

Études Picpuciennes 11



SSCC APOSTOLIC DISCERNMENT

Available for God's action

Alberto Toutin scc
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Translation from the French by Derek Lavery ssc.

Father Marie-Joseph Coudrin and
Mother Henriette Aymer de la Chevalerie,
co-workers with God.

Criteria for apostolic discernment
in view of pastoral and missionary conversion.

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the history of our world has been marked by events whose impact we are still in the process of measuring: social plurality and globalisation, technical developments offering unprecedented possibilities for communication and the cure of diseases. But we are also seeing an increase in the destructive and degrading power of the planet that is home for us, the circulation of financial capital and the opening up of markets without borders, as well as the need for regulations to ensure a fair distribution of goods and conditions worthy of work. We are citizens who are increasingly informed and responsible for our future, while governments seem increasingly removed from the real concerns of the people.

All this has had an impact on the life of the Church, which is facing the challenge of building a real communion for the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus, in a context marked by elements that are not only intercultural and inter-religious but also by internal tensions that are not always indicative of vitality. Moreover, with regard to ministries in the Church, their theology and their implementation in communities are challenged not only by the situations of abuse that institutionally affect the Church, but also by the awareness that the Church, made up of all baptised men and women, must also carry within itself the concern for the proclamation of the Gospel. The pandemic has highlighted our radical interdependence and our fragility, and therefore the need for a coordinated effort to move forward towards a more fraternal

and united world. These are situations that can overwhelm us as Christians; an urgent and fine discernment is needed from us in order to situate ourselves and provide paths of hope. Like any transformation, it does not happen without pain and loss. It was while grappling with these enormous challenges that the pastors gathered in Aparecida (Brazil) in 2007 to take stock of the transformations that needed to be implemented in the Church:

“We need to develop the missionary dimension of life in Christ. The Church needs to be jolted to prevent it from becoming well established in comfort, stagnation, and lukewarmness, aloof from the suffering of the continent’s poor. We need every community to become a powerful radiating centre of life in Christ. We hope for a new Pentecost that will free us from fatigue, disillusionment, and conformity to the environment; a coming of the Spirit who renews our joy and our hope.”¹

The events mentioned above and many others that we could add have shaken us and force us to question our ways of living as religious and also our way of being and of serving in the Church.

The last General Chapters of the brothers and sisters in 2018 took up some of the challenges launched by our world; the chapters expressed a deep desire for the spirit to work in vast sectors of the Church: the desire for a deep pastoral

¹ See: V Latin American Episcopal Conference *Aparecida* (2007), 362.

and missionary conversion. The magnitude of such a challenge can only be properly adjusted, in its demands and possibilities, if we progress together in our discernment with all our brothers and sisters in Christ, with seekers of God from other religions, with all the men and women who are friends of God and with whom we journey on the roads of the present world. We tackle this with confidence in the Lord Jesus, who never ceases to build his Church, a visible and effective sign of salvation through his dialogue open to all. In this dialogue, Jesus always takes the initiative through his Spirit, for it is the Spirit who can convert hearts and transform the structures of his Church. And in this logic of dialogue, it is the Spirit who takes the initiative to come to the level of man and woman; as such, the Spirit enables people to converse with Jesus, and to consent to him acting through them, so that the Gospel may be received in light of the expectations of humanity and the cries of Creation.

In the current circumstances, it is in the reception of the Gospel that its beauty and its source of ongoing renewal are verified in each of us and in the Church:

“Whenever we make the effort to return to the source and to recover the original freshness of the Gospel, new avenues arise, new paths of creativity open up, with different forms of expression, more eloquent signs and words with new meaning for today’s world. Every form of authentic evangelisation is always “new.” (*Evangelii Gaudium* [EG] 11).

We have received the Gospel by which we live thanks to an uninterrupted chain of witnesses who have also let themselves be shaken by the events of their time; they scrutinised the times to see in them the challenges of God and knew how to relay this dialogue of salvation in their day. As members of the religious family of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, we receive the Gospel as it was lived by our Founders, Father Marie-Joseph Coudrin and Mother Henriette Aymer. They, too, were shaken by the social uprising and by the criticism against an ecclesial institution that had become too complacent towards the monarchs, who legitimised an unjust social order that was distant from the suffering and misery of the people. They were also shaken by the tears appearing in the social and ecclesial fabric and by the precariousness of resources. Our Founders, inspired by the Gospel manifested in the Hearts of Jesus and Mary, knew how to incarnate in their lives and in our religious family, this dialogue of salvation. In the journey of their life, in the way in which they let themselves be touched by the challenges of the world and the Church of their time, we can find sources of inspiration and criteria that help us to relay the action of God for the Church in the world today.

Ultimately, the pastoral and missionary conversion of the Church is the response of men and women to a reality which overwhelms them, which they read in the light of the Gospel; they thus prepare themselves so that God may continue through them a dialogue of salvation and the work of completing his creation. Pierre Coudrin and Henriette Aymer made themselves available to the action of God and trans-

lated it into a form of life for our religious family of the Sacred Hearts. They called it “the work of God”, to make it clear that in their discernment and in their choices, they sought only to follow God’s vision and standards for acting in the world.

In this work, we present some of the main lines and criteria that have guided the discernment and the choices of our Founders. Their itinerary can also stimulate the journey of our sisters, brothers and secular branch members of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts, so that the Lord God may never cease to call us to support his work. In this discernment, we can witness how God continues his dialogue of salvation via the human journey, entering into the adventure of our freedom. Our presentation is structured around six main points which, on the one hand, are adapted according to the experience of each of our Founders and on the other hand, updated for the present-day Church as it responds to the calls to pastoral and missionary conversion.

1. The spiritual foundation: the inexhaustible depth of the love of God manifested in the Hearts of Jesus and Mary.
2. Collaboration with the work of God.
3. Zeal for the work of God: to be useful to the Church.
4. Participation in the reparative love of Christ.
5. A family of brothers, sisters and lay people.
6. The happiness of pilgrims on their way to the final homeland.

I.

THE FOUNDATION

The inexhaustible depth of the love of God manifested in the Hearts of Jesus and Mary

“We no longer know what the *love of the Good Lord* means”.² This cry from the heart describes acutely the pain which gripped the believer, the pastor and the Founder who was Father Coudrin. Such an experience led him to reflect ever more deeply on what was at the heart of this cry, namely the depth of the love of God, manifested in the Hearts of Jesus and of Mary. This was the foundation of his spiritual life that he sought to transmit to the newly born Congregation. And the dimensions to this love would never cease to grow as Father Coudrin and the Congregation underwent trials and consolidated themselves as a body in the service of the Church. Already in 1804, we find such a dynamic expressed and developed in his letter to Sister Gabriel de la Barre:

“Yes, my dear daughter, I live only to cement, at a great price if necessary, the work of the Heart of this amiable Master who fills me with his favours; if I am

² Marie-Joseph Coudrin, “Mémoire sur le titre de Zélateurs adressé à la Sacrée Congrégation des Évêques et Réguliers” (6 décembre 1816) in *Annales Congregationis Sacrorum Cordium* 35, Rome 1963, 220.

ungrateful, he still loves me, and I feel in my heart that he will love me always, yes always.

I would be limitless if I were to write to you with all the force of his grace on my soul, with the extent of his power in my depths. So love him exclusively and I tell you that nothing will separate you. Whether we are persecuted or left to rest in peace, let us be children of the Cross; may our feelings burn with longing for the immolation it demands or permits, and everything, yes, everything will be according to his will, which I feel and want to feel until death, is always adorable.”³

To see that the Love of God was not being received prompted the Good Father to participate in the sufferings of the Heart of Jesus. It was from within this Heart that he drew the certainty of the depth of God's love to sustain him as he faced obstacles along the way and fears that assailed his spirit; he came to see his life as a gift of self, if necessary, to the point of sacrifice; all this he experienced as a single and ongoing response to this love. It was this dynamic of dialogue, contained in the inexhaustible love of God, which impelled him to found a Congregation, dedicated to spreading devotion to the Sacred Hearts and to repairing the wounds inflicted on the Hearts of Jesus and Mary and on the suffering members of the ecclesial body.

³ Marie-Joseph Coudrin, “Lettre du Père Coudrin à Sœur Gabriel de la Barre” (Paris, 4 août 1804), LEBP 192 in *Correspondance (1804-1807)*, Vol. 2, Maison Générale, Rome 1995, 72.

With Mother Henriette, the spiritual foundation also took the form of the love of God that came to her and which was adapted according to her personality and according to the events of her whole life.

It is necessary to underline the delicate spiritual harmony that existed from the beginning between Father Coudrin and Mother Henriette Aymer. From their first meetings in 1794, the preaching of the young priest Coudrin resonated deeply with the spiritual approach of mademoiselle Henriette Aymer. Without fear, she was able to open her heart to the wisdom of the advice of young Father Coudrin:

“The preaching of our Reverend Father reassured her. She attended it assiduously and recognised her prayers. “So, I am not mistaken,” she said to herself, “since he preaches as I pray.”⁴

The overwhelming events experienced by Henriette shaped her spiritual life and set her on a process of conversion, a process of decentralising of self in favour of a life founded more and more on union with God. Indeed, the God of Love came to her during her time in prison in Poitiers (22 November, 1793 - 11 September, 1794), and then during her first steps in the Society of the Sacred Heart, where she met Father Coudrin. All of this led her to understand her life as one to be given as an expiatory sacrifice for her personal faults and those of others: a life offered in the service of all. Contemplating the pierced Heart of Jesus, she spent her whole life

⁴ Gabriel de la Barre, “Mémoires 1^{ère} partie” in *Écrits 1802-1829*, Maison Générale (Sœurs), Rome 2000, 15.

seeking to convert this love of God by which she was loved into a kind of vow of interior crucifixion. Mother Henriette expressed the deep meaning of this vow in a note to Father Coudrin (3 February, 1801); she would discover its scope throughout her life, especially in her personal trials or difficulties experienced in accompanying and consolidating the Congregation:

“I made the vow to be crucified in everything. In other words, in heart, spirit, mind, will and action I must accept all the crosses, all the sufferings, all the annoyances which present themselves and say: ‘even more, Lord!’ in such a way that if something indifferent in itself annoys me, I must not refuse it.”

I asked him to send me all the sorrows and all the sufferings of certain individuals; I asked to atone in this world or even in the next for all that they might have to suffer in Purgatory; I offered my life, my damnation even, for their particular salvation and for that of [all] everyone.”⁵

It is from this “foundation” that the main lines of the spiritual life of Mother Henriette sprung and which she sought to transmit to the members of the Congregation:

⁵ Henriette Aymer de la Chevalerie, “Billet au Bon Père” (s.l., 3 février 1801), LEBM 16 in *Correspondance*, Vol. 1, Maison Générale (Sœurs) Rome 2008, 53-54.

- Her vow of interior crucifixion was her response to contemplating the pierced Heart of Jesus.
- Her experience of intimacy with Christ in a particular way associated her to his reparative love. Rooted in this love, she took upon herself, in her own flesh, the sufferings and pains of everyone, on earth and in purgatory; she lived it in close communion with Jesus. It is his love that repairs and saves. Out of this conviction, she invited her sisters who were experiencing difficulties in the community to also enter into intimacy with Christ:
“Immerse yourself” - she wrote to Sister Agnès Crouzet – “in the painful and loving wound of the Divine Heart of Jesus; you will be safe from thunderstorms ... Love and you will fear less.”⁶
- The meaning of life, illuminated through contemplating the Heart of Christ, unfolded its transforming power, as she offered herself day by day as a victim for others. Such self-giving was a way of configuring herself to the feelings, attitudes and behaviours of Jesus who offered his life as a ransom for the many.

Henriette nourished the desire to be more and more configured to the Heart of Jesus in Eucharistic adoration. It was in those long moments of contemplation that she drank

⁶ Henriette Aymer de la Chevalerie, “Lettre à Sœur Agnès Crouzet” (s.l., s.d.), LEBM 215 in *Correspondance*, Vol. 2, Maison Générale (Sœurs), Rome 2008, 113.

from the source of love, “at the foot of the tabernacle”, “at the foot of the Cross”.

Marian dimension of the spiritual foundation

Underpinning the spirituality of our Founders, we find references to Mary. Both for Father Coudrin and for Mother Henriette, Mary was seen to be in close contact with her Son Jesus. This is symbolised in the union of the Heart of Jesus and the Heart of Mary which forms part of the distinctive emblem embroidered on the scapular or on the religious habit. For Father Coudrin, the Marian dimension is expressed above all through Mary's prayer of intercession with Jesus for the Congregation. From his youth and in the faith lived within his family he learned how to rely on Mary's prayer for us and to entrust her with his projects. It was about this conviction that the young student Coudrin wrote to his father to support the good words they shared with each other:

“O Lord, God of goodness, Monarch of the good and the wicked, grant, I say, that we may be blessed never, for a single moment, to depart from the path you have prepared for us. This is what I ask of you through the intercession of a Mother as effective as the one you have.”⁷

⁷ Marie-Joseph Coudrin, “Lettre à son père Monsieur Abraham Coudrin” (Poitiers, 8 février 1786), LEBP 3 in *Correspondance (1784-1804)*, Vol. 1, Maison Générale, Rome 1994, 22.

With the Good Father, the reference to Mary and the different devotions that honoured her were a response of gratitude for the many benefits received in the Congregation through her intercession. In addition, the devotions and feasts dedicated to the Virgin Mary constituted a beautiful liturgical ensemble to prepare the brothers and sisters to cultivate their availability for the action of God and to recognise with gratitude so many signs of his fidelity. This is why in his memoir addressed to the Holy See for the approval of the liturgical calendar proper to the Congregation, the Good Father was very keen to include certain Marian feasts that were celebrated in Rome:

“Our great devotion to the Queen of Virgins, to whom we owe so many and such great benefits, makes us want to appropriate other feasts which are celebrated in Rome in her honour, especially the feast of Mary, Help of Christians.”⁸

⁸ Marie-Joseph Coudrin, "Mémoire adressé au Saint Siège pour l'approbation du Propre des Fêtes de la Congrégation" (s.l., 29 septembre, 1824), LEBP 985 in *Correspondence (1824-1827)*, Vol. 6, Maison Générale, Rome 2008, 39-40. In the *Ritual, Rules, Constitutions and Statutes of the Congregation*, (Printers: Victor Andrée, Troyes, 1826), approved by the Holy See on 27 September, 1825 one can see the set of Marian celebrations that punctuated the liturgical calendar of the Congregation: apart from the *Salve Regina* and praying the rosary daily, there was the daily recitation of the small offices of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary (for those who could not read), or in place of the Office, the rosary (for those who did not know how to read). In addition there was a prayer to the Virgin before the Chapter of Faults twice a week, asking through her intercession and merits to be purified of all defilement and concluding with the *Sub Tuum*. There were also prayers to the Virgin in the rituals of admission of novices, of religious profession and in the solemn

Mary also appears associated with the missionary adventure of the Congregation outside France, when the Holy See entrusted the Sandwich Islands to it. The whole body of the Congregation was mobilised by this new field of action; by entrusting themselves to Mary's intercession, some made themselves available to go on mission, and all supported the mission. Thus, when the Good Father announced that three brothers were preparing to leave for the Sandwich Islands, he asked the whole Congregation to join in this mission of evangelisation under the patronage of the Virgin Mary, who was the expert in welcoming and sharing the Good News of God's action in and around her:

“Every evening, after the *Salve Regina*, a *Hail Mary* will be said for the same purpose [to bring Heaven's blessings on the Mission of the Sandwich Islands] and this pious practice will continue until we have

renewal of vows every year on November 21), and devotion to the Heart of Mary every first Saturday of each month. And then, the Purification of the Virgin (2 February), the Annunciation of the Virgin (25 March), the Seven Sorrows of the Virgin (Friday of Holy Week), the Visitation of the Virgin (2 July), Our Lady of Peace (9 July), Our Lady of Mount Carmel (16 July), Our Lady of the Snows (5 August), the Assumption of the Virgin (15 August), the Sacred Heart of Mary (at the time the Sunday of the octave of the Assumption) the Nativity of the Virgin (8 September), Holy Name of Mary (Sunday of the octave of the Nativity of the Virgin, Our Lady Of Mercy (24 September), the Holy Rosary (October - 1st Sunday), the Presentation of the Virgin (21 November), the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin (8 December) and Christmas (25 December). It is thus apparent that Marian devotion flows through daily life and the great moments of the life of the Congregation, thus shaping the sensitivity and spirituality of its members.

received the news that our missionaries have arrived in the Islands they are to evangelise.”⁹

For her part, the spiritual foundation of Mother Henriette also rested on the contemplation of the Heart of Mary. Her relationship with Mary was marked by a special love, by the discreet initiative of Mary who entered into the journey of Henriette and showed her love. At the same time there persisted in Henriette a feeling of unworthiness and smallness in the face of Mary’s gracious love for her. This sense of being unworthy sometimes led Henriette to a certain distrust in Mary’s initiatives of love. Indeed, Henriette wondered if this profusion of love did not, in fact, come from the devil. Nevertheless, in the crucible of Eucharistic adoration, in the contemplation of the pierced Heart of Jesus and through a life of service, Henriette came to purify this vision of herself and discern the different motions that worked in her mind and so, more and more, consented to being loved freely and superabundantly by God. It was the contemplation of the obedient Heart of Mary that disposed her. In this interior purification, like Mary, the Good Mother - because she was loved by God in her littleness and unworthiness - found the strength to accompany her sisters who were going through difficulties in their efforts to respond to the irrevocable love of God, manifested in the Heart of Jesus:

“Try to calm down and believe that your asylum cannot be outside the divine Heart of Jesus. You are

⁹ Marie-Joseph Coudrin “Lettre circulaire annonçant l’ouverture de la mission aux îles Sandwich”, (Picpus, 8 septembre 1826), LEBP 1152 in *Correspondance (1824-1827)*, Vol. 6, Maison Générale, Rome 1999, 283.

irrevocably His; He will not allow you to break the chains that His grace alone has committed you to carry. Take courage, place yourself in the hands of the Blessed Virgin and you will find peace again, peace with God, the only true happiness, peace with yourself, peace with your neighbour, the neighbour who loves you, who cherishes you, despite the annoyances that your position requires.”¹⁰

When Henriette invited the sisters to rely on Mary, she showed them the way that she herself had travelled, namely that of discovering in her feelings of smallness and unworthiness an inexhaustible source of happiness. This was a special joy to be discovered in the annoyances and feelings of powerlessness that often inhabited the sisters. In short, it was her readiness to accept and let herself be loved by God, in spite of everything.

¹⁰ Henriette Aymer de la Chevalerie, “Lettre à une sœur d’une maison de province” (s.l., 30 juillet 1824), LEBM 1223 in *Correspondance*, Vol. 6, Maison Générale (Sœurs), Rome 2008, 228.

II.

COLLABORATION WITH THE WORK OF GOD

Father Coudrin and Mother Henriette knew that their life was in the hands of God and that everything they did would be, above all, the fruit of God's welcoming initiative into their lives. This primacy of grace and God's providential initiative shaped their theological understanding of the Congregation as "the work of God". In his circular letter of 14 April, 1817, Father Coudrin announced to the brothers and sisters the approval of the Congregation, another sign of the providential action of God who had been leading the Congregation since the beginning and thus it became a key reading for the history that was to follow.

"You know our beloved sons and much cherished daughters, our institute in particular began at the time when the blood of the servants of God flowed from the scaffolds and already we have been 23 years in existence. The marvels of the Good God were needed to sustain us in the midst of the storm. The Lord has not ceased to bestow on us the miracles of his Providential care. He has led us by the hand. Each day we have known the proof of his all-powerful protection. We have been preserved during the Reign of Terror. The persecution of the Directory could not reach us as during these 14 years of an oppressive government we, aided by heavenly grace, have been able to shield knowledge of our Institute and especially the

infrastructures of our diverse establishments from a clever and treacherous police policy.”¹¹

From this understanding there flowed three specific forms of cooperation of the Founders with the work of God: first the discernment of the work of God in social and ecclesial events, then their availability and abandonment to this work, and finally their passion for it. Let us now consider each of these aspects.

Discernment of the work of God

The more confidence grew between Mother Henriette and Father Coudrin, the more responsibilities they shared with regard to the new community; they helped each other in discerning what God was doing in their midst. This is how Mother Henriette expressed to Father Coudrin what she had seen and reflected upon “before God” about the Congregation still in an embryonic state:

“There is no way that I can explain what the good God showed me about the devotion to his Divine Heart. All I can say is that he revealed this devotion through the ladies of the Visitation at a very distressing time for religion given the heresies and general disorder. Men have not corresponded with this first grace. He chose you to raise up a new order

¹¹ Marie-Joseph Coudrin, “Lettre circulaire aux frères et aux sœurs de la Congrégation annonçant l’approbation de la Congrégation et de ses premières Constitutions par le Saint-Siège” (Paris, 14 avril 1817) in *Annales Congregationis Sacrorum Cordium* 23, Rome 1960, 176.

which will be consecrated: one part is to make known, extend and re-establish God's reign in hearts through devotion to the sufferings of his (heart); another part is destined by a life of immolation and sacrifice to repair as much as possible the outrages he has received. This order will be established in spite of some persecutions that we experienced. It is in the design of God.¹²

Mother Henriette's reflections on the Congregation constituted a kind of confirmation in prayer of what Father Coudrin saw in the vision of la Motte (second half of September 1792). At the heart of the story with its uncertainties and promises, they discovered, maturing in prayer before the Lord, that both must be at the service of the spread of the love of God which springs from the Hearts of Jesus and Mary. Henriette enriched this common goal with a double dimension that came from her personal relationship with the Lord, her discernment and her prayer at the foot of the tabernacle. First is the spread of the Kingdom of God in peoples' hearts through devotion to the sufferings of the Heart of Jesus whose love is not received. Second is a life of reparation for the outrages inflicted upon this Heart through a life of immolation and sacrifice. These two paths reveal, on the one hand, Mother Henriette's inner finesse in finally configuring herself to the Heart

¹² Henriette Aymer de la Chevalerie, "Billet au Bon Père" (Mende, 7 janvier 1803), LEBM 109 in *Correspondance*, Vol. 1, Maison Générale (Sœurs), Rome 2008, 231-232.

of Jesus, and on the other hand, her pedagogical genius, in desiring to translate her spiritual intuitions into a workable approach for the members of the family in formation.

Availability to God's work

The attitude of availability and active abandonment to the activity of God became a key element that structured the spiritual life of the Founders and offered a key to reading the events of their personal history, as well as that of the Congregation and the Church. Thus, for Father Coudrin, whether it was the new recruits who joined the Congregation, the innumerable calls from local churches and even from the Holy See to expand our missionary field, the difficulties encountered in establishing the Congregation, the failings of its members, even the feeling of powerlessness which overwhelmed the Founder in the face of the immensity of the task received, all of this had to be matured before God. To his great surprise and despite everything, Pierre Coudrin perceived that God was counting on him and on the nascent Congregation to continue God's work. The crucible, where the Founder evaluated events from the perspective of God's activity, where he sought to conform himself to God's criteria and to forge the spiritual tools which he wanted to provide for his brothers and sisters, was Eucharistic adoration. To be at the feet of Jesus-Eucharist and listen to his Heart, was the formation school par excellence to which Pierre Coudrin tirelessly exhorted his sons and daughters of the Cross. This is what he wrote in 1804 to the Sisters of Cahors.

“My family is all I care about. The need to make it known occupies me day and night, but I have not yet been able to find a way to succeed [...] We hope for everything from on high - let us all be according to the Heart of God and all difficulties will be ironed out.”¹³

For her part, Mother Henriette strove to consolidate the Congregation, always attentive to the quality of interpersonal relations and to the life of prayer; she drew her strength from the certainty that it was God who was sustaining her and who was leading the Congregation, his work. Through a beautiful image, she once again repeated to Father Coudrin the joy and gratitude she felt seeing themselves both subordinate and available to the work of God in the Congregation.

“Thank you a thousand times for your kind words: it helps me put up with life. I am worried about your health, grace me with news of you, have mercy on the most miserable of your daughters. I think like you, my Good Father, we are held by a thread, but this thread is carried by a cable: we always hope.”¹⁴

¹³ Marie-Joseph Coudrin “Lettre aux sœurs de Cahors”, (Paris, 13 mai 1804), LEBP 170 in *Correspondance*, Vol. 2, Maison Générale, Rome 1995, 22.

¹⁴ Henriette Aymer de la Chevalerie, “Lettre au Père Marie-Joseph Coudrin”, (s.l., 20 mars 1822), LEBM 930 in *Correspondance*, Vol. 5, Maison Générale (Sœurs), Rome 2008, 164.

Passion for supporting the work of God

In order to be useful to the particular Churches in France and for the good of the Congregation, Father Coudrin quickly assumed high responsibilities, especially as Vicar General (Mende, Sées, Tours, Troyes, Rouen). These different services for years prevented him from following closely the progress of the Congregation and this caused him to suffer. However, without any hesitation, he trusted in the spiritual wisdom and proven capacity for governance of Mother Henriette. Indeed, the constant and unconditional support of Mother Henriette, was recognised by Father Coudrin as a sign of divine Providence. Moreover, the names given by Father Coudrin to Mother Henriette say a lot about this appreciation: “*Little peace*”, “*Great Counsel*” and “*Good Mother*”. Father Coudrin considered the whole life of Mother Henriette, all that she undertook to make the little religious family useful to the Church, as ‘*an habitual miracle*’.¹⁵

Having said that, as Father Coudrin saw his strength weakening, so his desire to accompany the whole Congregation more closely - and always with Mother Henriette - grew stronger. After so many years at the service of the local Churches, he wished to return to the Mother House in Picpus. Thus, he wrote to Mother Henriette:

“The burden seems very heavy to me, and I can see and feel even better than honours can make me

¹⁵ Marie-Joseph Coudrin, “Lettre au Père Isidore David”, (s.l., 24 juin 1805), LEBP 226 in *Correspondance (1804-1807)*, Vol. 2, Maison Générale, Rome 1995, 147.

happy... When will I find my poor little room at No. 11? Call me there, Good Mother, for that is where I should be rather than risking my salvation in a situation where I will be unable to do anything for the work without a miracle.”¹⁶

The passion with which Father Coudrin sought to make himself available to the needs of the Church and his firm resolution to support the work of God constituted one of the key aspects that he wished to transmit, as a distinctive sign, to the members of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts. This would become a distinctive sign of the Congregation’s contribution to the mission of the Church.

It is this gift of the Spirit which Father Coudrin lived that continues to reach us and is still at work in the different fronts of action of the Congregation today: parishes, schools, formation of lay people, human advancement projects. Present in more than 33 countries and journeying with the People of God, we, the members of the Congregation, brothers, sisters and secular branch, seek to collaborate with the actions of God that precede us, supporting the initiatives of the Church and, beyond that, supporting initiatives that foster a more reconciled and fraternal humanity. In Chapter 1 of the Constitutions of the Congregation that were approved by the Holy See in 1990 and which is common to sisters and brothers, this consecration to God’s work is expressed in terms of an evangelising dialogue with

¹⁶ Marie-Joseph Coudrin “Lettre à Mère Henriette Aymer”, (Archevêché de Rouen, fin décembre 1826), LEBP 1191 in *Correspondance (1824-1827)*, Vol. 6, Maison Générale, Rome 1999, 336.

and availability to the needs and calls of the Church and the world. It also provides criteria for collaborating with God's initiative:

“Our mission urges us to evangelising action by which we enter into the interior dynamism of Christ’s love for his Father and for the world, especially for the poor, the afflicted, the marginalised and those who have not heard the Good News.

To make the Kingdom of God present, we seek the transformation of the human heart and we endeavor to be agents of communion in the world. In solidarity with the poor, we work for a just and reconciled society.

Availability to the needs and demands of the Church, discerned in the light of the Spirit, and the capacity to adapt to circumstances and events are characteristics inherited from our Founders.

The missionary spirit frees us and makes us available to exercise our apostolic service where we are sent to bring and receive the Good News.”¹⁷

This fundamentally evangelising dimension of the consecration to the Sacred Hearts is also in line with one of the major intuitions of Pope Francis’ call for a missionary transformation of a Church which goes forth, which goes out to meet the men and women of our time. This call is rooted in one’s baptismal consecration, as well as in the religious vocation; in fact, this call concerns every member of the Church,

¹⁷ *Constitutions* 6.

both disciples and missionaries: *Disciple*, because he or she has been seized by Christ, by his Word and by the witness of those who live by the Word; as such, this encounter with the living Jesus is of the order of a friendship, of an “*itinerant intimacy*” (EG, 23) which needs to be cultivated in prayer, in listening to the Word, in the sacramental life and in the living of a community life; it is truly through these moments of encounter that the joy of knowing the Lord is deepened. *Missionary*, because this joy, by its very nature, is expansive, it wants to be communicated and shared. The mission of the Church is to communicate through attraction the joy of the encounter with Jesus and his Gospel; this takes place in every baptised person, in every consecrated person, to the point of constituting a new identity for us: “*I am a mission*” (EG, 273).

When the disciples of Jesus place themselves, within reach of each person and face reality, then all those who enter into this dialogue discover the power of the Gospel: the Spirit of the Risen One who acts through the disciple-missionaries:

“It may be that the Lord uses our sacrifices to shower blessings in another part of the world which we will never visit. The Holy Spirit works as he wills, when he wills and where he wills; we entrust ourselves without pretending to see striking results. We know only that our commitment is necessary.

Let us learn to rest in the tenderness of the arms of the Father amid our creative and generous commitment. Let us keep marching forward; let us give him

everything, allowing him to make our efforts bear fruit in his good time.” (EG, 279)

In the Christian understanding, baptismal and religious consecration do not exist without participation in the evangelising task of the Church. The very character of the encounter with Jesus as the Good News stirs us and leads us to this.

III.

ZEAL FOR GOD'S WORK: BEING USEFUL TO THE CHURCH

Zealots and adorers

The inexhaustible depth of God's love, which springs from the Hearts of Jesus and Mary, is manifested and deepened in the spiritual experience of the Founders as zeal, ardour, fire and an intense desire to consecrate oneself to spread this love. This key element of their spiritual life was so central that they wanted the members of the Congregation to be known by the name of zealots and adorers.

In his *Memorandum* of Presentation of the Congregation to the Holy See, Father Coudrin developed the richness contained in the names of **zealots** and **adorers**.

“If the tenderness of the Sacred Heart of Jesus for the salvation of souls really takes root within, how could one not be enflamed by zeal so as to respond to the love of such a good Master? If one thinks of the maternal tenderness of the Heart of Mary for the men who have become her children in the person of Saint John, would it be possible to not feel

one's heart aflame with a holy *zeal* to honor the Virgin of virgins?"¹⁸

"It is under the title *Zealots* that we have joyfully borne more than twenty years of persecutions and trials. It has been our consolation, our happiness and, I would dare say, our strength and our support. Now that it is calm why make us abandon a name that has been our consolation in the midst of the storm?"¹⁹

"I do not think that the title *Perpetual Adorers* of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in the Most Blessed Sacrament of the Altar could present the least difficulty. It explains in a special way both our consecration to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the homage rendered him day and night in the august Sacrament of the Eucharist to expiate the ingratitude and malice of men."²⁰

The names 'adorers' and 'zealots' contain a whole program of life: they configure the identity and mission of the entire body of the Congregation.

¹⁸ Marie-Joseph Coudrin, "Mémoire sur le titre des Zélateurs, adressé à la Sacrée Congrégation des Évêques et Réguliers" (6 décembre 1816) in *Annales Congregationis Sacrorum Cordium* 35, Rome 1963, 221.

¹⁹ Marie-Joseph Coudrin, "Mémoire sur le titre des Zélateurs, adressé à la Sacrée Congrégation des Évêques et Réguliers" (6 décembre 1816) in *Annales Congregationis Sacrorum Cordium* 35, Rome 1963, 223.

²⁰ Marie-Joseph Coudrin, "Mémoire sur le titre d'Adorateurs, adressé à la Sacrée Congrégation des Évêques et Réguliers" (6 décembre 1816) in *Annales Congregationis Sacrorum Cordium* 35, Rome 1963, 224-225.

Being useful to the Church

This burning zeal for the love of Jesus and Mary leads first of all to a deeper sense of belonging to the body of the Church. This zeal, because of its dynamism, gave rise to a great availability to the needs of the Church as recognised and discerned in the calls of her Pastors, or in what the Founders perceived in the midst of the People of God as weakness and poverty in relation to a Gospel-flavoured life. Thus, our Founders were able to translate zeal for the work of God in the Church into a diversity of services: education, parish missions, formation of the clergy, care of the elderly, mission *ad gentes*, etc.

Ultimately, this zeal becomes, among the brothers and sisters of the Congregation, an impetus to make themselves useful to the mission of the Church.

This zeal also aroused in Father Coudrin a great freedom and audacity in proclaiming the Gospel. This was evident from the first years of his clandestine ministry (1792-1800) in Coussay-les-Bois, la Motte d'Usseau and Poitiers and the surrounding area (Montbernage)²¹. Supported by a network of Christian faithful and courageous priests, the young Father Coudrin devoted himself, at personal risk and peril, to animating the faith of Christian communities, who were also persecuted, and administering the sacraments to

²¹ Théophile de Coursac, *Le Faubourg Montbernage au point de vue religieux pendant la Révolution Française*, 3rd edition (revised and corrected). Henri Oudin, Bookseller-Publisher, Poitiers 1859, including some extracts *Copia Publicca* 1219, with the clarifications of Marie-Joseph-Louis-Amadée, Marquis de Roux, *Copia Publicca* 1170 and Dom Pierre de Monsabert, OSB *Copia Publicca* 1256.

the sick and dying. As well as this network, our Founder also felt supported in his ministry by his certainty in the presence of Jesus who does not abandon his Church.

This certainty was both expressed and nourished by a double symbolic gesture. On the one hand, he always carried the Blessed Sacrament with him, because it was truly out of love for him and like him that he ran the risks of the Gospel. On the other hand, among the various disguises needed to be able to exercise his ministry in times of persecution, he used the clothing of the poor people in the Hospital for the Incurables in Poitiers and adopted the nickname of one of them, "Marche-à-terre". More than a disguise, it revealed the mission of the Founder and on which side he stood in the society of his time. Indeed, by this name and by donning the habit of the poor, he identified himself with the poor Christ who acts through him.

For some, this audacity in the name of the Gospel was the expression of a living faith in Christ who does not abandon his Church, of a pastor who, in his name, takes care of his flock. But others considered this audacity to be pastorally imprudent, if not an intransigent position of Father Coudrin: "*This imbecile of Jerome*" (criticism of some of the priests of Poitiers), a man "*behaving incomprehensibly*" (wrote Father Lemercier, parish priest of Sainte Marguerite parish in Paris), marked by a "*small and narrow mind*" (reported François-René Chateaubriand, French Ambassador in Rome, during the participation of the Good Father in the Conclave where Pope Pius VIII was elected).

Mother Henriette also lived this zeal as her response to knowing she was loved by God. This love she contemplated and above all welcomed in Eucharistic adoration, the sacrament of Christ's self-giving until the end. It was in Eucharistic adoration, the sacrament of the pierced Heart of Christ, that she made herself available to the love of Jesus so that He might love her sisters through her heart:

“Yes, my good sisters, I belong entirely to each one, I desire their happiness and all the consolations that can be found only at the foot of the Cross. Ah! More than ever, let us enter into the painful martyrdom that comforts the souls who follow the Bridegroom!”²²

Her strong devotion did not seek to alleviate difficulties or to smooth out their rough edges, but to look at them from a new, Easter perspective: it was an undeniable consolation that she found in the ordeal of “painful martyrdom”. So, in Mother Henriette's case, the ardent love of God was rooted in an unfailing trust in God's Providence; she carried on her shoulders the often very heavy burden of the governance and daily running of the communities. While she was aware that she was usually short of resources and means, she was helped by the certainty that God would not abandon his work. Far from causing her to fall into a kind of quietism or passivity, this confidence enabled her to move forward and face with spirit and lucidity the obstacles that arose on the way. Strengthened by this conviction, she encouraged the

²² Henriette Aymer de la Chevalerie, “Lettre à Sœur Ludovine de la Marsonnière”, (Mende, octobre 1803), LEBM 147 in *Correspondance*, Vol. 1, Maison Générale (Sœurs), Rome 2008, 312.313.

brothers and sisters in their life of their local communities or in their various ministries. This was the motto by which she never ceased to exhort the communities and by which she herself lived:

“Everything for God, everything according to God, everything should begin there, but at least everything should end there.”²³

In short, zeal was no more than the response to a desire to configure one's entire existence to the feelings, attitudes and options of the Heart of Jesus. This spiritual intuition, as prevalent in Father Coudrin as it was in Mother Henriette, became a source of inspiration and a horizon for the various pastoral fronts to which they and their religious family were committed. It was and is the aim of the Congregation to “retrace the four ages of our Lord Jesus Christ”, through religious consecration and the exercise of the various ministries and pastoral services:

“To retrace the *childhood* [of Christ] through the free education of poor boys and girls and through the formation of young people for sacred ministry; to retrace the *hidden life*, making reparation for the injuries inflicted on the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary through perpetual adoration of the Blessed Sacrament; to retrace the *apostolic life* by devoting oneself to the preaching of the Gospel and to the sacred missions; and finally recalling the *crucified life*,

²³ Henriette Aymer de la Chevalerie, “Lettre à Sœur Sister Adrienne de Bocquency”, (s.l., 10 janvier 1816), LEBM 498 in *Correspondance*, Vol. 3, Maison Générale (Sœurs), Rome 2008, 191.

by giving oneself to the mortification of the flesh and the spirit, as much as human frailty allows.”²⁴

The eloquent gesture worth more than a thousand words was the opening of a community through a symbolic foundational act: the beginning of Eucharistic adoration, as well as the reception of free classes for poor children in the houses of the Congregation.²⁵ Eucharistic adoration and attention to the poor were the concrete ways of manifesting God's work by retracing the life and ministry of Jesus and making oneself useful to the Church.

²⁴ “Supplique du Père Coudrin et de la Mère Henriette Aymer au Pape Pie VII”, (25 octobre 1814) in *Annales Congregationis Sacrorum Cordium* 35, Rome 1963, 190.

²⁵ Cf. Henriette Aymer de la Chevalerie, “Lettre à Sœur Gabriel de la Barre”, (s.l., fin juin 1824), LEBM 1216 in *Correspondance*, Vol. 6, Maison Générale (Sœurs), Rome 2008, 217.

IV.

PARTICIPATION IN THE REPARATIVE LOVE OF CHRIST

"We no longer know what the love of the Good Lord means", lamented bitterly Father Coudrin in his diagnosis of the spiritual health of the Christian life in France after the French Revolution. The French Revolution overturned the hierarchy of values that regulated life in society and in the Church and introduced another set: "humanity" and "philanthropy" replaced "Christian charity"; similarly, "respect for the Supreme Being" replaced "love of God". This new hierarchy of values also reflected and carried with it a profound critique of the ways of social existence that were marked by a division into "three separate states" (Nobility, Clergy, Third State). The first two were elitist, highly compartmentalised groups that secured privileges at the expense of the Third State (the largest part of the population), which was laden with chores and heavy burdens. The Church, as an institution, appeared to legitimise this order, with the ideology of the origin of the divine right of the monarchy. In this alliance between the Monarchy and the Church, uneasiness and criticism against one also implied criticism and questioning of the other and vice versa. The birth of this new social order embodying a new hierarchy of values was not without tears, resistance and tensions. The profound social transformations underway had a strong impact on the life of the

Church. The Church had not only to find its way, but above all recreate the alliance with a profoundly transformed society; the ecclesial fabric needed to be rewoven; the Church itself was torn by internal tensions and disoriented by the misguidance of many of its pastors. This is why the mission of the Congregation, also in its infancy, had to have, according to the vision of Father Coudrin and Mother Henriette, an eminently reparative dimension. In contemplating the pierced Heart of Jesus and that of Mary at the foot of the Cross, our Founders felt within themselves the pain of the love of Christ, always in search of men and women who would freely respond to it, and all the time taking the risk of such love not being accepted. The tears and tensions between the members of the ecclesial Body of Christ weighed intensely on their experience of faith. They hoped that the members of the Congregation would enter more and more into the feelings that the Hearts of Jesus and Mary felt for the people of God; rooted in this Love, they were placed to themselves in the fractures that run through the body of the Church and weaken social bonds. In other words, the members of the Congregation were called to stand in the place of those people who have distanced themselves from the love of God, so that, through their presence and ministry, they might witness to the reparative love of Christ.

The reparative mark of the Congregation assigned them a place in the Church and in society. According to Father Coudrin, this was precisely the ecclesial and social breach to which the title of “zealots” and “adorers” of God’s love refers:

“Desiring to call people back to confidence in the love of Jesus Christ and consecrated by our vows to this good work, we had to take a name which in itself could strike people’s minds and call them to more lofty sentiments, which could make them understand that they must open their hearts to a divine fire and finally lift their eyes towards heaven, eyes that for too long have been dragged down toward the earth.”²⁶

For her part, Mother Henriette, in her service as superior to form, accompany and animate the life of the brothers and sisters, unified all these dimensions into a mystical configuration to the reparative love of Christ. Concretely, this mysticism was expressed on the one hand by an ever-greater participation in the attitudes, feelings and decisions of Jesus which led him to the Cross and on the other hand, through a practical wisdom which consisted in living one's whole life as an offering to the Lord in concrete service to the brothers and sisters, and in attention to the needs of the Church. Eucharistic adoration, in particular, enabled Henriette to enter more and more deeply into the way the Lord had given himself up for her and still gives himself up for all thus associating ourselves with him as victims; in response to the reparative love of Jesus, she took upon herself the sufferings of those whom the Lord loves. Her bodily mortifications were both a fleshy reminder and expression

²⁶ Marie-Joseph Coudrin, “Mémoire sur le titre des Zélateurs, adressé à la Sacrée Congrégation des Évêques et Réguliers”, (6 décembre 1816) in *Annales Congregationis Sacrorum Cordium* 35, Rome 1963, 220.

of participation in the wounds of Jesus' Heart and in the sufferings of his members, the ecclesial body. Driven by this conviction, Henriette animated her sisters, delivering to them this treasure which she never ceased to explore at the foot of the tabernacle. Thus in 1816, Mother Henriette wrote to the Sisters of Laval who had been afflicted by the replacement of their Superior, Françoise de Viart by Sister Azelle d'Ormay. The letter is full of the practical wisdom she learned during the hours of contemplation of the Heart of Jesus and which dwelt within her:

“I ask for your friendship, your trust, because I have no doubt that you will be obedient, and I trust that the good God will help you, support you, and that you will be quite happy in making all the sacrifices that your state as victims and adorers of the Divine Heart of Jesus demands. It is from this furnace of love that I urge you to go and draw strength to carry your cross every moment of your life.”²⁷

Sister Gabriel de la Barre, her companion from the earliest hours and a fine connoisseur of the soul of the Good Mother, offers us a portrait of the spiritual personality of the Good Mother in the way she lived and how she exhorted others to live it: her vocation and mission as an adorer and repairer, as a woman given as a victim of love for those entrusted to her, is to love them with the sentiments of the Heart of Jesus:

²⁷ Henriette Aymer de la Chevalerie, “Lettre aux Sœurs de Laval” (s.l, mars 1816), LEBM 512 in *Correspondance*, Vol. 3, Maison Générale (Sœurs), Roma 2008, 213.

“How many times has she offered herself to God as a victim for the sins of others! How many times has she tried, through the fervour of her prayers, to draw upon herself the effects of God's justice through the crimes of men! ...] If God made her see into the future, she took the opportunity to redouble her prayers, her penances, in order to obtain for herself whatever would be painful, so that any consolations might be for others.”²⁸

In short, for Mother Henriette, reparative love lived every day was a form of loving and seeing humanity in the manner of Jesus. Father Coudrin also appreciated in the Good Mother her acute self-giving and reparative sense of love, seeing this as one of the significant and effective contributions to God's work for the Congregation. He never ceased to recall that it was her way of building up the community:

“I tell you that she is the support and the life of all of us before the good Lord [...] and I know that she has never ceased to be a victim for the whole family.”²⁹

This effectiveness was evident in a life that marked by a great availability to God's action, and in her willingness to truly take upon herself, the joys and sufferings, the progress and

²⁸ Gabriel de la Barre, “Remarques sur la Très Révérende Mère Henriette Aymer” in *Écrits 1802-1829*, Maison Générale (Sœurs), Rome 2000, 218-219.

²⁹ Marie-Joseph Coudrin, “Lettre au Père Raphaël Bonamie (Archevêché de Rouen, 27 janvier 1829), LEBP 1460 in *Correspondance (1827-1830)*, Vol. 7, Maison Générale, Rome 2000, 226.

failures of the members of the Congregation, of the Church and of humanity.

Father Coudrin, in his own flesh, also participated in the sufferings and consolations of the Body of Christ, the Church: in the sufferings, as and whenever the members of the Body of Christ were persecuted because of their fidelity to Jesus; in the engagement of the Church, whenever freedom in the exercise of the various ecclesial ministries was threatened.³⁰ This made him seem demanding, even intransigent, in the eyes of those who took more freedom with the ministry or who compromised themselves with the State.

³⁰ Cf. the Circular Letter of Father Marcellin Bousquet (December 21, 1891) in which he invites the brothers and sisters of the Congregation to make a contemplative reading of the brand new biography of Father Coudrin written by Father Prosper Maliges and which was about to be published. *Life of the T(rès). R(évérénd). Father M(arie). Coudrin, Founder and First Superior General of the Congregation*, V. Lecoffe, Paris 1892. In fact, Father Bousquet's reading reveals the interests and preoccupations of his time -affirmation of the infallibility of the Pope and also the dismemberment of the papal states- and, for all that, underlines certain traits of the spiritual personality of the Good Father, in particular his unflinching adherence to his principles and his loyal love for the Church: "At this time of collapse and struggle, when the whole society is lacking in Christian principles, it will be a great joy for us to contemplate our venerated Father inviolably attached to Rome, the centre of Catholic unity, wholly devoted to the teachings of the infallible Vicar of Jesus, for whom he professed the most filial devotion, supporting and defending always and everywhere, without fail, the interests of truth and justice, the cause of the Church and of Religion. Our Founder's character is beautiful! Admirable unity in his life! Right up to the end of a long career in various positions, through a thousand embarrassments, he knew how to remain faithful to his convictions without ever faltering, and to remain always true to himself." *Copia Publica* 705-706.

Father Coudrin was reluctant to adopt coping strategies, even for good reasons, and he believed that this should not happen with members of the Congregation. More freedom in the exercise of pastoral ministry could not be paid for by masking one's real identity as servants; there was a risk of disfiguring the demanding beauty of the witness to be given to the Master and Lord Jesus. We can see this firmness in the Good Father, in the application of the royal ordinances of 16 June 1828, signed by Charles X, which, among other things, required ecclesiastical schools (minor seminaries) to welcome only those who were preparing for holy orders, and also required teachers and those in charge of management to declare that they did not belong to a religious Congregation and were not legally established in France, that is, without having the approval of the State. However, to accommodate such requirements was unacceptable to the Good Father, especially since it would force the expulsion of the poorest pupils who did not enter into ministry. This is what he told the superior of the school in Cahors, Father Césaire Carré:

“Be assured that in Cahors as in Rouen they will demand a declaration that our conscience cannot safely make, that is to say that the teachers do not belong to any religious Congregation. Thus: *Sint ut sunt aut ab impietate deleantur: Deus provedebit*. We can never serve God by the means he disapproves of.”³¹

³¹ Marie-Joseph Coudrin, “Lettre au Père Césaire Carré” (Rouen, 4 janvier 1829), LEBP 1444 in *Correspondance (1827-1830)*, Vol. 7, Maison Générale, Rome 2000, 212.

When Father Coudrin participated in the sufferings of Christ and his Church, he experienced a great consolation which sprang from a mystical vision of the Church: he considered that the source of the Church's impregnable freedom was the fruit of a constant discernment of the action of the Spirit who inspires and guides the Church. This action is manifested at work in the various services and ministries that make the promise of Jesus visible within his Church until the end of time. This action also shines out in a special way in the lives of the saints who support and guide the Church's journey. This is why the Good Father was very keen that the members of the Congregation breathe in the rhythm of the Church's prayer through the recitation of the Roman Breviary, (in the time of Father Coudrin, many dioceses had their own breviary; but from then on, brothers and sisters prayed with the Roman Breviary). Moreover, it was a sign of communion between the Churches, and these with the Church of Rome, unlike the local breviaries; with the Roman breviary, "there are saints every day",³² the Good Father added, inspired by the Good Mother. It is the intercession of the saints who, with their lives and prayers, support the Church's journey and the work of God.

God's providential love as a source of happiness in times of trial

Our Founders were able to read the events that punctuated their lives and the life of the Church from the perspective of

³² Memories collected by Lay Brother Severin Coulanges, *Copia Publica*, 1036.

God's providential love. At the same they were able to confidently surrender themselves to this love in order to face both the precariousness and institutional weaknesses of the Congregation, as well as the contradictions and conflicts that arose in the social or ecclesial context.

By making themselves docile to God's initiative, they placed their decisions in the hands of this *God who led them as if by the hand*; and they invited brothers and sisters in difficulty to do the same; they then experienced a strange and unshakeable happiness – a happiness that accompanied and sustained their journey throughout the sufferings and adversities they underwent or accepted in the name of the Gospel. Theirs was a simple joy, undeniable in difficulties, unshakeable in tensions.

Their trust in the providential love of God put them in tune with his untiring action to accomplish his work with the help of his creatures. As a result, they could more naturally discern together the spiritual resources that the Lord was giving to those who were going through trials, and even recognise the opportunities to be seized in times of adversity and conflict. During the first years of the community in Poitiers, the Good Father exhorted the sisters to accept the scarcity of resources and strength, the sickness and even death that afflicted them, having in their hearts the confidence of knowing that they were in God's providential hands:

“Accept everything as coming from the good Lord and I am sure he will lighten the load.”³³

For Father Coudrin, this faith conviction based on his experience remained consolidated; he never ceased to live it himself and to share it with others as a source of happiness. A few years before his death, the Good Father invited Sister Anastasie Chesne to drink from the source of her own happiness: “Be happy in the accomplishment of God's will, my dear child.”³⁴

For her part, the Good Mother, far from being paralysed by the lack of means to support the progress of the communities and having to face her own anxieties and obscurities, through prayer and abandoning herself into the hands of God's providential love drew the strength to move forward and remain serene and at peace in adversity, despite her own dark night.

She thus opened her heart to her early companion, Sister Gabriel de la Barre, disclosing to her the source from which her peace and her strength sprang. At the same time, she shared it in all simplicity so that others might find serenity and courageous confidence, necessary virtues in these difficult times that the community was going through.

³³ Marie-Joseph Coudrin, “Lettre aux Sœurs de Poitiers”, (s.l., 19 janvier 1803), LEBP 89 in *Correspondance (1784-1804)*, Vol. 1, Maison Générale, Rome 1994, 243.

³⁴ Marie-Joseph Coudrin, “Lettre à Sœur Anastasie Chesne”, (s.l., 17 juillet 1834), LEBP 1917 in *Correspondance (1831-1837)*, Maison Générale, Vol. 8, Rome 2000, 267.

“You are wrong to worry about my silence, I am in pain, in bad humour and excessively lazy. Besides, I often have so much trouble and grief that my letters would be affected. The state of anxiety in which we live would overwhelm us if confidence in Providence did not support us ... Let us abandon ourselves to Providence and make a virtue of necessity. Don't think that I want to preach to you; but the habit of repeating this to myself means that it is under my pen. If I had the money, I would go see you, but we are absolutely destitute.”³⁵

The lack of means at her disposal, the disease that was ravaging the small communities, all affected the morale of the Good Mother, and all the more so because the needs of the educational mission in schools or minor seminaries could not wait, they were growing more and more and had to be managed on a day-to-day basis. It was in this context that Henriette and the communities made the necessary decisions, always in the light of God's Providential Love; this was how the necessary virtues were forged and characters were tempered. The Good Mother wrote to Sister Gabriel de la Barre, superior of Poitiers, a community which found itself very short of the means to accomplish the educational task they had taken on:

“Let us be patient, my friend, we will suffer until the blessed stay. For me, I am in a torment that cannot

³⁵ Henriette Aymer de la Chevalerie, “Lettre à Sœur Gabriel de la Barre” (s.l. (probably in Picpus), fin mai, début juin, 1812), LEBM 433 in *Correspondance*, Vol. 3, Maison Générale (Sœurs), Rome 2008, 88.

be explained. I still need money and I don't have any: 15 francs is my fortune at the moment. I need 130 f. to go to the store tomorrow. Courage and patience, this is what I keep telling myself, and I fail to meet these two conditions essential to my position. Besides, we are doing well, we have a lot of sorrows and particular problems, but we have to put everything at the foot of the Cross. So, let us say a good fiat and believe me, my poor old woman, that in the midst of my pains I think of yours and share in them.”³⁶

Despite the obstacles, Henriette did not let herself be beaten down. On the contrary, not only did she show courage and patience, but she was also able to carry with her the sufferings that the other sisters told her about. A strange strength arises in the hearts of those who take upon themselves the sufferings of others. They know that they are carried by a love greater than their poverty of resources and their exhaustion in adversity. It is the love of those who stand by the Cross of Jesus. This is the mysterious source of their strength.

A beautiful feature of the governance of the Good Mother was to make her own the concerns of the communities and the sorrows that the sisters entrusted to her and to bring

³⁶ Henriette Aymer de la Chevalerie, “Lettre à Sœur Gabriel de la Barre” (s.l., 1812 ou février 1813), LEBM 434 in *Correspondance*, Vol. 3, Maison Générale (Sœurs), Rome 2008, 91-92.

them to the feet of Jesus in adoration. It was from the crucible of adoration that she drew the necessary strength and light to go with the decisions of the Congregation.

Her style of governance, staying close to the experience of the sisters and brothers, clear-sighted in recognising the difficulties and opportunities of the time, confident in the promises of God who does not abandon his work: this was how the Good Mother discovered the happiness of the faithful servant of the Gospel (cf. Mt 24,46). In a letter addressed to the superior of Sées, Sister Justine Charret, whom the Good Mother had just visited, she shared her appreciation of the community and disclosed the criteria which govern her work. We find here a sort of guide for those who, like her, exercise the service of authority:

“I am very pleased to have seen all of you; I found everyone looked quite happy. Happiness and fervour usually go together. Thus, try to keep everything in peace, charity, union, benevolence and that mutual support that proclaims the good spirit and indulgence of the Superiors.”³⁷

A few years later, after the death of Father Coudrin, a young Flemish man joined the Congregation, Josef de Veuster (1840-1889). He took the religious name of Damien, in memory of the holy physician; he was canonised by Pope Benedict XVI, on 11th October, 2009. Imbued with the spirituality of the

³⁷ Henriette Aymer de la Chevalerie, “Lettre à Sœur Justine Charret” (s.l., 26 janvier 1821), LEBM 785 in *Correspondance*, Vol. 4, Maison Générale (Sœurs), Rome 2008, 284.

Hearts of Jesus and Mary and reparative love, Damien responded swiftly to the call to bring the Gospel to the Hawaiian Islands. He thus fulfilled Father Coudrin's vision of a body of brothers and sisters sent all over the world to spread the Gospel.

The source of his zeal in ministry led him to die as a leper among lepers; in this way he manifested in his own infected flesh, the beauty of a love that remains close to all, especially at the end. Damien's impulse to love in this way - until the last - came from his constant contemplation of Jesus who gave himself up for all, thus revealing to him the fulfilment of his existence. Damien sought to look at the lepers with the loving gaze of Christ.

“The sight of what souls have cost Jesus Christ, as well as the memory of what our own souls have cost him, must inspire us with the greatest zeal for the salvation of all. We must give ourselves over to everything that can contribute to the salvation of souls. We must give ourselves unreservedly to it. The measure of our zeal must be that of Jesus Christ.”³⁸

This gesture of self-giving was realised in the Eucharist celebrated with the lepers of Molokai and contemplated in Adoration. It was at the foot of the Blessed Sacrament, in communion with his brothers and sisters of the Congregation, with Anglican Christians, and especially with the suffering

³⁸ Damien de Veuster, *Carnet*, cited by Vital Jourdan, *Le Père Damien de Veuster de la Congrégation des Sacrés-Cœurs. Apôtre des Léproux*, Paris/Braine-le-Comte 1931, 355.

members of the Body of Christ, the lepers, that Damien found his resources:

“Without the constant presence of our divine Master upon the altar of my poor chapel, I could never have persevered in casting my lot with the lepers of Molokai. The foreseen consequences of casting my lot are beginning to appear on my skin, and are felt throughout the body. Holy Communion is the daily bread of a priest. Therefore, I feel myself happy, well pleased and resigned in the rather exceptional circumstance in which it has pleased Divine Providence to place me.”³⁹

Entering into the perspective of Divine Providence and devoting oneself accordingly to the criteria, attitudes and options of the Heart of Jesus as actualised in the Eucharist and contemplated in Adoration, were the two major criteria for the ministry of Father Coudrin and Mother Henriette that Father Damien de Veuster himself lived deeply. Thus, Damien, inspired by these criteria, was able to collaborate in God's work with the lepers of Molokai.

These criteria are deeply relevant to the reading of the missionary history of the Church, undertaken by Pope Francis in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*. In order to face the new issues and challenges of the Church in the face of the

³⁹ Damien de Veuster, “Lettre au Révérend Pasteur Chapman” (Kalawao, Molokaï, îles Sandwich, 26 August 1886) in Edouard Brion (édit), *Un étrange bonheur. Lettre du Père Damien lépreux (1885-1889)*, Cerf, Paris 1988, 71; *Father Damien's Letters* “Letter to Reverend Hugh B. Chapman” (LEFD 246), General House, Rome 2017, 533.

changing conditions of the present time, men and women are needed who welcome the grace that precedes them and supports them in their efforts. A grace that is gratuitous but demanding and which deploys its transforming power precisely in the men and women who make themselves available to its action with intelligence and generosity:

“Our history as a Church, which is glorious precisely because it is a history of sacrifice, of hopes and daily struggles, of lives spent in service and fidelity to work, tiring as it may be, for all work is ‘the sweat of our brow’.” (EG, 96)

The missionary history of the Church is, in the final analysis, the history of the holiness of all the members of the People of God who understand their existence as a gift of themselves, as a service to the most needy, as an effective love for the unloved.

Father Coudrin, Mother Henriette and Saint Damien of Molokai were generous and daring in their love for God and for their brothers and sisters, their companions in humanity, because they themselves were seized by this love of God, touched by the compassionate Heart of Jesus. They charted in their time and continue to chart today a path that leads into the dynamism of Jesus' merciful love for humanity, a path of evangelical holiness and happiness. By becoming our companions on this path following Jesus, they can help us to become bold and creative witnesses of Jesus' compassion:

“His compassion made him go out actively to preach and to send others on a mission of healing and liberation. Let us acknowledge our weakness, but allow Jesus to lay hold of it and send us too on mission. We are weak, yet we hold a treasure that can enlarge us and make those who receive it better and happier. Boldness and apostolic courage are an essential part of mission.”

(Gaudete et Exsultate, 131).

V.

A FAMILY OF BROTHERS, SISTERS AND LAY PEOPLE

God forms his People, his family

The more Father Coudrin invested himself in the various services of the pastoral ministry, the more he discovered that everything he did was for the edification of the body of the Church and for the establishment of his religious family. He was aware that the Church was always a work in progress, in the process of discernment, implementation and ongoing renewal in the light bearer and witness. "*Ecclesia semper reformanda*" in the way of the Gospel of which she is of spreading the Gospel through its members, the initiatives and structures of the Church. It was God's action which brought out of the members of the Congregation their best gifts; God acting in their lives required them to grow to the extent that they placed themselves at the service of the building up of the Church, in the various ministries and commitments, especially in times of difficulty or trial.

With this certainty in mind, Father Coudrin gave this wise advice to a sister worried about the political unrest at the time of the Restoration in France (July 1831):

“Calm down, my dear daughter. Since God sends us trials, let us hope that he will give us the dress according to the cold.”⁴⁰

Strengthened by this conviction and enriched by her practical wisdom forged in the crucible of the contemplation of Christ in the Eucharist, Mother Henriette also enlightened the brothers in the various situations that surfaced during the parish missions at Bouilly, near Troyes. Preaching and confessions were the pastoral devices in this time of reparation for the torn ecclesial body. Some brothers, however, demanded promises from penitents to better observe God's commandments in the future. Mother Henriette invited these friars, through Hilarion Lucas, not to overburden the penitents with demands, but rather to trust in the action of God who, with the good dispositions of the faithful, is already repairing the hearts of men and strengthening the ecclesial body:

“I believe, my good Brother, that you need to do more to increase, if possible, their present good dispositions, than make promises for the future which could become dangerous if they were convinced that, having fallen short by a few points, they had lost the fruit of their mission. It would then be very much feared that they would become as indifferent to religion as in the past, and certainly more criminal. Limit yourself, my good Brother, to making

⁴⁰ Marie-Joseph Coudrin, “Lettre à Sœur Constantine Yver”, (Archevêché de Rouen, 11 septembre 1831), LEBP 1650 in *Correspondance (1831-1837)*, Vol. 8, Maison Générale, Rome 2000, 66.

them understand what is a strict obligation and leave the rest to the grace of the Lord which will not fail them if they are faithful to your good instructions. This is what I think I can tell you with certainty; be indulgent, therefore, and the good Lord will do the rest.”⁴¹

Learning to walk together

Since God is at work in all the members of the Church, there is a need to discern and collaborate with this work: this requires a concerted, choral, symphonic exercise, involving all the baptised, with their faith, their gifts and charisms that the Spirit of Jesus never ceases to give them. From the very first years of his ministry, Father Coudrin received the support of his family, his compatriots, the men and women who also wished to collaborate with the Lord in the building up of his Church, and even run the risks for the proclamation of the Gospel. In Poitiers, Father Coudrin owed a debt of gratitude to Mademoiselle Marthe Marie-Anne Gauffreau (1755-1833), whom he called “the Mother of Priests”. Indeed, after leaving la Motte, Father Coudrin received a safe welcome at her home, rue de la Regratterie, as well as the information necessary to help the faithful during the Terror. When in 1834, he learned of her death, Father Coudrin wrote to Father Michel Soudais (1753-1843), who had also benefited from the hospitality

⁴¹ Henriette Aymer de la Chevalerie, “Lettre au Père Hilarion Lucas”, (s.l., janvier 1821), LEBP 782 in *Correspondance*, Vol. 4, Maison Générale (Sœurs), Rome 2008, 279.

of Miss Gauffreau, when he left his parish in Beugnon because of his refusal to take the oath to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy; he had to suffer exile and prison (especially at the Rochefort fortress and then at the Rochefort pontoons from June 1794 to February 1795):

“Good peace and happy ending, dear friend. This holy lady from Poitiers, who introduced me to the tender Soudais, has just died as a saint. Yes, dear friend, let's embrace Heaven.”⁴²

He then strongly encouraged the brothers and sisters of the Congregation not to be an obstacle to God's action, but rather to foster it through the mutual aid offered within religious communities.

Enlightened by this dynamic of grace in the Church, Father Coudrin wrote to the superior of the young community that was being born in Poitiers and, through it, to the community of brothers and to its superior, Father Isidore David:

“Console yourselves all, my dear friends, we have many trials, but God wills it, he will draw his glory from it, let us submit to everything and he knows how to make us triumph. ...] Oh my friends, how many obstacles there are to doing a little good and a little more good!

⁴² Marie-Joseph Coudrin, “Lettre à Monsieur l'Abbé Michel Soudais” (Picpus (probablement), 24 juillet 1834), LEBP 1918 in *Correspondance (1831-1837)*, Vol. 8, Maison Générale, Rome 2000, 267.

The good God wants everything, so let us hope for him and trust that he will do his holy will.

I carry you all in my heart and nothing can ever take you away from it, because we live only for you, my dear and tender children.

In short, my tender friends, I have no other joy than that which you may have; for if you suffer, I am not at ease, and our hearts are so closely linked that it seems that everything is one. So be all ONE, in the charity of the Good Master that unites us.”⁴³

After his fundamental experience of la Motte, Father Coudrin did not envisage his life and ministry without the brothers and sisters of the community. He lived only to support the work of God in the Congregation. God came to his aid through the brothers and sisters who joined the community. In a special way he walked with the Good Mother in fulfilment of God's vision of themselves, the Congregation, the Church and the society of their time.

Thanks to a growing affinity with the Good Father, the Good Mother knew from experience that God could realise his action in those who are disposed towards and rely on him. According to the dynamics of the Incarnation, grace transforms human nature and creation, and the latter then cooperates to become more and more capable of God. This

⁴³ Marie-Joseph Coudrin, “Lettre à Mademoiselle de la Barre [Sœur Gabriel de la Barre]”, (Mende, 16 décembre 1802), LEBP 82 in *Correspondance (1784-1804)*, Vol. 1, Maison Générale, Rome 1994, 225-227.

dynamic found daily and practical spaces for its realisation in the journeying of the communities.

In the administration of the scarce resources available to the nascent community of Poitiers, the Good Mother simply asked the superior, Sister Gabriel de la Barre, to watch over all and everything and to entrust herself entirely into the hands of the good Lord.

“The good Lord will come to our rescue, and try to see that. Think of everything, my very good one, be aware of everything, then you will be wholly with the good God; he will reward you a hundredfold.”⁴⁴

The Good Mother remained highly sensitive to the grace that God was granting to the body of the Congregation and which spread among the members of the community. This grace never ceased to bear fruit insofar as they used it for the building up of the community and the common mission. From her point of view, each member was called to collaborate with God who was leading his work by his hand; the work received his graces through belonging to the Congregation and being disposed to enrich this body by the daily gift of self in the service of the brothers and sisters. Everything that concerned a member of the family necessarily had an impact on the whole community. When the personal response to so many graces received weakened - the faith, the taste for the Gospel, the joy of serving in his name, the

⁴⁴ Henriette Aymer de la Chevalerie, “Lettre à Sœur Gabriel de la Barre”, (Cahors, vers le 13 décembre 1803), LEBM 155 in *Correspondance*, Vol. 2, Maison Générale (Sœurs), Rome 2008, 14.

different gifts and charisms, etc., - the Good Mother exhorted the brother or sister to rely on the community and to count on it. It is in this spirit that she addressed a letter full of wisdom and fraternal affection to Father Philibert Vidon – “*my good Brother*”, she told him in Sées, as he was beset by the thought of leaving the Congregation.

“So stay with us, my good Brother, for our happiness, our satisfaction, our edification. I am sure that if I could roll call all the individuals who make up our society, there is not one that I did not agree with. So try to calm your troubles and to attach yourself even more strongly to this divine Heart of Jesus which is and will always be our strength, our support. Pray for me who needs it so much. Just think that we are in solidarity with one another, and that it is perhaps on account of your prayers, your virtues, that God wants to grant special graces to the society of which you are a member. I hope you will tell me that you think like me. I will rejoice according to God and for you and for us.”⁴⁵

The Good Mother strongly urged this brother to see himself from the point of view of the community to which he belonged and with which he was in solidarity. In so doing he could place his discomfort and his troubles into perspective, thanks to the affection and interest which the members of the community show towards him. In this way he

⁴⁵ Henriette Aymer de la Chevalerie, “Lettre au Père Philibert Vidon”, (Picpus, 23 janvier 1818), LEBM 610 in *Correspondance*, Vol. 4, Maison Générale (Sœurs), Rome 2008, 26-27.

could see how much his person edified the whole body. It is in times of desolation that we are to attach ourselves even more to the divine Heart of Jesus, who is our source of strength and consolation. This was a beautiful way for the Good Mother to keep at one and the same time the concern for each brother and the concern for the whole body and therein to experience joy and happiness as God wishes.

Missionary impulse

Later, when the Holy See asked the Congregation to expand its missionary front beyond France to the Sandwich Islands (today, the Hawaiian Islands), Father Coudrin delivered a kind of spiritual *vademecum* or handbook for the brothers who were preparing to leave for the new mission. He strongly reminded Father Alexis Bachelot, as the head of this first group, of some fundamental points of the family spirit of the Congregation: fraternal life and in particular, one of its major premises, discernment, is to be carried out together to find the will of God:

“Love each other, endure the little pains that will be essential because of the different characters; have only one heart and one soul. The Holy Angels will help you, direct you, enlighten you, lead you to the port... Be gentle and obedient to one another. May each one not hold on too much to his feelings; it is more in accordance with the will of God to give up something for the good of all, than to want the best,

when there are obstacles which are not bad in themselves.”⁴⁶

This form of being a “synodal” church was already evident in the very process of implementation; it was a translation of the “vision” that Father Coudrin had of the Congregation at la Motte d'Usseau and which would always accompany him: a community of brothers, sisters and lay people, unified by the same desire - *to spread the Gospel everywhere* - and capable of translating it into a diversity of ministries according to the changing circumstances of their times. To make this possible and to live it in a family spirit, Father Coudrin maintained a privileged and constant relationship with the superiors of the local communities. He supported them in their role with his advice, accompanied them in the sometimes arduous service involving particularly heavy decisions concerning people’s difficulties or even the management of the houses. To the superior of the community of Poitiers, for example, who had a strong authoritarian leaning and who wanted to appoint a prior, he advised:

“Since you are establishing a Prior, give your brothers a certain air of confidence in you. For truly, my good friend, you have the way of treating everything as an absolute master, and this, I assure you, is the

⁴⁶ Marie-Joseph Coudrin, “Lettre au Père Alexis Bachelot”, (s.l., octobre 1826), LEBP 1163 in *Correspondance (1824-1827)*, Vol. 6, Maison Générale, Rome 1999, 303.

wrong way. A little conciliation works so well, when you have authority.”⁴⁷

In order to consolidate the family spirit in the Congregation, Father Coudrin also insisted that brothers and sisters take care of their parents and, if necessary, for reasons of precariousness or health, welcome them even into the houses. The criterion for this type of decision was indeed the option for the poorest often found in the families of community members. Thus Father Coudrin wrote to Father Bernard Jaussen, superior of the Sarlat community:

“Never forget that the first poor are the parents of our confreres, and that there is nothing above a father or a mother. ...] Only, do not wear yourself out, because our houses can do some good for the parents, young and old, of our brothers and sisters.”⁴⁸

Another level of the dynamic of “walking together: is that of fraternity experienced on a daily basis. Father Coudrin, without renouncing his role as Superior General who watched over the progress of the communities as a whole, was very keen that the members, among themselves and all towards him, weave relationships of frank and encouraging fraternity. As proof of this, he signed most of his letters to the members of the Congregation: *Brother M(arie) J(oseph)*. He

⁴⁷ Marie-Joseph Coudrin, “Lettre au Père Hippolyte Launay”, (s.l., 7 octobre 1822), LEBP 786 in *Correspondance (1821-1824)*, Vol. 5, Maison Générale, Rome 1998, 164.

⁴⁸ Marie-Joseph Coudrin, “Lettre au Père Bernard Jaussen”, (s.l., 7 janvier 1826), LEBP 1093 in *Correspondance (1824-1827)*, Vol. 6, Maison Générale, Rome 1999, 211.

could not bear the fact that, when addressing him, the members of the Congregation used titles that concealed this essential dimension: "Reverend Father" must never go under your pen, nor in your mouth",⁴⁹ came the severe reproach to Sister Françoise de Viart, one of his companions since the beginning and superior of Poitiers. Moreover, Father Coudrin always had words full of esteem and confidence towards the non-ordained brothers.⁵⁰

Another level of this "synodal" service, desired and lived by Father Coudrin, can be found in his ability as father and pastor, to create bonds of faith with the different people who journeyed with him. Particular mention should be made of the frank and loyal relationships he maintained with the various bishops and vicar generals with whom he worked, without fearing conflict, if for example, he considered that the freedom of the Church was being called into

⁴⁹ Marie-Joseph Coudrin, "Lettre à Sœur Françoise de Viart", (Troyes, 1^{er} décembre 1825), LEBP 1081 in *Correspondance (1824-1827)*, Vol. 6, Maison Générale, Rome 1999, 195.

⁵⁰ The so-called family spirit, with its strong sense of evangelical brotherhood, shines above all in the memories gathered by the lay brother Severin Coulanges: "He had a special affection for the lay brothers; he did his utmost to prevent people in the world from believing we were servants. Several times, while I was with the missionaries travelling through the countryside, I asked him to eat aside, for fear of disturbing these gentlemen who often had cases of conscience to submit to one another; he never wanted to consent and always told me: 'If these gentlemen have something to say, let them say it in their own particular way. I want us to eat together so that it may be seen that you are all brothers.'" *Copia Publica* 1160-1161.

question, or where the realisation of the work of God through the Congregation was met with obstacles.

As tensions grew between him and Abbé Lemercier, the parish priest of Saint Marguerite's parish in Paris, upon whom the house in Picpus depended, Father Coudrin could see that he no longer had the confidence of either the parish priest or the diocesan authorities. The conflict concerned the right of pastoral jurisdiction which the parish priest wanted to assert over the Picpus community, whereas the Congregation had been exempt from this right due to the climate of trust that had existed with the previous parish priests since the arrival of the community in Picpus 1805. This conflict forced the Good Father to reconsider the viability of the community in the diocese. In his discernment on this question, the Good Father regarded the Congregation from the perspective of the good and its usefulness to the life and progress of the Church.

In his letter to Father Eliçagaray, a member of the Commission of Public Instruction and a regular guest in Picpus, the Good Father read the facts to him. He was not fooled by the prejudices levelled against Father Coudrin. Father Coudrin had refused to recognise the appointment by Napoleon of Cardinal Jean-Siffrein Maury as administrator of Paris (1810-1814), without the Pope's confirmation. Moreover, he had received the approval of the Congregation by the Holy See before having obtained the approval of the French State. This made him seen as too ultra-montane for the Gallican sensibility that reigned among certain civil and ecclesiastical authorities of the time. But the criterion employed

to understand what the providential love of God was telling the Congregation was to remain faithful and useful to the Church.

“It is clear, in fact, that we have prejudices directed either at our establishments or personally at us, or else Divine Providence is allowing this humiliating anathema to determine and guide our journey. In the first assumption, we could never cure these prejudices; because apart from the fact that we do not know their nature, we can hardly hope to do better. The second hypothesis is for us a warning from the Sovereign Ruler of our fate, who prescribes, as it were, that we raise our poor camp and take elsewhere the feeble efforts he deigns to inspire in us for his glory and for the education of the poor. We can say, thanks be to God: *non habemus hic manentem civitatem*. Our tents are easy to transport, and indeed we may find some of them erected wherever we are called.”

[...]

“Yes, Monsieur l'Abbé, we only desire the good of souls; but good cannot be done where one does not have the complete confidence of ecclesiastical superiors. However, I repeat to you, there is no doubt that we do not have it. For if we had it, we would not be the object of a proscription that we have never experienced anywhere and that no one else has. However, let us say it, we believe we have been

useful, not only in the diocese, but also to the diocese.”

[...]

“God will not forsake us, any more than the work to which Providence has employed our feeble resources, if this work is pleasing to him. It is in the name of the Lord that we have undertaken it; we abandon the success to him.”⁵¹

Beyond the suspicions that weigh on both sides of the actors involved in this conflict, the differences in the vision of the Church or the friction between two strong personalities, the Good Father saw this as an opportunity to reaffirm the criteria and basic options that inspired the Congregation's contribution to the life of the Church: working in trust with pastors, respect for the various charisms and services in the community, concern for the poorest, availability to the needs of the local Churches, radical freedom based on the condition of pilgrims journeying with others towards our definitive homeland in God and placing initiatives and projects in God's hands. In short, an ecclesial awareness that adjusts and matures by reading the milestones of the Church's journey with the various actors involved. The horizon is this: always remain useful for the building up of the Church, knowing that it is God who leads it to its fulfilment.

⁵¹ Marie-Joseph Coudrin, “Lettre à Monsieur l’abbé Eliçagary”, (Paris, 27 juin 1820), LEBP 628 in *Correspondance (1817-1820)*, Vol. 4, Maison Générale, Rome 1997, 228.

Sharing spirituality and mission with the laity

Finally, we must not forget that since his vision in the Motte d'Usseau, Father Coudrin had imagined a group of missionaries called to spread the Gospel everywhere and of a society of women who would take care of the material needs of the missionaries, all dedicated to the Hearts of Jesus and Mary. That is to say, a religious family that would take the form of a religious institute for brothers and sisters.

This intuition of the Founder found its initial nucleus in an association composed basically of pious women - the Association of the Sacred Heart - which also included some priests, as chaplains and companions. It was within this group of lay people that Father Coudrin met Henriette Aymer and the core of women who would later form the initial nucleus of the Congregation. The young Henriette Aymer also shared the vision of a family composed not only of brothers and sisters united by vows, but also of an external society:

“We will always have a great society” -writes Mother Henriette to Father Coudrin- “in another form [than that of a religious order], which will be a kind of Third Order.”⁵²

The Founders translated this desire into the form of an external association of men and women who collaborated

⁵² Henriette Aymer de la Chevalerie, “Billet au Bon Père”, (s.l., 3 February 1802), LEBM 63 in *Correspondance*, Vol. 1, Maison Générale (Sœurs), Rome 2008, 140.

with and supported the mission of the Congregation especially through the ministry of Eucharistic adoration and the recitation of the *Salve Regina*. The members of this association gathered around a community of brothers and sisters; they were duly registered and had as their patron saint, the apostle of Vivarais, Saint Francis Regis (Narbonne 1579 - Lalouvesc 1640). In fact, when Father Hilarion Lucas approached the Holy See for the approval of the Congregation in 1814, Father Coudrin reminded him of the vows and prayers of "nine hundred people who are attached directly or indirectly to the Congregation",⁵³ i.e. more than 700 lay associates at the time.

In November 1816, the Good Mother, with the consent of Father Coudrin, had more than 3000 invitations printed for distribution to lay people.⁵⁴ The aim was to spread devotion to the Sacred Hearts among the faithful through daily Eucharistic adoration with the intention of making reparation – making 'amends' for sins and for the fact that God's love was neither loved nor recognised - and the recitation of the *Salve*. With tenacity, the Good Mother insisted that the leaders of the communities (sisters and brothers) distribute the

⁵³ Marie-Joseph Coudrin, "Lettre au Père Hilarion Lucas", (Paris, 25 octobre 1814) LEBP 476 in *Correspondance (1808-1816)*, Vol. 3, Maison Générale, Rome 1996, 305.

⁵⁴ Cf. Henriette Aymer de la Chevalerie, "Lettre à Sœur Gabriel de la Barre (s.l., fin novembre 1816), LEBM 531; "Lettre à Sœur Adelaïde Prieur-Chauveau" (s.l., novembre 1816), LEBM 546; "Lettre à Sœur Adrienne de Bocquency" (s.l., novembre 1816), LEBM 547; "Lettre à Sœur Hilde Lacoste" (n.l., fin novembre ou décembre 1816), LEBM 551; "Lettre au Père Régis Rouchouze" (n.l., fin novembre 1816), LEBM 552, in *Correspondance*, Vol. 3, Maison Générale (Sœurs), Rome 2008.

invitations; it was a way of encouraging those who wished to do so to enter into a communion of prayer with the brothers and sisters, and thus participate in the graces and indulgences granted to the Congregation by the Holy See.⁵⁵ In fact, this invitation was met with a great and favourable response by many lay people and contributed to the achievement of the main goal of the Congregation, namely, the propagation of devotion to the Sacred Hearts, as well as the fulfilment of one of the main services of the Congregation for the mission of the Church, perpetual reparative Eucharistic Adoration.⁵⁶

Mother Henriette and Father Coudrin, co-workers with God

At the heart of the family spirit and the dynamic of “walking together” in the Congregation is the essential relationship that existed between Father Coudrin and Mother Henriette.

⁵⁵ These were plenary or partial indulgences for those who united with the mission of the Church through confession, communion and Eucharistic adoration and prayed for the intentions of the Church, the Pope and even those of the Bourbon family, on the first Friday or Saturday of the month, or on July 9 for the feast of Our Lady of Peace. We also received indulgence for the sick who, at the point of dying, pronounced at least the names of Jesus and Mary, and for those who taught catechism to children and did other works of piety. Through a wide range of services and ministries the laity also participated in the mission of the Congregation. Cf Marcel Bocquet, “Nos fondateurs et l'Association Extérieur. L'appel de la Bonne Mère in *Annales Congregationis Sacrorum Cordium* 1, Rome 1956, 62-63.

⁵⁶ “L'appel de la Bonne Mère” (s.l., novembre 1816) published in Marcel Bocquet, “Nos fondateurs et l'Association Extérieur. L'appel de la Bonne Mère”, in *Annales Congregationis Sacrorum Cordium* 1, Rome 1956, 61-63.

Indeed, the different dimensions of this common synodal service that Father Coudrin wished to transmit to the Congregation were assumed and deepened thanks to his privileged relationship with Mother Henriette Aymer. Theirs was a relationship marked by great respect, mutual admiration, mutual trust and a shared sense of animation of the religious family,⁵⁷ a remarkable relationship which was all the more significant given their personal differences in sensitivity and social backgrounds. He was from a relatively well-off rural environment, she was from a rather well-off urban environment, belonging to the lower nobility of Poitiers. These differences were undoubtedly mitigated by their docility to the action of God in their lives.

The action of God opened up a horizon for them for new foundations. The relationship was founded on their radical rooting of each one in the love of the Lord Jesus, cultivated in reparative Eucharistic Adoration and deepened in the shared responsibility for the joint animation of the Congregation. The Foundress would always remain indebted to Father Coudrin who welcomed her into the Society of the Sacred Heart (1795) - the seed of the Congregation - by assigning her a turn at adoration; this Society was then based in Poitiers, rue du Moulin-à-vent. Thus, she wrote to Father Coudrin:

⁵⁷ Among the innumerable texts we can refer to the correspondence of Father Coudrin to Mother Henriette Aymer, LEBP 135; 770; 1436; 1460, Cf *Copia Publica* 744-745.

“When you established Adoration at Moulin and assigned me an hour, without knowing it, you fixed my destiny.”⁵⁸

For his part, Father Coudrin found Mother Henriette to be a source of support, advice and insight for his spiritual endeavours. At a time when the nascent community was looking for a form of common life “to make people love the Gospel”, Father Coudrin was rather inclined to adopt elements of monastic life: stability of the community, common prayer in the office, and certain ascetic practices such as fasting, poverty in clothing and austerity in lifestyle. Male monastic life was the only form of religious life he knew. However, given the needs of the Church of the time, instead of seeking to reproduce monastic life, both of them envisaged rather the creation of a form of common life that was more flexible and therefore more compatible with apostolic requirements. In the discernment to give shape to a religious life that would meet the challenges of the times, Mother Henriette offered Father Coudrin judicious advice and sound judgment. The advice resumed in a more articulate way what the Good Mother saw and appreciated in Father Coudrin. In other words, the new community was able to be born and seek forms of organisation and ministry based on the spiritual qualities that Father Coudrin was endowed with and that Mother Henriette knew how to highlight:

⁵⁸ Henriette Aymer de la Chevalerie, “Billet au Bon Père”, (Mende, Friday 7 janvier 1803), LEBM 109 in *Correspondance*, Vol. 1, Maison Générale (Sœurs), Rome 2008, 231.

“The good Lord has given you the precious gift of his habitual presence, that is to say, by talking, walking, or doing something else, without thinking, you think about God. Finally, he is more in you than you are yourself, if you can put it that way. To respond to this particular grace, it would be better if you went several times during the day (even if only for a moment) into the depths of your heart to adore it, because it is there that he stays and enjoys himself, because the faults you may commit are never made with complete deliberation.”⁵⁹

The young Henriette joined this spiritual figure in seeking and building together the form of life that best expressed the spiritual motions that animated them. Both bore the responsibility for the animation of the community from its first steps to its consolidation. When Mother Henriette was going through moments of illness, Father Coudrin was concerned for her and for the Congregation, which depended a lot on the animation of the two of them. To express his affection for Mother Henriette and their common responsibility in the animation of the community, Father Coudrin used an image that said a lot about how they understood the accompaniment of the Congregation:

⁵⁹ Henriette Aymer de la Chevalerie, “Billet au Bon Père” (s.l., vers le milieu de l’an 1801), LEBM 32 in *Correspondance*, Vol. 1, Maison Générale (Sœurs), Rome 2008, 231.

“Try then, to get better, to always support the poor boat that God has built using two very poor mortals and with such sad and badly polished planks.”⁶⁰

However, the accompaniment of the community was assured in various ways by Mother Henriette and Father Coudrin. At the end of the first years of their journeying together in the Congregation, Father Coudrin in reviewing it, could already see the fundamental role played by Mother Henriette, whom he nicknamed “Little Peace”:

“I can't look - without a certain tenderness – at all that has happened since, and although we hardly deserve it, there has been a lot of progress for a time like ours, and especially for a father so timid and fearful. It is true that the Little Peace carries the light and I am only holding the candlestick.”⁶¹

If the relations between them were full of respect and trust, Father Coudrin asked no less of the brothers and sisters of the Congregation with regard to Mother Henriette. If he perceived that someone in the exercise of his duties or in fraternal relations was not so attentive towards Mother Henriette, Father Coudrin reminded them of the role and importance of her presence for the community. Thus, when the young superior of the Mother House in Picpus, Father

⁶⁰ Marie-Joseph Coudrin, “Lettre à Mère Henriette Aymer”, (s.l., 6 août 1822), LEBP 770 in *Correspondance (1821-1824)*, Vol. 5, Maison Générale, Rome 1998, 144.

⁶¹ Marie-Joseph Coudrin, “Lettre à Sœur Gabriel de la Barre”, (Mende, 20 octobre 1803), LEBP 135 in *Correspondance (1784-1804)*, Vol. 1, Maison Générale, Rome 1994, 360-361.

Raphaël Bonamie, believed that he could do without Mother Henriette's advice for decisions affecting the whole community and the health of the whole body, Father Coudrin admonished him as follows:

“As you grow old, my good friend, you will learn that you must never humiliate an entire religious body, even though there are faults; the Good Mother has her own, and who does not?... Be certain, my dear Raphael, that she is the soul of the two families, that her own life hangs by a thread, that she is too old and you too young to remove the root from the trunk, the branches would soon be too weak to bear fruit...”⁶²

Out of this relationship that matured in faith and shared responsibility, Father Coudrin and Mother Henriette encouraged the members of the Congregation to live their vocation and mission in fraternal communion. The communion was to be nourished day by day at the foot of the Blessed Sacrament, in particular in the contemplation of the crucified love of the Lord, of his pierced Heart. In this way, its members could draw on the resources available in the faith to strengthen the bonds of brotherhood, even though in the post-revolutionary era, philanthropy was advocated as one of the flagship values for cementing a new form of society. The importance of communion, always to be received and built upon, in view of the mission - became more and more

⁶² Marie-Joseph Coudrin, “Lettre au Père Raphaël Bonamie”, (Archevêché de Rouen, 27 janvier 1829), LEBP 1460 in *Correspondance (1827-1830)*, Vol. 7, Maison Générale, Rome 2000, 225-226.

central to Father Coudrin, as he approached death. His last messages sought above all to strengthen communion between the different members of the Congregation. He was very afraid that they would not love each other enough to make the love of God credible and tangible.

In one of his last letters to the superior of the community of Coussay-les-Bois, also his niece, Father Coudrin delivered his spiritual testament which collated the memory of Mother Henriette regarding the religious fraternity and the family spirit they lived and advocated together:

“Be patient with each other. With time, nothing essential will be missing. Take good care of each and every one in particular.

Always be united. Have one heart and one soul. All of you, daughters of the Good Mother, have courage and faith, and I answer for the happiness as far one can have it here on earth.

Let us only remember that we are consecrated to the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary and that to this precious profession are undoubtedly attached sweet and healthy bitterness, inseparable from our vocation. The frequent use of the sacraments, especially the Holy Eucharist, gives us inexpressible graces to fulfil all our duties.”⁶³

⁶³ Marie-Joseph Coudrin, “Lettre à Sœur Eudoxie Coudrin”, (s.l., 17 juillet 1835), LEBP 2038 in *Addenda à Correspondance (1831-1837)*, Vol. 8, Maison Générale, Rome 2000, 12.

Mysteriously fruitful

This was how Henriette and Marie-Joseph lived out their spiritual fruitfulness in the complementary service of maternity and paternity regarding their religious family. They believed in a divine fruitfulness at work in the concrete exercise of the animation and support of the brothers and sisters whose care they shared. Above all, this fruitfulness emerged from an unfailing trust in the providential action of God who supported them, guiding the Congregation and urging them to serve the Church with freedom, ready to take, if necessary at the cost of their lives, all the risks involved in the proclamation of the Gospel. In short, Mother Henriette and Father Coudrin offer us a beautiful testimony of what is meant today by being “*mysteriously fruitful for the Church*”.

“Yet there is no greater freedom than that of allowing oneself to be guided by the Holy Spirit, renouncing the attempt to plan and control everything to the last detail, and instead letting him enlighten, guide and direct us, leading us wherever he wills. The Holy Spirit knows well what is needed in every time and place. This is what it means to be mysteriously fruitful!” (EG, 280)

This form of being Church in which sisters, brothers and lay people walk together, in dialogue with the circumstances of their times, seeking to discern the action of God and of the Spirit of Jesus and to support it, are features that could very well be one of the future examples for a wholly synodal

Church. In fact, the Constitutions of the Congregation emphasise that the religious vocation, as brothers and sisters, is received, resourced and lived in communion with the People of God. In fact, the first number of the Constitutions in the chapter common to the brothers and sisters, and the last number of the Constitutions of the brothers, remind us that the Congregation exists only by and for the service of the Church and its mission.

1. In the communion of the Church, the People of God, the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary and of Perpetual Adoration of the Most Blessed Sacrament of the Altar is an Apostolic Religious Congregation of pontifical right, founded by Pierre Coudrin and Henriette Aymer de la Chevalerie. Brothers and sisters, united in the same charism and the same mission, form a single Congregation approved as such in 1817 by Pope Pius VII.

153.2. We see ourselves likewise as pilgrims, together with the whole People of God. Our Constitutions and Statutes express the convictions, aspirations and concrete possibilities we have at this moment of our journey. In equality and shared responsibility, we desire to advance toward full communion among ourselves, with our sisters, and with all lay Christians.

Brothers, sisters and laity, who share the same spirituality and mission through the bonds that are woven between them, can contribute to this ongoing work of strengthening the ecclesial fabric, of offering forms of life in the taste of

the Gospel, always more fraternal and in solidarity with those who are left behind. It is by “walking together” that the Congregation, the Christian communities, men and women, all loved by God, can contribute to the realisation of the dream of fraternity and social friendship manifested by Pope Francis:

“Let us dream, then, as a single human family, as fellow travellers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all.” (*Fratelli Tutti*, 8)

Such a fraternity is to be lived out on a daily basis by men and women who know themselves to be fragile, vulnerable and at the same time aware of the harm they can inflict on others, sometimes even in the name of God. Brothers and sisters who are attentive to the cries of the poor and of the planet, seek with others to invent ways of living together, marked by respect for others and their full humanisation, by the sobriety of their lifestyle, by the sense of sharing goods, by the responsibility that falls to all for the care of our common home. In short, we are brothers, sisters and lay people, ourselves fragile, but more attentive to the most vulnerable, and also more aware and responsible for our planet. The Lord Jesus restores those he loves; he comes to them in their brokenness and heals their wounds. In turn, those who are loved in this way by God then make themselves more available to assist and continue the reparative

ministry of Jesus in every person, in the whole of society and in the whole of creation.

To help us associate ourselves with this work in the manner of Jesus, those we see on the edges of our streets challenge us in his name to place ourselves in their place, to feel with them and like them our powerlessness and their expectation for someone to look at them and take care of them. Seeing this, in spite of their “transparency”, we will be able to walk new paths of mercy with them. As brothers and sisters, fragile ourselves and in need of the mercy of others and of God, we will come closer to men and women and to the Lord who loves us and who puts humanity back on its feet thanks to our closeness in word and deed. Then and only then will we be able to become brothers and sisters today, good Samaritans of whom Pope Francis speaks, as restorers of the bonds of fraternity and artisans of peace and social friendship:

“Today we have a great opportunity to express our innate sense of fraternity, to be Good Samaritans who bear the pain of other people’s troubles rather than fomenting greater hatred and resentment. Like the chance traveller in the parable, we need only have a pure and simple desire to be a people, a community, constant and tireless in the effort to include, integrate and lift up the fallen.” (*Fratelli Tutti*, 77)

By taking this path, as brothers and sisters, renewed by the dynamic of reparation like Mary at the foot of the Cross, associating ourselves with the act of reparation that springs

from the pierced Heart of Jesus, we will be able to collaborate with so many other brothers and sisters in humanity in “the shared passion to create a community of belonging and solidarity worthy of our time.” (*Fratelli tutti*, 36)

VI.

THE JOY OF PILGRIMS ON THE WAY TO THE HOMELAND

In the spirituality lived out by Father Coudrin and Mother Henriette, their fundamental faith conviction was that whatever happened and despite human failures, God was accomplishing his work of creation and reparation for his Glory. This is what guided their apostolic choices and helped them face the obstacles and limitations that arose along the way. They saw themselves as pilgrims on the roads of history towards the definitive homeland, the encounter in communion with God and all the saints. This was the luminous certainty that illuminated the present, of which they already had a foretaste.

“For you have passed through death, and your life remains hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, your life, appears, you too will appear with him in glory.” (Col 3,3-4)

Their participation in the death and resurrection of Christ was the soil in which their lives had taken root, on which they built community and from which they nourished their apostolic momentum. This luminous certainty had soaked their personality to the point of becoming a key to a theological reading for that time; it was necessary to seize the occasions and opportunities to continue God's work and to

recharge one's batteries in the trials to be faced: precarious health (their own and that of those for whom they were responsible), the defection or even death of members of the Congregation and, on another scale, the hazards of social events and also the tears in the ecclesial fabric. All these events experienced in their personal history influenced them in the governing of the Congregation. The untiring action of God in the heart of history moving towards its fulfilment became the criterion for identifying and discerning how to collaborate in this action, or at least not to hinder it.

The more the community grappled with exhausting tensions, the more the Founders were convinced that the Congregation was at the service of the work of God. The Lord had been leading it as by the hand since its foundation. To familiarise themselves with the times and criteria of God, Father Coudrin and Mother Henriette maintained constant communication between themselves and with the communities regarding the life of the brothers and sisters, regarding the local Churches and events happening in the country. They then evaluated these situations and invited all to do the same in the contemplation of the filial love of the Heart of Jesus and by trusting in God the Father and his infinite, reparative, fraternal love. It was there that they matured the criteria that guided their personal lives and the choices of the Congregation.

United to one another in Christ

Father Coudrin offers us a good rereading of his own life by recognising as a constant, the common thread that linked

the events of his life with the action of God and his faithful and providential love. He realised that from his childhood to the founding and growth of the Congregation, through the years of clandestine ministry in Coussay-les-Bois and his two pilgrimages to Rome and even his participation in the conclave that elected Pope Pius VIII, everything was received and seen by him as a blessing from God. He recapitulated this confession of faith, in a grateful memory for all that God has done in him; and he shared it with Sister Françoise de Viart, who succeeded the Good Mother, as Superior General:

“Poor thatched cottage in Coussay-les-Bois! If my God had not yet chosen the smallest thing for his works, would it have ever been possible for him to have taken something out ...”⁶⁴

This was a confession of faith in the first person, the keystone of which was the smallness of the origins and the great mercy of God, who from small grains makes generous trees grow. It was the dynamic of the coming of the Kingdom of God and its growth that the Good Father recognised at work in him. In all the choices and paths full of risks for his life, he recognised the hand of God that had led and sustained him. Inspired by this grateful memory, the Good Father renewed his hope that God had begun and forged in him and through him in the Congregation. This was to be an irrevocable gift for those who, in turn, would welcome

⁶⁴ Marie-Joseph Coudrin, “Lettre à Sœur Françoise de Viart” (Rouen, 17 mars 1830), LEBP 1550 in *Correspondance (1827-1830)*, Vol. 7, Maison Générale, Rome 2000, 321.

him and allow him bear fruit in the choices and directions of their lives.

This openness to God found a profound echo in Mother Henriette. Through her experience, she too discovered that she had been seized by God who had given her everything and who, in order to make the gift bear fruit in herself and in others, called her to make a gift of her whole life. We find here the same dynamic of the coming of the Kingdom in her and in the Congregation: "Truly I tell you, no one will have left a house, brothers, sisters, mother, father, children, or land for my sake and the Gospel, without receiving a hundred times as much in this present age: houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and fields - along with persecutions - and, in the world to come, eternal life...." (Mk 10, 29-30) The gift of life "for Jesus' sake" results in an even greater gift, the life of the Risen One who comes into the present time and supports the journey of his disciples, even in times of persecution and adversity.

In the Good Mother there was a growing desire to be completely consumed by the merciful love of God through the daily service of brothers and sisters. Indeed, in one of her notes, the Good Mother entrusted to the Good Father the motions of God which she perceives for herself and the nascent Congregation.

“It is no longer only the Blessed Virgin who wants this order, but it seems to have become a need for the Heart of God, so great is his mercy for us.”⁶⁵

In this intuition, the Good Mother confessed her hope. It was as if she saw in the modest beginnings of the Congregation what God wanted to accomplish in her and through her. From her experience and her review before God, she came to the daring affirmation that the Congregation of the Hearts of Jesus and Mary was necessary insofar as it bore witness to the merciful action of God. Henriette and the Congregation entered into this dynamic of accomplishment by being available and docile, according to time and circumstances, by allowing themselves to be perfected by the mercy of God. It was the action of a God who loved and raised interlocutors through a dialogue of love and collaborators for his work of reparation. The privileged place to enter into harmony with the merciful action of God was in praying for one another. This prayer was a light that allowed everyone to stay awake and be attentive to recognizing the action of God in each one and to help each other to collaborate in its development. With the fine spiritual sensitivity and the pedagogical sense which characterised her, the young Henriette described to a sister of the External Society of the Sacred Heart at the time, what must be the distinctive features of an existence that allows itself to be

⁶⁵ Henriette Aymer de la Chevalerie, “Billet au Bon Père”, (Vers la fin de janvier 1801), LEBM 13 in *Correspondance*, Vol. 1, Maison Générale, (Sœurs), Rome 2008, 50.

shaped and accomplished by grace of God, with the support of prayer for one another:

“Pray that God grant us the grace we need relative to our position: to you the grace to make a choice, to me the grace of perseverance in a state in which all is death to nature, denial of oneself, desire of suffering or rather the need for suffering; finally in a state where life is nothing but a perpetual holocaust of one’s whole being to God and to God alone.”⁶⁶

This approach to thanksgiving may offend our theological sensitivity in the sense that the vision of the Good Mother remains marked by a certain pessimism about the possibilities of human nature. As if, in order to allow the action of supernatural grace, it was necessary to clear the road for it by suppressing nature. That said, however much she emphasised the primacy of grace, it always operates in a nature purified, transformed, even capable of giving a human face to the depth of God's love. To make oneself available for thanksgiving, there is always a struggle to be waged against the tendencies and impulses of violence and death that inhabit the human heart, but it is this same heart that is capable of love to the end, despite violence, as the pierced Heart of Jesus manifested. In the letter quoted above, we draw attention to the prospective vision of the Good Mother of a life completed by the primacy of grace, a life contem-

⁶⁶ Henriette Aymer de la Chevalerie, “Lettre à une Sœur de la Société extérieure”, (Poitiers, 1799), LEBM 5 in *Correspondance*, Vol. 1, Maison Générale (Sœurs), Rome 2008, 32.

plated from what it is called to become and from its fulfilment in God and by God. This is the road to be travelled from now on, a grace to be implemented, with everyone's help, through mutual accompaniment in the choices and forms of life that transforms and consolidates each person.

According to the spiritual intuitions of the Founders, the grace of the love of God, with its dynamic of dialogue, supposes the cooperation of all to accomplish his good will. It was the function of the community of brothers, sisters and laity associated with the Congregation to visibly mediate this grace in the community. Indeed, the grace that God offered to the Founders included the dynamic of sharing it and giving it to those who wished to receive it. The visions that inspired our Founders to make people love the Gospel were attractive and awoke the desire to manifest this in the form of community life. In other words, the graces received by the Founders were multiplied through the links created by the profession of vows between the members of the Congregation. They were and are bonds forged by the un-failing love of the Lord who calls each one by name and which mature in the life of the community. The religious profession of the vows inaugurates a process that lasts a lifetime, the process of being configured to the Lord Jesus, by becoming members of one another through Him. This process is nourished during the time that each one spends at the feet of the Lord in Eucharistic Adoration. It is during this time that we experience a foretaste, from then on, of the most profound encounter that is with the Lord and with his brothers and sisters. This is what Mother Henriette reminded Sister Gabriel de la Barre:

“Whether 100 leagues or ten thousand, we will never be far away: the bonds which unite us know no distance; the heart passes through them all, and perhaps, one day, we will all be gathered up above; pray, my very good one, that I can arrive there, however only when my time comes, because I do not want to rush it ...”⁶⁷

The most essential vow and praising God

It was God who was good enough to associate Father Coudrin, Mother Henriette and the members of the Congregation in his saving action that favours each brother, each sister, each person and the whole world. The best way to associate ourselves with this initiative of God, manifested in the Hearts of Jesus and of Mary, is to make ourselves available and to collaborate in it with all our intelligence, sensitivity and humility, so that our wounds might be healed through the reparative action of Jesus towards our brothers and sisters.

It is was for this reason that the Congregation would be, in the words of the Good Mother, “necessary to the Heart of God”. This whole process the Good Father summed up as “the most essential vow”, that is to say, that which unifies the gift of self through the vow of chastity, poverty and obedience forever opens it to its eschatological dimension: consecrated to the Hearts of Jesus and Mary, the brothers

⁶⁷ Henriette Aymer de la Chevalerie, “Lettre à Sœur Gabriel de la Barre”, (Mende, décembre 1802), LEBM 100 in *Correspondance*, Vol. 1, Maison Générale (Sœurs), Rome 2008, 214.

and sisters of the Congregation “*will fail in their most essential vow from the moment they wish to live for themselves and not work for the salvation of their brothers.*”⁶⁸

Collaboration in God's work is the most essential vow for every brother and sister. Each brother and sister is therefore called to recognise themselves as a work of God, that is, to enter into the life of God which manifests itself as a gift of boundless love in Christ; and the action of his spirit continues to foster the same dynamic in others. Lay people are also associated with God's work through a form of life of their own. The signs of God's action at the level of the local community and the diversity of ministries and services are verified on a day-to-day basis.

In his correspondence, Father Coudrin constantly reminded brothers and sisters that God conducts his work counting on the good disposition of all, their capacity to help each other and a firm and generous mutual charity. By doing this, we find the source of a strong and serene happiness. Father Coudrin wrote to Sister Alix Guyot, superior of the community of Mortagne and noted that we are together because of the Lord and serving him is inseparable from serving the brothers and sisters. In other words, the Good Father urges us to creatively translate what the most essential vow means into practice. The difficulties within the community and the annoyances that arise can be best dealt

⁶⁸ Marie-Joseph Coudrin, “Mémoire du Bon Père sur le titre des zélateurs adressé à la Sacrée Congrégation des Évêques et des Réguliers”, (6 décembre 1816) in *Annales Congregationis Sacrorum Cordium* 35, Rome 1963, 221.

with remembering that any effort made here on Earth leads to Heaven. This reference to the ultimate encounter in communion with the Lord and the saints becomes a source of creativity and patience for the passage of the present time.

“So work together to serve and adore this very good Master. If you are happy to be his children, I am happy for your happiness. Say this well to your good companions, to these dear daughters of his divine Heart. May they love one another, may they bear with their infirmities in the charity that banishes fear. Let all their deeds be done for the acquisition of Heaven.”⁶⁹

Then in the same letter, Father Coudrin summarises the vows as the path to be travelled – along with the sisters of the community – in order to taste here and now the promise of the Lord: the Bridegroom who will open the doors of Heaven to his own.

“Let them think that they have entered into religion only to die to themselves; may they be angels in obeying promptly, virgins to follow the Lamb and detached from everything so as to have nothing weighing down on them when the bridegroom opens the door of Heaven.”⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Marie-Joseph Coudrin, “Lettre à Sœur Alix Guyot” (s.l., 1827 ou 1828), LEBP 1309 in *Correspondance (1827-1830)*, Vol. 7, Maison Générale, Rome 2000, 93.

⁷⁰ Marie-Joseph Coudrin, “Lettre à Sœur Alix Guyot” (s.l., 1827 ou 1828), LEBP 1309 in *Correspondance (1827-1830)*, Vol. 7, Maison Générale, Rome 2000, 93.

It is very impressive to see the insistence of our Founders that the sons and daughters of the divine Heart of Jesus advance on the way of the Lord. They too must go through successive and constant deaths to themselves. Without this passage through death, there is no possibility to experience the transformative potential of the resurrection. The sons and daughters of the Cross are also the sons and daughters of the resurrection who are not afraid to die to themselves, fully assuming the logic of the life of Jesus, losing their own life for his name, only to receive it from him in the resurrection.

On the way to the final Homeland

As Father Coudrin grew older, a gap inevitably widened between his generation and a whole new generation who had joined the Congregation. Thus, he found himself torn between a certain nostalgia for the fervour of the early years of the Congregation and the difficulty in managing the different sensibilities of the recent arrivals. Father Coudrin had once again to accept a new death to self, that of being stripped of his expectations, however legitimate they may have been, to make room for the continuation of God's work in the community, according to God's vision, terms and timeline. He sensed that his vision of the Congregation had yet to be purified at the cost of a certain disillusionment in regards to his expectations. Alone, he would not succeed; he needed to be supported by the prayer of the brothers and sisters with whom he had journeyed over the years. The proximity of death made him feel the need to turn to his companions who were with him from the onset,

in particular, Mother Henriette, Gabriel de la Barre and Françoise de Viart, to support him in his last adventure: to meet his divine Master, Jesus. It was these companions that he felt were most able to understand the shadows that arose in his heart and to help him, through the intercession of the Virgin, to persevere to the end in his availability to the work of God. His prayer then turned to Mary and Jesus - that they may guard and protect the Good Mother for the good and cohesion of the whole Congregation.

“Good Mother, I hope to unite my poor prayers with yours to implore the help of Our Lady of Peace. May it please Our Lord, to keep this good Mother in peace and give us the great happiness of letting you live among us as a guardian angel.”⁷¹

In his last letter written to Sister Gabriel de la Barre, Father Coudrin told her of the feelings that grieved his heart. The more the feelings grew in him of loneliness, of a certain uselessness after so many sacrifices, of estrangement from the new generations, the more he felt a keen desire for God, to go to the final encounter with the Lord in heaven. It was a last confession of hope in God that it would be He alone who would accomplish his work in himself and in the Congregation.

“We poor old people are very different from all the youth who have come to us since our first sacrifices! I would be well compensated, I confess to you, my

⁷¹ Marie-Joseph Coudrin, “Lettre à Mère Henriette Aymer”, (Buchy, 8 juillet 1828), LEBP 1385 in *Correspondance (1827-1830)*, Vol. 7, Maison Générale, Rome 2000, 157.

very dear daughter, if I could, as before, find myself with people who think as we thought, who live as we lived and who die as we died!!!

Finally, I find myself alone in the midst of so many people, I withdraw, with my friends, my brothers; I am all alone and sometimes very sad. Heaven must therefore be very desirable for us, since nothing satisfies us."⁷²

A strange happiness

This grief, or better still, this growing nostalgia for heaven, led to a kind of stripping of himself that allowed him to re-focus even more on the divine Heart of Jesus. In truth, it is Jesus who loves his brothers and sisters through his person. To simply love them, in spite of one's fears and disappointments, accepting in surrendering to God that one does not know whether in the future the members of the Congregation will know how to love one another. It was God who initiated this work, it is God who gave it to the Founders and it will always be God, with the consent of the members of the Congregation, who will support it in its journey and lead it to its fulfilment. This last act of faith in God's action is transformed in the Good Father into an active hope through a simple, direct form of loving his brothers and sisters. By loving in this way, he experienced a strange happiness; he

⁷² Marie-Joseph Coudrin, "Lettre à Sœur Gabriel de la Barre" (Rouen, 5 janvier 1828), LEBP 1315 in *Correspondance (1827-1830)*, Vol. 7, Maison Générale, Rome 2000, 98.

wanted those who would survive him to take the same demanding path of happiness. Here are the indications of the future that he left to his brothers and sisters to continue the journey:

“So never be discouraged, my poor children. One more day and our troubles will end. A little more than a day and - from our good elder sisters Claire and Donatienne, to the youngest of you - you will see God. I tell you, my dear daughters: Taste, taste God in the journey of life. He alone is good. His will is the only good. Away from his heart, all is bitterness. Say it to all; say the same to my brother and his friends. I feel it for myself. Everything is nothing except to love God. Let us therefore live for him alone and die of the desire to please him. This is true happiness.”⁷³

To not get lost along the way in the quest for God, the compass is always the Heart of Jesus. It is there that he learned again and again that the only vocation that God never ceases to call was and still is that of loving him while loving his brothers and sisters. Those who thirst for God can truly quench their thirst in the Heart of Jesus; there, with the feelings of Jesus, one can meet the unconditional love of God the Father and thus taste a definitive happiness.

⁷³ Marie-Joseph Coudrin, “Lettre aux Sœurs de la maison de Mans” (Buchy, 8 juillet 1828), LEBP 1386 in *Correspondance (1827-1830)*, Vol. 7, Maison Générale, Rome 2000, 158-159.

For her part, Mother Henriette also let herself be shaped by the wisdom which springs from loving contemplation of the crucified Heart of Jesus. Here, she discovered who she really was and how precious she was and remained in the eyes of Jesus who loved her and gave himself up for her. It is in the light of this boundless love that Henriette thwarted any misconceptions that one may have or make about oneself. She discovered grace hidden in joys and also in personal disillusionments and even failed projects. This is the path she travelled and which she invites others to follow, to be before the Lord, even in disillusion and discouragement, so that his grace might mature in us:

“I am very sorry I could not reply to your letter, my good sister, for I would very much like to be able to help you carry the crosses that the good Lord sends you; but who am I to do so? If the sincere interest I take in your sorrows can help to relieve them, you can count on it, and on my intention to pray for you. I like to see you a little discouraged according to the good Lord; it will do you good. When we are at the feet of the Lord, we think we are ready to suffer everything; but when the opportunity arises, we find ourselves weak, and it is a grace that the good Lord gives us to be able to feel what we are. A little courage, my good sister! Pray to the Divine Heart of Jesus to support you! He alone can and wants everything

for you. It is with all my soul that I want you to be all His.”⁷⁴

The grace that Mother Henriette wishes for this sister passes through a path of decentring and stripping of her false securities in order to refocus ever more in God and so belong to him more completely, undivided. This is the narrow path to happiness “according to God” that Mother Henriette traces, a path that she resolutely travelled herself throughout her life.

With Father Coudrin, his feeling of longing for God grew and was rekindled as he neared death. As he reviewed his life and gratefully recalled the years of ministry in Coussay-les-Bois and la Motte d'Usseau, he had a foretaste of what was waiting for him. That time was truly a turning point in his life. He revisited it again and again, throughout his life, drawing from it something final, something definitive that he still hoped to receive from the Lord. It was there that he experienced something definitive which enabled him to accept the risks and uncertainties of his pastoral ministry, namely, that the centre of his life was not himself, nor his projects nor its deadlines, urgent as they were, but God and his work. The only thing he could do was make himself available for this work. Given that he always saw God's action as a grace which visited him at different times in his life, then the best disposition of the heart was, in simplicity, to welcome him and in

⁷⁴ Henriette Aymer de la Chevalerie, “Lettre à Sœur Justine Charret” (s.l., s.d.), LEBM 1512 in *Correspondance*, Vol. 7, Maison Générale (Sœurs), Rome 2008, 298.

generosity to respond to the grace by gifting himself to others, all for the love of Jesus. This is what he learned by taking upon himself the yoke of the pierced Heart of Jesus. Strengthened by this hope, Father Coudrin thus formulated the only desire that dwelled in him, one which he wished to be the unifying vector for all the desires and commitments of the brothers and sisters of the Congregation:

“You are too good, my dear eldest daughter, to wish me such good things. The best of all for you as for all our children and me, is the axiom of la Motte d'Usseau and Coussay-les-Bois: Paradise at the end of our days.”⁷⁵

The time spent at Coussay-les-Bois and at la Motte, where he perceived and recognised with unforgettable clarity God's workings, offered him a key to recognising God's ever-present action. This would help his brothers and sisters to recognise it in turn and to confess God always at work, wherever they accepted risks and joys in the name of the Gospel. This action of God rekindled in him the thirst for God and drew towards the inexhaustible source of hope all those who gave themselves up and abandon themselves to it - so that “God may be all in all” (1 Cor 15,28).

⁷⁵ Marie-Joseph Coudrin, “Lettre à Sœur Françoise de Viart” (s.l., 6 décembre 1826), LEBP 1189 in *Correspondance (1824-1827)*, Vol. 6, *Maison Générale*, Rome 1999, 334.

VII.

THE FUTURE OF GOD'S WORK: A DISCERNMENT TO BE PURSUED

Mother Henriette and Father Coudrin hoped that the community they founded together and accompanied in its growth would continue to be of use to the Church. It would be so by inserting itself into the essential dynamic of the Church, namely evangelisation, by proclaiming the love of God the Father as manifested in the Hearts of Jesus and of Mary. The ongoing process to recognise the challenges in the events of history, the encounters with different peoples and the dialogue with different religions requires apostolic discernment. The Founders, grappling with the events of their time, followed this process according to the criteria they discovered in the dialogue they had with the Lord Jesus and with his Mother. They also knew how to keep the members of the Congregation - brothers, sisters and laity - awake to the action of God who continued his work of love and reparation in the life of each member, through the uncertainties and often the contradictions that shaped history. It was a risky spiritual adventure, requiring each one to freely commit to the continuous search with all the members of the Congregation, to finding credible forms of life which make people love the Gospel. A risky adventure, but not a reckless one, for it was God who led and still leads "as by the hand" his work in the Church and in creation through

his providential love. The future of the Congregation always remains a gift to be received from God. Apostolic discernment is a way of going out to meet the God who comes to join our steps; He encourages us to move forward towards Him, without fear, while reaching out to the men and women of our time.

To welcome the initiatives of God and to support them, the Founders let themselves be schooled by the Hearts of Jesus and Mary. It was the feelings, attitudes and options of the filial and obedient Heart of Jesus and of the disciple's Heart of Mary that guided them in their discernment. In their time, they knew how to translate consecration to the Sacred Hearts into a form of apostolic common life at the service of the work of God, for each person, each culture, for the Church and all of creation. Pursuing this service of collaborating with the work of God requires constant attention and availability on the part of the members of the Congregation. God continues his work in each member of the Congregation; He is counting on everyone to discern and support it. In their time, brothers, sisters and laity, as members of one body, were all called to contribute to this discernment through the care of their spiritual life, their concern for fraternity, the gratuitous love for the weakest, their vigilant and creative insertion into their times - as a testimony given to the God who walks with them.

Today more than ever, we are called to continue to discern the action of God which precedes us, sustains us and awaits us. Brothers, sisters and lay people, we listen to what the Spirit of Jesus is saying to the churches and to the world.

The apostolic discernment made by our Founders was already in its very embodiment a confession of hope. It was a hope in a God who does not abandon his work, and who comes to tell us that any effort and sacrifice made in his name is not useless, even if the fruits are not visible or could be better. The Lord continues his work in the spiritual adventure of the brothers and sisters who place themselves at his service, in the concrete love of the men and women with whom they journey. We place our hope in the Lord who is at the centre, and we remain open to his often surprising encounters, especially when feelings of failure or helplessness can invade our hearts. We receive from him our future, a future that goes beyond all expectations and all concepts, and which manifests itself in the luminous wounds of his risen body.

The Founders were able to re-read their own itinerary, the history of their time, the journey of the Church and the life of the Congregation in the light of a God who never ceases to come to meet them. They knew that the future of the Congregation was already in the hands of God and that we must be prepared to receive it and to collaborate in its coming. According to the Founders, the name of zealots/adorers of the love of the Sacred Hearts was a reminder to all the members of the Congregation that any project, any commitment is already a response to a love that will never end, because it is inexhaustible and alive. Against this horizon, we can generously celebrate our growth and successes and courageously and confidently accept our own weaknesses and our failures and take the risks of new missionary adven-

tures, despite the precariousness of resources and declining numbers. From this perspective, we can recognise the providential love of God who accompanies the members of the Congregation in the most difficult times. The key to reading the love of God, manifested in the Hearts of Jesus and Mary and projected in the time of Founders as concrete love between brothers, sisters and lay people, allows us to look at reality in harmony with the gaze of God. They knew how to take advantage of favourable occasions in history, find strength in themselves in times of desolation, draw joy to live in peace in difficult times and discovered unexpected resources where they were often lacking. We can reread and discern the present in the light of the future of this God who joins us in the Risen One and through the maternal intercession of Mary.

In a book written to mark the occasion of the centenary of the Congregation in Montgeron (1920-2020), Gabriel Phalip ssc, reflects with grateful memory on the action of God. He helps us to appreciate God's workings through exceptional figures such as that of Father Paul Marie Julliotte (1867-1956). The figure of Damien inspired Father Paul Marie to give his life as a missionary. The first years of his ministry in the Congregation were lived in Molokai. His mission then continued in Paris in the chapel of Saint Cecilia which later became the parish of Saint Gabriel; finally, he became part of the founding group of the mission of the Congregation in Hainan, China, where he was to serve for more than thirty

years.⁷⁶ Such great adventures continue wherever we are still present, especially in parish service and the formation of young people. This review lays the groundwork for confident and bold vision for the future of God's work.

In 2020, the province of Germany celebrated 100 years of existence, although long before that many German brothers and sisters had joined the Congregation elsewhere. Manfred Kollig sscs took the opportunity to re-view their story from a perspective of hope. To do this, he suggested the following as criteria: "Eternity is more important than time".⁷⁷ This criterion reminds us that the God who accompanied the presence and mission of the Congregation in Germany continues to come to meet us. There are promising projects for the future, such as the opening of an international community in Berlin. But above all what makes visible the expectation of the Lord who is coming is the daily availability of brothers and laity, men and women, to his working in them and around them.

In 2023, the province of Indonesia will also celebrate 100 years of the missionary presence of the Congregation in this country. Isn't this a great opportunity to thank God for all that he does through so many brothers, sisters and lay

⁷⁶ Gabriel Phalip sscs, *Les Pères de Picpus à Montgeron (1920-2020). Cent ans de présence et de service*, Montgeron 2020, 158 pp.

⁷⁷ You can read the address given by Manfred Kollig, sscs on 3rd October in Werne on <https://arnsteiner-patres.de/nachrichten/hoffnung> and the translations into English and Spanish can be found in: <http://ssccpicpus.blogspot.com/2020/10/100th-anniversary-of-german-province.html>

people, and open up more fronts or breaches where the Lord is perhaps once again waiting for us?

The work of God is accomplished in the resurrection of the Lord. His Spirit works in surprising ways; to welcome him, he expects from us a lucid trust and an active availability like that of Mary. She ventured along new, often incomprehensible, paths of the God of the impossible, accompanying her son Jesus with his disciples. It was God who came to visit her and associate her with his work; this remains key to reading her life. The hope of God who came and set her on the road, courageously and singing, despite her smallness, about the great works that God was doing in her.

The invitation, therefore, is to place ourselves, brothers, sisters and laity, consecrated to the Hearts of Jesus and Mary, in a mode of apostolic discernment, enlightened by the criteria that inspired our Founders, so that we may continue to be useful in the church and serve our brothers and sisters in humanity. May our initiatives preserve the meaning of the adventure of the Gospel and give us a taste of the Eternal who comes to join us on the roads of our time, so that we may carry out his work, of course according to his timeframe and his way, but always having him with us.

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