



MARIE EUGENIE AND COMMUNION (Part 2)

III- COMMUNION IN TIMES OF CRISIS

1. Mild troubles

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

Father Combalot had the intuition of the foundation of the Congregation. He had called Marie Eugénie, but also Marie Augustine, Thérèse Emmanuel and Marie Thérèse. 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 Eugénie 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 recognized affection allowed Marie Eugénie to accept her director with his inconstancy: "...I see today that I love you, as much stern as I love you indulgent (...) your tenderness is written on each page of your letter, but sometimes in rather harsh characters.»¹

During the first two years, from March 1839 to March 1841, Abbé Combalot remained the sole "Father" of the Assumption, whose introduction to the Constitutions he wrote, 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 Eugénie, for her part, according to the sisters, refrained from any opposition, seeing only the good of the Congregation to be founded. This instability, however, attacked 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 Eugénie'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....* »² She places the foundation of her relationship with Abbé 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 very good of the work she is bringing into the world. She is vigorously 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 M. 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 position cannot be sustained for*

¹ Marie Eugénie au Père Combalot, 18 août 1837, n°4

² Marie Eugénie au Père Combalot, 7 avril 1840, n°118

long; but today we can only put down waiting stones: it is up to Providence to loosen your bonds. »³

In February 1841, Combalot gave the professed sisters of the small community the opportunity to "give their voice to 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 recognised 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?... Every year you are not so young, and... there is, therefore, always more boldness in wanting to make such a hard use of your strength... Do not tire yourselves too much, and the haste, which one cannot fail to have for your word, does not drag you down to the point of making you ill.* »⁴ Thus, the resistance that she may feel elsewhere does not divert her from her uprightness 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.⁵



Staying on course for communion:

- Be frank about your feelings
- Taking the good of the work as a priority
- Discerning what is essential
- Cultivating together faith, courage and trust in God

1. Differences of points of view

All this is happening in a Parisian context that is not very favourable to the community. The clergy of Paris were wary of Abbé Combalot and his originality; and there was concern about the age of the sisters and their lifestyle. Marie Eugénie needed reassurance. In a very beautiful letter, she affirms that her priority 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 interest, without discouragement, on which a new work needs to rely. My greatest fear, what troubles me so much, is to fear that this basis is missing; all that can console my soul, therefore, is to know you on this point with feelings similar to mine. I know that you are by conviction and by a state devoted to God, I strongly desire that, as you tell me, you are ready to do everything for this work, and to show you 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 whom I will love the most. ... »⁶ The reticence of the clergy towards the community is all the more strong because it is thought that Father Combalot builds his community with too much independence; Marie Eugénie begs Father Combalot to be attentive to his conduct : « *The greatest attack they make on us is to say to us and to you, very independent of the authority of the Archbishop... Please, my dear*

³ Emmanuel d'Alzon à Marie Eugénie en décembre 1840

⁴ Marie Eugénie au Père Combalot, 2 mars 1841, n°127

⁵ Cf. Père Combalot à Marie Eugénie, 6 mars 1841

⁶ Marie Eugénie au Père Combalot, 18 mars 1841, n°129

Father, avoid everything that would corroborate this noise, the most annoying of all for a community, since our first obedience must be to the Bishop. »⁷ What guides her, decidedly, is the good of the work and her attachment to the Church.

So when Father Combalot wanted to go over the authority of the Archbishop of Paris and obtain permission directly from Rome, Marie Eugénie continued to worry. For him, it was a question of putting down roots in the work. « *in the sacred trunk of the Church*», where she « *would draw abundant sap* »⁸, which could make it easier for vocations to come in. This project worries Marie Eugénie who sees in it a lack of respect for the role of the Archbishop of Paris; she thinks that it will prevent the development of the work and opens it up to Father Combalot.⁹, asking him with prudence to be able 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 charity 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 Fr 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 fight them too continually...I say the desires of my sisters, for I take you yourself as a witness of the perfect indifference in which I personally find myself for almost all the habits of my life.* »¹⁰ It seems that Marie Eugénie 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 recognises 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 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 course for communion:

- Honest speech that avoids misunderstandings
- Wise caution that follows the steps
- 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

2. Necessary rupture

Criticism of the community had led Marie Eugénie 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 11 April. The archbishop took care of it and saw the priest respond to him: « *As long as I live, my daughters will have no other superior*

⁷ Marie Eugénie au Père Combalot, 28 mars 1841, n°130

⁸ Père Combalot à Marie Eugénie, 2 avril 1841

⁹ Cf. Marie Eugénie au Père Combalot, 2 avril 1841, n°133

¹⁰ Marie Eugénie au Père Combalot, 5 avril 1841, n°134

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 Thérèse Emmanuel became its spokesperson. Father Combalot finds it difficult to accept this resistance and he considers that Marie Eugénie 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.* »¹¹ This makes him bitter; he promises the community a difficult future. However, he does a rather touching work 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 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 Eugénie, 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 the 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 making vows for the community: « *May God give you as many blessings as I am bitter, may he himself be your protector, your support, your comforter! Send 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...* »¹²

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 elements I have prepared, and to leave to yourself, Monsignor, and to the man of your confidence 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 in qualities and virtues to complete the edifice, will bless God with its growth.* »¹³

In spite of an interior struggle that will continue, Father Combalot gives here 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 Eugénie, 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 come out of the line of absolute separation where he entered... 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... »*

¹¹ Père Combalot à Marie Eugénie, 26 avril 1841

¹² Père Combalot à Marie Eugénie, 3 mai 1841

¹³ Père Combalot à Monseigneur Affre, mai 1841

¹⁴ She reveals to us here what was her line of conduct, at the height of the crisis: to keep 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...* » ¹⁵ 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 care not to compromise him, which he has often recognised" 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 Eugénie 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 Eugénie 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 Eugénie was to take care of in the 1850s, who gave news of her brother, then announced her mother's illness... He resumed contact with Thérèse Emmanuel from time to time, in 1849, in order to speak to her about a project for... a foundation! Another year, Marie Eugénie feared that he would get closer to the community of Nîmes. 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 her and did not hesitate to communicate those she received. She does so in one or two sentences, without commenting...



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 Eugénie to keep the course of communion in such situations, but we can already draw a good number of

¹⁴ Marie Eugénie, Notes Intimes, Mai 1841, n°172/01

¹⁵ Marie Eugénie à l'abbé de Salinis, 16 mai 1841

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 tranquillity or security, aiming for the essential; be prudent and not to skip steps; recognize each one in his 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...

Conclusion

Marie Eugénie's work for 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 Eugénie uses several images, such as that of the beehive¹⁶ 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* »¹⁷, as in the sky "each star differs from another star in splendour and clarity". Thus, in a certain diversity, which leaves to each one the character of his 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, keep one another, support one another, live in the most perfect unity. »¹⁸ 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 that enough faith for that? No, it takes love.* »¹⁹ 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 core. Let us conclude with these words, which are a beautiful lesson in communion that Marie Eugénie gives to Father d'Alzon: « *Jesus Christ is the principle, the trunk of all; the more you love him, the 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 of every kind, 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.* »²⁰

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¹⁶ Marie Eugénie à Marie Thérèse, 11 janvier 1839, n°1178 : « *Puisse-t-il nous dicter lui-même l'esprit qu'il veut que nous ayons. Puisse-t-il faire un jour de notre petite ruche une maison de paix, de charité et de ferveur !* »

¹⁷ Marie Eugénie, Instruction de chapitre du 10 juin 1877, « *Grands exemples laissés par Mère Marie-Claire* »

¹⁸ Marie Eugénie, Instruction de Chapitre du 20 août 1886, « *Avant toutes choses, que Dieu soit aimé, et puis le prochain* »

¹⁹ Marie Eugénie, Instruction de Chapitre du 15 novembre 1891, « *Dédicace des églises* »

²⁰ Marie Eugénie au Père d'Alzon, Lettre non datée de 1844, n°1630