

The roots of JPICS in the charism and spirituality of the Assumption according to the writings of Mother Marie Eugenie

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PART I MARIE EUGENIE'S SOCIAL PROJECT

The JPICS topic, in all its dimensions, was very clearly part of Marie Eugenie's thought and project. But it's complicated to present it in a structured way, because traces of it can be found in all kinds of documents: letters, Chapter Instructions, schedules of the first schools.

In the context of 19th century France, which, like much of Europe, was in a state of transformation, much poverty was, of course, to be found among the exploited working class, who lived in cramped, unsanitary conditions that undermined their dignity, especially that of children and women, in many ways. Then there were the day laborers and seasonal workers who, in towns or in the countryside, moved from place to place to earn a few pennies, depending on whether or not they found work. In other words, all the materially "poor". Women, too - from all social classes - found themselves in a situation of poverty, deprived of rights and excluded from the opportunity of a good education and from political life. As for the family, its nucleus was in danger of being shattered, either by the individualistic values that were developing in the milieu bourgeois, or by the violence and tension generated by promiscuity. In this case, the "periphery" (to use the term of the 2018 General Chapter) could correspond to a disintegration of human and moral values.

The poor beginnings of the Assumption Congregation, as Marie Eugenie and the first Sisters often recalled, the choice of a "practical poverty" that "preserves from the ideas of the world" and from "sluggishness"¹, the repeated misunderstandings of clergymen about the aims of the budding work, and the feeling of being few in number in the face of an immense task, undoubtedly shaped in the hearts of the Sisters the ability/desire to be close to the poor and to those on the margins of society. It should also be noted that, at the time of the foundation, the Church was very lukewarm in its thought on social commitment. The first encyclical on the subject, *Rerum Novarum*, dates back to Pope Leo XIII in 1891.

1- From the outset, a clear focus on the poor and on women

First of all, we shall see that attention to the poor is explicitly present from the very origins of the Congregation. During the first months of the foundation, Marie Eugenie asked Abbé Combalot to write a text that would serve as a basis for the Constitutions. This text remains in the Assumption patrimony under the title "Introduction to the Constitutions". It includes a paragraph entitled: "Education of the rich and the poor. The evangelical spirit and the spirit of the world. Service to the poor. Prejudices of the times." Abbé Combalot writes: "Ah! if one day it is given to you, my dearest daughters, to enlarge the boarding schools you want to build for the children of the rich, believe that you will be blessed by the divine King of the poor, if you join to them classes for the children of those whom the world despises and whose humble

¹ Marie Eugenie, Letter to Abbé Gros, no. 1504

servants you will make of yourselves. Daughters of faith and grace, you will aspire as a favor to the honor of teaching the poor girls of a village to pray, read and work, and you will make the children of opulent families understand that the riches of faith and the blessings of eternal glory are the heritage of the poor and the dowry of the destitute".² We note a dual objective in Father Combalot's words: to educate the poor and offer them a new dignity, and to awaken the consciences of the rich. From the outset, the direct work of charity is inseparable from conscientization, which aims to transform structures. But the reason Father Combalot writes this is that the Sisters themselves asked to be able to care for the poor. Father Combalot mentions this and comments: "you understood that you could do good to the rich only by expanding your heart in love for the poor", so that "it would be you (...) who would teach them by your example, to devote themselves to the relief of miseries, which too often they don't even know about."³ A 3rd idea emerges here: there can be no awareness-raising among others (students and families) without the direct commitment of the person who wants to carry out this awareness-raising work. For the Sisters, this commitment will also be a way of going against the grain of social trends: "the works of charity you practice towards them [the poor] will be for your Congregation like a divine insurance, which will preserve your houses and yourselves from the contagion of the world, the inevitable harbinger of the ruin of Communities. Indeed, what could be more opposed to the spirit of our times than the love of the poor and of poverty?"

The desire to take care of the education of women, whose upbringing is neglected by their families, can be seen as another work for justice, especially, as Abbé Combalot underlines, the milieu in which they develop in a milieu of superficiality and illusions, luxury and passion, outside Christian culture, with a degraded family life.

Marie Eugenie's personal experience motivated her work with women: "We had experienced that what women acquire in education is usually quite superficial, of no use to their children and with no connection to their faith, around which their studies almost always revolve if they prolong them. We knew beyond what we had experienced that, above all, they have totally false ideas of their dignity and their duties, ashamed of doing the least useful thing, of really looking after their homes and their children, glorying in being seen, in being indecently adorned, in attracting tributes they would repel if they knew how dishonorable they were, attaching to their husband's position and fortune a price that goes as far as abjection. Finally, although pious, they are very ignorant of the nature of their religion, of all its truths, of its history, of what would make them understand the Christian social spirit. I would add that few young girls have been taught the seriousness of life, the importance of the smallest steps at the beginning, have been fortified against its reverses or its pains, and accustomed to take care of the miseries they do not see, to condescend when it is only a question of their pleasure, never to bend when it is a question of their duty." ⁴

Taking care of women and their formation is therefore a way of making them aware of their dignity, their role in the family and in society, and of giving them the means to exercise this role, which Marie Eugenie recognizes as a vocation. It's a question of forming their intelligence, but also of enabling them to get to know the world and to reread their experiences, and to develop in them the thoughts of faith.

These two topics, that of the poor and that of women, are mentioned more and more clearly in

² Abbé Combalot, Introduction to the Constitutions R.A, 1839-1840

³ Ditto

⁴ Marie Eugenie, Letter to Père d'Alzon, July 19, 1842

successive drafts of the Constitutions.

The 1840 Constitutions include a reference to visiting the poor, to which we'll return later.

The statutes of 1854 (which led to the Institute's recognition by Rome) include the "poor" in the Congregation's mission to make Christ known and loved: "Their means of doing this are: 1. prayer 2. education of the higher classes 3. education of the poor 4. retreats for women... etc."

In the 1866 Constitutions, right at the beginning of the text, in the section on the "aim" of the Institute, after the details on the contemplative life, reference is made to the formation of women through works "such as boarding schools, orphanages, schools, retreats, preparation for First Communion, meetings and instruction of girls and women, etc."⁵ It's worth noting that, at the time, women were often poor, from the unprivileged classes. The text continues: "They may embrace the same works in the missions." If we can't "get out" of the house, we let the peripheries come into it, and the Congregation, for its part, can move and go out on mission.

It is through all this that Marie Eugenie undertakes Christianizing the intelligence, to help open up the consciences of a certain category of society, and to lead it out of its selfishness. The spirit of formation is even more important than the level of instruction: "Instruction is pushed very far here, but it is above all the spirit in which it is given that makes up our education. I don't esteem this teaching of pure knowledge at all. I esteem what elevates the intelligence, what imbues it with a superior character in intellectual concepts, Christian sentiments. Other educational establishments, even religious ones, focus more on the imagination, on the affectionate faculties. We focus more on the intelligence, to Christianize it by developing it, more on the will, to make it capable of renunciation and sacrifice". When Marie Eugenie talks about education at the Assumption, she likes to emphasize that the Sisters receive "a sufficiently large development of spirit, so that they are able to communicate this development to their pupils and give them a solid education". What's important is to enable young people to develop convictions, and for these convictions to be "serious", rooted in the Gospel: "it's rather the direction of this spirit, its particular temperament, its own character that has been given to it. It's not a bad thing that our children don't have much imagination; what we want is for them to have very serious thoughts and strong conviction."⁶

It's about making the Gospel, with its values of sharing, justice and recognition of people, a ferment of convictions and criteria for discernment. Forming Christian intelligences means broadening the field of vision and understanding of the world. To "understand" and "feel" the world, in order to implement an "active faith".

2- What does this mean in concrete terms for educational projects?

a) Visiting the poor

Abbé Combalot already spoke of visits to the poor in his Introduction, underlining their dual purpose: compassion in action towards people in difficulty, and the lesson that pupils from other social classes can learn from them: "(...) I believe that you will find in visiting the poor and in the exercise of charity one of the most powerful means of inciting your young pupils to combat in themselves the fragility and pursuits of an overly sensual nature."⁷ In this way, the first Sisters of the Assumption had already formed them in view of this contact and encounter

⁵ R.A., Constitutions of 1866

⁶ Notes from conversations, quoted in Etudes d'Archives n°5, An Educational Project of the 19th century

⁷ Abbé Combalot, Introduction to the Constitutions of the Religious of the Assumption, 1839-1840

with the poor.

In the Constitutions of 1840, the Sisters explain that the truly Christian character of education given at Assumption is at stake. In a way, it's a question of "nourishing the heart" and awakening the consciences of women who are, by vocation, called to live devotedness (an antidote to egoism, according to Marie Eugenie): "The education of girls must prepare them for this holy mission by an early but serious and real apprenticeship in the works of mercy practiced towards their brothers, according to the measure appropriate to their age (...) The Religious of the Assumption must therefore be able to visit the poor, and serve them as the most precious members of Jesus Christ, in order to be nourished at their feet with the practical sentiments of a profound humility and simplicity that are entirely evangelical. They should also be able to take their young pupils there, so that they can see misery at close quarters, and learn how to alleviate it." ⁸

A semi-enclosure was therefore set up to make these visits possible for the Sisters and pupils: "To better fulfill the duties of education towards the children in their care, and to preserve for the families a freedom of relationships likely to attract them, the daughters of the Assumption are only subject to a half-enclosure (...) in order to inspire in the children the spirit of charity and to give them real lessons on the duties and vicissitudes of life, the Sisters may take them to visit the poor from time to time as a reward. They may also visit these poor families in advance, to make sure that everything the pupils see there meets the needs of their education, or to bring some relief or consolation to the poor they have begun to care for with the children."

Encountering the poor is seen as a reward. It is further specified that "the service of the poor, as stated at the beginning of the Constitutions, should complete for our Sisters the life of humility and charity which we are so anxious to see develop in them, as well as the all-Christian education which they should give to their children". Sisters are designated for this mission, and are charged with "going to the poor with linen, food or remedies, to help them in their illnesses, to console them in their miseries, to prepare them to receive the Sacraments, and finally to render them, as with the most precious members of Jesus Christ, the most humble and charitable care possible.

In 1842, Marie Eugenie wrote to Father d'Alzon that the Sisters were "afraid of not always being Sisters enough to the poor if we stop seeing them, and of forgetting the realities of life in the midst of an existence that is always exceptional, however austere or poor it may be." She explains: "The Religious knows neither the isolation, nor the worries, nor the humiliations of poverty, nor the continual dependence on her own work. Her privations are usually more continuous, but once fixed, they are definitively limited"⁹. She thus affirmed that the "vow of poverty", even when lived in a radical way, is always chosen, and does not replace the concrete experience of encountering those who live in unchosen poverty, making their living conditions difficult.

As early as 1842, when the school was still in its infancy, Marie Eugenie told Father d'Alzon about her first experiences of visiting pupils: "Visiting the poor is one of the things that does them the most good. We choose the families well, and very rarely grant this grace, but on the two or three occasions that we have taken the students, we have been very happy with the results. The example of such humble patience, of such hard resignation to Christian misery, of such continual work by a poor child, of her submission to painful treatment, of her gratitude for the slightest care, is like a seed of reproach for all the contrary faults of the child we

⁸ R.A., Constitutions of 1840

⁹ Marie Eugenie, Letter to Père d'Alzon, July 19, 1842, no. 1556

guide." ¹⁰

In the Constitutions of 1844, after the instructions on how to dress for going out, a spiritual touch is added: "Deeply recollected in Our Lord, they will go to visit the poor, as they would have gone to the poor house of Nazareth (...) On returning home, they will first visit the Blessed Sacrament.

b) Charitable Associations

Volume 3 of the Origins describes the Chaillot boarding school, which the Community is preparing to leave and move to Auteuil: "It is characterized by an excellent spirit: marvelous zeal for work, ardor for all good works, great piety, loyalty, frankness, a great attachment to the Assumption and to everything that belongs to the Assumption. The students still sometimes go out to visit the poor, which is the most coveted of rewards. Charitable Associations are being organized. There are three of them: for the older ones, those in-between and the little ones. But it's such an emulation of zeal, that they will soon have to merge into one to avoid rivalries and fights".¹¹ The same text refers to "what we used to call the *grandes boutiques*, very small stores in reality and very modest, but set up in the garden, to the great delight of pupils and parents, invited to the charity sale for the poor."

9 years earlier, i.e. 8 years after the foundation and 5 years after the arrival of the first students, Marie Eugenie was already talking to Père d'Alzon about these student associations, to whom she explained how they worked: "We have formed a charitable association of which I can also see the Councilors (...) Its forms of election and admission would perhaps make in small part one of the trials of public life that you desire (...) The pupils first all gave their votes to those whom they judged by their charity and wisdom, worthy of being part of the association, pious enough to attract God's blessings, and we add industrious enough to work for the poor. Any child who was turned away would no longer give her vote, and I assure you they were severe. After that, they elected their councilors and treasurer. Every 15 days, they are given an account of the good to be done, of the state of the families adopted: new associates can be accepted by vote, but only after they have seen their account books, which are well kept and in which there is little or no useless or selfish expenditure. They are very zealous (...) It is only every 6 weeks that admissions are made, first of aspirants, then of associates (...) There is also a certain advantage in forcing them to make public reports, and in charging them with making speeches that should excite the charity of others."¹² Once again, it's worth noting that this is a "distinction", that these associations form people to be responsible, and educate them ethically, particularly with regard to personal spending and the use of money. Around the same time, an allusion in a letter from the Foundress shows that the Sisters' gaze was opening up to the peripheries surrounding the boarding school: "The poor of Chaillot seem very unhappy this winter. Sr. Gonzague is going to ask you for several things for the vouchers to be given in visits and the like." ¹³

And more than 10 years later, as other Communities are founded, we sense that attention to the poor is present everywhere and influences even the most unexpected decisions, such as the one concerning the choice of flowers to be planted in the Nice garden: "Speaking of plants, I forgot to tell you that it would be better to plant especially flowers that can be used for bouquets and sold. So, along the walls themselves, roses are better, everywhere and in the south, heliotropes and perfumed geraniums. There's a species of roses quite similar to the tea rose that creep and

¹⁰ Marie Eugenie, Letter to Père d'Alzon, August 17, 1842, no. 159

¹¹ Origins, Volume 3, 5th part, chapter XVII

¹² Marie Eugenie, Letter to Father d'Alzon, February 1, 1847, no. 1813

¹³ Marie Eugenie, Letter to Marie Augustine, October 27, 1856, no. 1380

are sold for bouquets. Because of the poor children and poverty, we'll have to prefer these flowers to the others..."¹⁴

There's no doubt that Marie Eugenie saw these two means - visits to the poor and charitable associations - as a way of contributing to the "social mission" of the Church¹⁵.

c) The "Notre Dame de Salut" Association

In 1857, the Religious of the Assumption settled in Auteuil, on a large property on which Mother Marie Eugenie had built a monastery combining tradition and modernity, both in its architecture and in the educational and spiritual project it proposed. It was in this monastery that the influence of Marie Eugenie of Jesus grew and her educational project developed. Her aim was always to reach families through their children. The social Christianity she sought to instill in the hearts of her pupils would also be effective in the lives of their parents. This is undoubtedly why, after the upheavals of the Franco-Prussian war and the Commune (which led to the ransacking of the Auteuil Convent), aware of the complex situation of a France grappling with the growing rise of secular ideas on the one hand, and the continued existence of a Church closed to social ideas on the other, she encouraged the birth and development of a work of a social nature. In her view, Catholicism should aim for the "magnificent position that would be made for it by men capable of understanding and creating genuine freedoms and true Christian socialism"¹⁶. In a hostile context, she dared to speak of the Church's "social mission". She saw in the Republic (which disappointed her in certain respects), properly understood beyond politics, an opportunity for "social transformation"¹⁷. Thanks to her connections and reputation, which already gave her a certain credibility, and thanks to the parents of students at the R.A. Auteuil boarding school, she was able to find resources.

As early as May 1864, we find mention of her help to "the small work of poor domestic care-givers", born 3 years earlier, which would give birth to the LSA¹⁸.

In 1871, she wrote to Père d'Alzon: "Paris is in a pitiful state. There is uneasiness in all the areas, and there is talk of Bonapartist or other movements as very forthcoming." ¹⁹ In the post-1870 context, some Catholics saw national defeat and social revolution as warning signs. It was necessary to react against the decline in religious sentiment and faith convictions, due to the adoption of middle-class values or indifference of many Christians, under the easy and corrupting regime of the Second Empire, due even more to the teaching given in state schools and the weak evangelization of the working-class milieu. Marie Eugenie was one of those who wanted to react. She writes: "I urged the fathers [= those in Paris: Picard, Pernet, Bailly] to lay the foundations of an Association of alms and prayers for the work of workers. There are duties

¹⁴ Marie Eugenie, Letter to Marie Thérèse, November 6, 1869, no. 1291

¹⁵ Cf. Marie Eugenie, Letter to Père d'Alzon, February 27, 1844, no. 1610

¹⁶ Marie Eugenie, Letter to Father d'Alzon, n°1911

¹⁷ cf. Marie Eugenie, Letter to Father d'Alzon, March 21, 1848, no. 1922

¹⁸ Report on the work of domestic care-givers for the poor: Father Picard tells the NDS ladies: "His words have found a prompt echo in your souls. You have given touching proof of this, by generously proposing a monthly tax for the work, which each of you has not hesitated to accept." Purpose: "Insofar as we care for the sick, insofar as we stand at their disposal, at every hour of the day and night, we resemble all the guards in the world." "Our immediate aim is to care for the sick who are poor, in their own homes, day and night, without any payment on their part. We don't even ask them for a glass of water." "In addition to the material goal of caring for the body, we also have a very spiritual one (...)" i.e., to acquire moral and spiritual influence, preach Jesus Christ and introduce Christian habits."

¹⁹ Marie Eugenie, Letter to Père d'Alzon, December 1, 1871, no. 3306

for everyone in this Apostolate, I hope they will tell you about them and that you will find the thing good."²⁰

Father Picard, who had experienced first-hand the horrors of war, the siege and the Commune in Paris (the annals of the Convent of Auteuil bear witness to the risks he took to meet the wounded in the streets of Paris), sensed the urgent need for a reawakening of the Christian conscience. But as there were still too few Assumptionist Religious to lead apostolic projects, the idea of Associations, which would enable him to rely on lay associates, struck a chord with him. Through the creation of local committees, the idea was to create a league for the defense of the Church's rights, to promote the union of Catholic-inspired workers' organizations, and to lay the foundations for a meeting of Christian teaching organizations, in a spirit of unity.

"To do something for the people, yes! But could these monks act alone? What would be the cost to them of an association that included many people of the world, generous women, willing to give their time, their money, their prayers, capable of devoting themselves to founding and maintaining the workers' works so necessary to the moral and religious good of the people (...) Father Picard, in his grand views, foresaw the day when workers' works and Catholic workers' societies would draw closer together, forming a great Catholic league throughout the world..."²¹ Father d'Alzon's unambiguous reply: "Your idea of association is perfect. Would you like me to go and preach a retreat on Rue François 1^{er} during the 4th week of Lent? I'll lay the foundations or develop the nucleus."²²

And the message immediately got through to his brothers: "The Superior tells me about an Association she's dreaming of for our works. We have to take it very seriously. Have you received a letter addressed to you or to Fr. V[incent] de P[aul], in which I propose a retreat for the fourth week of Lent for the ladies, and another for Passion Week, which I propose for men, especially young men(1)?"²³

On January 24, 1872, in the presence of Fathers François Picard and Emmanuel Bailly, under the leadership of the Religious of the Assumption and on the initiative of Mother Marie Eugenie of Jesus, an Association of prayers and alms for "the salvation of France" was formed in Paris, under the patronage of "Notre Dame de Salut". The Association brought together "Ladies of Society", mostly mothers of Auteuil schoolchildren. Father Vincent de Paul Bailly lightly referred to them as an association of pious ladies "orantes and seekers", orantes for the salvation of France and seekers to support Catholic and social works.

On January 27, 1872, in a letter to Mother Thérèse Emmanuel, co-foundress and loyal supporter, Marie Eugenie also talks about her project: "I've been busy all these days. We are in the process of setting up a charity to support and develop everything that can contribute to the salvation and moralization of the working class: patronages, orphanages, circles and so on. - Associates would donate two cents a week, more if they wished, but always that. This would be the work of Our Lady of Salvation; pray for it."²⁴ Commitment confirmed on February 5: "I have a thousand things to do for works in which I thought I should cooperate, one for vocational schools, one for workers' works. This requires notes or letters."²⁵ Through social works, the aim was to offer the working classes, "the victimized classes of the liberal capitalist system"²⁶, a

²⁰ Marie Eugenie, Letter to Père d'Alzon, December 1, 1871, no. 3306

²¹ The Assumption and its Works, September 1927

²² Father d'Alzon, Letter to Marie Eugenie de Jésus, December 4, 1871

²³ Père d'Alzon, Letter to Père Picard, December 4, 1871

²⁴ Marie Eugenie, Letter to Mother Thérèse Emmanuel, January 27, 1872, no. 817

²⁵ Marie Eugenie, Letter to Mother Thérèse Emmanuel, February 5, 1872, no. 818

²⁶ Soetens Claude, Père d'Alzon, the Assumptionists, the pilgrimages, p.309

form of religious and moral education that would enable them to lead a dignified life, in line with the Gospel.

A 13th century statue of the Virgin and Child presided over the meeting in the parlor. The association was named "Notre Dame de Salut".

The Association was successful. As early as March 1872, it had attracted the attention of the faithful and even the Bishops by proposing the establishment of Masses and Communion for the deliverance of the country, still occupied by Prussia until the war debt was paid. In an apostolic letter dated May 17, Pope Pius IX encouraged the Assumption's efforts by granting indulgences.

In 1872, the idea of pilgrimages arose, as an opportunity to raise the profile of the association. In August of the same year, a 1st pilgrimage to La Salette was planned. Linked to the founding of Notre Dame de Salut, the organization was initially handled by female executives, then by parliamentary figures and members of the nobility, particularly when the pilgrimages went further afield²⁷.

Marie Eugenie writes and gets in touch with the Fathers, with Father d'Alzon in the lead, who are at work, as this comment about Father d'Alzon testifies: "But really, he's unwell, obliged to go to these congresses to which he had committed himself, the congress of laborers in Poitiers and teaching this week in Paris, taking care of the other things as well."²⁸

Alongside the creation of Notre Dame de Salut, we find Marie Eugenie's commitment to other works: "Yesterday I had to go to Versailles for other matters and to serve friends. On Monday morning, I will go to the Archbishop's palace for a gathering of the women to found and support works of patronage and vocational schools for young girls. Since we have welcomed the work of Mlle. de St André to make florists of the linen staff, etc., we are taking care of them and patronizing them."²⁹

Later, when a misunderstanding arose between the Archbishop of Paris and the Assumptionists over the creation of the Committees and Associations, she became the fervent promoter of his works with the Archbishop of Paris.³⁰

After these ups and downs, the Association was able to move forward: "On February 6, 1873, the first General Meeting of the Association N.D.S. Mgr. de Ségur presided. He was there, at the rue François 1^{er}, in the midst of some forty members of society, including Mme. MacMahon - because the Auteuil boarding school educated their teenage daughters - Mother Marie Eugenie of Jesus, Foundress of the Religious of the Assumption, Mother M. du Christ, Fathers Picard and Bailly... So, there was much work to be done. The students of the Auteuil boarding school and their parents subsidized them generously."³¹

Later, Marie Eugenie rejoiced again: "You no doubt know, dear Mother, that it was our Fathers who began the great pilgrimage movement. Pray that they do not succumb to fatigue."³² The

²⁷ Vicomte de Damas, Duc de Chaulnes, Charles de Nicolay, Fernand de Carrière, Henri de L'Epinois, Comte de Combettes de Luc, baron d'Avril, Messieurs de Lacroix et de Belcastel

²⁸ Marie Eugenie, Letter to Father Emmanuel d'Alzon, September 1, 1872, no. 5137

²⁹ Marie Eugenie, Letter to Mother Marie Agnès, Superior of Malaga, January 26, 1872, no. 8835

³⁰ cf. Marie Eugenie, Letter to Père d'Alzon, November 22, 1872, no. 3344

³¹ Père Guichardan, Le Pèlerin, December 10, 1872

³² Marie Eugenie, Letter to Mother Marie Ignace, July 16, 1873, no. 4546

1st national pilgrimage to Lourdes took place in the summer of 1873.

d) The missions in situations of poverty

Marie Eugenie was quick to express her interest in distant missions. As early as August 30, 1844, on the feast of Saint Rose of Lima, Mother Marie-Eugenie made a missionary commitment in her own name and in the name of the Congregation, with Messrs Webber and Richard, *apostolic missionaries*, on the eve of their departure for Madagascar³³. A union of prayer had also been established with Messrs Charrier and Galy, missionaries in China.

A few years later, before the 10th anniversary of the foundation, missionary bishops were already approaching the Assumption. The Sisters were first asked to go to China³⁴ in 1848. This request was not honored. In 1849, it was the call from the Bishop of Cape Town, South Africa, that signaled the first missionary departure: "(...) The departure would be for the month of September. The Bishop wanted to found a boarding school with classes for the poor annexed to it".³⁵ Even if this foundation did not develop in the way Marie Eugenie had envisaged, the missionary Sisters experienced poverty in all its dimensions: "...this poor Mission tried to get through the times of the high cost of living, famine, war and Protestant persecution that God is sending it". It had to receive support so that, "despite the famine, Mgr. Devereux's resources would be sufficient to satisfy the most pressing needs of the Missionaries and Religious and provide them with the means to leave the place that the Caffres wanted to attack. These Religious are our Sisters...".³⁶ These Sisters experience a profound communion with the people to whom they are sent.

This is not the place to go into the history of the mission in South Africa, but it does seem important to emphasize that these extreme conditions were experienced by the Sisters right from the start.

A year after Monsignor Devereux's appeal, the Sisters were called to Richmond, England, to found a school for orphaned girls. Mother Thérèse Emmanuel, Irish, took charge of the foundation, and the abundant correspondence with Marie Eugenie, who remained in Paris, bears witness to their joint research during the two years the foundation was up and running: the cost of the school, catechesis among the poor, the reception of orphan girls and the help that could be given them, work with women working in factories... "I have been trying since yesterday to weigh up all the options available to me," she says. Since yesterday, I've been weighing up your request to visit the poor; I don't know whether other Religious go into homes just to teach catechism. I don't think there are any in France, but until I can find out more about this, go and see the mother of one of the children you're talking about, on condition that she asks you. Once you've been to see her, she'll probably come at least once, and then, by alternating visits, you'll probably be able to give her enough desire to learn, so that she'll come on Sundays."³⁷ "... if you can, let them attach themselves solely to the work of the poor. You could have with them some children from the farmers' class to whom you would give a little more instruction or private lessons, and as you say, much good would be done (...) You would

³³ See Origins, Volume 2, Chapter 5

³⁴ Marie Eugenie, Letter to Father d'Alzon, July 5, 1848, no. 1953: "*Providence recently put me in touch with a Director of Foreign Missions who would like two of our Religious for the English mission post in China; he would add a holy girl whom he has placed here to learn English.*"

³⁵ Marie Eugenie, Letter to Father d'Alzon, February 6, 1849, n°2011

³⁶ Marie Eugenie, Letter to the President and Members of the Councils of the Propagation of the Faith, December 18, 1850, no. 11463

³⁷ Marie Eugenie, Letter to Thérèse Emmanuel, May 11, 1851, no. 333

give more development to the work of the poor orphan girls..."³⁸

This "model" of schools for the poor will be reproduced in many places, thanks to benefactors and the sacrifices of the Communities: "Poor schools demand the greatest efforts from us."³⁹

These are two experiments, the 2nd and 3rd foundations, after the initial foundation in Paris, which give the Assomption a hue that cannot be taken away.

e) Practical fraternity with the poor: a fundamental attitude

In a beautiful letter to Père d'Alzon⁴⁰, Marie Eugenie explained how important she felt it was for the Sisters to develop "a love for the working classes"⁴¹ and "habits of practical poverty". She spoke of the importance of manual work, which gave them "a practical fraternity with the poor that alone makes them understand their fatigue and toil." She recounts how the Sisters, rubbing shoulders daily with the workers - painters, carpenters, masons - discovered their "gentleness" and "goodness": "I have constantly found in them," she writes, "a respect for fatigue and work that I find to be a very sensitive feeling. Always ready to leave their own work to take on what they judged to be beyond our strength in ours, they placed in it a kind of protection for our weakness that averted any embarrassment. "She insists on the importance of knowing the living conditions of the poor: "To judge the merit of a poor man who will go out of his way twenty times a day for fear of letting a woman draw a bucket of water from a well that is too deep, you have to know what it is like to carry the weight of work that lasts all day and is barely enough to sustain life. Those who have to approach the poor, or raise the rich, also need to know what this fatigue is like, and I want that there always be an opportunity for all the Sisters to experience it at least from time to time." For Marie Eugenie, going to the outskirts also means experiencing and measuring the harshness that there always be of simple people's living conditions, sharing them, if only for a few hours. That's why she says: "Knowing how to launder, iron, cook, clean the dormitories, varnish furniture and floors, and a thousand other stranger things, is knowledge that goes before Latin in our esteem, and I hope we'll pass on a little of this practical common sense to our little ones..."

Knowledge of the living conditions of the poor thus becomes an educational lever: "Much could be said about the need to make misery known to children who barely know its name, about the counterweight that works of charity bring to studies, and the relationship with the poor to the society of the rich"⁴². This experience leads the pupils to a beneficent examination of conscience: "The example of such humble patience, of such hard resignation to Christian misery, of the continual work of a poor child, of her submission to painful treatment, of her gratitude for the slightest care, is like a seed of reproach for all..."

We can add to this, as an allusion, to the situation of the "displaced", that Marie Eugenie also experiences (which brings her closer to us) the work of obtaining residence permits for foreign Sisters: "I take the pen of Sr. M. de Jésus to tell you of my concern about the new Decree of the French Republic, by virtue of which all foreigners must declare their stay in France with documents that establish their nationality, probably birth certificate, passport, or similar things. In Paris the declaration must be made to the Police Headquarters and in Lyon to the

³⁸ Marie Eugenie, Letter to Thérèse Emmanuel, October 3, 1851, no. 349

³⁹ Marie Eugenie, bill for Comtesse Blanche de la Celle, February 23, 1887, no. 11564

⁴⁰ cf. Marie Eugenie, Letter to Père d'Alzon, July 28, 1842, no. 1557

⁴¹ In France in the 19^{ème} century, the working class was growing and workers, living in difficult conditions, were truly on the periphery of society.

⁴² Marie Eugenie, Letter to Abbé Gros, November 1841, no. 1504

Commissioner of the Rhône, everywhere else to the Mayor of the City."⁴³ Then on October 17: "I wasted my day registering foreigners, the Police Headquarters sent us a gentleman for that which is a great courtesy." ⁴⁴

3- 1898 to 1953: years of conflict

In these post-foundation years, it's often a question of living through every displacement and caring for the displaced.

In the 1st part of the 20th century, due to multiple conflicts (in Latin America, the Philippines and Japan, Europe, etc.) and also at the time of expulsions in France (early 20th century), the Sisters themselves became "migrants", moving from one country to another, from one city to another, to be safer. We have the documentary basis to study their experience in those years. It would be very interesting to study this issue in greater depth. In several places, we also treat wounded foreigners, particularly those who are fighting. This was the case at Auteuil, Le Val and elsewhere... In 1919, the Sisters also arrived in the USA, in Philadelphia, a land of migrants... In 1938, in Argentina, a country also marked by migration in the 19th century.

In the early 1950s, after the great European conflicts, what came to be known as "social works" were developed. Here too, it would be very interesting to study. Many experiences could be explored, for example: Rome-Quadraro for post-war displaced persons in the 1950s, experiences in the Philippines during the return of the Sisters, and so on.

I think you've already discovered, from Sr. Sandra's talk, the new questions that arise with the great missionary expansion: "Is our life incarnated there where the Lord has sent us? Are we really one of those children, white, black or yellow, rich or poor, of the field where we reap?"⁴⁵ I'll end with this question, which still awakens in us this desire for communion with every person on this earth.

PART II THE BEGINNINGS OF THE LAUDATO SI' SPIRIT

1) Creation theology ⁴⁶

Even if Laudato Si' and ecological issues were not topics in Marie Eugenie's day, traces of the theology of creation can be found in her work, which has been at the root of our current thinking since Laudato Si' and the Church's call for an ecological commitment. For Marie Eugenie, the world is not the fruit of chance, but of divine creation. It is by God's benevolent design that the entire universe, still unfinished and in the process of becoming, is sustained in existence and moves towards its fulfillment. The status of "creature" links all animate and inanimate beings together and establishes them in a special relationship with God. This gives our life, and in particular our consecrated life, a character of praise: "At Lauds, we bless God for all he has done in creation, the earth, the sea, the mountains, the valleys [...] and we call upon all creatures to bless him." ⁴⁷

Among the many elements, I'd like to highlight a few:

⁴³ Marie Eugenie, Letter to Mother Madeleine Eugenie, no. 9998, October 8, 1888

⁴⁴ Marie Eugenie, Letter to Mother Madeleine Eugenie, no. 9999, October 17, 1888

⁴⁵ Mother Marie Denyse, Letter to the Congregation, December 12, 1963

⁴⁶ cf. article by Sr. Claire Myriam, in "Towards an Eco-Assumption", Marie Eugenie and creation, p.130

⁴⁷ Marie Eugenie, Chapter Instruction of September 24, 1876

a) God, Creator and Good

God, who created every living thing, is good par excellence: "God is a good that desires to give Himself. He suffers when He is not known. This is not a definition of my imagination, it's that of Saint Thomas: God is the Sovereign Good Who, by His very nature, loves to give Himself, to give out the goods that are in Him abundantly." ⁴⁸⁴⁹ He must be seen as "infinite goodness, supreme good tending to pour itself out and continually pouring itself out into all the beings it has created." ⁵⁰

God shares this good with all creatures: "God is everywhere, in us as well as outside us, in each of the beings He has created. He fills everything with His immensity. It is in Him that we live, that we move, that we are (Cf. Acts 17:28) [...] The heavenly Father does not deprive any creature of the goods of nature; He works ceaselessly to do it good." ⁵¹

For Marie Eugenie, God is fundamentally good. This is the foundation of her great trust, because she feels that He guides the world and shapes her life with a loving hand. This leads her to a spirituality of praise, adoration and joyful detachment. This character of praise appears several times as one of the characteristics of our Congregation: "one of the characteristics of the devotion of our Institute must be to strive to give praise to God in all things. Laus Deo, it seems to me, should be our motto, like Adveniat regnum tuum. I would gladly take: May Your Kingdom come, for our active life; and Praise God, for our interior life." ⁵²

Elsewhere: "I believe that we must consider our spirit as being primarily a spirit of praise of God. To adore God, to adore our Lord Jesus Christ, to render to Him in adoration, in praise, in love, all that we can render to His Divine Person. This is our goal, our first occupation, just as we must bring all the souls with whom we come into contact into this spirit of praise and love of God." ⁵³

b) The goodness and uniqueness of every created being⁵⁴

From this vision of God's goodness flows that of the goodness of creatures: "He is good, and He wants His creatures to be good."⁵⁵ This conviction is an invitation to the educators to whom Marie Eugenie addresses herself: "Deep down in the most wicked natures, there is always something good; let us believe in it, let us search for it with perseverance, and if we do not find it, let us attribute it to some idea of our own excellence that blinds us."⁵⁶

In this general vision of Creation theology, what does Marie Eugenie have to say about the creation of human beings in particular? In a Chapter of August 1880, she develops this theme in a rather "modern" way. Created by God's hand, human beings are made in His likeness. Marie Eugenie insists that the human race was created different from all other creatures: "When He had made all these things, He formed a unique creature, different from all others, because He made it in His image and likeness: this creature is man. He gave him - which he gave to no other

⁴⁸ Marie Eugenie, Chapter Instruction of July 20, 1879

⁴⁹ See also Marie Eugenie, Chapter instructions of July 22, 1883 and August 29, 1881.

⁵⁰ Marie Eugenie, Chapter Instruction, July 22, 1883.

⁵¹ Marie Eugenie, Chapter Instruction, November 3, 1882.

⁵² Marie Eugenie, Chapter Instruction of March 23, 1879

⁵³ Marie Eugenie, Chapter Instruction, August 13, 1891

⁵⁴ Cf. Sr Véronique's conference for the formators' session, 2021

⁵⁵ Cf. article by Sr. Claire Myriam, in "Towards an Eco-Assumption", Marie Eugenie and creation

⁵⁶ Marie Eugenie, Advice on education, 1842, n°1511

creature - the power to know Him, to love Him, and therefore to serve Him..."⁵⁷

The human person therefore has a very specific relationship with God: "Man also has a special relationship with God: "God had established a kind of relationship which made man a child of God, which united him to God, which gave him as it were a ray of His own light..."; "The heart of God therefore willed the heart of man. God created man's heart capable of loving Him..."⁵⁸ The image of light underlines the fact that the whole of human existence is permeated by the presence of God. Man's love is a response to the love of God, who first united with him.

In another Chapter, it's the uniqueness of each person in relation to the others that Marie Eugenie emphasizes, comparing souls to the stars in the sky or the species of plants: "Saint Paul says somewhere: "The stars have varied brightness, not all of them have received the same brilliance, the same strength; as there are many stars in the sky, so there are many sizes, varied brightness." It is also said that each leaf, among the countless species of plants and trees on earth, has its own distinct and particular form. They have not received universal gifts from God, but each has the share that is sufficient for it to accomplish its mission and give God the glory He expects from them."⁵⁹

Taking up the usual themes of theology, Marie Eugenie emphasizes the specific place of the human person in the world, in relation to God, and the importance of the uniqueness of persons when considering their relationships with one another.

c) All creatures give glory to God

At the same time, human beings live in harmony with other creatures. Their existence also has a meaning, a reason for being. They too are created to praise God in some way, and to bear witness to His existence. In this way, the praise of our lives at the Assumption echoes that of the whole universe: "The whole universe gives glory and honor to God by the harmony that reigns there, by the marvels that are there. All sing glory and adoration. Only it's an unconscious glory and adoration. When the bird sings, when every being responds to its law, it is obeying the Creator's will. In the marvelous ensemble of creation, the details are so sublime, so beautiful, so harmonious that the unbeliever who studies them is obliged to recognize in them the finger of God."⁶⁰

2) Looking at the person

a) The dignity of every person

In this logic, an Augustinian impulse invites us to discover the face of God in ourselves, but also in others: "The face of your Sisters can bring you to God...", says Marie Eugenie again in a Chapter from 1880.⁶¹ We know that our Rule invites us to look at others "with a new heart every morning".

This also influences the way a Sister looks at the people she accompanies in the work of education, especially children: "If you love a child very tenderly, don't stop at the poor little creature who needs so much care, unable as she is to help herself, and therefore more worthy

⁵⁷ Marie Eugenie, Chapter Instruction of August 29, 1880, *"Guarding the Heart"*.

⁵⁸ Marie Eugenie, Chapter Instruction of August 29, 1880, *"Guarding the Heart"*.

⁵⁹ Marie Eugenie, Chapter Instruction of June 26, 1870, *"Love in the Congregation"*.

⁶⁰ Marie Eugenie, Chapter Instruction of June 22, 1884

⁶¹ Marie Eugenie, Chapter Instruction, August 22, 1880, *"Religious modesty, guarding the eyes and guarding the lips are powerful means for advancing in the interior life."*

of concern. See in her a soul created in the image of God, where He will deign to rest one day. Go deep into the substance, make it worthy of fulfilling the mission God has given it on earth. I say go to the substance. The soul is the substance. The outward, attractive qualities of a person - beauty, grace, wit, playfulness - are merely phenomena. So, you see that all these motives, far from diminishing charity, only dilate and extend it; they make love more constant, because its basis is more solid, more generous, stronger. As you know, the Song of Songs says: "Love is as strong as death".⁶²

So, to consider a person's dignity is to look beyond their outward appearance to the "substance" of their being. And, above all, to consider them as capable of "helping themselves", the root of empowerment.

b) God's love passes through our shadows and lights

Considering the dignity of the person also means paying special attention to every aspect of his or her existence, an attention that God Himself gives us an example of: "God, who created human nature and made it in His own image, loves this work of His hands. To attract His gaze and His love, it is not necessary for the creature to be endowed with beauty, grandeur, intelligence, anything that interests fiction and captivates man's attention. The humblest, most obscure, most despised existence has a profound interest for Him, and He follows every movement, observes every phase. He is the Friend who knows our joys and sorrows, and understands all our emotions. If men can be moved to tears at the sight of another creature's sufferings, what is it not like for God, Who is our Father and Creator, and Who follows each of us with far greater love?"⁶³

If "God dwells in the depths of our souls... He sees, even in the sinner, this depth of the creature He has made in His divine likeness."⁶⁴ It is this certainty, no doubt, that leads Marie Eugenie to consider that the shadows within us, the dark or fragile aspects, are not an obstacle to the love we receive from God, nor an obstacle to the love we can offer: "...all human existences, even the smallest, the most obscure and the most despised, have their sum of emotions, thoughts, sufferings, joys, something finally which could attract man's gaze, if he knew them perfectly (...). The humblest, the most obscure, the most despised existence has for Him a deep interest, He follows all its movements, He observes all its phases."⁶⁵

Attention to fragile people and to the fragility of each person is therefore a posture fully linked to this theology of Creation on which Marie Eugenie is based.

c) Knowing yourself to recognize God

In line with the previous point, we can see the importance of self-knowledge as a lever for formation. As Marie Eugenie herself says: "One of the first foundations of the Christian life, and all the more so of Religious Life, is to know oneself and to know God..."⁶⁶

And to know oneself - with its lights and shadows - is to recognize God the Creator: "Every man in this world acts as if he had created himself. This is one of the absurdities of our times.

⁶² Marie Eugenie, undated Chapter Instruction, vol.1, Instruction V

⁶³ Marie Eugenie, Chapter Instruction of December 28, 1879, *"The importance of life"*.

⁶⁴ Marie Eugenie, Chapter Instruction of September 14, 1873, *"Sources of dissipation to be avoided in order to preserve the impressions of the Holy Spirit after retreat."*

⁶⁵ Marie Eugenie, Chapter Instruction of December 28, 1879, *"The importance of life"*.

⁶⁶ Marie Eugenie, Chapter Instruction, January 3, 1875, *"The knowledge of God and of oneself, the foundation of religious life"*.

Capable, learned men put themselves infinitely below simple pagans because pagans recognized that all things were created by a superior Being. It is this truth that is being denied in these times. By the fact of our created, received nature, we therefore belong to God as to our Creator..."⁶⁷

From there, we can consider that helping a person to take responsibility for himself, to welcome himself, to find his rightful place, is a way of directing him towards God.

3) Taking care of nature

As we know, Marie Eugenie placed great importance on gardens and natural spaces. Her father already loved trees, and had endowed the garden of the Preisch estate with an arboretum that still exists today. Marie Eugenie's letters contain many references to this theme. I'll take the example of trees:

- Marie Eugenie loves diversity:

To a Sister working on the layout of her Community's garden: "Modify the enclosed sketch as you wish, but, believe me, instead of your large lawn, this mixture of paths, flower beds and lawns in the middle would do much better. Introduce any modifications you like, just keep the flower beds in ink and arrange the plan yourself."⁶⁸

To Père d'Alzon: "When it comes to planting green trees that could hide us from the sight of the houses at the end of the garden, I'd prefer it not to be in a regular line. Couldn't we come up with a design where, by varying the trees and planting them sometimes in groups, sometimes in semi-circles, we'd avoid what in a line of similar trees cuts off the view."⁶⁹

She loves lists of trees of various species: "You should ask your friends for lilac, seringa, cherry laurel and other plants for next autumn; there's no garden where you can't pick some up at the foot of the old bushes. We ourselves will send you bunches if transport is cheap, and little by little you'll be planting your flower beds."⁷⁰

And in one Chapter: "Why put only roses in one flower bed, violets, hyacinths or tulips in another? Isn't beauty made up of a certain mixture? The Divine Bridegroom, when He goes down into His garden, wants to find roses, lilies and violets; He wants to collect the fragrance of all these flowers He has placed in the soul."⁷¹

- It takes care of the place of the trees and the season in which they are planted:

"I don't know if for green trees and evergreen bushes (cherry laurels, evergreens of all kinds) this is a good season (...) Spruces and most green trees don't come under other trees or their shade."⁷²

- She doesn't like trees to be cut down unnecessarily:

In this way, we can see that to build the great monastery of Auteuil, trees had, of course, to be cut down... But Marie Eugenie took good care of them throughout the work. To this end, she

⁶⁷ Marie Eugenie, Chapter Instruction, January 5, 1879

⁶⁸ Marie Eugenie, Letter to Mother Marie Gabrielle, December 20, 1866, no. 5501

⁶⁹ Marie Eugenie, Letter to Mother Marie Bernard, January 20, 1865

⁷⁰ Marie Eugenie, Letter to Mother Marie Bernard, February 21, 1859, no. 329

⁷¹ Marie Eugenie, Chapter Instruction, February 15, 1885

⁷² Marie Eugenie, Letter to Mother Marie Bernard, March 20, 1859

commissioned Father d'Alzon, who had come into the château to rest near the monastery under construction: "Before you leave, I'd like to point out something I noticed last night. Mr. Demion had the trees you claimed to respect cut down at the end of your wooded area... the night before last. See if you need to give some orders."⁷³

A few days later, we realize that felling a tree is not a trivial matter, and that it requires discernment: "We're preparing the courtyard, we're keeping the trees that will protect you on the street side, we haven't even touched the others yet but we may have to take a decision on a few that provide humidity, or prevent the new building from drying out." And a little later: "I thank you for having the lawn tilled, and I think the reasons you give for continuing are excellent."⁷⁴ And a little later: "I thank you for having the lawn tilled, and I think the reasons you give for continuing are excellent, but will you please tell Jacques not to cut any more trees until I get back."⁷⁵

In the course of later renovations, for example, she advised Thérèse Emmanuel to send a Sister "to look after the trees, to see if we really need to cut down the ones Sister Marie Marthe talks about... I want everything to be spared, but we also need to cut down anything that gets in the way."⁷⁶

Yes, Marie-Eugenie's landscaping at Auteuil truly inspires ecological concern!

4) Nature, a source of inspiration

Marie Eugenie's connivance with nature is so strong that she finds it a great inspiration to speak of the spiritual life, particularly with regard to natural rhythm.

Here are just a few examples:

Plants must be allowed to take their natural form. It's the same for the human soul. One day, she explained to Father d'Alzon, whom she felt a little too constrained: "Our Lord does not ask the ivy for the strength of the oak. He does not demand that the tree, which needs a certain soil and a certain sun, should live, grow and bear fruit without that soil and without that sun, nor that the humble shrub of our gardens should have the resistance and energy of the desert plant, which, it is true, needs neither dew nor care, but which also does not lend itself to the touch of the human hand, lives only by the rays of the sun, but also lives only for them (...). As for me, how can I achieve any perfection, if you want from me what I cannot have, and if you break the powers that are mine."⁷⁷

The spiritual life has its seasons, which we must respect: "For each of our souls, there is also the night, the winter during which work is not successful, when we can take nothing, neither for others nor for ourselves. But we also know the words of Scripture: Winter is over (Ct 2), life returns. We're rather inclined to believe that night is death, that winter will last forever, as if, when we saw the garden a month ago, we'd said: "These trees are good for nothing. They'll never grow leaves again. It would be better to throw them in the fire, never to have planted them." We're tempted to say that to ourselves and to others: "There's nothing left, nothing, everything's dead. But no, Sisters, the time will come when God will send His strength, His grace

⁷³ Father d'Alzon, Letter to Marie Eugenie, February 15, 1857

⁷⁴ Father d'Alzon, Letter to Marie Eugenie, February 27, 1857

⁷⁵ Marie Eugenie, Letter to Father d'Alzon, March 9, 1857, no. 2601

⁷⁶ Marie Eugenie, Letter to Mother Thérèse Emmanuel, December 11, 1863, no. 557

⁷⁷ Marie Eugenie, Letter to Father d'Alzon, June 23, 1849

and His light." ⁷⁸

In difficult times: "At times like these, you can say to yourself: "But God Himself is the vinedresser of my soul. If, after the sweetness of spring, He takes me through the heat of summer and the rigors of winter, He knows what He has to do. He's a sovereign and very wise winemaker. The big thing for me is to keep myself under His action."⁷⁹

At all times, you have to take care of your soul, and it's a big, hard job, similar to that of the farmer: "He starts by uprooting the trees. He tires a lot, and reaps nothing right away. He pulls out the thorns, pricks his fingers, has a lot of trouble, and still harvests nothing. Then comes a first ploughing, a second ploughing. He treated the earth with smoke for it was a loathsome soil. Finally, after many years of hard work, he harvests the wheat and puts it away in his granary. The farmer is a good image of the spiritual life, where you have to pull a lot of things out, prick your fingers and go to a lot of trouble. There is a goal: to acquire God's love, to get to the point where Jesus Christ lives in us, can look upon us as a living member of His Mystical Body."⁸⁰

Sometimes we experience aridity. God is rain and sun at the same time: "...you are a poor land that produces neither fruit nor flowers. An arid, miserable land, it must be watered with the water of grace. This grace comes into your earth from our Lord Jesus Christ. This earth must be warmed: He is the sun of justice and holiness. Expose yourselves to His rays."⁸¹ Sometimes we have to ask ourselves "how do we water the garden" of our soul?⁸²

5) The culture of peace

Still in the spirit of *Laudato Si'*, Marie Eugenie lives in uncertain times and times of great anxiety. She often emphasizes the uncertainty that marks these times: "This is the great unknown and a real danger"⁸³. She finds it hard to believe in peace: "It is our first share in the misfortunes of this war, which will perhaps be followed by so many evils and so many other wars that we cannot yet rejoice in the peace that has been declared today, it is said, but whose conditions are still unknown." ⁸⁴

Perhaps that's why it evokes a certain culture of peace. It is based on the practice of the Benedictines, who inscribed the word "Pax" (Latin for peace) on the walls of their monasteries, and the Jesuits, who inscribed the same word on their letters:

"The Order of Saint Benedict inscribes *Pax* everywhere. It inscribes it above all in the hearts of the children, whose calm and recollected life is a life of peace; and through the zeal of the children, it carries out an apostolic work by bringing peace. The most active Order of modern times also inscribes *Pax Christi* at the top of everything it addresses."⁸⁵ It's a question of having peace within ourselves and giving it.

To this peace we can add humility, one of the words she uses most often in her Chapters, and simplicity, which she admires in St. Francis of Assisi, even if she doesn't quote him often.

She links peace to rest and the ability to change rhythm. Rest is important because it strengthens the ability to refocus on God: it's a matter of trying to find peace by re-immersing

⁷⁸ Marie Eugenie, Chapter Instruction, August 25, 1872

⁷⁹ Marie Eugenie, Chapter Instruction of June 27, 1880

⁸⁰ Marie Eugenie, Chapter Instruction of October 26, 1884

⁸¹ Marie Eugenie, Chapter Instruction of November 14, 1884

⁸² cf. Marie Eugenie, Chapter Instruction, August 19, 1883

⁸³ Marie Eugenie, Letter to Thérèse Emmanuel, January 24, 1871, no. 738

⁸⁴ Marie Eugenie, Letter to Mother Marie Madeleine, February 1, 1871, no. 7116

⁸⁵ Marie Eugenie, Chapter Instruction, March 7, 1880

oneself in the source of ardent love for the Lord, in silence and solitude. Nature is a source of inspiration: "Stand there, content, happy, confident, not doing much, since it's vacation time. But, says Saint Francis of Sales, it's doing a lot to be at peace with our Lord, it's filling your time well to do God's will. This will shall be in one thing or another. For one Sister, it will consist in strolling for an hour in the garden every day, occupying herself with nothing other than watching the little birds, listening to them sing, breathing in the fresh air. But this will be God's will, and in fulfilling it, she will find great peace." ⁸⁶

This second part of the conference highlighted the seeds of "Laudato Si'" in Marie Eugenie. This always leads her to ask the question of relationships: to others, to herself, to God, to the world. If she attaches so much importance to the values and attitudes I've just outlined, it's also because she believes that the person is a "social being", a connected being, a being called into harmony. In this sense, the two parts of today's presentation respond to each other.

By way of conclusion, it should be noted that from the outset, Marie Eugenie acknowledged that she had "social ideas"⁸⁷. She even sees a social aspect in her inner and spiritual work to live humility and simplicity. In a meditation, the text of which we have here, she addresses God as follows: "I ask you to make me faithful to the duties you teach me, to the resolutions you have made me take, to begin again to live with Jesus, being reborn today with Him on the altar where I offer myself like Him, and above all, give me the love of the hidden life, of the simplest and sweetest humility that effaces itself and bends to everything. Show how 'social' His virtues are."

⁸⁸

On the other hand, she loves "fiery democracy", not the kind that politics advocates, but the kind that transforms people's relationships with one another. ⁸⁹

She believes that Redemption manifests itself in the world through "a social state where no man had to suffer any other fate than that of nature, that is, where the Christian principle tended to remove from each person the oppression of others..." ⁹⁰

And even if she is disappointed by the attitude of some Catholics around her, she believes in the power of the Gospel: "It is not possible deep down that the earthly regeneration of humanity, of its social law, should not come out of the Word of Jesus Christ."⁹¹ Convinced that the Gospel has "social consequences", she likes to hear it said that through our education, "we alone can give the religious and social spirit that women need..."⁹²

So, I think it's fair to say that the entire work of the Assumption, both inside and outside the monastery, was aimed at developing this "Christian social spirit".⁹³ It's important to appreciate the extent to which Marie Eugenie went against the grain of the Church of her time, even taking risks by admitting to being close to ideas not approved by the Church.

Through the social project that animates her at every moment, Marie Eugenie intends to participate in the advent of Christ's Reign, which is, above all, a "social Reign". And this work,

⁸⁶ Marie Eugenie, Chapter Instruction July 25, 1874

⁸⁷ Marie Eugenie, Letter to Père d'Alzon, July 19, 1842, no. 1556

⁸⁸ Marie Eugenie, Meditations on the 4 Ends of the Mass, n°1527

⁸⁹ Marie Eugenie, Letter to Father d'Alzon, n°1610

⁹⁰ Marie Eugenie, Letter to Father d'Alzon, n°1610

⁹¹ Marie Eugenie, Letter to Father d'Alzon, n°1611

⁹² Marie Eugenie, Letter to Père d'Alzon, July 19, 1842, no. 1556

⁹³ Marie Eugenie, Letter to Père d'Alzon, July 19, 1842, no. 1556

astonishingly, is both internal and external: "You know this word so dear to the Assumption, this request of the Our Father that we repeat every day: May your kingdom come (...) First of all, I would say His social reign. Perhaps never has the reign of God been more ignored than now. Despite everything, this is not the time to be discouraged (...) We must never stop asking for this universal and social reign of the Lord, however sad life may be on the outside (...) Is His reign entirely established in us? Who doesn't feel that within ourselves there is still something to add to this reign of our Lord? There is also a social reign of our Lord Jesus Christ which we can procure and which we must ask for. We have works of zeal. We deal with children. Do you think the big thing for us is whether they pass their exams well, whether they know more or less geography or history? It's not about that. It's about forming the reign of our Lord in them, obtaining in them the advent of our Lord, procuring through education that great marvel of a Christian family (...) If through teaching we succeed in making Christian girls first, then Christian women and families, will we not have contributed to the social reign of Jesus Christ?"⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Marie Eugenie, Chapter Instruction of December 3, 1882