

"THE BREATH OF THE NEW WINE AND ITS ENERGETIC PRESSURE "

Mother Thouret's intention to have the Rules and the Institute approved by the Pope

Let's say already at the outset, that across our conversation on the first of the upcoming " Saturday mornings" we will try to establish a still strong bond with our roots. We thus share with those who live next to us, Sisters and Friends of Jeanne Antide, a common memory and a common history. The shared past is transformed into a form of unity: although we don't know each other, yet "we recognise each other".

But the memory isn't only a question of the past: it emanates energy and orientates towards future paths. In the long and rough process that preceded and followed the pontifical approval, we are called today to reflect how : in mother Thouret's intention to obtain the Pope's approval of both the Rules and the Institute, we can in fact understand what is our call today in history: " undertaking new paths so that the ideals become reality in life: systems, structures, services, styles, relationships and choice of words". That's what Jeanne Antide did. The Orientations demand this from us, *New Wine in new Wineskins*.

In the first years of the life of the community founded by her, mother Thouret and her companions had experienced that the "wineskins mentioned in the parable are containers made of soft leather. They can still extend themselves furthermore to enhance the breath of the new wine that continues to simmer. If on the contrary, the wineskins were dry and rigid they would lack the necessary flexibility to sustain the intensive pressure of the new wine". And it was under the pressure of the boiling new wine that mother Thouret organized herself to head to Rome in search of "really suitable structures to safeguard the innovative richness of the Gospel". Let us also welcome this challenge that concerns each one of us, each community and the groups of Friends.

And may Mary, "woman of the new wine, render our steps steadfast in the mystery of the Cross that the Spirit implores for every new creation."

THE PERSONAGES INVOLVED

The diocese of Besançon

- The Sisters of Charity of Besançon
- Mgr. Cortois de Pressigny
- Mgr. De Chaffoy
- The vicar of Besançon, A.-E. Durand

Pius VII and the Holy See

Mother Thouret

Mgr. Narni Mancinelli

Card. E. Consalvi, Secretary of State

1815 A PARTICULARLY CRITICAL YEAR

THE DIOCESE OF BESANÇON

The sisters of charity of Besançon

If in a span of six years, in Regina Coeli, only twenty novices joined the Congregation, even in France, already in 1812, a drop in the number of new candidates to the novitiate had been verified and in the opening of new houses: "We should find it hard – wrote mother Thouret with concern to Mgr. Lecoz on the 28th February 1813 – to see the progress of the Institute in France impeded, we left it vigorous and sound, in no difficulty, needing only to be maintained and to continue to spread".

In France, Napoleon's wars, the general uncertainty that had accompanied and followed the forced renunciation to the throne and Napoleon's exile caused the drop in new religious vocations. Moreover, the financial resources grew rapidly meagre and therefore it became impossible for the Institute to afford new works. In the meantime, Sr. Christine Menegay, who was nominated vicar in Besançon by mother Thouret, perceived the difficulty for a substitute that was supposed to be resolved within three or four months and which henceforth lasted instead, over four years.

1815, A PARTICULARLY CRITICAL YEAR

With the fall of Napoleon, the sisters lost the support of a government who had lavishly favoured them across the 'Chapter 1807 of the hospital and teaching Congregations', the benevolence of Madame Leticia and the crucial support of the Napoleonic prefect of Besançon, Jean Debry. The year 1815 was also marked by a turning point even in the Kingdom of the two Sicilies, with the return of the Bourbons to the throne. As it happened also in France, each time the government changed, a new approval for the Institute was necessary in order to proceed with its works and with its service to the poor.

Again during the same year, with the sudden demise of Mgr. Lecoz, the sisters found themselves deprived of the personal care of the archbishop of Besançon, who had given a crucial contribution to the spreading of the Institute. Mgr. Lecoz shouldered mother Thouret whenever she started new charitable works. He had constantly defended the sisters' reasons in front of negligent and sometimes even hostile administrators. Very often he had to press on to assure to the emerging Congregation the approval of the minister of Worship and the 'Permit of imperial approval'. In vain he strived to achieve the highly desired building for the novitiate. He had followed with particular attention the preparatory phase for the departure to Naples. His sudden demise that occurred on the 3 May 1815, had deprived the sisters of his influential support.

But throughout Besançon, the demise of the Archbishop Lecoz caused a deep trauma. His place remained vacant for four years and the pastoral care remained entrusted to Mgr. Antoine-Emmanuel Durand, a venerable 72 year old man. Having refused the oath on the civil Constitution of the clergy during the Revolution, Durant retired in Switzerland and from there he ran the diocese together with the vicars De Chaffoy and Villefrancon. After the Concordat, Lecoz kept him in his activities and therefore this active and courageous old man found himself governing the vast diocese. Canon Durand, a man of devotion and enlightened fervour, across his strong pastoral experience, managed to achieve a big authority over the diocese which was recovering from the trauma after having been governed by the ancient president of the clergy's National Assembly, the "ex-avowed" Mgr Lecoz. Durand's apostolate was admirable and focused mainly on the spiritual renewal of the clergy and on the return to the faith of the entire Franche Comté. Soon after his demise in 1819, Mgr. Cortois de Pressigny took possession of the diocese.

Mgr. Cortois de Pressigny

Throughout France, the bishops of the Restoration were chosen especially from among the emigrants of the Revolutionary period or from the resistant priests who had opposed Napoleon: on the whole, in both cases, it was a matter of very old ecclesiastics such as the 74 year old Mgr. Gabriel Cortois de Pressigny. After having refused to take the oath, he had chosen to be exiled in Savoy and later in Switzerland and Bavaria. On his return to France immediately after the Napoleonic Concordat until 1814, Cortois de Pressigny continued to lead a withdrawn life, far from any pastoral responsibilities.

With the resurgence of the monarchy, Louis XVIII appointed him to the helm of the delegation sent by the Holy See. He had the task to abolish the Concordat of 1801 and to cancel the organic Articles which were considered "shocking upheavals" by the Gallican bishops, inasmuch an expression of the pontifical authority who supported Napoleon's power. As we know well, the negotiations with the Holy See to reinstate the Concordat of 1516 failed, thanks especially to the work of the Secretary of State, Cardinal. Hector Consalvi.

However the diplomatic experience turned out to be of great importance: Cortois de Pressigny managed to obtain the esteem of Louis XIII, who in 1817 appointed him to fill the vacant seat of Besançon. At the news of that nomination, in the diocese of Besançon, all the priests, both the refractory and the ex-emigrants, who stayed away from the pastoral commitments during the episcopate of the "constitutional" Lecoz, acknowledged in the person of the Mgr. Cortois de Pressigny the return to the old and sure religious traditions.

Mgr. De Chaffoy

When Lecoz passed away, the vicar general, Canon Durand assumed the task of spiritual director of the Sisters of Charity of Besançon. Overloaded with commitments, he transmitted the task to abbot Denizot, parish priest of the cathedral of Besançon, and who for long years supported firmly the return of Mgr. de Chaffoy to the helm of the congregation and even considered him as its true founder. And so it happened. Therefore in Besançon, many things had changed since the departure of mother Thouret to Naples: the superior general was hundreds of kilometres away, the Episcopal seat of the congregation's superior remained vacant for a long time, and above all Mgr. De Chaffoy wanted the insertion of new governing figures: the spiritual director with the right to vote within the Council and the Assistant. De Chaffoy assumed personally the role of Spiritual Director and Sr. Marie-Anne Bon was appointed Assistant. On the other hand, the houses of the Sisters of Charity had spread in some other dioceses of France and Savoy and even in other Swiss and Italian regions.

For her part, Jeanne-Antide, was extremely worried about the problem regarding the renewal of the annual religious vows that were suspended in France in 1814-1815, due to the difficult politico-socio climate. She insisted to resume carefully while Mgr. de Chaffoy postponed the ceremony to the arrival of the new archbishop, who would reorganize the community and finally make it possible to renew the vows which had been heavily postponed. But Mgr. Cortois de Pressigny wasn't yet in possession of the Diocese. We are thus in summer 1818.

This time it was mother Thouret to take time for the renewal: on the 18 September 1818, she presented to Pope Pius VII the official request to obtain the pontifical approval of her Institute. At this stage she had to wait for the approval of the Rule on behalf of the Holy See for the renewal of the vows according to the new Rule.

Already in 1811, Jeanne-Antide in Naples had to oppose several times the government's decisions who wanted to integrate them with the autonomous communities of the Oblates and Tertiaries. Then, in 1815, in order to dissolve the bonds between the Sisters of Charity of Naples and those of France, king Ferdinand of Bourbon had placed the congregation «under the spiritual protection of the Mission Priests of St. Vincent de Paul of Naples », hence targeting to replace the authority of the Archbishop of Besançon on the communities of the Kingdom with a local authority. In reality, this initiative had no practical effect, but it is also emblematic of the precarious situation of the same Neapolitan community.

Faced with the changes and the different strategies of the governments, who were looming in Europe during the Restoration, it was then necessary according to mother Thouret to turn to the Holy See to obtain the pontifical acknowledgement and the approval of the Constitutions, in order to be able to express more clearly the ecclesial horizon of the works at the service of the poor and the universal character of the institute of the Sisters of Charity.

At the time of the request for papal approval, the Sisters of Charity of Besançon were an institute with simple vows, with a superior general in the person of the archbishop of Besançon and had establishments in the dioceses of various national States. But the 'service of the authority' was organized differently in France and in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. In Besançon, the spiritual direction and the government of the Institute – the reception of the novices, admission to the religious profession, opening of houses, transfers of sisters, nomination of sisters servants – were entrusted to the spiritual director, Mgr. de Chaffoy.

in Naples, the leadership of the Sisters of Charity was firmly in the hands of Jeanne-Antide, foundress and superior general of a centralized institute, as it was willed by Napoleon. Every approved institute should have its mother general, who depended on the prefect and who in turn was in communication with the Minister of Cults. In Naples this move proved to be too innovative and in fact it encountered a lot of resistance. But with the end of the Napoleonic experience, this model of female religious life had lost its strength. Thus it had to deal afresh with the new civil and ecclesial authorities.

For mother Thouret, it was certainly necessary to give solidity and unity to the congregation. And the choice that offered the best reassurance was to turn to the apostolic see: the pontifical approval would "consolidate" the institute as Mother Thouret expressed in her petition. It would therefore place it in a situation of great solidity in front of the continuous changes of political regime that had repeatedly threatened the survival of the congregation.

The pontifical obedience would assure new vigour to a congregation that had emerged twenty years before: "On the 11th April next it will be twenty years – wrote mother Thouret turning to the Holy Father - since God brought into being this Institute which has peopled heaven with a great number of our good Sisters who lived and died in good repute. In all the countries where our Sisters are established, the people demonstrate their great personal satisfaction: they do good and contribute to the people's edification and this increases the spreading of our Institute". And which, according to us it then needed a more consolidated juridical frame work that would assure at the same time, a wider horizon of presence and service

It must be pointed out that such a plan wasn't the one and only. In fact Jeanne-Antide, shared this resolution with many other foundresses of new religious institutes of active life, who precisely during the years of the Restoration asked for pontifical approval. France and Belgium anticipated the Southern European nations, who remained attached for a longer time to the eighteenth century models. But this wasn't the case with mother Thouret, who sent the Petition to Pope Pius VII precisely from Naples to obtain the pontifical approval.

PIUS VII and THE HOLY SEE

Pius VII, who returned to Rome in 1814 from the forced exile imposed on him by Napoleon, dedicated himself with great energy to the pastoral and spiritual goals of the Church who was freed from the troubled revolutionary season. Since the outbreak of the French Revolution until the end of the Napoleonic Empire, the Church witnessed the decline of most of the certainties and historical-juridical foundations on which the papacy stood since the Middle Ages onwards. The dismantling of the ecclesiastical organisation of the Old Regime had also passed through the suppression of convents, monasteries, abbeys and confraternities. Throughout the

nineteenth century, only parishes and new female religious communities of active life remained for a long time the only widespread and numerous territorial presence, capable to reach the faithful everywhere.

Thus, the Holy See impressed a strong urge to the reorganisation of the dioceses and the parishes, the formation of the diocesan clergy, the care of the spiritual and moral life of the people, the diffusion of new forms of devotion and piety to be more in harmony with the needs of the time, to support the nascent female congregations of active life. All this in view of assuring a more widespread pastoral action of the Church, in situations that had never seen before the presence of women. In fact, they were the “new sisters” the first women, who having obtained a teaching certificate, opened schools in isolated places, in the countryside or near the mountains. They were the first sisters to take care of the female inmates who managed to exclude the armed guardianship, the abolition of sentences to harsh imprisonment and enchained feet while launching courses in literacy. Moreover, they were the “new sisters” – and almost for over a century they were the only ones – who assumed the service in the operation theatres, in the labour wards and even with syphilitic patients. They reached also the male wards and the psychiatric hospitals. Briefly, the human and Christian formation of entire generations was determined by the works run by sisters, especially across kindergartens, small schools and child centres, catechism classes, boarding schools, hospitals, prisons, “crèches”, agricultural colonies, orphanages... up to the most remote African villages. In fact, Father Comboni wrote: “The sister of central Africa means everything. The missionary would do very little without the sister. She is the only accepted person in the primitive African society. Only she can understand the harem’s secrets and communicate with the women”.

It was therefore the strong conviction of Pius VII for the popular re-evangelisation of the society that the new female congregations of active life could offer a fundamental contribution. Thus they needed to be sustained and addressed within this vast pastoral work undertaken by the pontificate. It is precisely within these new pastoral perspectives of the Holy See that the transformation of the Sisters of Charity of Besançon into an institute of pontifical right occurred.

The canonical procedure to obtain approval from the Holy See began on the 12 September 1818, with the sending of an official request to Pope Pius VII on behalf of mother Thouret to be able “to present and submit to the examination and approval of Your Holiness the book of our Rules and Constitutions that direct us all”. In the ‘petition’ to the Holy Father, the Foundress didn’t fail to explain that the so called “Sisters of Charity of Besançon are established in France, Switzerland, Savoy and in Naples : in the dioceses of Lyon, Autun, Chambery, Strasbourg and Dijon; in Naples and in the diocese of Marsi” and that their foundress was acknowledged during the Chapter of Paris in 1807 reserved to the “teaching and hospital congregations” with annual vows. Before sending it to the Pope, the Foundress had submitted the text to Mgr. Narni Mancinelli, recently elected bishop of Cosenza, who on the 20 July 1818 had considered “very suitable the way of presenting the document. The style is appropriate to the Holy See”.

Mgr. Narni Mancinelli

Therefore, in autumn 1818, Jeanne-Antide reached Rome to follow personally the approval’s procedure accompanied by Sr. Rosalie. She took with her recommendation letters on behalf of Mgr. Narni Mancinelli, addressed “to the most Eminent Cardinals, to whom I already gave news about this community in Rome” , together with the necessary credential letter of the institute on behalf of the archbishop of Besançon. The archbishop of Cosenza recommended to the prelates the Sisters of Charity of Besançon who were “obliged to settle down in Naples to serve in the hospitals and to take care of young poor persons. They – as he attested to cardinal Michael Di Pietro, sub-deacon to the Holy Apostolic College – are highly loyal to the Holy See and since then, while the nation was utterly against the Religious duties, this community wept and prayed for the glory of the Catholic Church”.

Regarding the person of the Foundress, “the noble Sister Jeanne Antide is endowed with extraordinary talents and unique virtues” (to Cardinal E. Consalvi, Secretary of State), and regarding the service of the poor accomplished by them, “the spiritual and temporal benefit carried out by the Sisters of Charity towards the poor has always encouraged me to sustain them at the Throne of Naples and to entrust them now to the Highest Throne of Rome to whom they are utterly faithful” (to Cardinal Cavazzi Della Somaglia, Vice Councillor). Besides, “Since their arrival from France, I have heard the confessions and assisted the French Sisters of Charity who settled down in Naples many years ago”, he reassured while addressing Canon Giovanbattista Gallinari, messenger and apostolic author to whom he entrusted “the Superior General of the French Sisters who wants to present the Rules of the institute to the Holy Father for approval”.

The vicar of Besançon, Antoine-Emmanuel Durand

At that moment, Mgr. Cortois De Pressigny was still out of office. Thus mother Thouret addressed the vicar general, Canon Durand to obtain the essential credential letter which had to accompany the ‘Petition’, even without mentioning anything to the Vicar General about the current request for pontifical approval. In his answer to the letter dated 30 August 1818, Durand attested the apostolic vitality of the Sisters of Charity of Besançon: “You have numerous vocations. Everywhere, your daughters work very well, they edify others and are useful. Wise persons protect them and many of the Communes where they are not present ask for their

presence. Few congregations have spread so rapidly like yours". Instead, the revival of Christian life in the diocese of Besançon, was still difficult: "I am sorry to say that I have 130 parishes without a priest. Sure, next year we will have 80 seminarians, but before they could carry out the Holy Ministry, we will lose the same amount of priests. May God assist the Gallican Church who is currently tormented by much evil". Even the prolonged vacancy began to weigh upon Mgr. Durand: "I have been longing for an Archbishop! I really need a rest but I cannot afford it". After the demise of Mgr Durand, Mgr. Cortois de Pressigny effectively took over the diocese on the 1st November 1818, when the "petition" of mother Thouret had already been sent to the Holy See.

The Secretary of State, Cardinal Consalvi

On the 20th November 1818, the Secretary of State, Cardinal Hector Consalvi, after having personally encountered the Foundress, and "who didn't want to disregard the ordinary path of the Rules and Constitutions, together with the direct Petition to obtain the Pontifical approval" decided "to hand them over to the Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Regulars, to be examined and hence express their opinion as carefully as possible". The entire dossier was entrusted to the secretary of the Congregation, Mgr. Giovanni Francesco Guerrieri, who on the 8th December 1818, received "Sr. Jeanne Antide Thouret, with another sister and the person who assisted them, to put in order and prepare for the examination of the Rules and Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity". After having provided the translation of the entire dossier from French, they asked the opinion of cardinal Giulio Maria Cavazzi della Somaglia, Vice Chancellor and of Mgr. Guerrieri himself who then referred to hold a plenary meeting of the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars, which took place on the 12th February 1819.

After the pontifical approval, besides providing the Sisters of all the dioceses a secure frame of reference for their religious, community and apostolic life, they could clarify the position of the Institute in the life of the universal Church, while linking their charism of their religious and apostolic congregation to the Holy Father. Thus the Sisters could participate in the universal mission of the Church and could also express the universality of their mission with the poor.

By Sr. Paola Arosio
sisterpaola@hotmail.com

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A.-E. Durand to Jeanne-Antide Thouret, 30 August 1818. On the back of the letter, mother Thouret had written "Letter to Mgr. Vicar General Durand, administrator of the Diocese of Besançon, who has been accepted by the Holy See for the approval of our Statutes and who still has a copy conserved in the archives".

Mgr. Narni Mancinelli to canon Giovanbattista Gallinari, messenger and apostolic author, Cosenza 20 July 1818.

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