



MARIE EUGENIE AND COMMUNION (Part 1)

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 closest people. 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 Thérèse, 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 father¹ and yours repeat to me all the words, all the details of these short interviews that were enough to hold you 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 it is here 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 thoughts, of that fraternity finally, that you are willing to accept in the future."*²

Working together for the Kingdom, sharing the same vision, feeling 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 cooling down, 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 inside 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."*³

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 THE UNITY

¹ Il s'agit de l'Abbé Combalot

² Il s'agit de l'Abbé Combalot

³ Marie Eugénie, Notes intimes, *Mai 1837, n°160/01*

The first condition of communion for Marie Eugenie is the ability to drink from the same source, to immerse 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 Thérèse Emmanuel left for England where she was the Superior of the Richmond Foundation. This is the first separation between the two Mothers and therefore also the first time we can find a good match between them. Very soon after Mother Therese Emmanuel's arrival in England, some families of the young girls who wish to become Religious of the Assumption insist 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 rising from the beginning, 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."*⁴ 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."*⁵

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 Thérèse 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 for our first sisters.

One day, when there was a problem with the relationship between the Superior of Nîmes and Father d'Alzon, Marie Eugénie 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 be nothing outside the closest union at the center of the Congregation."*⁶ 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 rapprochement not only be a joy for us, but also an opportunity to renew ourselves, to soak us again. And how can we re-soak 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."*⁷ 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.

⁴ Marie Eugénie à Mère Thérèse Emmanuel, 3 juin 1850, n°285

⁵ Marie Eugénie à Mère Thérèse Emmanuel, 3 juin 1850, n°285

⁶ Marie Eugénie à Mère Marie Gabrielle, 6 mars 1865, n°5465

⁷ Marie Eugénie, Instruction de chapitre du 13 août 1891, « *Sur l'esprit de l'Assomption : louange, amour, joie* »



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 that we can take to lay the foundation stone of unity: what importance do we attach to them?
- * What consolidates our communion, our unity?

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 Eugénie 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, wives 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 the reason developed, they have fantasies, whims, so firmness is necessary with them, but that 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. »*⁸

In the Councils 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."*⁹ 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.

⁸ Marie Eugénie, Instruction de chapitre du 6 septembre 1891, « *Sur la bonté* »

⁹ Marie Eugénie, *Conseils sur l'éducation*, 1842, n°1511



A small exercise of vigilance:

* 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 saying inwardly of 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 Eugénie 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 absolutely as in the other, in the same spirit, in the same customs, so that all may be in faithful union with the center. This is what makes the strength of a Congregation."*¹⁰

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 Eugénie 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 in the "Councils 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 of the house? 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 neglect on any point other than that of study, she will not find it necessary to demand external discipline with such accuracy. However, my daughters, if they were all right, which would be difficult, since they would all have a different opinion, it would be better for education to adopt a worse way than all of them, but one that would be uniform in all teachers."*¹¹

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 Eugénie questions us because she gives more importance to the common way of

¹⁰ Marie Eugénie, Instruction de chapitre du 3 septembre 1876, « *Pratique fidèle et fervente de nos règles* »

¹¹ Marie Eugénie, *Conseils sur l'éducation*, 1842, n°1511

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 uses of the house rather than in one's own ideas, one obtains 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.”¹²

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 teacher of the residential school, or the class teacher, or the teacher of studies in what she tells you to do, so that there may be unity and together in the organization of the residential school. Thus, that the sisters in charge of the lessons confine themselves within the framework traced out to them, that they take the trouble to go all the way and that, by a poorly understood zeal, they do not go any further.”¹³ 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 of vigilance:

- * 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 applying? How can I be stimulated?

• Getting rid of oneself

What does this mean? **Marie Eugenie often returns to the necessity 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, 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 myself with this character, myself with this vivacity, myself with these tastes, myself with these antipathies; it is this “myself” in all its forms that must be rejected and left, if we want to have the forms of our Lord Jesus Christ. Philosophers say that it is quite impossible to make two opposing forms live together in the same subject. Thus, an artist cannot make a human figure that is both strong and delicate, energetic and lacking in vigor. The same is true for our soul. As long as our own form remains, the form 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.”¹⁴ The quality of our relationship with God and our relationship with others depends on the vigor of this work to detach us from our "self".

The following week, in a new chapter, we can find the same idea, applied this time to the mission of education: “By starting again this life 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

¹² Marie Eugénie, *Conseils sur l'éducation*, 1842, n°1511

¹³ Marie Eugénie, Instruction de Chapitre du 24 septembre 1871, « *Recommandations relatives au pensionnat* »

¹⁴ Marie Eugénie, Instruction de Chapitre du 4 octobre 1874, « *Nous défaire de notre amour-propre pour nous revêtir de Notre Seigneur Jésus* »

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 his own views, his 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 teacher of studies and by the teacher of the residential school in charge of student discipline. Without this unity no good can be done, and this unity is based on the spirit of humility.”¹⁵

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

- * 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, I..." into "if you want, we..."

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Novembre 2019

TO COME:

MARIE EUGENIE AND COMMUNION (Part 2)

III- COMMUNION IN TIMES OF CRISIS

IV- IMAGES OF COMMUNION

¹⁵ Marie Eugénie, Instruction de chapitre du 11 octobre 1874, « *L'esprit d'unité fondé sur l'esprit d'humilité* »