

Table of Contents

Editorial	3
Sister Mercedes Méndez	
01 Education.....	7
Sister Isabelle Eugénie Gorgeu	
Marie Eugenie and Communion (I)	9
Sister Veronique Thiébaud	
Marie Eugenie and Communion (II)	21
Sister Veronique Thiébaud	
Discernment in the manner of Marie Eugenie.....	35
Sister Veronique Thiébaud	
Going to the peripheries: take the road with Marie Eugenie	49
Sister Veronique Thiébaud	
02 Archives.....	65
Journey with Mother Therese Emmanuel	
Sister Veronique Thiébaud and Sister Katrin Goris	
03 Theology.....	79
Enlargement of the intelligence in a Post Covid-19 World	
Sister Josefina Magat	
04 Religious Life	85
The Assumption in Africa-Madagascar: the irresistible current of grace in our cultures	
Sister Claire Josée Banamwana	
05 Assumption Together	91
On the way...	
Mercedes Escobedo Solórzano y Mariana Pruneda Fuentes	
06 Youth and Vocation Ministry	95
The Vocation, Under the Gaze of Marie Eugenie	
Sister Marie Valérie Lagarrigue	
07 JPIC	101
Being in and with nature: at the school of cultural traditions	
Sister Viviane M. Sawadogo	

Editorial

Sister Mercedes Méndez
Head of the Communication Team

Original Spanish

We have chosen the anniversary of the celebration of the first Mass in the Assumption as the date for the publication of the *Assumpta* magazine because of its significance in keeping with its objective: to offer theological-spiritual articles that help us deepen our charism and its updating and inculturation, or, as Mother Marie Eugenie would say, an instrument that helps to enlighten minds with the Truth of the Gospel¹.

On November 9, 1839, the first Sisters received permission to have the Blessed Sacrament in the chapel, and to have the first Mass celebrated therein. That was the moment when the Lord really took possession of His Assumption². Mother Marie Eugenie saw the Eucharist as "the continuation of the Incarnation" [C. 25.3.81]: Jesus, after having ascended to heaven "did not deprive us of His presence" [C. 5.5.78]; through the Blessed Sacrament "Jesus Christ dwells among us and gives Himself to us" [C. 23.6.78], He gave us this mystery where we can "serve Him and love Him" [C. 5.5.78]. Our Eucharistic spirituality is rooted in the foundational experience that Mother Marie Eugenie had at her First Communion which gave rise to her Eucharistic devotion which was present in her even during the period of her life of unbelief [L. VI, 1501]. Mother Marie-Eugenie describes what happened that day as she received Jesus present in the Eucharist, "the One Whom she received for the first time", Who

¹ "The peaceful development of faith in matters of intelligence." D'Alzon. L. VII, 1556. "Focusing all our affections on Christian truths" D'Alzon. L. VII, 1556.

² "The first Mass was celebrated by Fr. Combalot on November 9, 1839. [...] From now on, the foundations have been laid, He who is your seal is there to support your courage [...] Jesus Christ is in their midst". Or. I, 311-313.

took possession of her, to "render" in her, a homage "that alone she would not be able to render" [MOI, 51]³.

In relation to this process that we could call mystical-passive configuration to Christ through the Eucharist and Adoration, Mother Marie Eugenie proposes, among other things, a more active one that is carried out through study. It undoubtedly corresponds to another experience that was a foundation for Mother Marie Eugenie's life, the one she had during Lent after her conversion at Notre Dame de Paris in 1836. She speaks of this conversion as an "intellectual renewal" [L. VI, 1501], in which grace was undoubtedly at work. The importance of study in the Assumption will merit dedicating a future issue of this magazine to that theme, but in this first issue we would like to indicate some key points that we hope will guide your reading. The interest in what we would call today "ongoing formation", rather than study, arises from faith and love of truth which Mother Marie Eugenie, as we have already said, identifies with Christ, and for this reason "Truth must be the object of all the ardor of our adoration and love" [C. 10.3.78]. She insists that the truth to be known and deepened is "the Divine Truth and not those truths which are the object of human curiosity" [C. 3.3.78]. Through study we must come to understand the mystery of Jesus "as Creator and Redeemer" [C. 10.3.78]. In Jesus, we know the Father and we make Him known; that is why we must dedicate to the Mystery of the Incarnate Son "all the strength" of our intelligence and the "inclinations" of our heart [Constitutions 1844, Art. 12]. Study is necessary in order to acquire the "Spirit of Jesus Christ" which enables us to "transmit love and knowledge of the truth" to those to whom our mission of education is directed.⁴ Jesus Christ is the center of study and education in the Assumption. In virtue of the Mystery

³ Mother Marie Eugenie often returns in her writings to this form of divine indwelling that enables us to pay homage in Christ to the Father, which, without Him, would be unthinkable, so that we can offer God "an honour as befits Him"; thanks to His gift we can offer the "greatest, holiest, most worthy" sacrifice that a human being can offer: the Eucharist. C. 23.6.78 - *Patience and Interior Life, Fruits of Devotion to The Blessed Sacrament*.

⁴ Mother Marie Eugenie considered study to be necessary for good religious teaching, referring to it not as the teaching of religion, but as the transmission of all human knowledge from a Christian point of view. Cf. *Constitutions, 1840 - Chapter 12, 1844 - Article 12*.

of the Incarnation, all branches of knowledge have their center in Christ [L. VII, 1592]. In view of these affirmations, we understand that Mother Marie Eugenie affirms that it is not only the content of studies which should sanctify⁵. The way they are carried out perfects us if the dedication to them is done with a spirit of freedom and detachment.

Although, since the foundation, studies have characterized the period of initial formation, which they must continue all through life with the same spirit that we have just described. Mother Marie Eugenie insists that we must seek out "solid" doctrine, which is why she exhorts us to take care of the time spent in spiritual reading, and to choose books and doctrines which enlighten the intelligence, not those which lead to error⁶.

This magazine wants to offer this solid nourishment that will help us deepen our understanding of the spirituality of the Assumption, as well as its updating and inculturation, and thus deepen our identity, life and mission.

The authors are mostly Sisters and lay friends from our Provinces, because we believe that we have many people who have generated or can generate spiritual-pastoral theological thought. The Assumpta Magazine will be published annually, and will respect the sections indicated in the summary. From the second issue

⁵ "May the three great bases of your studies be recollection, a living and deep faith, and love: recollection which will unite you to God the Father of lights and Creator of the very beings that these truths embrace, and to J.C. Who, being the Wisdom of the Father, gave Himself to us, weak creatures, to be ours; faith (28) which will make you see in all things the action of God and of J. C. for Whom all things were made; love which will make them penetrate into the intentions of the Saviour by teaching them to glorify God in their works and to convert all their knowledge and power to the service of souls and to fix in them His light, power and glory." *Constitution of 1844, Article 12.*

⁶ "Never commit this error, which has led many souls astray; never read the books in which the persons you wish to convert have found their objections. It may seem that such a book is not too dangerous, and that it can be read without hesitation, since it must be refuted. Do not be mistaken, Sisters. One must nourish oneself with light in order to give light; one must never nourish oneself with error under the pretext of fighting against it. This is also one of the characteristics of the Spirit of the Assumption". C. 5.5.78 - Devotion to the Blessed Sacrament; Adherence to the Holy See. Respect for the Word of God.

onward it will have a unifying theme. In this first issue, there is no clear theme because we wanted to take advantage of studies already done, current events, and the presentation, from a theoretical framework, of some secretariats and services of the Congregation.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank all those persons, especially those responsible for the different fields of mission of the Congregation, for the analysis, reflection and writing that an article of this category implies. We would also like to thank the team of translators for translating these articles into another, and less familiar, language. We also invite you, the reader, to suggest topics of that are of interest to you or to offer your thoughts in some area of our spirituality, by writing to webmaster@assumpta.org.

We thank Sister Rekha and her Council for suggesting this publication. It responds to the calls of the 2018 General Chapter held in Lourdes for Sisters and laity to continue to deepen the sources of our spirituality, and to put our attention on formation. Thank you because at no time have we lacked encouragement and collaboration in thinking about the project.

Thank you very much to everyone.

Education

Sister Isabelle Eugénie Gorgeu
Secretariat for Transformative Education

Original French

Summary

Discernment, communion and peripheries, were 3 words that echoed strongly during the last General Chapter. In the following texts, Sr. Veronique invites us to a journey with Marie Eugenie to discover how to experience and implement these realities in our mission of transformative education.

We are called to accompany young people and adults, in their **discernment** in making personal and community choices. An exercise of freedom that leads each one to prepare to choose and to sense what inhabits the Heart of God. For this, we must not only constantly cultivate some "attitudes" of the heart but also direct our gaze towards Christ in order to act like Him, to know how to name our feelings and not to discern alone; to spend time in deep reflection, peace and silence.

Transformative education in the Assumption urges us to work together for the Kingdom, to feel that we are part of the same family, to work towards **communion**, the basis of human relationships. Marie Eugenie reminds us that communion is built on goodness, humility, and a certain unity of action. In times of "crisis", how can we stay on the course of communion? By naming one's feelings frankly, by opting for trust, by taking the common good as a priority and by relying on community discernment. It is also

important to know how to recognize that truth and different points of view are not obstacles to communion.

The social, economic, political, and religious situation is the space where the **peripheries** of a country or a continent are plotted out, where frontiers and walls are erected between men and women, between populations. It is therefore important to educate people's mentalities in order to open them, to put them into perspective through awareness-raising and meetings between the different environments. The challenge is to educate a practical fraternity by proposing, to students and adults alike, concrete experiences of services and encounters, exchanges, and shared moments, and then to help them to re-read the lived experience in order to understand the consequences that this brings about in the life of each one. Accompanying each one in the development of an interior, attentive and respectful outlook towards each person also implies that each one has the courage to know how to recognize and assume one's own weaknesses, limits, and inner peripheries.

01/01

Marie Eugenie and Communion (I)

Sister Veronique Thiébaud
Archivist of the Congregation

Original French

Communion is a theme dear to Marie Eugenie and it would take many pages to cover all its aspects in her correspondence and chapters. She used the word "communion" minimally, which she attributes more to the relationship with God: she prefers to speak of "unity" or "spirit of unity" with regard to human bonds, between Sisters and with the people closest to them. Unity is often linked to charity and humility.

There is no doubt that she places this need for unity and communion at the base of human relations, in particular those with her Sisters, as this letter written at Côte Saint André to Josephine de Commarque, before she became Mother Marie Therese, testifies: "I need, my dear sister, to come and tell you myself the immense consolation I already feel in thinking of you, in having my father⁷ and yours repeat to me all the words, all the details of these short interviews that were enough for you to hold on so generously to him. Destined by Providence to work together, to strive together to glorify the name of our God, and to make His love reign in our hearts forever, we can no longer remain strangers to each other. I dare to call you "sister" and it moves my whole soul; for herein is the early expression of those holy and intimate relationships that the grace of Jesus Christ wants to establish among us, of that family life that must unite us, of that devotion to the same

⁷ This refers to Fr. Combalot.

thoughts, of that fraternity finally, that you are willing to accept in the future."⁸

Working together for the Kingdom, sharing the same vision, belonging to the same family, living fraternity: these are already elements that make it possible to envisage communion in Marie Eugenie's way. They also define the horizon that a work team, an educational community, can set for itself.

The letter also shows that Marie Eugenie can love people before she really knows them and that her love in Christ does not stop at the universe that is familiar to her. This is what she had expressed a year earlier when she spoke of her affection for her loved ones: "Instead of becoming disheartened, my heart has widened, I love you as much, perhaps more, but certainly much better, since it is in Jesus Christ and I love all my unknown brothers with a love that God deigns to increase each day in my heart. Closed within myself, I was selfish at 3 or 4; now the world is not big enough for my love, I would like to spread the waves of it on all tired hearts, and especially to be able to give this light and this love that I enjoy to those who do not know it."⁹

Although this document will focus on very concrete aspects of communion, it is in a very broad context that we must understand Marie Eugenie's vision of communion. According to her, communion takes root in Christ before attaching itself to spontaneous sympathies or blood ties. It stimulates us to enter, because we are part of the Assumption family, into a desire for a broader communion that transcends borders and embraces unknown lands and faces.

I. Drink from the same source to strengthen unity

The first condition of communion for Marie Eugenie is the ability to drink from the same source, to insert her roots in the same soil. An event in the early days of the Congregation allowed her to clearly express her thoughts on this subject. In May 1850, Mother Therese Emmanuel left for England where she was to be the Superior of the Richmond Foundation. This is the first separation between the two

⁸ This refers to Fr. Combalot.

⁹ Marie Eugenie, *Notes Intimes*, May 1837, n°160/01.

Mothers and therefore also the first time we can find a good symmetry between them. Very soon after Mother Therese Emmanuel's arrival in England, some families of the young girls who wished to become Religious of the Assumption insisted that a novitiate be opened on English soil, which would facilitate the arrival of vocations. Eleven years after the foundation, when the Assumption began slowly and saw many obstacles arising from the beginnings, Marie Eugenie resisted: *"I would rather do the Novitiate of the French themselves in England. But since you can receive and keep postulants until the trial is well done, it seems to me that this is enough and that you can simply say yes, that you will receive novices. Only if you asked if they would make profession there, could you promise that. Giving the habit once, if it helps a vocation, is not a matter of concern."*¹⁰ The young Foundress thinks that all the Sisters must be formed "at the source" in order to be able to live their lives in communion of destiny: *"I want all of them to take in the unity of the same center 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 well before the present extension in any place and by any person. That is the general principle."*¹¹

She adds in the same letter: *"We are obliged to see the future more than the present, but there is no future for the Congregation unless we have subjects extremely well formed and filled with the spirit of unity."* Mother Therese Emmanuel shares this conviction of Marie Eugenie, since she in turn writes to her on Christmas Day 1850: *"Do I need to tell you, my dear Mother, that your letter this morning gives me peace of heart. I really needed it! If you only knew how much I need unity with you..."* Communion, which is translated as "the spirit of unity", therefore passes above all else for our first Sisters.

One day, when there was a problem with the relationship between the Superior of Nimes and Father d'Alzon, Marie Eugenie reaffirmed this attachment to unity: *"I would rather enter into his ideas than do even better with less unity, but on the condition that there would*

¹⁰ Marie Eugenie to Mother Therese Emmanuel, June 3, 1850, n°285.

¹¹ Marie Eugenie to Mother Therese Emmanuel, June 3, 1850, n°285.

be nothing outside the closest union at the center of the Congregation."¹² His priority seems to be internal communion and the greatest possible unity.

What ensures unity, which strengthens communion, is the "spirit of the Assumption" that unites us. Thus Marie Eugenie expresses this reflection at the end of the summer holidays of 1891, when the Sisters were going to disperse: *"It is always a great joy to be gathered together during the holidays and it is the consolation we feel at this time when many Sisters who were working for God and fulfilling their mission in the distance have momentarily come closer to us (...) I would like, my Sisters, that this joy of coming close together not only be a joy for us, but also an opportunity to renew ourselves, to be reinvigorated. And how can we reinvigorate ourselves? Well, I believe that it must be above all in the spirit of our Institute, in the spirit of the Assumption (...) I still recommend that you, my Sisters, keep among yourselves this fraternal bond so powerful, this tightening of hearts in unity that makes us, as Sisters, have to love ourselves more than we love others. Soon we will leave each other, some of us will go very far away, but our Lord is a gentle and strong bond to keep us together if we pray to Him."*¹³ These words can be coherent in the context of our work as Assumption Together, in the context of our teams of educators or in the context of the adventure we live with a group of young people, during a school year or in a pastoral group.

This raises questions for us:

- * How do we help those who share our life, our mission to "drink from the same source"?
- * Common formation, exchanges, shared research are as many means as possible that we can take to lay the foundation stone of unity: what importance do we attach to them?
- * What consolidates our communion, our unity?

¹² Marie Eugenie to Mother Marie Gabrielle, March 6, 1865, n°5465.

¹³ Marie Eugenie, *Chapter Instructions of August 13, 1891, "On the Spirit of the Assumption: praise, love, joy"*.

II. Some advice for educators and those who live/work in Community

Whether we think of our relationships in community of life, in community of mission, or in our relationships with the people we accompany, who are entrusted to us in an educational project, communion is built on the same foundations. Here are some of them, knowing that the list could be much longer!

Goodness and kindness

Marie Eugenie often returns to the virtue of kindness. She talks about it more specifically when she looks at the Sisters' relationships with the students: *"Now we must also be good with the children. Believe that patience and a great deal of kindness are always necessary to do them good. They see you as nuns, spouses of our Lord and when they see you as good, charitable, patient, they are edified. You probably have to be firm; they are children. They do not yet have their reason developed, they have fantasies, whims, and so, firmness is necessary with them, but this firmness always has its root in goodness. Let them know that it is useless to insist with you on what you do not want, but let them always be assured of your kindness as of your firmness. Be fair. The children need us to be fair with them (...) It seems that everything is contained there. Well, that's very true. It is necessary to be fair in severity and always act the same with all. Especially no preferences, this is very important."*¹⁴

In the Counsels on Education, a kind of essay she wrote at the request of the Sisters at the beginning of the Congregation, she invites every educator never to stop looking for what is good in the other: *"At the bottom of the worst natures there is always something good. Believe it. let us seek it with perseverance, and if we do not find it, let us attribute it to some idea of our own excellence that blinds us."*¹⁵ There can be no communion without this personal decision to look at the other with kindness and desire to see the best in the other.

¹⁴ Marie Eugenie, *Chapter Instructions of September 6, 1891, "On Goodness"*.

¹⁵ Marie Eugenie, *Counsels on Education, 1842, n°1511*.

A small exercise on watchfulness:

- * Do we know how to express what is "good" in each colleague, each student, each person we accompany, each sister?
- * Let us end the day by noting inwardly the "good" of each one and present them thus to God: "Lord, I thank you for N... who....."

A certain unity in the way of acting

In 1876, as the number of Sisters increased and the General Chapters became important because they helped to put words into the project of this unity, Marie Eugenie said one day: *"One of the advantages of these meetings is to agree so that everywhere we have not only the same rules, but the same way of understanding and applying them. Everything that is done, everything that is said in a General Chapter, tends towards this goal: that each house be established in perfect compliance with the Rule. May we live in one as completely as in the other, in the same spirit, with the same customs, so that all may be in faithful union with the center. This is what makes the strength of a Congregation."*¹⁶

This may seem excessive, this insistence on a common way of acting, and it is understood that in a Congregation now spread over four continents, not everything can be exactly the same from one end of the world to the other. The importance of context, the embodiment of a project on a very concrete land, with a unique history, leads to practices that are diversifying. But a common ground, common values, shared objectives, make it possible to act in communion, in the same direction, whatever the place or the project.

Marie Eugenie also insists on this idea in terms of education, especially when she speaks about the first Community as the first educational team in the history of the Assumption. Thus she writes

¹⁶ Marie Eugenie, *Chapter Instructions of September 3, 1876, "Faithful and Fervent Practice of our Rules"*.

in the "Counsels on Education": "Do you know what is the most important, the most difficult and what will not be given to us either by study or by intelligence, but only by the perfection of the religious spirit? It is a perfect unity in our way with the child. I can see you at first sight accepting this necessity in general terms, but let us come to the detail, is it not true that each of you will have her ideas, her natural dispositions, and that it will be difficult for her to go beyond that? One will remember a severity that hurt her in her childhood, because she was deprived of what encourages her, and if, as she takes care of young children, she is told, as I would say, that there must be a firm authority with them that gets them used to obedience, and who gives their minds strong habits instead of too much indulgence, don't you think she will not rely more on her own and very close experience than on the spirit that would have been chosen for the teaching in the home? Another will believe that obedience can only be obtained in almost harsh ways; another will be inclined to take pity on the disorder of children, their faults and be neglectful on any point other than that of study, she will not find it necessary to demand external discipline with such strictness. However, my daughters, even if they were all correct, which would be difficult, since they would all have a different opinion, it would be better for education to adopt a lesser way than all these, but one that would be uniform in all teachers."¹⁷

We must read and reread this passage to feel how much it challenges us. Indeed, how many times do we not have the temptation to impose our personal ideas or to continue to do as we "feel" it when the group has decided otherwise? Often with good intentions, because our experience seems to us to be the best. Marie Eugenie questions us because she gives more importance to the common way of acting, to the common project, than to personal opinions. This means that **communion is built on a great renunciation of one's own points of view**: "By believing (...) in the practices of the house rather than in one's own ideas, one obtains

¹⁷ Marie Eugenie, *Counsels on Education*, 1842, n°1511.

*this so desirable unity. It is a matter of" joyfully attaching oneself to the spirit of the house in order to leave one's own."*¹⁸

She returned to this in a Chapter Instruction in 1871, when her educational insights had already been put to the test by many years of experience: "I want to recommend to you in particular accuracy, dependence, not so much spiritual as that which consists in asking for permissions, namely to agree with the Sisters who are in charge of the children, either the Mistress of the Dormitory, or the Mistress of Class, or the Mistress of Studies in what she tells you to do, so that there may be unity and harmony in the organization of the boarding school. Thereby, that the Sisters in charge of the lessons confine themselves within the framework traced out for them, that they take the trouble to go all the way and that they not go any further because of a badly understood zeal."¹⁹ Respect for the decisions and options of those who hold coordination functions, acceptance and consideration of everyone's role in the organization and seriousness in the implementation of personal mission are, according to this Chapter, essential stones for building unity.

A small exercise on watchfulness:

- * Do I know how to express the common rules of the group to which I belong?
- * What are the common rules that I have difficulty putting into action? How can I be stimulated?

- **Getting rid of oneself**

What does this mean? **Marie Eugenie often returns to the need of renouncing oneself in order to enter into harmonious relationships with others.** Here is an example of what she strongly affirms: "We can only fill ourselves with the life of Our Lord, we can only manifest it in our mortal existence, according to the expression of Saint Paul,

¹⁸ Marie Eugenie, *Counsels on Education*, 1842, n°1511.

¹⁹ Marie Eugenie, *Chapter Instructions of September 24, 1871*, "Recommendations Regarding Schools".

*if we deprive ourselves of our own life, of our own spirit, that is, of what is properly our self. We often say: "I am so made; I think this; I believe that. "I am me with this character, me with this vivacity, me with these tastes, me with these antipathies; it is this "me" in all its forms that must be rejected and done away with, if we want to have the ways of acting of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Philosophers say that it is quite impossible to make two opposing forms exist together in the same subject. Thus, an artist cannot make a human figure that is both strong and delicate, energetic and inert. The same is true for our soul. As long as our own form remains, the ways of Our Lord cannot transform us. We therefore need continuous and persevering work to deprive ourselves of our way of seeing, thinking, being, wanting, acting, etc. - to clothe ourselves in the way of seeing, thinking, being, wanting and acting that Our Lord has taught us in His Gospel."*²⁰ The quality of our relationship with God and our relationship with others depends on the energy we put into this work to detach ourselves from our "me".

The following week, in a new Chapter, we can find the same idea, applied this time to the mission of education: *"By beginning again this mission of teaching which is part of the goal of our Institute and which resumes with the beginning of the new school year, I do not think I can recommend anything more important than to apply yourself to this unity so well marked in the Rule: that there be a great unity among the teachers, each renouncing her own views, her own ideas in order to try to enter exactly into the ideas of those who are at the head of each class, and to faithfully enforce the rules adopted by the Mistress of Class and by the Mistress of the boarding school in charge of student discipline. **Without this unity no good can be done, and this unity is based on the spirit of humility.**"*²¹

Whether we are lay or Religious, belonging to a group that serves a common project, that of the Assumption, forces us to live out this form of self-denial. No organization escapes the fact that the

²⁰ Marie Eugenie, *Chapter Instruction of October 4, 1874, "Despoil Ourselves of Our Self-love So As to be Clothed with Our Lord Jesus"*.

²¹ Marie Eugenie, *Chapter Instruction of October 11, 1874, "The Spirit of Unity Founded on the Spirit of Humility"*.

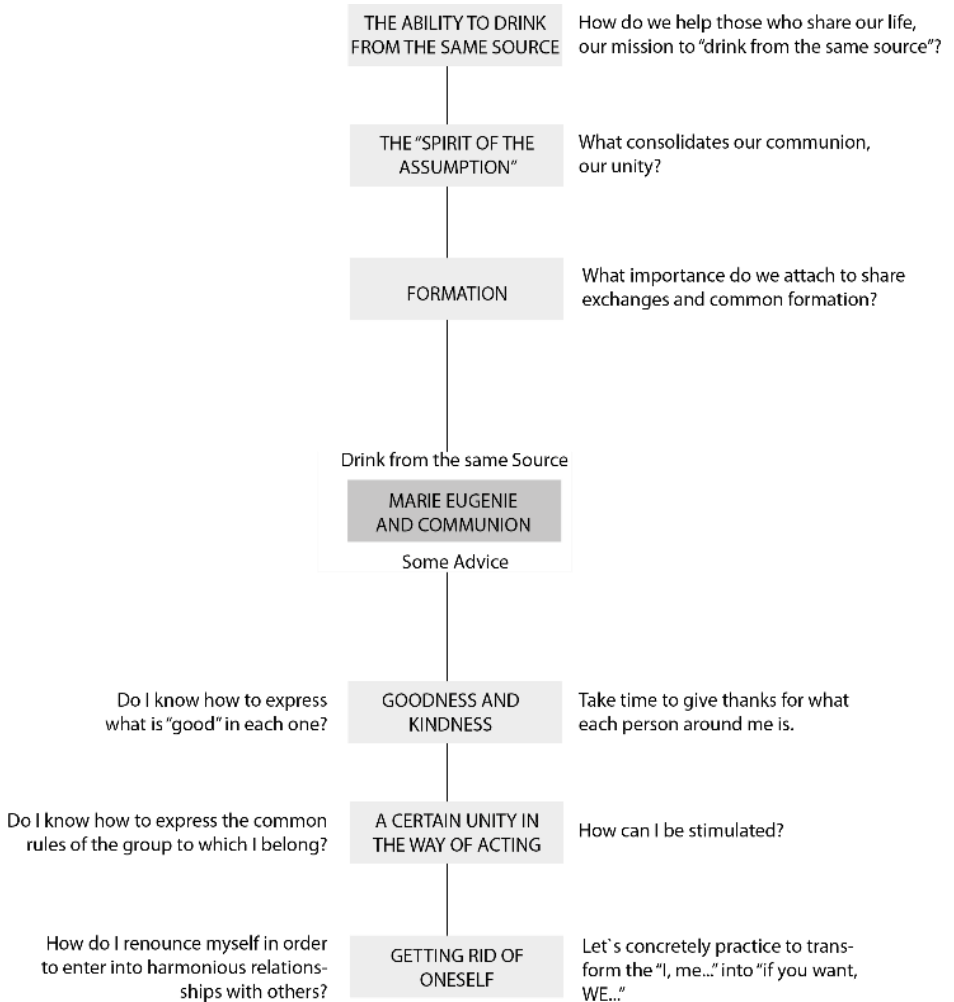
quality of work also depends on the ability of its members to forget themselves so that others can give their full measure.

A small exercise on watchfulness:

* How many times a day do we say "me, I..." to defend ourselves or impose ourselves on others?

* Let's practice concretely to transform the "I, me..." into "if you want, we..."

III. Summary diagram



01/02

Marie Eugenie and Communion (II)

Sister Veronique Thiébaud
Archivist of the Congregation

Original French

I. Minor troubles

On the road to communion, there are sometimes moments when there are many obstacles, "crises" that seem insurmountable. Marie Eugenie has often experienced them. One of the first was the departure of Father Combalot, two years after the foundation. It is to the story of this crisis that we are going to look into now, seeking to draw some lessons for the crises we ourselves could go through, in our teams, in our relationships or in our projects... How can we keep on the course of communion while the crisis is raging?

Father Combalot had the intuition of the foundation of the Congregation. He had called Marie Eugenie, but also Marie Augustine, Therese Emmanuel and Marie Therese. He had accompanied the journey and the formation of the young Foundress. A deep affection united them, rooted in God to the point that Father Combalot, radical as usual, wrote to Anne Eugenie on February 25, 1839: "*You and I love each other only in and for God... So you are my dear treasure, my angel, my daughter, my only blessing.*" This acknowledged affection allowed Marie Eugenie to accept her director with his inconstancies: "...I see today that I love you, as much when you are strict as when you are

indulgent (...) your tenderness is written on each page of your letter, but sometimes in rather severe terms."²²

During the first two years, from March 1839 to March 1841, Father Combalot, who wrote the Introduction to the Constitutions, remained the sole "Father" of the Assumption, developing a beautiful analysis of Christian education and the vocation of women. In spite of everything, the Sisters had to bend to the impetuous character of the priest. When they had to study, they studied. When they had to close their books for days on end, they applied themselves to asceticism. When it was necessary to eat, they ate and fasted as soon as he asked for it. Marie Eugenie, for her part, according to the Sisters, refrained from any opposition, seeing only the good of the Congregation to be founded. This instability, however, assailed the confidence of the young woman: *"I think I have told you, it is confidence that I lack; often I no longer dare, either because I fear you, because I fear myself or because I fear the future."* When the first jolts announcing the crisis arrived, Marie Eugenie's first attitude was to open her heart, with a certain frankness, recognizing the specific role of the one she was suffering from and opting resolutely for trust: *"Give me back this trust, my dearest Father, always give it back to me by being truly my Father, to the full extent of the word...."*²³ She places the foundation of her relationship with Father Combalot in Christ: *"The bonds that bind me to Jesus Christ also bind me to you..."* Little by little, however, the young woman feels that the priority should no longer be her personal attachment, or even her safety, but the good of the work she is bringing to fulfilment. She is wholeheartedly encouraged by Father d'Alzon, a friend of Father Combalot, to choose the good of the work as her priority: *"No, you must not leave the success of your work to Father Combalot. You tell me that those around you rely more on you than on him (...) Stand firm on the points of Rule, that is your right, and for the rest, go in a spirit of faith, let it be done. I feel that this requires great courage and that such a difficult*

²² Marie Eugenie to Father Combalot, August 18, 1837, n°4.

²³ Marie Eugenie to Father Combalot, April 7, 1840, n°118.

*position cannot be sustained for long; but today we can only wait: it is up to Providence to loosen your bonds."*²⁴

In February 1841, Combalot gave the professed Sisters of the small Community the opportunity to "speak up in the Chapter", that is, to take part in a Community decision. At the same time the Sisters reaffirmed their desire to remain in good understanding with Father Combalot whom they recognized as their Superior. A few days later, Father Combalot left for Nantes; the letters sent by Marie Eugenie show a very concrete affection: *"Isn't it too much what you're doing for Lent?... You are not getting younger, and consequently, there is always more boldness in wanting to make such a severe use of your strength... Do not tire yourself beyond measure, and the eagerness, which one cannot fail to have for your word, does not make you ill."*²⁵ Thus, the resistances that she may feel elsewhere does not divert her from her upright and positive affection for the one who called her to found the Assumption. Marie Eugenie was then elected Superior of the Community, a fact which Father Combalot was delighted about.²⁶

Staying on course for communion:

- Name your feelings with sincerity
- Make the good of the work a priority
- Discern what is essential
- Cultivate faith, courage and trust in God in unison

II. Differences in points of view

All this is happening in a Parisian context that is not very favorable to the Community. The clergy of Paris were wary of Father Combalot and his originality; and there was concern about the age of the Sisters and their lifestyle. Marie Eugenie needed reassurance. In a very beautiful letter, she affirms that her priority

²⁴ Emmanuel d'Alzon to Marie Eugenie in December 1840.

²⁵ Marie Eugenie to Father Combalot, March 2, 1841, n°127.

²⁶ Cf. Father Combalot to Marie Eugenie, March 6, 1841.

now is the interest of the work: *"...It is true that it would be a very great consolation for me to count on your devotion and your affection, I am not saying for myself, I am not worth it, but for the work of Our Lady (...) God alone, my dearest Father, can deserve these devotions without limits, without self-interest, without discouragement, on which a new work needs to rely. My greatest fear, what troubles me so much, is to fear that this foundation is missing; all that can console my soul, therefore, is to know that on this point your feelings are similar to mine. I know that you are by conviction and by state devoted to God. I strongly desire that, as you tell me, you are ready to do everything for this work, and to show yourself always His friend and not only mine, which is too little. I confess to you that the strongest feelings of my gratitude and tenderness are and will now be for the souls who will unite themselves most closely to me in the accomplishment of this foundation; they will be those who will do the most for the work of Our Lady that I will love the most...."*²⁷ The reservations of the clergy towards the Community is strong because it is thought that Father Combalot builds his Community with too much independence; Marie Eugenie begs Father Combalot to be attentive to his conduct: *"The greatest attack they make on us is to say to us and to you, that we are very independent in relation to the authority of the Archbishop... Please, my dear Father, avoid everything that would corroborate this rumor, the most annoying of all for a Community, since our first obedience must be to the Bishop."*²⁸ What guides her, decidedly, is the good of the work and her attachment to the Church.

So when Father Combalot wanted to bypass the authority of the Archbishop of Paris and obtain permission directly from Rome, Marie Eugenie continued to worry. For him, it was a question of putting down roots in the work. *"In the sacred trunk of the Church"*, from which she *"would draw abundant sap"*²⁹, which could make it easier for vocations to present themselves. This project worries Marie Eugenie who sees in it a lack of respect for the role of the

²⁷ Marie Eugenie to Father Combalot, March 18, 1841, n°129.

²⁸ Marie Eugenie to Father Combalot, March 28, 1841, n°130.

²⁹ Father Combalot to Marie Eugenie, April 2, 1841.

Archbishop of Paris; she thinks that it will prevent the development of the work and opens up to Father Combalot³⁰, prudently asking him to tell the Archbishop that she does not approve of this approach. At the same time, she does not let any misunderstanding arise: *"You are wrong, my dearest Father, to believe that I said that you had done nothing for the work. Read my letter again..."* She adds, however, that nothing has weakened her love for him. For her, truth and difference of opinion are not an obstacle to communion. Feeling that the differences are growing, the young nun is nonetheless worried about the future of her relationship with Father Combalot: *"... Everything worries me, and to complete my frankness, what worries me above all are my relations with you...I fear that being charged by my position to express to you the desires of my Sisters, the opposition to which I have been the object for you, will lead you to continuously be in conflict with them...I say the desires of my Sisters, for I take you yourself as a witness of the perfect indifference in which I personally am accustomed to throughout my life."*³¹ It seems that Marie Eugenie gave herself the rule of personal indifference in order to better listen to the desires of the Community. In order to keep her confidence, she relies on the bond already established with Father Combalot, on the qualities that she recognizes in him and that she expresses to him: *"I tell myself that you will come back calmer than you left, I repeat myself according to the assurances of affection you give me, according to your good heart, your uprightness, your qualities, your virtues, I dare to say even, according to what I have*

³⁰ Cf. Marie Eugenie to Father Combalot, April 2, 1841, n°133.

³¹ Marie Eugenie to Father Combalot, April 5, 1841, n°134.

done for you, that it is not possible for you to be as bad for me in the future as you have been good in the past. ...”

Staying on the course of communion:

- Honest speech that avoids misunderstandings
- Wise caution that respects the stages
- Respect for each other's roles and link with the Church
- Personal indifference and listening to the desires of the Community
- Building on the positive memory of the past and recognizing the qualities of others

III. Necessary rupture

Criticism of the Community had led Marie Eugenie to meet Monsignor Affre, Archbishop of Paris, during the absence of Father Combalot. Together they considered the need to appoint a new Ecclesiastical Superior. This was to be announced to Father Combalot on his return on April 11. The Archbishop took care of it and heard the priest respond to him: *“As long as I live, my daughters will have no other Superior than me.”* Father Combalot then sought by all means to remove the Community from Parisian authority, trying to convince the Sisters to go with him to Brittany. But in the name of reason and the desire to protect the work, a strong Community cohesion was expressed against this project. Mother Therese Emmanuel became their spokesperson. Father Combalot found it difficult to accept this resistance and thinks that Marie Eugenie participated in the decision: *“All possible reasons and considerations will never, my dear Sister, prevent what is done from being done. You and your Sisters wanted a Superior for your work. And it is not me. The Archbishop imposed it on you, but it was you who urged him to give you one.”*³² This makes him bitter; he promises the Community a difficult future. However, he does a rather touching task of distancing himself: *“...I could not but feel extreme pain, and when this feeling gave way to thoughts that necessarily had to follow it. I saw in it an open disposition of Providence which*

³² Father Combalot to Marie Eugenie, April 26, 1841.

I blessed and to which I tried to submit with Christian resignation." After the sorrow, reflection, one might say, to accept the situation... In his letters, one can find an alternation of distance and resistance, signs of a struggle that is commensurate with the personal commitment he had put into the foundation of the Assumption. On May 3, 1841, he attempted a final approach, bringing the Sisters together and trying to convince them to take immediately the decision to leave for Brittany, preferably without Marie Eugenie, who, according to him, could not ensure the cohesion of the group. Once again, it was in Community that the Sisters reacted, after a unanimous vote in which they affirmed their decision to stay in Paris, with their young Superior. When personal relationship is no longer sufficient to preserve communion, the Community helps to cope with the rupture. The decision is announced to Father Combalot who leaves the house without delay. The Sisters will try to go to see him the next day but he refuses to receive them. This does not prevent him from expressing his wishes for the community: *"May God give you as many blessings as I am bitter, may he himself be your protector, your support, your comforter! Pass on this morning's letter to the Archbishop. Ask him for a Father for your souls. Give to the one he has chosen, in his wisdom, your trust..."*³³

To Monsignor Affre, just before leaving Paris for Rome, Father Combalot will send a letter of recommendation. *"I have just asked you to appoint a Superior for the small Community whose members I have prepared, and to leave you, Monsignor, and to the man you trust, all the freedom necessary to continue, consolidate and strengthen this nascent work. I place in your hands all the authority that my status as Father and Founder gives me over them (...) The thought that presided over its creation seems to me to be useful and opportune; but my direct cooperation would henceforth raise too many obstacles for it to develop (...) Placed under your immediate authority, and in the shadow of your solicitude, they will no longer have any storm to fear; and I, in recognizing what I lack*

³³ Father Combalot to Marie Eugenie, May 3, 1841.

in qualities and virtues to complete the edifice, will bless God with its growth."³⁴

In spite of an interior struggle that will continue, Father Combalot here gives a sign of communion that goes beyond human feelings. Bitterness does not prevent him from handing over the work, encouraging his future and acknowledging his own shortcomings.

For Marie Eugenie, the rupture is a terrible ordeal: *"I don't dare to admit to myself the state I'm in after all that has happened. My soul is so sad that I need both encouragement for the work and for myself, but it is necessary to do without it. God's will be done. I would like to have some hope to see M. Combalot leave the path of absolute separation in which he is... Since yesterday I have been searching in my mind how I could have avoided this separation... All that consoles me is the gentleness and moderation that had remained with me all along the last scenes. I had tried so hard to keep myself during the storm, interiorly and exteriorly united to the dispositions of Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament..."*³⁵ She reveals to us here what was her line of conduct at the height of the crisis: to maintain gentleness and moderation, not to respond to the provocations of Father Combalot, to stand by the Lord... In a letter to Father de Salinis, she wrote: *"...The big question in such cases, it seems to me, is not who was right or wrong, but rather to cover up the wrongs as much as possible and remedy the disadvantages. It was enough for me that the Archbishop had expressed to me the desire to appoint a more stable Superior, and that my Sisters had all declared to me that they did not feel the courage to make a vow of obedience in the hands of our Father, and that there were no sufferings or material difficulties which they did not prefer to his superiority. It was then necessary to act as frankly as possible..."*³⁶ Once again the young Superior shares important elements: not to look for who is right or wrong, to cover the wrongs and remedy the inconveniences, to rely on the Community decision... She adds that she has always acted towards M. Combalot "with dedication and

³⁴ Father Combalot to Monsignor Affre, May 1841.

³⁵ Marie Eugenie, *Notes Intimes*, May 1841, n°172/01.

³⁶ Marie Eugenie to Abbé de Salinis, May 16, 1841.

care not to compromise him, which he has often recognized" and that she would like this decision to have another Superior not to damage the bonds of affection which bind the Sisters to their "Founder", acknowledging to him without ambiguity the intuition of the beginnings. ... *"If he is incapable of this kind of guardianship, is what we do any less his work, his thought, the thing he desired most for the greater glory of God?"*

For a few months, Marie Eugenie will work to recreate a relationship that Father Combalot refuses. She explains herself as follows: *"Nor should you be surprised that we have continued to write to you and to bring your memory before God (...) we only remain convinced, as I still am, that on reflection, when you are alone in your soul with God, you will be well pleased that we have continued to do what you have wished to see accomplished for the glory of God..."* In October, Father Combalot reclaimed the books he had left in the library in the Rue de Vaugirard. Marie Eugenie once again expressed to him her friendship and the part she was taking in his sorrow. However, the estrangement was definitive. It was the sister of Father Combalot, whom Marie Eugenie was to take care of in the 1850s, who gave news of her brother, then announced her mother's illness... He resumed contact with Therese Emmanuel from time to time, in 1849, in order to speak to her about a project for... a foundation! Another year, Marie Eugenie feared that he would get closer to the Community of Nimes. Throughout the years, her correspondence reveals that she always kept him in her memory: she asked Father d'Alzon from time to time if he had any news from him and did not hesitate to communicate those she received. She does so in one or two sentences, without comments...

Staying on course for communion:

- Don't look for who's right or wrong
- Do not give in to the temptation to speak ill of the other.
- Going beyond human feelings
- Trusting in community discernment
- Work to avoid breaking up the relationship permanently.

There would be many other moments of crisis to go through in order to understand what allows Marie Eugenie to keep the course of communion in such situations, but we can already draw a good number of leads from this first experience: watch how we speak to others and about others, never forgetting to keep their qualities in our hearts; speak with rectitude and in truth, naming our feelings; seek the common good more than our own tranquility or security, aiming for the essential; be prudent and not skip steps; recognize each one in her mission and responsibilities; listen to the Community and the team and trust in Community discernment; rely on God, in faith; do all that is in our power before giving up the relationship...

IV. Summary diagram

Some questions to help you stay on course for communion in times of crisis

In the case of minor troubles.

- Can I sincerely name my feelings?
- Is the good of the work my priority?
- How do I discern what is essential?
- How do I cultivate faith, courage and trust in God?

When the points of view are different.

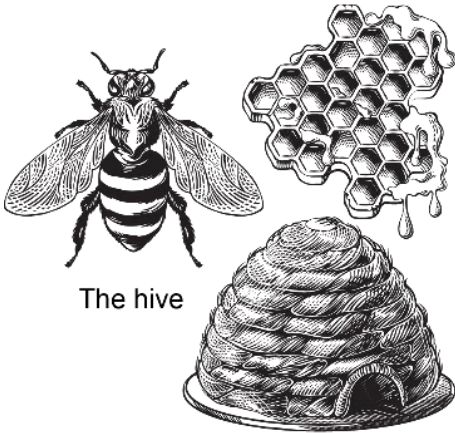
- How do I remember the past?
- How do I make myself indifferent and listen to the desires of the group, of the community?
- How do I value the qualities of others?
- How do I take into account the role of each one and the link with the Church?
- Do I know how to be prudent and follow the steps?
- How do I clarify my thoughts to avoid misunderstandings?

When rupture is unavoidable...

- Am I looking for who's right and who's wrong?
- How do I resist the temptation to speak negatively of the other?
- How do I practice not focusing only on human feelings?
- How do I trust in community discernment in making my decision?
- What do I do so that I don't break up relationships forever?

Some images of communion according to Saint Marie Eugenie

What are the images that represent communion for you?



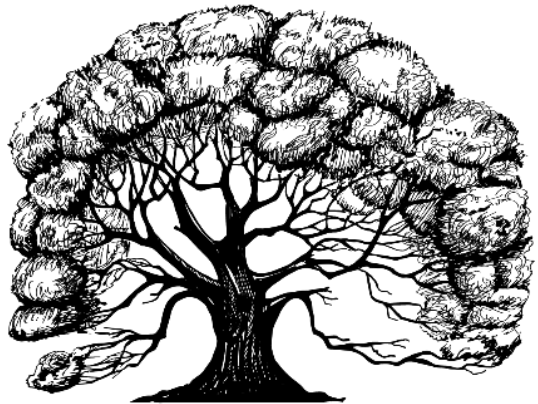
The hive



The body and its members



The garden



The tree and its branches

V. Conclusion

Marie Eugenie's work towards communion is therefore a realistic work, which takes into account the diversity of situations and persons and a personal transformation through a return to Christ, the Source of all communion. To evoke communion within the Community, Marie Eugenie uses **several images**, such as that of the beehive³⁷ or the garden. **In the hive**, all the bees work in a harmonious movement. **In the garden**, "each flower differs from another flower in fragrance and beauty"³⁸, as in the sky "each star differs from another star in splendor and clarity". Thus, in a certain diversity, which leaves to each one the character of her grace, we are invited to live what Saint Paul suggests in developing the **image of the body**: "He [Christ] is the head, and we are the members. We must help one another, love one another as members of the same body (...) All the members help one another, care for one another, support one another, live in the most perfect unity."³⁹ As members of a body, we are also "branches of a tree" whose trunk is Christ. The first attention of the branches is to draw from the same sap: "In our work, in all that we do, let us be that branch that grows out of the root that is our Lord Jesus Christ, let us receive from Him the sap, the influence and the action. Is faith enough for that? No, it takes love."⁴⁰ In doing so, Christ Himself guarantees the cohesion of action and the communion of hearts. This is true within the Assumption Community, understood for us in the broadest sense, but it is also true in the Church, in the world, when other branches, even more different from ours, take their place on the common trunk. Let us conclude with these words, which are a beautiful lesson in communion that Marie Eugenie gives to Father d'Alzon: "Jesus Christ is the principle, the trunk of all; the more you love Him, the

³⁷ Marie Eugenie to Marie Therese, January 11, 1839, n°1178: "May He Himself tell us the spirit that He wants us to have. May He one day make of our little hive a house of peace, charity and fervor!".

³⁸ Marie Eugenie, *Chapter Instructions of June 10, 1877*, "Noble examples left by Mother Marie Claire".

³⁹ Marie Eugenie, *Chapter Instructions of August 20, 1886*, "Before all else God must be loved and then the neighbor".

⁴⁰ Marie Eugenie, *Chapter Instructions of November 15, 1891*, "Dedication of a Church".

more you will love the other branches in Him: you will see and adore the different degrees, the different expansions of His grace and His life in the priest, in the poor, in the Religious men and women of all types, but beware of wanting to take part in them other than in the general communion of the faithful, for the sap that nourishes one would weaken the sap that must nourish the other. The trunk alone can carry all the branches: it is too general a claim today to want to be a trunk or at least to make oneself universal. Be a branch, if you want to be something, and even believe that you will never be better disposed to charity towards all, than by being humbly in your place what you must be in Jesus Christ."⁴¹

⁴¹ Marie Eugenie to Father d'Alzon, undated letter of 1844, n°1630.

01/03

Discernment in the manner of Marie Eugenie

Sister Veronique Thiébaud
Archivist of the Congregation

Original French

How do we make choices? What direction shall we take? We are like the musician who must constantly adjust the sound of his instrument to the correct note. In our educational mission, we are called to make choices and to help other people, young or adults, to make personal choices as well. This exercise of freedom, which leads everyone to prepare himself to choose, to feel what dwells in his 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 was the case between 1837 and 1839, when she had to discern her vocation⁴². 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 directed towards fulfilling God's plan, each according to her mission, and thus contributing to a

⁴² Cf. Sister Veronique Thiebaut, in 'Transformative Education in the Assumption', Document of the International Education Gathering, 2018, "*The Vocation Journey of Marie Eugenie*", pp.44-63.

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."*⁴³ 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."*⁴⁴ This search for love is for her the only valid horizon: *"Loving must be the work of your life, your effort and the reason for all your actions. Turn your thoughts towards that, and see if you are still acting out of love... See if you take advantage of everything to increase God's love in you."*⁴⁵

Moreover, for Marie Eugenie, the reflection, the path that leads to the decision is meaningful only 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 ardor 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."*⁴⁶ 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?

I. Some "habitual customs" of the heart to cultivate

- **Do not lose sight of the horizon of our lives**

⁴³ Marie Eugenie, *Chapter Instruction*, October 9, 1870.

⁴⁴ Marie Eugenie, *Chapter Instruction*, February 9, 1873.

⁴⁵ Marie Eugenie, *Chapter Instructions*, February 9, 1873.

⁴⁶ Marie Eugenie, *Chapter Instructions*, December 10, 1871.

In a text that is usually called Mary Eugenie's "creed", the latter declares: *"My gaze is fixed on Jesus Christ and on the extension of His Kingdom."* Mother Therese Emmanuel uses the image of the compass in her Instructions to Novices: *"The helmsman of 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.

- **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..."*⁴⁷ 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 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."*⁴⁸ 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 resistances 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 within, to put words on their feelings, to note in their memory the strong points and the fragile points that they gradually discover in themselves.

- **Get into the habit of naming your motivations for action**

⁴⁷ Marie Eugenie, *Chapter Instructions*, August 29, 1880.

⁴⁸ Marie Eugenie, *Chapter Instructions*, October 12, 1873.

Saint Marie Eugenie once told the Community that "fear, desire, joy or pain"⁴⁹ are at the root of the motivations that drive us to act. This can help us set up 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 paths then present themselves to us: we must look at them with honesty in order to choose one.

Moreover, Marie Eugenie 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 fulfil 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 herself a cook, will also have the possibility in her life to take care of others, to help them to have a better life... and her deep desire to "take care" can be realized in another way.

- **Cultivate indifference**

This last example shows that God does not allow Himself to be locked up by circumstances. He will, in any case, fulfill His project of love and life for us. 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 lives take. Marie Eugenie 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 fervor.*"⁵⁰

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. This tenet is certainly not easy. To have no choice between health and illness, suffering and consolation, jobs of one kind or another; to be indifferent to places, people, things, honor or dishonor. Saint Ignatius wants us to*

⁴⁹ cf. Marie Eugenie, *Chapter Instructions*, February 23, 1845.

⁵⁰ Marie Eugenie, *Chapter Instructions*, November 11, 1888.

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."⁵¹ 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.*"⁵²

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 out this "indifference"?

II. Some elements of the method

• Contemplate Christ to act like him

"What is more difficult, says Marie Eugenie, is to adjust all our actions, all our desires, all our feelings, all our affections to the good pleasure of God."⁵³

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.⁵⁴ Gospel contemplation is therefore one of the stages in the process of discernment.

• Use our intelligence, our five senses and name our feelings

"Our soul or our intelligence does not rise to these summits of knowledge except when supported and carried, so to speak, by its senses and the **sensitive** impressions that come to it from outside.

⁵¹ Idem.

⁵² Marie Eugenie, *Chapter Instructions*, October 12, 1873.

⁵³ Cf. Marie Eugenie, *Chapter Instructions*, June 27, 1875.

⁵⁴ Marie Eugenie, *Chapter Instructions*, February 23, 1845.

Faith itself enters a person only through the sense of hearing."⁵⁵ Marie Eugenie emphasizes this 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.

- **Ask for advice - Do not discern alone**

When Marie Eugenie evokes, in her Counsels 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 receive..."⁵⁶ 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 Council about all matters of any gravity. There are some things she decides about after talking to the Councilors, and others on which she has them vote."⁵⁷ 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.⁵⁸

Beyond the Community, students can also be trained to engage in Community discernment and to bring their "vote" to a decision. This was the case when the number of students began to become significant. A **charitable association** was then founded where students could get involved. Thus, in 1847, Marie Eugenie wrote to Father d'Alzon: "...We have formed a **charitable association**, about which I also see the Councilors. Perhaps this association could be

⁵⁵ Marie Eugenie, *Chapter Instructions*, January 30, 1876.

⁵⁶ Marie Eugenie, *Counsels on Education*.

⁵⁷ Marie Eugenie, *Chapter Instructions*, August 24, 1879.

⁵⁸ Cf. Inspirational Text CG 2018: "One event in the early days of the foundation embodies this experience with much force, a turning point, an "all or nothing" moment... On that day, the 3rd of May 1841, Abbé Combalot, the Father and first bearer of the founding intuition, abandoned the little community on rue de Vaugirard...) In those uncertain hours, the discernment was made by all the Sisters together, thanks to the initiative of Mother Therese Emmanuel. The decision not to leave Paris, provoking the rupture, was a community decision. We recognize here a constant in the search for the initial thought on the project of the nascent Assumption, this thought that Marie Eugenie will express to Father d'Alzon and to Abbé Gros as "our thought", sought out, experienced, discerned in Community."

adopted by you (...) First of all, the students all gave their votes 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 who laboriously work for the poor. Any child who was rejected no longer gave her vote and I can assure you that they were severe. After that they elected their councilors and treasurer."⁵⁹

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.

• **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 Eugenie wrote to Father Combalot regarding books he had forbidden her to read: "[My thoughts] are only enlightened and completed by contact with opposing ways of seeing; my mind falls asleep by being with people of the same opinion..."⁶⁰

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 Eugenie writes about our educational works at the very beginning of the Counsels 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, 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

⁵⁹ Marie Eugenie, *Letter to Father d'Alzon*, February 1, 1847, n°1813.

⁶⁰ Marie Eugenie, *Letter to Father Combalot*, December 30, 1837, n°15.

they should probably not be blindly believed, since everyone here below observes according to their manner, but which must nevertheless be taken into account."⁶¹

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

With regard to Community, Marie Eugenie 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"⁶², but who do not participate in the construction of an evangelical world. She questions our hidden 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 to 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."⁶³

- **Taking the time... to follow God's rhythm**

Discernment requires time... and we must accept not to be the master of this time. Thus, Marie Eugenie considers that in order to "work to advance in love", "we must not go faster than God wishes and want more light than He gives us. God will let us know every day what He wants us to take away."⁶⁴ 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.

- **Deep reflection, peace and silence**

Time and again Marie Eugenie praises silence... Considering that the great challenge of her life - and therefore of her choices at

⁶¹ Marie Eugenie, *Counsels on Education*.

⁶² Marie Eugenie, *Chapter Instructions*, June 13, 1884.

⁶³ Marie Eugenie, *Chapter Instructions*, December 17, 1870.

⁶⁴ Marie Eugenie, *Chapter Instructions*, December 3, 1871.

every moment - is to work to resemble Christ, she compares herself to a painter who must observe his 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 canvas that would always stir, full of life, activity, memories, events. Remove, simplify, soothe, keep silence, so that God may come and give you what only is desirable, what only is lasting..."⁶⁵

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 of 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 care for Catholic orphans, reduced to taking refuge in work-houses (...) They were to be trained to become teachers or nursery governesses, 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."⁶⁶ 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 bound it to themselves. The correspondence between Marie Eugenie and Therese Emmanuel is very extensive and includes the

⁶⁵ Marie Eugenie, *Chapter Instructions*, August 12, 1877.

⁶⁶ *Origins III, Chapter 7.*

constant progress in discernment, with some interesting characteristics.

- **Priority given 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 Therese Emmanuel: "One thing worries me in all your letters, it is the cost-saving measure of your Duchess and her concern to make you live so inexpensively, to plant trees and not eat the fruits. I haven't read these details here, we would have disliked her. We are very concerned about your health, and we are so worried that you may be too tired and that you may be lacking something."⁶⁷

- **Principle of prudence**

The same Duchess of Leeds would have already wanted, 15 days after the arrival of the Sisters, to accept boys in the school in addition to the orphans. Marie Eugenie opposes as a principle of prudence: "As for the little boys that the Duchess of Leeds proposes to take, I don't think so, 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."⁶⁸

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

Very quickly, the question arises of a completely free school. Marie Eugenie 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 pens to the Brothers', and she paid almost six cents a week for each; today they are at the mutual school (école mutuelle), 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

⁶⁷ Marie Eugenie, *Letter to Therese Emmanuel*, May 24, 1850, n°183.

⁶⁸ Marie Eugenie, *Letter to Therese Emmanuel*, June 3, 1850, n°285.

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."⁶⁹

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 for 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 prefer the first way. But be careful to always say: we give that amount of money per week for supplies."⁷⁰

Later, when the Duchess of Leeds pushed 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 regarding projects and conversations in the boarding school; I only wish that the time to open the school 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 fragility 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 Yorkshire and near Richmond because of the foundation, the families native to the area, and because Providence seems to have led us there, I would at least

⁶⁹ Marie Eugenie, *Letter to Therese Emmanuel*, June 13, 1850, n°287.

⁷⁰ *Idem*.

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 it possible for your property to be expanded on reasonable terms?"⁷¹

• 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: "Just believe me. Try little by little to return to your Bishop on a footing of respect so distant that he does not have the opportunity to interfere in your arrangements, nor to give you many advices that would mean 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 admission of your children, there is nothing really important than to remain free to do, with time, the best you can."⁷²

• 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 Eugenie recalled: "*Look at the general good of your house and establish a very good spirit rather than spare some individual interests or characters and keep this or that child. It is charity with a greater scope...*"⁷³

• 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 be formed 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

⁷¹ Marie Eugenie, *Letter to Therese Emmanuel*, November 4, 1850, n°309.

⁷² Marie Eugenie, *Letter to Therese Emmanuel*, July 3, 1850, n°289.

⁷³ Marie Eugenie, *Letter to Therese Emmanuel*, July 11, 1850, n°291.

girls are considering leaving their country with difficulty. Marie Eugenie resists and reminds us of the priority: *"I want all of them to draw the unity from the same center, 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."*⁷⁴

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... Fr. d'Alzon to whom I communicated your letter in its entirety, put only this reservation... etc."*⁷⁵

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 formed."*⁷⁶

In conclusion, it can be said that Marie Eugenie'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 have no rest if I did not know how much God wants us to rely on Him."*⁷⁷

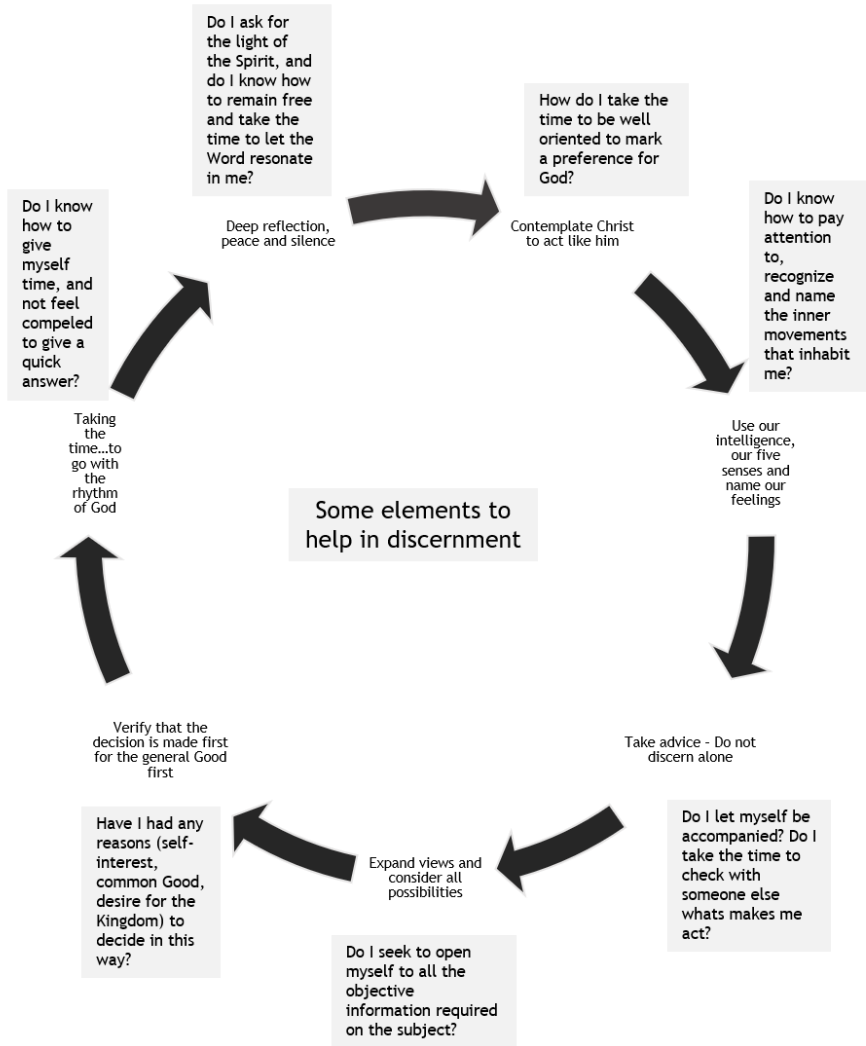
⁷⁴ Marie Eugenie, *Letter to Therese Emmanuel*, November 18, 1850, n°312.

⁷⁵ Marie Eugenie, *Letter to Therese Emmanuel*, June 24, 1850, n°288.

⁷⁶ Idem.

⁷⁷ Idem.

Some “habits” of the heart to cultivate: orientation of one’s gaze; self-knowledge; motivation; indifference.



01/04

Going to the peripheries: take the road with Marie Eugenie

Sister Veronique Thiébaud
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Original French

The social, economic, political and religious situation and the international relations of a region, a country or a continent are the space where the peripheries take shape, where walls - visible or invisible - are erected, where borders - geographical, social and moral - are revealed. In the context of the 19th century, France, like many other countries of Europe, was undergoing change. What can we call "peripheries"? The working class, exploited, living in conditions of promiscuity and unhealthy conditions that affect the dignity of people, especially children and women. But beyond this specific class, all the "poor". Women too - from all social classes - were on the periphery: still deprived of rights, often exploited, excluded from education, politics, etc., and often excluded from the world of work. Through them, the families whose human and moral values were being eroded, were being torn apart. Finally, what was "unknown", "different" could represent a frontier opening the field to the experience of the periphery: the distant mission lands, the difference of ideas in the Church, the divisions due to war... The poor beginnings of the Assumption Congregation, the choice of a "practical poverty" that "preserves the ideas of the world" and of "sluggishness"⁷⁸, the repeated incomprehension of the men of the Church in the face of the aims of the emerging work (the Assumption) and the feeling of being few in number faced

⁷⁸ Marie Eugenie, *Letter to Abbé Gros*, n°1504.

with an immense task, undoubtedly shaped in the hearts of the Sisters the capacity/desire to be close to the poor and those who were on the margins of society. We will attempt to analyze, as exhaustively as possible, some concrete features of this movement towards the periphery experienced since the time of the foundation.

I. In the beginning, an explicit project towards the peripheries

One may wonder if the "peripheries", as we define them today, were present in the Assumption's initial project. In the "Introduction to the Constitutions", a text written by Father Combalot at the request of Marie Eugenie, there is 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 time." This is what Father Combalot wrote: "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 classes for the children of those whom the world despises and of whom you will make yourselves humble servants. Daughters of faith and grace, you will desire as a favor to teach the poor girls of a village to pray, read, and work, and you will make the children of wealthy families understand that the riches of faith and the blessings of eternal glory are the heritage of the poor and the dowry of the needy." The possibility of being able to work for the education of the poor appears here as a blessing. From the outset, it is linked to the opening up of the mentality of the wealthy classes, put into perspective with a work of awareness and encounter with different milieu. Father Combalot then mentions the fact that the first Sisters understood that they could "do good to the rich only by expanding [their] hearts in the love of the poor" and that they should rejoice in "becoming the servants of the poor, so that in the education of the rich they seek only a powerful means of forming friends and mothers for them". He insists: "What indeed is more opposed to the spirit of our times than love of the poor and poverty?"

The poor, therefore, are one of the peripheries to which the Religious of the Assumption have wanted to turn to from the time of their foundation. We can see in the desire to take care of the formation of women, whose education is neglected by the families, another movement towards the peripheries, especially since Father Combalot describes with precision the superficial milieu in which they revolve. Responding to this educational emergency is a way of "descending" into the world as other Congregations do: "We still see today the great contemplative orders themselves, descending from the high mountains of the mystical life to come to the aid of their brothers".

The various drafts of the Constitutions will take up this initial call of Father Combalot. If the Constitutions of 1840 include the mention of the visit to the poor, to which we will return in the rest of the article, the Statutes of 1854 (which allowed the recognition of the Institute by Rome) include "the education of the poor" among the means to make Christ known and loved. The same text specifies that "the Religious of the Assumption can also be sent to the Missions for the same purpose". We find this idea in the Constitutions of 1866 with the mention, among others, of works such as "boarding schools, orphanages, schools (...), meetings and instruction of girls and women, etc." The same text specifies that "the Religious of the Assumption can also be sent to the Missions for the same purpose",⁷⁹ works that can be lived out "in the Missions". In 1888, in the Constitutions which were to receive the definitive approval from Rome, the same expression was found with an addition: "They may also embrace works of charity compatible with their occupations and their semi-enclosure, and go, with the consent of the Sacred Congregation of the Propaganda, to the missions, keeping the same statutes."⁸⁰

⁷⁹ R.A., 1866 *Constitutions*.

⁸⁰ R.A., 1888 *Constitutions*.

- What about the education projects we write, the objectives we formulate in all our educational works?
- Do we have the concern to make this attention to the peripheries of our time appear explicitly?
- And if we were to name these peripheries or give them a face, what would they look like?

II. How does this project take shape in practice?

a) Visits to the poor

Father Combalot already spoke of visits to the poor in his Introduction, underlining their twofold aim: 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 arousing your young pupils to go against the sensitivity and pleasure seeking of an overly sensual nature."⁸¹ The Constitutions of 1840 stipulated that the truly Christian character of the teaching given at the Assumption is at stake. It is a question, in a certain way, of "nourishing the heart" and awakening the consciences of the young students: "The education of girls must prepare them for this holy mission through an early, but serious and real learning of the works of mercy practiced with regard to their brothers, according to the measure that is appropriate for their age (...) It is necessary, therefore, that the Religious of the Assumption be able to visit the poor and serve them as the most precious members of Jesus Christ (...) They must also be able to bring their young students to see poverty up close and to teach them how to alleviate it."⁸² A semi-enclosure was therefore set up to make these outings possible for the Sisters and the students: "so that they may inspire the children with the spirit of charity and give them real lessons on duties and the vicissitudes of life, the Sisters will be able

⁸¹ Father Combalot, *Introduction to the Constitutions of the Religious of the Assumption*, 1839-1840.

⁸² R.A., 1840 *Constitutions*.

to lead them to visit the poor from time to time as a reward." Let us note that the encounter with the poor is a reward. Some Sisters are specially appointed to accompany and extend these visits; they are charged "to go to the poor with clothes, food, or medicine, to serve them in their illnesses, to console them in their miseries, to prepare them to receive the Sacraments, and to give them, as to the most precious members of Jesus Christ, the most humble and charitable care they can receive."

Marie Eugenie wrote to Father d'Alzon that the Sisters were "afraid that if they stopped seeing the poor, they would not always be sisters enough to the poor and would forget the realities of life." She explains: "The Religious knows neither the isolation, nor the worries, nor the humiliations of poverty, nor the continual dependence on her own work. She is usually in more continual deprivation, but once these are fixed, they are definitively limited."⁸³ She thus affirmed that the "vow of poverty", even if lived in a radical way, is always chosen and that it does not replace the concrete experience of encountering those who live in non-chosen poverty, making their living conditions difficult.

Marie Eugenie recounted these first experiences to Father d'Alzon: "Visiting the poor is one of the things that do them the most good. We choose the families well, we very rarely grant this grace, but for two or three times that we have taken the students there, we have been very happy with the result. The example of such humble patience, of such hard resignations of Christian misery, of this continual work of a poor child, of her submission to painful treatment, of her gratitude for the slightest care, is like a germ of reproach for all the contrary defects of the child we are guiding."⁸⁴

b) Charitable associations

These visits are prepared within the boarding school by the work of student organizations: "The students still go out sometimes to visit the poor, it is the most envied of rewards. Charitable associations are

⁸³ Marie Eugenie, *Letter to Father d'Alzon*, July 19, 1842, n°1556.

⁸⁴ Marie Eugenie, *Letter to Father d'Alzon*, August 17, 1842, n°1559 / Cf. also Marie Eugenie's Letter to Abbé Gros, November 1841, n°1504.

being set up. There are three of them: those for the older students, for the younger ones and for the little ones; but it is such an emulation of zeal that they will soon have to be merged into one to avoid rivalries and battles."⁸⁵ The same text refers to "what used to be called the big stores, very small shops in reality and very modest, but set up in the garden, to the great joy of the students and parents, invited to the charity sale for the poor."

In 1842, in addition to the visits, Marie Eugenie already spoke about these association of students to Father d'Alzon to whom she explained how they functioned: "we have formed a charitable association whose councilors I also see". She then explained the rules for admission to this association which is a laboratory of public life, for which one must be judged "worthy". There are councilors and an elected treasurer. "Every fortnight they are given a report on the good to be done, on the state of adopted families: new members can be received by vote, but only after seeing their well-kept books of accounts in which there is little or no useless or selfish expenditure. They are very zealous (...) There is also a certain advantage in forcing them to make public reports, to charge them with making speeches which should excite the charity of others."⁸⁶ Again, it can be noted that this is a "distinction", that these associations form responsibility and that it educates the ethical - especially about personal spending and the use of money - and political sense through reports and speeches.

More than 10 years later, other Communities having been founded, we feel that attention to the poor is present everywhere and influences even the most unexpected decisions, such as the choice of flowers to be planted in the garden of the newly founded Community in Nice: "Speaking of plants, I forgot to tell you that it would be better to plant especially those flowers that can be used for bouquets and/or sold (...) Because of the poor children and of poverty, we will have to prefer these flowers to others..."⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Origins, Volume 3, 5th part, Chapter XVII.

⁸⁶ Marie Eugenie, *Letter to Father d'Alzon*, February 1, 1847, n°1813.

⁸⁷ Marie Eugenie, *Letter to Marie Therese*, November 6, 1869, n°1291.

There is no doubt that Marie Eugenie sees in these two means, visits to the poor and charitable associations, a way of contributing to the "social mission" which she recognizes in the Church.⁸⁸ It is also an expression of the 4th vow that the Sisters wished to make: vow "to extend the Kingdom of Christ". Rome refused this possibility but the passion of the Kingdom is found in the common formula of the vows that the Sisters still pronounce. This Reign which mobilizes the heart of Marie Eugenie⁸⁹, is a "Social Reign": "... We must never cease to ask for this universal and social reign of the Lord, no matter how sad life may be outside... We are dealing with children. Do you think that the great thing for us is that they pass their exams well, whether they know more or less geography or history? It is not that (...) If by teaching we manage to make Christian girls first, then Christian women and Christian families, will we not have contributed to the social reign of Jesus Christ?"⁹⁰

We can ask ourselves:

- What concrete form does the movement towards the periphery take in our educational works?
- Do we really take the means to make it a distinctive character of the work and an object of motivation for those who commit themselves to it?
- How do we help young people re-read their experience at the service of the poorest or excluded and see the concrete consequences that this has in their own lives (personal expenses, use of money and time...)?

This preoccupation, which went beyond the students to their families as well, would even lead the Foundress to encourage the Fathers of the Assumption, especially Father Pernet, to found the Association Notre Dame de Salut, first of all, a charitable association destined for the working class: "We are concerned with

⁸⁸ Cf. Marie Eugenie, *Letter to Father d'Alzon*, February 27, 1844, n°1610.

⁸⁹ Cf. *Etudes d'Archives* n°1.

⁹⁰ Marie Eugenie, *Chapter Instruction of December 3, 1882*.

forming a work to support and develop everything that can contribute to the salvation and moralization of the working class, orphanages, circles, etc.". The associates would give a small amount of money per week, more if you want, but always that at least. This would be the work of Notre Dame de Salut."⁹¹ She supports this project with Father d'Alzon himself: "I urged the Fathers to lay the foundations of an Association of alms and prayers for the laborers' works. There are duties for everyone in this apostolate, I hope that they will tell you about them and that you will find it a good thing."⁹² As is often the case with Marie Eugenie, action and prayer come together with the same goal.

c) Remote missions

In addition to the "nearby" peripheries, Marie Eugenie very quickly expressed an attraction for distant missions. Already in 1844, she made a missionary commitment in her own name and in the name of the Congregation, with two apostolic missionaries leaving for Madagascar⁹³. Another, with missionaries to China.

A few years later, in 1848, the Sisters were first asked to go to China⁹⁴. This request will not be honored. In 1849, the Bishop of Cape Town, South Africa, gave the signal for the first missionary departure: "Bishop Devereux, Vicar Apostolic of the Eastern Provinces of the Cape of Good Hope came to us regarding a few words I had said to Mrs. Delmas, to ask us for Religious (...) he would like to found a boarding school with children from poor classes of society added to it."⁹⁵ Some Sisters go. Marie Eugenie has to ask for financial support from the Propagation of the Faith⁹⁶ when their situation becomes difficult, to "get through the times of dearth, famine, war

⁹¹ Marie Eugenie, *Letter to Therese Emmanuel*, January 27, 1872, n°817.

⁹² Marie Eugenie, *Letter to Father d'Alzon*, December 1, 1871, n°3306.

⁹³ Cf. *Origins*, Volume 2, Chapter 5.

⁹⁴ Marie Eugenie, *Letter to Father d'Alzon*, July 5, 1848, n°1953: "Providence has lately put me in contact with a Director of the Missions Etrangères who would want two of our sisters for the English section in China, it would add to a young saintly girl whom he has placed there to learn English."

⁹⁵ Marie Eugenie, *Letter to Father d'Alzon*, February 6, 1849, n°2011.

⁹⁶ cf. Marie Eugenie, *Letter to the President and Council members of the Propagation of the Faith*, December 18, 1850, n°11463.

and Protestant persecution". It would be a question of using the money "to satisfy the most pressing needs of the Missionaries and Sisters and to provide them with the means to leave the posts that the Caffres would attack. These Religious Sisters are our Sisters..." The Sisters also live the experience of the peripheries in communion with those who have left for the unknown. The difficulty of this first journey to a distant land and the hard decisions that will lead to the separation of the Community from Cape Town show how much the journey to the peripheries is a demanding challenge that requires a real preparation.

Other calls will come, which are not always answered: either circumstances make the project impossible or the principle of realism outweighs the appeal of the mission. But there is enough to expand the heart and awaken the dreams of the first Sisters!

Because of the difficulty of these missions, Marie Eugenie invites the whole Community to join in prayer with those who work there: "But outside this circle, there are all the souls of the world. When we are at the feet of the Blessed Sacrament, we must often ask God to reign in souls and hearts. To visit, in all the beach-fronts of the world, all the missions. How much the isolated missionaries need your prayers..."⁹⁷ as they face struggles, danger, isolation.

When in the years 1892-1895, the time came for new departures (to the Philippines, Nicaragua, El Salvador), prudence guided the choice of the Sisters sent: "If Sr. Maria Teresa had any repugnance for the Philippine Islands, we would never send her there. These are Missions that can only be done when the heart is there."⁹⁸

A year after South Africa, the Sisters will leave to found a school for orphaned girls in Richmond, England. Mother Therese Emmanuel, Irish, takes charge of the foundation; the abundant correspondence with Marie Eugenie who remained in Paris testifies to their common search during the first two years of the foundation: the cost of the school, catechesis among the poor, welcoming the orphans and the help that can be given to them, work with the

⁹⁷ Marie Eugenie, *Chapter Instruction of July 20, 1879*.

⁹⁸ Marie Eugenie, *Letter to Marie Celestine*, December 11, 1889, n°10350.

women working in the factories, etc....⁹⁹ ; "... if you can, let us focus only on the work of the poor. You could have a few children from the farmers' class with them and give them a little more instruction or private lessons, and as you say, we would do a lot of good (...) You will give more development to the work of poor orphan girls..."¹⁰⁰ This "model" of schools for the poor will be replicated in many places, thanks to benefactors and the efforts of Communities: "Poor schools demand the greatest effort from us."¹⁰¹

This experience of missions that lead to the distant peripheries in a radical experience of poverty is an opportunity to reflect on how to live out, in a smaller sphere, the going to the peripheries: "At a time when our Sisters are leaving for the missions, leaving France (...) We must not believe (...) that sacrifices are only in the mission. They can be found everywhere: in sickness, in the various houses to which we may be sent, in jobs, in Superiors. At every moment we must renounce ourselves and detach ourselves. (...)"¹⁰² The going to the peripheries begins simply where we are: "I only want to remind you, at the moment when the work of education is going to begin again for us, (...) that we must see in the children whom God sends us the object of our zeal and not desire to be sent to faraway lands. Saint Francis de Sales says that we must be careful of imaginary virtues, of imagined wonders we would do instead of applying ourselves to the state we are in..."¹⁰³

- How does the lure of the open sea nourish our work on our inner peripheries?
- How do we accompany young people to recognize, accept and reach their inner peripheries?

⁹⁹ Cf. for example, Marie Eugenie, *Letter to Therese Emmanuel*, May 11, 1851, n°333.

¹⁰⁰ Marie Eugenie, *Letter to Therese Emmanuel*, October 3, 1851, n°349.

¹⁰¹ Marie Eugenie, note to *Countess Blanche de la Celle*, February 23, 1887, n°11564.

¹⁰² Marie Eugenie, *Chapter Instructions* of October 26, 1873.

¹⁰³ Marie Eugenie, *Chapter Instructions* of September 25, 1892.

III. Developing love for the poor and practical fraternity

Many are the letters of Marie Eugenie where she expresses the importance of formation to work with the poor: the Sisters are chosen according to certain criteria and formation.¹⁰⁴ We even find on this subject the demanding request of a Bishop: "I saw Bishop Capel, he spoke to me a lot about what would be desirable for the Novices to learn in view of the impoverished classes and the studies they would do in London for two years to make themselves completely competent (...) he said that if we seriously wanted to devote ourselves to the education of the people in England in our poor Schools, we needed these two years of study."¹⁰⁵

Formation and preparation of the heart which also implies a certain amount of work on oneself: the Sisters "are only able to work on others after having worked on themselves for a long time."¹⁰⁶ This interior work also makes it possible to develop that gaze of which Marie Eugenie speaks in her Chapter on "The Importance of Life": "The most humble, the most obscure, the most despised existence has for God a deep interest, He follows all its movements, He observes all its phases."¹⁰⁷ Man is invited to share God's gaze. Going to the peripheries means taking an attentive look at those people in the shadows, who are not so far from us. To love them, as God loves them. An attention which, for Marie Eugenie, is exercised through everything, to the point of thinking of writing an address on an envelope out of delicacy towards the mailman: "these poor people have so much work to do that we must make it as easy as possible for them."¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Marie Eugenie to Mother Therese Emmanuel, November 8, 1850, n°310 / April 1, 1852, n°383.

¹⁰⁵ Marie Eugenie to Mother Therese Emmanuel, January 11, 1872, n°812.

¹⁰⁶ Marie Eugenie to Mother Therese Emmanuel, November 18, 1850, n°312.

¹⁰⁷ Marie Eugenie of Jesus, Chapter Instructions of December 28, 1879.

¹⁰⁸ Marie Eugenie to Mother Marguerite Marie, November 15, 1893, n°1205.

Thus, caring for the poor is a formative act, for which it is necessary to be formed and to prepare oneself!

- How do we prepare, with the students and teachers, the "going" to the peripheries?
- How do we accompany them in the development of this inner, attentive, respectful look at people?

In a very beautiful letter to Father d'Alzon¹⁰⁹, Marie Eugenie explains how important it is for her to develop in the Sisters "a love for the working classes"¹¹⁰ and "habits of practical poverty". She mentions the manual works that give "a practical solidarity with the poor which alone makes us understand their fatigue and their sorrows." She tells how the sisters, in daily contact with the workers - painters, carpenters, masons - discovered their "sensitivity" and their "goodness". She insists on the importance of knowing the living conditions of the poor: "To judge the merit of a poor man who twenty times a day will be disturbed for fear of letting a woman draw a bucket of water from a well that is too deep, it is necessary 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 bring up the rich, also need to know what this tiredness is, and I desire that there will always be here for all the Sisters the opportunity to experience it at least from time to time. "For Marie Eugenie, going to the peripheries is also to experience, to measure the hardship of the living conditions of simple people. To share their situation, if only for a few hours.

A call to watchfulness over the heart, to know how to recognize, through the features of those whose paths life offers us to cross,

¹⁰⁹ cf. Marie Eugenie, *Letter to Father d'Alzon*, July 28, 1842, n°1557.

¹¹⁰ In the 19th century, in France, the working class was developing and the workers, living in difficult conditions, were really on the periphery of society.

those men and women on the periphery towards whom we can always move forward.

- How do we work with the young people in our institutions to learn about the condition of those who have hard and strenuous work little recognized by our societies today?
- What activities do we offer for them to experience these conditions?

The movement towards the periphery, the love of the poor, is inseparable from an examination of our lifestyles and the choice of a certain sobriety. The first Sisters were convinced of this: "Poverty must be closely practiced among the Sisters. They must see it as the foundation of the spirit of faith and simplicity in which God calls them to work (...) To do the work of Jesus Christ, King of the poor, we must take as our foundation the poverty in which He lived."¹¹¹ This chosen poverty will be prolonged in the events that the Community will have to go through in sometimes difficult living conditions: lack of money, cramped houses, times of war and consequent displacement....

IV. Conclusion

We could develop this reflection further. It is certain that Marie Eugenie felt called to widen the space of her heart. In one of her Chapters, she invites us to imitate the "breadth of heart" of the Virgin Mary and Solomon: "I will now speak of the breadth of the heart. It is said of Solomon that God gave him a heart as wide as the sands of the sea. Like those sandy beaches that stretch as far as the eye can see and can contain the sea that has no limits, so was the heart that God had given to Solomon."¹¹² A little further on: "With holiness and watchfulness over the heart, let us try to have the breadth of Mary's heart... Her heart has always been wide, always generous..."

¹¹¹ Religious of the Assumption, 1840 Constitutions.

¹¹² Marie Eugenie, *Chapter Instructions of August 26, 1877*.

After receiving God there, she received all peoples there... Her heart is wide enough to have for all, for the just and the sinner, for the soul that tends towards perfection and for the soul that needs to come out of sin, special tenderness and help (...) A narrow heart is one that closes itself, that does not give, that does not want to enter into all God's intentions, into all that our Lord wants to do through him for others. A wide heart, on the contrary, is filled with goodness, generosity and charity."

Going to the peripheries is, in a sense, to widen the space of one's heart to move the frontiers of love to infinity and to say with Marie Eugenie: "My heart has widened, I love you as much, perhaps more, but certainly much better, since it is in Jesus Christ and I love all my unknown brothers with a love that God deigns to increase each day in my heart... now the world is not big enough for my love"¹¹³ She is sure of this: "There are no limits for the love of God."¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Marie Eugenie, *Notes intimes* n°160/01, May 1837.

¹¹⁴ Marie Eugenie, *Chapter Instruction of October 7, 1881.*

Going to the peripheries

Educational works

- Is this reality taken into account? Is it a distinctive character of the establishment and a motivation for those who commit themselves to it?
- What are the stated objectives?
- What would these peripheries look like?
- What concrete form is given to this movement towards the peripheries (living conditions, identification of social poverties...)?

Developing love for the poor and practical fraternity

- How do we help teachers and students to recognize and take responsibility for their own poverty?
- How do we accompany them in the development of this inner, attentive, respectful look at people?
- What activities do we offer them to experience these conditions?
- How do we work with the young people in our institutions to learn about the condition of those who have hard and strenuous work, little recognized by our societies today?

Meeting with the most deprived and excluded in our society

- What proposal do the students have to meet the most disadvantaged in our societies? How do we prepare with our students, our teachers the "going" to the peripheries?
- What formation is given to students to identify and get to know the peripheries of our time, the most deprived who are next to them and even in their school?
- How do we help young people to re-read this experience in the light of faith?
- How do we accompany them in becoming aware of the concrete consequences that this has in their personal life (personal expenses, use of money and time...)?

02

Archives

Journey with Mother Therese Emmanuel

Sister Veronique Thiébaud and Sister Katrin Goris
Archives Team

Original French

Journey with Mother Therese Emmanuel

Since the Bicentennial, many Religious of the Assumption have felt the desire to rediscover Mother Therese Emmanuel: her religious life, her mystical life, the legacy she left to the Assumption.

In fact, our Archives have a rich collection of "Therese Emmanuel":

- her small spiritual notebooks (for about thirty years, from 1854 to 1884), covered with an agitated handwriting, as was her soul;
- the biographical notebooks, written by Mother Claire Emmanuel from the memoirs of Therese Emmanuel herself, but also of Marie Eugenie, of Marie Therese... ;
- the notebooks of recopied notes, which correspond more or less to the first 15 years in the Assumption of the young Irish girl (1839-1854);
- her personal diaries (years 1850, 1860, 1870...);
- the many originals of letters sent to Marie Eugenie and other Sisters: a correspondence nourished by the constant desire to share: "...my

heart is full of words when it turns to you," Marie Eugenie once wrote to her;

- the letters received from the Sisters;
- the letters of Monsignor Gay (the latter have been entirely transcribed thanks to a young priest who is going to continue his doctoral research on the spiritual relationship of Mother Therese Emmanuel and her spiritual director);
- the correspondence with Father d'Alzon, the Instructions of the Novitiate, the Sisters' souvenirs and personal objects, etc.).

The manuscripts, sometimes illegible, are so many traces of Therese Emmanuel's relationship with the Lord. We can be grateful that Msgr. Gay had asked her to write down the "details of her impressions" in order to be able to direct her in the best possible way. Through a French mixed with English, or "Anglicized", we discover the meanders of a path that must intersect with the concrete life of this woman whose great practical sense is sometimes forgotten when we only see her mystical side.

Marie Eugenie said of her that she knew how to combine an intense spiritual life - sometimes incomprehensible to those close to her - with great apostolic work. Mother Therese Emmanuel was committed, sharing with her Sisters the first steps of the foundation of the Assumption, to pioneering the meeting with the poor in Richmond, supporting Marie Eugenie in the immense task of writing the Constitutions and in the turmoil of the crises that the Assumption traversed in the first 50 years of existence, and of course, forming so many novices, the "foundation stones" of the Assumption in the making.

Everything could have opposed her to Marie Eugenie, but the essential united them: the fascination for God, the certainty that He led all things, a certain sense of freedom and adoration, the desire to serve Him. Thus, year after year, their relationship was to be consolidated: frank, but always loyal, Therese Emmanuel would be at the side of the Foundress in all the bad times, praying for her, seeking to build unity, drawing with her the features of the

Assumption that they were to leave as a legacy. A few years before Therese Emmanuel's death, when she was already very ill and a fatal outcome was feared, Marie Eugenie wrote to Father d'Alzon: "My soul is truly broken, it is half my life that I would lose with Mother Therese Emmanuel."

The letter that Marie Eugenie sent to the Sisters to announce the passage to heaven of Therese Emmanuel is an invitation to deepen her heritage: "You all know what this Mother was, what we owe to her spirit of prayer, to her zeal, to her ardent love for all that was the service of Our Lord: the Office, adoration and religious spirit. She was consumed by it (...) Let us gather around the Cross which marked her birth and received her last breath and be more than ever faithful to all the teachings she gave you."

On the threshold of this unexplored world, that of the collection of documentation that the Archives offer us, conscious that we will only be able to walk through part of it but that it will be a grace, we must choose an entry point: the Archives team thought it might be good to read the notes of Mother Therese Emmanuel, "little by little", in small excerpts - flashes - in order to savor and receive them in a new way. We are therefore inaugurating this series of "flashes" which will always include some excerpts from Mother Therese Emmanuel's spiritual notes and a commentary written by someone from the Archives team. This commentary aims to give key points to better understand the extract (context of the life of Therese Emmanuel, of the Congregation), to highlight the originality of her spirituality while linking it to the spiritual patrimony of the Church and to underline the relevance of this experience. We will thus follow her, step by step, through the important moments of her life, discovering with her the God Who had taken hold of her.

The first "Spiritual Flash" invites us to discover the profound questioning of Therese Emmanuel during her youth (1836-1837), her inner struggle before pronouncing the "yes" that was to engage her in the unexpected adventure of the foundation.

Sister Veronique Thiébaud, Archivist of the Congregation

Excerpts from the spiritual notes of Mother Therese Emmanuel

November 10, 1836 – And so! Is the world only a hollow and empty soap bubble? Is it nothing but vanity, sin, passion and, struggle, while the cloister is the asylum of God's holy peace and a tranquility unknown to the world? Is it imagination that gives it these shades of sublime and solitary beauty? But living together also has very painful sides. In all institutions where human beings are assembled for one purpose or another, one cannot hope to be free from the small inconveniences that one must concede to one another. This is what in religious life is as annoying as the bite of an insect too despicable to be paid attention to. These duties, these supports for the weaknesses of our associates (for we must not be an occasion of sin for them), these little things would tire the most ardent... This continual self-denial, this total mortification of will and spirit, this separation from all subjects of profane interest, will I be able to submit to them? Would not all these little things imposing upon my spirit, the boredom and the meticulousness of sacrifice, end up erasing from my soul the enthusiastic sight of immolation and hiding from me the purpose to which all these little things lead and for which they must be endured? Would not vows be iron bonds on my soul if the feeling which leads me to submit to them comes to abandon me? On the other hand, I weigh everything that can be said in favor of a happy life in the world; all its happiness finally leaves no other trace than a memory quickly erased by the first sorrow... Let us even suppose that I devote myself to any being and make it my destiny; it remains nonetheless imperfect. A few days of happiness will be my share in exchange for all that I have given, then I will be reduced to selfishness, indifference, to myself, the worst of resources, and I will have only memories to compensate me for the present and the future... Isn't it much better to give God those affections that no creature can satisfy and devote my little life to Him?

Yet is there only the cloister, prison of thought as well as of action, to sanctify one's soul? ... After all it is the sacrifice of a few years that would pass in the world like a troubled dream and which in the

cloister will be filled by the anticipation of the promised rewards for the mortifications, privations that I will endure.

I must also ask myself what is this little life that in my reflection I separate from all human things and that I place as if on a pinnacle from which all objects are shrunk by distance. It is in the same space of time that my life is going to last that human geniuses, developing their great and admirable designs, have acquired an immortal name for themselves; yet they are dust. Although it is not given to me to carve also my name in the annals of glory, must I bury it in the darkness of the cloister to live there according to the will of another, to think of it only under dictation, all this life, all these years which belong to me? There I will gain a name and fame for all eternity. My ambition aspires to eternal laurels.

August 13, 1837 - I walked alone in the woods thinking of the destiny that awaits me. Although it could be improved to some extent, it is a bland, flat and boring life that I have to live. Constituted as I am, it is not likely to please me. My thoughts and feelings will probably be my only refuge and my only relief through life (...)

August 19 - Among the impressions that the calm of nature has created in my soul, there is one that I think has visited it for some good purpose, making me feel the nothingness of all things. If this impression continued, it would lead me into a cloister before long.

August 20 - The impression I expressed in my note of yesterday struck me even more deeply today. Everything is void. As Monica¹¹⁵ says, the thing that disgusts me most in the life of the world that could be mine is that kind of bland and insignificant joke which seems to have no other purpose than marriage in its most interested aspect. I would rather spend the years of my life under the most austere and rigid rule than be destined for a similar fate. It is better to renounce all things for an eternal hope than to waste time on such small things. Oh! how quickly the novelty which at first might please would be exhausted and turned into a monotony with no way out. For those who reflect, there is a certain greatness in the idea of

¹¹⁵ A cousin of Catherine O'Neill.

giving oneself entirely to religion, of concentrating one's thoughts and affections on Him Who alone is perfect, and alone is capable of filling the emptiness that all the pleasures of the earth leave in the soul. If through the detail of life, the little things of each day, the smallness of existence, we could remember the sublime thought that everything is for God, for the One who cannot perish, the One in comparison with whom all men are but atoms, then our goal and our efforts would be great and elevated. How quickly freshness abandons all earthly joys! How quickly disappointment and weariness are felt in a life whose object seems to have been reached. The years pass by in this nothingness and the last day arrives. Will this be my destiny? Should I foresee and not avoid? As Mme de Staël says: 'The power of love is too great, it is too great in ardent souls. How happy are those who consecrate to God alone that deep feeling that the inhabitants of the earth are not worthy of! Though I am little in the balance of the world, I would disdain to put my little treasure of affection at the service of any I have never known. I might despise the perishable goods of this world for what is immutable and eternal. I do not look to the attractions of the present, but beyond, until the time of old age, of the fading flower, when memory will remain the only link with the joys and sorrows of my youth. All is nothing. This is only a simple reflection produced by the consideration of the world, but I would need much more for me to be able to follow the example of M.¹¹⁶ The piety that leads to the cloister will lack in my heart and mind long before I can leave my books, my independence and my thoughts.

- What then will my destiny be? I am almost alone in the world, I pass unnoticed for the most part, but it is not a sorrow to me, I can do without the sympathy of the many, and there are few whose thoughts I care to occupy. I am fully prepared to make the pilgrimage of life without friends dearer and more intimate than my books. They are my world of joy or sorrow, and they have more influence on my soul and spirit than any living being.

¹¹⁶ Allusion to a friend who had entered the convent.

MY DESTINY. Early years of Catherine O'Neill, Mother Therese Emmanuel

THE WORLD, A SOAP BUBBLE...

And so! Is the world just a hollow, empty soap bubble? Do these words reveal a 19-year-old woman's search for meaning, her culture, an existential questioning, the ephemeral value of life?

Scientists, writers, poets, spiritual persons have used the soap bubble to evoke the world. Had Catherine read the poem of her compatriot Lord Francis Bacon: *the world, a bubble of air, and man is much less than a lightning bolt*¹¹⁷? This image evokes the fragility of life, the futility of things, and even the culture of well-being in the words of Pope Francis; *a culture that makes us live in soap bubbles, which are beautiful, but are nothing; they are the illusion of the futile, of the temporary, an illusion that leads to indifference.*¹¹⁸

The page we are about to discover, written in English on November 10, 1836, allows us to enter Catherine's universe, her feelings, her reflections. As a watermark, we perceive her past and her intelligence at work.

1836. Mr. O'Neill, after transferring his business to his sons John and Francis, takes his daughters, Mary Ann and Catherine, back to Limerick, Ireland, to their uncle William Howley, a lawyer who has worked tirelessly for the Church and who has recently been living in Rich Hill's house. There, the young women are living life to the fullest: Catherine loves to dance, plays the piano and enjoys reading.

Life in Liverpool has been austere. Mr. O'Neill had chosen this industrial city for his Company, *The Alan Francis O'Neill and Sons Company*, but business was no longer going well there and bankruptcies accelerated his return to Limerick. Their house, located on the hill, was next to the hospital, the prison and a reformatory. There were no exits for these young women except to go and listen to the charismatic and born agitator speaker, Daniel

¹¹⁷ Lord Francis Bacon (1561-1626), *The World:* "The world is a bubble, and the life of man less than a span".

¹¹⁸ Pope Francis, *Lampedusa*, 2013.

O'Connell. O'Connell organized protest meetings (Irish question). Mr. O'Neill was one of his most politically influential followers.

Catherine is back in Limerick ... after 8 years in York and New Hall, from 1826 to 1834: the boarding school or in her words the 'cloister'. There, the 9 year old child became a young woman: intelligence enlarged, faith strengthened and heart in waiting. All her youthful years were spent in isolation, an isolation that would forge her character and guide her faith. She discovered religious and monastic life; her spiritual quest was accompanied. These two places were at the same time refuge and security, study and fulfilment, 'her world' for 8 years. And now in the family, questions emerge: is the world *only a hollow and empty soap bubble, vanity, sin, passion and struggle?* Something is gradually awakening in her. This world from which she has been preserved stands as a judge of her destiny.

WILL I BE ABLE TO COMPLY? The world or the cloister. Rich Hill, Limerick 1836.

To understand, let's go back for a moment to those 8 years. An education sometimes stronger than tender, a very 'cultural' curriculum: music, art, dance, theatre, visits, participation in the York Festival, European languages including French... Catherine will learn virtues and morals, will follow the class of humility, will pray the Office, will have a confessor, and will make her First Communion at Christmas as the tradition called for. Far from the family, she will grow up as a woman and a Christian. This time of "cloister" is also the interior life, that God, Who since her childhood secretly shapes her, Whom she honors and prays to daily, in a spirit of sacrifice which has been dear to her since childhood and which will remain so until she says that *the earth is a place of exile where one must expect to suffer.*

There was the cloister, and then the world. This world so cruel that first took away her mother when she was 7 years old, inconsolable grief and a story that seems to be renewing itself: her maternal grandmother also died, leaving 6 young children. A world and a family where mourning follows one another. There followed

repeated remarriages, 3 wives in each of her grandparents' homes. Wasn't her mother already her father's second wife? Extended and reconstituted families, generation after generation. There are also her father's successive businesses and bankruptcies, the tense and unstable socio-political context since the English annexation of Ireland in the 16th century, the rivalry between Catholics and Protestants, leaving many Catholics without rights. Ireland was coming out of a difficult period which caused many exoduses, a million migrants, high mortality, repeated famines and epidemics. The Ballad of the White Horse bears witness to this: *For the great Gaels of Ireland, Are the men that God made mad, For all their wars are merry, And all their songs are sad.*

How can we not be worried? What she feels on November 10, 1836, is *vanity, sin, passion and struggle*. Beyond seduction and appearance, is there a lasting happiness, a happy life in this world? She is perplexed: *a happiness of a few days, quickly erased by the first sorrow, or marrying an imperfect being...* Unacceptable, she refuses happiness in this world as it is: should we resign ourselves to choose the other way? Isn't it much better to give God my affections and devote my little life to Him?

Reasoning and feelings quarrel. In her, these two realities, cloister and world, jostle against each other, which she knows well enough to be able to confront them: nothing very exhilarating up to this day, and what awaits her? A future of clarity after shared joys and sorrows, a future of light after much darkness?

What she is looking forward to in these days is much deeper. Certainly the cloister is an *asylum for the holy peace of God, a tranquility unknown to the world*, but one that is full of daunting daily aspects. Catherine calls them: a common life with its painful sides, a continual self-denial, a total mortification of will and spirit, a separation from all subjects of profane interest. She goes even further by *blaming what she perceives as a prison of thought and action*, even if it is to sanctify the soul, of necessary sacrifices. *My little life*, as she will say, *in the darkness of the cloister*? Catherine rightly asks herself: it is precious my little life, the only one that belongs to me, what to choose? The asylum of peace where one

lives according to the will of another, where one thinks under the dictation of another and leaves all these years that belong to me? *Will I be able to submit to it?*

The young woman reflects, welcomes feelings, confronts ideas, also fears her imagination that would embellish reality. She has experienced the cloister from the outside, would she be able to live inside? She has seen and perceived what this life has of sacrifice, of submission, that vows can be iron bonds, rigorous obligations... *and what if the feeling that leads me to submit to them comes to abandon me?* Deep doubt or pride? Catherine counts herself among the most 'ardent', who wonder how to sanctify their souls, but who can also be discouraged by duties, by the weaknesses of others who risk hiding the purpose. If one must submit, it would be for this sole purpose, to sanctify one's soul through sacrifice. She is afraid that the *enthusiastic sight of immolation* will fade from her soul. Ardent and lucid, passionate and ready to immolate herself but... Her nature, which was described as haughty in the York archives, and her spirit of independence resist.

The happy life in the world does not go without sacrifices, she knows this perfectly well, she who has endured many hardships. To submit, in the cloister or in the world, is always to submit. But what is to be preferred, which path to choose? What she weighs is the eternity of choice. Indeed, human geniuses acquire an immortal name but are dust! A sacrifice of a few years, a few days of happiness and then reduced to selfishness, indifference, to oneself? Decidedly, she refuses the role of wife and mother as well as the mundane life that society wanted her to play. What she aims for is eternity: to earn a name and fame for all eternity, *my ambition aspires to eternal laurels*. Eternity and eternal, immortality and immortal, her only concern is to sanctify her soul!

**I WALKED ALONE IN THE WOODS. Fill the void, feel the nothingness.
Limerick 1837**

Nine months have passed. At 20, you have to move on. What future is taking shape, what destiny awaits her? It is now an existential question for Catherine. Years go by, and the young woman

continues her quest, alone. Like a gentle breeze, God makes Himself present. He continues His work surreptitiously, through her reasoning. He will not let her rest until her heart remains in Him. *All is for God, for the One who cannot perish...* she whispers. One does not overcome the essential by turning ones back on Him or by a simple omission, Catherine knows it, the essential always comes back. And quoting Mme de Staël, she recognizes how much *her power to love is too great. Everything is for God. He cannot perish...* So many loved ones have left this world too soon, the perishable life of mortal beings. God silently accompanies this nature so restless in search of her destiny.

In Limerick, in the woods. August offers its long days, all is in bloom and will bear fruit in its time. Nature's calm calms her soul! It *creates in her soul*, power and force of creation, traces of the unexpected and the unsuspected. Catherine walks, alone, and her heart wanders. The solitude of the woods makes her touch *the nothingness of all things*, whereas God is defined by the fullness of being. Catherine's soul is visited, it will be visited very often later, and often discreetly. But these days it is a very special visit. To feel the nothingness which, as she writes, risks being a simple reflection, an imagination? *Everything is nothingness!* This impression comes back three times and it is hardly enough for her to renounce the world and choose God, because for that *I would need much more!* Reasoning still prevails. It imposes delays on grace. Catherine tries to name her emotional wanderings where emotions and emotional emptiness, feelings and rational thoughts mingle, jostle each other, but in vain. What will be my destiny? What will make her leave her books, her independence, her thoughts that examine everything? Where is this desire for God, this desire to be his, to suffer for him? Where is the heart of the child who sought sacrifice? Where is the heart of the young person who had decided in New Hall to dedicate herself to Him?

The life of the world, the one that unfolds before her, Catherine portrays it as *bland, flat and boring. The pleasures of the earth, this life leaves an emptiness in the soul, it is unlikely to please me.* No to pleasures with no destiny and no future, no project, no answer to a

need.¹¹⁹ Gone are the days of salons, dances, *this kind of bland and insignificant joke*. Nevertheless, Catherine knows that what she knows about this life can be improved to some extent, even if this life is repugnant because its only goal is self-serving marriage. A happiness of a few days or years, which is not a happiness of eternity, what's the point? There are few memories of loved ones, of a warm and loving home, or of simple family relationships. Catherine is in need of the love and tenderness that will mark so much the life of the future Therese Emmanuel, her relationship with Marie Eugenie, whom she will love, through tribulations but with unflinching fidelity.

The ideas come one after another. *To give oneself entirely to religion, to concentrate one's thoughts and affections on the One who alone is perfect, in comparison with whom all men are but atoms*, why not. This idea pleases her, there is a certain greatness, she says. But what can remind us of this *sublime thought that everything is for God, for Him Who cannot perish, except the little nothings of each day, the smallness of existence?* By writing in this way, Catherine unveils what she will later call the minutiae of love, the secret of a happiness, the coherence of a life. These trifles, these little things, to which she attaches importance, she sees in them the means to achieve the goal. Only then would *our goal and our efforts be great and high*. But she lacks the piety that usually leads to the cloister.

Catherine is overwhelmed by so many thoughts. In this note of 1837, she writes that her only refuge, her only relief are her thoughts, her feelings and ultimately 'my books!' What were those dearly loved books that influenced her thinking, made her faith lukewarm and nonchalant this burning love for God? Mme de Staël, novelist and philosopher who died in Paris in 1814; John Milton, 17th century poet, author of Paradise Lost; Georges Byron, one of the most illustrious poets in the English literary history of the 19th century; Isaac Disraeli, writer and literary critic of the 18th century, a Jew of Italian origin who converted... Books, her only friends, and that *more than a*

¹¹⁹Mother Therese Emmanuel, Instructions to Novices, p. 75: the foundation as a response to the actual needs of society.

loved one, more intimate, this world of joy or sorrow, these books that have more influence on her soul and spirit than any living being. Will her books have the last word?

In this month of August 1837, Catherine seems to be alone with her questions. To whom should they be entrusted, to whom should they be spoken about, to whom should they be referred? To take the risk of sharing them, of confronting them? *I am almost alone in the world; I pass unnoticed for the most part.* Suffering that will mature the woman. Courted and admired, she remains nonetheless alone in the world, as Marie Eugenie experienced at the same time. Being the chosen one of one or the other, does not tempt her at all. And then this dear independence to leave. *I don't want better!* Is it true that she can do without the sympathy of the many, that she is prepared to make the pilgrimage of life without friends... *The years pass... and the last day arrives!* What will be her destiny, she who deep down desires eternity? In her search, on the path where she is lost, God will find her.

Theology

Enlargement of the intelligence in a Post Covid-19 World

Sister Josefina Magat

Original English

We live in unprecedented times. A great segment of the world's population is observing quarantine at home. Schools and workplaces are closed. Inside hospitals, grocery stores, and local governments, a frenzy of activity tries to contain a virus, feed a population, and protect the economy from crashing. Wildlife venture out on emptied streets while the rivers, seas, and skies are now untrammelled by pollutants and human excess.

We live in an in-between time. This is a liminal moment between the old world order and a new one still unknown. On the one hand, lockdown has been a blessing to family time, a boon for innovation in e-learning, e-governance, and e-business. It pushes the logic for a universal basic income. A possible return to local agriculture, manufacturing, craft and small enterprise, might create the needed jobs at home for thousands of overseas workers. Forced to discover what is essential, a new perspective is dawning on many, while some already shift from materialistic consumerism to a new spirituality, a new quality of relationships, and a new awareness of respecting our natural environment.

We live in troubling times. The pre-Covid scene still plagues us: a politics that is more nationalistic than global; governments using the

crisis to keep themselves in power; militarization causing fear and repression; neglected basic services for the poor in favor of big businesses and politicians; bankrupt industries; and increasing places of famine and starvation. Meanwhile, good education remains only for a few.

In the midst of this promise and peril, what does it mean for the Assumption? For our apostolates and Communities? What does it mean to be an Assumption Sister today?

Some of our ways need to be rethought; some will remain constant. We are still educators, religious, and a community of believers, sent to be in solidarity with our people. How are we to undertake the ever-present task of forming the intelligence for these new times? St. Marie Eugenie defined intelligence for us.

"Of course, for you, as for me, development is not the quantity of things learned; it is, if I may put it this way, the broadening of intelligence and character in the possession of truth which a wider science presents under different aspects. I am going to use every improper expression, but I have no time to do better: what broadens character and intelligence in study, what powerfully co-ordinates all things learned, serves as their purpose, their link, their reason: in one sense it is a philosophy, in another, broader sense, it is a passion".¹²⁰

The hypothesis redefines it:

"Intelligence means the ability to reflect, to judge, to discern. It is the ability to understand how human beings think and how thought leads them to make decisions and to act." (Reference Text, p. 32, 1998)

See-Judge-Act: A tool for forming the intelligence is the See-Judge-Act framework of Cardinal Joseph Cardijn that has guided both Liberation Theology in the past and current social action programs¹²¹. Formation of the intelligence requires the

¹²⁰ Marie Eugenie, *Letter to Fr. d'Alzon*, 1844.

¹²¹ Cf. Sands, Justin (2018). Introducing Cardinal Cardijn's See-Judge-Act as an Interdisciplinary Method to Move theory into Practice, *Religions* 9(4): 129.

transformation of perspective (See), the habit of on-going reflection and discernment (Judge), and the efficacy of forming or participating in progressive movements, and assuming coherence in one's lifestyle choices (Act).

To see: Marie Eugenie calls us to a new way of seeing, one that goes beyond ourselves, sharpened by an actual immersion into a different reality. In our educational process here at Assumpta Technical High School (ATHS), the impact of immersion, as learners and educators engage in the reality lived by those in the periphery, radically changes us from within. But how do we keep ourselves immersed now with the limits of social distancing and safety protocols? It begins with identifying new peripheries. As we grapple with reopening of classes for more than 2,000 K-12 learners, new modes of delivery become inevitable. Distance learning poses new requirements in technology and we are faced with some teachers and students without electronic devices and connectivity for on-line or even blended learning. Our school itself struggles with expensive but needed platforms and applications to upgrade into a comprehensive electronic system for a meaningful education. How do we align limited resources with new demands? How do we help teachers survive the gap months while classes are suspended? Beyond ATHS, how do we respond to the farther periphery like families who have lost jobs and are unable to withstand the prolonged lockdown without facing hunger and its social consequences? Daily, our eyes meet hard questions and challenges.

To judge: Annually, we craft our joint lay and religious community plan. Where we can, we nourish together our spiritual energy. Re-reading the mission is a collective enterprise and basis for informed judgment and discernment process. Given where we are now, we shift to distance learning so students do not come to school and teachers have the option to work from home. Printed learning modules are picked up at the gate of the school. Differentiated, personalized education also requires upgrading basic facilities, immediate retooling of teachers, and revising curricular programs. The parents confirmed the wisdom of this decision when even those

who, for the safety of their children, were willing to have them stop for one year, agreed to enroll again. This is the result of a sustained transparent communication with parents, as the school assumes the serious process of making a judgment on matters of consequence.

To act: We remain aware of our responsibilities towards our mission, our wider community, and our country. The Philippines has a punitive approach to enforcing quarantine. This forms part of our educational context. We cannot just be happy with doing what is best for our school and remain cut off from the rest. We support the generosity of our San Lorenzo alumnae and act as conduit in reaching out to our poor families. We expand our awareness by discussing authentic news on injustices and corruption but also on magnanimous acts of private citizens. We affirm creative adjustments to new situations of families, of being Church, and of living as concerned Filipinos. It is an on-going vigilance and commitment to the truth.

As contemplative communities, formation of intelligence is our way of living with intentionality and purpose. It is our way of being community, assuming common discernment and collective, purposeful action which requires serious attention to our on-going formation as Sisters and lay partners in terms of:

- a. *Making it habitual to consider the context in which we operate.* When Marie Eugenie says, "The world is too small for my love," it behooves us to expand beyond our local reality and link with global dynamics, for we are all connected. Our response to those in the periphery becomes more focused then and mutually transformative.
- b. *Responding to the urgent needs of our natural environment:* In the present pandemic, countries make direct cash aids to their citizens, keeping them indoors to weather the crisis. We are challenged to question our past death-dealing life choices. Over the years, our lifestyle has endangered life in this planet. As religious communities, we can inspire with a life of simple choices to renew the environment, have a responsible and

respectful space sharing with other living creatures, and witness to a new way of living in our common home. It will underline a better image of humanity, living a deep kinship with the rest of God's creation.

- c. *Allowing our mission to flow into and from our life of prayer and community encounters.* It means that our personal and communal prayer embrace realities lived in mission, while our mission evolves as fruit of our faith in Jesus and our commitment to the Gospel. Our Monday assemblies opening with the Word of God, daily Masses and adoration, annual retreats, and even our simple "Namaste" greeting are then not mere spiritual devotions. They fundamentally breed our personal relationship with God. The motivation to become a productive member of the larger community comes from this relationship. God forms us to participate in addressing what in us and in our society is contrary to the Gospel, and in actively making His Kingdom happen where we are.

Pope Francis says, "*An emergency like Covid-19 is overcome in the first place by the antibodies of solidarity.*" He expresses the hope that, in the light of the Resurrection, "*we would encounter the necessary antibodies of justice, charity and solidarity*" to change the world. He calls for a "*civilization of love*" contrary to one marked by "*anguish and fear, sadness and discouragement, passivity and tiredness.*" This civilization "*has to be built daily*" and requires "*the commitment of everyone.*"¹²²

The project our Holy Father speaks of is the task of forming the intelligence in a post-Covid world. It is to coax and prod the world, full of both possibility and great inequity, to choose the path of innovation in solving our problems. It is forming an intelligence that sees potentials instead of just material profits, that judges with kindness, and that acts for the good of the many rather than the few.

¹²² O'Connell, Gerard (2020) Pope Francis Shares His Vision for Covid-19 Aftermath, *America Magazine*, April.

04

Religious Life The Assumption in Africa- Madagascar: the irresistible current of grace in our cultures

Sister Claire Josée Banamwana, Kenya.

Original French

Introduction

Before speaking about the life of the Religious of the Assumption in Africa, we can situate it in the Church that invited her to come and set up her tents in Africa.

With legitimate pride, we recall that Christianity has been present in Africa from the very beginning (in Egypt and Ethiopia) and later in North Africa. This ancient church has enriched the universal Church with prestigious spiritual, liturgical and theological traditions¹²³. "Africa is the cradle of Christian contemplative life. Always present in North Africa, it took root in sub-Saharan Africa in the last century."¹²⁴

Consecrated life then moved to Europe and America before returning to the African continent thanks to the missionary Congregations that were deployed there, especially at the beginning of colonization. In this impulse, the Religious of the

¹²³ Documentation Catholique, n°2123, 1995, p. 817

¹²⁴ Africae Munus n° 119

Assumption came to Rwanda, invited by Bishop Aloys Bigirumwami. Guided by the Bishop of Liege (Belgium), he went to meet Mother Marie Denyse, the then Superior General, who spoke of this foundation as "a true irresistible current of grace, a true breath of the Holy Spirit."¹²⁵

"Africa was very dear to the heart of Mother Marie Eugenie. It was the first distant mission she founded. When we think about it today, we can say that it was a folly on her part to have founded in Cape Town in the first years of the Congregation's existence", Martine Tapsoba writes. After this experience, "one might have expected that there would no longer be a foundation in Africa, and in fact, Mother Marie Eugenie no longer dared, no doubt because of the difficulties of communication. It took more than a hundred years, God's time, to dare to start again."¹²⁶

The presence of the Assumption in Africa

God's time came and the Assumption landed again on African soil in 1954, in Rwanda, land of a thousand hills, in order to give young girls a valuable education preparing them for their future mission in the Church and in society. Mother Marie Denyse, recounting her first journey, shows that it was the Church that received the Assumption: at Nyundo, it was the welcome by the White Sisters, then by the Mission to the sound of drums and the cries of joy of the children, and by an indigenous Congregation; at Birambo, the Auxilium, the White Fathers, the Bishop...¹²⁷

Without delay, the Assumption spread to East Africa in 1957, then to West Africa in 1958, and to Central Africa, which became the Central African Region in 1994. Each Province has been enriched with new countries over the years¹²⁸. Africa expanded further after

¹²⁵ Mother Marie Denyse, *Letter of November 1, 1954*.

¹²⁶ Partage Auteuil n°81, 2008 (In this issue, one finds a sharing of the life of the Assumption in each country of Africa).

¹²⁷ cf. Mother Marie Denyse, *Letter of November 24, 1954*.

¹²⁸ In Africa today, the Assumption is present in 13 countries: Rwanda, Chad, Tanzania, Kenya, Ivory Coast, Niger, Burkina Faso, Togo, Benin, Guinea Conakry, Cameroun, Democratic Republic of Congo, Madagascar.

the merger when Madagascar and Guinea were given to us. Yes, the Lord has done wonders, eternal is His love.

How is the life of the Religious of the Assumption understood in Africa?

In Africa, as elsewhere, religious life, as a particular form of following Christ, has always been concentrated in the radicalization of poverty, chastity and obedience in order to imitate Christ and to live like Him, only in function of the Kingdom. Called to follow and imitate Christ radically, the religious should strive towards greater uniformity with the life of Christ, which implies not only an interior adherence to the Person of Christ but also total dedication to Him¹²⁹.

Getting such a vocation accepted was not easy because the cost of adopting religious life for a young African girl was equivalent to renouncing not only the richness of marriage and of the bride, but also a family of her own, including her culture¹³⁰.

On the other hand, in spite of her living conditions which are not easy, it must be recognized that "the African woman... plays a primordial role in the family and society. She is responsible for maintaining order and communion. She works for reconciliation, so that joy and life may reign... Wherever there is life, there is a woman..."¹³¹. Women, chosen by Christ, remain faithful to this vocation of their gender while living the vows because they have preferred Christ to all the goods of the world, to conjugal love and to carnal generation, thus testifying that He is the only necessary richness to be sought, as well as the extension of His Kingdom. Christ's call was the strongest, and the one called takes up again the words of Jeremiah: "You have seduced me, Lord, and I have

¹²⁹<https://www.africaredeemptorists.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/text+in+French+.pdf>

¹³⁰ Cf. Sr. Jane Wakahiu, *Voices of Courage: Historical, Sociocultural and Educational Journeys of Women Religious in East and Central Africa*.

¹³¹ Martine Tapsoba, *Religious Life here as elsewhere*, 2000.

been seduced, you have overcome me, you have been the strongest".¹³²

The Religious of the Assumption in Africa are those women who have decided to leave all that the world presented to them as a source of wealth, joy and happiness, because they have discovered in Jesus Christ the Author of true happiness that invades us so strongly that nothing counts anymore¹³³. The life of the Religious of the Assumption is well known and loved for what it is, although it seems demanding for some people. Demanding in terms of the conditions of welcome, but attractive by joy and simplicity, their spirituality is based on the mystery of the Incarnation and their life unites prayer and apostolate, as well as a strong community dimension. Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament attracts many young people, as does the Liturgy of the Hours, which they are gradually discovering.

Formation: a recognized characteristic

An African proverb says: "He who follows in his father's footsteps learns to walk like him". Our Mother Marie Eugenie showed us the way. Those who succeeded her have carefully guarded it and today we drink from the same source as those who have gone before us, working to make Jesus Christ known and loved, to extend his Kingdom wherever we are assigned. The sources from which we drink are first of all the Word of God, the Eucharist celebrated every day and other Sacraments given by the Church, the documents of the Congregation. Let us underline in a special way the Rule of Life which is a mine to be exploited and to be lived above all, in order to become more and more Religious of the Assumption.

Formation is a means of recharging our batteries¹³⁴; annual and monthly retreats are effective means that allow us to remake and renew ourselves spiritually.

¹³² Jer. 20:7.

¹³³ Mt. 13:44-46.

¹³⁴https://www.dominicasanunciata.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/wdomi_pdf_11713-r9S0lvFuuaYBe08N.pdf

Marie Eugenie said that formation is fundamental for the life and future of the Congregation: "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. (...)"¹³⁵ An invitation to become more involved, all the more so since we have many resources, in order to form ourselves solidly.

This area of formation has been, moreover, from the very beginning, a place where the Religious of the Assumption have been able to share some of their richness. For example: from 1964 to 1969, two of our Sisters helped the Togolese Congregation of Notre Dame de l'Eglise to be formed and to acquire its autonomy; in recent years, in East Africa and Rwanda, Bishops have asked the Assumption to help the emerging Congregations have a solid religious formation; in 1973, a farm was set up in Singa Chini, Tanzania, to form people to become self-reliant and to offer them an opportunity for development, according to our charism of transformative education, taking into account the local culture; in 1975, in Ivory Coast, the Bible Camps came into being as a means of global evangelization by and for young people (they then spread to other Provinces in Africa, then to Europe and the United States). Many other examples could be added to this list.

The importance of inculturation

The attachment of each person to his or her culture requires special attention. We always remain attached to our family, ways and racial ties, each one jealously guarding the features of his or her culture like a treasure. According to Thomas Mbaye, "inculturation is welcoming, assimilation, integration of the Gospel message. It is the Christianization of our different cultures. It is the conversion of our hearts..."¹³⁶

Sister Clare Teresa, r.a., goes further, writing: "Inculturation is the insertion or incarnation of the Gospel and Christian life in a culture", recognizing "the dignity of each culture as well as the diversity of

¹³⁵ Marie Eugenie, *Letter to Therese Emmanuel*, November 18, 1850, n°312.

¹³⁶ Thomas Mbaye, omi, <http://www.avaas.net/contribution/mbaye.php>

cultures, willed by God (...) Our universal vocation and our mission of education make this work of inculturation of faith and Christian life a task particularly suited to our charism"¹³⁷. Our first missionary Sisters entered this process, gradually leaving their European habits behind and learning to lead a life similar to that of the Africans, in joy and simplicity, despite all the difficulties, including language, all kinds of poverty inherent in life in the countryside etc.". Today, in a troubled African context (wars, loss of cultural values, lack of quality education, etc.), by living close to their people, the Religious of the Assumption want to give a sign of openness and appreciation of local values. At the same time, the integration and rooting of the charism in a particular context is the vector of a certain prophetism, for example when the importance of community life or commitment to human dignity is emphasized. This coherence of life in the following of Christ requires continual discernment. It is this coherence that attracts authentic vocations.

¹³⁷ Sister Clare Teresa, *Letter II on the Kingdom*, 1987.

Assumption Together

On the way...

Mercedes Escobedo Solórzano
y Mariana Pruneda Fuentes

Asunción Juntos México

Original Spanish

This year has brought a huge variety of challenges worldwide. In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, life as we knew it has come to a halt and with it many of the planned projects. Borders of all kinds are shifting, in a movement that invites us once again to continue at the service of life.

During the week of November 2-8, 2020, the "Hispanic American Meeting of Assumption Together at the Service of Life" was scheduled to take place in Mexico City. This meeting is framed by the experience of walking together as religious and lay people according to the charism and spirituality of the Assumption, enriching ourselves and recreating the charism from the perspective of the different vocations. This time it was to bring together lay and religious from America and Spain as the invited Province. Among the participants from Mexico and the representatives of the Provinces of the American continent (United States, Mexico, Central America and Cuba, Ecuador, South Atlantic (Brazil and Argentina) and Spain, there were supposed to be about one hundred participants.

The objective that we set for ourselves was to clearly define the sense of belonging to "Assumption Together" and to look for some

common lines of action that would impel and guide us towards concrete commitments, according to the different realities. Of course, to find ourselves in joy, fraternity and friendship in a simple event, but daring in its results.

From the first quarter of 2019, the Province of Mexico, as host of the event, began the planning, calling on those who could take charge of the organization. The collaborative work included some Sisters, members of the lay communities in Mexico and the management team of the school in Aguilas, where the meeting was to take place.

In the first meetings the intentions were clarified, imagining the possibilities, identifying the needs and forming the work teams: a large organizing team, support for exchanging ideas and proposing elements for the realization of the meeting; a steering committee, with the general vision, the contents, the logistics, the budget and the agenda of the event, and several small teams for the areas of communication, food, accommodation, recreation.

As a communication tool and making good use of technology, an online platform was integrated, created to facilitate registration activities, text distribution and suggestions prior to the meeting.

From the beginning it was proposed that the contents and their development would have to be strongly linked with important realities that are being experienced in the different participating countries, as well as with the priorities and orientations of the Congregation. With this clarity and after a survey done in the provinces, it was agreed to work with five themes that would be the axes of the development of the activities, the reflections, the exchanges, the searches: Migrants, Ecology, Family, Youth and Diversity and Interculturality.

How can we deal with such broad, current, present, obscure and hopeful subjects at the same time? What would be the best way to go through the experiences, the questions that arise from them and the answers that they demand of us?

"The internationality of the Congregation, present in 32 countries and 4 continents, allows us to give an answer both at the local and global level. Our contemplative identity and the strength of our educational mission can offer perspectives capable of promoting communion, witnessing to wisdom and offering prophetic hope". (General Chapter 2012, Ecology and Migration Fact Sheet)

We thought of working in workshops for each of the themes, since this would allow us, in an experiential and participatory way to see, hear, and feel these different realities of our world and to reflect on them; then to share paths of discernment and to propose common actions for the Assumption in our Continent. At the same time, it would be important to define the specific FOCUS of each workshop, in order to focus on those aspects that, like Assumption, mark and guide our works:

- Regarding Migrants:

To reflect on the opportunities and possible decisions to become involved with the reality of migration from the different spaces and realities where each one is.

- Regarding Ecology:

To deepen the need for conversion of the whole person towards a new way of living that prioritizes the care of the "common home".

- Regarding Family:

Identify those aspects that should be recognized and worked on so that the family can be a space for the healing of the person and the reconstruction of the social fabric.

- Regarding Youth:

To explore the opportunities that today's world offers young people to find meaning in their lives, to defend hope and to carry out their mission in the world.

- Regarding Diversity and Interculturality

To deepen the need to give place to the other by recognizing, respecting and welcoming differences.

After this uncertain pause that we all share from our Provinces, surely the themes will continue to be valid, although perhaps it will be necessary to rethink the approaches and to incorporate the experience that the situation we are living today is involving us as humanity.

Following the rhythm that the whole world has now taken, it was decided to postpone the meeting until further notice. In listening to and discerning this new reality, the Provincials and the organizing team have taken into account not only the health situation of each country and the difficulties that there may be in travelling during this year, and we do not know until when, but also the economic situation. We have thought about the emergency that demands that we attend to new situations; about the pain, the uncertainty, the losses that affect us all in different ways.

Inspired by Marie Eugenie and sure that "none of our efforts has to be the last", we feel we are on a journey as "Assumption Together", with the certainty that the reality of death and life that awaits us after the pandemic, will surely open new routes for us to rethink our projects and our actions.

Youth and Vocation Ministry

The Vocation, Under the Gaze of Marie Eugenie

Sister Marie Valérie Lagarrigue
Secretariat for Youth and Vocations

With special thanks to Sister Veronique Thiébaud

Original French

When we evoke the story of a vocation, we are on the threshold of a dynamic and fruitful mystery, the mystery of a God of love Who creates us and calls us to live for Him and for the world. In an interview with young people, Bishop Aveline, Bishop of Marseilles, said: "I will understand the depth of my vocation under God's gaze"¹³⁸. The mystery of our vocation unfolds throughout the days, until the great passage where the Lord will give us "*on the other shore, a white stone on which is written a name known only to the one who receives it*"¹³⁹.

The story of my vocation cannot be reduced to its beginnings. As we like to say, the reasons why we have chosen this form of life are often not the same reasons why we have continued along the road.

¹³⁸ Interview of Msgr. Aveline for the 57th World Day of Prayer for Vocations. <https://jeunes-vocations.catholique.fr/contact/accueil/vocations/>.

¹³⁹ Book of Revelations 2: 17.

The story of a vocation is woven day after day, is built up by the multiple choices of daily life, those multiple "yesses" to the unexpected from God Who calls us to the present moment.

Marie Eugenie will often return to the origin of her vocation. What does she share about this mystery of a call?

It is through the evocation of precise moments, dated and foundational, that she evokes the path of her vocation.

The first moment is, of course, that of **her First Communion**. Thus, she wrote to Father Lacordaire that she had made it "*with love*" and that God had given her "*graces*" which had been, among other things, the "*foundation of her salvation*"¹⁴⁰. In the same way, in 1881, at the age of 64, during a conversation, Marie Eugenie recalled this First Communion experience: "*it was the first call to my vocation*"¹⁴¹. She then experienced **the greatness of God** and the first fruits of what she will name the rights of God: "*It seemed to me that the One Whom I had just received was bringing me to the throne of God, to render Him within me, **the homage**, that, alone, I was incapable of rendering Him*"¹⁴². Such homage is also for us the source of our love of the Blessed Sacrament and of Adoration.

The second event was undoubtedly her **conversion** which occurred while she was listening to Father Lacordaire during Lent 1836. She would write much later to Father Picard¹⁴³ "*the first vocational movements came under the arches of Notre Dame during the Conferences of 1836*", ... "*It was still something vague, undecided, the **desire** to consecrate oneself to **the cause of God and of the Church** without knowing where or how*".

The final step before her commitment to religious life was her **Confirmation** in 1837, on Quasimodo Sunday, the Sunday of the Easter Octave. "*It was there that I received from God the grace to give myself entirely to Him [Our Lord] for religious life and for this*

¹⁴⁰ Marie Eugenie of Jesus, *Letter to Father Lacordaire*, December 13, 1841, n° 1501

¹⁴¹ Marie Eugenie, *Conversation on the beginnings of the Foundation*, April 30, 1881, cf. *Foundation Texts II*.

¹⁴² *Idem*.

¹⁴³ Marie Eugenie, *Letter to Father François Picard*, November 8, 1862, n° 1509.

work, and to make a first vow of chastity which, although limited, was fortunately for me the irrevocable decision of my vocation." The preparation for Confirmation allowed her to make a retreat preached by Father Combalot to the Dominican Sisters. She then specifies, speaking of her Confirmation, that "*on that day my vocation was fixed*", "*the door to a new life*"¹⁴⁴.

If these three stages are foundational in her choice of God, we know very well that all her education had prepared her for it, giving her a capacity to listen, a sense of duty that disposed her to an unreserved 'yes'.

When we want to consider a **theology of vocation** in our **Assumption**¹⁴⁵ experience, a first conviction is that "**Man** comes to life because he is thought, loved, wanted by a good will"¹⁴⁶. Vocation speaks first of all of **God**, of the "*rights of God*", a **Father**, who calls to life. Our fundamental vocation is a "*call to life*"¹⁴⁷, a life received, which arouses our gratitude, our homage, leading us to give our life, in the image of the Giver, Creator and Redeemer. "*A gift received which, by its nature, tends to become a good given*"¹⁴⁸. What is at stake is not primarily personal sanctification but a response to God's gift, a response which aims at taking care of others, at feeling responsible for their salvation. It is in this way that, with Marie Eugenie, God draws us and calls us to His likeness, to the gift of our life, to render Him homage!

The central mystery of our Congregation, of our educational project¹⁴⁹, is that of the Incarnation. By his incarnation, **the Son** calls us to follow Him. He places man before the fundamental question: "What should I do with my life?". There is no passage in the Gospel, or encounter, or dialogue with Jesus that does not have a vocational significance. "*The life that Jesus offers us is a story of love, a story of life that wants to blend in with our own and put down its*

¹⁴⁴ Marie Eugenie of Jesus, *Letter to Father d'Alzon*, July 28, 1842, n° 1557.

¹⁴⁵ I will take up here part of the work of FIAT in 2014, "The Theology of a Vocation".

¹⁴⁶ *New Vocations for Europe* (In Verbo Tuo), Rome, 1997, n° 16.

¹⁴⁷ Pope Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation Christus Vivit* §248, 2019.

¹⁴⁸ *New Vocations for Europe* (In Verbo Tuo), Rome, 1997, n° 16b.

¹⁴⁹ Assumption France, *Referential Management – Basic Value* - §1- 2013.

roots in each one's soil"¹⁵⁰. With Marie Eugenie, God mysteriously draws us, at the beginning and throughout life. This "sovereign charm by which God attracts souls, this sovereign charm, is the gift of Himself. What a gift this **Incarnation** of the Word is. If in the Incarnation He gives Himself fully to all, through religious life we give ourselves fully to Him"¹⁵¹. The mystery of the Incarnation is at the heart of His choice, of our choice of a consecrated life.

We know it. **The Holy Spirit** leads us towards a progressive understanding of God's plan and calls us to witness throughout our lives. Pope Francis says it clearly, "The Holy Spirit makes you enter ever more deeply into the Heart of Christ, in order to fill you ever more with His love, His light and His strength."¹⁵² As he said, "deep down, holiness, is the fruit of the Holy Spirit in your life (cf. Gal 5:22-23)"¹⁵³.

In this way, the unfolding of our vocation blossoms throughout our lives.

We like to quote **Marie Eugenie** affirming that "*It is foolishness not to be what one is as fully as possible*"¹⁵⁴. This conviction marks our educational pedagogy, it is profoundly vocational. "*To fulfil one's own vocation, it is necessary to develop oneself, make all that one is spring up and blossom.*"¹⁵⁵ Thus, the unfolding of our vocation until death will pass through this gift of self through our gifts recognized and shared.

"So many times in life we waste time asking ourselves: "But, who am I? But you can ask yourself who you are and spend your whole life searching for who you are. Instead, ask yourself, "Who am I for?" You are for God, without a doubt. But He has wanted you to be for

¹⁵⁰ Pope Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation Christus Vivit* §252, 2019.

¹⁵¹ Marie Eugenie of Jesus, *Chapter of May 2*, 1884.

¹⁵² Pope Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation Christus Vivit* §130, 2019.

¹⁵³ Pope Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation Gaudete et Exultate*, §15, March 19, 2018.

¹⁵⁴ Letter of Marie Eugenie L 1563.

¹⁵⁵ Pope Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation Christus Vivit* §257, 2019.

others too, and He has placed in you many qualities, inclinations, gifts and charisms that are not for you, but for others."¹⁵⁶

So, in the spirit of the Assumption, with the conviction that the Holy Spirit continues to elicit vocations, let us cast the nets with full confidence and witness with our whole life to the joy of following Him.

¹⁵⁶ Pope Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation Christus Vivit* §286, 2019.

Being in and with nature: at the school of cultural traditions

Sister Viviane M. Sawadogo
JPIC Team

Original French

The evidence of the ecological crisis is no longer in doubt. It is there... real, keeping us between discomfort and urgency. It eludes us. As Eslin (2017: 14) puts it so well: "*The affair is driving us crazy! Furious! We feel intimately this determinism that chains us, and we are revolted by a revolt that, in vain, turns on itself.*" This ecological crisis is of great complexity that requires change at the personal, collective, and structural levels.

In his Encyclical *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis calls for an ecological conversion. While taking up again the fundamental elements of the Christian faith that can transform our ecological being, he encourages dialogue with all (cf. LS 14), and especially with the indigenous peoples, repositories of wisdom capable of bringing harmony back to our Common Home: "*It is indispensable to pay special attention to the indigenous communities and their cultural traditions. They are not a mere minority among others, but they must become the main spokespersons ...*" (LS 146). Learning traditional cultural wisdom broadens our horizons for a real transformation of our lifestyles.

This article is part of the dialogical dynamic called for by Pope Francis. Far from being a comparison, it is a listening to the ecological vision of traditions in the Amazon and in Africa, which will be preceded by the resumption of some important points of the Christian vision of creation.

Creation and separation for harmony

The questions regarding *being* and *acting* in the field of ecology bring us back to those age-old human questions that the Catechism of the Catholic Church takes up again: "What is our origin?" "What is our end?" "Where does everything that exists come from and where does it go?" (CCH 282). The first account of Genesis (Gen. 1:1-2:4) at the frontispiece of the Bible is essential to the Christian understanding of Creation and the human being. From the first to the sixth day, we see a harmonious ordering of the works that God calls into existence. Creation also consists of "a certain number of creative operations that are primarily works of separation," as Abadie (2009: 18) explains. For example, light is separated from darkness, the continent (land) from the mass of waters (sea) etc. (vv. 3-4, 6-8; 9-10). Separation establishes differences without any violence intervening (Cf. Abadie, 2009: 19). Each being is wanted in itself and for itself. It is in this already harmoniously ordered creation that God called the human being to life on the sixth day. While other beings are made according to their species, it is said of the human being that he is created *in the image and likeness of God*. (Gen 1:26).

The Biblical account puts us in the presence of a good and beautiful creation, existing in peace and returning to the Artist-Creator. *"The universe did not arise as the result of an arbitrary omnipotence, a demonstration of strength or a desire for self-affirmation. Creation is of the order of love."* (LS 77). Being created in the image of God does not place human beings on a pedestal that would justify a despotic relationship with the environment. "The Creator Himself confers upon mankind a peaceful possession of planet earth." (Coste, 1994: 66). Relationship is at the heart of

creation, and the human being becomes fully himself only in that relationship which keeps his heart open to universal communion, (LS 92) at the service of life. This is what Jesus showed us throughout His life. He showed Himself to be first and foremost sensitive to that which closed our access to the source of Life. What do other traditions teach us about this Life in creation and the mission of the human being within it?

The Harmonious Life in the Amazon: The Kogi People and the Law of Origin / The Law of the Mother

We all want to *live happily*, we want to gain access to "life in abundance" (cf. Jn 10:10). The Instrumentum Laboris of the Synod for the Amazon (2019) sheds light on how the indigenous peoples of the Amazon represent this "life in abundance": a life in harmony with oneself, nature, human beings and the Supreme Being. This is shown by an examination of the *Kogi* model.

The *Kogi* Indians live in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, the highest coastal massif in the world, which they consider to be the heart of life, Mother Earth. With no writing, no identity papers and no money, their community is cut off from the world, far from modern progress and globalization. Seeing themselves as the guardians of the Earth, they call themselves the "big brothers"; in their eyes, it is the "little brothers" who are destroying the environment. The *Kogis* live according to what they call the Law of Origin or the Law of the Mother, which rests on four pillars (Cf. Falk: 2017): **1.** Everything has an origin, a source. **2.** Everything has order and its own place. **3.** Everything has a function, a reason for being. **4.** Everything is linked in a mutual dependency. This Law of Origin structures their life within the cosmos and for them it applies to all things and must be recognized and respected as such.

Respect for the natural balance perceived as a kind of spiritual alchemy is therefore essential for this community. For example, to build a house requiring the use of wooden beams, or to take something from nature, there is a process that consists first of

thinking about why, then justifying the act, and consulting the community to give a ruling and decide on the procedure to follow. Once the act has been carried out, there is a need for compensation, which *ultimately* aims at ensuring the sustainability of the species in nature. In the case of the construction of the house, trees are replanted to replace those felled for the occasion. Or the fruit taken for eating is returned directly to the ground by sowing its seeds next to the fruit tree in the certainty that the fertile soil will make it grow and bear fruit again. Another dimension of the life of the Kogis challenges us. Even living in a world of abundance, they have an approach to wealth and possessions that is the opposite of that of the contemporary age. It is based on non-possession, a deliberate choice to avoid covetousness and greed.

The Kogis are a society always *in relationship*, supported by common values through the sharing of time, work, emotions, ideas, projects... These relationships favor the practice of a collective intelligence based on a horizontal political system. To make decisions, men, women, children and the elderly come together and "discern" together. And even if they do not have a classical school system, throughout their lives the Kogis acquire knowledge in a wide variety of fields.

In short, the Kogi model is a holistic "system" of interrelationships that manifest themselves in all the dimensions of their lives. For this community, ecology is a way of being and knowing, and there is no happiness possible if the means used to achieve it exclude others (human and non-human) and if they do not integrate a concern for the interdependence of all creatures.

Traditional Ecology in Africa

There is a closeness between the Amazonian perception of man's relationship with nature and traditional African ecology. In Africa

too, traditional forms of representation of the cosmos are rooted in a holistic rationality that maintains an interdependence between God, ancestors, human beings, and non-human beings: "*Africa apprehends things in their interactive globality on all registers, environment and society, visible and invisible, natural and supernatural, etc.*". (Nzamba, 2013: 8). God occupies the summit of this interaction, but as Kabemba says, (2009: 75): "*Each partner goes out of himself to enter the other's game.*" This interaction called "Bende" in *Ciluba*, one of the languages spoken in the Democratic Republic of Congo, means that every man is "another man's man" (*muntu wa Bende*) or more specifically "another man of God" (*muntu wa Bende wa Mvidi Mukulu*). Not only man, but all things are also seen as things-of-Other-of-God. In short, "*neither man, nor thing, nor even the cosmos, nothing belongs to itself, everything belongs to God... It is a whole altruistic ethic, respectful of the other (animal, man, world) that is being put in place.*" (Kabemba, 2009: 76) The existence of all creatures takes place within a chain of relationships that promote the harmony of the whole. "*The natural environment determines the underlying attitudes, beliefs, behaviors and social practices, lifestyle and thought systems and mental representations of individuals and social groups that provide ... an ideal or archetype of what life is all about, centered on nature and society.*" (Nzamba, 2013: 8).

In the same dynamics, for the Mossi ethnic group in Burkina Faso, the traditional representation of the cosmos structures the life of the whole group. Land chiefs are considered to be the "experts" of the laws of nature. Their mission, which is of a sacred and spiritual nature, defines the rules of access to the land and to the physical elements of the universe. They are considered the holders of a "science" that guarantees harmony in the whole cosmos. One of them explained, during an interview with them, that the wisdom relating to the protection of nature is of divine order: "*Our ancestors were great sages of nature because they received from God the spirituality of the earth, one of whose essential functions is its protection.*" In the *moaga* imagination, Mother Earth comes after

God. Such a representation is the basis of traditional practices and many social rules for the protection of life by safeguarding cosmic harmony. For example, certain species of trees are forbidden to be cut down because they are considered to be totemic and mythical. Similarly, each clan of the Mossi group has an animal totem pole that is forbidden to be used as a consumer product, and certain green spaces and sacred woods are forbidden to be cut down. If these prohibitions are originally spiritually based, if we look closely they have another function, which is the preservation of biodiversity and respect for nature. This traditional conception of the Mossi includes the *"harmonious life"* in maintaining harmony between the visible and the invisible world. Building on the tradition received from the ancestors, it is concerned for the future generations by ensuring that no practice will unbalance the environment, thus endangering life on earth.

"... Created things are made for man in view of God. It is not for man to use and abuse them as he pleases, to make them his own, to make them his pleasure and his end in this world; but it is so that they may serve a higher purpose, that they may lead man to God." (Marie Eugenie of Jesus, August 8, 1880: 85). The richness of the Christian tradition cannot be denied in the face of the ecological emergency. However, the consideration of the resources of cultural traditions in the education of ecological awareness and conversion in our various places of mission is a vital necessity.

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