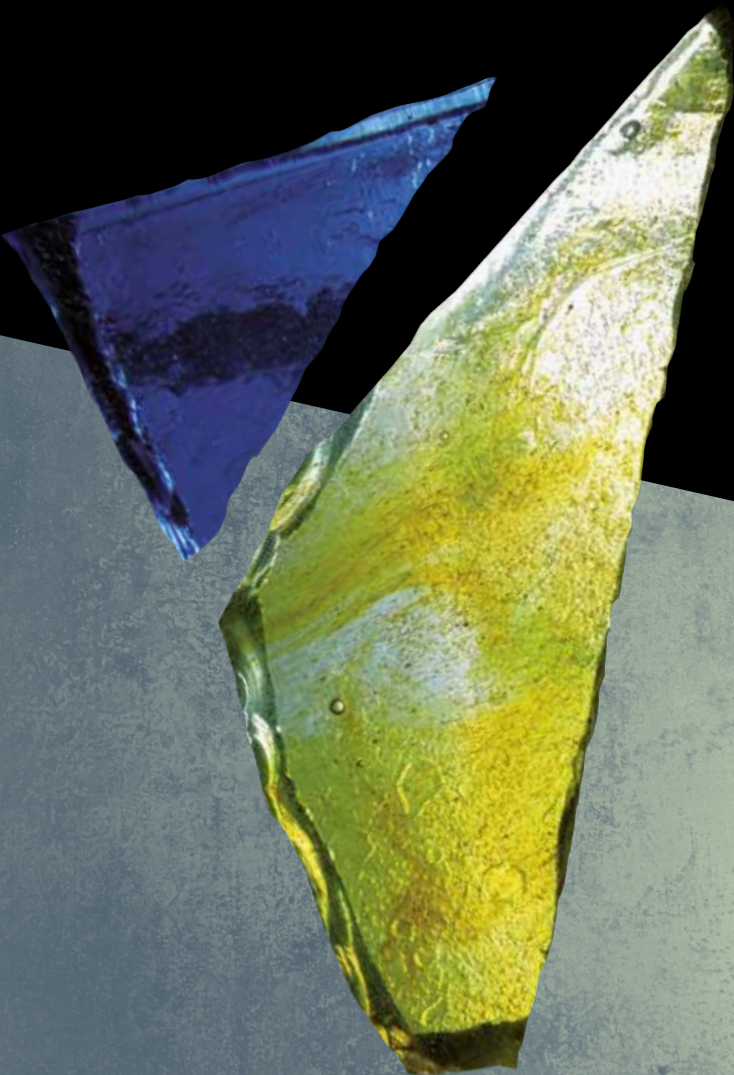




# WINGS AND OARS

Marie Eugénie  
and Thérèse Emmanuel  
Two Lives in the service of Christ



**I**t is with great joy that we celebrate the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of our oldest sister in the Assumption, Saint Marie Eugénie of Jesus, and of her who, as she herself says, was the “*half of her life*”, her constant and untiring support, Mother Thérèse Emmanuel.

Chosen and called by the Lord, they let themselves be fashioned by Him. In order to establish the new Congregation of the Religious of the Assumption within the Church and for the world, they lived in genuine communion, a true friendship knit together and deepened by the passage of years. Therefore, we celebrate them together. Our desire is to commemorate their history to inspire the same passion in ourselves, that which gave them wings and, through the love of Christ, served them as oars.

This book enables us to embark on a personal journey, with their experience as a starting point, and to hear resound a triple invitation:

***To celebrate life*** filled with wonder before a God who, through the Mystery of the Incarnation, entered into the human condition;


***To descend into the depths of our being*** and find in Christ, our inner and faithful friend, the light and strength that give meaning to our existence;

***To play our part in the world for the Kingdom*** by participating in the transformation of society.

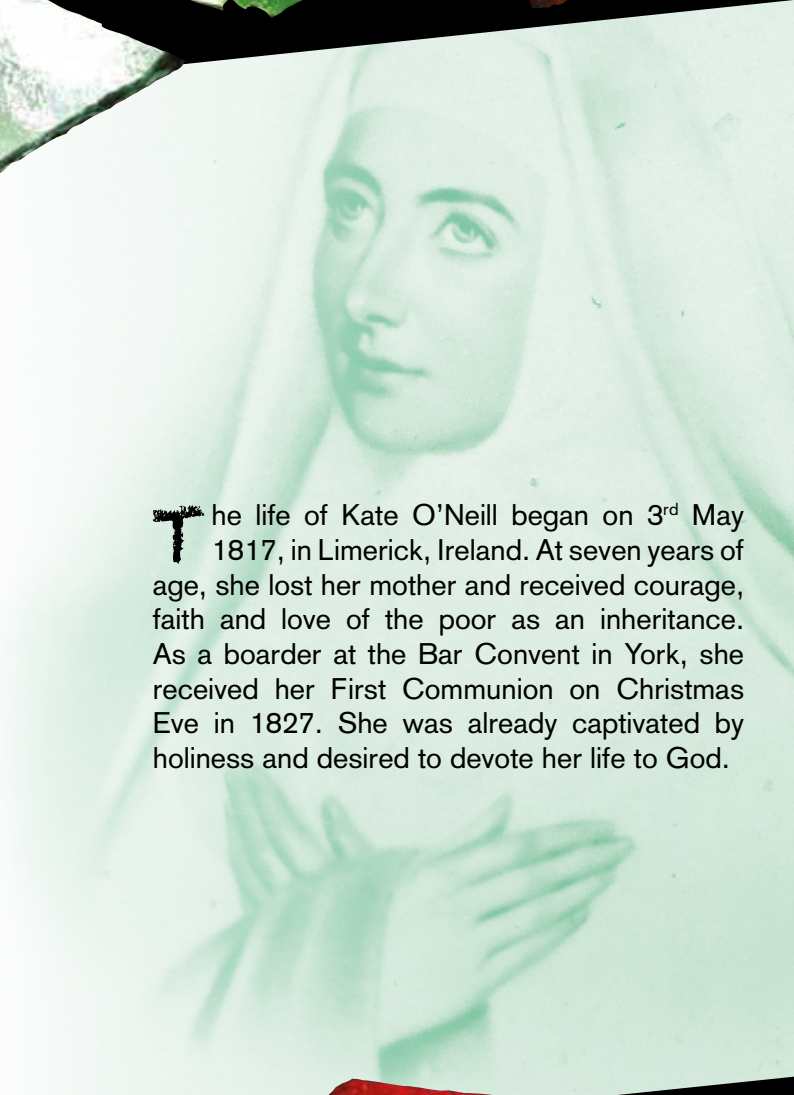
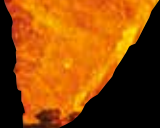




May Marie Eugénie and Thérèse Emmanuel accompany us on our own quest so that, open to the call of God, we may discover and receive our vocation, the gift of His mercy, a path filled with surprises, a space open to the unparalleled encounter with Christ and with others.

Sister Martine Tapsoba  
Superior General




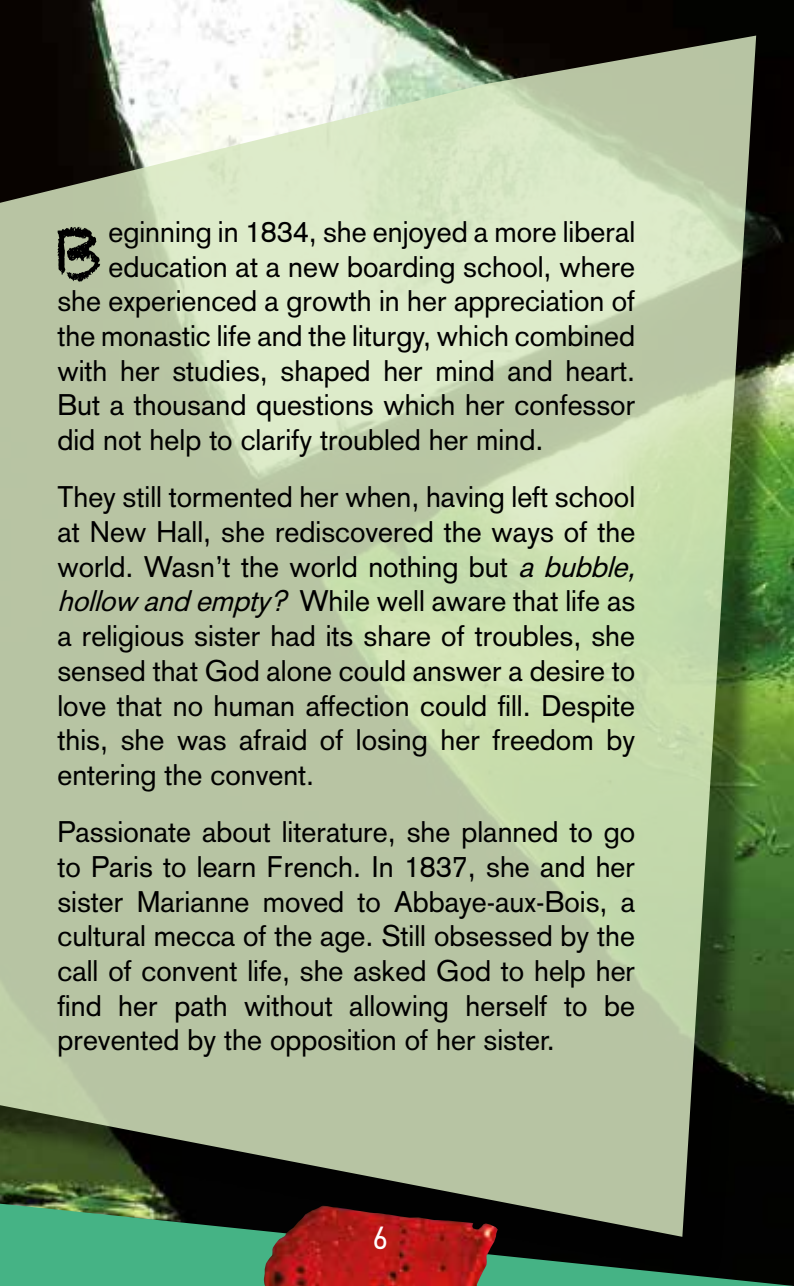


God opens  
the way



The life of Kate O'Neill began on 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1817, in Limerick, Ireland. At seven years of age, she lost her mother and received courage, faith and love of the poor as an inheritance. As a boarder at the Bar Convent in York, she received her First Communion on Christmas Eve in 1827. She was already captivated by holiness and desired to devote her life to God.


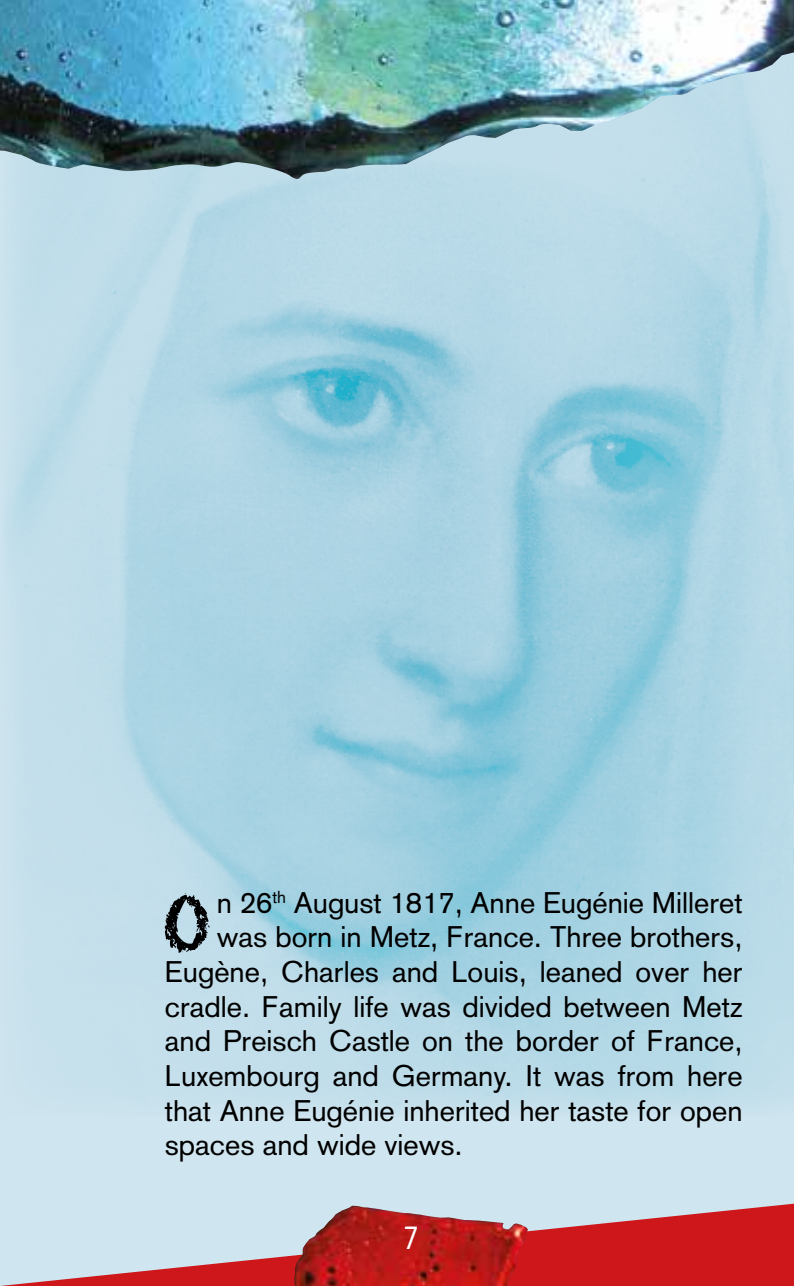




**B**eginning in 1834, she enjoyed a more liberal education at a new boarding school, where she experienced a growth in her appreciation of the monastic life and the liturgy, which combined with her studies, shaped her mind and heart. But a thousand questions which her confessor did not help to clarify troubled her mind.

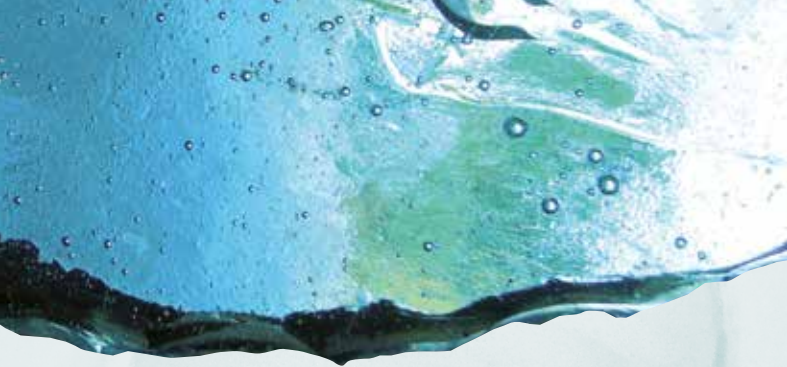
They still tormented her when, having left school at New Hall, she rediscovered the ways of the world. Wasn't the world nothing but *a bubble, hollow and empty*? While well aware that life as a religious sister had its share of troubles, she sensed that God alone could answer a desire to love that no human affection could fill. Despite this, she was afraid of losing her freedom by entering the convent.

Passionate about literature, she planned to go to Paris to learn French. In 1837, she and her sister Marianne moved to Abbaye-aux-Bois, a cultural mecca of the age. Still obsessed by the call of convent life, she asked God to help her find her path without allowing herself to be prevented by the opposition of her sister.




**O**n 26<sup>th</sup> August 1817, Anne Eugénie Milleret was born in Metz, France. Three brothers, Eugène, Charles and Louis, leaned over her cradle. Family life was divided between Metz and Preisch Castle on the border of France, Luxembourg and Germany. It was from here that Anne Eugénie inherited her taste for open spaces and wide views.





**F**rom her mother, she received *natural virtues* and a sense of duty. She learned that the work of the mind must touch the heart, the will and the character. Freedom, being in touch with nature, the love of beauty but also associating with the poor, just as important as the accumulation of knowledge, allowed her to unfurl her wings. Thanks to her father, a wealthy banker and Member of Parliament, the young girl was equally open to the political and social issues that enlivened the conversations in the parlour. Here we can already find the outline of the educational programme at the Assumption.



All life is the work of God, who has knit us together with love from our mother's womb (see Psalm 138-139). It is good to review our past and to contemplate, as we learn to express it, what God has written within us from our infancy – like the first impulse towards life.

What values did you inherit from your family, your country, the earth?

Which elements of your roots do you acknowledge as important?

**C**hristmas 1829 : At her First Communion, Anne Eugénie glimpses the immensity of God and His love. An unbreakable bond is born in all secrecy.

Then came the period of disruptions: her father's ruin in 1830, the sale of Preisch, the separation of the Milleret spouses. Anne Eugénie left for Paris with her mother, who would die of cholera in 1832. The days seemed empty to her. The futility of worldly life and the narrowness of a faith limited to ritual made her question the meaning of existence. She began to think that the Gospel might be the word that would awaken her to life.

**T**hen during Lent in 1836, while waiting for Father Lacordaire, who was preaching at Notre Dame, the young girl presented her intuitions and doubts to God. The words of the priest answered her thoughts, rekindling in her the sense of good, giving her a new generosity and faith: *'I was truly converted.'*

How, from then on, could she devote her energies to God and commit herself to the Kingdom? The life of a religious sister was one possible path, but she knew that a choice like that would not be easy. She placed her faith in God, who alone had *'loved, sought, redeemed, urged her on ...'*

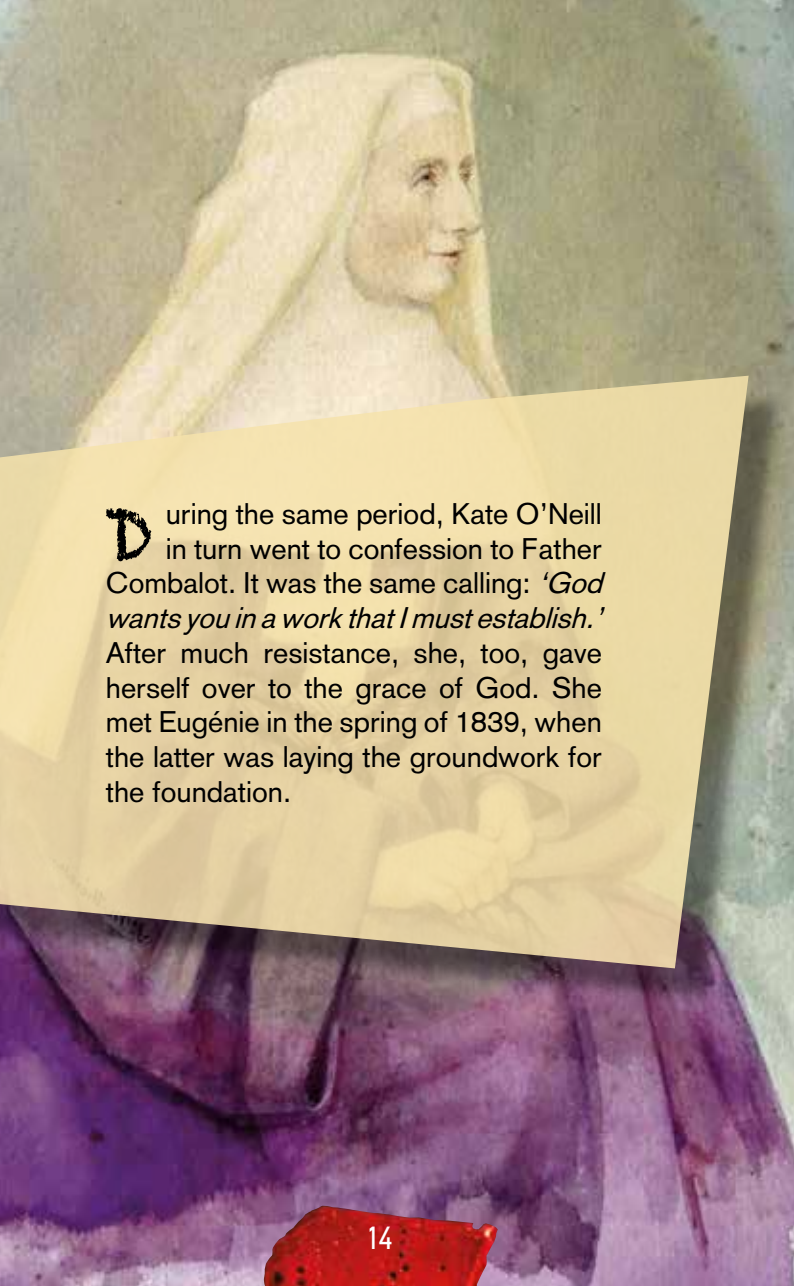


A year later at the Church of St. Eustache, she went to confession to Father Combalot. Very quickly, he told her about wanting to found a congregation that, rooted in a rigorous life of contemplation, would implement an educational programme for girls, with the aim of converting society to the values of the Gospel. But if Anne Eugénie had the desire to devote her life to Christ and to serve the Church, she did not see herself as a foundress! She resisted, citing her lack of experience, her youth and her ignorance of convent life. Father Combalot would not let her go. Accepting her inner struggle, she understood little by little that *God was leading her with particular care*, that He was manifesting Himself to her through unexpected circumstances. Following her Confirmation on the Sunday after Easter, she gave herself over to the Holy Spirit in order to answer the call of God and embark on a path that she had not envisaged.

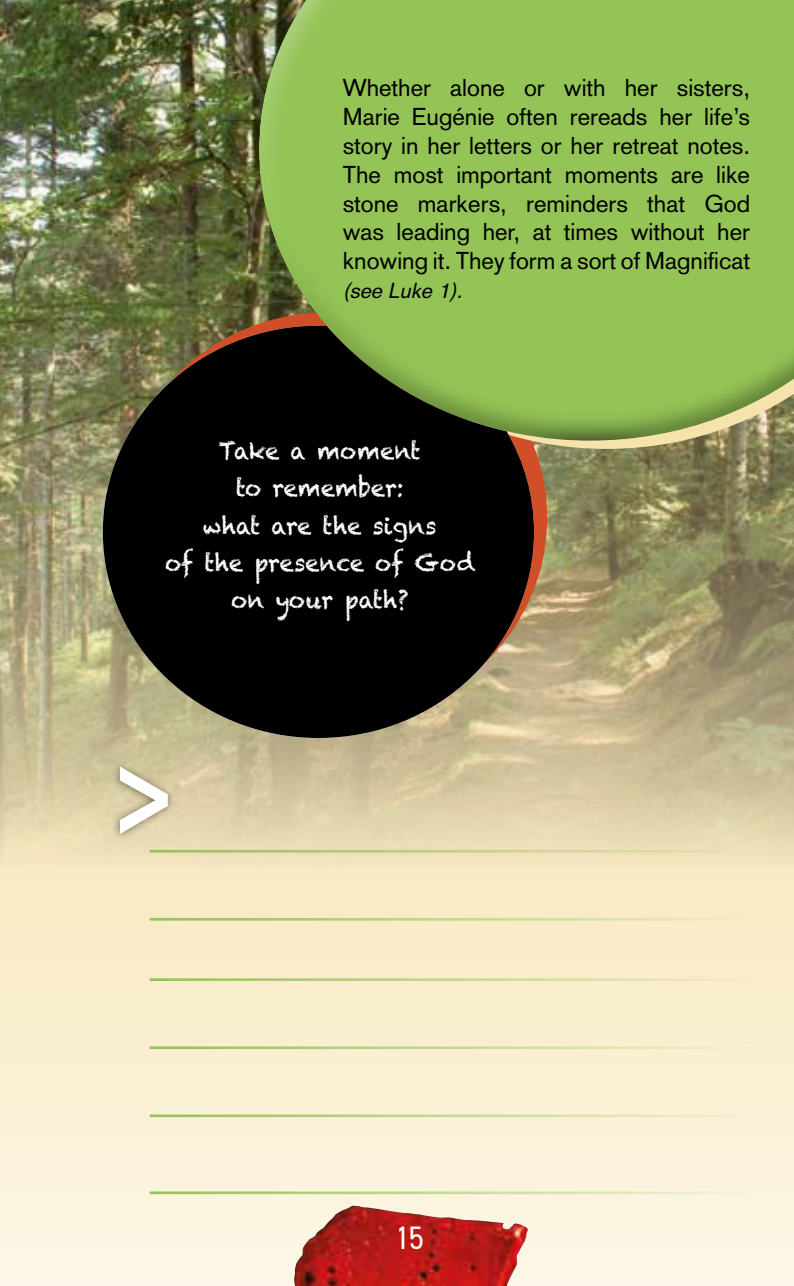
In spite of family resistance, she pursued her path and, in November 1837, she withdrew from society to live with the Benedictines of the Blessed Sacrament in Paris. In August 1838, she joined the Visitation at Côte Saint André. She continued her studies and learned the rudiments of convent life. The certainty that she was loved by God gave her the strength to go forward with great confidence and to climb into the ship with Him, since he would always come to her aid as though by some miracle.







**D**uring the same period, Kate O'Neill in turn went to confession to Father Combalot. It was the same calling: *'God wants you in a work that I must establish.'* After much resistance, she, too, gave herself over to the grace of God. She met Eugénie in the spring of 1839, when the latter was laying the groundwork for the foundation.



Whether alone or with her sisters, Marie Eugénie often rereads her life's story in her letters or her retreat notes. The most important moments are like stone markers, reminders that God was leading her, at times without her knowing it. They form a sort of Magnificat (see Luke 1).

Take a moment  
to remember:  
what are the signs  
of the presence of God  
on your path?



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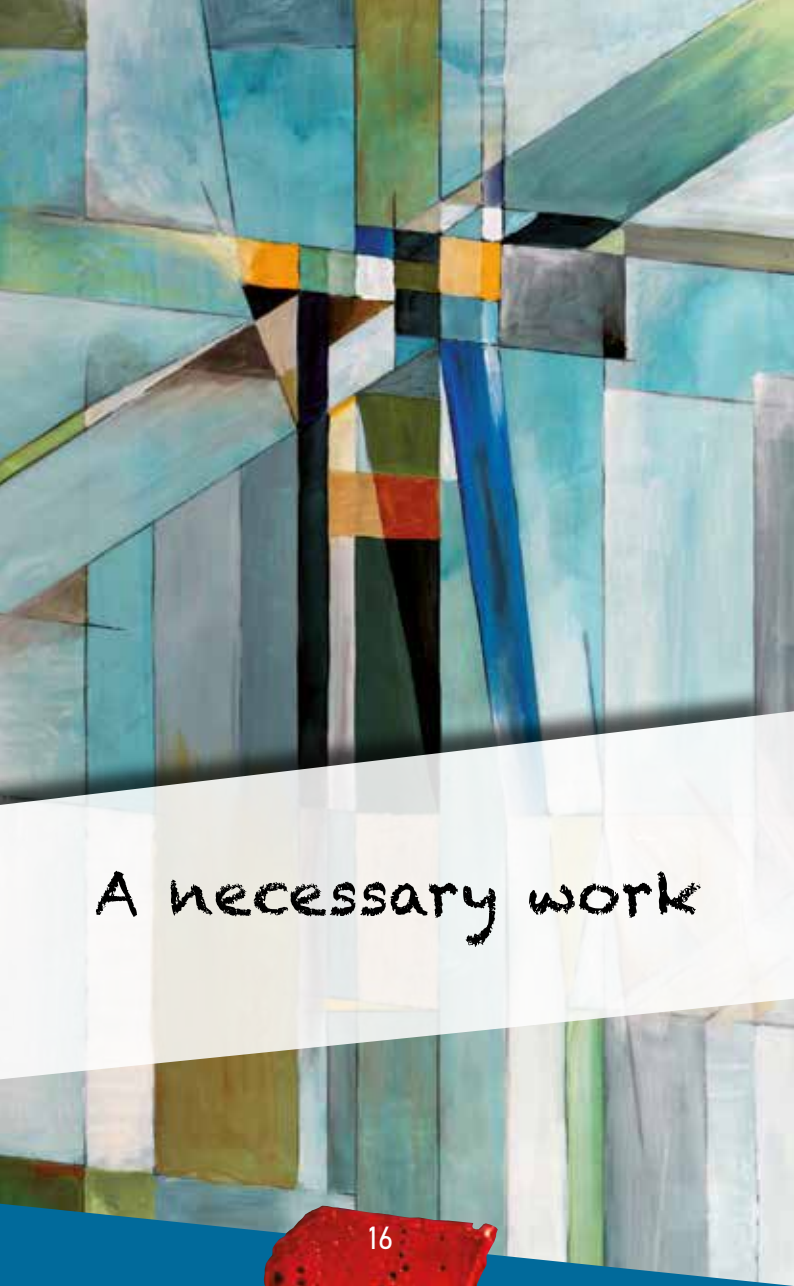
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## A necessary work



Father Combalot had a remarkable gift for persuading young women to join his new Congregation! After Eugénie and Kate, Joséphine de Commarque and Anastasie Bévier were quickly convinced by his enthusiastic description. Through his voice, they heard the call of Christ, the call to undertake a voyage, to open the way for others. The new Congregation was to play its part in transforming society through the education of young girls. The Gospel could be a leaven for social justice and the broadening of the spirit, illuminating the mind and guiding choices. The young Eugénie was convinced that to love one's times, to *understand* and *feel* them, enabled commitment in a decisive manner to the service of the Kingdom.



Marie Eugénie feels called to *"understand and feel"* her era, the concerns of her contemporaries. She founded the Assumption in response to the needs of her time and to work with others to build a better world.

In contemplating the world  
(Psalm 145 can help you here),  
what do you see, and what do you hear?  
What shadows and what lights?  
What challenges? What callings?



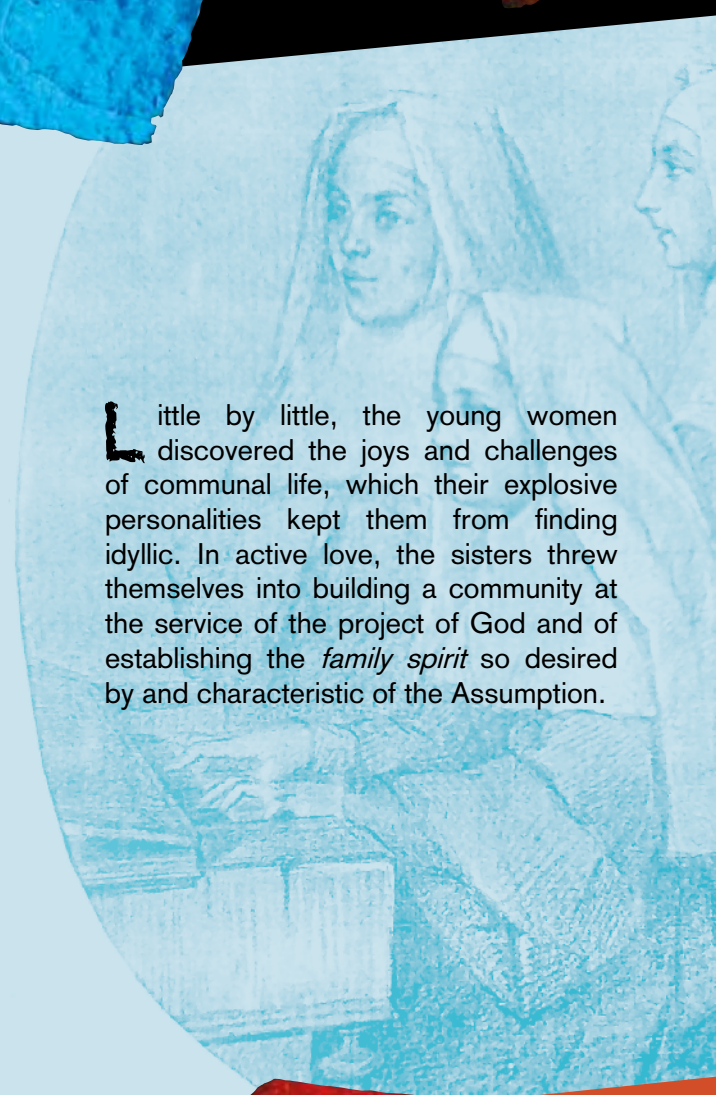
**A**nastasie, Sr Marie Augustine, was the first young woman to join Eugénie, Sr Marie Eugénie, on 30<sup>th</sup> April 1839, the Feast of St. Catherine of Siena, in a small apartment on Rue Férou near Saint Sulpice. It was the founding act of the Religious of the Assumption, made by two humble young women full of faith.




Every day, Kate and her sister Marianne attended Father Combalot's classes with the small community, but they didn't truly take part until the summer relocation to Meudon. Marie Eugénie experienced a special joy when Joséphine, the future Sr Marie Thérèse, joined them, for she had been the first to share her dreams for the Assumption. As for Marianne, in spite of her generosity of heart, it very quickly became apparent that she was not called to the Assumption.




Little by little, the young women discovered the joys and challenges of communal life, which their explosive personalities kept them from finding idyllic. In active love, the sisters threw themselves into building a community at the service of the project of God and of establishing the *family spirit* so desired by and characteristic of the Assumption.





**M**arie Eugénie, for example, didn't take an immediate liking to the independent and brilliant Kate, called to become Sr Thérèse Emmanuel.

Like all close friendships, theirs was built over time as they learned to appreciate their differences of character as a richness to be respected and shared.



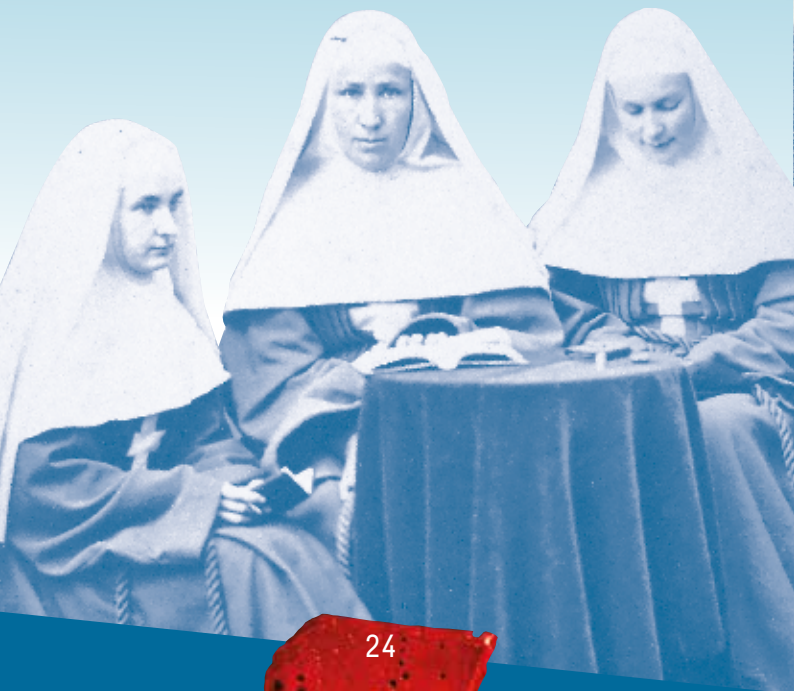
**S**ettled into a new home at Rue de Vaugirard in the centre of Paris, the sisters were able to have daily Mass, adore the Blessed Sacrament, and sing the Divine Office in the chapel. Though little accustomed to household tasks, they embraced their new lifestyle with joy.



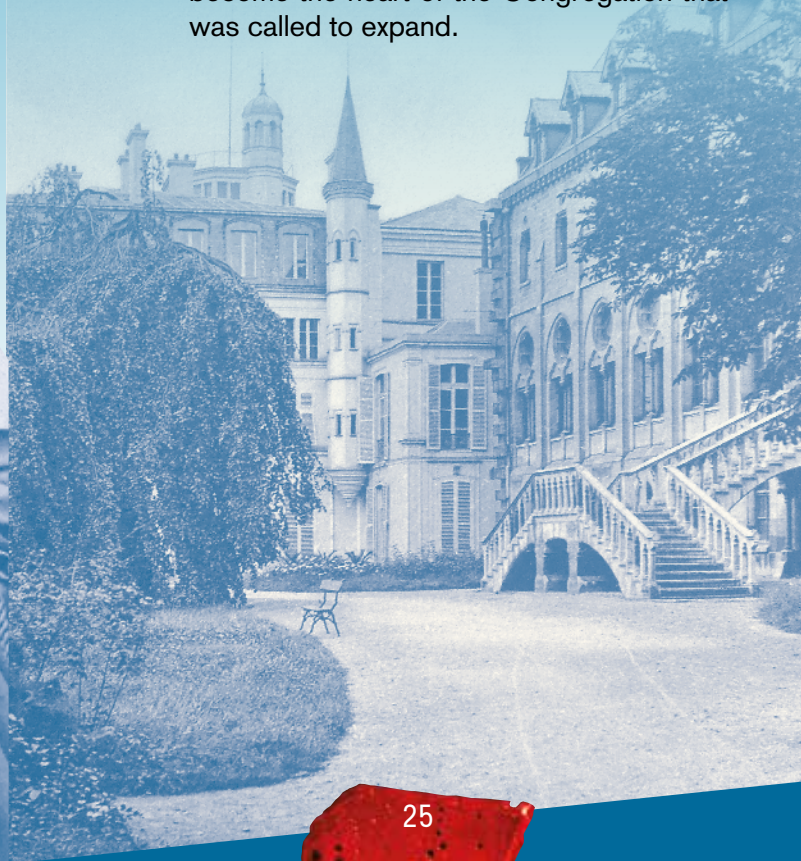
CHRISTUS



**H**owever, before making their initial vows, they would have to part from Father Combalot, who had become increasingly inconsistent and unstable. The young community survived this trial that had threatened to destroy it, thanks to their unity of spirit and the deep conviction that *this work was necessary*. Several months later on 14<sup>th</sup> August 1841, the three original sisters made their vows with great joy.



**T**here followed a series of moves ... They had grown and needed more space. They opened a boarding school. A large abbey was built at the site of the Château de la Thuillerie in Auteuil. It would become the heart of the Congregation that was called to expand.

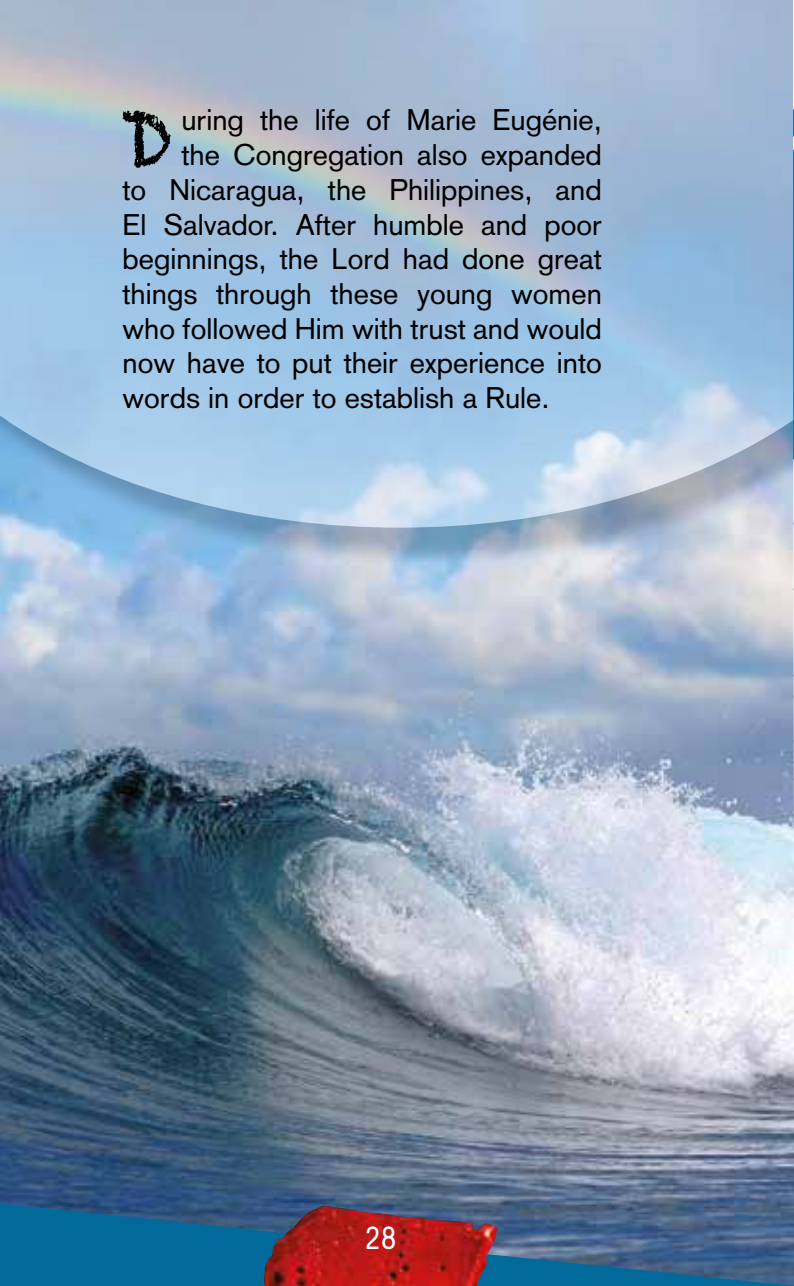


**A**s women passionate about their mission, the sisters began convents in South Africa and New Caledonia in response to appeals from the Church as well as the need for education. The difficulties connected to the distance from Paris did not allow them to pursue the mission as hoped, but their hearts remained alive with a deep and sincere zeal. On the day of their perpetual profession at Christmas in 1844, they asserted: *I dedicate my whole life to the expansion of the Kingdom of Our Lord Jesus Christ.*




**I**n 1850, the foundation in Richmond, England, marked a turning point for the young Congregation. In addition to the orphanage they had established, the sisters became close, in an unobtrusive and effective manner, to the women working in the factories. Responding to the needs of the locality, they discovered how to truly encounter others. Thérèse Emmanuel, the Superior of this community for two years, was very much loved. On returning to Paris, she resumed her responsibility as Novice Mistress and was able to support Marie Eugénie in her continued foundational work, in particular, the establishment of various communities in Europe, schools or houses of adoration: Sedan, Nîmes, London, Bordeaux, Lyon, Malaga ...





During the life of Marie Eugénie, the Congregation also expanded to Nicaragua, the Philippines, and El Salvador. After humble and poor beginnings, the Lord had done great things through these young women who followed Him with trust and would now have to put their experience into words in order to establish a Rule.



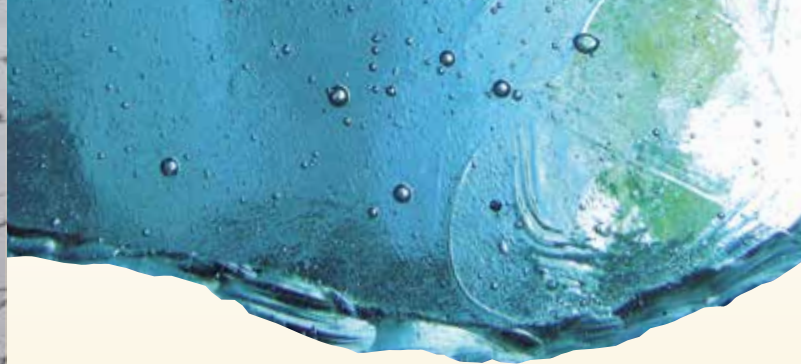
Faced with the calls of the world, each of us is called to “make a difference” through his or her own way of relating and engaging with society, by daring to take “decisive actions” even within a “small sphere”, as the disciples were called to offer the bread that was multiplied (*see Mark 8: 1-9*).

To which calls  
of the world  
can you respond?  
How?  
Which “decisive action”  
do you need to choose?





## The written Rule



**T**o write the Rule is to build the Congregation. Each would say it in her own words, Marie Eugénie through the *beehive* and Thérèse Emmanuel through the *boat*: images, movements and temperaments, experiences ... an adventure where the Lord took the helm.






To write the Rule is also to transmit the *character* of the Congregation: *to indicate a way of life, studies, an aim for our efforts*. One must inform oneself, explore the Rules already in existence, pray, feel, in order to find *our spirit, our primary possession*. The understanding of our two mothers had been fully engaged; their desire was strong, their *faith firm and fervent*. The Rule would write itself through listening to the inner Master, who acted in the secrecy of their being.



After Father Combalot, it would be Marie Eugénie and Thérèse Emmanuel's turn from 1840. Very quickly, resistance emerged: *the Rule was edifying* but utopian. How were they to find an expression which was both faithful to their intuition and acceptable to the men of the Church? How could they unite personal intuition and spiritual hearing?

They would nevertheless persevere, *striving firmly and gently*. This Rule would be modified up until its definitive approval in 1888! And *touching the Rule in order to revise it, when it has been written from bits and pieces, is like touching a house that was built a bit in the same way*. It was life that rewrote the Rule each time.

The writing, the work of a discerning community, would take 49 years. Visions, intuitions, ideas but also esteem, respect and encouragement were woven together to make the unexpected appear. Marie Eugénie worked mainly with Thérèse Emmanuel, who was more developed in the interior life, *who consulted God ... and I would like that to be felt somewhat in our Rule*. For God spoke to her heart for the good of the Congregation. Her gift was to be inhabited by the Scriptures, *that book through which God shows us the way*. There could be found *a host of passages which express what one wants to say*.



**T**o each, her grace. While Marie Eugénie visited the Bishop's office, Thérèse Emmanuel performed *her vocation: to sanctify herself!* She prayed before the Blessed Sacrament. Together, they moved forward with great freedom and good-heartedness, advised by Father d'Alzon. The Rule was a motorway for the Gospel: it consolidated belonging and radicality, and was translated into decisions and a daily way of life. In her letter of profession in 1844, Marie Eugénie asked the Lord to be *the author of the Rule*. Along with her, we can witness through the Rule, that God *strengthens attraction and vocation*.



To write the Rule is to build the Congregation – it is to create a future (*see 1 Cor. 3: 10-17; Ps. 126*). The act of writing engages the whole person.

And you, what are you writing?  
And building through writing?  
God always enters through "our" door,  
through who I am. Through which door  
does God speak to you?  
Which page of the Scripture  
is calling you?



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**T**oday three themes stir our lives, our mission, our faith, moving our minds and hearts.

## The Expression of the Aim

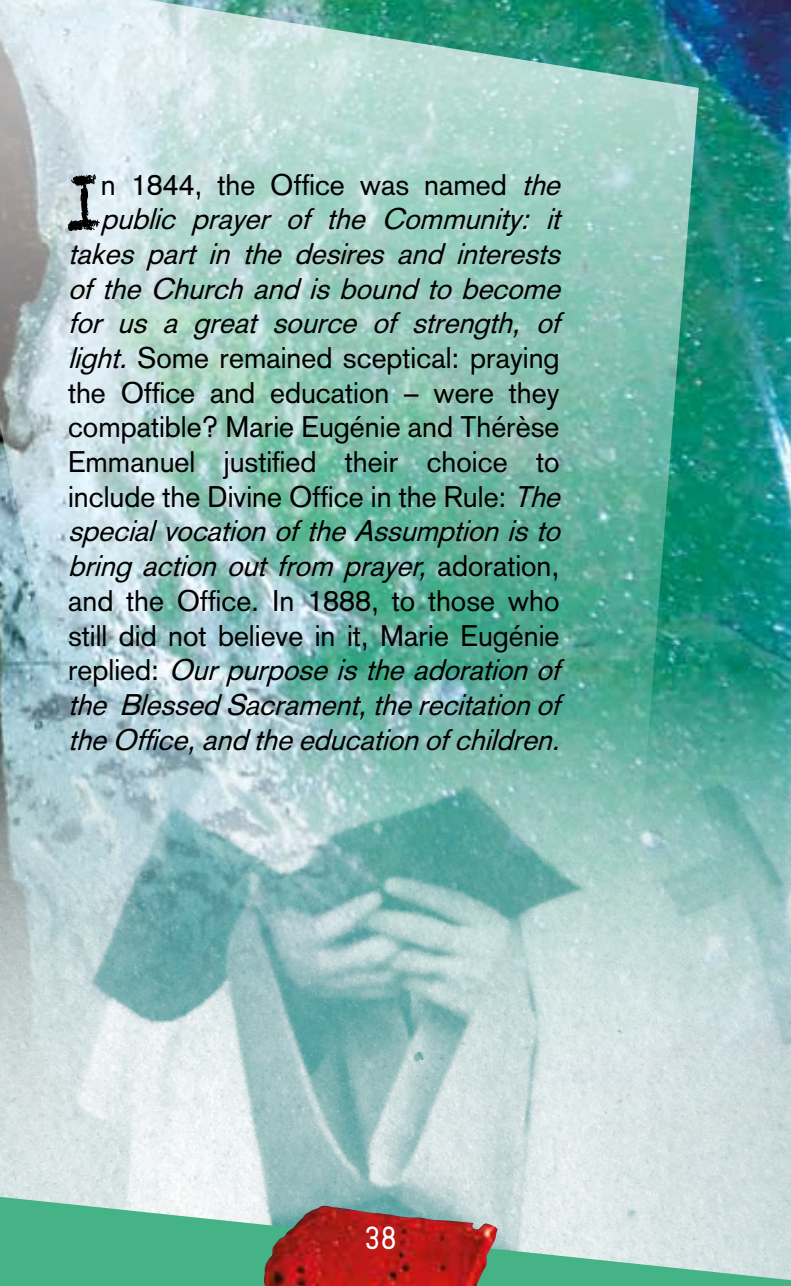
**T**heir unparalleled entire attention on Jesus Christ and the expansion of His Reign still determines the way of life for the Religious of the Assumption today: a contemplative life maintained by silence, the Divine Office and prayer, the origin and strength of their apostolic and missionary zeal. This passage of the current Rule brings us back to the Aim of its beginnings: *to honour the mystery of the Incarnation and the person of Jesus Christ*. Later, *working to make Our Lord known and loved* would be spoken of. The means? *Prayer, the education of the upper classes and the poor, retreats*, and the possibility of going *on Missions*. For the approval of the Rule, all things are united in Christ, to Whom all is given, in working *throughout one's life for the expansion of the Saviour's Reign*.

## The Divine Office<sup>1</sup>

**T**he Divine Office of the Church, prayed each day, would be *the attraction for all the sisters*; it permitted *the attainment of the calm development of faith in the things of the mind*, of shaping oneself for the Kingdom. During the Divine Office in 1838, Marie Eugénie received the motto *Maria assumpta est*. An entire chapter was dedicated to this *important act*. A way of living and loving unfolded around it; an understanding of faith was given.

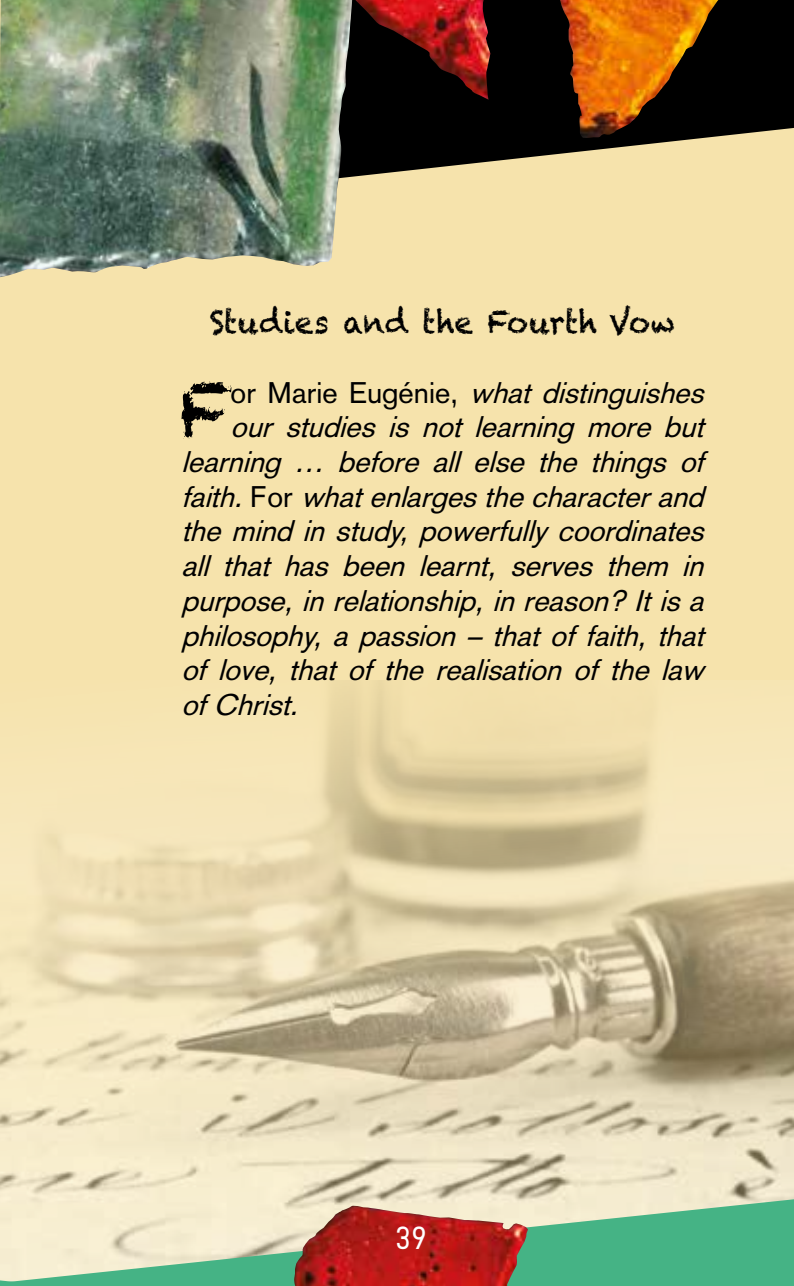
1. Today often known as the Prayer of the Church





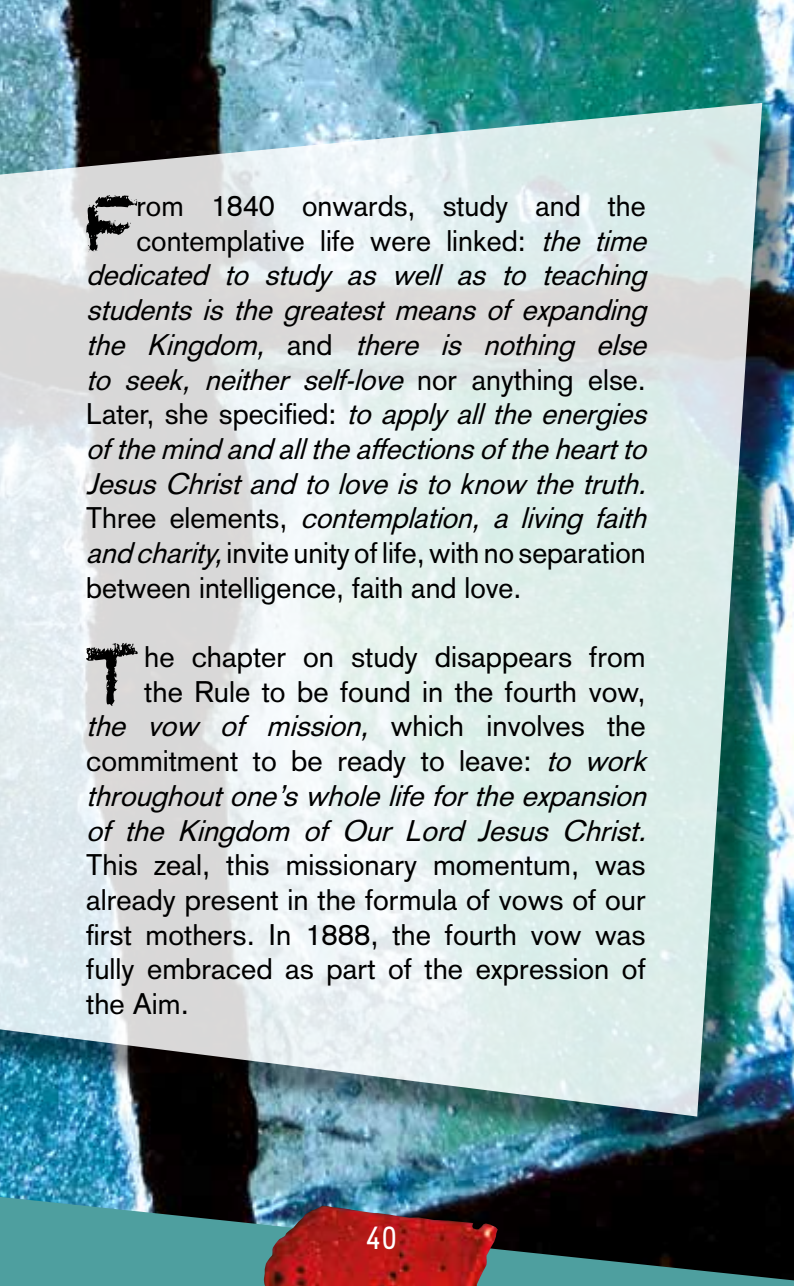
In 1844, the Office was named *the public prayer of the Community: it takes part in the desires and interests of the Church and is bound to become for us a great source of strength, of light*. Some remained sceptical: praying the Office and education – were they compatible? Marie Eugénie and Thérèse Emmanuel justified their choice to include the Divine Office in the Rule: *The special vocation of the Assumption is to bring action out from prayer, adoration, and the Office*. In 1888, to those who still did not believe in it, Marie Eugénie replied: *Our purpose is the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, the recitation of the Office, and the education of children*.

## Studies and the Fourth Vow



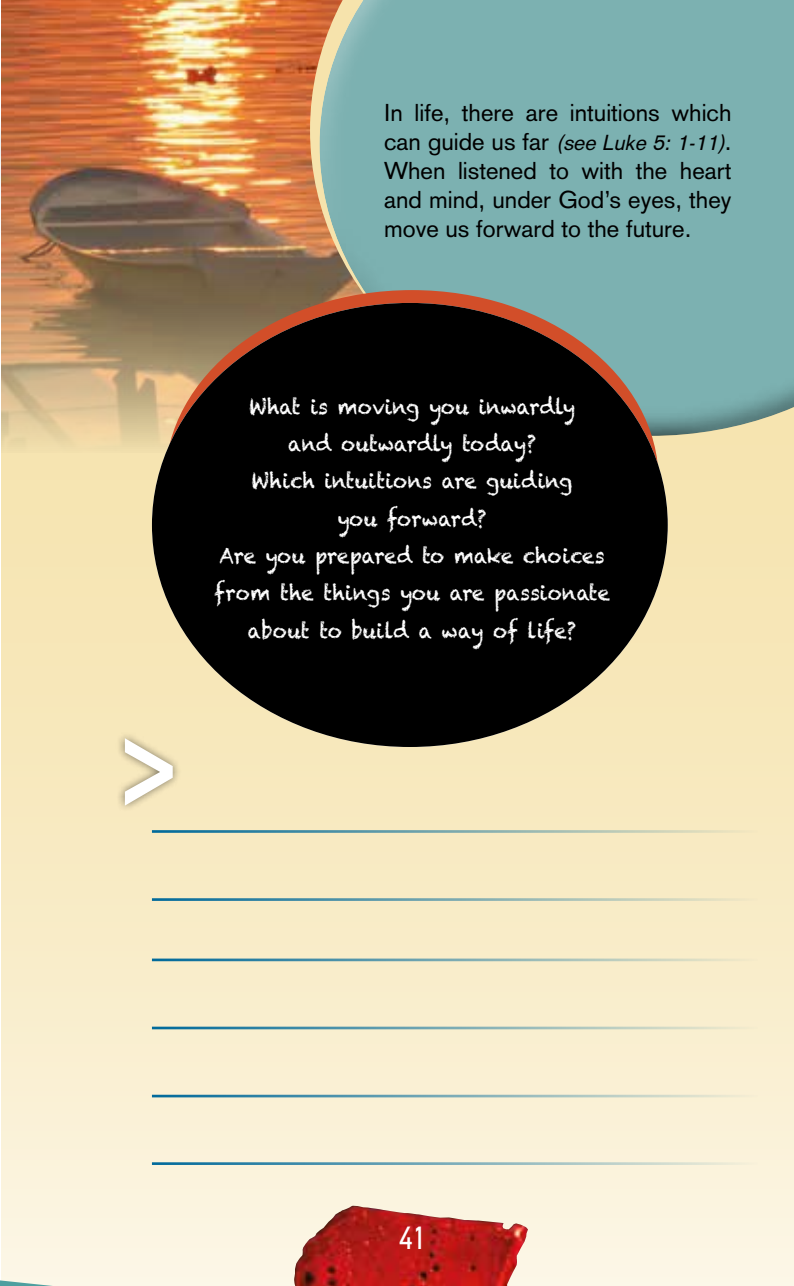
For Marie Eugénie, *what distinguishes our studies is not learning more but learning ... before all else the things of faith*. For *what enlarges the character and the mind in study, powerfully coordinates all that has been learnt, serves them in purpose, in relationship, in reason? It is a philosophy, a passion – that of faith, that of love, that of the realisation of the law of Christ*.





From 1840 onwards, study and the contemplative life were linked: *the time dedicated to study as well as to teaching students is the greatest means of expanding the Kingdom, and there is nothing else to seek, neither self-love nor anything else.* Later, she specified: *to apply all the energies of the mind and all the affections of the heart to Jesus Christ and to love is to know the truth.* Three elements, *contemplation, a living faith and charity*, invite unity of life, with no separation between intelligence, faith and love.

The chapter on study disappears from the Rule to be found in the fourth vow, *the vow of mission*, which involves the commitment to be ready to leave: *to work throughout one's whole life for the expansion of the Kingdom of Our Lord Jesus Christ.* This zeal, this missionary momentum, was already present in the formula of vows of our first mothers. In 1888, the fourth vow was fully embraced as part of the expression of the Aim.



In life, there are intuitions which can guide us far (*see Luke 5: 1-11*). When listened to with the heart and mind, under God's eyes, they move us forward to the future.

What is moving you inwardly  
and outwardly today?  
Which intuitions are guiding  
you forward?  
Are you prepared to make choices  
from the things you are passionate  
about to build a way of life?



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**A** decree signed on 11<sup>th</sup> April 1888 by Pope Leo XIII approved the Rule once and for all. There was immense joy. On 29<sup>th</sup> April, the eve of the foundation's anniversary, Marie Eugénie returned to Cannes, where Thérèse Emmanuel, suffering from tuberculosis, was in her final moments. There on her bed, she left the decree, the result of a finished work, witness to the long road of founding, the seal of God upon the Congregation. Thérèse Emmanuel said her goodbyes: *I belong to the Assumption; my life has been wholly dedicated to it. I am not leaving it – I am going to the Assumption of Eternity. Great duties remain for the elders: they must show the way, train the novices, and affirm what we must be. The Congregation is entering a new phase: a phase of growth and blossoming through the Church's recent recognition of our life.*



**S**he renewed her vows and died on 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1888, surrounded by Marie Eugénie and her sisters. *You know all that this Mother was, what we owe to her spirit of prayer, of zeal, to her fervent love for everything that was of service to Our Lord, the Office, adoration ...*

This friendship built the community, the beehive, and crossed the seas in a boat. The mission continued for the Congregation, with its wings and its oars!





## Paths of friendship

The correspondence between Marie Eugénie and Thérèse Emmanuel testifies to their mutual affection in the service of *the life of the Assumption*. Together they carried its foundations, the questions of the buildings and composition of the communities, the sisters' ailments, their lack of fervour, the search for money, the hardships and the joys... Marie Eugénie loved as a *Mother, a sister, a friend*, and Thérèse Emmanuel was devoted to her: *since you are a mother, I am a daughter*.



Madame  
Madame la Supérieure Générale  
des Religieuses de l'Assomption  
à Autun  
Paris



This friendship helped Marie Eugénie to bear a burden that she had not chosen and that called her to decentre from herself to assume her role in the community. On the departure of Father Combalot, she felt inexperienced as the Mother Superior and Foundress of this *foundation without a founder*, as well as *unqualified* to guide the sisters. It was through leaning on Christ that she accepted this responsibility.



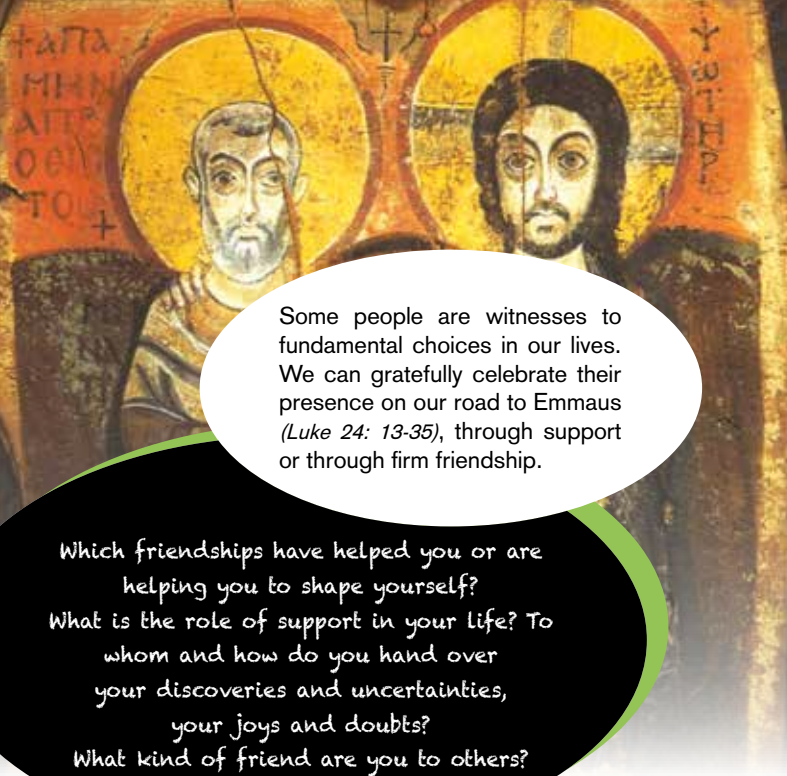
She also saw her role as that of a businesswoman, for whom Jesus was the model in her public life. For her, the work came first. She coordinated the parlours, the correspondence and the travels, always watching out for *the general welfare of the house*, more than for *the interests of individual personalities*.



Father d'Alzon encouraged her to assume the position of Mother Superior and, in 1858, prepared her to accept the election to Superior General for life. When she met him in 1838, Marie Eugénie immediately felt *a great deal of respect and trust*. He very quickly became a support. Their correspondence, based on freedom, straightforwardness, and trust, reveals their cooperation. They helped each other for the sake of the foundations, the Rule, the spiritual life...

Their friendship overcame misunderstandings. Shortly before his death in 1880, he wrote to Marie Eugénie: *Nothing remains but God and a few friends, God willing. I put you in the first place of those left to me.*





Some people are witnesses to fundamental choices in our lives. We can gratefully celebrate their presence on our road to Emmaus (Luke 24: 13-35), through support or through firm friendship.

Which friendships have helped you or are helping you to shape yourself?  
What is the role of support in your life? To whom and how do you hand over your discoveries and uncertainties, your joys and doubts?  
What kind of friend are you to others?

**T**h  r  se Emmanuel, for her part, occupied the position of Novice Mistress for almost all her life. She guided the young sisters so that they could discover *the good that existed within them and that would help them to grow*. Attentive to their gifts as well as to their struggles, she believed that *each had her perfume, her colour, her form, her unique and special nuance*. She also invited them to weigh every word of the Rule, every personal choice, for *there is nothing insignificant or unnecessary in the spiritual life*. She required their cooperation as partners in their own training, referring them unceasingly to the Lord, their *friend*, their *brother*, their *spouse*. She welcomed this role as the work of God through her: *I enlighten you with infinite care, but ... it is for the others. I have made you a channel so that you may water others*.



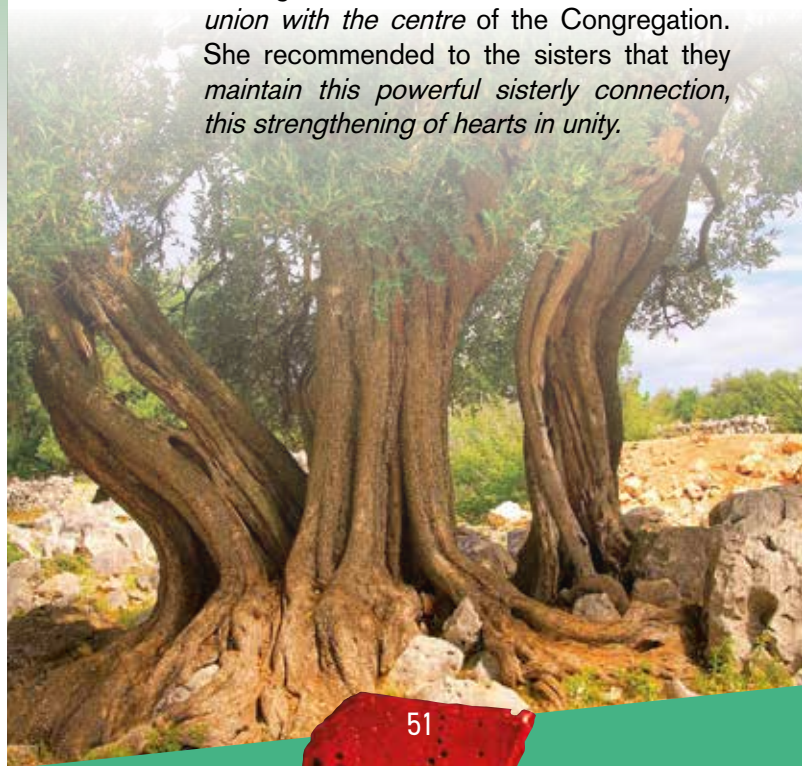


"Each of us has a mission on earth", each of us possesses a special grace, a talent to bear fruit in the service of others. Gifts and responsibility (Matthew 25: 14-30).


What is your  
"special grace"?  
What talent  
can you develop  
for the service of  
the Church  
and of the world?



**M**arie Eugénie counted on the formation to transmit the spirit of the Assumption to the young sisters, for *we are all the rocks of the foundation. Unity of spirit*, a priority for her, required mutual understanding of the regulations in order to remain in *faithful union with the centre* of the Congregation. She recommended to the sisters that they *maintain this powerful sisterly connection, this strengthening of hearts in unity.*








When the threat of division loomed, she called upon them to seek *all together that which is best for the Congregation*; here Thérèse Emmanuel demonstrated an unwavering friendship. They learned to rely together on God, who remained when people failed: *He can act freely. We are supported by the greatest help in leaning on Him.* He had taken hold of their hearts.

Very soon, spiritual graces followed one after the other for Thérèse Emmanuel. At Christmas in 1840, at the Chapel of the Visitation, she received this saying with power: *Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus, Dominus Deus Sabaoth!* She heard it resound throughout the entire midnight mass and she allowed it to work on her soul, *an empty stable, bare, battered by the wind, that must put off itself so that Jesus can be born within it.* One day in August 1843, she confided to Marie Eugénie that during adoration she had been as though inwardly overturned by Jesus Christ, who told her: *'My life was crucified. I want to put my life in you.'*



**M**arie Eugénie tried to accompany her, but she did not always understand this spiritual life so different from her own. Helpless, she confided in Father d'Alzon, seeking a more accurate discernment and encouraged Thérèse Emmanuel to write to him. Later, Monsignor Gay helped Thérèse Emmanuel to decipher the mystery of a God who gave of himself through her weakness: *I want it to be I who lives in you.*

**F**or her part, Marie Eugénie was attracted to the mystery of the Incarnation, the foundation of her personal life and of the apostolic dynamism of the Assumption: *Oh, my God ... I offer myself to you forever to be a member of your Holy Incarnation.* Whenever she was lost, she would take the *words of the Gospel* as her *compass*, certain that God would work within her, there to form *the likeness of Jesus Christ*, whom she would shine forth.

Like a painter seeking to replicate Christ, a candle that merges its own flame with that of God, or a crystal which allows the latter to pass through itself *like a radiant sun*, she embarked on a permanent process of transformation, the principle of her spiritual life.





Engraved on Marie Eugénie's profession ring are these words: "Lord, thou knowest that I love thee" (see John 21: 15-22). She dares to draw near to Christ, contemplating him with attention and passion, she engraves within herself the traits of his humanity... The way of contemplation of a woman who let herself be seduced and transformed...

Which image of Christ  
captivates you?  
Which of his traits  
do you wish  
to have yourself?



**M**arie Eugénie's path to holiness, marked by perseverance and enterprising boldness but also by questions, sensitivity, and the awareness of her limits, took shape in this desire for the likeness that transfigured her humanity on the humble path of the everyday. At the end of her life, it became even simpler: *Now I want nothing except to be good.*

During the General Chapter of 1894, she resigned her office and welcomed Sr Marie Célestine as Vicar. Four years later, on 10<sup>th</sup> March 1898, she breathed her last after a long path of letting go. Marie Célestine wrote: *One can never replace a Foundress (...) We have the sweet trust that Our Mother, this Foundress chosen by Our Lord for our Congregation, shall live through all who are called to govern us ...*



**M**arie Eugénie and Thérèse Emmanuel steered the boat together, their eyes fixed on Christ, who was the vessel, the destination and the compass, by taking the oars with Him to face the winds. Each acted like a good helmsman who *gives all his attention to holding the position that he must maintain in order to arrive at the journey's end, because the life of all the passengers depends on how he steers his ship.* It was thus that the oars became wings, giving birth to an unfurling, the sign of the blessing of God.

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