, and streams belonging to the Milleret family were occasionally given over to hunting, but more often saw the adventures of the children and their pets. One summer, for example, Anne Eugénie and her brother Louis, her faithful Companion in games and mischief as well as periods of solitude and wonder, tamed a deer with big black eyes. The wild creature trusted them enough to eat out of their hands.

M. Milleret, somewhat cold and strict at home, was a respected man of the business world who owned three banks and was chief tax collector of the area. He had political ambitions, too, and eventually was elected Deputy of the Moselle region. The ideas of Voltaire and the secret brotherhood of the Masons greatly influenced his thinking and behavior; most likely he was a deist rather than a Christian. His wife, the daughter of a family of aristocratic swordsmen with lands in Belgium and Luxembourg, was also

perhaps more a Christian by tradition than by conviction, but she gave her children a taste of what it meant to do justice and to love mercy. Much later in her life Marie Eugénie was to comment about her childhood that it *always seemed to me as Christian as most so-called religious up bringing*. The Milleret children studied at home, reading both French and German books from their father's well-stocked library, but they also visited the humble houses of the district, learning from their mother to care for the sick and respect the poor. Their mother prompted in the children a spirit of self- denial as well as what Marie Eugénie used to call the *natural virtues: honesty, uprightness, and generosity*. The healthy, vigorous life they led at Preisch was comfortable, but it was also there that the children of Jacques and Eleonore-Eugenie learned courage, self-control, and a certain austerity.

At the same time, trials were not lacking, even for landed gentry living in considerable comfort. Anne Eugénie was five years old at the death of her brother Charles, who was only nine. A year later, her little sister Elizabeth also died. Her eldest brother, Eugene, was already twenty in 1822, so it was with Louis, just a year or so her senior, that Anne Eugénie spent her childhood With Louis, Anne Eugénie would learn how to share everything, from the wonder of a tame deer to the mysteries of adult conversations overheard in drawing rooms and salons. As they grew older their political and social awareness grew with them, leading them to raise questions on the mystery of our existence.

Christmas 1829! Without even the ordinary preparation, just a little instruction from the parish priest, Anne Eugénie received the Body of Christ for the first time. After she had received the host, she suddenly felt herself taken up lovingly into the grandeur of God. The very being of God, the living God, absorbed her, making her understand her own smallness very acutely, even as she was filled with a desire to pay God great homage. In an instant she understood that she could do that only through the One whom she had just received.

But that was not all. In that small church of Saint Ségolène, in the midst of what was supposed to be simply a conventional rite of passage, everything turned upside down. Later, she remembered that she had felt *a silent separation from everything I had any attachment to, so as to enter, alone, into the immensity of the One whom I possessed for the first time. . . . The moment I received Jesus Christ, it was as if everything I had seen on the earth, my mother included, was only a passing shadow.*

As she returned to where her mother sat waiting, a voice spoke in her heart, saying *you will lose your mother but I shall be for you more than a mother. A day will come when you will leave everything you love in order to glorify me and serve this Church which you do not know.*

Throughout her life, Marie Eugénie spoke often about this moment to her sisters because she recognized it as the original grace from which everything else flowed. She continued to taste that experience of Christ, coming back to it over and over in order to

discover its meaning for herself and for the Assumption, which in some real way was born that Christmas Day from the heart of God. By his mysterious choice, Anne Eugénie's heart had been grafted forever to Christ Jesus through the Eucharist and through the Church she did not know. Like Augustine, who cried Out "O Mercy, you came to look for me even when I did not know you," her heart would be restless until it rested in God.

But she was still a long way from that kind of rest. A serious case of typhoid soon after prevented her from pursuing her studies at school in Metz. She recovered at Preisch, where books became her friends, and where, face to face with solitude, she learned what it meant to seek, to deepen, and to reflect.

She needed all the fortitude and courage gained from that experience and from her earlier years at Preisch, because in 1830 her father lost his fortune and had to put Preisch up for sale. In the house in Metz, too, sheriff's seals were everywhere, as jf it were the house of the dead, she wrote later. After such comfort and ease, the reduced standard of living and the loss of so many of their possessions must have been very hard to bear. But an even more bitter drama now undermined the household: M. and Mme. Milleret announced that they would separate. And with the separation of the parents came the separation of those two inseparable friends. Anne Eugénie went to live in Paris with Mme. Milleret while Louis remained with M. Milleret. Broken, this bond of ownership which attaches you even to places. Family, position, home, everything has changed. . . .1 hardly ever see now even one person known to me from my childhood. It was a different kind of solitude now, in its own way far harsher than the disease which had threatened her life. There were respites, of course. On the hill of Montmartre in Paris where the two Milleret women lived, the teenage Anne Eugénie enjoyed a brief but happy time of intimacy with her mother. There was a tenderness between them that had never before been expressed; those months imprinted themselves deeply on Anne Eugénie's heart and mind. But they were not to last.

In 1832, a cholera epidemic ravaged the capital. Mme. Milleret became ill; within a few hours she was dead. Fifteen years old, alone, and in great distress, Anne Eugénie experienced utter helplessness, made worse by the lack of any religious comfort either for her dear mother or herself. Her childhood was over, her adult life uncertain. To whom could she turn for help?

CHAPTER 2

1832-1836
NOTRE DAME

"My thoughts are a troubled sea which wearies me and weighs me down."

Even as he tried to recoup some bits and pieces of his fortune in Metz, M. Milleret was nevertheless deeply concerned about his motherless daughter in Paris. Beyond the question of her care and safety lay another question, equally important to people of his class and station: who would teach Anne Eugénie to be a lady of good society? When a friend of Mme. Milleret offered to take Anne Eugenic into her home, he accepted gratefully.

Mme. Doulcet, the wife of the chief tax collector in Qiâlons, was a very rich, very worldly, important hostess of the area. She must have been pleased to discover in Anne Eugénie a ready wit and real charm; these qualities were to make Mile. Milleret a great success in salon and ballroom. But even though she enjoyed the way of life led by Madame and her friends, Anne Eugénie found herself at the same time unsatisfied. The social circle of the Doulcets, even more irreligious than her own, with all its gossip, scandal, and specious arguments, clashed with the reading she had done and with her ever-present grief. In a world where the choice of the ribbons on a bonnet or the length of a petticoat was all-consuming, she had a thousand real questions which nobody could answer. In the midst of a crowd, was alone with feelings and thoughts which she described in her journal as a troubled sea. She felt that she might drown in this "sea"

which wearies me and weighs me down. I would like to know everything, analyze everything, and, plunging into the frightening regions of my mind, proceed boldly, pursued by some restless need of knowledge and truth which nothing can satisfy. Tired of myself, I would like to blot out this mind of mine, quiet, stop its probings. . . .I am all alone, alone in the world and in a bitter isolation of spirit. What difference does it make to have all these people coming around me with their joyful laughter in which I even join, these friends who shake my hand without bothering to find out if I am suffering. . . . When I am with them, I am more alone than ever; if I were to die tomorrow, I would be forgotten the day after. Nobody would come to pray at my tomb.

Here are the questions of a person who desires to live in the truth, the suffering of someone who understands that living in the truth can be both costly and isolating. In her present situation it was clear that such living had rarely if ever been tried. But she also had a wry sense of her own limitations:

I find myself completely taken up by questions well beyond my reach and which I would be better off not to think about. . . .And then the most trivial object is going to engross this haughty spirit of mine: a green leaf, a ray of sun. What am I talking about? A vain thought, praise.

When she wrote these lines, Anne Eugdnie was barely 18 years old, a somewhat reluctant debutante in a provincial French town. The lessons of her early life and her present suffering, however, had already given her a real capacity for reflection, analysis, and honesty.

In the winter of 1835, M. Milleret, no longer so sanguine about the frivolous atmosphere of Chez Doulcet, sent his daughter to Paris, to the home of Mme. Foulon, his cousin. A change in living situation brought me to the home of some very' pious women, wrote Marie Eugenic much later; it was perhaps an even greater danger. They bored me, struck me as narrow-minded. The isolation in this pious house weighed on her as it had in the worldly atmosphere of Châlons. At the same time she continued to be haunted by the Truth whose name was still known to her. But in the midst of this lonely, confusing life, she did have one anchor, one still point -- eucharistic grace. Much later she observed that this bond of love had steadied her during this period:

I could doubt the immortality of our soul but I involuntarily pushed away everything that attacked the sacrament of our altars, and, when at church, I saw the host in the hands of the priest, I begged it in spite of myself to make me like it and to draw me higher. But my upbringing, where Christ was for naught, barred my way to this great devotion.

It was customary at that time for those who claimed to be Christian to attend a "Lenten series," long sermons delivered cm Sunday afternoons during Lent in fashionable Parisian thurches. Anne Eugénie chose Notre Dame, where the young Dominican priest Henri Lacordaire had inaugurated his conferences only the year before. Although Lacordaire was still a few years away from refounding the Dominican order in France, he was at the height of his powers as a preacher. His reputation for eloquence and faith had reached the ears of Anne Eugénie and piqued her curiosity.

On the final conference day of Lent 1836, the crowd squeezed into the old basilica for the ten o'clock Mass and then settled down to wait until one in the afternoon, when Father Lacordaire would mount the pulpit steps and begin. During those hours of waiting Anne Eugénie laid out her questions before God -- praying without knowing it, really. Finally the moment arrived. She heard Lacordaire cry out: Assembly, what do you desire of me, truth? You are seeking it, you want to receive it. It is prayer that re-establishes our relationship with God.

. . Like insects that last but a day, lost under a blade of grass, we wear ourselves out with vain speculation We wonder where we come from, where we are going, but can we not say: "O you, whoever you are, who have made us, deign to draw me out of my doubt and my misery!" Who is unable to pray like that? Doubt is the beginning of faith, as fear is the beginning of love.

The words seemed addressed directly to her. Truth descended on her heart like rain on new leaves, while the gentle light of consent opened her eyes. A short time later, Anne Eugénie wrote to Father Lacordaire: Your words answered all my thoughts. They

completed my understanding of things; they gave me a new generosity, a faith that nothing would ever be able to make waver again. I was truly converted!

My vocation dates from Notre Dame, she was to say many times. From then on, there lived in her not only faith in God but also the desire to serve him. That moment in Notre Dame was for Anne Eugénie an encounter with Truth, with Christ and his Church, a decisive encounter which would orient her entire life. In a single impulse, the young woman who had not known Love's name now desired to adore the God who is Love and to consecrate her life to him.

The months that followed were illuminated by her conversion and by a call to give all my strength, or rather, all my weakness to this Church which, alone, in my eyes, had the secret and the power of Good on this earth. But how to answer the call? She dared at last to seek out Father Lacordaire at his lodgings on -the rue Saint-Dominique. His counsel was full of wisdom, especially for a nineteen year old: "Pray and wait." Father Lacordaire advised her to read and ponder the works of contemporary philosophical writers who were treating questions of society and faith, including Bonald, Bourdaloue, and Joseph de Maistre. And he spoke to her about religious life in terms that Anne Eugénie would never forget: It is a total self-sacrifice for others, it is a giving up of one's freedom in order to free those who are still in chains; it is a consecration of one's total life in a relationship of love and in the desire to follow Christ and be closely associated with his mission of salvation.

CHAPTER 3

1836-1837
SAINT EUSTACHE

"I am incapable of founding something in the Church of God."

"Pray and wait." For a year, Anne Eugenie waited. Through her reading she affirmed her faith intellectually and discovered the Church which she did not know. The ideas of Félicité Lamennais, Charles Montalembert and other young and fiery French Catholic intellectuals focused her attention on the sorry state of European society and the need for its reform, even is transformation. To work for the coming of the Kingdom of Christ and freedom of all people according to the Gospel became bier ideal. I dreamed of being a man so I could be used in great ways like them, she was to confess later. For Anne Eugénie, the will of God was to be found in a society where no one [would] have to endure. . . oppression by others.

At the same time, within her heart, the tiny spring of faith was becoming a stream as the grace of her long ago First Communion now poured freely down upon her. Her personal relationship with God deepened through her particular attraction for the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. The Foulon family lived near the church of Saint Sulpice, and she often took refuge there. She was to recount the effect on her: All I needed to do was to close the doors of Saint Sulpice in order to be moved to tears by Jesus Christ's extreme love for me and by his presence on our altars.

As the desire for a total consecration increased in Anne Eugénie, she was to have an extraordinary meeting with a no less extraordinary man. The story is told in Les Origines de l'Assomption, a four volume account of the beginnings of the congregation written by a sister just after Marie Eugénie's death in 1898. Our mother often recounted to us that when she was in Paris with her aunt, Mme. Foulon, she had a rather strange dream one night. She saw herself in a large and beautiful church with which she was not familiar; the crowd filled the nave and in the pulpit was a priest of venerable appearance who seemed to look at her for a long time, while an inner voice said to her: "There is the guide you are looking for, the one who will show the path on which you are to walk."
Eugénie was not superstitious and paid no attention to that dream, but the following day, two of her relatives urged her to accompany them to the church of Saint Eustache to hear a famous preacher. That was during Lent 1837. The invitation was accepted, but how can the astonishment of the girl be described when, upon entering Saint Eustache, she recognized the church in her dream, the altar, and the preacher himself -- Father Combalot.

Who was the Abbé Theodore Combalot? At 40 he was well-known throughout France, a fiery orator who preached the Kingdom of God from mission to mission all over the country. The fire that burned in him made his words excessive, yet his preaching often touched hearts. For twelve years he had wanted to found a congregation which would combine the most demanding contemplative life with the work of education of

women. At that time schools for boys were common, but schools for girls were unusual. Believing that the regeneration of society would be accomplished by women, Combalot was seeking a foundress to collaborate with him in educating women for the task. He planned to dedicate the congregation to Our Lady of the Assumption.

At Saint Eustache, the sermon that day had made a poor impression on Anne Eugénie. Hers was a soul looking for peace, not the strife and struggle his language suggested. But driven as if by an irresistible force, Eugénie returned to Saint Eustache several times to hear Father Combalot preach. When she made up her mind to talk with him about her desire to do something for God, however, he received her rather unpleasantly:

--Do you have great devotion to the Blessed Virgin?

--Not as much as I would like.

--Well, then, there's nothing to be done with you.

Still, he made an appointment with her for the following day, telling her to meet him at his confessional at half past six in the morning, just before his Mass.

The second interview was not particularly satisfying, either, but Anne Eugénie continued to ask Combalot's advice. Finally, however, the confessor's lack of reason and restraint frightened her level-headed nature, and she decided to leave him. Thinking she had to give him her reasons, she sent a note by the sacristan and waited for a reply. He soon came out in person and motioned her into the confessional. "You must not leave me," he said. "God wills that you stay under my direction. . . .There is something in this letter. . . ," the priest repeated, visibly moved by what he had read. "God is sending you. God wills that you stay."

For Father Combalot it was evident that God had finally sent him his foundress. Mlle. Milleret possessed all the qualities of a foundation stone; her intelligence, lively faith, and gentle zeal would be the columns of the institute he had been dreaming of building for so long. Anne Eugénie, on the other hand, felt very anxious. This completely new work, twelve years in the dreaming stage, was not yet begun in any concrete way. Now suddenly, a man she hardly knew was proclaiming that she, only twenty years of age, was to bring it to birth. She wished to commit her entire life to Christ, but could she trust this impetuous priest?

Father Combalot brushed aside her concerns, maintaining that it was necessary "to rebuild everything on Christ, to make both him and his Church known, to extend the limits of his Kingdom." His words struck a chord of grace in her, but she still balked at the thought of a foundation. Then, according to *Les Origines*, came a brief and wonderful dialogue. It is hard to determine which partner appears the greater or more humble:

She: lam not familiar with religious life, 1 have everything to learn. I am incapable of founding something in the Church of God.

He: It is Jesus Christ who will be the founder of our Assumption; we shall be only instruments and, in the hands of God, the weakest ones are the strongest.

Anne Eugénie continued to struggle. She was willing to enter the Daughters of Charity to take care of the poor and the sick, but she wept as she felt the weight of the work that Combalot asserted God was entrusting to her. Once she wrote:

I am struggling against the Holy Spirit, and l am trying to escape from Him, but praise God, up to now I have been defeated in the struggle; as soon as I entrust myself completely to God, I feel a peace so profound and so sweet that I am consoled by it.

Yet another time, she would remark: The Spirit is struggling in me like an eagle.

She asked for and received the sacrament of Confirmation in the chapel of the archbishop of Paris on the first Sunday after Easter 1837. That day was decisive: My vocation was determined Confirmation was for me the door to a new life. No longer was Anne Eugenic alone in confronting fear and uncertainty; now the Spirit was with her.

Notre Dame, the religious and cultural center of Paris, had seen the conversion of Anne Eugénie and her happy first call. In the heart of popular Paris, near its toiling and bustling marketplace, les Halles, Saint Eustache was seeing both the plan for a specific foundation and a radical consent to the cause of God.

CHAPTER 4

183 7-1 838
LA COTE SAINT ANDRE

"Here I experienced true joy in entering the house of my God."

In July 1837, Anne Eugénie went home to Lorraine for the first time in five years; she had not been there since her mother's death. Family and friends surrounded her with attention and curiosity, for everybody was eager to see how the little girl they remembered had become a young woman. On the surface all was gaiety, but under the surface, the parties and *soirées* prompted mixed feelings as she recalled her childhood her non-believing family circle, and her father's financial decline.

The return of a "long lost" son or daughter is always cause for celebration, but family also carries with it certain obligations. She had to speak of her future, but Father Combalot had forbidden her to disclose the real plan. She was to say simply that she wanted to be a nun and no more. If they were to ask "Where?" her reply was to be the equally simple "I don't know." Questions of how and why were to be answered the same way. When she did speak in this limited fashion to her father about her call, he told her that he was against her entrance to religious life. On August 24, 1837, she wrote in her journal: Tomorrow is my birthday. I'll be twenty. So in one year I'll be free and will give my all to our work, no matter what happens. M. Milleret, a gentleman accustomed to single-minded determination in the business world, was frightened when he found it in his own home; although he had been a somewhat remote father during Anne Eugénie's childhood, he now expressed his love for her very tenderly. His gentleness was much harder for her to bear than harshness would have been. At the same time she suffered too the heartbreak of knowing that her old playmate Louis, the brother with whom she had shared everything, found her desires incomprehensible. She recalled later that she had wept many bitter tears during that summer. Still, father or no father, brother or no brother, she was determined to follow her heart. Another year had to pass, however, before she could do so freely. During that time her father was still in charge, and he hit upon a plan which he hoped would turn her away from her notion of being a nun. By proposing that she become a boarder with the Benedictines of the Blessed Sacrament on the rue Ste. Genevieve in Paris, M. Milleret imposed on his youngest child a solitude that he himself would not have been able to stand.

The monastery buildings (still to be seen today at 18 rue Tournefort) were quite austere, but Anne Eugénie had her own "certain austerity" of the Preisch years, along with the great ardor of her new-found vocation. Of course she suffered from the cold and the damp as well as her aloneness, but she lived that solitude in a conscious way, allowing it to change and shape her. During the year she undertook an ambitious program of study that she called the renewal of my mind. Convinced that she must flow read, write, and think in the light of faith, she began to study theology, history, and the social

teachings of the Church. She read voraciously, working away at a large collection of French and foreign literature. She discovered Michelet's 1 'Histoire de France and Victor Hugo's Voix Interieures. Jocelyn, Lamartines narrative poem about a reluctant young priest, although on the Church's Index of Forbidden Books, nevertheless suited her fancy and caused her to dream of a love beyond measure.

At the same time that she was doing all this work, she was also corresponding regularly with Father Combalot. A few delightful letters survive from that year: As for Lamartine's Chute d'un Ange, would you let me [read it]? I'm warning you that I'll take your silence for consent. . . because I always endup doing what I feel like doing even as I reproach myself for it. And again: You are a little late with your forbidding me to read Father Orsini, it's finished! . . .I really wish, dearest Father, that you wouldn't always forbid me to read what isn't exactly according to your ideas.

The time spent with the Benedictines was like a long retreat with the inner work of change and growth as intense as the study and spiritual direction with Combalot. Anne Eugénie followed the entire Divine Office in the choir -- that is to say, Matins, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Compline, or approximately three hours of community prayer -- made a morning meditation, attended the conventual Mass, and spent an hour in front of the Blessed Sacrament each afternoon, an hour that she particularly relished. But her life as a boarder rather than as a member of the community made her desire her own sisters all the more. She realized at some point during this semi-eremetical year that she was ready to prepare more directly for the foundation. To do that she would need a real novitiate, in a community which could form her in religious life.

Ironically, as her mind and heart were growing stronger, her body was becoming weaker. Her recurrent spells of dizziness worried her father even more than her desire to enter religious life, and so at last he gave his consent to her staying with the Visitation Sisters of Côte Saint Andre in the south of France. The climate, he thought, would be favorable to his daughter's health. It turned out that he was right, both literally and figuratively.

On August 15, 1838, ten days before her twenty-first birthday, Anne Eugénie stepped into the cloister of the convent of the Visitation. Here I experienced true joy in entering the house of my God. Her joy was intensified by the warmth of the welcome she received from the sisters, who taught her the fundamentals of religious and monastic life, the little details of a love lived day by day and celebrated hour by hour. She savored the encounter with God in the solitude of her cell, the silence of the evening, and the prayer, not to mention the exuberant joy of community recreation. Her humor and freshness are still noted in the archives of the Visitation.

The spirit of Saint Francis de Sales was alive at Côte Saint Andre. Fraternal love, simplicity, honesty and good humor marked the house and impressed its newest, temporary member, who would later transmit this spirit to the newborn Assumption. Marie Eugénie often cited Francis de Sales and Jeanne de Chantal for their amiability as well as for their mastery of prayer. At a trying, severe time in the Church's history, they

had led ordinary Catholics to a spirituality which was based on humility, gentleness and love and to a theology which stressed the Incarnation of Christ. Two hundred years later, the young Marie Eugénie and thus the young Assumption were to benefit from such orientations.

Anne Eugénie followed a program of study designed by Father Combalot, a program which covered much of the great tradition of the Church. In dogma, Aquinas had first place; in moral theology, Alphonsus Liguori was her master. In spirituality, she was drawn to both Teresa of Avila and Augustine, but Scripture was her favorite study. At this time she learned to read and quote Saint Paul, whom she desired to make one of the special patrons of the Assumption because of the treasures and the knowledge of Jesus Christ that she found in the epistles. In addition to all of this professional reading she studied German for two hours a day, Latin and English for one hour each, and helped with the making of the Communion hosts. Combine that with the prayer life of the Visitation community and her own personal prayer, as well as the correspondence with the Abbé, and it is no wonder that she complained only half humorously that she didn't have enough hours in her day.

Even though she was deeply immersed in academic study, she did not forget the world and its needs. Later she was to recall how the times influenced the development of a particularly Assumption response: Religious education being a need at this time, it seemed to us that our new family should devote itself to it and try to introduce into it all the new and intelligent models -- all that was new in Catholic thought -- with the entire movement carried out in that particular direction.

This passage demonstrates her concern for integrity of action, for concerted effort, as well as for an awareness of the need of change.

The correspondence with Father Combalot continued as before, with humor, freedom and audacity still marking her writing. Here, for example, she criticizes the great orator's own work: I am reading your philosophy, my dear Father. Well! I am infinitely sorry that you haven't rewritten this work. There are some beautiful things. . . . and yet, due to lack of style and care, it is becoming extremely tiring to read.

But obviously their exchange was not limited to friendly banter. The priest lived an authentic experience of God and gave the novice the means to find her own way to such experience through sensitive letters of spiritual direction. His counsels focused on payer, the Mass, the rosary, awareness of the presence of God throughout the day, and that "prayer of foresight," in which one looks at one's day in advance. "Pray every morning with courageous precision," he urged. Taking these counsels to heart, she made them her own. She was aided in this task by her almost daily reception of Communion, at this time an uncommon practice that required permission from one's director. His permission suggests that even though he seemed to breathe fire, he also knew his directee and her needs quite well.

During the course of her novitiate, although most of their exchange was by letter, she and Combalot did meet several times. One such meeting was particularly providential because it was there, at the estate of Father Combalot's mother in Chatenay, that Anne Eugénie Milleret and Emmanuel d'Alzon met for the first time.

Even though he was very young, Father d'Alzon was Grand Vicar of Ni'mes. A valued preacher who belonged to Lamennais' school of thought, d'Alzon looked for the "spiritual regeneration of France" and wished to dedicate his life to it. Naturally, the work anticipated for the embryonic Assumption aroused his interest. So too did its would be foundress. Thirty years old himself, he marveled at a young woman not yet twenty two who could express herself with such theological clarity and spiritual humility.

Later, reflecting separately on that first meeting, one almost echoes the other:

She: We did not have very many one to one conversations, [but] in such a short space of time, I felt for him great esteem and confidence.

He: I had one short and very serious conversation with her which confirmed in me that she had the makings of a foundress.

On the other hand, at that first meeting, d'Alzon had turned to Father Combalot, whose terrible disposition he knew only too well, and told him that he knew of just one obstacle to his work. "And what is that?" asked Combalot. "You, my dear friend!" replied d'Alzon. It is not recorded how Combalot took to this assertion, but the future would witness to its insight and truth.

CHAPTER 5

1838

JOSEPHINE, ANASTASIA, KATE

"My first sister. . . "

While Anne Eugénie was being gently conformed to Jesus Christ in the novitiate of the Visitation, Father Combalot was working in his own unique way to recruit young women for the Assumption. In September 1838, preaching at a retreat for priests in Sarlat in the Perigord region of France, he informed his captive audience at some length and with his usual enthusiasm about the work of the Assumption. This event was to bring about important results.

In the manor of la Bourlie, a few hours on horseback from Sarlat, a large family seriously committed to the Church was making its influence felt. It was common knowledge that one of the de Commarque daughters, Josephine, wanted to enter Carmel. It was also known that although she was 27 and thus technically free to do as she liked, her parents opposed her entrance because of her fragile health. So far they were winning the battle, but Combalot was to win the war. When he learned about Mlle. Commarque and her desire, he quickly sent her an urgent message; she must come without delay to Sarlat where he would communicate some very important things to her. At Sarlat, Josephine found a second letter which explained that the Religious of the Assumption proposed "to bring all the sciences to the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ and to devote themselves to the upbringing and education of girls." The priest concluded with a statement which, as far as he was concerned, was irrefutable: It seems to me that, given the times in which we are living, you will give more glory to God and to the Church in a congregation which will combine contemplative life with a true apostolate than you would in a totally contemplative order.

Not surprisingly, Josephine did not know what to think of such a proposition or the bald manner in which it was made. Before meeting with Combalot, she had asked a priest at the cathedral in Sarlat, "Does this work already have many religious?" His reply: "Oh! I believe so! Maybe 2000!" Such was the power of Combalot's preaching that not only did his retreatants believe that the Assumption had been founded, but they had also boosted its membership by 2000 per cent. With those convincing numbers to encourage her, Josephine went to meet Combalot. Later she said about that meeting:

It was only then that I understood that nothing had been begun and that Mlle. Eugénie was the only religious he had. The figure of two thousand was considerably lessened, but that did not shake my confidence. I felt that Providence was holding me by the hand and leading me.

Father Combalot immediately put Mile. de Commarque in touch with MlIe. Milleret, at this time a novice of just two months' standing. So began the correspondence

which would unite Anne Eugénie to the one whom she called my first sister. In these letters Anne Eugénie was able to refine her ideas and her cherished religious and educational plans with an enthusiastic and intelligent partner. Meantime, Josephine's affectionate nature must have been a balm for someone who had been so cut off from human affection for so long; in one letter to Anne Eugénie, Josephine wrote: "I love you as if I had always known you."

While the two young women were making their plans for the future, however, Josephine's parents were hearing from friends in high places that Father Combalot was "an enterprising man without any prudence, very excitable and not at all practical. an excellent heart and a volcanic head." And after the first blush of excitement wore off, Josephine began to doubt her gifts and grow anxious about her lack of formal education. That kind of thinking robbed her of the strength she needed to deal with the apprehensions of her father and mother. Consequently, Josephine, the first one, was to enter the Assumption only afterseveral others. Nevertheless, she continued to be present in the heart of Anne Eugénie. The future Sister Marie Thérèse, nurse, founder of the house at Sedan, and advisor to Mother Marie Eugénie, would be a very precious stone of the Assumption.

If Josephine de Commarque's vocation to the Assumption was something like a local train -- a little slow, with many stops along the way -- then the vocation of Anastasia Bévier was an express. A native of Normandy, orphaned at an early age, she had spent her childhood and youth in a boarding school where she had learned to love study. She was a bit of a bluestocking. Although it was rare at that time for a woman to do so, she had taken university exams and had passed with honors. One day, as she was walking through the streets of Paris, she suddenly found she could believe absolutely in the existence of Christ. By her own testimony it was the most beautiful moment of her life. From then on she was decided: she would dedicate herself completely to Christian education, to the teaching of faith to the young.

One day, in search of the sacrament of penance, she met Father Combalot sitting tirelessly in his confessional in the church of the Carmelites. We can only imagine their initial dialogue and subsequent encounters, but we do have an account of the most decisive meeting from Anastasia herself. She reported: "That day, having run out of arguments, Father Combalot showed me his library, the Summa of Saint Thomas, and the enormous folios of the Fathers of the Church. He said, 'You will read all of that!''Oh, then I am yours!' I cried out."

Later, Anastasia, who was to become Sister Marie Augustine and principal of several schools, would develop an entirely new course of studies for the students of the Assumption. Remembering her own youthful disappointment at and disgust with the incomplete and tendentious spirit of traditional textbooks, she would write new texts that explored the relationship of faith with culture and culture with faith.

Like Anastasia Bévier, Catherine O'Neill was a young person in a hurry. Born in Ireland, but educated in England, she had a lively, ardent spirit and an Irish temper to

match. In 1838 she was 23, and had never lived apart from her elder sister, Marianne, since the death of their mother sixteen years earlier. After their years in boarding school, the O'Neill sisters lived for some time with their father in Liverpool, where they led the normal life of girls of their age and station. They enjoyed dressing up, going to parties, and dancing away the night; they loved reading romantic novels and weeping over the adventures of the heroines.

Still, Kate carried within herself great ambitions which she would try to raise to the heights of sanctity. She had heard the call of the Lord at her First Communion on December 25, 1827, just two years to the day before Eugenic was to hear the same call. The question of a possible religious vocation both attracted and repelled her. That the superficial life she was leading could only separate her from her true self, she knew to be true, but how to find the wholeness which is holiness was beyond her ken at that moment. She hid her confusion and longing under a layer of fiery speech and pride; as Marie Eugënie noted when she spoke with her for the first time: what was so beautiful and proud in her attitude frightened me. The roots of that proud beauty lay deep in the land of saints and scholars, a land renowned also for its marvelous horses. One might say that she was a kind of spirited, temperamental thoroughbred that only the Lord of Lords would be able to tame. Having just read Mme. de Stael's Corinne (1807), Kate convinced Marianne to try a travel adventure. Like melancholy Sir Oswald Nelvil, the hero of the novel, they would leave prosaic Liverpool and lead a glamorous life on the Continent, first in Paris and then in Rome. And so, in January 1838, the two Irishwomen settled into a small apartment at the Abbaye-aux- Bois, a monastery of Augustinians in Paris where unmarried ladies of good family could take lodgings outside the cloister. A literary salon met in these genteel surroundings, a gathering which must have been very agreeable for Kate, who had her "dearest friends," her books, forwarded to her there. Her personal library included a great many novels like Corinne, the story of romantic, artistic, and ultimately tragic love. Fluent in French, Kate and Marianne soon made friends in the circle of Mme. Recamier, their neighbor at the Abbaye-aux-Bois. In her salon they met Mme. de Castellane, a countess and intimate friend of Mme. Recamier, and also Chateaubriand, the writer, Christian apologist, and politician. Soon Paris was no longer a foreign city to them.

During the Lent of 1839, the two sisters accompanied Mme. de Castellane to Saint Sulpice for the inevitable "Lenten Series," but found they had very little taste for the torrential language of the preacher, whose identity should not be too hard to guess! Still, whether because of curiosity or Providence – or both - the O'Neills continued to attend the series. Combalot was drawing crowds of up to 6000 with his dramatic message and delivery. One Sunday he spoke so enthusiastically about the need for religious orders in France that Kate decided that she could talk to him. She felt that he would take her seriously if she spoke to him about her desire for religious life.

On March 23, she made up her mind to go and ask the question whose answer she both longed for and feared. Combalot had never met her before. All he knew about this foreign young lady was that she was considering entering the convent. Nevertheless, he

told her bluntly: “God wants you; you must become a religious. God wants you for a work that I must found.”

The two combatants -- for the interview quickly became a kind of verbal wrestling match -- circled each other warily, with Kate imagining herself just out of reach. “What is this work?” she asked. “Education,” he replied. “I don’t want anything to do with it!” she declared, thinking herself safe. But Combalot was the more experienced fighter and surprised her with the depth of his answer: You don’t understand that it is through women that society will be regenerated, yet people give girls only pious practices and don’t help them to understand Jesus Christ. They don’t reveal Christ to them. They don’t teach them to relate everything to Jesus Christ, to restore everything in Jesus Christ. When she tried to take the offensive again, the priest easily pinned her: “My daughter,” he said, “it is pointless to keep going over and over it. This is the will of God; you must do it. It will be.”

Kate O’Neill’s long journey, culminating in this struggle at a latter day Peniel with an unlikely angel, had prepared the future Sister Th&èse Emmanuel for the Assumption. She would be the co-foundress and Marie Eugénie’s closest confidante as well as the novice mistress from the beginning of the novitiate in 1842 until her death in 1888.

In this way were the first “living stones” (1 Peter 2:6) of the Assumption found and pulled out of their original soil for the sake of the foundation. In one crucial year, the Assumption gained several of the rocks on which it would stand. Anne Eugénie had entered the Visitation alone, but when she left it on April 13, 1839, she knew that those days were over. The community life of the Assumption was about to begin.

CHAPTER 6

April 30, 1839
RUE FEROU

"Our congregation had such weak beginnings."

On April 30, 1839, the feast of Saint Catherine of Siena, Anne Eugénie Milleret and Anastasia Bévier met in a small apartment on rue Férou, a tiny lane near Saint Sulpice. It was appropriate that they came together on such a day, for Catherine had been someone who had combined an active life in and for the Church with the deepest contemplation. Now, in the evening, as the great bells of Saint Sulpice joined all the other bells of the capital to ring in the month of Mary, they realized that the day was equally appropriate for a congregation dedicated to the Assumption. Year after year, Marie Eugénie would celebrate that anniversary by recounting once more the amazing deeds of God:

Our Congregation had such weak and powerless beginnings, so disproportionate to the good things God has been pleased to derive from it, that we would not even dare to recount them ~f it were not for the fact that it is precisely in the absence of any human strength and wisdom that the works are shown to be more truly of God. It is the disproportion which makes us see and believe our Creator and Jesus Christ, the one who wanted from us only a total and zoving dependence on Him.

Religious life, given its rhythm by the sound of the bell, was really beginning for the Assumption; the little communit prayed, studied, and attended to household chores, its members always carrying the great project in their hearts. (It had grown to three with the arrival of Joséphine Néron, a childhood friend of Anne Eugenic. Her fragile health, however, prevented her from continuing with religious life, and she left the community after less than a year.) Times for Office, silence, spiritual reading and prayer were decided so that they could savor. moment by moment, the joy of pleasing God. Allowing themselves to be led by Father Combalot, they began to experience the meaning of religious obedience. He had established for them a program of studies informed by his great faith in and burning love for the Church and the Blessed Virgin Mary. Unfortunately, he also had a quick temper and a capricious, rather possessive side to his nature, and these began to throw off the rhythm and affect the harmony of the little community.

About those early days, Marie Eugénie told stories ~ almost hard to believe: Father Combalot changed his mind every other week about everything. Sometimes, for example, concerning the studies he would say: "There is nothing as beautiful as the psalms; work on Bellarmine and Saint Augustine." We'd start doing it, but a week later he'd say: "You are too scholarly, leave me all your books." Another time he said. "You are all weak, you look unwell, you must eat meat, even on Fridays." But two weeks later

he was saying: “This is abominable. It’s incredible; you don’t even observe the laws of the Church! You certainly need to do penance!”

Still, reflecting on this experience much later, Marie Eugénie insisted that even in this seeming folly the hand of God was at work, preparing the sisters for a far greater “folly.” That is how, that is exactly how Jesus Christ formed and founded the tiny and young Congregation, deepening in it forever the folly of obedience, that is, of faith, of the choice of God above anything else. If the Assumption exists, it is only because the first sisters obeyed simply and without discussion an authority which, I recognize, was often very unreasonable.

It shou1d be said, however, that the intimate notes of Marie Eugénie tell us that she cried very often the first three months of the foundation!

The door of 15 rue Férou was often pushed open by fiends and benefactors who helped the community in many ways. But they received help for themselves as well. The little apartment was an oasis of prayer in the heart of Paris; anyone who wanted to “come away for a while,” to drink from its wellspring and rest in its shade was welcome. Young people, attracted by this new kind of humble yet bold religious life, pushed the door open and asked to stay. One such person was Henriette Halez, a rue F&ou neighbor. Her early life had been a nightmare: orphaned suddenly, then raised by a grandfather who had killed himself in front of her eyes, she had fallen into the hands of a coarse guardian. Now, however, having the good future to know the community, she resolved to enter as soon as she came of age. She would take the name Sister Marie Josèphe. Sadly, she was to die of consumption only a few. years later, the first of a long line of young sisters gone too soon to rejoin their Lord.

As for Kate and Marianne O’Neill, they came to rue Férou, too, but at first only to share in the study. They arrived each morning at nine for Anne Eugënie’s course in Latin. Commenting on Aquinas’ treatise on the Incarnation with only the original text at her disposal, she translated and summarized the material, then dictated her notes to her listeners. This was followed, of course, by the religious duties of the community and the sparse midday meal. Classes resumed at four with Father Combalot’s instruction on dogma and patristic theology.

Rue Férou was a kind of “school of poverty,” a tiny apartment where the sisters slept on straw mattresses and ate at their meager table sitting on the few chairs the house could boast. It must have been stiflingly hot in a Paris July, and so, with the community growing and Anne Eugénie becoming weary, they decided to rent a beuer-ventilated house at 12 rue des Pierres in Meudon, a small country town not far from Paris. There, on August 5, 1839, the feast of Our Lady of the Snows, Catherine O’Neill gave herself forever to God and to the. Assumption. There also, on October 5, 1839, Josephine de Commarque, my first sister, finally joined her cherished community.

Despite the change in location, the spirit of poverty was growing rather than decreasing. Josephine used to tell a funny story about her entrance day that illustrates this

spirit. It is about Anastasia. On her way to the train station to welcome Josephine. she fell on a saw, opened her knee, and then cried out: “What joy! Only my knee is cut; my dress isn’t torn!”

Fifty-five years after these events, in 1884, Marie Eugénie remembered how their life was, and spoke too about what it meant: Going back to those first days and seeing everything the Lord has done for us, I was struck by a thought I need to express to you. It is that in our work, everything is from Jesus Christ, everything belongs to Jesus Christ, everything must be for Jesus Christ. . . We began in a poor little apartment, then in rented houses. We were a few poor girls without a place on the earth. God gave us everything. . .. Everything comes from Him; everything, therefore, belongs to Him and must return to Him!

CHAPTER 7

1839-1842
RUE VAGIRARD

“A house between a courtyard and a garden”

Toward the end of rue Férou, not far from the Luxembourg Gardens, is rue Vaugirard. A few hundred yards father on the right, at what is today no. 106, stands a rather large between a courtyard and a garden, both of which are very small. Here the little community was to become stronger as the vision of the foundress became clearer, but her vision was to be clarified as much by their trials as by their joys.

The sisters moved to rue Vaugirard in the fall of 1839, and their first few weeks in the new house were very busy. The courtyard and garden were indeed "very small," but they were adequate for a young community with only one desire: a chapel for the Blessed Sacrament. They prepared a simple room at the top of the house for this purpose, decorating it with an unpretentious wallpaper, which, as les Origines reports, seemed “magnificent" to them. Above the ordinary wooden altar they made an arched window, then put sheets of colored paper over it to make it look, a little, like a stained glass window.

The first Mass was celebrated -- and not without emotion -- by Father Combalot on November 9, 1839, the anniversary of the dedication of Saint John Lateran, the pop&s own church in Rome. After communion, the Body of Christ was placed reverently in the tabernacle. From that time on in every house and apartment, in tents in the desert and tenements in the city, from generation to generation, the cornerstone and Master of the house was going to stay with His Assumption.

From then on, too, the tiny Assumption made its way into the life of the larger Church through its celebration of the Divine Office. Beginning with the first Sunday of Advent the sisters is took up the mighty work of praying the Roman breviary is length, complexity, and beauty. The invocation at the start of each liturgical hour connected them with the cry of people:

--O God, come to our assistance!

--Lord, make haste to help us!

One account suggests the solemnity of their liturgy despite the make-shiftness of their chapel. “There were only four sisters, but they recited the office in choir; they arranged the chairs like stalls and at each ‘Gloria Patri’ solemnly rose for the bow.”

The four sisters who rose with each “Glory Be” were no longer thinking of themselves as Eugénie or Kate, Anastasia or Josephine. At the November 9th Mass they had taken new names as a sign of their lives’ being changed forever in Christ Jesus. It

was an old custom of religious life, based on a tradition which stretched back to the days of Genesis, when God had given Abram and Sarai new names for their new task, and to the time of Jesus, who had called Simon "Peter," the rock on which he would build his Church.

So it was Sister Marie Eugénie Milleret, along with Sister Thérèse Emmanuel O'Neill, Sister Marie Augustine Bévier, and Sister Marie Thérèse de Commarque who welcomed Henriette Halez and Constance Saint-Julien to the house on rue, Vaugirard. Henriette became Sister Marie Josèphe, while Constance took the name Sister Marie Gonzague. These six women, ranging in age from Marie Gonzague's 18 years to Marie Thérèse's 27, formed the first true Assumption community. From the beginning their relationships with each other were marked by confidence and respect, by simplicity and friendship, and also, a certain freedom of spirit which allowed each woman her particular grace. Marie Eugénie's recollection sounds somewhat idealized, but with these natives of different regions and even nations, many blessed with strong personalities and all that goes with such strength, there was great need of grace. It is interesting to observe that Marie Eugénie points to "freedom" as the thing which promoted grace.

As at rue Férou, many people came to visit, for the sisters saw friendship as a way to build the Kingdom of God. Their circle of friends was always widening, with people coming not only from Paris, or from France, but also from Ireland and Great Britain, and later from Poland, Italy, and Spain. Some loved science, others politics, still others poetry; the house rang with the exchange of ideas and opinions. Many of these visitors were famous in their fields or would become so, people like Eugéne and Leon Bore, who were art critics; Jean Joseph Poujoulat, who would later dedicate to Marie Eugénie his translation of Saint Augustine's letters; Frederic Ozanam, who founded the Saint Vincent de Paul Society. There was also Chateaubriand the famous historian, who became so emotional at the clothing ceremony of one novice that he was mistaken for her father. There must have been quite a few exciting and stimulating afternoons in the parlor of rue Vaugirard.

Mornings were certainly demanding there, and most afternoons were more likely to be spent in study or work than in conversation. The sisters rose at five to pray, attend Mass, and participate in Lauds, the first hour of the Office. To the theology, Scripture, Latin, and Patristics of the first days were now added work on the psalms, the liturgy, Christian art, philosophy, and the natural sciences. The first sister up in the morning got to keep the community's only Latin dictionary at her desk for the day.

The stark emptiness of the house disturbed their friends. "There isn't anything here," someone is reported to have said, and the comment was not too far from the truth. They had the bare necessities and no more -- not even heat during the winter. The treasurer of the community, Sister Marie Augustine, invariably told anyone returning from making a few purchases, "That's too expensive, don't buy it anymore," so they went to the market on rue Sevres, haggling so much over every centime that the merchants hated to see them coming. "We economized every little bit of money; with only our small allowances, we had to pay the rent, keep up the chapel, clothe and feed

ourselves. We handled everything carefully and took care of our books and the little furniture we had, just like the true poor."

To poverty was added a general lack of know-how These girls, after all, had just left a world in which there were other people to cook and clean and mend for them. "Sister Augustine, especially, used to put into one pot everything she was given to prepare the day's meal. After a few such attempts, she was put in charge of sweeping," noted one of her sisters. There was humor to be found in this Assumption, and tenderness, too. The poverty, while real, was never mean- spirited or sour. Each wanted the good for the other, as can be seen in Marie Eugénie's remark about Marie Josèphe, who had begun to cough and look pale: I cover her with flannel so she won't look so thin and we put a fire in her room.

Of course, they had chosen their poverty, unlike the poor all around them. But they were willing to live as much a possible like the "true poor" and to suffer the consequences. They also knew that this external poverty was the way to a more interior poverty, a surrender which meant trusting entirely in the poor and powerless means of Jesus Christ. As she prepared for her clothing, that is, for her taking of the religious habit, Marie Eugénie identified this surrender with Jesus' Passion: I shall take up my cross of poverty, abandoning myself to Providence.

The first clothing ceremony took place on August 14, 1840. Bishop Affre, a friend of the community for more than a year, had just been named archbishop of Paris. He presided over the celebration with his vicar general, Father Gros. The sisters were dressed in purple habits and white veils, symbolic colors of penitence and joy. They echoed the psalmist as they sang Psalm My heart and my soul ring out their joy to God, the living God.

They are happy who dwell in your house,forever singing your praise.

One day within your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.

Two months after the first clothing, there was cause for another, because the community was blessed in October with the arrival of two more sisters, Marie Catherine and Anne Marie. Natives of Beam, they caine firmly committed to the work of the Assumption and -- a great blessing indeed -- well prepared for housekeeping as well. In March 1841, the sisters elected Mother Marie Eugénie as their superior, a choice that Father Combalot seemed to ratify with joy. In his remarks on that occasion he remained the 24 year old superior, "You were already their mother."

But there was a serious storm brewing, and it was to come from the place one might most expect. The year before, Father Combalot had written some thirty pages of introduction to the as yet unwritten constitutions of the Religious of the Assumption. In them, he had laid out the religious and education plan of the Assumption, starting and ending with "Jesus Christ the Alpha and the Omega of all human sciences." It was a typical Combalot production -- full of sound and fury as well as solid principles. And it

was also strictly his; he had not consulted with anyone but God. When Marie Eugénie began to write first Constitutions of the Assumption, she took a different approach and sought out the thinking of the Church in the person of the bishop. In short, she did not rely on Combalot alone.

As the months went by, moreover, she became more willing to admit the inconsistencies of the priest, who repeatedly destroyed one day what he had put together the day before. I am sometimes very troubled about the future of our work, but we have never had any other support except Providence, and after all He has done for us, we must not hesitate to abandon ourselves to Him. Early in 1841, she decided to get in contact once again with Father d'Alzofl, whose frank reflections concerning CombalOt she had not forgotten. Father d' Alzon answered forcefully, with objectivity and detachment, but honestly: "No, you must not tolerate the kinds of things you're telling me about. No, you must not relinquish to Father the success of your work!"

For his part, Archbishop Affre was worried about Combalot's authoritarianism and delegated another priest as super ior for the young community. (Although Marie Eugénie's had been elected by the sisters, the community still lacked a certain status; the bishop was acting as a kind of guardian here.) Father Combalot refused to accept this development, swearing that he would remove the community from Paris and re-establish it in Brittany. He demanded that the sisters abandon Marie Eugénie and follow him to Brittany. They must choose between founder and foundress.

Thérèse Emmanuel unequivocally expressed her own position, which was also that of the entire community. Not one of Marie Eugénie's daughters would deny that Father Combalot had been a mighty force behind their work, but not one would follow him to Brittany. On May 3, the feast of the Finding of the True Cross, Father Combalot bundled his belongings together, declared that they would never see him again, and left the house. The next day he departed for Rome, but not before writing to Archbishop Affre, asking him to care for the work.

"There was a great intimacy among us; we were strongly bonded to one another, and that is what saved the foundation." That strong bond of community had given these young women the strength they needed at that terrible moment. For Marie Eugenic, waiting to learn of their choice, it had meant the difference between life and a kind of death. After Combalot left, she experienced great distress -- I cry like a child -- yet her faith was growing stronger, almost without her knowing it. As she would often do later, she found the necessary words:

God never takes anything away without giving Himself more profoundly in that place. . . . He showed us that it was He who was accomplishing the work and that He wanted to do it alone.

The words were for her sisters, but they were also for herself; it could be that they led to the continued focusing of her prayer:

Lord, take away my concerns about the work so as to leave me nothing else but the concern to accomplish what will be with the light and the grace that I have at that moment.

CHAPTER 8

1841-1842
THE IMPOSSIBLE FUTURE

"A foundation without a founder."

After the storm, it seemed for a time that the sky would stay clear for them. And for the months leading up to the first professions of Marie Eugénie, Thérèse Emmanuel and Marie Augustine, there was indeed a kind of peace. Needless to say, given the history of this community, it was not to last.

On August 14, 1841, the three sisters made vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. At the behest of Church law, those vows were temporary, but their hearts understood them as permanent. Each then received a gold ring to symbolize this commitment. "My Lord Jesus Christ has given me his ring," states the Ceremonial, the ancient ritual for the consecration of virgins; "I am his spouse. I will dwell all the days of my life in the house of the One whom I have seen, whom I have loved, in whom I have believed and to whom I have given my love." That first time, as it has been ever since, each sister chose her "word," that is, a short text from Scripture that she wished to live, and this was engraved inside her ring. Marie Eugénie chose the words of Saint Peter: "Lord, you know that I love you." (John 21:17) That evening she prayed to this Lord in her journal:

Lord Jesus, just the way I am, lowly and faulty in my actions, I dare to beg that your mercy lead me to true holiness. . . .1 trust you to give it to me; I give myself to you so you may lead me there by any means. Here I am, the child of your Providence; do with me according to your love.

Her deep trust was in striking contrast to the mistrust which had been engendered by Father Combalot's schemes and displays of temper. Even those well-disposed to the work were unsure that it should continue as planned. Archbishop Affre, for one, found the life too difficult for such inexperienced religious. He asked: How can an apostolic order chant the entire Office? That is reserved for the cloistered orders. How can you combine religious and secular studies? Are contacts with the realities of the world and social concerns reasonable for consecrated women? Isn't it contradictory to try to bring all that together? Can this convent without a grille really shelter these young sisters?

When Affre opposed the chanted Office, Marie Eugénie responded with firm assurance: Your excellency, our vocation is, above all, to join prayer to action. This struggle to keep the Office was to become a recurrent theme in the early life of the Assumption. Why was it such an issue? First, it is important to understand what the archbishop was suggesting as a replacement for the Roman breviary. Most, if not all, active congregations of women were using the "Little Office of the Blessed Virgin" at this time. Unlike the Divine Office, which at that time covered almost the entire psalter in the course of a week (now in the course of a month), the Little Office used many fewer psalms, a convenient but

limited arrangement. Similarly, the great Office designated portions of scripture to be read at each hour. These also covered many books of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments. The Little Office, again, was far more limited in this regard. Marie Eugénie believed that the richness of the Office would be essential for the spiritual health of the Assumption. She also preferred that the sisters pray from the Word of God rather than from the pious devotions so popular at this time. Finally, she had a great desire to link the old tradition with contemporary life. She was convinced that the Office was an important element in making the Assumption all that it was meant to be.

But Marie Eugénie's faith in God and in the efficacy of the Office could not deny two disquieting facts: frightened by the extreme poverty, postulants were leaving, and the work of education -- for which the congregation had been founded -- was not even begun. The situation appeared hopeless to Bishop Gros, the ecclesiastical superior, who saw problems to be solved rather than divine folly to be lived. Considering the whole thing logically, he asked why Marie Eugénie shouldn't return to the Visitation while the others joined congregations of their choice?

She was grateful to Bishop Gros for giving her the opportunity to reflect on the reason for the foundation and on its spiritual dynamism, the gift of God from its beginnings. In writing to him, she would also be able to consider how she herself had been prepared for the foundation. This request gave her the opportunity to affirm that the work would come into being in any case because it was so necessary. God had not only hewn his first stone to fit the structure, but he had also continued to strengthen its foundress over two often difficult years. Now she was going to share that confidence and faith with the Church of Paris.

In her letter to Bishop Gros, she responded directly to his fears and to those of Archbishop Affre:

It is zealous thinking that is in charge of the foundation; it is fire, passion, and ardent love for the Church and this society so far away from God which has given birth to this work. The irreligiousness of three-quarters of the people necessitates a work of education. Serious studies will put us in a position to make Jesus Christ known.

Because the Assumption will open its doors to students accustomed to luxury, we could never have too much practical experience of poverty, whether it be to fill them with a little disregard for the comforts of life or to keep [the comforts] from ourselves.

We want to give our lives with a touch of madness, without any self-interest. We prefer to go to heaven a little sooner than to lose all the happiness of religious life: the Office, the prayer, the Rule; it is our weakness that makes them necessary for us. Religious engaged in education have a greater need to pray than the others.

In that letter, Marie Eugénie showed herself conscious of creating something new and of being of her time. She sensed that the open way of life coupled with the traditional customs pleased rather than shocked people. Toward the end, she pointed out to the bishop that the thinking in the letter was that of all the sisters -- no mean thing to be able to say, Considering the diversity in the community. The support of the community clarified and enriched the action of its superior.

The response, dated November 7, 1841, came quickly. Bishop Gros consented to all her requests and assured Marie Eugénie of the confidence of the

archbishop of Paris. Soon after this welcome news came more, equally welcome. Just two months later, three little girls were entrusted to the sisters, a small beginning to threir boarding school, and within the next year, two more sisters made their first professions. Chateaubriand and the Count de Montalembert were witnesses to. these vows, which were the subject of articles in l'Univers and la Gazette de France. The situation which had seemed so hopeless was now utterly changed, justifying Marie Eugénie's assertion that the spirit of faith, the love of Jesus Christ, the desire for His Kingdom, and the confidence in His Providence have been the only foundations of the Assumption.

CHAPTER 9

1842-1844
IMPASSE DES VIGNES

" I believe we are put here to work for the coming of the Kingdom..."

When Sister Marie Thérèse was asked years later todescribe the move to the Latin Quarter of the city, she said:
I remember that it was very cold; everything was covered with snow. The two houses were large and the rent wasn't high, which persuaded us. The garden was huge and had beautiful trees, but overall the property was in poor condition.

The new establishment was on rue des Postes at Impasse des Vignes. Moving into Impasse des Vignes before all the work on the houses was complete, the sisters settled their students in the less run-down building and themselves in the other. They had decided to move in before everything was done in order to work alongside the workmen. For six months the community rubbed elbows every day with bricklayers, plasterers, painters and carpenters. During this time, the sisters were not only introduced to the mysteries of pipes, plaster, and joists but also to working class people. They discovered great goodness and solidarity, pride in work well done, as well as sensitivity and respect in those men without formal education. The artisans for their part were always ready to leave their own work to help the sisters, who tackled the unfamiliar jobs with spirit. To the construction crews, the sisters, though clearly educated and from some social class different from their own, were too willing to do common labor to be confused with great ladies. Their attitude surprised and pleased the workmen, who often questioned them to discover the "why" and the "for whom" they had chosen their life.

At community meetings during this time Marie Eugénie shared her desire that fervor should keep up later what necessity was now imposing upon them. From her point of view, knowing how to launder the clothes, clean the rooms, [and] polish the furniture ranked ahead of the study of Latin. Convinced that poverty is the guardian of faith because it offers independence from the values of the world, she added: I hope that we shall communicate a little of this commonsense to our girls.

By this time, August 1842, there were eight girls, representing several nationalities, and this number had swollen to fourteen by the beginning of the school year in October. The Gazette de France ran an item about the philosophy of the little school:

To make true mothers of families, to give them the extensive knowledge and simple habits without which they would not be able to exert the influence that Christianity must give them: such is the goal of this congregation on which so many hopes are resting.

For those young future mothers and their equally youthful teachers, Marie Eugénie -- only 25 herself -- wrote a book in which she set down the aims of Assumption education. In Counsels of Education, she insists on the importance of faith in Jesus Christ for the students in order to keep them as close to Him as possible. She also discusses the

means to take to build this faith, difficulties according to the ages of the pupils, and the studies themselves. All of this went down into a large notebook in which half the page is given over to her text while the other half comprises commentary and corrections added over the years. She wanted the program of studies to combat the unruliness of the intellect, with scripture as the basis for their approach. The sisters were to teach ever mindful that they were preparing future Christian mothers and wives -- essentially the future of the Faith. She urged one sister not to lose heart over her own limitations in this regard:

Greater than your difficulties in loving, you possess, so that you may never falter, the unfailing strength of Jesus Christ, the One whom nothing wearies,nothing discourages, nothing stops. . . . Let us go toHim when our charity is depleted. He will teach us thatzeal, like love, never says: "it is enough!"

Here was a concern for the formation of good judgment, a critical spirit, a rightness of thought -- especially in the light of faith -- and of confidence in grace. Faith, she liked to say, gives greater understanding than old age. Two things stand Out from a reading of these many pages. One is her constant reference to a person, Jesus Christ, and his life in other persons. The second is an image from Augustine's City of God, where he speaks of the city of selfishness and the city of dedication. For Marie Eugénie, all education consists of leaving the city of selfishness in order to enter the city of dedication to God and neighbor.

Her Counsels on Education stemmed from a broad vision of life which is best captured in her letters. To her old mentor Father Lacordaire, for example, she wrote at length about her vision of the earth. She saw it not as a place of exile but rather as a place of freedom to act for God's glory -- a fairly unconventional view at this time. She sent Lacordaire a list of beliefs:

I believe that we are placed in this universe to work for the coming of the Kingdom of God in ourselves and in others.

I believe that Jesus Christ has saved us to make us free to work according to His Word.

I believe that each of us has a mission on earth.

It is simply a question of seeking how God can use us to make His Gospel known and lived.

I believe that we must do it courageously and by means of faith. . . the poor means of Jesus Christ, surrendering the success of it to Him.

I believe in a truly Christian society where God, although invisible, reigns everywhere and is preferred to everything.

I believe that this society is not a utopia, because "the Son of Man will one day draw everything to Himself."

To make known Jesus Christ, the liberator and King of the world, to teach that everything belongs to Him, that He wants to form in each of us the great work of the Kingdom of God [and wishes] each of us to enter into His plan:

* either to pray
* or to suffer
* or to act.

I must confess to you that this is for me the beginning and the end of all Christian education.

The last pages of this letter discuss the difficulties that she was encountering as she tried to make her ideas understood even in the Church. Rather than discouraging her, however, disappointments and misunderstandings led her to look for new ways to show that apostolic work is not opposed to the contemplative life. Marie Eugénie believed that in order to raise up saints, she and her congregation must form young people in prayer. She also believed that since, as times change, the type of saint also changes, it was necessary to create new orders in the Church. The sisters would have to suffer through conflicts without forgetting Jesus' admonition: "be ye cunning as serpents but innocent as doves." (Matt. 10:16)

But even as Marie Eugénie "thought globally" -- to borrow a current idiom -- she "acted locally," giving her time and her tenderness to her sisters. In 1842, after only a year of temporary vows, Marie Josèphe, the sister whom Marie Eugénie had covered with flannel" against the cold, died. She was only 23. During Marie Josèphe's struggle with consumption, Marie Eugéne had learned what it means to love as a mother loves; with the death of this sister she learned to mourn as a mothermourns.

God sent others, not so much to replace Marie Josèphe as to join her. She was the vanguard of the Assumption in heaven; they would remain on earth for a while longer. It was for them that Marie Eugénie opened a formal novitiate in 1842. Sister Thérèse Emmanuel became the Mistress of Novices, a responsibility she would carry until her death in 1888.

The letters to Father Lacordaire show details of her originality as a foundress, but her correspondence with Father d'Alzon reveals the vision and thinking of Marie Eugénie over nearly half a century. From 1841 until his death in 1880, she and he shared their lives through some 4000 letters. The very distance that separated them, with Marie Eugénie usually in Paris and d'Alzon in Nîmes, prompted this remarkable outpouring of letters. Long missives from her and short ones from him often crossed each other despite the amazing rapidity and reliability of the postal relays.

When the correspondence got underway, Father d'Alzon was still Grand Vicar of Nîmes, as he had been at their first and only meeting at Chatenay. Since his letter to her regarding Father Combalot's behavior during the crisis had been forceful and supportive, it is not surprising that Marie Eugénie and all the sisters should come to see him as their priest, friend, and confidante.

The letter-writers often focused on social questions, but even more on the need for reform in the Church. They did not overlook the importance of education either, as this excerpt from one of her letters suggests:

It is necessary to form strength of character, with particular attention given to uprightness, honesty, loyalty, honor, generosity and dedication . . . Our concern an active faith, a faith ruling over judgment and personal tastes, such as affections.

There was also a personal side to their exchange. With Father d'Alzon, Marie Eugénie would always be able to share the struggles and graces that took place within her. He was to be the special witness to her journey on that long road to sanctity.

My spirit is too weak for the mission I am in charge of; it gives way when I look at everything all at once. . . . This work is for God to do; as for me, when I falter, I just allow myself to enter into Him in a way I cannot explain.

It was to d 'Alzon, too, that she confided her concern about the proper spiritual accompaniment for Sister Thérèse Emmanuel, a genuine mystic who received many graces in her prayer: interior words, messages for the congregation, communion with the Passion of Christ. As the sister-superior of the community,
Marie Eugénie was supposed to lead Thérèse, but she could tell Father d'Alzon that in fact she did not know what to do or how to do it. He was her true friend in Christ.

A large part of the correspondence deals with the writing of the Constitutions and the Rule. In 1843 and 1844 Marie Eugénie encountered the same difficulties with Father Gaume, the new ecclesiastical superior, as she had had with his predecessor Father (now Bishop) Gros in 1841. The Church of Paris was still dubious about active religious leading this "too contemplative" life, still dubious, too, about the central activity of the life, the chanted Office. Such doubt and interference on the part of that Church to whom she wished to devote all herenergies caused Marie Eugénie to suffer. It was a sad confirmation of something she had written earlier: I did not know the members of this Church. I dreamed offinding in them apostles, but I was to find only men.

If she continued to struggle, however, it was because she was firmly convinced that, for the Assumption, the act of educating depends on the contemplative life. Contemplative life, as she understood it, is the source of an active life of faith, of missionary passion and of freedom of spirit. In the midst of the struggle she considered yielding, but then asked herself if she could do other than what God was showing her:
The further I go, the less sympathy I have for priests or pious lay people. . . . They do not understand anything. . . . Their hearts do not beat for anything broadminded. Do I have to modify our style so as to take out of it everything that shocks narrow minds?
She could not bring herself to do such a thing because she was growing more and more attached to the integrity of the foundation, in which everything [seemed] strictly linked together.

Because the writing of the Rule was becoming urgent, Marie Eugénie set out in October 1844 to work on it with Father d'Alzon in Nîmes. Sailing down the Rhône, she met some Good Shepherd Sisters, an order founded just fifteen years before. She and they were able to talk at length about the writing of their respective Rules as well as their problems with episcopal overseers. In Nîmes itself she made her retreat with Father d'Alzon and worked on the Rule with him. It was a meeting of kindred spirits, as she herself observed later: from our similar points of view and from our like-mindedness, we both came away with livelier insights on the important questions that we were dealing with together.

CHAPTER 10

1844
AN ABRUPT
TURNING POINT

"The night of my understanding. . ."

A book and its condemnation by the Church touched off a major crisis in the intellectual life of Marie Eugénie in 1844.
One of her heroes in the movement to regenerate French society, Félicité Lamennais, had recently published his Voix de Prison. His ideas affected her deeply, making [her] heart beat faster. She confided in Father d'Alzon: there isn't even a hair's breadth of difference between me and the present ideas of M. Lamennais. Yet she knew that the Church had condemned Lamennais' program of reform because underlying it was the doctrine of establishing the Kingdom of God on earth through human effort alone.

She did not want to scandalize the sisters -- I wouldn't want to say anything that isn't of the strictest orthodoxy -- but at the same time she could see the crying need for reform. She was not alone in this insight; Lacordaire and d'Alzon had also placed great hope in what Lamennais was teaching: "reform oneself in order to reform the world. . .transform oneself in order to transform the world!" It was close to the gospel, but it lacked a sense of the power of Christ, an acceptance that he is the sole Savior of the world. It seemed that she and they would have to choose between the progressive ideas of Lamennais and the very conservative ideas of the Church. What a terrible choice to have to make for those so much on fire for the Kingdom!

Marie Eugénie's roots and her formation had prepared her to be receptive to the world vision and militant faith of Lamennais. Her education had been based on the best values of European culture: fraternity, liberty, justice. Lamennais' doctrine gave her a vision and a plan of action which allowed her to integrate her compassion for humanity with her passion for God. With its condemnation of that vision -- or at least of the principles underlying it -- the Church had shaken Marie Eugénie badly. The lack of openness which she saw in the Church, especially in some of its hierarchy and ministers, caused her to speak about this time as the night of [her] understanding, to say sadly: my faith is passing through darkness.

During this time, Father d'Alzon advised her to have humility and patience, which he himself was exercising under similar circumstances. By allowing her judgment to be enlightened by others, both ordained and lay, saint and sinner, the minds of her own time and those of the Christian tradition, she found the courage and the wisdom that she needed. As time passed, she came to base her desire for reform solely on the Kingdom of God. Slowly but surely, she realized that redemption does not necessarily have immediate and visible earthly consequences.

Marie Eugénie came to believe that the Kingdom is the exclusive business of God. Changes in social or political structures cannot make the Kingdom on earth; on the contrary, changes will come about as a result of conversion of hearts. All Christians are called to serve, but in that service, Marie Eugénie came to distinguish between action for

God and the action of God. Not yet 27, she had reached a turning point in the long and steep spiritual road on which she was journeying; once she made her choice, the Church, she experienced a second conversion to the redemptive power of Christ. She saw that she had first to allow him to extend his Reign in her heart.

One day in that bleak year of 1844, while at Notre Dame, she experienced a deep spirit of recollection. She remembered her first call and saw the roads she had taken since that time; she understood clearly that the call remained, but that her way of answering was being adapted to the desire of God rather than to her own desire. I saw the temporal Reign of Jesus Christ, but He saw His inner Reign in my soul. . . He drew me by a secret love whose only desire was to take possession of my heart.

Mother Marie Eugénie shared that experience with her community, reflecting with the sisters on its meaning not only for her personally but also for the Assumption. Sister Thérèse Emmanuel, for her part, had insights in prayer which often confirmed the sense of the foundress and the community that the Assumption would work at the outposts of the Kingdom in order to extend it still further.

On Christmas Day 1844, the first five sisters made their final professions. At that time the Church permitted religious to make a fourth vow which expressed the particular character of their congregation. So to the usual three vows the Religious of the Assumption added a fourth:

In the presence of the Holy Trinity, I make the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, and [I vow also] to consecrate my whole life to extending the Kingdom of God in souls.

Some thirty years later (1878), Marie Eugénie was to write:

The Reign of Jesus Christ. . . is the reason I am a Religious of the Assumption; that is the object of the fourth vow I have made. I must do or say nothing that does not have as its goal the extension of the Kingdom.

On that profession day, Marie Eugénie's notes show to what extent she gave herself to the King of that Kingdom, abandoning herself to him forever. The Kingdom is not simply an idea to her, but a person who is Jesus Christ. To him she says simply:

I abandon myself to you without reserve. I ask you for the grace to serve you alone. . . to adore you and bring others to you.

The following Spring brought some relief from the pain of 1844. Father d'Alzon returned to Paris in May and preached the community retreat. The subject of the retreat was the motto already proposej by him for the congregation: "Adveniar Regnum Tuum." ("Thy Kingdom Come.") He was to take the same phrase a few months later for his own foundation As it had been and would be in Paris by the women of the Assumption, the Kingdom was to be proclaimed in Nîmes, too, and by Assumption men.

CHAPTER 11

1845
CHAILLOT

"In this life of poverty, what vitality and joy!"

In 1845, Marie Eugénie's uncle, M. de Franchessin,helped the community find a house in keeping with its continuedgrowth. Thanks to his intervention, the sisters set up housekeeping on the right bank of the Seine, at 6 rue de Chaillot,where they were to remain for the next twelve years. The ratheruncomfortable house sat on seven and a half acres of land plenty of room for the new buildings they could now see theywould need. Giving the most habitable places in the house to thestudents, they took what was left for themselves.

More than fifty years later, a novice of that time recounted: "all the religious were young and full of enthusiasm and life. The most venerable Mothers weren't even thirty years old." Another religious, recalling the makeshift lodging "which resembled Noah's Ark," added:

In this life of poverty, what vitality and what joy! What hearty bursts of laughter in the low- roofed and dark rooms of that old house! How well we slept in those garrets transformed into a dormitory for religious! As for the refectory, it was set up in the basement, as black and as ugly as could be.

Remembering those days, people agreed that the ceilings of the parlors, right beneath the roof, were watertight -- as long as it wasn't raining. When it rained, guests found themselves sharing the conversation with the plink-plink of water dripping into buckets

"A boarding school that is too poor will put off the parents of the students," warned Father d'Alzon one day. Asumptuous boarding school will soon degenerate into a luxury hotel, retorted Mother Marie Eugénie.

There was little danger of the Assumption's being confused with the Ritz. And far from putting people off, the poverty attracted them. The good academic reputation, the competence and youth of the teachers, and the dynamism of the new type of education were often topics of conversation in certain Parisian circles. The boarding school was growing far beyond the expectations of the sisters, but not beyond those of their friends. Bishop de Hercé of Nantes, for example, wrote to them:

Your house on the Champs Elysées will be an asset for the families of that section of town; your disdain of riches and your love of poverty will show them that you carry in your hearts a treasure far superior to those of the earth and will raise their sights to the Beauty which is God.

Dom Guéranger, the abbot of Solesmes and great liturgical reformer, impressed by his conversation with Marie Eugénie, encouraged his monks to meet her themselves. One monk was later to tell the sisters something he meant as an honest compliment: "Your Mother General truly had the head of a man; all her comments were crystal clear."

Of course, the implication about the heads of all other women was also crystal clear. Perhaps the comment of the bishop of Bordeaux was a little easier to accept: “We would need three or four men to equal that woman!”

Yet Marie Eugénie belonged entirely to her Lord, serving him by serving her sisters and the work of the Assumption. Like the others, she did her share of household chores, particularly on Sunday afternoons. It is said that the carriages of those who wanted to see her formed a line that stretched all the way to l’Etoile, a good ten or fifteen minute walk from the house. Impatient or not, important or not, they had to wait because “the Superior General was doing the community’s laundry.”

The novitiate was also growing. Many postulants entered at Chaillot, though of course not all stayed. The life was demanding and austere, both physically and spiritually. other Thérèse Emmanuel taught the novices the fundamentals of Assumption life, introducing them to prayer and to the Office, explaining the Rule and the customs of the community. She said about this period that at times she thought her heart would burst with gratitude for the beauty of this life consecrated to the glory of God. A statement like this does not imply, however, that the novitiate was an ethereal place. Mother Thérèse Emmanuel combined a great intimacy with God with a certain earthy realism. She did not allow her novices to neglect the little things done well which she call “the delicate touches of love.”

The dozen years in Chaillot (1845-57) were to see the first extension of the congregation to other cities and countries even to other continents. The progress of the early years, however, was interrupted by political events, beginning with the downfall of the monarchy of Louis Philippe in February 1848.At first it appeared that a peaceful revolution might be possible.The ideals of 1789 -- liberty, equality, fraternity -- seemed to have a real chance of finding their way into the political life of France, this time with and through Christians.

Marie Eugénie was also hoping that these events were signaling an openness to her cherished ideas: the Kingdom and politics, God and freedom. She was not alone in her hope; at that time priests all over the country were blessing “liberty trees” for their parishioners. In the first months of 1848, with freedom in the air, France seemed to be moving toward a republic. Writing to Father d’Alzon, Marie Eugénie remarked: Nobody more than we has been founded with this society of the future in mind, and our desires are hastening its coming.

But it was a time of confusion as well as elation. While Lamartine and other Catholic intellectuals were waving the tricolore alongside other republicans, many other Frenchmen were looking to raise the red flag. The recently published Communist Manifesto made sense to many who had suffered the miseries of injustice and oppression at the hands of landlords and factory owners. And, as we have seen, the official response of the Church, as represented by the hierarchy, was often cautious, if not reactionary. The interest, courage, and intelligence of Marie Eugénie led her to define and understand the situation during that difficult period. She maintained her independence of judgment in relation to current Catholic opinion and even with respect to Father d’Alzon, whose point of view from the provinces often differed from her own, informed as it was by her proximity to the capital. She foresaw the internal divisions of the parties as well as their insensitivity to the aspiration of the people and to the calls of history.

Her intellect and character moved her to go directly to the sources; her connections with politicians like Philippe Joseph Buchez, president of the Assembly of the Second Republic and founder of Christian Socialism as well as an old family friend, gave her the opportunity. Maintaining a certain flexibility in an era when the uncompromising attitude was in vogue, she welcomed all. Dignitaries came to exchange idea with her; adversaries under opposing flags found the parlor of Chaillot a good place to meet. Certain of her discretion, they talked and listened to her because they knew her to be impartial, having neither personal interests nor ideology to defend. Her one goal was the establishment of the Kingdom of Christ, Savior and Liberator.

As the months passed, divisions between extremist and moderate republicans led Marie Eugénie to write: the republicans will kill the republic. She was prophetic; soon the streets of Paris saw political change being born in bloodshed. On June 23, for example, Bishop Affre, a great friend of the Assumption for ten years, was wounded and died on the barricades in the neighborhood of Saint Antoine. A sorrowful witness to the inhumanity of men, Marie Eugénie was brought back time after time to her experience of 1844. It was becoming all too clear to her that the coming of the Kingdom would not be of human making.

Yet what she saw and heard, far from leaving her apathetic or cynical, actually strengthened her faith. More than ever, she wanted to defend the rights of all people. She never despaired of either individuals or humanity, but at the same time, all her hope was now totally in God. Throughout this difficult period, she still envisioned a society of people free from all slavery, free with the freedom of Christ, people experiencing for themselves the Kingdom of God.

CHAPTER 12

1849
THE CAPE AND
RICHMOND

"Do you know that they are proposing that we go to China? I admit it's tempting."

The explosive French political scene was not able to distract Marie Eugénie from her desire to extend the Kingdom.Her broad perspective, her heart, and her passion for that Kingdom kept her open to the whole world. In a sense, France had served as a sort of experimental ground, a laboratory for her ideas. Now, other places were calling as well. To Father d'Alzon she wrote: Do you know that they are proposing that we go to China? I admit it's tempting.

The China project turned out to be unfeasible, but others were to materialize. Even though there was only one community in France at this time (1848-49), the second would open at the Cape of Good Hope, at the southern tip of Africa. The third would also be established outside France, in Great Britain.

South Africa! Bishop Devereux, an Irishman, was the apostolic vicar of the Cape, a British colonial territory. He asked the Assumption for four religious to assume the direction of a school for girls in Grahamstown, a town of some 8000 people several day's journey --by ox cart -- from Port Elizabeth. No other communities of sisters had settled there as yet. With the enthusiasm and energy of her 27 years, Sister Marie Gertrude, also Irish, offered to go. The entire community of Chaillot was taken up with the mission, as Marie Eugénie noted: Nothing else except this missionary call stirs up as much fervor, passionate love for the Kingdom, and detachmentfrom everything which is not for God.

Archbishop Sibour of Paris was less enthusiastic, howevever, and raised questions about such a young congregation's founding a community so far away. Although he finally consented to it, the project struck him as too bold, almost foolhardy. In an attempt to insure its future a little more, he demanded that certain points concerning the authority of Marie Eugénie over the community's activities despite the distance and the relationship of the community with the local bishop be clearly specified. Both parties agreed to these demands.

On August 27, 1849, Marie Eugénie sent out the first little missionary community: Sister Marie Gertrude, the 27 year old superior, 30 year old Sister Veronique, and 20 year old Sister Ligouri. There was also an English novice. Bishop Devereux was at the farewell, too, with his own young sister who was to begin her novitiate (at the Cape) a little later. Marie Eugénie was moved as she stood on the dock at Anvers and watched the sails of the Oceanie disappear from sight. Her fragile seedling was being uprooted from European soil for first time.

The voyage was difficult; in three and a half months they faced mutiny, fire, and shipwreck on an island! Fortunately, the welcome for the missionaries was warm and joyful. This feeling was reflected in their first letters home, which took months to reach the mother house; they were enthusiastic and excited by all that they were seeing and hearing, tasting and smelling in Africa. But soon the sisters discovered the less happy realities of Grahanistown life: hostile Protestants, spreading famine, and war between the

Africans and the British. Their courage wore thin and began to change into over-activity, especially on the part of the young, inexperienced superior. This frenetic activity led them to try to answer every need, to be unable to judge between essential and non-essential. Works began to accumulate which often had no connection to the original orientation of the Assumption. They found themselves so busy that there was no more time to pray; the silence and the enclosure space, so necessary for Assumption life, were no longer real parts of their life.

Slowly, along with the loss of customs and direction, there began a kind of breakdown of obedience as well. The tone of the letters from Sister Gertrude became demanding: she and Bishop Devereux needed money, Marie Eugénie must get it. Marie Eugénie did get it, and sent it, too, but other news from the Cape alarmed her even more than such letters. Sister Gertrude had begun to accept local novices and to form them according to her own style of religious life, but she did not inform her Superior General of her actions.

The other sisters were unhappy with this turn of events and asked to be allowed to serve the mission according to the religious life of the Assumption. The bishop's answer was to send them home to Paris. Gertrude asked for others by name, a request Marie Eugénie accepted, but with increasing anxiety.As for the bishop of the Cape, he kept none of the promises he had made to Archbishop Sibour. Undoubtedly he was thinkingonly of the sisters' apostolic contribution, which was, in fact, considerable.

Finally, in 1852, Archbishop Sibour had had enough and told Marie Eugénie to recall the Assumption community. Deeply distressed, she wrote a letter in which she called the sisters back in the name of obedience, but with an almost tender delicacy. In order not to leave the mission at the Cape stranded, she even offered to pay the travel expenses of a new community whose preparation and purpose were more in keeping with Bishop Devereux's needs.

Unfortunately, Sister Gertrude chose to write directly to the archbishop rather than to Marie Eugénie. In her letter she stated that she preferred to stay at the Cape with her novices even though the other sisters, including Devereux's own sister,had already left. In short, she was proposing a break with the congregation.

A very small community did continue in Grahamstown with Gertrude, though not without suffering and hardships;eventually she received official recognition of her community,which, as the Missionary Sisters of the Assumption, is still active today in South Africa. During the years that followed, Marie Eugénie tried several times to bring about a reunion of the two groups, but in vain. Still, the old ties remained. More than forty years after the break, Sister Gertrude, short of vocations and money, came back to Auteuil. Marie Eugénie, now very old and with a dimming awareness, still welcomed her with all her heart and with great emotion, calling out Gerty! Gerty! as she caught sight of this long lost sister.

The distance, the poor communication, the problems in adapting the Assumption way of life to such a different culture, climate, and local Church, all conspired to defeat the mission at the Cape almost before it began. Today, with hindsight, it is tempting to decry the folly of that adventure, to wish, somehow, that everyone involved could have been more sensible. But precisely that type of folly has always enabled men and women

to leave home, cross oceans, and face great dangers, all in order to spread the Gospel to all nations.

It is tempting, too, to wish that the wound caused by the split would have never happened, but this would also be a mistake because Marie Eugénie allowed the failure of this mission to teach her. The human limitations of the Church were now very real to her, as were the hard lessons she had learned about prudence and her own obedience to the Church. She allowed the pain caused by the failure to touch her deeply, inside, so that through this experience, her prayer could become all the more loving and receptive. The inner frontiers of her heart were being pushed back -- a painful but life-giving process, as she noted at the time:

I have just come from prayer and I am impressed by the idea that I must enter into a deeper friendship with Jesus Christ and believe in His tenderness. He has loved me, He has chosen me, I come from Him, Jam going to Him and all my weaknesses exist oniy to end up in that great diminishment, through which, by leaving the narrow confines of my tiny being, I will be totally immersed in Him.Above all, Marie Eugénie was learning to love the Church more and more, the Church of the Word made flesh, the divine and very human Church of saints and sinners.

That same Church continued to call the Assumption to travel to distant places. In 1849, just as the Cape adventure was getting underway, an English bishop asked for a community to care for orphans in Richmond, in Yorkshire. Four sisters, with Mother Thérèse Emmanuel in charge, sailed across the Channel in the spring of 1850. The community at the Cape was in the process of disintegration, but at Richmond the situation was markedly different, in large part because of the presence of Thérèse Emmanuel. Marie Eugénie had decided to part with her "good right arm" and take charge of the novitiate herself for two long years in order to give the infant community a fighting chance. So, instead of an inexperienced religious new to a country and its customs, the Richmond foundation had as its superior one of the original founders, an Irishwoman who had been reared in England, even educated at York, not too far from Richmond. She was also deeply grounded in prayer, with an authentic mystical life that was to show her how to invent new ways yet remain faithful to the life of the Assumption.

On May 31, 1850, the community was at last in Richmond. "The house is situated on a big hill. The garden slopes toward a river whose stream can be heard from our cells," went a contemporary report. The setting delighted the contemplative heart of Thérèse Emmanuel. She was equally delighted by the absolute bareness of that house; there was nothing but floor and walls, not even a few straw mattresses. The bareness of the spiritual environment, however, was another matter. Very few priests ministered in that almost completely Protestant area. When there was a Mass, the community went to the parish church.

Mother Thérèse Emmanuel spoke of throwing her soul "onto the fullness of God." The presence of God was so intense within her that she often lost track of time. When she came back to herself, however, she was the first to take on the most thankless or tiring chores. Above all, Thérèse Emmanuel allowed herself to enter the Kingdom there on the streets of Richmond. Soon twelve orphans were living in the old cottage which the sisters had converted into a convent. The community also welcomed for meals the students from a nearby school headed by a Miss Burchall.

But there was more to their life than simply the care of children. Right next to the convent, making use of "the river whose stream could be heard" from the cells of the sisters, stood a dreary paper mill. Many of the workers were women, who passed by the convent garden going to work in the very early morning and heading home late in the evening. Harsh conditions, precarious family situations, and loose morals in some women caused tension to build and then explode among these workers. The overcrowding and exhaustion led to coarse joking and scoffing under the influence of a certain Sarah Thompson, who laid into the rare Irish Catholics with venom. She had a crude authority among the women, and with it she did not hesitate to give a hard time -- either with her tongue or her fists -- to those who tried to defend their faith.

When the sisters learned of this situation, they reflected together as community. They analyzed the problem and decided that they needed to confront it with the gospel. One day, on the way to church, they had their chance when they met some of the mill workers and stopped to talk. In the midst of the women stood the defiant and apparently indomitable Sarah Thompson. When her eyes met those of Mother Thérèse Emmanuel, however, something happened. It was the beginning of a simple and amicable relationship, with no strings attached. "She changed my inside," Sarah was to say in speaking about Thérèse Emmanuel.

A few weeks later, and for many Sundays to come, a joyous and peaceable group of women and girls climbed the path to the convent to spend an hour hearing about God and the Church. When they left they promised: "We'll tell our husbands and children everything. They need it more than we do." The doughty Sarah and her daughter were baptized a few months later. Through the attention of the sisters to Sarah and her fellow workers, families and society were being transformed in Yorkshire as they were in Paris, according to the goal of the congregation.

Something of the Kingdom showed through in that community. It is said that Mother Thérèse Emmanuel's look conquered hearts, but she had the support of the other sisters as well. She depended on them rather than behaving as an independent agent; her persistent requests for more sisters and her worry that she was too much on her own can be understood as indications not only of her very human side, but also of her awareness of the need for community. She grew more and more for Christ "like another humanity added to his own," according to her own expression; her notebooks are filled with interior conversations between herself and Christ which she wrote down out of obedience.

The Lord gave the community several signs of the rich innr life of Thérèse Emmanuel. One instance is particularly striking. The sisters had to fetch water from the other side of the road with a wheelbarrow and a barrel. To fill the barrel they had a bowl rather than a bucket! Finally they decided to have a wel1 dug in the garden, but the deep and costly drilling yielded nothing. The well was dry, no doubt about it. "Let's pray," said Mother Thérèse Emmanuel, and so they began a novena. Coming out of Mass on the ninth day, when it was barely daylight, they found the well full of fresh, sweet water which never ran dry. Like Sarah Thompson's conversion, the well was a sign with a degree of mystery and great joy which strengthened the faith and love of the sisters.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Channel, Marie Eugénie was accumulating responsibilities all too quickly. Sister Marie Augustine was bedridden, so Marie Eugénie, already replacing the novice mistress, was now also in charge of the studies. Her Uncle de Franchessin, the man who had helped her to find Chaillot, and someone whom she loved dearly, died suddenly. And of course the concerns about the Cape were still there, causing her real anguish. It must have been a lonely, troubling time without the presence of the one who had been with her since the beginning. Still, they wrote regularly, and though Thérèse was far away, she did her best to give Marie Eugénie the support she needed.

Much of their correspondence had to do with the work of the foundation, of course; Marie Eugénie was able to conssent fully to the innovations which were so in keeping with the original vision. But there was also a personal side to these letters between two such dear friends and sisters. Thanks to that separation, there remain not only business details but also some charming lines which offer insight into the character of each. One writes from Paris:

I shall have to tell you that I am still sad and that I really miss you at times like this. I believe that Jesus Christ desires to give us much simply because of our powerlessness.

The other responds from Richmond: God takes everything away from us to make us come to realize that he alone is our true support. One is worried about health, poverty, and the cold: For you I fear winter; your wind from Richmond passes through my heart.

The other is worried about the exhausting load of her Superior General: Is it fair that I have a share in your authority without sharing in your hardships? Mother Thérèse Emmanuel returned to Paris in 1852 leaving behind a healthy foundation in England with Sister Marie Ignace (the former Miss Burchall, headmistress of the neigbouring school) as superior. By the time Thérèse Emmanuel left, several Irish and English girls had asked to enter the novitiate and so begin the life of the Assumption in Britain. There were now two Assumption houses in two countries; soon there would be more.

CHAPTER 13

1854- 1855
SEDAN AND NÎMES

"I dare not refuse you permission to care for the cholera patients."

The Church of France was also calling. In 1854, Cardinal Gousset, the archbishop of Rheims, and the former bishop of Sarlat, Josephine de Commarque's native place, asked the Assumption to take charge of a boarding school in Sedan, a city northeast France not far from Paris. Josephine, now Sister Marie Thésèse, was designated for that foundation. As always, poverty was the first mistress of the house: "For a long time we had only one sheet for each bed, but nobody complained. The owner's horses were stabled in the cellar of the house."

The sisters had barely arrived when a violent cholera epidemic broke out. When Sister Marie Thérèse immediately offered to take care of the sick, Mother Marie Eugénie, though not without trepidation, gave permission for the sisters to expose themselves to that terrible disease, saying: I dare not refuse you permission to care for the cholera patients. Perhaps she was remembering her own mother's death to that same disease and the terrible aloneness she had faced afterward. In that summer of 1854, Sister Marie Thérèse and her companion became nurses, tirelessly accompanying the dying. They must have used every spare moment to ready themselves for the school, because in the fall the school opened as planned.

With the house at Sedan established, Marie Eugénie could turn her attention to the south of France, to Nîmes, Father d'Alzon's city. For several years he had been asking her to found a House of Adoration there. It was to be a center of prayer in the heart of the city as well as a place of refreshment for the sisters working in more active communities. But it took a long time to finalize the plans for this foundation particularly because there were doubts about where it would lead. Would there be two types of Assumption house, one more contemplative and the other more apostolic? For Marie Eugénie, however, it was clear: the Assumption was both a life given over to the Kingdom where joy and love follow from contemplation, and a life of adoration which spreads to service for the Kingdom. In fact, as if in proof of her vision, less than a year was to pass before a school was entrusted to that community of adoration. The foundation at Nîmes became a kind of model for future Assumption life. Its custom of constant adoration soon became an Assumption custom, and its relationships with its lay friends presaged the way that the entire congregation would seek to relate with the many people who came to its doors.

On November 9, 1855, sixteen years to the day of the first Mass on rue Vaugirard, Father d'Alzon exposed the Blessed Sacrament on the altar of the Nîmes house. Each sister having received "her" hour for adoration, the "liturgy" of Adoration that round-the-clock-prayer which begins with the Consecration and goes on hour after hour until Mass the following day, was born in the Assumption. It would be easy to imagine a large end sumptuous chapel proportional to what was taking place in that room, but this is how one of the sisters of the community described it:

The room that served as a chapel was so cramped that the benches which Father d'Alzon sent from the school had to be placed lengthwise in such a way that, in order to turn toward the altar, we could fit only one knee on the kneeler. It was really hard to keep our balance in the position and the least movement anywhere in the line brought with it an overall shaking. It was like a row of sparrows sitting on a flexible branch -- which gave us the opportunity to meditate on the spirit of detachment!

The humor of the story cannot hide the paradox of God's work: grace springs forth from great poverty. The poorer the tabernacle, the more the glance is drawn to the unique treasure

Since her first communion, when she had understood that it was only through Jesus Christ that she would be able to give perfect adoration to the living God, the mystery of Christ's Body had continued to draw Mother Marie Eugénie. Now, with that Body set out always on the altar in the heart of the house at Nîmes, she was able to write:

When I search for the mystery which is my very own. . . I simply must turn again to the Blessed Sacrament. All the other mysteries, each in turn, move me to a certain extent, but the Blessed Sacrament always moves nw without measure and binds me to it. It is the form, if I may say so, in which Our Lord loved me, made Himself known to me, came to seek me. . . . He is present there, and a few walls to break through or a few steps to go don't keep me from conversing with Him.

Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament leads each person, as did Marie Eugénie in that first moment of grace, to love not only what Jesus Christ is but also what he wills. The spring which flows from an act of adoration waters the ground of each life as it prostrates body, heart, and will. Moreover, the Christ exposed on the altar is the One who gathers his people together and acts in history. Before Christ, each one is urged to extend his Reign on earth. Rooted in the earthly realities of human culture, each person offers these to the Father so that all creation may be consecrated and transfigured into Christ, according to its deepest vocation. This is the meaning of the eucharistic action of each Mass.

At Nîmes, thanks in large part to the practice of adoration, a new type of friendship was being built up with lay people. In order to adore hour by hour the One whom they did not wish to leave alone in their chapel, the sisters decided to form adorers among the people who already loved the Assumption and came to pray there. The Lord himself had suggested this to Mother Thérèse Emmanuel, saying in one of their interior conversations, "Make for me a people of adorers who honor me and love me. . . so that I may enlighten them inflame them [with my love]. . .." After sharing that loving and peaceful time of adoration with the community for a while, many of these adorers, both men and women, desired to know Christ and his Church more deeply. Clearly, they needed support And so it was that the Third Order was founded in Nîmes, around Christ and with the sisters.

Believing that this foundation of a lay fraternity responded to a secret aspiration of many Christians who wanted to do something more for Christ and the Kingdom of God Mother Marie Eugénie worked with Father d'Alzon on the first draft of the "Rule of the Third Order of the Assumption":

To be resolved to have as the goal of one's life not glory, fortune, and the things of earth, but the glory of God, the extension of the Reign of Jesus Christ, and the good of souls.

To make of one's life a practical protest against the maxims of the world, especially against the life of luxury, egotism, and inaction. .

To work to make Jesus Christ known through conversation, teaching, writing and through every kind of work that can communicate the spirit of the Gospel to a greater number of people, and to help [its members] be conformed to it themselves.

Both Marie Eugénie and d'Alzon believed that religious and lay people together would be necessary for the realization of the mission of the Assumption. In such a religious-lay community each would find, in addition to a collaboration in the mission of the Church, spiritual and intellectual support for the journey. Lay people, finding themselves by profession more directly involved in the building of the "earthly city," could bring an indispensable experience and know-how. Religious, for their part, could assure the permanency of the vision by their vows, which also gave them a greater availability; they could offer a more complete dedication and clear-sightedness, the fruits of prolonged periods of prayer. As they developed their vision of such a community, Marie Eugénie and Father d'Alzon called on it to be and do several specific things. A center of apostolic activity and place of fraternal communion, it was also to act as a haven of quiet and prayer from which could be drawn strength, peace, and energy for the spirit.

In the seven years between 1848 and 1855, the Assumption had grown from one house and school to four communities: Chaillot and Richmond, Sedan and Nîmes. It had suffered the failure of the venture at the Cape but been heartened by the success of Richmond, deep in a Protestant world, responding to the call of the poorest. At Sedan it had gladly answered the urgent call for help at real personal risk to the sisters. At Nîmes it had taken up another part of its mission and enabled lay people to join in that work. It was clear that each of these first foundations was adding something new to the whole; as each discovered new ways to spread the Gospel in society, each was developing and confirming the original intuition.

CHAPTER 14

Christmas 1845
THE ASSUMPTIONISTS

"Our two Assumptions, our twofold Assumption."

In 1844, five years after the foundation of the Religious of the Assumption, Marie Eugénie expressed a desire to see an order for men founded in the Church of God with a spirit similar to that of our Assumption. Such an order would give boys a stronger, more intelligent, more Christian character; she hoped, too, that it would teach them how to be truly free men. W'hat is obviously lacking in France for men today, she wrote, are religious orders that can relate to the character, spirit and even the physical forces of our time. Throughout that year, she continued to develop her ideas about the unity of that formation, cal1ing for the new order to have both a philosophy and a passion and asking: What passion should these men be given? She answered her own question this way: That of faith, love and making the Gospel message a reality.

As for Father d'Alzon, to whom these remarks were addressed, he could not have agreed more fully, as he himself says in this excerpt from a letter:

I agree entirely with what you call the philosophy and the passion of men's religious orders. My particular passion would be the revelation of the God-Man and the divinization of humanity through Jesus Christ and that would also be the philosophy.

Soon d'Alzon would be making that philosophy a concrete reality by founding the first community of the Augustinians of the Assumption. It is certain that Mother Marie Eugénie's interest and encouragement helped to make his foundation possible, just as his care and encouragement had helped to steady "her" Assumption from its earliest days.

Each prompted the other to become all that God had intended for him or her. And each was able to confess the weaknesses that got in the way of that intention. On August 21 1844, for example, d'Alzon wrote to Marie Eugénie: "I'm getting old, I'll be 34 in a week! It is impossible to reform myself, and the way I am, I have too many defects to believe myself good for anything of even the slightest importance." Lines like these, so self-revealing, give a feeling for the genuine intimacy that they shared. He could be vulnerable with her and she with him.

They could also work mightily together. In April 1845 he went to Paris and stayed there for the next five months. (This was the time when he gave the sisters at Chaillot the retreat on "Adveniat Regnum Tuum.") Later he was to report:

I went almost every day to the convent of the Assumption. . . After Mass, I would spend a fairly long time with superior, either preparing the Rule of the Third Order or rereading the constitutions for sisters or talking about the preparations we would make regarding the order for men.

He had barely returned to Nîmes, when Marie Eugéne wrote on September 22: For the moment I am thinking only of your teachers, of our matters of concern, and of our Good God right in the midst of it all! His response, dated September 27, echoes her thought and adds to it: 'If I am the father of your Assumption, then are you not the

mother of mine? Or rather are not both of them ours in the sense that they belong to Jesus Christ who has entrusted them to us?"

Three months later, at Christmas, Father d'Alzon and Mother Marie Eugénie's dream became a reality when the first six Assumptionists gathered together at Nîmes to begin a life dedicated to the motto "Thy Kingdom Come." The following day, the first letter of the founder was for the foundress: We began with six, you with five; our numbers really have to compensate for your greater length of time. . . but I only want to talk to you about the work. Now we are underway! From now on, it will no longer be a question of one or the other, but of our two Assumptions, our twofold Assumption.

During the years that followed, the relationship continued to be intense and true. As with all real friendships, however, there were rocky moments as well as joyful ones. Marie Eugéne was at times a little insecure about their relationship and said so; she needed some proof, in the form of greater approval, from time to time. Her doubts hurt d'Alzon, but he responded kindly, with great patience and humility. One day, however, he wrote: I understand that what hurts God the most is [for us] to doubt his love for us." It was a discreet echo of what he himself was experiencing.

Still, the mutual support of the work did not cease. Each made the other's congregation known to young people and encouraged likely candidates to enter. Among the young men whom Marie Eugénie met in Paris and sent to Father d'Alzon in Nîmes was Stephen Pernet, the future founder of the Little Sisters of the Assumption. In addition to keeping an eye out for each others' vocation needs, they assisted each other in many other ways as well. The topics of their almost daily letters ranged from Canon Law to account deficits. In the economic area, Marie Eugénie, a person with a genuine head for business, was able both to lend d'Alzon money and to give him good advice about how to use it. As time passed, each was to aid the other financially, but each avoided interfering with the internal affairs of the other institute. And in the midst of it all one finds great tenderness and a pressing invitation:

--Become a saint!

--Become a saint!

--Between you and me there is the Lord. I thank him every day for having made us his together and for having brought us together in a way that I hope will last for all eternity.

Their correspondence was marked by real freedom on both sides. When he, great lover of the Church that he was, allowed himself to become over-extended, she chided him gently about not devoting himself to his true work, the development of the spirit proper to his order:

I find that you are all kinds of good things, except that (being head of your own order). And it is to that very thing that I attribute your lack in the realm of vocations. That fact that you are preaching to the Protestants or combating Gallicanism or allowing yourself to be eaten alive by irritating individuals isn 't the question. What you are not doing is what is your greatest responsibility in the world!

On another occasion she was to say, still with that same knowing affection: You would be better off being a bishop.

A man with an enormous capacity for work, d'Alzon did indeed preach to Protestants and combat Gallicanism, the latter a serious problem for the unity of the Church, since it claimed that the French church was independent of Rome in matters other than dogma. The Church in France was split on this issue, and it caused people like

d’Alzon and Marie Eugénie great anguish This deeply stressful time in the Church’s history affected both the founders and their congregations. Considering the turmoil of the time and the trials he faced in getting his foundation off the ground, it is not surprising to learn that Father d’Alzon fell ill. In 1853, at the age of 43, his letters reflect long days of anguish, great weariness, and profound discouragement. Marie Eugénie’s maternal side, already well developed through her care for her own sisters, now reached out to this man who needed her compassion. He confessed: “Before, it was I who did you good;now you are the one doing the same for me.”

Marie Eugénie remained at all times the spiritual daughter of Father d’Alzon, who would never stop supporting her. But he recognized their mutuality and was not shy about putting it into words:

You are certainly the person on whom I lean with the most confidence and the one I am most eager to support.

What a marvelous expression of their friendship!

CHAPTER 15

1857-1866
AUTEUIL

"To make the mind as Christian as the heart."

"What governs my relationship with a sister is [the responsibility I have] to give her back to God just as He wishes."

By 1855 the boarding school and novitiate at Chaillot had expanded to such an extent that it was necessary to look for a more spacious home. In addition, there were other encouraging signs for the future. Mother Marie Eugénie had just received from Rome a first approval of the "statutes" (a summary of the constitutions). The "Laudatory Brief" signed by Pope Pius IX was a genuine source of encouragement for the Assumption from the Church. Finally, closer to home, the French government was about to officially recognize the congregation. So it was a good time for the Assumption sisters to establish a mother house.

At 40, Marie Eugénie was at the height of her energy, fueled by the experience she had gained over the last dozen and more years. Now she had the chance to choose a kind of treasure box and place in it the treasure confided to her the congregation. It was a different kind of experience from the decisions to rent the apartment on rue Férou or the house at Impasse des Vignes. This place, she hoped, would last, and really be theirs, reflecting the character of the religious and educational life of the Assumption. It would have a quiet location but be near the city; monastic in its appearance, it would be a place of austere beauty for sisters, students, and friends.

Some friends proposed purchasing the Chateau Thuilerie in the suburb of Auteuil (now, of course, part of the sixteenth arrondissement of the city of Paris). At that time Auteuil was rather isolated but still convenient to the city. The house, known as the "invisible chateau" because it was hidden by many trees, had a long history. A tile factory had been established there long ago to take advantage of the natural clay banks of the area, hence
its official name. By the end of the eighteenth century, however, it was no longer a humble workshop, but rather the home of the Countess of Brienne. She used to entertain the young Napoleon
Bonaparte at her "invisible chateau"; the small living quarters on the ground floor were reserved for him.

Obviously, the old house's career was taking a new turn with the arrival of the Assumption sisters and their students. The large reception hall, once the scene of glittering balls and entertainments, became the chapel. Napoleon's private suite became parlors whose visitors were quite different from those the First Consul used to meet. Marie Eugénie welcomed many people there, including the priest-writers Fathers Gay, Gerbert and d'Hulst. Dom Guéranger of Solesmes visited with her there, as did her faithful friend Father Lacordaire. Prominent laymen also found their way to Auteuil as

they had to Chaillot; Louis Veuillot exchanged ideas with the foundress concerning the publishing of l'Univers, his newspaper. Over the years many great causes were debated in that small parlor.

Marie Eugénie reserved the refurbished chateau for the students and those visitors. For the sisters and the novices however, she had a different idea. She planned a large gothic style monastery with stone arches and a cloister, a refectory with a vaulted ceiling, an austere chapter room and monastic cells. For Marie Eugénie this building spoke in stone of the absoluteness of God. Everything was designed in order to remind the people living in it that only God was worth seeking

The first stone was laid on April 14, 1856. Even before construction was completed, however, the first guests arrived. A weary Father d'Alzon and some novices were lodged in the Thuilerie. On August 10, 1857, the sisters left Chaillot to settle for good in Auteuil. Rue des Tombereaux became rue de l'Assomption. At that time the property extended from what is now number 24 to beyond number 17 of the Street, and as far north as Avenue Mozart.

Auteuil has remained the mother house except for displacement because of political reasons up to the present time. Soon this community was joined by others: a House of Adoration in London in the same year, followed in quick succession by schools in Bordeaux (1860), Lyon (1862), Malaga (1865) and the "little convent" in Auteuil in 1866. (In 1901 the big monastery was expropriated by the state; it was destroyed in 1926 in order to build that quarter of Paris. The "little convent" which Marie Eugénie had built for the youngest students is the present 17 rue de l'Assomption.)

Life at Auteuil was busy and demanding, with many outlets for work and creativity. The boarding school was flourishing. The structure of the students' day and the balance in the way they spent their time had been well tested in Chaillot. The austere but joyful family atmosphere, the celebrations and visits to the poor, and the demanding program of studies had been found to serve the needs of young women well. Marie Eugénie continued to develop her ideas about education in writing as well as in practice. Parents of prospective students received a small booklet about the mission of Assumption education which put to rest Combalot's long ago complaint to Kate O'Neill. He had said back then that girls received "pious practices" and little else, that nobody taught them to "relate everything to Jesus Christ, to restore everything in Jesus Christ." What the Assumption was proposing, however, was something quite different:

The goal of education at the Assumption is an integrated development of the girls' personalities. It combines rigorous studies with a profoundly Christian orientation. . Teaching does not consist only of filling the head' with information, but also of developing the mind and moral sense. . . . It is necessary to make the mind as Christian as the heart, to enlighten the spirit in order to attach the will more strongly to good, and to strengthen the faith.

In the quiet backwater of Auteuil, a revolution in education was taking place. This was evident not only in the classrooms, but also in the activities of the Third Order, by this time established at Auteuil as well as in Nîmes. The members met regularly with Mother Thérèse Emmanuel as their leaders. As a result of their spiritual discussions and their prayer, they planned projects with real social significance. For example, they

became involved in bettering the welfare of rag-pickers, which later led to catechism classes for these workers, and they also sponsored a youth fellowship for poor girls from Chaillot. Whenever possible, the Third Order involved the students, many of whom were the daughters of the members, in its projects.

There was yet another piece to the Assumption educational mosaic. Marie Eugénie placed a great deal of emphasis on the education of the sisters. In order for the kind of education described in the prospectus to take place, she realized that the teachers would need to be able to see clearly and deeply. They would need to be free of every other occupation and they would also need to keep up their education by means of continual studies. . . . These lines come from the Rule of Life (article 12) on which she was working during this time. Having sisters study both secular and religious studies was an innovation which reflected her deep interest in the relationship of culture with faith and faith with culture.

The young sisters were led by Marie Eugénie's vision to study out of love for the truth and out of the desire to teach well. She wanted them to be filled with light in order to give light, a light for the Kingdom, not for themselves. A bright person herself~ Marie Eugénie often spoke of the need for humility in approaching study. She urged each sister to learn to contemplate not only God and his splendid creation, but also the often less than splendid events in that creation. In that way the sisters would be able to see what was happening around them in faith and could attempt to understand these events, these signs of the times, from God's perspective If their outlook was to focus on the whole world in general and on the lives of individuals in particular, then it would have to rest on Christ and Scripture. When Marie Eugénie asked that the strength of [the] mind as well As the affections of the] heart be consecrated to Jesus Christ, she was asking for that integration which she had always desired for herself and for her sisters.

Her leadership was confirmed in 1858 by the General Chapter the first of many such. In a General Chapter, delegates from each house (today, from each province) come together to seek the will of God for the congregation. A major event in the life of a religious congregation, the Chapter's decisions orient the entire group for the next six years. It is a time for serious listening and discernment of spirits.

In 1858, then, the sisters listened and prayed and elected Marie Eugénie Superior General for life. This caused her a certain amount of concern. She had been acting as the general superior since the very beginning, first without being elected, and then after being elected by a special vote. Even at that time, she had shared her reservations about taking on this responsibility with Father d'Alzon, saying: it would be extremely advantageous to me not to let me be renamed superior. I feel I am getting out of the habit of obeying. His response was to the point: "For me this is most definitely a clear-cut matter. I believe that God wants you there, that he wills that you give your spirit to the work that you have founded."

Years after her initial hesitation, Mother Marie Eugénie found herself obeying the will of God by obeying the will of the congregation to lead it. Her major task was not so much the governance of the congregation in its day to day affairs as it was the provision of service to the communities in general and to each sister in particular. Twenty years after the foundation, she now had to transmit its particular spirit and its founding vision to sisters who might not have even been born when she and the others had come together on rue Férou, in those weak and powerless beginnings. To those now gathered into the large

monastery at Auteuil, with its appearance of solidity and even power, she was often to speak of the early days, not out of simple nostalgia, but rather as a way to remind her hearers that "here we have no lasting city" (Heb. 13:14).

When she wrote it is our spirit to love each other with tenderness, Marie Eugénie was setting down the particular tone of her authority. No unreachable figurehead, but rather a sister deeply interested in others, she shared in her community's concerns, joys, and hesitations, its discoveries, encounters, and decisions. She encouraged serious discernment, but urged that it be done in an atmosphere of joy and freedom of spirit. She Knew her sisters and loved them, making it a habit, as she said, to see in them only what is eternal. . . . For me what governs my relationship with a sister is the responsibility I have] to give her back to God just as He wishes to see her.

Marie Eugénie knew how both to ask for and give pardon, a great grace in anyone, but especially important in a leader. A little story suggests how it was with her. One day, completely worn out, she had barely returned to Auteuil when she got up and hurried back to the house from which she had just come. She went back to ask forgiveness from a sister she had just afraid she had hurt. It was a small thing, but telling enough to be remembered.

She herself was often wounded, especially by the acerbic personality of Sister Marie Augustine, whose criticism and pointed silences were hard to bear. Other sisters also added to her burden with their own very human suspicions and individualism. After twenty years of religious life and of being a leader, Marie Eugénie was well aware that community life has its hardships as well as its joys, as she noted in her journal:

[I choose] to receive from the hands of our Lord as part of His poverty, His humiliations, and His sufferings, the pain that people might cause me and the words that might be said to me or about me.

She had an exceptional gift for helping others to see the hand and of the Lord in their lives, too. Despite her many other responsibilities, she took a great deal of time for the deeply important responsibility of spiritual direction, both in person and in writing. Many of her chapters (that is, the weekly instruction of the community by the superior), dialogues with individuals, and letters have been preserved, and they offer a way to understand and appreciate her spirituality

First, it is easy to see that she sets great store by commonsense: size up the things going on inside you by distancing yourself a little, the way painters do so they don't distort the proportions. This advice came out of her concern to allow each soul its particular form, not in the chaos of desires but in that calm place where God wishes to leave his image. God is the one to leave an image, not the director; by encouraging her directives to be free, faithful, and abandoned before him, she wove these values into the fabric of Assumption life.

About faith she wrote: it is folly not be what we are as fully as possible. Her confidence in the creature stems from her absolute trust in the Creator. She recognized the power of faith to touch every aspect of a person and to change that person for good:

See how the nature of faith is the distinctive nature of our spirit and how it must act upon our life, transform our mind, fill our affections and give us a new love.

Faith would make possible abandonment, something she often recommended to her bright and eager sisters. She asked one: What difference does it make that you are unable? To another she suggested: Remain in the hands of Providence like a child who doesn't move, who doesn't fuss.

Her constant and total dependence on Jesus Christ was leading her to freedom, and it was a freedom she wanted to share with the entire Assumption. She urged on each sister the study of Jesus Christ, the love of Jesus Christ . . . intimate time spent with Jesus Christ. These things would enable a person to live more in the depths of the soul where God dwells. She was a kind of missionary to the spirit: in one conversation, she spoke of the uncharted territory of the soul where each person must walk to discover the dwelling place of God.

Out of the four great rules of religious life in the western Church, Marie Eugénie chose the Rule of Saint Augustine (to which were added the particular constitutions of the congregation) for the Assumption because it is centered on the single commandment of love. She said that it was necessary to speak often and virtually only about faith, hope, and charity, and very little of the other virtues. The "Prologue" to Augustine's Rule affirms this insight:

Before all else, love God and love your neighbor, for these are the first commandments given to us.

To love in community or elsewhere is to forgive, to lose one's life and not to expect a return because God alone suffices. It is to find one's pleasure in service. Augustine concludes his Rule with this prayer, which must have been Marie Eugénie's prayer for her sisters as well: The Lord grant that you may observe these rules out of charity, as lovers of spiritual beauty, discharging the fragrance of Christ from the holiness of your lives, not as slaves under the law but as free persons under grace.

Her solicitude for her sisters' physical health was as great as her care of their souls, but she experienced great pain herself because there was very little to be done for the sick. The great killer of the nineteenth century, tuberculosis, was incurable; the victims had simply to wait, in great pain, for the release of death. The poorly heated buildings and the generosity of young people enduring beyond their strength often prompted a simple case of flu to become a serious and lingering pulmonary infection leading to death. Marie Eugénie dealt with these threats to health as best she could, often sending weary sisters to "take the waters" as they used to say in those days at a thermal spa. She also kept after them about their health, writing to one young sister in a cold February:

I don't want to neglect to tell you that I find that [having] three colds already this winter is much too much, I want you to take care of yourself, get up later in the morning, cover yourself when you pass through cold areas, stay only in heated rooms, and do everything you have to so you won't cough anymore. Tell me if you do all these things.

She must have received an answer that she didn't much like, because another note whose tone may be described as crisp was soon dispatched to the same person:

What does that mean, that the cause of your new cold is night chills: isn't your door completely shut? Or don't you have something near you to cover yourself with when it gets cold?

In addition to the constant stream of letters and notes, Marie Eugénie spent long periods of time with her sick sisters. But even her great tenderness could not conquer some illnesses, especially consumption. During her long life as the mother of the congregation, she was forced to bury some two hundred of her daughters, many of whom were between the ages of 20 and 30. Each death was a blow to the foundress and the community, who asked themselves: "What more could we have done?" Yet they had done perhaps the most important thing of all; they had stayed with the dying sister, surrounding her with song and with prayer, with loving presence. Marie Eugénie believed that the mystery of the dormition of Mary (her falling asleep in death followed by her assumption into heaven) was of help in the relatively peaceful death of most of the sisters. But her presence at their bedsides, her encouragement of their faith, must have also helped them to peacefully take the path of consent and holiness.

But in the midst of death, we are in life, and life was abundant in the Assumption, which continued to grow vigorously during these years. So many foundation demands were made that some had to be refused. In 1861, for instance, Father d'Alzon proposed to buy the church of the "tomb" of the Blessed Virgin in Jerusalem; Marie Eugénie could not accept his offer to set up a community of sisters there, much to her regret. When in 1864, his fervor led him to ask for some sisters to accompany his men to Bulgaria, she again refused, citing the lack of sisters adapted to that kind of apostolate and mission.

Father d'Alzon was upset when Marie Eugénie refused his invitation to Bulgaria and then made in the same year the foundation of Malaga, in southern Spain. But, respecting her freedom and still desiring to have sisters for the Balkan missions he planned, he invited some women from the mountains of Cevennes to join him in the work. These women eventually became the Oblates of the Assumption; Mme. Marie Correnson, whom d'Alzon chose as his co-foundress, spent some time with Mother Marie Eugénie to prepare herself for the task. The Assumption also helped the Oblates for the first two years by lending first Mother Madeleine and then Sister Marie Emmanuel to be directors of formation.

The following year, in 1865, Father Stephen Pernet, A.A., whose vocation had been guided by Marie Eugénie, and Mme. Antoinette Fage founded the next congregation in the Assumption family: the Little Sisters of the Assumption. Marie Eugénie gladly welcomed the future Mother Marie de Jesus to Auteuil to introduce her to religious life. There must have been elements of déjà vu in this experience for her as she watched this young woman learn what it would mean to be the foundress of a congregation. There were benefits to both sides in this arrangement, since the students of the Assumption were exposed even more to the social problems of their time and to the evangelization of the working class family, which the Little Sisters made the goal of their institute. How wonderfully ironic that these two foundations found support, help, and sisterly affirmation in the very drawing room of the young Bonaparte! A room which had seen plans for war and conquest hatched in its confines now witnessed the development of plans for peace and service instead.

Mother Marie Eugenie was happy to serve the Church in this way. Her own foundation could have been sufficient to take up all her time and energy, but this she did not allow. Instead, she helped many other congregations, in France and elsewhere. She

entered into a “prayer alliance” with missionaries bound for China, became interested in the English Church, and developed ties with the Polish Fathers of the Resurrection. She welcomed for a long stay Mother Macrina, abbess of the Monastery of Minsk in what is today Byelorus; all of the sisters of this unfortunate woman had been martyred and she was on her way to Rome to beg the Pope for help. Contacts like these and those with the great orders in the Church the Jesuits, Dominicans, Benedictines kept Marie Eugénie and the Assumption open to the world. Her wide and impartial range of relationships fostered in her and her sisters a great independence of mind and spirit. This freedom she put at the service of the Church, writing:

We must work for the Church and make our life one of constant devotion to the Church.

There were walls around the monastery at Auteuil, but there were also gates which opened to the people of God.

CHAPTER 16

1866
SAINT PETER'S -- ROME

"The life of the Church must be formed in us through suffering."

When Mother Marie Eugénie remarked that the life of the Church must be formed in us through suffering, she was not speaking in pious abstractions. Already knowing what it was to suffer not only from forces outside the Church but also from forces within it, she was not afraid to call this latter type of suffering by its true name. If persecution comes to us, it will do its work, she had said, speaking of certain churchmen's attempts to discredit the new foundation. In 1866, almost thirty years into the life and work of the Assumption, a virulent attack on the congregation in general and on herself in particular would cause Marie Eugénie to understand her own prophetic words even more deeply.

Because of the obedience that she wished to live, Mother Marie Eugénie desired the Church's confirmation of her work, or, as she put it, the work of God. She needed to be sure that the work of the Assumption belonged to God alone, and only the Church could give such a guarantee by officially recognizing and approving the congregation. At that time a religious institute had to pass through three stages before it had that the full approval of the Holy See in Rome. Briefly, the process went as follows.
Stage One: promulgation of the "Laudatory Brief," a decree praising the initial outline of the constitutions.
Stage Two: promulgation of the "Approbation of the Institute," remarks, requests for corrections and more explicit encouragement from the Holy See once the constitutions had been presented in final form.
Stage Three: following a period of lived experience with the revised constitutions, a final approval was issued. With this approval, the Church accepted responsibility for a congregation.

The "Laudatory Brief" had been issued in 1854. After eight more years of work on the final form of the Constitutions, Marie Eugénie wished to obtain the "Approbation of the Institute" with as little delay as possible, and so decided to go to Rome herself. Leaving the congregation in the hands of Mother Therese Emmanuel, she set Out with great enthusiasm from the port of Marseille for Italy. With her on that voyage went one young sister who could speak Italian. It was May 1866.

The trip was clearly as much pilgrimage as business. Her young companion reported that at the tomb of Saint Peter,

[Mother Marie Eugenic] seemed unable to pull herself away from that place. I saw her place on Peter's tomb the Constitutions that she brought to Rome to be evaluated and approved in order to become, thus, a source of life for all of us.
Marie Eugenic remembered that moment as well, writing: I prayed very much for the Congregation and I asked Saint Peter that the love of the Church might always be its

main characteristic and that it might die out o f it is not to be always tenderly united to the Chair of Rome!

Between meetings with various ecclesiastical officials, Marie Eugenie continued to explore Christian Rome, visiting the other basilicas, the catacombs, and attending Mass in the room where Saint Ignatius died. There she received a certain insight into her own situation. She wrote to the sisters:

Saint Ignatius knew al/the pains of a foundation; he learned through experience that it is through suffering that the works of God are born. . . .1 was the first stone laid by the hand of God and that was no small task!

On May 31, the day of her audience with Pius IX, she confided to her companion: I need to pray much today; before I go to see the Pope, I would like to spend two or three hours in front of the Blessed Sacrament. . .

The Pope himself was friendly, the audience encouraging. However, in the days that followed, she began to notice that her meetings with Vatican officials were marked by a certain reserve on their part. Her efforts to obtain the "Approbation of the Institute" came to a standstill. Everyone regretted it, but nothing could be done. Nobody would say just why, but nobody would help her, either. Then news from Paris began to shed some unpleasant light on the situation.

Mother Thérèse Emmanuel had written to say that Father Véron, the Episcopal vicar for religious who had previously been most helpful, was now creating all kinds of problems for the Assumption. His job was to make available to Rome all the supporting material for the request for approbation, but he was deliberately delaying the process. Before he could send the dossier, he was claiming, he would have to make a thorough investigation of the governance of the congregation, its fidelity to the Rule, and even the accounts of each community. It seemed unreasonable and puzzling. But the puzzle was soon solved. Returning to Paris in haste, Marie Eugénie soon perceived the reasons behind Father Véron's hostility. Her trip to Rome had angered (and perhaps frightened) both the vicar and his bishop, Archbishop Darboy of Paris. At this time traces of Gallicanism still persisted in many French dioceses; for Gallican bishops, Roman authority was mostly interested in limiting episcopal rights, and so had to be resisted. International congregations desiring the "Pontifical Right" to be subordinates to the Pope rather than to the local ordinary were thus, naturally, objects of suspicion. By making the trip to Rome, Marie Eugénie had almost guaranteed the kind of "persecution" of which she had spoken earlier.

Father Véron went about his work methodically and vindictively. Questioning each sister at length, he paid particular attention to those, like Sister Marie Augustine, who had complaints. Meanwhile, he ignored the General Counsellors, thereby effectively removing the means of governance from the hands of the Council and it's duly constituted Superior General. In this atmosphere of darkness and mistrust, slander and rumor reared their ugly heads, maligning Marie Eugénie and casting doubt on the value of her leadership. It was said, for example that the archbishop approved of her work but had lost confidence in her. Her heart, always so attentive to the voice of the Church, was wounded, yet she still trusted in the providence of God. She wrote to Father d'Alzon

I need only as much of a good reputation as it pleases our Lord to guard for me and, except for a short time of bodily pain after people have said abusive things to me, my heart is happy.

Father d'Alzon's encouragement from "the heart of a father and of an old friend" must have helped her spirits, but it was no protection against the continued persecution engineered by Father Véron. Perhaps the climax was reached when he threatened to remove the Blessed Sacrament from the house in Auteuil and to bar entrance to the chapel altogether. His idea was to force the sisters to leave Paris. Faced with this kind of abuse, Mother Marie Eugénie could see no other solution than to propose her resignation as Superior General. This pacified Father Véron, who rescinded his threat of a ban for the time being.

It was December 1866. She had come home to Véron's "investigation" in July of that year, and had since suffered through six wretched months. During that time her intentions. her vision, even her personal character, had all been called into question and dragged through the mud. And then everything changed. Father Véron died suddenly, and Archbishop Darboy seems to have had a change of heart; at any rate, he made known his personal esteem for Marie Eugenie. Rome, convinced by the many testimonies of bishops friendly to the Assumption, granted the Decree of Approbation of the Institute, which Pius IX signed on September 14, 1867.

The "Véron Affair," as it came to be known, was over. But it had done its work -- not only in the negative sense, but also in the effect it had on Marie Eugénie and thus on her congregation. At 50, she found herself more than ever attached to the Church. She recognized that her faith had passed through a trial created by the Church in its own weakness. She could see that she was being conformed to Christ in his Passion and Resurrection by sharing them in her own life. Making the Way of the Cross early each morning, Marie Eugenie now knew the disfigured face of the Incarnate Lord in his Church through her experience: "Ecce Homo, Ecce Ecclesia."

Long before she had remarked with real disappointment: I was seeking apostles, I found only men. This time, too, she had found "only men," but in her maturity the experience of suffering had transformed her disappointment into a humble love, a greater desire to serve the Church, to pray for it, and to suffer in it. Aware of the change in herself, of her entrance into some new stage in her life with Christ, she wrote:

Here I am almost a half a century old. I believe, I feel, that I am leaving the streams and going out to sea, and whatever this sea is fills me and intoxicates me!

CHAPTER 17

1870-1876
DESPITE THE WAR

"Let us pray and return to our work with more fervor than ever."

France declared war on Prussia on July 18, 1870. By the beginning of August three defeats of the French army had brought the Prussians to the gates of Paris, and things looked dark for the City of Light. The Auteuil community dispersed in small groups to the other houses in France and England, while the novitiate moved to Switzerland. About twenty sisters,
however, stayed behind, transforming the convent into a small hospital. Marie Eugénie circulated from house to house outside the capital, with special care for Sedan, which had been a battleground early in the war.

The surrender of Napoleon III on September 2, 1870 led to the collapse of the Second Empire and the proclamation of the Third Republic. A provisional government continued the war with Prussia, but with Paris surrounded by the enemy, there was little hope of victory. During the particularly early and severe winter that followed, famine threatened the lives of Parisians as much as did the bombardment. Both conditions caused many people to flock to the sisters' house at Auteuil. Caring for the wounded and for refugees during those months of anxiety and sorrow, the sisters continued to punctuate their days with the prayer of the Office:

O God, listen to my prayer. O that I had wings like a dove to fly away and be at rest. So I would escape far away and take refuge in the desert.
For I can see nothing but violence and strife in the city.
As for me, I will cry to God and the Lord will save me. Evening, morning and at noon
I will cry and lament.
O Lord I will trust in you.

Psalm 55

The psalms' recognition of the dark side of the human condition must have been a great source of courage and comfort for them in those dark days. Still, there were also moments of light, like the times when all the inhabitants of Auteuil -- the sisters, the soldiers, and the wounded --took part in celebrating the feasts of the Immaculate Conception, Christmas, and Epiphany together. The sisters managed to find each person a tiny gift and a few evergreen branches; as always, the liturgy brought joy to the community and raised people's spirits.

On January 28, 1871, France made its surrender final by signing a general armistice with Prussia. Adolphe Thiers was named executive head of the Third Republic, but soon found himself confronted by another crisis: the people of Paris had risen in insurrection against the national government, and the National Guard was on their side. Revolutionary Socialists controlled the Council of the Commune of Paris and so the city;
Thiers' government had to take refuge in Versailles, about twenty miles away.

From that vantage point, the national government put ferocious military pressure on the Commune; essentially, the people of Paris had gone from war with a foreign

power to civil war in the space of a month. The city was filled with the sound of guns and the smell of powder; many of the streets were stained with blood. Civil war is a time to settle old scores, as one week's incredible toll of 20,000 victims attests. Throughout the city the old anti-clericalism of the 1789 revolution re emerged, as priests and religious were arrested, imprisoned, and executed. The sisters were not immune to the danger. One day, for example, they found themselves undergoing a search by the entire 63rd Battalion of the National Guard. They were unharmed, but the Jesuits and the Dominicans, subjected to the same searches, were not so fortunate. Some of their number were imprisoned and others were executed. Throughout this grim period the Blessed Sacrament was the source of the community's strength, and the psalms were its comfort:

Within our walls lives destruction; malice and brutality never leave the street.
As for me, I cry out to God. The Lord will save us. Psalm 55

By late spring it was clear that the government in Versailles would prevail. The Commune had been broken, and Marie Eugénie returned to Paris on July 2, 1871. She came home to a city that had been brutalized both by the Prussians and by its own people, a city experiencing the profound grief of defeat after a full year of war. Little by little, the sisters also returned, each with a story of Providence at work in her life. Certainly Providence had been at work for the Assumption as a whole, operating in unexpected ways. Because many of these sisters had been welcomed by the communities in London, Richmond, and Nîmes, this ordeal had actually strengthened the bonds of love and friendship within the congregation.

God was also providing for the growth of the Assumption. Because young women were constantly asking to enter into its simple yet difficult life, it became evident that other foundations would have to be made. Mother Marie Eugénie did not want to keep any more workers at home than were necessary.

She was going to send them "into the fields."

Before the war, the congregation had already been established in Poitiers, Reims, Saint-Dizier, and Nice, as well as in Nîmes, Sedan, London, Richmond, Bordeaux, Lyons, and Malaga. As always, each foundation was marked by a great poverty. It is told that some communities had only one pen and that it passed from one sister to another -- because they liked to write! With the war had come an interruption in the plans for expansion, but once peace returned, expansion resumed. Most of the new foundations were in Europe, but there was another attempt at a non-European mission, this time in the South Seas.

In 1872, a Marist priest and great friend of the Assumption, Father Vitte, was named Bishop of New Caledonia. Part of Melanesia in the South Pacific, the island was used by France as a penal colony from 1864 to 1894. Father Vitte urged Marie Eugénie to send some sisters to take care of a small school for girls run by a laywoman who was about to leave the area. The girls were mostly the daughters of prisoners, and, according to Father Vitte, "the most underprivileged children on earth." It would have been hard to say no to such an urgent appeal, and so three sisters embarked for New Caledonia. Unfortunately, the mission was once again beyond what they and their General had calculated. Conditions were as difficult as they had been at the Cape twenty years earlier,

and they took their toll. One sister died of a tropical disease; the second lost her leg because of an accident and died of complications in 1876, while the third left not only the mission but religious life altogether.

For the moment the sisters had to accept that their missionary work was for Europe. They founded a school in Montpellier in 1874 and another in Madrid in 1876 at the behest of King Alfonso XII, who had been made aware of the Assumption by his cousin, Mercedes d'Orléans, a former student at Auteuil. The sisters went too to Lourdes; where since 1858 great crowds of the faithful had been coming to visit the grotto in which Bernadette Soubirous had spoken with the Blessed Mother. Offered the opportunity to make a foundation there, Marie Eugénie hesitated, but Thérèse Emmanuel, confirmed by the Lord in prayer, urged her to take up the challenge. They bought the house of the Benedictines, right across from the grotto; this house still belongs to the congregation.

The school in Auteuil was also growing at a great rate, so much so that a school was founded strictly for day students, first on rue General Foy and later on rue Lubeck, where it remains today. Further foundations in Ramsgate and Sidmouth in England, in Cannes, in Rome, and in San Sebastian in Spain added to the scope of the congregation. In the 1890s, some forty years after the disastrous attempt at the Cape and twenty years after the failure of New Caledonia, the Assumption again left Europe and founded in Central America and in the Philippines. These foundations were not without trials, but they lasted, and the congregation was to be enriched by its experience of other peoples and their cultures.

During her long life Mother Marie Eugénie answered the cal1 of the harvest master many times, sending many workers into his vineyard all over the earth. And many times, too, especially when the new foundation was in France, she took part in the actual work of setting up the houses and the schools. Not surprisingly, there was never enough money even though she possessed genuine business acumen; she managed anyway, dealing with architects and carpenters alike with the authority and interest in detail that were natural to her.

Marie Eugénie lived, worked, and traveled through nineteenth century France with mediocre health. In addition to actual illness, she often suffered from that overpowering weariness that comes from worry, opposition, and loneliness. She certainly recognized that her burden of responsibility had repercussions on her physical condition:

I was suffering from despondency and would have liked to lie there and die, but it was precisely during that overpowering weariness that an infinite number of things would demand that I attend to them with all my soul, with all my attention, and with all the energy I could muster. There are material details and spiritual concerns, accounts and rules, etc . . . . and to all that, there is only one response inside me. I have a backache and would like to lie down, especially if it means not having to get up again. It is at such times when everything weighs me down and wearies me to such an extent that I can't even open my mouth to talk about it.

It was a hard life she was leading, but not so hard that she couldn't laugh at herself a little, even as she acknowledged her fragility. Her ability to do both and to keep going suggests that her weakness actually gave her strength. Certainly her poor health led her to realize in her body that God would have to do the work. She offered her sufferings in union with the Passion of Christ and trusted in him to see her through. It is good to feel

one’s strength unequal to the task, she once wrote to Father d’Alzon. When I feel devoid of strength and without my health, I trust in God for everything.

Perhaps Marie Eugénie’s physical frailty was one of the secrets to the rapid expansion of the Assumption. She herself remarked on the disproportion between the good things God had been pleased to derive from the congregation and its weak and powerless beginnings. Her physical disability forced her into that place of weakness where God alone can act. There she practiced abandonment, poverty of heart, and confidence in Providence, remarking: it is a very precious time of life when we understand that by ourselves we can do nothing and that with God we can do everything.

I am at home in the hands of God, she once said; when I am weak, then I am strong.

CHAPTER 18

1878
AT SIXTY

"It is not an easy thing to explain the spirit of the Assumption the way I feel it."

At sixty, Marie Eugénie had reached the time in nineteenth century life when people began to die of old age. In Rome, Pope Pius IX, who [had] witnessed the development and approbation of the work, was succeeded by Leo XIII. Closer to home, Father d'Alzon was seriously ill and could no longer provide the kind of support on which she had relied for so many years. It was a moment that called for reflection, and so, when the sisters asked her to define the spirit and the spirituality of the congregation, she was ready to oblige them. In fourteen chapters given week by week from February through May of 1878, she spoke at length about her vision of the Assumption.

Before beginning that series of conferences, Marie Eugénie expressed a desire to talk with her sisters and get their ideas so that she could better explain her own. Clearly, she did not see herself as the sole guardian of the Assumption spirit. Rather, she recognized that it was a mutual trust of the entire Assumption family, a family that included not only the sisters, but also their friends. Nevertheless, the chapters of 1878 bear particular witness to Marie Eugénie's longstanding devotion to and involvement in the mission and spirituality of the congregation. She puts her stamp on the Assumption in a special way, focusing on four traits that she sees as essential to Assumption life:

* A lofty idea of God.
* Christ, the center of Assumption hearts and lives.
* The Church as the Body of Christ and source of all life.
* A particular approach to the Blessed Virgin.

A Lofty Idea of God

The thinking of Marie Eugénie centers on God, living God who had already made his presence known to her at the time of her First Communion: I was captivated by the grandeur of God, she said time and again. In the chapters she develops the idea of God as Beauty, Goodness and Truth, as Love spurring people on to love. The happiness of each one's life, God is capable of filling the needs of each as well. God wishes each person to go in a direction which he has planned, to become the full human being he created, upright and honest alive and happy, developing the natural talents to give God honor and glory. If a person follows this path, her love will turn into adoration and the joyful submission of her heart; if she experiences this type of transformation, she will also desire to make God known and loved.

As a consequence of its gaze fixed on God, says Marie Eugénie, faith is the first characteristic of the Assumption, the first response to that God who so desires to reveal himself. An ardent faith, as sure and as straight as an arrow heading for its mark, carries with it all the thoughts, affections, and decisions of the faithful. It enables a person -- or a group of persons -to order her life -- or the life of a congregation -- according to what cannot be seen but what can be known.

Christ, the Center of Assumption Hearts and Lives

Five conferences in a row, starting on March 10 and ending on April 21, focus on Jesus Christ. In the first of these, entitled “Knowledge and Love of Jesus Christ,” Marie Eugénie reminds her listeners that Christ is the center, the life, the raison d’etre of the Assumption. She says: We are called to honor particularly the mystery of the Incarnation. By this she means that in the mystery of the Word-made-flesh, all things are reconciled: time, history, creation, and all human life find their destiny and meaning in Christ. Such a Christ is a cosmic Christ, but for Marie Eugenie, Christ is also the Christ of Augustine, the” humble Jesus,” and the Christ of Paul, whose declaration, “It is no longer I who live, but Jesus Christ who lives in me” (Gal.2:2O) suggests the Christ to be found in each person. Not only is Jesus the life of each believer, but each human life becomes part of the mystery of Christ, who is able to make himself manifest in human flesh.

In three brief movements Marie Eugénie offers the means of knowing and loving Jesus Christ: study, reading, and prayer. She urges that each person first practice the prayer of simple presence to God, that is, loving attention to God, to his Word, and to what he is doing in one’s life. Second, she calls for recollection, a further step in the interior life, in which a person surrenders to the actions of the “Teacher-Within,” as Augustine expresses it, in an attitude of desire, love, and receptivity. The third movement is union and an even greater silence -- which may come without one’s even knowing it.

Another way of loving Christ is to follow him more closely; this is the way of humility. On April 7, 1878, Marie Eugénie devoted her entire chapter to this virtue. She wanted to break the image of humility so dear to popular piety and so she spoke forcefully on humility as accepting to be only what one is, but all that one is. Freed from false roles, a humble person can dare to be fully herself. As for achievements, successes, talents, and the like, all come from God, all belong to God, and so all are meant to give God glory. On the other hand, there is also failure and apparent uselessness. The truly humble can, in the face of such pain, savor the joy of following the way of Jesus who died a failure on the cross. Whether seeming good or seeming ill, everything should be handed over to God; this handing over is humility.

Another aspect of love of Jesus Christ for Marie Eugénie is abandonment, the union of wills, the “yes” to the desires of God. It can be understood as a dance of sorts. She urges the person who wishes to abandon herself not to move afoot before Providence, but rather to delight in receiving her life from God.

This is the time for the great Dancer to lead the dance. And then the person should move, allowing herself to be led to an active renunciation of her own will. The dance repeats itself over and over in love. Finally, according to Marie Eugénie, such love moves the lovers to long to speak of love, to wish to extend the Kingdom by their whole lives, to desire to attend to their “Father’s business” like Jesus, and even to be willing to die for it as he did, going through the dark night and the Passion.

The Church as Body of Christ and Source of All Life

For Marie Eugénie, there is no Christ without the Church, the place where the believer encounters Christ in hid resurrected body and the brightness of his glory. She sees the Assumption’s particular vocation as one of loving the Church and making it loved. Tasting the richness of the patrimony of the Church, and nourished by the divine life of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, the Assumption brings time into harmony with the rhythm of the liturgy. It does this in order to enter into the long lineage of the

saints and to allow the Father to take, restore, and lead his Church back to himself through that liturgy. Marie Eugénie wants her sisters to love the Church and to make it loved as it is, with its suffering pilgrim face, its divisions, even its sin. After forty years of service to the Church, she knew what she was talking about.

A Particular Approach to the Blessed Virgin

Marie Eugenie's Marian theology is straightforward: Mary must be associated with the mysteries of her Son. As she does in the gospel, she points to the person of Christ, from the Incarnation to his Passion and Resurrection, rather than to herself. The Mary of popular devotion has little place in the life of the Assumption.

With respect to Mary's Assumption itself, Marie Eugénie points out that Mary was not raised to heaven as a result of personal effort but rather was irresistibly drawn and absorbed by God through love. During the course of her life, through ordinary and extraordinary events, Mary said "yes" over and over again. These acts of consent led her to be progressively overcome by the life of the Trinity until the glory of God burst forth in her weakness in the final phase of the great mystery of the Assumption. The first creature to return bodily to the Kingdom of the Father, Mary took first place of all human beings after her Son, who crowned her that day and forever.

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In these famous chapters of 1878, as she looked back and also looked forward, Marie Eugénie developed for her listeners her ideas about the spirit of joyful detachment, that state of being which receives all things from God's love. It is a spirit which welcomes with confidence everything that comes from him, a spirit willing to undergo gladly even opposition and suffering because of its certainty that nothing can separate it from him. It is a spirit which enables a person to be pulled out of her own" soil," to leave the land of self-preoccupation in search of God alone.

CHAPTER 19

1880-1888
A TIME TO SAY
GOODBYE

"I have made it a habit to see in people only what I shall see in them for all eternity."

The congregation founded by Father d'Alzon, the Augustinians of the Assumption, was also expanding throughout this period, and the relations between the two congregations were based on mutual support. The sisters had encouraged the fathers, especially at the beginning of their mission; the Paris community of Assumptionists had supported the sisters in their difficulties with the archbishop and during the Franco-Prussian War and the Commune. With the two institutes founded in the 1860s, the Oblates of the Assumption by Father d'Alzon, and the Little Sisters of the Assumption by Father Pernet, the relationship was somewhat different, since the Assumptionists were still charged with overseeing the governance of these congregations. By the mid-1870s the Assumptionists were wondering what their future role would be in regard to those congregations, and even though Marie Eugénie had founded her institute before Emmanuel d'Alzon had founded his, the Assumptionists were also asking themselves the same question with respect to the Religious of the Assumption.

During the General Chapter of 1876 in Auteuil, Father d'Alzon put forward Father Picard as a "delegate" or "visitor" to the sisters, a role of fraternal accompaniment without judicial authority. But different interpretations concerning the powers of the "visitor" Were to cause difficulties between the two congregations. Until the death of Father d'Alzon, however, the mutual confidence of the two founders enabled them to continue the collaboration without undue strain.

Throughout the years of growth and trial, Father d'Alzon had always been there for Marie Eugénie, encouraging, fatherly and friendly. As he aged, their relationship took on the colors of autumn, but the tone between them was the same as it had been during the spring and summer of their exceptional friendship. Humor was always present. In one letter he writes: "I have an inordinate desire to see you," and then a little further on: "I am becoming despicable as I get older; get rid of me" In the next paragraph, however, the playfulness takes a serious turn as he reveals his real feelings: "I am inviting you to get rid of me, but I'd really be upset if you followed my advice.' Finally, after a strict, almost scrupulous review of their friendship, he says: "It seems to me that I can love your soul without measure. I am close enough to eternity to see clearly.'

As Father d'Alzon's health deteriorated, his letters were less frequent but no less expressive and beautiful. On May 24, 1879, for example, he wrote: "I have only God and a few friends when God allows it. I rank you at the top of those I have left." Two months before his death, in September 1880, he wrote again: "As the horizon grows dark, it is important to remain more and more united to our Lord."

On November 1, 1880, Marie Eugénie expressed the desire to see her old friend, provided that her visit be a consolation and not a strain. On November 14, the fathers allowed her to go to the room of the sick man. She stood at the doorway. Father d'Alzon

asked that the shutters be opened so that he could see Mother Marie Eugénie clearly. “Dear Mother,” he murmured, “how sad it is to see each other for such a short time.” Then, in a strong voice, he blessed her. It was their last meeting; a week later, on November 21, Emmanuel d’Alzon died. It was the end of an era.

There had been, of course, differences of opinion and temperament between these two great figures throughout that” era.” Hurts and misunderstandings, often caused by the desire to remain honest and direct with each other, were not uncommon but they were usually followed by happy reunions. They maintained their personal freedom and were thus able to say hard -- sometimes unjust -- things to each other despite their mutual attachment The refusals to found houses in the Balkans and Jerusalem, for example, and the problems concerning the authority of the fathers over the sisters were painful moments, but they could not tarnish the beauty of a friendship lasting a half century. Their relationship was for each an experience of learning about the greatest Love of all. Reserved and tender at the same time, he came to know himself through his spiritual direction of her, sometimes agreeing with her and sometimes resisting her. For her part, she had a will to obey and to be open, a will centered on God. At the same time, her emotional dependence on him and her need for his approval contended with her strong desires for equality and complete participation with him.

At 63, Marie Eugénie felt keenly the pain of the separation following his long illness, yet she cherished the hope that the separation was not final, as she wrote to her sisters:

I have made it a habit to see in people only what I shall see for all eternity. What I shall see eternally in Father d 'Alzon is his love for Jesus Christ, his devotion to the Church, his zeal for souls.

How hard it must have been to let go of someone about whom she had once exclaimed: He loved my soul!

Ten years earlier Father d’Alzon had written some lines which suggest how well aware he was that their friendship was mutual:

If I have given something, I have also received a great deal. It is that mutual communication which is the source of what I have been able to say. We have purchased in the Cevennes a small property where there are two ravines. Each has a small spring which flows into a common river. When the waters come together, who can say what is the true origin of the stream?

What a beautiful image of that friendship and of that twofold foundation!

Another death at this time caused Marie Eugénie still more grief when her first sister, Josephine de Commarque, the tireless Sister Marie Thérèse, died on April 18, 1882. With her went forty-two years of daily service to the congregation. The following year, the sixty-eight year old Mother Thérèse Emmanuel ~s health caused Marie Eugenic real anxiety. When Thérèse left to rest in Cannes for a few months, Marie Eugénie prayed: I beg the Lord to leave her for me, I need her so much! Therese did regain Some of her strength that time, but Marie Eugenie knew only too well the seriousness of lung disease, which was often fatal.

Although Therese Emmanuel was still left to her, Marie Eugenie was going to face new trouble as the old questions of authority surfaced yet again. As the official “visitor” named by Father d’Alzon, Father Picard, d’Alzon’s successor as Superior

General of the fathers and Marie Eugenie's' good friend and confessor, raised the issue of the independence of the Religious of the Assumption. Would or would not the Assumption Sisters keep for good their legal autonomy in relation to the Assumption Fathers? This important question raised others and brought certain problems to light as well: what were the limits in regard to the chaplains, confessors, and ecclesiastical superiors? What was the relationship of the Religious of the Assumption to other religious orders? What freedom of conscience -- which Father Picard wished to be greater in scope -- was allowed the sisters with regard to their superiors?

There were differences of opinion among the sisters. Subordination to the fathers, with its implied protection, seemed necessary to some but unnecessary to others. The beautiful unity which had existed not only between the two congregations but also within the Assumption itself now seemed to be coming apart. But there had been other times when that unity had been threatened, and there had always been a pillar which supported the keystone. As in 1841, when she had urged resistance to Father Combalot's attempt to split the group, and in 1866, when Father Veron had tried the same thing, Mother Thérèse Emmanuel upheld the authority of Mother Marie Eugénie in 1886. Marie Eugénie's prayer to keep Thérèse Emmanuel because she needed her "so much" had been perhaps even truer than she had known in 1883.

What were to be the legal ties between the two congregations? Only a Chapter could decide such a serious matter, and so a special session was convened in July 1886. On July 18, before the opening of that assembly, Marie Eugénie spoke to her sisters about "Prayer and Abandonment." Then she put herself into God's hands and waited for the decision.

Monsignor d'Hulst, the delegate from the archbishop, presided over the Chapter. After much discussion and discernment, the autonomy of the Religious of the Assumption was confirmed, just as Father d'Alzon had always wished and advised. The shadows on both sides dissipated little by little as each side realized that the relationship of mutual support would not come to an end or be changed into an unequal relationship of subordination by the sisters to the fathers.

In the same General Chapter, the Constitutions, carefully revised in the light of lived experience, underwent the last required modifications. Nearly fifty years of meticulous work had involved discernment, consultation, and submission to the representatives of the Church, as well as freedom, personal choice, and experience. At last Marie Eugenie could take the Rule to Rome in view of obtaining the definitive approbation. This time all the procedures were concluded within a few weeks. On April 11, 1888, Pope Leo XIII signed the decree and placed it in her hands.

It was a bittersweet moment for Marie Eugénie, for the person who had been with her from the beginning, the one who had lived the Rule with her day after day, who had contributed so much to winning the approval of the Church, lay dying in Cannes, offering herself in a state of simple, intense prayer. Mother Thérèse Emmanuel's life was ebbing away as Marie Eugénie hastened to Cannes from Rome to place the Constitutions on the bed of her friend and sister. For one last time Therese Emmanuel fulfilled her role of friend and counselor by waiting for Marie Eugénie to return with the confirmation of their work by the Church. Once that mission was accomplished, she could die in peace, saying on May 1, "I belong to the Assumption, my life was totally, consecrated to it; I am

not leaving it, I am going to the Assumption in eternity." In the early hours of May 3, 1888, her 73rd birthday, Mother Thérèse Emmanuel rejoined her Lord in that eternal union which had begun on earth.

In her life, Mother Thérèse Emmanuel had two great loves -- Jesus Christ and the Assumption. She loved Christ, the Word who spoke so much to her, the Lamb at the center of the liturgy on earth and in heaven. And the Assumption, how could she not have loved it? She gave it all her strength by being at the side of Marie Eugénie during its slow birth and painful growth and by forming the novices day after day in the joy of belonging to it. With these youngsters, whose wholesome naiveté and eagerness must have heartened her, she emphasized the pre-eminence of the gospel; the mysteries of weakness, annihilation, and salvation, especially as they are revealed in Christ's Nativity and Passion, were the foundations of her spirituality. Similarly, her mystical experiences were rooted in Christ. She allowed herself to be led solely by him.

Her relationship with Marie Eugénie was not always easy. Differences of culture and of temperament played their part in these difficulties, as did differing opinions on the balance of contemplative and apostolic life. With respect to the latter issue, a difference in experience may have led to the difference in opinion. Mother Thérèse Emmanuel received extraordinary mystical graces. These gifts left Marie Eugénie wondering, at least at the beginning, what importance to attach to them or what support to give to them. She was disturbed but at the same time attracted by experiences which she did not have herself, or at least did not have in the same fashion. Still, the foundress came to recognize in them the work of the Spirit, and often allowed herself to be led or confirmed by the words the Lord had spoken to Mother Thérèse Emmanuel. Above all else, each desired the glory of God; each loved the Assumption with her whole heart and mind. Despite their differences, they made decisions together and led the congregation into the greatest possible unity. They also offered a beautiful example of mature friendship in the Lord.

A new emptiness was being hollowed out around Marie Eugénie by the deaths of Father d'Alzon, Sister Marie Thérèse, and Mother Thérèse Emmanuel, but there were moments of grace as well. The fiftieth jubilee of the Assumption, celebrated in 1888-1889, was one such joyful time. On August 28, 1888, the feast of Saint Augustine, the sisters celebrated the Golden Jubilee of both the congregation and Marie Eugénie with a Mass presided over by the archbishop of Paris. From Rome, Leo XIII sent a special blessing. For Marie Eugénie that celebration was like a seal of approval affixed by the Church. The gospel of the day, "You are the salt of the earth, the light of the world" (Matt. 5:13-14), made clear that this experience of the mountaintop was not an end but another beginning.

The jubilee year continued. On April 30, 1889, the present and former students took their turn to celebrate the anniversary of the foundation. Boarding school students of long ago, some with their grandchildren in tow, found again their classrooms and dormitories and everything that they had loved. Their affection was full of veneration for their teachers and in particular for Marie Eugenie. The solemn singing of the "Te Deum" on the way to the chapel and the festive meal shared in friendship were followed by a great pageant of living tableaux. At the end there was a surprise: the tower, the monastery, the park and the pond with its little statue of Saint Peter on the island all lit up at once, illuminated by Bengal lights. Every corner of the great park was full of light, a

worthy symbol of the fifty years of being “light for the world” that both Marie Eugénie and her Assumption had spent so lovingly.

CHAPTER 20

1889-1898
THE SEASON OF LOVE

"I catch a glimpse of a state of being stripped to the bare essentials where nothing remains but love."

The years following the death of Mother Thérèse Emmanuel in 1888 were difficult for Marie Eugénie; her close friends were gone and her own body was failing, too. She spoke very little of the void created by their deaths, but she suffered from it, even as she recognized that it was a part of life. In order to do the work of Jesus, stripping is necessary, tile release of everything, she wrote after a retreat. The Lord became ever more her sole "refuge and strength," as the psalm has it, but even with such a Friend she was going through a hard time.

At the same time, the vision of a society transformed by the gospel sustained her and gave her life. She still dared to make plans and even to dream. She still visited the communities, traveling both by stagecoach and train. Her sense of responsibility, her tireless love for the Kingdom, and her habit of giving all her strength to extend it were still being "experienced" in fruitful activity. Houses begun in Rome (1888) and Rouen (1889), for instance, were followed by communities in Nicaragua and the Philippines, both in 1892. In 1895, the Assumption reached out to El Salvador, and two other houses opened in Europe: one in Genoa and the other in Boulouris in the south of France. Such expansion suggests an abundance of vocations to the Assumption life. "The harvest is ready . . . Look up, raise your eyes . . . the Master is calling." (John 4:35)

During those years, Marie Eugénie also saw the birth of the fifth branch of the Assumption. Under the impetus of Father Picard, Mme. Isabelle de Clermont-Tonerre founded the Orantes of the Assumption, a group dedicated entirely to contemplation. A member of the Third Order and a good friend of Marie Eugénie, she had lived for a long time in the Assumption at Cannes, where her daughter Caroline was educated.

In 1893, Marie Eugénie took up her pilgrim's staff once again and headed to Rome for the fourth time. Along with a few sisters and students, she met with Leo XIII for a conversation full of simplicity and encouragement. The Pope assured the foundress of his esteem for her and for the work of the Assumption. Leaving that audience, a happy Marie Eugénie went so far as to say that because of it she was able to forget many painful things that [she had] had to carry for fifty years.

She attempted to return to Rome in 1894, but fell sick along the way and had to stop in Genoa. At 77, her strength visibly diminishing, she was no longer able to govern with as firm a touch as the ever-growing, ever more far-flung congregation required. She was reluctant to quit her post, however, because she still felt a bond with all the sisters, and feared that if she were to resign the unity among them would be less great. Still, throughout her life, Marie Eugénie had been attentive to the least sign of the desire of God and the Church, so when Father Odelin, the ecclesiastical superior, delicately proposed that she give over the responsibility of the congregation, she understood at once: Have I reached that point? she asked. Odelin replied, "Mother, it is the wish of the

archbishop." Marie Eugénie said in reply: Oh! If it is the archbishop's wish, then I have nothing more to say.

Obedience to the Church, an obedience which she had desired and lived her entire life, paved the way for that final act; she stepped down from her duties and handed in her resignation in a simple and free act of the will, since the Church [asked her] to do it. That was her way of completing her work. Entrusting her precious burden to God and to the Church, she had confidence that another would do as well, if not better, than she.

The Chapter elected as "Vicar," Mother Marie Célestine MacDonell, a Scot who was currently the local superior of the Madrid community. In that position she would have all the powers of the Superior General, without having the title, for as long as the foundress was alive. Marie Eugénie was pleased: Mother Célestine will certainly know how to unite hearts. Saint Paul says, "Our outer body is being destroyed, even as our inner being is renewed each day." (2Cor. 4:16) Such was clearly the case with Marie Eugénie, whose whole life had prepared her for her death. A passage from notes written in 1854 suggests how the "renewal" of which Paul speaks was at work even during the prime of her life: God desires that everything collapse around me. I catch a glimpse of a state of being stripped to the bare essentials where nothing remains but love. . . . I would even be able to contemplate without the slightest distaste that kind of death that comes about when one is in a state of infirmity and continual helplessness. If through humiliation I were to come to the point of being less appreciated by people, then they would leave me more to Jesus.

Marie Eugénie had lived every season of her life mindfully, hearing the particular call of each time and seeing the task to be accomplished in it. It would be the same for this season. In 1854, at 37, she had glimpsed the future; forty years later, "the future" had become the present. At age 77, she approached this new season with the same lively and engaging nature that had already carried her so far and would carry her out onto the road again, just for the joy of being with her sisters one last time. Toward the end of 1894, she visited San Sebastian and Madrid, to thank Queen Marie Cristina for having allowed Mother Marie Célestine to leave; afterward she spent time with the community of Andecy, north of Paris. Incredibly, in March 1895, she set out once more for Rome, accompanied by Sister Marie Michel, her nurse. To the great joy of the sisters, the route of the train allowed her to make many stops along the way: Montpellier, Nîmes, Boulouris, Nice, Cannes, Genoa, and finally Rome. After this three month journey, she returned to Auteuil via Lyons. She made several other trips in the next two years, but by January 1897 it was clear that her traveling days were over. Leaving the General Chapter three years earlier, she had said quietly: I have nothing more to do except to be good. Since that time she had been just that, using her days to love. She had always been thoughtful, but during her retirement she became even more so, writing, sending little pictures or long letters, never forgetting a feast or a birthday. As she aged she blended her wisdom with humor, as in fact she had done all her life, but she could still get right to the heart of the matter if need be. To a sister dying in Montpellier, for example, Marie Eugénie put all play aside: it seems to me that the moment has come to receive Extreme Unction. To another who asked her how to grow old in a saintly way, she gave this magnificent response:

You ask me how to grow old in a holy way? By working unceasingly under the eye of God, with the utmost patience and confidence, by preserving in one's soul, in one's affections, the immortal youth of Jesus Christ who is our new Man, our inner Man. . . .

Keep your mind occupied with the mysteries of Jesus or His words. Keep your heart fixed on heaven which is our homeland; through Hope, you must already live there in the peace of the children of God. Finally, as old age is ordinarily the time of infirmity and lack of energy, bear with it with the gentleness and the simplicity of the Lamb. That is what makes old age holy!

Her legs could barely carry her by then, while her thinking and speech were also slowing down, but she could still rally for the sake of others. In order to receive the best wishes of the schoolchildren, for instance, she used to meet them in the park of Auteuil, greeting them from a little cart drawn by Nonotte the donkey.

Her age and position were no guarantee against humiliations, though. One day, she asked her nurses to take her to the grotto of the Virgin in the garden, saying: I want to pray for a person who has hurt me. Yet she preferred feeling that pain to being callous. Just a short time before, she had written a note to herself about this issue:

Never make the foolish mistake of preferring that I become hardened rather than being allowed the joy of being with Jesus in gentleness and humility.

On June 28, 1897, the vigil of the feast of Saints Peter and Paul, a sister questioned her: "What grace are you going to ask for us tomorrow?" The response was quick and firm: Steadfastness in the faith and love of the Church! On another day she remarked: I really like the "Gloria" very much. You can leave all your pains and worries through that prayer of praise. Two months later, on August 25, she celebrated her eightieth birthday along with the fiftieth birthday of Mother Célestine. She was unable to speak on that day, the annals note, but "she looked pleasant and happy."

This inability to speak worsened through the fall of 1897, especially after a small stroke in October. Always a person with great facility in speech, she was now in a great silence which she bore as she bore all the rest of the indignities she was suffering. Recalling her dignity, her lively independence and intelligence, and her ability to relate to others, those around her were struck by the patience with which she allowed her nurses to handle her, abandoning to them her infirm body. Peace radiated from her, leading her doctor to declare: "She is writing at this moment the most beautiful page of her life."

If she had been able, she would have repeated something she had said long ago; her patience came from daily meditation on the Passion. Even during those last six months of her life, she continued this practice. Her nurses gathered together each morning and read the stations, while she held her crucifix in her hands, never taking her eyes off it. One day she did manage to say a word: I am looking at my Lord. It is in looking at Him that one learns how to love. The beautiful gaze of Mother Marie Eugénie was all that was left, and she knew it was enough.

In that great silence, she had the time to look back over her life. She could return to the beginning and contemplate the Beauty and Love that had taken hold of her at her First Communion, converted her at Noire Dame, fashioned her both gently and roughly through her long life. Following from its source that trickle which became a great river, she could be reconciled to herself, forgive and allow herself to be forgiven. It was a time for accepting the past and present will of her Lord.

The frequent visits of Dom Logerot, Benedictine from Solesmes, and her good friend Father Picard were meant to be a great help to her, but during that late autumn of love, scarcely any further mediation was possible. On February 2, 1898, Mass was celebrated in her room; she was able to read the epistle aloud in a strong voice. The

gospel of the day, the feast of the Presentation, drew attention to the aged Simeon, holding the Child in his arms and saying: “Now, Lord, you can dismiss your servant in peace . . . for my eyes have seen your salvation” (Luke 2:29-30), a passage whose significance could hardly have been lost on the Sisters in the room or on Marie Eugénie herself. At the end of the Mass she was able to give them a final blessing.

On February 13, she Peacefully received the last rites, cooperating by her gestures. She lingered for a little while more, receiving many visitors on March 4, less than a week before her death. The nurses wanted to turn her well-wishers aside lest they exhaust her, but she motioned that her sisters did not tire her. The long habit of tenderness was deeply rooted, refusing to die before her. On March 9, with all the superiors around her, she received the Body of Christ once more for her last journey. The One whom she had received as a little girl so long ago at Saint Ségolène was coming to lead her to God and to fulfill his promise

That evening, the sisters chanted Compline around her bed. The prayer she had said every night of her religious life sustained her on its final night:

I dwell in the shadow of the Most High.
Under his wing I find refuge.
You will not fear the terrors of the night.
He gives his angels command to guard you. Psalm 91

Into your hands I commend my spirit.

Psalm 31
Protect us, Lord, as we stay awake; watch over us as we sleep, that awake we may keep watch with Christ, and asleep rest in his peace.

In the middle of the night the King, her Lord, came to lead her into his presence. At three o’clock in the morning of March 10, 1898, Marie Eugénie gently passed away into him. She went so peacefully that only the one closest to her, Mother Célestine, caught the moment. But the universe showed a curious empathy of events. Sister Marie Michel noted that Marie Eugénie’s watch stopped at the exact hour of her death. A large tree near the grotto fell on the morning of March 10, and the faithful little donkey Nonotte also collapsed on that day.

The news of Marie Eugénie’s death spread by letter to the twenty nine Assumption houses in Europe, Asia, and Latin America. The Religious of the Assumption, 1100 sisters descended from the original five, had lost their last and dearest link with the original foundation.

Her funeral took place on March 12, presided over by the archbishop of Rheims. All those who knew Mother Marie Eugénie, the rich and the poor, came to pay their last respects. Father Picard and many other Assumptionists were there, as was a considerable crowd of other priests and religious -- Jesuits, Capuchins, Dominicans, Carmelites, Benedictines -- and friends and former students. In a long procession, the Church in all its diversity carried her body out of the church and laid it in the mausoleum at the far end of

the park. Her body remained there and was later transferred to the present chapel at Auteuil, but her soul had long since gone home.

Like Mary in her Assumption, irresistibly attracted by the Beauty, the Goodness, the Truth that is God, Mother Marie Eugénie was now able to adore Jesus Christ for all eternity. She was able to be "face to face" with the One of whom she had spoken on her profession day:

It is He whom I have seen, whom I have loved, in whom I have believed, and to whom I have given my love.

EPILOGUE

The Congregation of Blessed Marie Eugénie Today

"Dare to be holy!"

What has become of the Assumption after the death of such a foundress? How does it continue on its way? Subjected to the same upheavals in society and Church -- persecution and war, the secularization and break-up of cultures -- which she faced in her time, the pilgrim Assumption continues to enter into the vision of Mother Marie Eugénie. Generation after generation, it still returns to the same sources of support that she looked to, namely, faith and abandonment, missionary passion and ardor, in order to make Jesus Christ and his Church known. After the Second Vatican Council and the events of May 1968, when France experienced a major societal upheaval, that Church decided to show the face of Marie Eugénie to all Christians and to humanity at large.

On Sunday, February 9, 1975, pilgrims coming from all over the world converged on Rome. Thanks to post-conciliar openness to change and the internationality of the congregation, they were going to witness a beatification ceremony different from any other before it. For the first time, the old basilica of Saint Peter resounded with hymns in the principal languages of the crowd as well as the traditional Latin of the Sistine choirs; for the first time, the drums of Africa were allowed to find their place in the liturgy. And on the Altar of Confession, right above the tomb of Saint Peter, Pope Paul VI proclaimed Mother Marie Eugénie Milleret to be "Blessed Marie Eugénie." At that moment a huge photo of her (the first ever photograph used at such a ceremony) was unveiled in the "Gloria" of Bernini to the lengthy applause of the young and cosmopolitan crowd. From that moment on the entire Church, and in particular that of Paris, could celebrate the feast of Blessed Marie Eugénie each March 10.

That Church which Marie Eugénie had loved and served so well now exalted her in its heart, revealing her sanctity to the whole world. Paul VI proclaimed in his homily the relevance of her message:

She is our contemporary in the problems that she lived with and the solutions that she attempted to bring to them. The saints, because they are the intimates of God, do not become outdated! The holiness sought after in every state of life is the most fundamental promotion that women can attain. Will this ceremony be without a tomorrow? No! We shall return to our tasks, carrying away with us the humble and ardent longing for holiness. . . . We must dare to be holy!

Marie Eugénie has accomplished miracles since her death, but the greatest miracle is the very existence of the congregation she founded 150 years ago. What is not possible to express concerning the foundress can be expressed, shown, and revealed by the Assumption's living its mystery in spite of its weaknesses, short-comings, and failings.

So where are we in all that? The number of sisters has not greatly increased in more than a century we number about 1500 but the number of communities has multiplied many times over. At present 207 communities are working in 31 countries in Europe, the Americas, Africa, and Asia.

AMERICAS EUROPE AFRICA ASIA

USA Sweden Ivory Coast India Mexico Denmark Burkina- Thailand Guatemala Belgium Faso Philippines El Salvador Scotland Niger Japan Nicaragua England Togo Ecuador France Benin Brazil Italy Cameroon Chile Spain Rwanda Argentina Zaire Tanzania Kenya

The context of today's Assumption is, of course, radically different from that of the nineteenth century, but the love of Christ and his Kingdom which inspired Marie Eugénie still remain the reason -- and I would even say passion -- for the existence of our communities. The apostolic activity flows from that faith and that passion in a life nourished by prayer and study, by the joy of putting everything in common, by the richness of the sharing, and by the strength found in decisions reached together.

Whether under a tent with the Tuaregs of North Africa or on a college campus with students in the United States, the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament exercises its mysterious attraction on Christians and all types of people who pass by, while the chanting of the psalms in the Divine Office gives a rhythm to each day. As once in Chaillot or Richmond, so now today in the junior college at Osaka, the hostels in Kerala, the little schools in the favellas of BeloOrizonte, Brazil, we find an education of faith, in faith, and according to faith; we find human and spiritual formation through the development of individuals and communities. In Søndeborg, Hengrave, and Kigali, sisters and laypeople, drawing from the same spirituality, collaborate in the mission as once they did at Nîmes, spurred on by a mutual exchange which enriches the spiritual and temporal life of each and the fidelity of all.

The differences in lifestyle, customs, dress, and living conditions are tremendous, yet wherever you go Bobo Dioulasso or San Salvador, Nairobi or Mindanao you will find communities surprisingly similar to those with whom you are familiar. You will find poor and praying communities, occupied with the work of Kingdom, sometimes exposed to

danger but always attempting, whatever the cost, to live the Gospel. You will recognize "that certain something" simple, joyful, welcoming, open to the new yet anchored in tradition that certain imaginative and original "something" which is the Assumption.

Everywhere today, fast-paced socio-cultural changes have turned societies upside down; like all modern people, our sisters in their communities are constantly confronted with new situations. Everywhere, too, they are dealing with the need to bridge the gap between faith and culture. This challenge was first articulated 150 years ago by Marie Eugénie, who founded the Assumption in a time of crisis in response to that crisis.

That is why the Assumption speaks today of "re- foundation." What does that mean, if not the desire and the necessity of realizing in our time and for our world the plan set forth by Marie Eugenie? It means entering into the same mystical experience as Marie Eugénie and devoting our strength to the service of evangelization that is, making Jesus Christ known. Our challenge is as old and as new as the Good News itself.

The work of spreading that Good News often leads to a wonderful exchange as the Gospel transforms culture and culture expresses the Gospel in new ways. Such an exchange is brought about by all kinds of interventions, but especially by Christian communities. They are the privileged places where the human family, going about its ordinary life, meets the Church. Often considered outmoded, the Church is, in reality, the memory of values cast aside by a broken, hurrying world. It serves, educates, and heals, laboriously re stitching the frayed social fabric of our world through brotherhood and sisterhood.

I would like to add that the essential beauty of our life contemplative, apostolic, and communitarian all at once -- is also difficult to balance, and so obliges us to humbly acknowledge our weakness. This beauty, which enables us to talk to God and about God while living in God as true sisters, is the source of both our joy and our struggle.

Within each community, within each sister, the Assumption is fragile, as is the grace in our lives and in the entire human family. Marveling at what God accomplishes with so little, we can sense his power and his love for using what is weak and small. So we continue on our way, day after day, generation to generation, like pioneers who feel the heaviness of the earth, but who, nevertheless, till their soil.

May God's Glory shine forth in our weakness and may his Kingdom come!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sister Hélène-Marie Bones was Superior General of the Religious of the Assumption in the period immediately following the Second Vatican Council. During that time the Assumption re-examined its roots and charism and began the process of recondition in which it is still actively involved today. Sister Hélène has also served as Mistress of Novices in France, and has been a leader of many sessions of religious formation both for the Assumption and for other religious congregations. At present she lives and works in Compiègne, France.

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Anyone wishing more information in English about Marie Eugénie‘s work as it is lived today should contact the communities listed below.

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