

TIME OF TESTING... TIME OF RENEWAL...
Marie Eugénie in the turmoil of the events of 1870
TRESOR D'ARCHIVES n°9

Marie Eugénie's era was politically complex. Different regimes succeeded at the head France, sign of the struggle between the supporters of the former monarchical regime and those of the Republic, led by a democratic ideal. Civil revolts and *coups d'état* ensued. In 1851, when the rulers of the 2nd Republic were confronted with their lack of experience and a large portion of the population worried about the future, Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte regained power by a *coup d'état*. He proclaimed the Second Empire, thwarting republican pretensions. In July 1870, France got involved in a disastrous war against Prussia. In the Archives, we find a series of documents dating from these troubled times. They help us understand how Marie Eugénie lived through them, just 150 years ago.

War disrupts the plans

On June 25, 1870, the Congregation's 3rd General Chapter was held in Auteuil. It preceded the dispersion of some of the sisters, who had been sent to safety since war was declared just after the Chapter. The communities of the Assumption in the east of the country (Sedan, Saint-Dizier, Reims) were in a dangerous zone. In Saint-Dizier, the Assumption became a military hospital, which means that war-wounded were welcomed in the Monastery. In September 1870, Sedan was the scene of the arrest of Napoleon, disgraced, followed closely by the proclamation of the 3rd Republic. Reims, not far away, was also threatened in the summer of 1870. As mentioned in the notes of the Founding texts, Mother Marie-Eugénie, in Lyon, where she had gone at the beginning of August, learned of the first French defeats. She therefore returned to Paris, which was also occupied by the enemy. Auteuil found itself in the heart of the storm, and the vast majority of the sisters had to be dispersed in order to protect them. Marie Eugénie worked endlessly, organizing the departures for Poitiers, Lyon, Bordeaux, Nîmes and England. The sisters' safety was a priority for her. The Novitiate left for Lyon. The entire Congregation was affected by these events. The sisters, Marie Eugenie the first, saw their programs crumble, their plans modified; they had to face the unexpected. In these times of pandemic, when everything in our world is disrupted, this makes us close to our Mothers.

Auteuil becomes a military hospital

On August 26, Marie Eugénie herself left Paris. About thirty sisters remained there with Mother Marie-Séraphine. A military hospital was organized at the Petit Couvent, which received and cared for the wounded. The annals of Auteuil in 1870-1871, of which we carefully keep the two notebooks, recount these days. They bear witness to this war lived from within: « On Thursday, October 13, I went to the ambulance for the bandages. Around 9 o'clock in the morning, we began to hear the cannon in the direction of the forts of Montrouge and Issy; around 10 o'clock the shots followed each other with frightening rapidity, we went up to the children's dormitories, thinking that from there we could see from which side was fighting (...) the cannon thundered to shake everything. When I had oriented myself a little, I saw very well with the naked eye, the Prussian guns setting off from a redoubt they had made on the heights of Clamart. I was amazed to see the smoke long enough before hearing the detonation, I was told it was always like that. » In these same annals, we discover how Father Picard narrowly escaped cannon balls during a day he spent with the wounded in the streets of Paris. We meet people welcomed at the Petit Couvent, such as two young civilians, who were hit by enemy bullets while they were working on earthworks in the Bois de Boulogne. A sister recounts about one of the two: "I took him to a room where there was no one yet, so that he could rest better (...) When I returned to see him, I found him crying. hot with tears, his pillow was completely inundated. This poor boy inspired my pity, I wanted to console him, I told him that we would be sisters for him, that we would take good care of him (...) I sent for Sister Marie Jeannette to find out the cause of his tears; he told her it was hunger because for two days he had not eaten anything; not understanding French, he did not know when to go get his ration, and when he arrived, he could find nothing. "

The same books report the numerous inspections to find out the number of beds, to make sure that the patients were accepted. The sisters were inexperienced and did not know the rules for hospitals. They also needed money: "It had been arranged with the mayor of Passy that we would provide bedding, (...) that we would provide our care and all the necessary personnel, and the mayor would undertake to give us 1, 50 francs per day, for each soldier ... "

Paris changed face: "*When you haven't seen the aspect of Paris during the siege, you can't imagine it even slightly. Paris, so gay, so brilliant, so luxurious, is today so sad, so dirty, so dreary: you only*

see soldiers and constables, each one dirtier than the next .. People hang laundry out on the Champs-Elysées... » In the heart of Paris, Auteuil therefore lived, at the rhythm of cannon fire and the arrival of the wounded, in great desolation.

The complete transcription of these notebooks from 1870-1871 can be found on the Congregation's website.

From Nîmes, Marie Eugénie accompanies the communities “at a distance”

After leaving Auteuil, "with a heavy heart" as she wrote one day to Father d'Alzon, Marie Eugenie left for the South. She stopped in Poitiers, then in Bordeaux before arriving in Nîmes on October 4, 1870. She remained there for 8 months, which would allow her to stay more easily in contact with the sisters of the whole Congregation. Her letters to Mother Thérèse Emmanuel and to Father d'Alzon are true historical sources. She sought to keep in touch with events, following the evolution of the war as well as that of the communities. She sometimes remained for days without news of some of them: "No news from Reims" (ME, Lettre à TE, n ° 696, September 27, 1870), "nothing very new, my dear daughter, I fear that the situation is still very serious and that on the 1st day we have to leave. Saint Dizier seems delivered from the fear of a battle, there are passing French troops. "(ME, Letter to TE, n ° 699), " We have received your dispatch, but unfortunately we also receive this morning the disastrous news from the army of Mac Mahon de Sedan. What is going to happen? What government are we going to have? "(ME, Letter to TE, n ° 701, September 4, 1870) Great uncertainty about the future. They have to live with it. Sometimes the news of a community comes like a ray of sunshine: "*I finally have news of the sisters who remained in Saint Dizier, they were not worried in the asylum they obtained at the hospital but their house was inhabited by 700 or 800 Prussians who damaged everything. I only received a few words ...*" (Marie Eugénie, Letter to Father d'Alz., N ° 3275, September 1, 1870)

Surprise to discover that she sometimes wrote long letters in English to ThérèseEmmanuel: "*Good Bye dearest friend, all is quiet here, we are afraid to receive no news more from Paris, they write today, they say it is perhaps the last time for a long while*"(ME to TE, letter n ° 706, September 13, 1870). The latter was then in Lyon with the Novitiate. During the month of September, her exchanges with Marie Eugénie reported about the search for a place of asylum outside France. She and the novices

found shelter, in Switzerland, in Sacconex,. Marie Eugénie closely followed the queste, then the journey. She even dictated to Thérèse Emmanuel what to say in the event of a control during the trip. At the end of September 1870, the novitiate arrived at its destination: "We are very happy to know that you are safe. "

A path of trust and faithfulness

During these long months, Marie Eugenie "*has much to think about in order to accommodate so many scattered sisters*"; she is constantly concerned about the situation of the communities: "*I have no news from Reims, I hope that since there was no fighting, there will be no violence.*"(ME, Letter to Father d'Alz., N ° 3277, September 18, 1870)

But perceiving that the sisters are filled with faith gave her comfort: "*The sisters of Auteuil are in perfect disposition, full of courage and fervor; Father Picard preached a retreat to them (...) and they participated with all their heart.* »(ME, Letter to Father d'Alz., N ° 3278, X September 1870,) She rejoiced in the good they were doing and followed from a distance the reception of the wounded in the hospitals. She nevertheless lived the distance with sadness: "*For Auteuil I am very touched by the letters from our sisters, they are in the best spirit. Alas! will I receive more. Often I regret not being with them anymore.*"(ME, Letter to Father d'Alz., N ° 3279, September 22, 1870)

In 1871 a lull arrived, but the situation remained unstable; a new revolution was feared. Marie Eugénie hoped that for all, "*the trials will be a renewal*" (ME, Letter to Father d'Alz., N ° 3291, May 25, 1871). A means of holding on: trust in God...: "*At this moment I don't see any wisdom except surrendering oneself to God, serving and praying to him...*" (ME, Letter to Father d'Alz., No. 3294, July 23, 1871)

When she returned to Auteuil in June 1871, she found a monastery which had just been looted by insurgents from the Commune. Lists of destroyed furniture and letters of complaint are also in the Archives.

The founder reread her way of governing, which was subject to unforeseeable events over which she had no control: "*In the end, I see that government is above all a work of patience; few things seemed to be doing as one would like, and one brings them back to the general good only by going about it as gently as possible, and especially with the least prejudice.*"(ME, Letter to Father d'Alz., N ° 3295, August 4, 1871)

During these destabilizing months, she retained - for herself and for the sisters- the call to sanctify each moment of life, whatever they may be, as evidenced by her last chapter for the Sisters of Nîmes:

“On the verge of leaving you, I want to point out to you how quickly time passes, the necessity of using for our sanctification each of the moments that are given to us. See how quickly this year (taking half of 1870 and half of 1871) filled with grave and painful events has passed! (...) This is how life goes and from there, the need to sanctify it ... So understand, my sisters, the importance and the price of the time that God gives you to prepare your eternity. "(ME, Instr. Of May 7, 1871) She underlined the importance of living in dependence on the body-congregation and always acting as a member of this body. Before concluding by asking forgiveness for her own shortcomings, she insists: "Understand, then, my sisters, how important it is that by sanctifying yourselves, you help to establish, to maintain in the Congregation what should make it true: supernatural spirit, the spirit of poverty, obedience, chastity, the spirit of humility and zeal, in a word the spirit of Jesus Christ and of the Gospel... ”

May the experience of our Mothers in troubled times, help us to go through the upheavals of our time with serenity.

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Archivist of the Congregation

October 2020

- 1- General Chapter notebooks
- 2- Auteuil newspaper during the war of 1870
- 3- (or 3 bis) Letter from Marie Eugénie in English
- 4- Order of seizure of the Auteuil convent by the insurgents
- 5- Various documents attesting to the looting
- 6- Proof of damage
- 7- (or 7bis) List of equipment damaged by looting in 1870