

## The *Supplication* of Mother Thouret to Pius VII House and way

“I came to Besançon to begin the work alone on 11<sup>th</sup> April 1799...”

“...following the example of Saints Ferréol and Ferjeux...”

“...for the re-establishment of faith and morals ...”

“...like a grain of mustard-seed ...”

“...a tree which has spread its branches...”

We all know that these **words** are **found in the *Supplication*** Mother Thouret addressed to Pope Pius VII in order to obtain the pontifical approval of the Rules and of the Institute. This document is for us like a trunk filled with family’s memorabilia, in which are kept some key-words about our historical and theological past. The words used in the *Supplication*, together with many others, make up the “community language” we share as Sisters of Saint Jeanne Antide, though translated in our own languages.

**Our community language**, is rich in references, images, dates, writings, places, ideals, evangelical pages, horizons, events, outstanding people .... Thinking of some of the memorabilia kept in our common trunk we shall mention few words and names: service, Besançon, 1810, Saint Vincent, washing of the feet, Mons. De Chaffoy, God Alone, daughter of the Church, Mother M. Antoine de Padoue, Bellevaux, you shall love, Paris 1807, the Solitaries, Instruction on the Vows, Mother Maria Candida, Grand rue 131, General Chapter, Preliminary Discourse, Einsiedeln, at the feet of the crucified Jesus, History of the Union, Manuscript of Sister Rosalie, 23 May, Abbot Filsjean, our life is Christ, Regina Coeli, the soup’s pot, Mons. de Pressigny, Bocca della verità, Partout dans le monde, Mons. Narni, a free school for young girls, Savoy, the poor which are precious members of the suffering Christ ...

We stop here, yet the list could go on: our community language in two hundred and twenty years **has got richer**, also thanks to great events like the Vatican Council II, the Jubilee celebrated in the year 2000, the Extraordinary Year dedicated to Consecrated Life, the re-writing of our Rule of Life, the themes chosen for our Chapters and the following decisions, the annual Circular letters, the General Superiors of the Congregation in Rome and in Besançon and those of the reunited Institute of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Jeanne Antide, the missionary spirit taking us all over the world, the fusions with other Congregations, the extremely rich production of documents of the Church on religious life, Francis’ pontificate ... and we could go on.

This is just to say how important it is that we **master our community language**, which belongs to the common patrimony we have inherited, which runs through our veins, and which – like all alive languages – is like a choir, an orchestra, a musical *ensemble* which – with the contribution of all and of each one – each day communicates, feels indignant, questions, prays, feels emotional, calls, sings, dreams, decides, learns, fascinates ... through words and life.

**Such community language** is at the same time the **music score and the music played, grammar and narration**, or “house and way”: **house**, because through this community language we feel that we all belong to the same family, to the same congregational body. Mastering our common language help us find the way to get home through the living and shared memories which are always fresh and charming. We were born and are still living in a house built by all those who preceded us: our Foundress, her first companions, the poor, many priests, the Solitaries, the sick, some Ministers, the Daughters of Charity, many Sisters and Bishops, illiterate children, soldiers, prefects, ordinary women of the alleys, few Cardinals and prisoners ... We are somehow contemporaries of all these people, they are part of us, of our family’s patrimony. We call them incorrectly “testimonies of our past”, yet actually they live in our very house, we have deep relationships with them, up to this day they talk to us, inspire us, warn us, give us directions, they are companions on our earthly journey at this historical time.

At the same time, this **community language is on a journey, on a way** towards new frontier, new situations, requests, different cultures, various needs, peripheries ... **Along the way our community language becomes part of the surrounding social fabric**, our relationships with colleagues at work, brothers and sisters in religious communities, collaborators, volunteers, and especially the poor. Our community’s vocabulary gets enriched and our language acquires new hues. However, it is mainly **while journeying**, as K. Rahner said, **that the Church incarnates at the heart of history**, through its relationship with the contemporary world, with its cultural and social diversities: “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts” (GS 1). As **we** religious men and women, **by vocation**, are at the **“outposts” of the Church’s mission**, (EN 69), we, before all others, are called along the way to pass on to today’s world the Christian faith, love for the poor, passion for a fairer world, and to do so in a meaningful and credible way.

It is through the lens of our community language that **today we want to dedicate sometime to the *Supplication*** sent by Mother Thouret to Pius VII in order to get the pontifical approval of the Institute and its Rules. We will see that the *Supplication* is for us “house and way” as well.

The document goes **straight to the point**, immediately revealing its **historical and theological values**: we come to know in detail the various contexts in which our Institute began, and how they marked its development and consolidation. It shows us the life of the community at a crucial time of its history, and in a clear and passionate way explains the motivations which led to its origin. After twenty years of hard yet thrilling experience the Institute was at a turning point.

As we saw in the first of *Our Saturday’s Mornings*, **1815** was also for Jeanne-Antide and her Institute, a **historical time to be faced with courage and lucidity**: the sudden death of Mons. Lecoq happened just few months before the fall of Napoleon’s Empire and followed by the Restauration of the legitimate sovereigns. We already know that the model of feminine religious life imposed by Napoleon – hospitallers and teachers with simple vows and led by a Superior General – no longer had legal validity. Thus, it had to be renegotiated with the new civil and ecclesial authorities. Meanwhile, Pious VII had come back to the Vatican after the exile imposed by Napoleon, and was dedicating great energy to the pastoral work and spiritual care of the Church, which had just gone through Napoleon’s rule and earlier through the long and difficult time of the revolution.

**The Holy See** was working hard at the reorganization of dioceses and parishes, promoting the clergy’s formation, caring for the spiritual and moral life of people by launching new devotions and prayers. Pious VII and the roman Curia were convinced that **the new feminine Congregations** could give a fundamental contribution to **the re-evangelization of society**. Therefore, it was necessary to give them support and direction.

Jeanne-Antide thought that the pontifical approval would provide the Sisters in all dioceses with a stable framework for their religious, community and apostolic life and it would situate clearly the Institute within the life of the universal Church, connecting its charism as an apostolic religious congregation to the Pope. *The Daughters of Saint Vincent de Paul* – as we shall see this was the denomination wished for by Mother Thouret – would take part in the universal mission of the Church and would be able to express fully their universal mission at the service of the poor.

In the *Supplication*, we find explicit historical references to

- the religious persecutions during the French Revolution
- Jeanne Antide’s exile in Germany because of faith
- the religious peace wanted by Napoleon
- the reorganization of hospital care and education brought about by the Concordat with the Holy see.

We find also detailed information about

- the precise circumstances in which the request for the new foundation was made
- the spiritual and apostolic motivations which are at the heart of the Institute’s foundation
- the religious and practical reasons which made Mother Thouret ask for the pontifical approval
- the international profile the Institute has progressively assumed between 1799 and 1818, even though the uniting element remained the common Rule for which the approval had been requested
- the horizon towards which the Institute looked in order to expand its charitable service

<p><i>Most Holy Father,</i>  <i>your very humble and very obedient daughter in Jesus Christ, Sister Jeanne-Antide Thouret,</i>  <i>being for a long time animated with the most ardent desire to receive from Heaven the great happiness</i>  <i>of coming in person to the feet of Your Holiness to kiss them and to receive your Blessing,</i></p>	
Community aspect	<b>as well for all my companions, the SISTERS OF CHARITY called "OF BESANCON",</b>
Apostolic aspect	<b>established in France, Switzerland, Savoy and Naples;</b>
Community aspect	<b>we unite together</b>

*to present to Your Holiness our declaration of perfect obedience as well as the sincere feelings of veneration for Your Holiness with which our hearts are full.*

*Most Holy Father I come also with the greatest confidence to the feet of Your Holiness to fulfil the sacred duty imposed on me of offering for examination and for the approbation of Your Holiness the book of our rules and constitutions which we all follow.*

*Will Your Holiness accept it, and grant us the great grace and favour of the precious approbation of Your Holiness,*

Community aspect	<b>which we all request with the greatest humility</b>
Theological motivation	<b>in the name and for the glory and love of Jesus Christ,</b>
Theological motivation	<b>the poor</b>
Pastoral motivation	<b>the edification of good Christians</b>
Institutional motivation	<b>and the strengthening and prosperity of our Institute: it will be the great consolation and encouragement of all the members of our Community.</b>

<p><b>The question about the denomination to</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• identify clearly the Institute</li> <li>• notify its popularity</li> <li>• confirm the ecclesiastic authority about it</li> </ul>	<p><b>Most Holy Father, it is also my duty to explain to Your Holiness that our name, in our Rule, is mentioned as CONGREGATION OF THE DAUGHTERS OF SAINT VINCENT DE PAUL OF BESANCON. That is what we were called during the course of nine years. We took that name on the advice of the Administrators of the diocese of Besançon.</b></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• certificate the imperial approval</li> </ul>	<p><b>In 1807, on the occasion of a General Chapter of all the Communities of Sisters serving the public, held in the palace of Madame Mother of the Emperor in accordance with a decree of the said Emperor dated 30th September of the same year 1807, we were given the name of the CONGREGATION OF THE SISTERS OF CHARITY OF BESANÇON,</b></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• distinguish the Institute from other hospitaller and teaching communities</li> </ul>	<p><b>to distinguish us from other Communities with almost the same name and avoid confusion;</b></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• explicit and strengthen the sense of belonging of the Institute to the Vincentian tradition</li> </ul>	<p><b>But we are no less the daughters of Saint Vincent de Paul, whom we honour as our Founder, father, model and special protector.</b></p>

*Most Holy Father, permit me to tell Your Holiness the beginnings of our Institution.*

<b>P E R S O N A L  T E S T I M O N Y</b>	Attachment to the Holy See in spite of persecutions	<b>After suffering much on account of the holy Catholic religion during the first years of the French Revolution,</b>
	perseverance in living her religious consecration even when facing the exile	<b>I withdrew to Germany in a Community of Sisters.</b>
	Call received by the refractory priests from Besançon's diocese also in exile	<b>In 1797 I received a visit from the Vicars General of the late Mgr. de Durfort, Archbishop of Besançon</b>
	Her vocation to be the Foundress of a feminine Institute for the care and education of the poor manifested by the ecclesiastic	<b>They told me they were returning to France and that I also ought to return and establish in Besançon a Society of Sisters devoted to the spiritual and temporal service of</b>

<b>O F H E R</b>	authority	<b>the sick poor and to the education of poor girls.</b>
	Inability to carry out such a big task	<b>I replied that I was not capable of that,</b>
	Previous decision to live for ever in exile	<b>and that I had decided not to return to France,</b>
	Will to persevere in living her consecration in a personal way	<b>but to finish my days in retirement and holy poverty.</b>
<b>manifested by the ecclesiastic authority</b>		
Pastoral need for the foundation		
apostolic reason for the future foundation	<b>They answered that they ordered me to return to France within a fortnight</b>	
Statement requiring "obedience"	<b>and work there after the example of Saints Ferréol and Ferjeux for the re-establishment of faith and morals in the diocese.</b>	
<b>Jeanne-Antide:</b>		
Acceptance lived as "obedience"		
Again persecuted because of the Catholic, apostolic and roman faith	<b>They said further: "You will tell us that you are not a priest, and that you can neither preach nor hear Confessions. That is true, but you can do great good there with the means God has given you. Obey, because God speaks to you by the mouth of your Superiors".</b>	
	<b>I thought I should return to France out of obedience.</b>	
	<b>Some months later, the Revolution flared up again. The priests were obliged to hide from the persecution,</b>	
	<b>and so was I, for I was fiercely persecuted.</b>	
	<b>In 1799, the situation was calmer,</b>	
<b>The ecclesiastic authority</b>		
JA's vocation is indicated as a "kayros" by the ecclesiastic authority		
	<b>and the same priests renewed their proposal of that undertaking,</b>	
	<b>telling me not to delay, as the favourable time had come.</b>	
<b>Jeanne-Antide:</b>		
the foundation began not believing in God but that God can do anything!		
	<b>I went to Besancon to begin the work alone, on 11th April 1799, in the name of Almighty God and with complete trust in His omnipotence.</b>	

Believing that God can do anything apostolic aspect	He pleased to make the work burst into life; it was a grain of mustard-seed, and he made it germinate and take root, and it became a great tree in Besancon and has spread its branches by several establishments in that city and in the towns and countryside of that vast diocese,  and also in the dioceses of Lyon, Autun, Chambéry, Strasbourg, Dijon; in Switzerland and in Naples and the diocese of Marsi.
Institutional aspect	With God's grace I formed all the Sisters who compose our Institute in conformity with the rule which I have the honour to submit to Your Holiness.
Believing that God can do anything pastoral fruits	Everyone is satisfied with the Sisters wherever they are established.
apostolic fruits	They do good and edify the people,
vocational fruits	and that makes our Institute continue to spread.
<i>To God alone be all the honour and glory, for the salvation of souls and our sanctification.</i>	
charismatic fruits	On 11th April next it will be twenty years since God brought into being this Institute,
fruits of holiness	which has peopled heaven with a great number of our good Sisters who lived and died in good repute.
<i>Holy Father, I confirm that I am an unworthy and obedient daughter of Your Holiness, and I prostrate to kiss your very holy feet with great humility.</i>	

In the beginning we said how necessary it is for us to master our *community language*, which helps us perceive and interpret our time according to the Gospel and our charism. It is a language that shapes our approach to life, preventing us from assuming a passive attitude. Our community language expresses “a special” way of talking about God, oneself, life, others, the poor, the world, the future. Today we have chosen to spend time listening to the **community language spoken by Jeanne Antide**, through words, expressions, historical references and circumstances mentioned in the *Supplication*.

Thus, as we learned that ... “going to Mass” is not enough! Because one should be able to explain in one’s own words, why s/he goes, what reason make him/her go, what s/he finds in it. Likewise, Mother Thouret, thought that it was not enough to make a foundation, form other Sisters, open houses, serve the poor, educate children to Christian values, improve the life of prisoners, promote the rights of the weak ... Several times during her life she was requested to **look in a critical way at her own experience**, in order to explicit motivations and purpose, explaining her reasons. It’s enough to think of the *Justificatory Memorandum*, prepared for the Chapter in Paris, the *Memorandum of pure truths*, or the *Supplication*, without mentioning the Circular letters, as well as the private and institutional ones. These were all opportunities for her and for us of practicing the community language in order to explain our faith, our life, our special dedication to the poor, our commitment to work for a better, fairer world in which solidarity and fraternal relationships prevail.

Now that we have appreciated the **rich content of the *Supplication***, we would like to close by highlighting – always looking through the lens of “house and way” – few **strong elements**, which may help us see what is essential when faced daily to a complex and multifaceted environment.

We are compelled to leave out – due to the lack of time - the consequences coming from the choice about the Institute’s denomination wanted by Mother Thouret: *Daughters of Saint Vincent de Paul*. Such a denomination in fact led to assume responsibility and determined also spiritual, social, and apostolic choices. Shall we see it in another of *Our Saturday’s Mornings*? We hope so!

From the *Supplication*, we take up the **aspects mentioned in that unique document**: the ecclesial aspect, and the **apostolic one**, as well as the **community** aspect, which are all mentioned more than once. It is also worthy to highlight the **reasons for a new foundation** which are at the origin of the ecclesial call and of Jeanne Antide’s acceptance. The historical context – the revolutionary conflicts which were coming to an end baring their consequences on the quality of

social life and on faith – help us appreciate the importance of “working for the re-establishment of faith and morals following the example of Saints Ferréol and Ferjeux”, first evangelizers of Franche Comté. Besides, we may as well appreciate that it was a community of women “consecrated to the spiritual and temporal service of the poor and to the education of poor girls”.

Through the *Supplication* we can also see how the story of the Institute’s origins **begins telling us about the main stages in Jeanne Antide’s life**, from her experience of persecution among the Daughters of Charity in Paris during the Revolution, and then as an exiled in Germany during the Terror. The **call for a new foundation** came in fact while she was in exile. The *Supplication* seems to suggest that she was still in Germany at that time, although we know that that was not the case. However, it is sure that at that time Mother Thouret was “on the way”, neither she was safe at home, nor at the Mother House in Paris, and she was certainly not at Le Vègre surrounded by snowed mountains. **She was on the way.** She could only count on her faith *in God who can do anything* and on her consecration to God and to the poor. It was just a mustard-seed, something without value for those who do not know the Gospel language. Yet that “mustard-seed” was sown by the Church in the good soil of the Diocese of Besançon, so that it could die and bear fruit; and the fruits it brought were apostolic, pastoral, vocational and charismatic ones, as well as fruits of holiness. For all of them we can only thank God with the very words of Jeanne Antide: “To God alone all honour and glory for the salvation of souls and our sanctification”.

That mustard-seed is still bearing fruits, while we journey along the way, they are visible in each one’s life on many occasions and in different times. The mustard-seed dies to bear fruit. That is also true for our Congregational-body at each Chapter, at each reconfiguration of its organization, each time a young woman begins her first day of the novitiate ... The mustard-seed dies to bring more fruit. Those fruits become visible any time a Sister wears the apron of service responding to a new obedience received, and also whenever a Sister comes to the end of her earthly life, or else each time a young woman asks to be admitted to the postulancy. The mustard-seed dies to bear more fruit whenever one of our houses is closed, as well as when we dream and dare to begin a new foundation. **The mustard-seed dies with the faith that *God can do anything*. And God can!**

The mustard seed dies **with the certainty that nothing** of our dedication, enthusiasm, courage to stay at the “outpost of the mission” **is in vain**. The mustard seed dies with the certainty that nothing of our relationships, tenacity, hidden sacrifices, our long and sometimes difficult aging season, or our very brief life will be lost. Nothing is in vain. **Everything finds its “house” in God.** The suffering caused by the dramatic scenario which followed the pontifical approval, the hurting wound due to the formation of two separate communities having the same Foundress, the concern caused by the lack of Neapolitan vocations ... as well as the joy for the vocations blossoming in Savoy, for the liveliness of children attending classes at Regina Coeli, for the good behaviour of the girls at the boarding school in Naples ... Everything finds its house in God. All that we live in the name of the Gospel along the way, will find its eternal abode in the house of God, whose doors are now wide open thanks to Christ who died, rose and is now alive among us. Because God can do anything!