JOURNEYING THROUGH OUR RULES OF LIFE

« In everything I took advice from God, from the circumstances and from the times »

INTRODUCTION

In the various editions of the text of the Rule, Jeanne-Antide, several times during her life, attentive and open to the current needs and the signs of the times, unfolded her experience of foundress and formator.

Little by little she becomes aware of the new realities of the Church and of the Congregation; an institute that passes from secrecy to an official acknowledgment; which goes beyond not only the boundaries of the diocese where it emerged, but even of the Countries where the communities are established.

« In everything I took advice from God, from the circumstances and from the times »: this expression could become the title of our introduction to the history of the Rule.

We have at this stage three versions of the Rule « written » by Jeanne-Antide

- The so called Rule of 1802, written and revised in several stages: we are referring to a manuscript drawn up by the abbot Filsjean and read again attentively by Jeanne-Antide. It is conserved in the archives of the Provincial House of Besançon. Naturally, another previous version is found in the National Archives of France.

- A hard copy of the Rule of 1807 approved by the Archbishop of Besançon, Mgr Lecoz.

- The bilingual Rule of 1820, a French-Italian parallel text approved by Pius VII
- ¹ LD 1791-1818. A.B March 1806

A Rule, like all other laws in the Church must be put within the framework of the Alliance, the Alliance with Christ. Speaking of the Rule, Jeanne-Antide uses certain expressions that convey the Exodus experience:

« We are provided with light by reading and reflecting on our Holy Rules. ...like ...that mysterious pillar which preceded the Israelites in the desert, they will disperse the shadows which surround us in the night, that is, our doubts, our perplexities on difficult occasions; Oh! If only I could exhort you with words of fire! If only I could write our Holy Rules in your heart in letters of bronze, ineffaceable letters! » ¹

¹ PD p.156-157
Thus these Rules acquire a meaning in relation to the Alliance; they are a dialogue of a call and response, an expression of Love. They are also a “form” that is determined by our way of living together in Christ’s footsteps.  

A look at the texts of the past is for us a way of questioning ourselves, today. We do not re-read these pages to apply them as they are presented, we are living in other times, in another society, but we will go back to them to let ourselves be imbued with Jeanne Antide’s profound intuition, with her daring in order to live our religious life today in a creative fidelity.

I- THE THREE RULES WRITTEN BY JEANNE-ANTIDÉ

I-1 1800: the small Rule

Since the beginning of community life Jeanne-Antide was concerned with having a precise organization. « From the beginning, I wrote for them some small regulations for every day, for every week, for every month, and every year. The Superiors approved it and the Good God deigned to bless my efforts... » 2

Without doubt, it is this little rule that is read at the end of the Retreat in October 1800 during the first consecration of the sisters; Mr. Bacoffe speaks of it in the epochal Register:

« Yesterday evening, our dear daughters have finished their Retreat and the Superior told them that she was going to teach them the Rule of Saint Vincent de Paul which she perfectly knew by heart. In fact she had written the principal dispositions, because she couldn’t consult the book of the Rule. So the sisters asked to listen to the reading on their knees. »

I.2 The Rule of 1802:

« Finally, the Concordat was made with our Holy Father Pope Pius VII. The Churches were opened; the crucifix and the priests returned to the altar. Later the Bishops were nominated for the dioceses. Then the ecclesiastical Superior of Besançon told me: «They are engaged in the nomination of Bishops. It is said that the one for Besançon is nominated. We do not know who he is; but, when he comes, you must have a Rule to present to him. You must busy yourself making one. We have made all possible enquiries to get hold of that of St Vincent de Paul. Everybody answered: I do not know of one. I know only the one made from the biography of the saint, the Paris Sisters have only some manuscripts that they will not pass on to anyone. So without delay, see to the composition of a Rule. » 3

Even Sr. Rosalie points out that Jeanne-Antide begins to work as requested by Mr Bacoffe in accordance with the Vicars general. 4

It is therefore necessary to take in consideration the changing political circumstances to situate oneself properly in the new society and in the emerging Church. With this premise in mind,

2 MPT n.12 LD p.8
3 MPV n. 17 LD p.10
4 MSR p.86
Jeanne-Antide ventures to draw up a Rule. She writes down the principles that could lead the Congregation to become known and acknowledged. But other more profound reasons animate Jeanne-Antide since she adds: it’s “in order to form a whole and durable rule, by putting clearly and highly updated all that it contained, without ambiguity and secrets, so that nobody will remain doubtful.”

Thus Jeanne-Antide expresses a sincere desire of clarity in view of the future and to assure stability and organisation to the emerging Institute.

“**In order to organize in a wise and solid manner such an interesting establishment, and in order to make known to the persons who will compose it about their duties as religious and as servants of the poor, she composed Constitutions and regulations, in which she herself suggested to fix all the reports that should exist between the members of the society in question, to direct their particular conduct in all the duties and to make reign in the whole community an order that would help it to stand on its feet and the right order to procure its enlargement and to constantly lead it to its goals.**”

Thus Sr. Rosalie summarises the goal aimed at by J.A: « she wished “this to be done for His greatest glory and the spiritual and temporal good of the poor, for the edification of the Christians, for the sanctification of its associates and her own. »

Irrespective of the language of that time used by Jeanne-Antide, we can highly perceive what animates the heart of Jeanne Antide: first and foremost it’s **for God and for the poor** that this Rule is drawn up, to witness and offer to others the possibility to follow an evangelic path in Christ’s footsteps and to share a life with Christ at the service of the poor.

And Jeanne-Antide goes on:

“*In the name of God I obeyed learned men who could have made a better one than I, and with much less labour. I had every reason to be afraid. But no! Without presumption I put my trust in God, the omnipotence of God, Who uses the most ignorant to do the greatest things, for his glory alone. “*

Let’s join Jeanne Antide in that room of the ex-convent of the Visitation, at Dole, where she is writing the Rules: "*Alone with God, from whom I implored the help of His Holy Spirit, I searched in my memory for recollections of the customs I had followed with the Daughters of Charity, and I wrote down exactly what I knew, of spiritual and temporal matters, and of the government of the Institute*."

---

5 MPT, LD p. 11-12
6 ROL 1802, Letter of presentation to the Archbishop
7 MSR, LD p.87
8 MPT n.18, LD p. 10-11
9 MPT, LD n. 19 p. 11-12
It’s therefore with her great trust in God alone that she implores the Holy Spirit. "The Holy Spirit gave me His light to know all that it was necessary to add, to make up for what I had not known."\(^{10}\)

Jeanne-Antide transmits to her daughters the Vincentian tradition with which she was imbued during her time spent with the Daughters of Charity: "We didn’t draw them from our own resources. We gathered most of them from the practices that we witnessed among the Daughters of Charity, where we lived for a long time; we believe that most of these practices were established, at least, by Saint Vincent de Paul."\(^{11}\)

"I wrote it myself, word by word, with the light of God alone. I had no manuscript or printed copy of this Rule, for I had never read or seen one in the Paris community where I spent eight years."\(^{12}\)

But this text isn’t simply a treatise of norms and rules; if it is a reliable reference, it also bears an inner energy, a vital urge and conveys the Love of Charity that inhabits the heart of Jeanne-Antide. In fact its first introductory page will be repeated in the successive versions, up to the “Preliminary Discourse”:

"Christian charity embraces all times and all places, without distinction of age, sex or condition; it pours out with the same goodness both into the begging hands who invoke her openly, and also within the shameful indigence that it manages to find out across the secret shadows in which it hides: it understands kindly all types of infirmities and meets all the needs according to the fullness of its power and its faculties. Animated by the zeal inspired by this beautiful virtue, the Daughters of Saint Vincent de Paul will dedicate themselves entirely to alleviate all types of poor people. They will serve the sick in the hospitals and in their homes; they will instruct the girls in the schools created for this goal; they will bring up orphans and abandoned children; they will help the prisoners and the unlucky travellers; they alleviate poverty everywhere according to their possibilities and their abilities."\(^{13}\)

II-2 RULE of 1807

"...She was aware that the Archbishop had not yet approved or disapproved of it, because she had not asked him for approbation. She was inspired by God to ask for it, for greater security of her Institute. But, for her request to succeed, she thought it necessary to make some corrections in the terms slipped in by the priest who had copied the Rule, which were offensive regarding the Archbishop and on other even more difficult subjects. She saw that such terms could be an obstacle in the way of the Archbishop’s approbation. The priest in question being unemployed, she invited him to the house where she lived, gave him board and lodging and said to him: "You know I had to submit the Rule to the Archbishop: He examined it and had it examined. He has not objected to its being in use, but it is not invested with his approbation, which seems to me to be necessary to guarantee a greater solidity to our Institute, which has already been eight years in existence. So I

\(^{10}\) MPT n. 19, LD p.12
\(^{11}\) PD, LD p.145
\(^{12}\) To Mr de Fulguro LD p.314
\(^{13}\) ROL 1802 p. 5
have decided to ask him for it; but I see that terms you have used, which are neither useful nor necessary, could easily be a barrier to approbation. And, whatever his way of thinking, it is not our business to reform him. His authority is no less: he is the Superior in this diocese and we are his inferiors. If we wish to ask a favour of him, we must not leave in the rule reasons for him to refuse it. We must consider not ourselves but the Institute, which is God’s work and which must be supported for God’s glory and the good of souls. The years will pass, and the time will come when we shall be told that the Rule and Institute have an approbation.”

The Rule is corrected chapter by chapter by the Abbot Filsjean and read once more by Jeanne Antide. Each chapter is gradually approved by the Archbishop who gives his final approval and the permission to be printed on the 26th September 1807.

From now on, Jeanne-Antide acknowledges Mgr. Lecoz as Superior of the Institute and the latter will succeed to support and to sustain her in all that she has to face. And it is always the good and the future of the Institute that he seeks first and foremost. And it is this newly published Rule now approved by the Bishop of Besançon, that Jeanne-Antide will take to Paris to present to the Minister of Worship during the Chapter of 1807, in the presence of around forty Superiors of Congregations who take care of the poor and the sick in France: “She obtained from the printer a number of copies of her Rule and had them bound, the night before All Saints. She took not a moment’s rest! In the morning she heard Mass, and left by coach at eleven, 1st November, for Paris, with a Sister as companion »

I-4 RULE of 1820

Almost 20 years have passed since the beginning of the Institute. It grew like a tree and “spread its branches by several establishments in that city and in the towns and countryside of that diocese, and also in the dioceses of Lyon, Autun, Chambéry, Strasbourg and Dijon, in Switzerland, and in Naples...”

Jeanne Antide has insight and imagination regarding the future of her Institute.

"... to give more detailed attention to the Institute God entrusted to me, but, to ensure its existence and solidity, I thought of submitting it to our Holy Father the Pope and asking for approbation of its Rules and Constitutions.”

She imagines her Institute divided in Provinces and this will be fulfilled already in 1825, with the formation of the Province of Savoy.

---

14 MSR p.114-115  
15 MSR p. 114-115  
16 MSR p. 117. The accounts’ book of the community contains traces of this edition  
17 Letter to the Pope Pius VII, 12th September 1818, LD p. 330  
18 To Mgr de Pressigny, 1819, LD 332  
19 Letter to Sr. Victoire Bartholemot, 22 May 1825, LD p.399-400 and letter to the Sisters of Savoy, 6 June 1825, LD 491-492
For the Sisters in France, she considers no better proof of her motherly devotion than that of informing them of God’s great benefit:

"The Pope Pius VII approved our Institute, our Rules and Constitutions... I invite you, my very dear daughters, to unite yourselves with me in thanking God for having, by this approbation, consolidated our Institute forever..."  

If the identity of the Institute is defined, unity will be safeguarded:

"The Rule is in two languages. French and Italian, as our Institute is established in Italy. The Rule is complete in both French and Italian, because all the Sisters in all our establishments, in whatever country of the Christian world they may be, form a single body and the same Institute."  

It should be pointed out that during the time of the Extraordinary Consulte of Rome, all the legal texts and decrees, were published both in French and Italian, the French page corresponding to the Italian version. It’s therefore a model that inspired Jeanne-Antide to print the Rule of 1820.

The Rule protects the unity of the Christian family against every external intervention that tends to introduce changes contrary to its nature. Proof of this is the result of Jeanne Antide’s reaction in face of the project of the Minister Zurlo, when he wanted to establish for the sisters residing in Naples, a regulation that would make them independent of Besançon.

And this commitment on behalf of Jeanne-Antide to consolidate her institute will in fact provoke a division …

I-5 What Jeanne Antide says about the Rule

The Rule must be known, frequently remembered: “You must read the book of our holy Rule three times a year and more often if necessary.”

Jeanne-Antide will insist on the fidelity to the Rule, not only to the letter but to the spirit of this Rule: "We are not afraid to say here, dear Sisters: our Rules will teach us all we have to do to sanctify ourselves in our state and do good in it. They will even direct us ceaselessly towards perfection."

Jeanne-Antide insists on the benefits of the Rule, on the necessity of being faithful to the Rule, and also to raise every sister’s awareness regarding the responsibility: “to transmit these same feelings to the daughters who will come after us. Thus, we don’t only enrich ourselves with these good works, but we shall share in those done after our death as a consequence of our edifying example and our good conduct.”

---

20 Circular to the Sisters in France, 1819, LD p.331
21 To the Curate of Villemarechal, 1823, LD p.389
22 Circular 1810, LD p.185
23 Preliminary Discourse, LD p.156-157
24 Preliminary Discourse, LD p.159
Fidelity to the Rule is requested from the young aspirants as a condition to be received in the community:

“When you asked to be received, you were asked if you were ready to follow the Rule, to do all that you will be asked to do according to the Rule itself, to belong totally to God as Christians and Daughters of Charity.”

But this, is also requested from the elderly sisters: “You, dear sisters, who have been the first called to the vineyard of your vocation, make your seniority felt in community by a greater gratitude to God, by exactitude in keeping the Rule and having the spirit it prescribes.”

If all are responsible, the superiors are then responsible for the fidelity of the community and of each sister. It is to be remembered with special vigour. It’s not only a question of external fidelity, namely, to the practices prescribed, but fidelity to a spirit.

“And all you, the Sister Servants, to whom we have entrusted a part, precarious and limited, of our authority in the houses where we have placed you so that you may help us to support all the sisters, there, not only in the practice of all the exercises prescribed by the Rule but also in the spirit which it calls for in all and even more in you especially. Does that spirit live in you? If it does not live in you, you will make it die in the souls of our daughters.”

And since our Rules pave the way to fidelity, they are also a path of happiness for the sisters, for the communities, for the poor, for the good of the sisters and for the good of the poor who are strictly connected to each other. “We shall sanctify ourselves as we work for the happiness, and above all the salvation of the poor.” And thus our Congregation "may live in this wonderful Peace while bringing happiness to man on earth”.

III- THE SUCCESSIVE RULES

As we have already pointed out, Jeanne-Antide never gave up reading and revising her Rule, keeping in mind the developments of the society and the Church, of the “circumstances and of the time”. The Superiors who succeeded her did the same. During the 19th century, there have been different editions of the rule.

1863 - BESANCON

In Besançon an edition of the Rule is made, drawing from that of 1807. The text contains the approval of Cardinal Matthew, Archbishop of Besançon. It’s preceded by an introduction on the origins where Mgr Bacoffe is presented as the founder. As for Jeanne Antide it is said that "regarding the essential changes in the Rule – referring to the prelate of Besançon – the mentioned changes state that the sisters of Naples no longer belong to the Congregation of Besançon. This community, a daughter of Besançon, has made and is still doing much good in Italy".

---

25 Circular 1821, LD p.206
26 Circular 1812, LD p.198
27 Circular 1812, LD p.191
28 Preliminary Discourse, LD p.146-147
29 ROL 1863 p.6-7
The general plan is similar to that of 1807. The structuring of religious Provinces is not foreseen.

1902 - ROME
An edition which repeats the version of 1820 is printed. Some modifications are made but as Mother Zmiglio says:
"...these modifications keep intact the substance of the Rules and constitutions ... Now, since a divine wisdom directed the spirit of our venerable Foundress in drawing up the Rules and the Constitutions of our Institute, you will understand, my dearest sisters, that in the new edition of this precious book there cannot be significant changes, but simple modifications required by the necessity of the times and situations." 30

The modifications consisting in “simple variations” refer to the Sacraments, to the spiritual direction according to the Decree “Quemadmodum” of 17th December 1890; and also to the new manner of electing the major functions. Quemadmodum highlights the importance and the respect of the freedom of conscience of those «who depend » on the authority, especially vis-à-vis Communion and the choice of the confessor.

Mother Zmiglio advised her sisters:
"Keep this new volume preciously, conserve it carefully besides the old version which is its faithful reproduction ... Receive it as a gift which, in his mercy our Divine Saviour sends us through the hands of his Vicar on earth ... read it, meditate it and observe all that it prescribes to you. The exact observation of the Constitutions and Rules which it contains will assure the life of our community and will give glory to God and contribute to the salvation of the souls." 31

Certain modifications aren’t really in conformity with the spirit of Jeanne Antide, especially the introduction of the “lay” sisters.

1917 – The new Code of the Canon Law
A strong emphasis is made on the juridical elements (those concerning spirituality will be found also in the other texts) and will thus affect the uniformity of all the Rules which very often will be limited to re-write the Code’s articles.

The fourth vow remains, the vows will become perpetual and will be preceded by the Novitiate and the temporary profession.

1928: Rome, Savoy, Malta
The Rule of 1928 is totally new and very few expressions can be found from the Rule of 1820. The Charism passes to the fourth level while the vows and the state of perfection appear in the forefront.

FIRST PART : LIFE IN THE INSTITUTE
Chapter 1 – The goal of the Institute:

---

30 ROL 1902, p 8
31 ROL 1902, p10
1- The Congregation of the sisters of charity under the protection of Saint Vincent de Paul, depends directly on the Holy See and on His Eminence the Cardinal Vicar of the Sovereign Pontiff who is pro tempore, the protector of the Institute.

2- The general goal of the Congregation is the Glory of God alone and the holiness of its members through the practicing of the vows of charity, chastity, obedience and charity towards the poor and through the observation of the Constitutions.

3- Its goal is to contribute in the neighbour’s salvation through both spiritual and temporal works of mercy, above all through the service of the sick in the civil and military hospitals by curing all kinds of maladies, in the clinics, in the houses for mentally ill people; by assisting the prisoners, the poor of both sexes in the beggars’ hospices; by caring for children in the child-care centres and in children’s homes; by educating young women whatever their condition in both boarding and day schools.

The Rule of 1928 is printed in three versions: in French, in Italian and in English. Sr. Anne presents in the preface the reason of this new Rule and the big changes made: "The most significant modification which you will found added to our previous constitutions ...is the one concerning the formula and the duration of the vows. Having been suggested the choice between the annual and the perpetual vows, the common desire of all the houses of the Institute was declared in favour of the most complete and irrevocable form of consecration ..." 32

At the end of chapter XXVIII of the Constitutions, we find again the conclusion of the Preliminary Discourse: “Receive this book, my dear sisters, not like any purely human book, but as a gift ...”

1934 - Besançon
The branch of Besançon adopts the Rule of Rome, with the approval of cardinal Binet, who writes: "... After having continued the work of Our Venerable Predecessor Mgr Humbrecht, that of putting in perfect harmony the Constitutions of the Sisters of Charity, founded by the Blessed Jeanne-Antide Thouret, with the Code of Canon Law, we approve the Constitutions that have been revised; we oblige the French branch of the Sisters of Charity, belonging so far to the diocesan law and depending on Besançon, to be conformed to them." 33

"1- The Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of Besançon is a religious institute with simple vows and of Diocesan right.

3- Its special goal is the engagement of the neighbour’s salvation in both spiritual and temporal works of mercy, above all through the service of the sick in the civil and military hospitals by curing all kinds of maladies, in the clinics, in the houses for the mentally ill; by assisting the prisoners, the poor of both sexes in the beggars’ hospices; by caring for children in the child-care centres and in children’s homes; by educating young women whatever their condition in both boarding and day schools."
1949 – BESANCON
Pope Pius XII acknowledges the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of Papal Right. Mother Lapierre writes:
“Today, thanks to the paternal goodness of his Holiness Pius XII, our Institute is of Papal Right”\(^\text{34}\)

**Vatican Council II** (1962-1965)
It deals with a big Church event concerning all the lay believers, priests, religious men and women regarding the life of the Church.
The Council asks for the revision of the Rules and Constitutions of all the Religious Institutes to put them in harmony with the Council Documents and more generally with the spirit of the Council. The Motu Proprio "Ecclesiae Sanctae" gives some accurate indications regarding the work to be done and fixes also the dates to be respected. It orders the summoning of Special Chapters to be celebrated in every religious congregation.

In the Congregation a big work is organised and launched:
- an 18 page questionnaire is sent to every sister to be deepened and answered personally.
- a questionnaire is sent to every community containing 33 pages which must be compiled by the community.
Mother Maria Candida asks the communities to meet once weekly between the 12\(^{th}\) February and the 30\(^{th}\) May 1967.

**The special Chapter** took place in two sessions:
- the first one from the 3\(^{rd}\) November till the 15\(^{th}\) December 1968 (while the second session was being prepared, Mother Maria Candida fell sick and passed away on the 16\(^{th}\) July 1969).

At the end of the first session a booklet entitled « Plan of the texts for the new editing of the Rules and Constitutions » is given to each sister who is invited to express her opinion.

- the second session took place between the 17\(^{th}\) October and 4\(^{th}\) December 1969. This chapter becomes elective with the election of Mother Antoine de Padoue Duffet who was previously a counsellor.

At the end of the second session, three provisional booklets "ad experimentum" are drawn up: “God is Love”, "The service of the authority”, “formation.” These contain and express the Chapter’s research.

**The General Chapter of 1975** deepens and completes the reflection on the texts while the editing of the future Constitutions is entrusted to a commission made up of four members. Their draft is modified several times according to the indications received and the observations of the legal experts and other competent persons.

\(^{34}\) RoL 1949 p. 3
The General Chapter of 1980 votes for the different articles which make up our “Rule of Life” which, as desired, remains faithful to the Spirit of Jeanne Antide. Once more the Charism finds its specific place.

ROL 1.1.1

To love Christ Jesus,
to love and serve the poor
who are His members,
to show them the love of the Father,
this is the charism and mission
St. Vincent de Paul and St. Jeanne Antide
received from God.

Called by God in the Congregation
of the Sisters of Charity,
we share in this charism
which we make visible today.

The Church will approve the Rule of Life on the 11th April 1981.

CONCLUSION:
I end with this paragraph 1.1.1, without speaking of or doing the anamnesis of Chapter VII on the authority Ad Experimentum (2010) and on the text of the re-writing of the Rule of Life approved during the special General Chapter celebrated in October 2017, which are too recent to enter into the history of these two texts.

The above paragraph 1.1.1 expresses our charism and we try to live it according to our current conditions. Our Rule of life enables us « to be and to remain in gratuitous self-giving” 35 together, according to the circumstances and the time.

« In everything I sought advice from God, from the circumstances and from the time ».

35 Jean Claude Lavigne, Pour qu’ils aient la vie en abondance, p104-105 – La vie religieuse, Ed. du Cerf, 2010
BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Manuscrit of the Rule of 1802, Provincial House's Archives Besançon
- Rule of 1807, Besançon, Imprimerie Chalandre, 1807
- Rule of 1820, Rome 1820, Presso Vincenzo Poggioli Stampatore della Camera Apostolica
- Rule of 1863, Besançon 1863, Imprimerie J. Jacquin
- Rule of 1902, Roma 1902, Tipografia Vaticana
- Règle de 1928, Maison Mère des Sœurs de la Charité, Rome 1928
- Regola di 1928, Casa Madre delle Suore della Carità, Roma 1928
- Rule of Life of 1928, Mother House of the Sisters of Charity, Rome 1928
- Rule of 1934, Lyon 1938, Imprimerie Emmanuel Vitte
- Rule of 1949, Besançon 1949, Imprimerie Jacques et Demontrond