THE MEMORANDUM OF PURE TRUTHS
of Jeanne-Antide Thouret

“To the glory of God”

Our Saturday’s mornings
11th January 2020
by Sr Paola Arosio

“... the Mother house was suppressed a few days after the Queen’s death ...”

“... the Chambre Nationale ordered all of us to go off to our place of birth. When I left Paris, I wanted to go to Switzerland ...”

“... there was a plan to set up constitutional teachers ... I opened a free school...

“... I walked alone at night by forests ... I went in the name of God ...

“... I used to welcome good Catholic priests who were in hiding ...

“... sometimes I was three days and three nights without sleep ... I was denounced to the authorities...

“... Madam Antide, you have been both the parish priest and the vicar ...

“... a holy French priest had been living in Switzerland. ... I had a sister in that Company. She died in Neustadt...

“... in Landeron, God deigned to show me his plans ...

“... I returned to France under obedience ... This is how our Institute started: on 11th April 1799...

“... I say this to the glory of God: there was nothing of that kind all the time I was with the Sisters of Charity in Paris. God had given me an authentic vocation ...

“... at the same time I was training my Sisters for the active life...”

“... with the consent of the ecclesiastic Superior, I kept making grow our small community...

“... I went off to Dole, to the suppressed Visitation convent ...”

Since we got in our hands Letters and Documents, these and numerous other expressions of Mother Thouret have become part of our identity as Sisters of Charity. As we all know, all the sentences above can be found in the Memorandum of Pure Truth, text autographed, written by Jeanne-Antide in 182; further on we shall see what reasons made her do it.

In the MPT there are bits of conversations, which, thanks to the power of direct speech and their rich contents, are fixed in our memory. These dialogues are immediate, they take us straight into the context, they show us the personality of the people involved, showing their value in a way impossible to plain narration.

Thus, when we hear the words: «Citizen, you hold meetings, what do you read then?», we can imagine the details of the interrogation of the revolutionary Committee of Surveillance of Sancy underwent by the citizen Thouret. It was December 1794 and the Great Terror was in power. On 8th June, in Paris, a crowd of almost five hundred thousands of Paris’ citizens had taken part in the Feast of the Supreme Being. According to the Gregorian calendar it would have been Pentecost that is the birth of the Church. On that very day Maximilien de Robespierre was hailed as the charismatic Pontifex Maximus of the cult of the Supreme Being. Just two days later, on 22nd Prairial of the II year, he had a new law approved to regulate trials in Court: no more attorneys, the preliminary interrogation of defendants was eliminated, written evidences or testifying became useless; “moral evidence” alone would be enough to sentence to death by guillotine. The
revolution’s enemies, according to the new law, could be those accused of corruption of mores and public morality: a definition which submitted everyone to the Revolutionary Tribunals’ power. The concept of “people’s enemy” was so wide and vague that anyone could be accused of being one to the Surveillance Committee in Sancy. However, even though the guillotine’s shade was expanding Jeanne Antide had the courage of saying openly that in those “meetings” she read neither the republican catechism nor the revolutionary doctrines: in those meetings “good Catholics” read «prayers and Gospel, the law and the duties of Christians, and the doctrine of the Holy church of Jesus Christ».

The same climax was reached in the summer 1798, when the Revolution “revived stronger than ever on 18th Fructidor”, (4th September 1797), and the city authorities openly threatened to shoot her because she had not taken the oath: «You are a refugee! The military Commission should shoot you! Make your submission and you shall not be shot». However, Jeanne Antide was not scared and answered: «My conscience does not permit me to do so».

The dialogues and direct speeches contained in the MPT, take us straight into the context, they make us feel the emotions and show us the personality of the people involved, what they think and what they believe in. Many dialogues in the MPT are fixed in the memory of those who approach the precious direct testimony of Jeanne-Antide.

In the short narration about the time spent with the Solitaries, Jeanne-Antide using the direct speech reported the precise words pronounced by the Founder of the Christian Retreat. It was one of the most difficult stages in their peregrination. On 12th August 1796, Fr. Receveur, “no longer knowing what to do, made us land on the bank of the Danube and said to us: «Here we are between heaven and earth, without shelter and in great peril». When reading this we immediately realize the tragic situation in which the Solitaries found themselves, for months they had been pilgrims unwanted and often rejected in Switzerland, Austria, Germany. Their life was at stake, Brothers and Sisters were exhausted and had run out of resources to keep going. Nothing was left but turning to God making a religious vow. Thus, we imagine Father Receveur say with a thundering voice: «... all those of over twelve years of age must make a vow to go within a year to Jerusalem. Raise your hand, all of you, to Heaven, and all say it with me». While listening to this solemn yet dramatic religious resolution, we can see the ascetical preacher, spiritual guide and Founder Receveur, a man able to lead souls to God with his fervent homilies and his ideal of radically reforming Christian life starting from the inner life.

Other two pearls are the dialogues, very dear to us, through which, as Jeanne-Antide wrote in her MPT, “God deigned to show me His plans, most unworthy as I am”. She was at Le Landeron, at the beginning of the summer 1797, within the French speaking and Catholic Canton of Fribourg in Switzerland. There, a number of former religious women from France as well as some “refractory” priests belonging to the diocese of Besançon had found refuge. They had opened an even a major seminary in exile, under the direction of Mons Charles de Chaffoy, with the help of other diocesan Vicars, also coming from Besançon. Many newly ordained priests would have been ready to return to France, after being forced into exile, as soon as it would be possible, and work at the reorganization of pastoral ministry in Franche-Comté.

The length of the dialogue among the exiled priests from Besançon and Jeanne-Antide, (MPT n. 9: 1st 2nd and 3rd), let us imagine the crucial importance the young refugee attributed to such meeting and to its vocational content. The conflict which had seen the Church opposed to the French society because of the Revolution, the trauma caused by the schism between constitutional and refractory priests, the dramatic revolutionary attempts of destroying Christianity, had unequivocally revealed that the best resources of the French Church were called to work for a new evangelization. It was necessary to rebuild a society founded on Christian values and praxis, and this required a renewed pastoral ministry. The faithful were also called to contribute under the guidance of Bishops, priests, and the new Congregations, especially the feminine ones. The “new” nuns – with their pastoral ministry in schools, the caring of sick and their families at their homes – would contribute to bring peace between society and Church while giving new strength to faith and charity within the French parishes.
We know by heart the words addressed to Jeanne-Antide by the priests in exile: «We are going to return to France, because it is enjoying peace. You must also return. You will take young women and form them as you have been formed, and you will come and start in Besançon an institution for the instruction of the young and the care of the poor sick». We also remember the understandable first reaction of Jeanne-Antide. In fact, she immediately stood up, showing the spontaneous urge she felt of leaving the room and go away, before answering: «I am not capable of that; it is I who have need of formation». Yet, the Vicars knew her personality and her experience and said: «You will do very well. It is enough to have courage and memory; and you seem to have them».

As we know, for the Vicars of Besançon, even the vow made by Jeanne-Antide of sacrificing the return to her home-land in order to be a religious, was not a good reason to escape from the Church’s call. Those priests had made the renewal of faith and the re-establishment of Christian practice in the Besançon diocese their life’s mission. Therefore, they mentioned the first evangelizers of Franche-Comté, Saint Ferréol and Saint Ferjeux, who had lived in the 1st century A.C., so that Jeanne-Antide and her future companions could become a living and creative memorial of the evangelical courage and missionary zeal of the two martyrs, Founders of Christianity in Franche-Comté: «That is all very fine – said the two Vicars – but obedience has to be preferred to any other sacrifice. God speaks through Superiors and I order you to return to France within a fortnight, to help us restore faith and morals in our diocese, like Saint Ferréol and Saint Ferjeux». Si isti et istae, cur non ego? “If these and those, why not I?”, wrote Saint Augustine, adding “And these and those were able to do so not because of their virtue, but thanks to the Lord their God”.

Finally, almost anticipating, or perhaps responding to further objections presented by Jeanne-Antide, which are not mentioned in our text, the Vicars insisted on the main role women had within the Church during the Revolution. In fact, they had put in place a “hidden pastoral ministry”, which Jeanne-Antide described in four numbers of her MPT. We know that Jeanne-Antide closed her narration with the direct speech of Sancey’s Parish priest: «Madame Antide, I am under great obligations to you; you have supported my parishioners well during my absence; you have been both Parish priest and curate, in doing your work». In those dark years, in fact, many were the priests who could, secretly, continue their ministry thanks to the support and complicity of brave men and women, who in private houses hid sacred furnishings, organized clandestine meetings of prayer and catechesis, during which sacraments were administrated and contacts were established with the neighbouring Christian communities for a common opposition to the prevarications of the revolutionary government.

Within the wide phenomenon of the feminine pastoral ministry there was the blossoming of many new feminine religious Congregations in France, among which that of Mother Thouret. The Vicar of Besançon, insisting on the fundamental contribution of women to the “clandestine pastoral ministry”, confirmed: «You will tell me you are not a priest that you cannot preach or hear confession. True, but you can do great good there by your vocation and by the means which God has given you». The French Revolution, therefore, was followed by a new era for religious women, with new possibilities of active collaboration with the pastors of the Church, who, up to that time, had never thought of relying on the service given by religious women and their pastoral ministry.

However, the last tail strokes of the Revolution caused the failure of the foundational plan, so dear to the Besançon’s priests: “In the event the Revolution revived more strongly than ever; in those days it was called the Revolution of the 18th Fructidor. Then all the Catholic priests were obliged to go into safe hiding”. Our future Foundress, too, had to live in forced solitude at La Grange, from Autumn 1797 to Autumn 1798. In the MPT Jeanne-Antide stopped the narration about her return from La Grange, to report a second and even more stringent foundational dialogue with Besançon’s Vicars. The dialogue brings to her narration a new pace and a missionary direction. It was February 1799: «Well! What about our plan? – asked the Vicars – This is the favourable moment; the revolution is calming down. Have you trained any young women?». Jeanne-Antide seemed still at loss before such a big apostolic undertaking and justified herself saying: «No. That has
The apostolic fruits of that free and aware surrender of Jeanne-Antide to God did not wait long to come: “This is how our institute started: on 11th April 1799 ... a free school for the education of girls ... two aspirants, then a third ... a larger apartment ... a pharmacy and a copper for the soup for the sick poor in their homes ... the knowledge of different medicinal drugs for the sick poor ...”. As we know, to the detailed account of the first two years of the new born community, she dedicated 9 of the 27 numbers in the MPT, 4 of which are very short. To us it is a precious narration: the new beginnings are key in a person’s life, as well as in the life of a community. Like in a seed, they already contain the future developments and failures. Once the call was accepted and the decision made, Jeanne-Antide embraced it giving everything for it. With the help of God and her resolute personality she was able to involve her first companions in their apostolic service, teaching them to know different drugs ... visiting the sick ... teaching pupils ... talking about God ... giving consolation and encouragement to the sick ... teaching them all that was necessary to their salvation ... inviting her companions to follow her method.

We know by heart the rhythm of those days consecrated to the pastoral ministry in schools: each morning the school, then lunch, again school in the afternoon, and back home in the evening. And when assisting the poor with charity works they used to: “Prepare different drugs and make distillations ... dress wounds, take the pulse, recognize different maladies ... to speak of God to the sick, instruct them in everything necessary for salvation, help them to receive the holy sacraments of the Church, ... to get the sick to make their thanksgiving, to console them, to encourage them always, to read spiritual books to them, and to bury the dead ... to prepare the soup to be distributed and the meat for the sick poor ...”. We also remember that the breath and heart-beat of this service came from personal and community prayer, from a daily relationship with God: “Prayer vocal and mental was practiced from the first day, as well as examens, readings, the rosary, ejaculatory prayers, silence. There was a day of retreat each month, confession each week and communion; Holy Mass every day in a room, as worship was not yet re-established in the churches, repetition of meditation, special conferences, instructions, the practice of the presence of God when the clock struck ...”. Since one learns to pray by praying: “From the start I wrote for them a little Rule for every day, every week, every month and every year. The Superiors approved it, and God deigned to bless all my efforts”.

We always go back to the grace and the struggles of the beginnings certain to find in them an inspirational source: the narration of the first steps of our community puts us back in the action of the Holy Spirit which goes before us, is with us and increases our strength. With this intention, let us go back to the MPT’s pages in which we find the narration of the beginning of Jeanne-Antide’s and her companions’ apostolic adventure, to find courage again, to resume with renewed generosity our journey, to celebrate, together with Jeanne-Antide, the main role played by the grace of God in our life: “God had given me ...”. It is not by chance that we see these words of her direct testimony as the summary of her whole human, spiritual, apostolic experience as a determined woman, a courageous Foundress and a fearless missionary: “I say this to the glory of God: there was nothing of that kind all the time I was with the Paris Sisters of Charity. God had given me a veritable vocation, much tenderness for the sick, desire and good will to comfort them, with God as my motive and purpose”. We see here the humility and energy of the origins and, above all, the action and the reception of the transforming Grace of God.

We have already highlighted that the new beginnings are a true turning point in one’s life as well as in community life. They are a chance to which, usually, many generous and confident energies are given. Yet like any chance with the passing of time they develop both their potential fecundity and their difficulties which
may lead to a crisis, with the consequent possible conflicts. Fecundity and crisis marked the whole existence of Mother Thouret, as they are also part of our personal life within our communities as in our service, and obviously also within the Congregation.

Let us see in detail, following what Jeanne-Antide wrote in her MPT. As we have seen, numbers 6 to 14 are a testimony of the vocational and apostolic fecundity of the beginning: the school in Rue des Martelots was soon full of girls, a larger apartment was let to welcome the aspirants which joined the small community. Thus, Jeanne-Antide was able to respond to the request of opening the house in Rue de Grand-Battant – a school, a pot for the distribution of soup and meat, home-visiting - connections were established with the Charity Office which guaranteed the economic support for three schools in three different parishes in Besançon and for the distribution to the sick of natural remedies prepared at the community pharmacy. Meanwhile, prayer and communal life found their organization in the little Rule.

Fecundity and crisis: at number 15 of MPT, Jeanne-Antide explains the circumstances of the first crisis, that with the Daughters of Charity in Paris. From the beginning it appears as a juridical question, which could be easily resolved, as it was said in one of the well-known dialogues, in which we can listen to Jeanne-Antide’s voice and to that of the ecclesiastical Superiors.

It was the year 1800, on the eve of the Concordat between Napoleon and the Catholic Church: “The churches had not yet been opened, when I learned that the Community of the Sisters of Charity in Paris was starting again. I went to the ecclesiastical Superiors and said to them: «I stayed as a novice for some years with the Paris Sisters, but I never made vows there. The first house was suppressed, and the Chambre Nationale compelled us to leave for our birthplace. What do you think I should do if they recall me?». The Superiors’ answer seemed able to solve the question simply referring to Canon Law and to the status quo: «We do not want you to go there. You have no obligation to return. We do not want to lose you. We are very satisfied with you; stay in your establishments and continue to propagate your Institute without any dependence on the Paris Sisters – they have no right to it». Yet the crisis, as we know, flared up about the denomination of Mother Thouret’s Institute, Sisters of Charity, which the Vincentian nuns did not tolerate because they wanted it reserved to themselves. Even the decision of changing it in Daughters of Saint Vincent was not satisfactory for the Sisters in Paris. This unresolved question, as we know, will keep coming up causing conflicts: at theCongregations’ Chapter in 1807, then during the procedure for the pontifical approbation of the Rules, and finally, it will be one of the reasons given by Mons Cortois De Pressigny to keep the Sisters of Charity of Besançon under diocesan obedience.

In 1801, once the Concordat between Napoleon and Pope Pious VII was signed, “the churches reopened, the crucifix was put back on the altar and the priests were free to attend to their ministry”. Finally, also in Franche-Comté, the long period with constitutional Bishops (1791-1801), which, therefore, were schismatic, and who had governed a mainly “refractory” diocese, came to its definitive end. It was time for the appointment of a new Archbishop for Besançon. Jeanne-Antide provided us with the ecclesiastical Superiors’ words commenting on it: «They are engaged at the nomination of Bishops. It is said that the one for Besançon is nominated. We do not know who it is». These words were loaded with expectations for the new life of the diocese, where the return to the old “ultramontanists” traditions of Franche-Comté was wished for. However, when the new Bishop’s name was made known, everybody’s expectations about the return of Franche-Comté within the Catholic, Apostolic and Roman Church were disappointed ad a new, even

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1 For the details about the denomination’s question, Mother Thouret speaks about it in 1822 in the Justificatory Memorandum, n. 2.
2 At the Paris Chapter of 1807, the official name became Sisters of Charity of Besançon, giving no satisfaction to the Daughters of Charity in Paris. With the pontifical approbation in 1819, the name was changed in Daughters of Charity under the protection of Saint Vincent de Paul. Mons. Cortois de Pressigny in his letter to the Nuncio in Paris, Mons. Macchi, giving the motivations to keep the Sisters of Charity under diocesan obedience according to the Rule of 1807, presented their denomination as the main reason: “Rome cannot be ignorant that there has existed in France for nearly two centuries a very extensive society, most useful, which will not see without distress that the name it bears with honour, I will even say with glory, has to be shared with a new society. I cannot think that the French government will tolerate this identity of name, which can cause serious inconvenience and is unjust” (from Paris, 19th February 1822).
3 Cf. Sr Marie Jacqueline M. lecture at Our Saturday’s mornings, 14th December 2019.
greater question had to be faced. In fact, the new Bishop appointed was Mons. Claude Lecoz, a schismatic Bishop, who had come to a compromise with the Revolution. The choice caused deep disappointment among the Vicar Generals and the priests, as well as among the feminine religious Congregations of the diocese.

Just the name of the old President of the Councils of the National Church in France, from 1797 to 1801, recalled painful and still vivid memories. “The new Archbishop for whom I feel repugnance, hasn’t a good name”, that is what Jeanne-Antide said when discussed the matter with the Canon Jean Claude Filsjean. This happened in Dole, between the end of Spring and the beginning of Summer 1802, at the ancient convent of the Visitation, where Mother Thouret had retired to have free time in order to write the Rule to be submitted to the approval of the new Archbishop of Besançon. At the news of Claude Lecoz’s appointment, Mother Thouret by all means wanted to give the office of Superior General to the parish priest Charles Bacoffe: “who provided the renting of the first house with the income of the secret sum of money” clandestinely capitalized during the Revolution. However, thinking of the future of the Congregation, Canon Filsjean found “unsuitable” this attribution to Bacoffe, which could be the cause of a perilous fragility for both the present and the future of the Institute. In favour to the designation of the Archbishops of Besançon, Canon Filsjean gave a series of sound motivations which can be found, always reported as direct speech, in the MPT: «An Archbishop has more merit, more strength, influence and honour than a simple priest, to aid and sustain your Institute, which will never lack good superiors when it is always an Archbishop who is chosen». Mother Thouret could not accept to entrust the government of the Institute to a schismatic Bishop. We can easily imagine Canon Filsjean and Mother Thouret while discussing this decisive question: whom should the office of Superior General be given to? Yet, before Filsjean’s firm statement: «Oh, come! He is sent to us by God and by His Church », Jeanne-Antide had to accept. The name of Fr. Bacoffe disappeared and was replaced by the Archbishop of Besançon, in the person of Claude Lecoz at that time.

The consequences, both positive and negative, of that decision, as we know, will be enormous in the years to come. Positively, Archbishop Lecoz was constantly at Mother Thouret side, starting with the opening of new works for the education of girls, for the care of wounded soldiers and veterans of the Napoleonic wars, of prisoners at Bellevaux, of the poor assisted by the Charity office, of sick in hospital’s wards, of poor families at the “work-house”, up to the organization of the Sisters’ departure for Naples. Many letters sent to the Minister of Cults to get the ministerial approbation of the Institute and the Imperial approbation had Lecoz’s signature, as well as the repeated requests for the concession of a building for the novitiate. Besides, in the first five years of the Neapolitan adventure Mons. Lecoz never stopped supporting from far Jeanne-Antide and her community at Regina Coeli. Up to his death in 1815.

Yet, the exclusion of Father Bacoffe from the life of the Congregation caused a crisis which brought forth further consequences. The attribution of the Superior General’s office to Mons. Lecoz - who was considered schismatic by the priests who had refused to take the oath, in spite of the Concordat and the pontifical approbation of Lecoz – was interpreted as Mother Thouret’s rejection of a worthy priest like Fr. Bacoffe, who was truly against the republican constitution, and enjoyed great esteem in the diocese. The request of the approbation submitted by Mother Thouret to the Holy See was also seen as a further attempt of the Foundress of getting rid of the other refractory priest who had wanted the foundation of the Institute in Besançon, Mons. de Chaffoy, in order to be alone at the head of the Congregation. The result, as we know, was the division of the Institute.

Surprisingly the MPT closes its narration at the time of the opening of Bellevaux – “filled with men and women of all ages, imprisoned according to sentences passed in the criminal and police courts” – and with the benediction by Fr. Bacoffe of the religious habit, which, after the Napoleonic Concordat, could finally be worn again. We said “surprisingly”, due to the reasons which in 1825 had led Jeanne Antide to write the MPT.

In order to understand such motivations, we need to see what was happening in Thonon-les-Bains, in Upper Savoy on the southern border of the Geneva’s lake, capital city of the French region of Chablais, ancient Province of the Duchy of Savoy. After a short occupation by Switzerland in the XVI century, Thonon-
Thonon-les-Bains returned to the Duchy of Savoy up to the outbreak of the French Revolution. Occupied by the revolutionary army in 1792 became part of the Department of Mont Blanc. It was returned to the Savoy’s House in 1814, where it remained up to 1860, when it was definitively annexed to France.

In 1810, the same year in which she received the request of going to Naples, on 8th May Jeanne-Antide announced the departure of the first Sisters for the General hospital of Thonon, which at that time was part of the French territories under the Napoleonic Empire. They were 4 Sisters, three nurses and a pharmacist; Sr Basile Prince was the Sister Servant. They were accompanied by Sr Christine Ménéguy, which represented the Superior, Sr Thouret, and they had been preceded by a letter of Mons. Lecoz addressed to the Parish priest of Thonon, Rev. Jean Neyre, member by right of the Administration Board of the General Hospital⁴. The Archbishop of Besançon recommended the four Sisters to rev. Neyre asking to support and advise them: it was necessary to give time to the Sisters to settle and make themselves known. The parish priest Jean Neyre, who had made the request took at heart the small community of Thonon, guided by Sr Basile. It would be with his personal economic help and his constant and kind collaboration with Sr Basile Prince that it would be possible to open a small outdoor pharmacy for the poor, have the chapel restored, since it had been neglected for a long time, some hospital’s rooms transformed in free classes for the education of poor girls, and the home visiting of the Sisters well organized.

The people living in Thonon knew rev. Neyre and greatly appreciated him. Everybody knew his youthful disdain of danger when he refused to swear the oath on the Civil Constitution of the clergy. He went into hiding, was arrested and jailed, yet he escaped. Clandestinely he cared for the people of the region deprived of their parish priests. Arrested again he was imprisoned at the notorious Île de Ré, an island in the Atlantic Ocean, North-West of France, opposite La Rochelle. In that prison, where many refractory priests were kept, he supported his fellow-prisoners. Once again, with the complicity of the guards he was able to run away and cross the Swiss border. When, finally, the Revolution died down, Rev. Neyre was appointed Parish priest in Thonon-les-Bains. The city was in a miserable state, ransacked and looted, and it had been orphan of priests for many years. The new Parish priest exorted the wealthy of the city to visit the sick, and with great personal sacrifices helped the poor, each Sunday he distributed bread to the poorest. Having seen the negligence in assisting the sick at the General Hospital, Rev. Neyre tried to improve the situation. Thus, making good use of his acquaintance with Mons Lecoz, he obtained four Sisters of Charity of Besançon to work at the hospital. When in 1824, he was appointed Director at the Major Seminary of Annecy, the whole city was in tears as for a father leaving his family.

The year 1815 was a year of great changes in Thonon: with the Paris Treaty of 20th November, all territories of Savoy were returned to the royal house of Emanuele I of Savoy, King of Sardinia and Piedmont. The community of the Sisters in Thonon found itself outside the French kingdom. However, the relationships with the Mother House in Besançon were constant and friendly. Sr. Christine Ménéguy destined a fifth Sister to the hospital there and the Savoyard postulants who began to knock at the door were sent to Besançon for their novitiate. The news from Naples did not take too long to come. The Sisters’ service in the wards, assisting the sick, was particularly appreciated by the administration: “It is Sr Basile Prince who has given to the hospital this wise government, which has now become traditional, and guarantees a constantly increasing prosperity of the hospital”, says a Report in 1816.

Within the community of Thonon, in 1819, the pontifical approbation of the Institute and of the Rule was received “with tears of joy”, as Sr. Basile wrote to Mother Thouret. It was not the same among the ecclesiastics in Besançon. On 7th June 1820, Mother Thouret was compelled to clarify to the administrators at the hospital in Thonon that she was the only Superior in charge of the Institute. As a consequence, she had to ask them to stop their relationships with Besançon. Dreaming of the opening of a novitiate in Savoy in favour

⁴ Mons. C. Lecoz to the parish priest of Thonon Jean Neyre, 7th May 1810, unpublished letter, reported in Histoire de la Province de Savoia, 2006, three precious volumes edited by Sr Marie Hélène Magnien, archivist at La Roche sur Foron. From the I volume 1810-1860, are taken all the news about Fr Neyre and the Thonon foundation.
of the pontifical branch, Mother Thouret suggested to the administrators that some aspirants could be received within the hospital community.

Rev. Neyre, understandably, was very much concerned about the deterioration of the relationship between Naples and Besançon: the authority in Naples was too far and that in Besançon made pressure on other Bishops of the French dioceses, where the Sisters of Charity of Besançon were already present, urging them to refuse the pontifical approbation as well. Rev. Neyre did not miss the opportunity of advising Mother Thouret, suggesting the appointment of a Provincial Superior in Savoy, and availing himself of his many acquaintances to enable the dream of a novitiate in Savoy come true, he suggested the name of trustworthy ecclesiastics in Turin and Chambéry and officers in another Province of Savoy, Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne, so that Mother Thouret’s Institute, no longer under the jurisdiction of Besançon, may get the indispensable Patent Letters by the King of Sardinia and the Archbishop of Chambéry, Mons. Irénée-Yves Dessaules. On 4th September 1822, addressed to the Archbishop of Chambéry, came “the authorization of His Majesty for the establishment of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de’ Paul in Thonon and in the parishes of the Duchy which would request it for the relief of the sick poor and the education of poor girls”.

The restoration of the Duchy of Savoy in 1815 brought also the restoration of the ancient Episcopal Chairs, suppressed by the Napoleonic Concordat, among which in 1822 was suppressed that of Annecy, whose first Bishop was Mons. Claude-François de Thiollaz. He was a Savoyard of rare energy, very good at organization, he put all his energies into giving new life to the diocese affected by material, moral and spiritual poverty. His priority was the formation of future priests, for whose care he appointed Rev. Neyre as the Superior of the Major Seminary which had just resumed its activity in Annecy. In spite of the new and demanding task Rev. Neyre did not cease to care for the future of the community founded by Mother Thouret in Savoy. The creation of the diocese of Annecy made necessary a new authorization, as that given for Thonon by the Archbishop of Chambéry was no longer valid. Rev. Neyre, on 26th February 1825, addressed to Mother Thouret a long letter, full of wise and practical suggestions for the consolidation and development of the Congregation in Savoy, among which the suggestion of writing a Memorandum in which Mother Thouret was meant to “explain

1. when and how your Institute was formed;
2. why it was not possible the union with the House in Paris;
3. why the House in Besançon did not want to accept the Rule approved by the Pope.

Facts and reasons – precised Rev. Neyre – should be presented in all truth and simplicity”. Mother Thouret was supposed to send also to him this document which could be useful in various circumstances. “Undoubtedly, the approbation of the Holy See shuts the mouths of those who want to speak without being informed; it provides full justification, if you ever needed justifications. Meanwhile, those who defend your interests and wish to do so shall be very much satisfied to have in their hands such a document as evidence”. On 2nd May 1825, Rev. Neyre wrote to Mother Thouret: “I received your Memorandum and I will make use of it if necessary; for now put your soul at peace and serve the Lord joyfully and with a righteous conscience”.

The MPT does not seem to give a direct answer to the third question about the reasons for the refusal of the Rule approved by the Pope in Besançon. In fact, in a different way from the preceding documents, the last number of the MPV (n. 19th) is dedicated to the time of the writing of the Rule of 1802 – the so called Manuscript of Dole – and to the consequent deterioration of the relationship with Fr. Bacoiffe and with Mons. De Chaffoy. This number 19 could seem long, full of useless details and therefore rather boring. In fact, its purpose was the demonstration that the choice of Mons Lecoq, (the schismatic Archbishop), as superior General had not been at all the result of Jeanne-Antide’s initiative. In the same way the list of ecclesiastics who had given their “consent and approbation” to the opening of the school on 11th April, was due to the necessity of firmly stating the belonging of Jeanne-Antide and of her Institute to the Catholic, Apostolic and Roman Church.

Let us see in detail: who was the Bishop of Rosy? A Catholic Bishop among the unfaithful? Claude-Ignace Franchet de Rans, had been auxiliary Bishop of Besançon from 1756 up to his death in 1810, titular
Bishop of Rhosus in Anatolia, current Turkey ("among the unfaithful", *in partibus infidelium*). In 1792, having refused the oath, Franchet de Rans, had been expelled from France and had found refuge at Soleure, in Switzerland in the Lausanne’s diocese, where among others, already exiled, he met the Archbishop of Besançon, Mons. Raymond de Durfort, also mentioned in the list of the *MPT*, and some of his General Vicars. Due to his title of Chapter’s Dean, at the premature death in exile of the Archbishop de Durfort in 1792, Franchet De Rans became administrator of Besançon, up to the day on which the office was given to the Bishop of Lausanne who in turn chose Mons. de Chaffoy as his representative.

**Who were the two General Vicars, mentioned in the *MPT* who had “returned from deportation”, and, therefore, we assume, were also refractory priests?** The first certainly was Mons. De Chaffoy. The other was very likely Mons. Paul-Ambroise Frère de Villefrancon, appointed Archbishop of Besançon after the death of Mons. Cortois de Pressigny. Mother Thouret did not have any connection with the four Constitutional Bishops of Besançon from 1791 to 1801. Some of them will still have an active part in the government of the diocese when Mons. Lecoz was Bishop⁵. As we have seen, Mother Thouret’s point was to highlight that the choice of Mons. Lecoz as Superior General and of working with the schismatic Bishop were only due to the pontiff’s decision of approving the appointment of Lecoz and the necessity of guaranteeing stability for the present and the future time to her Institute. Mother Thouret seemed to say that there wasn’t any personal issue with Fr. Bacoffe, whom she still wanted to consider as the “Superior of the community” for all his life as stated in the *MPT*. For the same and opposite reasons, she had no issues with Mons. Lecoz, with whom, at least initially, Mother Thouret wanted to establish only formal relationships based on politeness.

If the content of number 19 of the *MPT* may seem too long, we could read again and enjoy all the other numbers: as we have seen there are plenty of lively dialogues, of adventures, we come to know people of great personality who give us precious details about the first house in rue des Martelots, lets us know what Jeanne-Antide thought and believed in, what moved her within, help us imagine the daily life of that first community with its service, fraternal life, prayer and formation. The *MPT* is, therefore, as Mother Antoine de Padoue used to say, “a document of inestimable value because of the authenticity of the testimony it contains”, due to the richness of dialogues and direct speeches reported and to the frequent mention of the presence and the action of God on which we now want to stop briefly, before closing our conference.

Let us start again from the beginning: after telling us of the firs dramatic consequences of the Revolution – suppression of the Daughters of Charity in Paris, refusal to receive the pension destined to former religious, the decision to go abroad in order to live as a religious – Jeanne-Antide told us about the busy days in Sancy, where she spent herself completely in the clandestine pastoral service, teaching in the illegal school, visiting the sick affected by the epidemic. It was through this narration that Jeanne-Antide revealed the deep reason of her total and risky dedication: “I went in the name of God”. The reason of this capacity of giving oneself was God. Otherwise, it would have been just the strenuous effort of her will. In the same way God was the reason of the days spent in Dole and totally dedicated to the writing of the Rule, written “in the name of God, putting in God all my trust, counting on God’s omnipotence, because He makes use of the most ignorant”. It was God who made her go through the forest of Sancey at night, who supported her among the Solitaries with no safe destination on the Danube, in the heavy days in rue des Martelots as well as in the dangerous rooms of Bellevaux.

It was in a constant dialogue with God that Jeanne-Antide’s conscience opened to the call of the Spirit who inspired her in a concrete way; for instance, through the letters received by Fr Receveur when she joined the Christian Retreat: “I thought I saw the will of God in my joining that community because there was no longer one of that kind in France and no hope of one being soon re-established”. It was in the unceasing dialogue with God that the *Manuscript of Dole* was completed: “Chapter after chapter, the Holy Spirit granted me the necessary light”.

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Again, the grace of God was celebrated in an explicit way on the occasion of the vocational dialogue which took place with the exiled Vicars General of Besançon: “I was in Landeron when the opportunity came, in which God deigned to show me his plans, though unworthy”. In precarious circumstances, faced to the uncertainty of the future, being aware of her previous failures, at a time in which she was most vulnerable, Jeanne-Antide felt that the grace of God was touching her. Isaiah says that we are men and women “of tired hands and weak knees”, yet supported and transformed by the grace of God. Each time we are overwhelmed by our weaknesses and fears or exhausted by our roaming around with no destination, God comes to meet us and the transforming action of his grace enables us all to go on in our journey, step by step, towards the fullness of humanity.

It is our openness to the transforming action of God’s grace that enables us to see new ways that nobody could see beforehand: “You will take young women and form them as you have been formed, and you will start in Besançon...”. It was the openness to the grace of God which made her find the inner strength able to give new breath and new energy: “That is what we did”. When we receive the transforming action of the grace of God we bring good fruits even in difficult situations which seem to be beyond our possibility, as it happened to Jeanne Antide who said: “It is I who have need of formation”. Then, the transforming action of the grace of God enables us to give positive answers to such difficulties: “You must give the title of superior General to the Archbishop of Besançon and his successors”. He makes us able to imagine a better condition and to act in order to anticipate it: “it is necessary that faith and good mores are re-established”.

We like to close this conference on the MPT with the portrait of Jeanne-Antide Thouret offered by Mons. Lucien Daloz, Archbishop of Besançon from 1980 to 2003, as the postscript in the book We have heard the cry of the poor by Fr Théodule Rey-Mermet, who played an important role in the diocese of Annecy, from 1985 to 2002.

The portrait made by Mons. Daloz, according to us, corresponds well to the picture of Mother Thouret given in the MPT: “Jeanne-Antide also revealed her ‘Comtoise’ roots in her active, realistic and practical nature. ... Even her prayers were ‘committed’ and marked by situations, events, trials. And yet, this wilful efficacious woman, who knew how to stand up to people whatever their rank, ... was also extremely vulnerable, and suffered in her intimate being, though without stiffness or bitterness. ... Undoubtedly her tenacious and flawless desire of God’s will, at any price, is the clearest line of continuity throughout her eventful life. Was not this ‘God alone’, which she could read in the hóuto of her family home as in that of many Franche-Comté homes, the heart of her faith? Did not she want to serve Jesus Christ in the poor, Jesus Christ crucified, with whom she declared herself ‘ready to suffer’? Did not she want to allow herself to be guided by the Holy Spirit? And by the Church, whose daughter she was proud to proclaim herself?

The mark Jeanne Antide left on her Institute – concludes Mons. Daloz – is so personal and so vigorous that it is always clearly recognizable, living and active, in those who continue her work, throughout the world, in the service of God and the poor”.

And so be it!