

**The following article was first published by the Benedictine Monks of Sainte Joseph de Clairval in France. I have found the articles in their newsletter very interesting and inspiring. With the permission granted me by Père Jacques, I present for your edification random selections from past and present issues.**

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March 21, 2007

*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Mt 28:19).* Christ's call has inspired generous hearts to enter missionary life. In this way, "Mary of the Passion let herself be seized by God Who was able to satisfy the thirst for truth that motivated her. Founding the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, she burned to communicate the torrents of love that sprang up in her and wished to extend them over the world. At the heart of the missionary commitment, she placed prayer and the Eucharist, because for her, adoration and mission blended to become the same work." ( Homily by John Paul II during the beatification of Mother Mary of the Passion, October 20, 2002).

The future Mother Mary of the Passion, Helene de Chappotin, was born on May 21, 1839. Around her cradle were four brothers and sisters as well as six cousins, for an uncle and aunt lived with the Chappotins in a cramped apartment near the cathedral in Nantes, France. Most of the year, however, was spent on the family's immense property, "the fort," a few kilometers outside the city. Helene was a gifted and willful child, boisterous and a leader of other children. She stirred by the conversations she heard around her, full of memories of the Revolution and the Catholic counter-revolt of the Vendée.

### **Her heart was broken by love**

From her earliest years, Helene showed a surprising maturity. But her overall character and the talents that made her shine in her little world were the cause of some concern for Madame de Chappotin, who devoted all the more attention to the child's religious upbringing. Helene was consumed with the thought of eternity to the point of anguish. She found peace again the day her heart "was broken by love for Our Lord," as she put it. A love for the poor characterized her childhood, and for them she made generous sacrifices. With friends, she founded the "*Association Sainte-Anne*" to obtain clothes for them. Nevertheless, her vivacious temperament was given free rein in rambunctious games. In 1847, when Helene was eight years old, her father was named chief engineer in Vannes. As a result, the family had to leave the Fort for a small apartment. Deprived of her cousins. Helene took refuge in reading. In 1850, she made her first Communion on the feast of Corpus Christi: "I felt so much that I belonged to God after this first Communion...I begged God to take me before I became bad."

But this same year began for Helene a painful time marked by several deaths. "Before me the emptiness was growing ever larger," Helene would write. "Who was worth the effort of being loved? This mystery from my childhood was growing terrible." In April 1856, she attended the annual retreat for the Children of Mary in

Nantes. At the beginning of the retreat, the preacher prophesized: "In this chapel there is a soul that God is seeking, wants, claims. We will all pray for this soul during Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament." Without hesitation, Helene said to herself, "I'm this soul; they're going to pray for me." She would later add, however, "With this conviction, I was more childish, more of a cut-up, than ever, I distracted the others. Nothing for God up to the last sermon, nothing... But when the final Benediction of the Most Blessed began, it seems I must have had some of the grace of Saint Paul on the road to Damascus. I kneeled down, still cold. The thought came to me: 'I am He Who will always love you more than you love Him, He Whose Beauty is without spot, without disappointment, for I am the Infinite God.' I heard nothing, it was a moment's thought, but it made another creature out of me." Helene's life changed completely. Gone were the boredom, the nonchalance –from then on, her life was transformed by the love of God. And on day, a new inspiration came to her: "What do you owe Me for having taken hold of you in this way?" Jesus asked her. Religious life appeared before her. "Only the complete gift of myself could repay Him Who gave Himself completely to me.," she replied. And just as the Beauty of God had forced itself on her love, so did religious life force itself on her conscience, and even on her desires.

Helene deepened her spiritual life: long hours of prayer, mortifications...Her family soon noticed the change in her, but the young woman did not speak of her vocation; she knew her mother would be fiercely opposed. At the end of 1858, Father Lavigne, her confessor, asked her to make a discernment retreat with the *Dames du Cénacle* in Paris. Helene told her parents, and they agreed to it. But shortly before Helene was to leave, Madame de Chappotin was struck down by a stroke that carried her off in a week. Helene stayed home with her father.

### **A new name**

One day, at the suggestion of a friend, she went to the Poor Clares in Nantes and decided to become a nun there. She entered the cloister of the Poor Clares on December 9, 1860. The following January 23, while she was in choir, she received a new name: "All of a sudden, I heard the distinct and clear words – I do not know if it was with the ears of the body – 'Are you willing to be crucified in place of the Holy Father?' ... I said yes. And then fell on me these words and this name, like a consecration: 'Mary, victim of Jesus and of Jesus crucified.' I believe that since then, this has been my heavenly name, beyond any human will... The love that I felt was so violent that it seemed impossible to endure on earth; one would die if it did not diminish." This mysterious name evokes the words of Saint John: Jesus Christ, the just, is the *expiation for our sins, and ... for the sins of the whole world* (1 Jn 2:2). Jesus urged Helene to unite herself to His sacrifice, to enter with Him into the mystery of the Redemption of the world, in the context of the Church of her day, when the temporal power of the Pope over the Papal States was threatened with extinction. The shock produced by the revelation of this new name was so great that Helene fell ill and had to leave the convent. She returned to her family and spent her profound solitude reading French spiritual authors of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1864, she learned of the existence of the Society of Marie Réparatrice, consecrated to the adoration of the Most Blessed Sacrament in reparation for the sins of the world, with Mary at the foot of the cross, and following the rule of Saint Ignatius. She joined their novitiate in Toulouse. She took the habit on the following August 15, and was given the name Sister Mary of the Passion. At the beginning of 1865, she was chosen to go to the mission in Madurai, in southern India. In 1859, at

the request of the Jesuit fathers, the Society of Marie Réparatrice had sent a first group of Sisters to Madurai to take care of the many young widows and girls of the country. In a geographical, cultural, and religious context that was unfamiliar to them, they had to adapt the forms of their religious life. On May 3, 1866, Mary of the Passion took her first religious vows and was almost immediately named superior of the house in Tuticorin. Her work there was highly praised and, in January 1867, she was named provincial superior for the three houses in Madurai.

Mother Mary of the Passion had many good qualities for her position, but her extreme sensitivity caused her great pain. Her delicate health was tested by the climate: violent stomachaches and headaches, heart ailments... It was necessary to respond to the material and spiritual needs of families: catechism, retreats, school activities, dispensaries, women's shelters... Her work included the care of thirty-some Sisters spread across three communities. With great flexibility, she blended prayer, Eucharistic adoration, and apostolate. The atmosphere of charity that she established in the communities aroused the admiration of visitors, "When one enters your community," a bishop told the sisters, "one is struck, one feels something special... It is the charity that reigns throughout."

### **A difficult decision**

Nevertheless, the difficulties the Sisters faced in the apostolate were so great that the Superior General considered repatriating all her daughters to France. Mother Mary of the Passion answered that a lot of time was needed for these women to adapt to missionary life. In 1874, she was asked to open an orphanage and two schools in Ootacamund, a large market town in a very favorable climate north of Madurai. Mother Mary of the Passion achieved the foundation in conditions of extreme poverty. During this time, in Madurai, the situation deteriorated due to the number of misunderstandings about the work of the Congregation and discipline; difficulties communicating with Europe were largely to blame. The Superior General relieved Mother Mary of the Passion of her responsibility for the province, while leaving her Superior for the house in Ootacamund, and sent one of her assistants to the scene. The assistant offered the nuns a choice between accepting a set of measures that seemed arbitrary and unacceptable to them, or leaving the Congregation entirely. Finding themselves in an awkward situation, the sisters reflected, took counsel, and prayed, and then most decided to leave the Congregation. Mother Mary of the Passion, still in Ootacamund, remained silent. The sisters had made their decision without her, but about twenty came to join her. Bishop Bardou, the one who had requested the foundation in Ootacamund, agreed to receive them. However, he sent Mary of the Passion and two of her companions to Rome to explain the situation and find a solution.

While in Rome, the Sisters, who were staying in poor accommodations, suffered from hunger and cold, but soon the authorities decided in their favor—on January 5, 1877, authorization was given to establish the Institute of the Missionaries of Mary, exclusively devoted to mission. Mary of the Passion drafted a rule of life to submit to Bishop Bardou. At the heart of the rule she put the total offering of self, without reservation, for the Church and the Salvation of the world, and then the imitation of Mary, following Jesus all the way to Calvary. She had developed certain convictions – that missionaries need a specific kind of preparation, and a better understanding of the cultural landscape of the mission country.

The Church's missionary activity "derives its reason from the will of God, *who wishes all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, Himself a man, Jesus Christ, who gave Himself as a ransom for all* (1 Tim. 2:45), *neither is there salvation in any other* (Acts 4:12). Therefore, all must be converted to Him, made known by the Church's preaching, and all must be incorporated into Him by baptism and into the Church which is His body. ... Though God in ways known to Himself can lead those inculpably ignorant of the Gospel to find that faith without which it is impossible to please Him (Heb. 11:6), yet a necessity lies upon the Church (1 Cor. 9:16), and at the same time a sacred duty, to preach the Gospel. And hence missionary activity today as always retains its power and necessity" (Second Vatican Council, Decree *Ad Gentes*, no. 7).

### **A blessing and a grace**

Mother Mary of the Passion next went to France to open a novitiate there in Sainte-Brieuc, where the bishop received her warmly. Many vocations came forward, brought by the parish priests in the area. In 1878, a ceremony was held for the first novices to leave as missionaries to India. In June 1880, the novitiate was transferred to the former estate of the bishops of Sainte-Brieuc, not far from the city, at Les Châtelets. In June 1882, Mary of the Passion returned again to Rome. There she met with Father Raphael Delarbe who held an important position in the Franciscan Order. He asked her to write the final Constitutions for her Institute, and suggested she open a house in Rome itself. Convinced that God wanted her to be a Franciscan, Mother Mary of the Passion spoke to the Franciscan Minister General, Father Bernardin, who gave his full approval, "When I saw your desire to belong to Saint Francis," he would later say, "I felt that it was a blessing and a grace for our order."

Everything seemed to be going well. But in November 1882, the favor the new congregation was enjoying in Rome revived the suspicions that had hovered over its foundation since its separation from the Society of Marie Réparatrice. Malicious voices attributed the foundress' intentions to personal ambition. On March 16, 1883, Mary of the Passion was deposed from her office of Superior General and was forbidden from writing to her Daughters. Soon after, the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith resolved a financial dispute with the Society of Marie Réparatrice against the Missionaries of Mary, a decision that was humanly disastrous for the latter.

### **The great missionary**

Even though Fathers Bernardin and Raphael, as well as the bishop of Sainte-Brieuc, supported her in her trial, Mary of the Passion felt all the more humiliated that she had not been able to defend herself. Moreover, the decision that condemned her contradicted earlier assurances given her. Her spiritual life was shaken: "Sometimes my faith foundered," she would later say, "sometimes it seemed to me that God would judge me without even listening to me, and would condemn me for no reason." But this heavy trial purified her, and her prayer before the tabernacle further deepened her union with the Eucharistic mystery. "The great missionary for the Institute," she would write in 1888, "is Jesus exposed and adored. The power of the Eucharist and of prayer joined with action for the conversion of nations has yet to be understood." Finally, in February 1884, Leo XIII named a *chargé d'affaires* to examine the situation of the Missionaries of Mary. For Mary of the Passion, this

examination was a "long series of little agonies: God alone knows what I have heard read about myself..." At the conclusion of the investigation, the bishop of Sainte-Brieuc wrote to the sister, "You have won the trial, and I rejoice with you... The unjust removal which was imposed on Mother Mary of the Passion is revoked by the Supreme Pontiff himself." At the end of July 1884, Mother Mary of the Passion was unanimously reelected as Superior General. "Too much anguish, too many disappointments have passed over my soul for me not to have great fear in taking up the yoke of responsibility again," she would write. This anguish that often plunged her into a dark night would remain a permanent trait of her spiritual life.

In August 1885, the Institute was officially placed under the direction of the Franciscan Minister General, beginning a period of magnificent missionary expansion. In 1886, four foundations were established—two in Ceylon, and one each in China and Paris. The separations produced by the departures caused Mary of the Passion to suffer greatly, as she personally loved each of her Daughters. But nothing lessened the maternal and fraternal love the foundress poured out in the vast correspondence she constantly maintained with the Congregation. From 1886 on, requests for foundations poured in continuously, every week, then almost every day. The foundations in Europe were not only training grounds for the mission countries—they met the need for evangelization in the slums of big cities. To meet the considerable material needs, Mary of the Passion relied on work: "Whatever the cost, we must work, and find enough work to live." So the Sisters devoted themselves to drawing, painting, sewing, lithography, printing, weaving, and so forth. Mother Mary of the Passion also organized her Sisters' missionary formation. She wrote a "Novice Mistress' Rulebook," a veritable treatise on spiritual formation, as well as other spiritual writings.

In 1890, the Institute received pontifical approval; at the time it numbered 17 houses and 495 Sisters. Mary of the Passion gave all credit to God. Yet, in the depths of her soul, a work of purification was underway. On the one hand, she passionately wanted God, His love, and His glory, and she drowned herself in silence of adoration; on the other hand, she did not know what the Lord thought of her and even doubted her eternal salvation. Father Bernardin, who experienced similar spiritual sufferings, told her, "Don't worry, be done with it once and for all, make the perpetual offering of your soul, your being, and your eternity to God."

### **"Walk in the footsteps of Jesus!"**

In November 1896, a general chapter began at the end of which the foundress exclaimed, "Today I feel a great desire to say to you what Saint Peter said to the lame man of the Gospel: *I have neither gold nor silver, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk!* Yes, I have neither gold nor silver, but what I have I give you. I give myself entirely to you despite my crosses, my poor health, my poverty. But stand up and walk! I beg you, walk in the footsteps of Jesus!" From then on, the foundations increased: Congo, Mozambique, Canada, Austria, Mongolia, Burma, and Japan.

In her activity with the poor, especially in big cities, Mary of the Passion concerned herself with the social question. The state of women was an issue especially close to her heart. She encouraged the creation of professional schools and workshops where women could learn a trade and receive a fair salary. "In Christianity," said Pope Paul VI, "more than in any other religion, woman has had from the beginning a special dignity, the numerous and outstanding aspects of which are reflected in the New

Testament. It is clear woman is called to participate in the life and operation of Christianity in such an important way, that perhaps all the potentialities have yet to be discovered" (December 6, 1976).

In 1900, the grace of martyrdom was given to Sisters of the Institute in China: in Tai Yuan Fu, the Boxer Rebellion resulted in the massacre of the entire mission, notably of seven Sisters who had arrived the year before in the midst of her tears, the foundress exclaimed, "Now I can say I have seven real Franciscan missionaries of Mary! Their martyrdom speaks for itself. Through their vocation, they offered themselves for the Church and for souls. They have been a holocaust to the end..." These martyred nuns were canonized on October 1, 2000.

Worn out by the strains of her constant travels and daily work, Mary of the Passion died in San Remo, Italy, on November 15, 1904, leaving about three thousand religious spread across eighty-six foundations on all continents.

Let us ask Blessed Mary of the Passion to obtain for us the grace to live according to the Gospel, with an ardent zeal for the salvation of souls.

Dom Antoine Marie, osb

[Helping Hand](#)