



## Marie Eugenie, Notre Dame and Lacordaire

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Notre Dame Cathedral is sacred ground for the Assumption. At the present, when the whole world has witnessed with pain the burning of this monument for our faith and our Congregation, it is good to read what our Archives offer us about Marie Eugénie's experience there. Indeed, we have some manuscripts, written by Marie Eugénie, which are real treasures.

*"Towards the end of the summer of 1838 I saw Father d'Alzon for the first time. I had just turned 21 years old. During Lent of 1836, I attended Father Lacordaire's conferences. In order to have a place, we arrived a long time in advance. I thus had long hours of prayer at Notre-Dame, where the first thoughts of a religious vocation came to me. "*<sup>1</sup>

This is how Marie Eugenie evokes the conferences of Lent 1836 at Notre Dame in a small notebook of memories, the original of which is in the Archives.

In a conversation about the beginnings of the Congregation, (April 30, 1881, on the Feast of St. Catherine of Siena) she mentions again her intense experience in Notre Dame. *"In 1836, I attended Father Lacordaire's conferences at Notre Dame. I was then staying with Madame Foulon my cousin. Thanks to a family having connections with the Chapter of the Church, we were able to secure three places near the( communion) bench; but, as there were many people, we arrived for the ten o'clock high mass, and remained in the church until the conference, which began at one o'clock, which gave us a considerable time to pray. It was a great grace for me; I have never prayed better than in this church, and it is there, for the first time, that I had the thought of my vocation. "*<sup>2</sup>

In a letter to Father Picard, written in 1862<sup>3</sup>, she retells the story of the foundation, and again, it is easy to imagine the ancient arches of the cathedral, in the midst of a colorful crowd, reminiscent of the generations who have already prayed in this place and announcing future generations: *"I want to start today the account for which you asked me concerning the beginnings of our Institute ( ...) **The first movment of my vocation came to me in Notre - Dame during the conferences of 1836.** I say the first movement because it was still something vague, uncertain, the desire to devote myself to the cause of God and the Church without knowing where or how. Father Lacordaire's predication awakened my faith and determined me to commit myself entirely on the side of the truth. **The long hours that I spent waiting for him, the Church itself where so many Christian generations had passed and whose depths seemed to me reserved for the steps of those whose lives are entirely consecrated to God, acted so deeply on me.** God had,*

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<sup>1</sup> Archives des Religieuses de l'Assomption, n°1505

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Textes Fondateurs, Volume 2

<sup>3</sup> Marie Eugénie, Lettre au Père Picard, n°1509, 8 novembre 1862, in Textes Fondateurs, Volume 2

*I believe, had touched on my soul for the first time at my first communion, but I did not understand it. It was at Notre Dame that I began to hear his voice. "*

After this "conversion" in Notre Dame, (the memorial of which is affixed to the pulpit of the cathedral which resisted the fire), an exchange with Father Lacordaire was born. Marie Eugenie continues, in her letter to Father Picard: "At the end of the conferences, I was eager to see Father Lacordaire. My mind had passed by doubts, I also had difficulties linked to my situation. He advised me to read many serious books... M. de Maistre, M. de Bonald, Bourdaloue, etc., and without admitting the thought of vocation about which I said a word to him, he told me beautiful things about religious life that I have never forgotten. He presented it as the gift that a soul gives of himself to Jesus Christ to help him in the work of the redemption of humanity, each according to his attraction, some by suffering, and others by the apostolate or good works. He gave as an example the Order of the Redemption of the Captives, where it is promised to Jesus Christ to make himself a slave for the deliverance of those whom He has come to redeem, *formam servi accipiens*. At the time he was Madame de Swetchine's chaplain, and it was in the two little rooms she gave him in her hotel that he received me.

*My resolution from this time was to become seriously and truly Christian, not in the manner of the world, but in the manner of the Gospel. I spent the year reading, praying often, as I could, for I had no guide, and I had very little instruction in all that concerned the service of God. "*

In the conversation of 1881, already mentioned, Marie Eugenie also recounts the story of her first meeting with Lacordaire: "I arranged to see Father Lacordaire, at the end of his conferences, without anyone knowing it; he put me in the most violent state where someone could be put. I had made my appointment with him at Madame Swetchine's. I was accompanied by an elderly maid. We were taken to Father Lacordaire's apartment, and we were made to wait in a first room. The library caused me a certain astonishment: they were all romantic, modern books, Benjamin Constant and others. Father Lacordaire arrived, or rather the abbe Lacordaire, for he was not yet religious, but he already had of extreme reserve, great modesty, barely raising his eyes. Only, after having introduced me alone into a second room where he worked, and at the end of which one could see an alcove, he began by closing the lock. I was, by my education, the most fearful person about being alone with men. When I saw him close the bolt, my first move was to measure mentally the distance from the window to the garden, and I burst into tears. He, who understood nothing of my despair, seemed rather astonished, and said to me, "Mademoiselle, calm down."

*I did calm down, and I never forgot the comparison he made then, to give me an idea of what religious life is. "For example, in the old orders that were founded in the Church, there was the Order of Mercy: these were people who, knowing that others were slaves, offered to sacrifice everything, even their freedom, to redeem the captives and give them to Jesus Christ. That's what religious life is: a gift of oneself to save souls. "*

*After a few moments, he gave me a list of books to read, and I did not see him again. I read many of these books; there were some well-chosen ones: the Mélanges; de Monsieur de Bonald, the works of Monsieur de Maistre, the Mysteries of Bourdaloue.*

If, after this meeting, the young Anne Eugenie did not see Father Lacordaire for spiritual direction, the departure of the Abbot Combalot led the new foundress to reconnect with Father Lacordaire in 1841. The trust she showed is touching: *"I cannot, father, find any excuse to come and bore you from so far. Let me not even search for it, and tell you in all simplicity that it often seems to me that, having done me much good in the past, you may be destined by God to finish saving me and to save me. to conform to JC, by bringing me out of a thousand troubles, in which I hardly think I can be assisted except by you."*<sup>4</sup>

On this occasion, she returns to the experience of her first communion: *"But God in his kindness had left me a bond of love"* then to the experience of Notre-Dame and its context: *"A new change led near very pious women, and this was perhaps my greatest danger. They bored me, they seemed to me narrow, and though I resumed my annual Easter confessions, I never so strongly had the spirit of the world, and I was close to despising that of God. It was then, my father, that the mercy which pursued me brought me to your pulpit. Since it was necessary to follow a Lent [cycle], I had chosen yours. Grace was awaiting me there. Your word answered all my thoughts, it explained my instincts, it completed my intelligence of things, it revived in me this idea of duty, this desire for good -all ready to wither in my soul-, it gave me a new generosity, a faith that nothing should waver. I will not tell you, father, to measure my gratitude-these blessings are fulfilled only in Heaven- but I can say that since that time there has been no sacrifice or prayer for me in which your memory has not taken the first place. It was the last year of your Conferences. Before leaving for Italy, I dared to ask you for a few moments, and although I did nothing but talk to you about my doubts, the difficulties of my position, and that my first thoughts of a religious vocation did not arouse much more than your smile... I was really converted, and I had conceived the desire to give all my strength, or rather all my weakness, to this Church, which alone henceforth before my eyes, had here below the secret and the power of good.* She then confided about her painful experience of the Church.

In another letter, Marie Eugénie seems to induce a long term epistolary relationship, a relationship that would enable her to find a wise counsel with the Father: *"My Reverend Father, I was late in thanking you for the advice contained in your answer, but I have done it only in order to contain myself exactly within the limits of the permission which you have kindly granted me to address to you when I need positive advice. Desiring today to ask you some things with all the simplicity of absolute confidence in which I am before God, wanting to address you, I will ask you, Father, permission to answer your letter first, and to tell you the aspirations I bring in the*

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<sup>4</sup> MARIE EUGENIE, Lettre au Père Lacordaire n°1501, 13 décembre 1841

*correspondence which you would graciously accord me.”*<sup>5</sup>

The criterion she expresses in order to live this relationship with serenity are interesting: complete freedom for Father Lacordaire to answer her requests or not; the freedom not to answer Marie Eugénie's questions if they are too indiscreet; the opportunity to pose any questions that he deems useful to better understand; the freedom for Marie Eugénie to express, if necessary, her difficulty in answering; mercy for the excessive naivety she sometimes shows...

In response to this trust, Father Lacordaire shows great support for Marie Eugénie, as seen by some original letters that can be consulted in the Archives.

Here are some eloquent examples:

- "Trust and perseverance are the virtues you need most, and I pray God to give them to you. (About the Constitutions)"<sup>6</sup>
- "Write to me whenever you want; I repeat to you that you will never tire me, and I will always answer you as best as I can. I will be as simple with you as you are with me."<sup>7</sup>
- Your last letter "comforted me by informing me that you were tranquil on the part of the diocesan authority, to which you finally inspired confidence, and which will not seek any more to modify your rules in a direction opposed to the vocation that God has inspired you. It is a very big gain, the rest will come in its time. We must never be in a hurry with God, being assured by Holy Scripture that His ways are not our ways and that we must do everything with strength and gentleness."<sup>8</sup> The experience of Marie Eugénie at Notre Dame and the beautiful relationship that followed with Lacordaire really make this cathedral a unique place for the Assumption. Among the "treasures" of the Archives, we can find the drafts of the letters n° 1501 and 1502, written by the hand of Marie Eugénie, as well as the originals of a dozen letters from Father Lacordaire, between 1841 and 1850 ... Notice to amateurs who wish to study this correspondence!

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<sup>5</sup> MARIE EUGENIE, Lettre au Père Lacordaire n°1502, 4 février 1842

<sup>6</sup> Lettre du Père Lacordaire à Marie Eugénie, 19 novembre 1841, original conservé aux Archives

<sup>7</sup> Lettre du Père Lacordaire à Marie Eugénie, 10 mars 1842, original conservé aux Archives

<sup>8</sup> Lettre du Père Lacordaire à Marie Eugénie, 5 octobre 1842, original conservé aux Archives