



## Discernment in the way of Saint Marie Eugenie

How to make choices? Where to orient our path? We are like the musician who must constantly adjust the sound of his instrument to the evangelical note. In our educational mission, we are called to make choices and to help other people, young people or adults, to make personal choices as well. This exercise of freedom, which leads everyone to prepare himself/herself to choose, to feel what dwells in his/her heart and in God's heart in order to make informed decisions, is called discernment.

By following closely the journey of Marie Eugenie of Jesus, we can see that it was not rectilinear and that discernment in her could not avoid meandering, as it was the case between 1837 and 1839, when she had to discern her vocation<sup>1</sup>. In her way of discerning throughout her life, we can identify some ways to form ourselves in discernment and to train others in this practice.

Before going any further, it is necessary to specify that for Marie Eugenie, discernment is always aimed at serving God's plan, each according to her mission, and thus contributing to a work of love, which requires us to decentralize ourselves: *"How often will we find that we have substituted God for ourselves, that it is we who place ourselves at the center of our lives and that we only consider events in relation to our interests without seeing God's will in them."*<sup>2</sup> She draws the sisters' attention *"to what must be the basis of our desires, the purpose of our efforts and our vocation, to God's love alone, the only necessary one."*<sup>3</sup> This search for love is for her the only valid horizon: *"Living love must be the work of your life, your effort and the reason for all your actions. Turn your thoughts to this side, and see if you are still living on love... See if you take advantage of everything to increase God's love in you."*<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, for Marie Eugénie, the reflection, the path that leads to the decision is only meaningful because it will lead her to act. Discernment must lead to a decision that is translated into concrete manifestations in one's life. Intention is not enough, neither is the impulse of the heart. Thus, she once said to the sisters: *"It is very good to feel this impulse, to have this ardour of heart for the service of Our Lord. But that is not enough and probably Our Lord will not judge us on what we have experienced, but on what we have done."*<sup>5</sup> In order not to lose sight of all this at the time of the crucial choices of our lives, we can cultivate the ground of discernment and prepare our hearts every day by developing some attitudes so that they become habits.

**What is your intention?**  
**Which concrete action will you choose?**

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Sœur Véronique Thiébaud, in *Transformative Education in Assumption*, Document of the International Education Gathering, 2018, « *Le cheminement vocationnel de Marie Eugénie* », pp.44-63

<sup>2</sup> Marie Eugénie, Instruction de chapitre, 9 octobre 1870

<sup>3</sup> Marie Eugénie, Instruction de chapitre, 9 février 1873

<sup>4</sup> Marie Eugénie, Instruction de chapitre, 9 février 1873

<sup>5</sup> Marie Eugénie, Instruction de chapitre, 10 décembre 1871

## I- Some "habits" of the heart to cultivate

### 1- Do not lose sight of the horizon of our lives

In a text that is usually called Mary Eugenie's "creed", the latter declares: *"My gaze is all in Jesus Christ and in the extension of his Kingdom."* Mother Thérèse Emmanuel uses the image of the compass in her instructions to novices: *"The pilot who drives a ship always keeps his eyes fixed on the compass to be able to steer the ship."* By cultivating the habit of looking beyond our own existence, we prepare our hearts to make decisions that do not lock us in but, on the contrary, deploy us and deploy our capacities.

### 2- Get to know oneself

*"When he had done all these things, he[God] formed a unique creature, different from all the others, because he made it in his image and likeness: this creature is man. He gave him - something he did not give to any other creature - the power to know him, to love him, and consequently, to serve him..."*<sup>6</sup> Every person is thus called to know and recognize himself as a unique person, loved by God, capable of serving him. Helping a person to understand this is already preparing him/her to make choices in accordance with God's plan.

Based on this conviction, we can accept our own shadows, qualities and defects, learn to name them so that they can be taken into account when discerning: *"It is on the knowledge we have of our fragility, of our misery, that the right self-esteem is based."*<sup>7</sup> For one can only discern with accuracy when one has a just self-esteem. To learn to know without fear one's strengths and weaknesses, one's resistance and inner obstacles, one's attractions and what gives joy... is to prepare oneself to discern. Throughout the days, by accompanying people, it is therefore possible to encourage them to name what is inside, to put words on their feelings, to note in their memory the strong points and the fragile points that they gradually discover in themselves.

### 3- Get into the habit of naming your motivations for action

Saint Marie Eugenie once told the community that "fear, desire, joy or pain"<sup>8</sup> are at the root of the motivations that drive us to act. This can help us to build a small review and project grid. Under what influence - among the 4 mentioned - did I act in a given situation? And in the situation before me, what would I do if I acted out of fear? What would I do if I acted according to my deepest desire? And so, with each of the possible motivations, several roads then present themselves to us: we must look at them with honesty in order to choose one.

Moreover, Marie Eugénie invites us to seek to formulate with ever greater precision what could be the only desire of our lives. A unique desire that expresses both our uniqueness and the broad horizon we contemplate. A desire that we can fulfill in all the circumstances of our life. Thus, the one who has always dreamed of being a doctor and who, because of different circumstances, finds himself a cook, will also have the possibility in his life to take care of others, to help them to have a better life... and his deep desire to "take care" can be realized in another way.

### 4- Cultivate indifference

This last example shows that God does not allow himself to be locked up by circumstances. His project of love and life for us, he will realize it anyway. That is why, having confidence in him, we can cultivate indifference and say to ourselves that he will be there no matter what direction our

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<sup>6</sup> Marie Eugénie, Instruction de chapitre, 29 août 1880

<sup>7</sup> Marie Eugénie, Instruction de chapitre, 12 octobre 1873

<sup>8</sup> cf. Marie Eugénie, Instruction de chapitre, 23 février 1845

lives take. Marie Eugénie returns several times to this notion dear to Saint Ignatius of Loyola, also inspired by Saint Vincent de Paul who says that *"a soul that is not established in this indifference cannot serve God with generosity and fervour."*<sup>9</sup>

To live indifference, we must be able to rely on God, to be sure that his presence will lead us to life in all circumstances: *"Saint Ignatius asks that we reach holy indifference; certainly this doctrine is not easy. To have no choice between health and disease, suffering and consolation, jobs of one kind or another; to be indifferent to places, people, things, honour or dishonour. Saint Ignatius wants us to establish ourselves in this holy indifference, in order to be ready to always follow the holy will of God, to do what is most pleasing to God; it is the supreme act of love."*<sup>10</sup> It is an ongoing work to establish oneself in this trust, in this indifference". Also note that Saint Ignatius does not say: *"I am indifferent but: I make myself indifferent."*<sup>11</sup>

**What is the horizon of your life? The objective you want to achieve?**  
**How do you get to know yourself?**  
**Do you usually name your motivations when you act?**  
**Do you have enough confidence in God to be able to live "indifference"?**

## II- Some elements of the method

### 1- Contemplate Christ to act like him

"What is more difficult, says Marie Eugénie, is to adjust all our actions, all our desires, all our feelings, all our affections to the good pleasure of God."<sup>12</sup>

This is why she invites us to draw from the Gospel source, to look at Christ's way of doing things and to identify his desires so that they may transform us and our own desires may adjust to Christ's desires.<sup>13</sup> Gospel contemplation is therefore one of the stages in the process of discernment.

### 2- Use our intelligence, our five senses and name our feelings

*"Our soul or our intelligence rises to these summits of knowledge only supported and carried, so to speak, by its senses and the sensitive impressions that come to it from outside. Faith itself enters a person only through the sense of hearing."*<sup>14</sup> Marie Eugénie emphasizes during an instruction given to the sisters. She adds that the latter can be attentive to the movements of consolation that inhabit them. Naming what gives joy, taste, peace is also a way to advance in discernment.

### 3- Take advice - Do not discern alone

When Marie Eugénie evokes, in her Councils on Education, the position of those in charge of educational institutions, she insists: *"It is up to them to be enlightened by all the advice that their position allows them to take..."*<sup>15</sup> On another occasion, she mentioned the obligation of the Superior General and local superiors to seek advice: *"Please note that the Superior General cannot decide anything important without her advice. She must talk to her counsel about all matters of any gravity. There are some things she decides about after talking to the counsellors, and others on which she*

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<sup>9</sup> Marie Eugénie, Instruction de chapitre, 11 novembre 1888

<sup>10</sup> Idem

<sup>11</sup> Marie Eugénie, Instruction de chapitre, 12 octobre 1873

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Marie Eugénie, Instruction de chapitre, 27 juin 1875

<sup>13</sup> Marie Eugénie, Instruction de chapitre, 23 février 1845

<sup>14</sup> Marie Eugénie, Instruction de chapitre, 30 janvier 1876

<sup>15</sup> Marie Eugénie, Conseils sur l'éducation

takes their voices."<sup>16</sup> Many of the events of the foundation's times have also given rise to community discernment, such as the day when it was necessary to separate from Father Combalot.<sup>17</sup>

Beyond the community, students can also be trained to engage in community discernment and to bring their "voice" to decisions. This was the case when the number of students began to become significant. A charity association was then founded where students could get involved. Thus, in 1847, Marie Eugénie wrote to Father d'Alzon: *"...We have formed an association of charity, of which I also see the counsellors. Perhaps this association could be adopted by you (...) First of all, the students all gave their voices to those they judged by their charity and wisdom, worthy to be part of the association, pious enough to attract God's blessings, and we add laborious work for the poor. Any child who was rejected no longer gave her voice and I can assure you that they were severe. After that they elected their councillors and treasurer. »*<sup>18</sup>

Learning community discernment trains children so that they are then able to engage in discernment that affects their personal lives.

Moreover, even if it concerns a personal aspect of life, discernment, when we accept to be enlightened by others who will see the situation from another point of view, is enriched by this community dimension.

#### **4- Expand views and consider all possibilities**

Taking advice also means giving yourself the opportunity to broaden your own views. As early as 1837, when the Assumption was not yet founded, Marie Eugénie wrote to Father Combalot about the forbidden readings: *"[My thoughts] are only enlightened and completed by contact with opposing ways of seeing; my mind fell asleep by being with people of his opinion..."*<sup>19</sup>

To discern and decide what is good for oneself or for one's project also implies that one allows oneself to be enriched with lucidity by the experience of others. Thus, Marie Eugénie writes about our educational works at the very beginning of the Councils written on this theme for the sisters: *"As you know, I am ignorant of what has been written by Mme de Lambert, Mme Necker, Mme de Rémusat, Aimé Martin 182, and several others whose works must one day be the object of our serious attention. We will have to examine them together to see what we can learn from them, to judge their principles and means according to the infallible rule of Catholic morality, and finally to compare their insights with ours: for the experience must have given them truths of observation in which they should probably not be blindly believed, since everyone here below observes according to their systems, but which must nevertheless be taken into account. »*<sup>20</sup>

#### **5- Verify that the decision is made first for the general good**

With regard to community, Marie Eugénie insists strongly on the need to serve the general interest before her own well-being, arguing that the *"world is full of people who seek what they like"*<sup>21</sup>, but who do not participate in the construction of an evangelical world. She questions our hidden

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<sup>16</sup> Marie Eugénie, Instruction de Chapitre, 24 août 1879

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Texte inspirateur CG 2018 : « Un événement exprime cela avec une grande force, à l'aube de la fondation, moment-clé, moment de tout ou rien... Ce jour-là, le 3 mai 1841, l'Abbé Combalot, le père et le premier porteur de l'intuition fondatrice, quitte la minuscule communauté de la rue de Vaugirard...) En ces heures d'incertitude, le discernement est mené par les sœurs ensemble, grâce à l'initiative de Thérèse-Emmanuel. La décision de ne pas quitter Paris, provoquant la rupture, aura été une décision communautaire. On reconnaît là une constante dans la recherche de la pensée initiale sur le projet de l'Assomption naissante, cette pensée que Marie Eugénie exprimera au P. d'Alzon et à l'A. Gros comme « notre pensée », recherchée, vécue, discernée en communauté. »

<sup>18</sup> Marie Eugénie, lettre au Père d'Alzon, 1<sup>er</sup> février 1847, n°1813

<sup>19</sup> Marie Eugénie, lettre au Père Combalot, 30 décembre 1837, n°15

<sup>20</sup> Marie Eugénie, Conseils sur l'éducation

<sup>21</sup> Marie Eugénie, Instruction de chapitre, 13 juin 1884

intention: "*Charity is permanent, it does not seek what is hers... It seems to me that this is the subject of a very useful examination. Do I seek my interest, my satisfaction, or am I busy providing the good, the utility, the pleasure of my sisters? There are some sisters who seek little general utility, which is the interest of the community, and who are attached to such an occupation, such a study (...) They want to spend their time in such a study because they find it satisfying, they want to develop, to add to their capacity improvements that they lack.*"<sup>22</sup>

## 6- Taking the time... to go with the rhythm of God

Discernment requires time... and we must accept not to be the master of this time. Thus, Marie Eugénie considers that in order to "*work to advance in love*", "*we must not go faster than God wants and want more light than He gives us. God will let us know every day what He wants us to take away.*"<sup>23</sup> It is therefore a question of going at God's rhythm and also respecting the rhythm of the person who takes the time necessary to let the points of view descend, to weigh inwardly and bring before God the different possibilities of choice.

## 7- Deep reflection , peace and silence

Time and again Marie Eugénie praises silence... Considering that the great challenge of her life - and therefore of her choices at every moment - is to work to resemble Christ, she compares herself to a painter who must observe her model at length in order to be able to reproduce it. This requires time, patience and silence. "*Ask a painter if it would be possible to paint or draw a model on a canvas that would always stir. So, try not to be a web that would always stir, full of life, activity, memories, events. Remove, simplify, soothe, silence, so that God may come and give you what only is desirable, what only is lasting...*"<sup>24</sup>

### The means:

- \***Evangelical Contemplation – Deep reflection and Silence**
- \***Use of the senses and re-reading of emotions**
- \***External advice and different perspectives considered**
- \***Time**

## III- A concrete example: the early days of the foundation in Richmond

In 1850, the Duchess of Leeds proposed the founding of a community in Richmond, England, to establish an orphanage. "*She offered a house and garden on her land in Richmond, took care of all the expenses, and assured us of the benevolence and even the support of the Bishop of York... Her goal was to take in care Catholic orphans, reduced to taking refuge in work-houses (...) They were to be trained to become teachers or nursery governors, according to their abilities and aptitudes. If later on we wanted to establish a boarding school next to the orphanage, the duchess would gladly lend herself to anything that could promote our views.*"<sup>25</sup> Mother Therese Emmanuel was sent to be superior of the new foundation which, as we can imagine, was based on permanent discernment, which allowed, among other things, to remain free from outside persons who supported the foundation and could have quickly linked it. The correspondence between Marie Eugénie and Thérèse Emmanuel is very extensive and includes the constant journey of discernment, with some interesting characteristics.

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<sup>22</sup> Marie Eugénie, Instruction de chapitre, 17 décembre 1870

<sup>23</sup> Marie Eugénie, Instruction de chapitre, 3 décembre 1871

<sup>24</sup> Marie Eugénie, Instruction de chapitre, 12 août 1877

<sup>25</sup> Origines III, chapitre 7

### **a- Priority to the care of people**

While the Duchess of Leeds would like to save money and organize the garden according to her views, the foundress wrote to Thérèse Emmanuel: *"One thing worries me in all your letters, it is the economy of your Duchess and her concern to make you live so cheaply, to plant trees so that you do not eat the fruit. I haven't read these details here, we would have taken her in dislike, we are so concerned for your health and we are so worried that you may be too tired and you may be missing something."*<sup>26</sup>

### **b- Principle of prudence**

The same Duchess of Leeds would already like, 15 days after the arrival of the sisters, to accept boys into the school in addition to the orphans. Marie Eugénie opposes a principle of prudence: *"As for the little boys that the Duchess of Leeds proposes to take, I am of little opinion, at least for the beginning. I would like her to let you limit yourself first to your poor school and your orphans. When it goes well, we'll see."*<sup>27</sup>

### **c- Realism and taking into account the context**

Very quickly, the question arises of offering a completely free school. Marie Eugénie then reasoned pragmatically and even went so far as to ask the gardener in Paris what she paid to send her children to school, in order to have a realistic opinion: *"I have just left you to question the gardener. Her little boys paid for all their books, papers and feathers to the Brothers', and she paid almost six cents a week for each; today they are at the mutual school, where they are given what is necessary in exchange for good points when they have earned them. This must be the effect of a government subsidy. Among the Sisters of Chaillot, her granddaughter pays a penny for a paper notebook that lasts her about a week and everything in proportion. Our sisters also tell me that in England there are free schools where children give something for fire in the winter. All this does not prevent the school from being free."*<sup>28</sup>

And she invites us to take into account the English context: *"There are more advantages, in my opinion, to be able to find among what each child is paying for its supplies how to give them free to poorer children and to make their punctuality a condition for granting them. The whole question is whether it is better to ask for this money for supplies per week or every time you give it away. This is to be judged in the country and it seems to me that I would like the first way as much. But be careful to always say: we give that amount of money per week for supplies."*<sup>29</sup>

Later, when the Duchess of Leeds pressed for the opening of a boarding school, the Superior General remained realistic and identified the obstacles in a very concrete way, considering all aspects of the problem and naming the needs: *"You did not do anything wrong in speaking as projects and conversations of the boarding school; I only wish that the time to open it would actually be delayed enough for us to have really enough subjects formed; until then any new development would be a great evil rather than an advantage. Moreover, it would seem very unfortunate to me to build a boarding school in Richmond in such a small area of land, while in England all the other Teaching Congregations have large gardens and extensive enclosures. What you also say about the chest diseases so frequent in this place seems to me to be a great inconvenience for young girls; I would have much preferred to be able to exchange for a property in the south of England in certain climates that I was still told these days to be so good. With the delicacy of many English children, this would seem to me to be a great burden. However, since there may also be reasons to want to stay in*

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<sup>26</sup> Marie Eugénie, Lettre à Thérèse Emmanuel, 24 mai 1850, n°183

<sup>27</sup> Marie Eugénie, Lettre à Thérèse Emmanuel, 3 juin 1850, n°285

<sup>28</sup> Marie Eugénie, Lettre à Thérèse Emmanuel, 13 juin 1850, n°287

<sup>29</sup> Idem

Yorkshire and near Richmond because of the foundation, the families of the country, and because Providence seems to have led us there, I would at least like us to spend the expense of building only in a large plot, a kind of "small countryside" as it is the habit in England. Is there any way in your property to grow a lot on reasonable terms?"<sup>30</sup>

#### **d- Freedom of decision**

In any decision, Marie Eugenie wishes to remain free... free, first of all, from those who could influence in a direction that would not be faithful to the spirit of the Assumption: *"Believe me only, try little by little to return with your Bishop on a foot of respect so distant that he does not have the opportunity to interfere in your arrangements, nor to give you many advices that would be so many subjections. I prefer a thousand times better that you make a bad decision by yourself when you don't have time to get an answer from here, because then we can finally make the opposite decision."*

She also wants to be free to be able to redirect the decision after some time in order to improve the work: *"And on subjects such as the way school contributions are collected, the dismissal or the entry of your children, there is nothing really important that remains free to do with time, for the best."*<sup>31</sup>

#### **e- Decisions for the general interest**

The discussion then opened on the type of students that should be welcomed and that not everyone in Richmond agrees with. At that time, Marie Eugénie recalled: *"Look at the general good of your house and establish a very good spirit rather than to spare some individual interests or characters and keep this or that child. It is a charity with a greater scope..."*<sup>32</sup>

#### **f- Priority for the quality of the work and not its development**

Finally, when English benefactors tend to think that young girls who would like to enter the Assumption could train in England and not go to France, the temptation of ambition is great. Indeed, it would be an opportunity to have more vocations, as some young girls are considering leaving their country with difficulty. Marie Eugenie resists and reminds us of the priority: *"I want all of them to take in the unity of the same centre the spirit with which they must work one day, and I believe that in the order of my duties and for the true future development of the Congregation, unity of spirit comes before the present extension in any place and by any person whatsoever."*<sup>33</sup>

All this, not forgetting to **take several enlightened opinions** to support her points of view: *"...Father Marcel whom I consulted advised precisely to take the opinion of the Bishop... Mr. d'Alzon to whom I communicated all your letter, put only this reservation... etc"*<sup>34</sup>

She considers that the choices of the present have an impact on the future and that this must be taken into account realistically: *"We are obliged to see the future more than the present, and there is no future for the Congregation unless we have subjects who are extremely well formed and filled with the spirit of unity. I therefore believe that we must postpone the beginning of the English boarding school and even more so the foundation of small houses for which we need superiors, something that does not happen in a day, until we have a few more subjects trained."*<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Marie Eugénie, Lettre à Thérèse Emmanuel, 4 novembre 1850, n°309

<sup>31</sup> Marie Eugénie, Lettre à Thérèse Emmanuel, 3 juillet 1850, n°289

<sup>32</sup> Marie Eugénie, Lettre à Thérèse Emmanuel, 11 juillet 1850, n°291

<sup>33</sup> Marie Eugénie, Lettre à Thérèse Emmanuel, 18 novembre 1850, n°312

<sup>34</sup> Marie Eugénie, Lettre à Thérèse Emmanuel, 24 juin 1850, n°288

<sup>35</sup> Idem

In conclusion, it can be said that Marie Eugénie's experience undeniably enlightens us on the continuous work of discernment and on the points of attention that we must keep in mind. But for her this is only possible, on a personal level as well as on a foundation level, because at the end of all her efforts, she knows that she can rest in God: *"I would not have rest if I did not know how much God wants us to rely on Him."*<sup>36</sup>

Sister Véronique Thiébaud, Archivist of the Congregation  
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<sup>36</sup> Idem