



Meet Mother Marie Joanna of the Incarnation (General Superior from 1921 to 1953) and Sister Marie Luce of the Ascension

TREASURE OF ARCHIVES n°11

A triple centenary took place in 1921 in our Congregation: the death of Mother Marie Celestine, of the election of Mother Marie Catherine as Superior General and of her death. Mother Marie Joanna, Mother Marie Catherine's Assistant, ensured the transition at the head of the Congregation until her own election in the spring of 1922. This Archives treasure opens a door on the collection of documents relating to Mother Marie Joanna, Jeanne Saleur, 4th General Superior of the Congregation (1922-1953) whose life is closely linked to her twin sister, Lucie, who later became Sister Marie-Luce. We are pleased to present you with some of these documents.

Handwritten notes on the youth of Jeanne and Lucie Saleur

By means of a handwritten notebook of Mother Marie Joanna, dating from 1965, we have access to several details about her youth. Jeanne and Lucie were born on April 19, 1874 in Sermaize-sur-Saulx (Marne, France), on Good Shepherd Sunday. Mother Marie Joanna recalls the first expression of her vocation: *"Around 1880. When I was six years old, a lady in the street interrupted her conversation with my mother to ask me: 'And you, Jeanne, what are you going to do when you grow up? - I'm going to become a nun'".* After having attended the school of the Sisters of the Christian Doctrine, Jeanne and Lucie were still young at the Assumption of Saint Dizier. They lost their mother at the age of 14 (two months after the death of their grandmother who lived with the family). Mother Marie Joanna wrote: *"Papa sent us to boarding school at the Assumption, and we went back with him every Sunday to work on the Brevet Élémentaire exam which was taken in Châlons sur Marne in 1891.* The admission document for this exam can be found in our archives.

Next came *"a few years in our pretty house built on Papa's plans. Relationships at the Convent. And with our friends at the Convent (...) Papa's business is not going well, he wants to start a company, which cuts into his income. We only have my mother's brother's family (...) Our education is finished, we have to organize our life at home with our father, but after two years, Dad confronts us with reality; we have to make a living. The decision was quickly made. I will get a job with a family as a teacher and Lucie will stay with Papa.* A youth marked by the brutal realism of life. Jeanne therefore went to work in the North of France. Mother Marie Joanna describes then how, again because of limited financial means, Lucie and their father moved from the family house, that had to be rented, to a smaller house, *"but fortunately near the Convent of the Assumption". Lucie also had to work for a family, with their father agreeing to go to a nursing home in his old age. " It all happened like that, but a few days later a telegram was sent to me in the North, and the same telegram from Lamalou-les-Bains was sent to Germany to Lucie: "Father passed away. What to do" (signed by his servant). Our father*

did not like the retirement home and took the train with his servant to Lamalou-les-Bains (then Montpellier, Hérault) where we had gone with him every year since our childhood... Our answer to both of us was the same: 'Take the dear deceased back to Saint Dizier' (...) The funeral took place in the church of La Noue, in Saint Dizier. The twins were 21 years old. After some time, Jeanne joined the Religious of the Assumption whereas Lucie was married for 20 years to a man who had had 7 children from a first marriage: "she dedicated herself to them as if they were her own and was for her husband the faithful companion and the firm support he needed. She herself had a daughter, Solange, who was "a real link between them all" but who died in 1911, still very young, in Bordighera, where Lucia's family came to spend a few months each year to be closer to Mother Marie Joanna (Jeanne), who was superior there. In 1919, Lucia's husband died of a heart attack. As her husband's children were all grown up, Lucia joined the Ladies of Calvary where she cared for the poor and sick for six years. Deafened and weakened by the difficult living conditions of the Ladies of Calvary, Sister Marie Luce obtained permission to enter the Assumption, where she spent the rest of her life until her death in 1953.

Notice on Mother Marie Joanna's the life

However, what was Jeanne's itinerary? She had become, as we have said, Mother Marie Joanna of the Incarnation. Having taken her perpetual vows in 1900, she came to Auteuil after the General Chapter of 1906 to help Sr Marie Dolores in the Economat. She organized and supervised the move at the time of the expulsions from the Externate in that year. In September 1907, she was entrusted with the foundation of Bordighera where, according to a note written from the testimony of sisters who had known her well: "*We found in her that strength which supported us in the duties of our religious life, and, at the same time, that serene gentleness which was able to understand, encourage and forgive everything*". She was sent to Genoa (Italy) as Superior in October 1916: "*She had a gift for words which touch the soul and force you to reflect and choose. We could always knock on her door with her smile and her deep gaze, the interest she took in everything that was ours, invited us to speak...*". It was from Genoa that she travelled to Val Notre Dame to take part in the General Chapter of 1921 which would elect the new Superior General following the death of Mother Marie Celestine on 11 April of that year. Mother Marie Catherine, upon her election, chose Mother Marie Joanna as her Assistant. "*Three months later, the two Mothers left for Rome, the Way of the Cross began*". Mother Marie Catherine fell seriously ill the day after their arrival, on December 6. She died on 15 December, leaving the Congregation in disarray and without a Superior General. Under these exceptional circumstances, the Vatican gave permission for a postal vote. On April 25, 1922, the feast of St. Mark, the voting envelopes were opened, and God gave the Congregation its 4th Superior General, in the person of Mother Mary Joanna. The election was made official on 19 May 1922. Mother Marie Joanna fulfilled this mission until 1953, going through, among other things, the ordeal of the Second World War which caused a new dispersion in the Congregation following the General Chapter of 1939. There are many documents in the Archives showing the way in which she marked the Congregation during her mandate (correspondence, chapter, important decisions, links with the Roman Curia).

Mother Marie Joanna will's

Feeling that age was diminishing her strength, already preparing her future resignation, Mother Marie Joanna wrote, on July 14, 1951, a moving will of which we hold the manuscript and copies in the Archives:

"In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, so be he.

This is my spiritual testament.

I thank God for giving me birth in a Christian family, for growing up in the Catholic faith, at the Assumption, and for giving me the grace of a religious vocation.

I ask Him to forgive me for my sins, for the abuse of the graces I have received, and I hope for heaven only through His mercy and the prayers of the Blessed Virgin.

I ask all those to whom I have caused pain to forgive me, and I forgive with a great heart, while telling myself that I have nothing to forgive, having always been surrounded by affection and filial respect since I became Superior, and even more so since I was placed at the head of the Congregation, despite my unworthiness.

I have always loved all my daughters but have not always shown them enough. Let them know that they are all in my heart and in my prayers.

I beg them all to keep the spirit of Our Lady, the spirit of the Gospel as it has always been in our dear Congregation - the spirit of Our Mothers contained and expressed in our Constitutions, our Rules - the love of the Church, of Our Holy Father the Pope.

In spite of the multiplicity of Novitiates, keep the unity of spirit, the union of hearts in charity - To be Catholics in the Congregation, united despite the diversity of nations so that our Assumption may always be beautiful in the eyes of God as being holy. May action not take first place, but flow from the contemplative life sustained by prayer and the Office, the adoration of Our Blessed Sacrament.

May God bless all my dear daughters - Pray for her soul rest of the one that will not forget you in the Eternal Homeland with Our Lady of the Assumption.

Sr. Joanna of the Incarnation. D.S."

Resignation from office

In April 1953, Our Mother Mary Joanna, who had kept absolute silence about her intentions until then, read to the General Councillors the letter she had sent to the Sovereign Pontiff to present her resignation (...) Our Mother added that she had done so in order to take 'alone' the responsibility for her initiative and so that the Council could never be suspected of having pushed, held back or influenced her. She added at the General Chapter that, given her age, "it was a simple question of common sense".

After the election of Mother Marie Denyse, Mother Marie Joanna became Provincial of Belgium until 1959. Weakened by age, she spent the end of her days at Val Notre Dame, in an essentially contemplative life which lasted until 4 July 1966, the date of her death. Here is what the sisters testify: *"In these days of illness, Our Mother Mary Joanna remained what she had been all her life: maternally good..."*

Thus, throughout her life, Mother Marie Joanna sought to live the Word she received on the day of her perpetual vows and which she explained as follows: *"The first desired word: Voluntas mea in ea, has always done me a lot of good because it completes my mystery. You know how I consider the Incarnation, from the point of view of the abasements of Our Lord, taking our corrupt nature. [Our Lord] took our corrupt nature and raised it to Himself, making each Christian a member of His mystical body, wanting to live in Him, becoming the person of His life, and manifesting Himself to others through the covering of our personality, so that as the Word animated Holy Humanity, Jesus wants to animate us (...). (...) This word Voluntas mea in ea would remind me of this unceasingly, showing me also through all my miseries God's will, which uses all to achieve its ends, making its most docile instrument. "*

Sister Véronique Thiébaud, Archivist of the Congregation
September 2021

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- 1 Handwritten biographical notes of Mother Marie Joanna
- 2 Mother Marie Joanna
- 3 Lucie Saleur - Lescot - Sister of Marie Luce
- 4 Passport and identity card of Mother Marie Joanna
- 5 Front of the image of the perpetual vows of Mother Marie Joanna
- 5b Back of the image of the perpetual vows of Mother Marie Joanna
- 7 Testament of Mother Marie Joanna – recto
- 7b Testament of mother Marie Joanna – verso
- 8 Certificate of capacity to teach primary children of Jeanne Saleur
- 9 Birth certificate of Jeanne Saleur
- 10 Acceptance of the resignation of Mother Marie Joanna by the Vatican
- 11 Certified photo of Mother Marie Joanna