

Circular Letter 1821

Mission impossible

The context

From Paris, where she had arrived in Autumn 1821, Jeanne-Antide on 2nd December sent a circular letter to the Sisters in Naples. She had left Naples to go back to France in order to introduce the Rule approved by the Pope to the Sisters and to re-establish the dialogue with Mgr de Pressigny¹. She also thought she could resume, with the communities established in the diocese of Besançon, the relationship forbidden by the Archbishop in his letter of November 1819: "*I ... will forbid your being received, even for a single day, in the houses of the Sisters of Charity in the Besançon diocese*"².

In the letter the Archbishop had expressed his reasons: he feared that the changes made by the Pope to the Rule would trouble the conscience and the peace of the community. They caused him "*disquiet*". Then, he concluded without ambiguity: "*It is better, then, that you **establish your new Institute elsewhere** and that we, here, keep what we have*"³. That meant that from the announcement of the approbation of the Rule, Mgr de Pressigny reckoned that the changes requested by the Holy See had transformed the Rule in such a way that a new Institute had been established outside the diocese of Besançon and in it, among other changes, his office as Superior General of the communities had disappeared.

The interdiction to go back to Mgr de Pressigny's territory was strengthened by the letter Jeanne-Antide received in Savoy from Sr Catherine Barrois who wrote on behalf of the Archbishop: "*You will reply to Madame Thouret, that I wrote to her two years ago what you will repeat to her from me: that I will never receive her in any establishment in my diocese, that I consider her to be simply a secular, and if, against my will, she dares to present herself in any of the houses of your Congregation, I will, if necessary, call in the civil authorities*"⁴.

Following the advice of Fr Neyre, the parish priest of Thonon, Jeanne-Antide had gone to Paris with the hope of getting in touch with the apostolic Nuncio and other people who could make Mgr de Pressigny change his mind. In December 1821, writing to Fr Neyre, she repeated the

¹ Mgr de Pressigny Archbishop of Besançon arrived in the city on 1st November 1819.

² Mgr de Pressigny *Letter to Mother Thouret*, 6th November 1819, LD p. 332-333.

³ id

⁴ Sr C. Barrois *Letter to Mother Thouret* 24th August 1821, LD p. 355.

purpose of her trip: "So I came to Paris to try and do something, so that I could say I had done everything that depended on me; and God will do what He wishes: He is almighty ..."⁵.

A letter of Mr. de Montaiglon to Mr. de Raimond father, who lived in Paris, tells us that Jeanne-Antide was with Sr Rosalie and Sr Elisabeth Bouvard and that they stayed at "rue du Regard, at the side of the Luxembourg"⁶.

The recipients

The Circular letter written from Paris was addressed to the **Sisters in Naples** which Jeanne-Antide had left four months earlier «*in tears*». After the first years of the foundation, Mother Thouret, at the end of each year, had got the habit of sending a circular letter to all the communities. No doubt, this letter is one of those, since in it she wished "a happy new year" to all the Sisters. Other Circular letters had different aims, in that of March-April 1820 Jeanne-Antide deplored "the ingratitude, the in-submission to our Holy Father the Pope" of some members of the clergy of Besançon and of some nuns who "make every effort to draw all our Sisters into their fatal way, and in so doing they bring our Institute to ruin"; in the same letter she had also invited her daughters to remain faithful to the Church of Jesus-Christ: "I am a daughter of the Holy Church and you also must be that with me"⁷.

This new Circular letter is in line with her habit. She wrote it to the communities in Naples without mentioning neither her trip, nor the fact that she was in Paris rather than in Savoy or in Franche-Comté. She did not say anything about what concerned her. It is a circular letter written at the end of the year with a spiritual content, for the on-going formation of the Sisters, and, according to the indications of Mother Thouret, it should be read several times in the year⁸.

Jeanne-Antide had spoken of her trip also in some letters written earlier than the Circular of 1821. On 16th September, in fact, she had briefly informed Sr Geneviève about her arrival in Thonon reassuring: "we had a happy journey. We reached here on the 12th of this month at night. I wrote to you from Turin"⁹. There she met Sr Basile and the first community she had sent to Savoy¹⁰ which was waiting for her.

In Thonon, where she had arrived on 12th September, she received from Sr Elisabeth Bouvard, who was still at Bellevaux, the letter dated 24th August in which Sr Catherine Barrois from Besançon let her know that Mgr de Pressigny confirmed his decision not to receive her: "I will never receive her in any establishment in my diocese, ..." ¹¹. He had made known his decision to all the communities through his Ordinance of 31st August: "We forbid the Superiors of the

⁵ J-A Thouret *Letter to Mr Neyre* LD p. 362.

⁶ Mr de Montaiglon *Letter to Mr de Raimond* 21st March 1822, LD p. 379.

⁷ J-A Thouret "Circular" March-April 1820 LD p. 341-343.

⁸ J-A Thouret "Circular"1806 "You must keep this Circular and have it read in common the first Monday of each month in the coming year and make it the subject of morning prayer the following Tuesday" LD p. 171

⁹ Jeanne-Antide Thouret "Letter to Sr Geneviève Boucon" 16th September 1821 LD p. 341.

¹⁰ A d P. Duffet : "The first companions of Jeanne-Antide" p. 234

¹¹ Mgr de Pressigny "Letter to Jeanne-Antide", 24th August 1821, quoted by Sr Catherine Barrois LD p. 355.

Houses of the Sisters of Charity of Besançon of our diocese, to receive in the Houses they govern, Sister Jeanne-Antide Thouret, former Superior of the Sisters of Charity of Besançon, Sr Marie Thouret, her niece and Sister Marie Nielle, who accompanies them..."¹² ? This ban blocked her way. She no longer could return to Besançon!

She had already been informed by a letter of the Archbishop, in March 1821, that he had made known to the Nuncio in Paris, Mgr Macchi, his categorical judgement and his irreversible intentions towards her: "*I believe that Madam Thouret does not have neither the virtues, nor the qualities suitable to a Superior; she does not have even those necessary to be a religious. I persevere therefore in my intention of not receiving her in any of the religious houses of the diocese. She likes to command and she is not able to obey*"¹³.

The Circular letter did not mention any of these letters. We guess that Mother Thouret left Thonon for Paris in October, since the route to Besançon had been closed to her.

Why did she address this Circular letter only to the Sisters in Naples?

In spite of her affection for them, even if it was hard for her, Jeanne-Antide, at that time refrained from writing to the Sisters of Besançon in particular, not to put them in a difficult position before the ecclesiastic Superiors or their confessors. That was the motivation she shared with Sr Marthe in 1823: "*I have acted on the orders that were given to you; I did not want to cause you to fail in them and get you into trouble by writing to you*"¹⁴. However, she thought necessary to go to France in order to give a direct explanation about the decisions of the Holy See regarding the modifications of the Rule, so that she could make herself understood: "*I will give you full knowledge of all the changes*"¹⁵, she wrote.

How could she send a Circular letter to the Sisters of France from Paris? In 1821, they were divided between those who had followed, willingly or by force, the indications given by Mgr de Chaffoy and the Archbishop, that included the Sisters in the diocese of Besançon as well as those who would be compelled to join them later on, like the Sisters in Bourg, those living in the houses established in Savoy at Thonon, at Saint Paul, at Annecy and those of Besançon who, like Sr Elisabeth Bouvard, had chosen to side Jeanne-Antide. All these felt less concerned by the orders of Mgr de Chaffoy.

It had been difficult for the Sisters of the diocese of Besançon, not to submit to the injunctions of this priest who had the office of Superior General, especially while waiting for the new Bishop after the death of Mgr Lecoz. In fact, Mgr de Pressigny, had been appointed two years earlier but he had not yet come to Besançon. Meanwhile, Mgr de Chaffoy was revered by the Sisters and some of them considered him like the Founder of the Institute. His decisions were

¹² Sr C. Barrois quoting Mgr de Pressigny : "*Ordinance*" 3rd August 1821 LD p. 357.

¹³ Mgr de Pressigny "*Letter to Mgr Macchi*" March 1821, quoted by Mother A. de P. : "*Notes*", LD p. 328 French version.

¹⁴ J-A Thouret : "*Letter to Sr Marthe*" 1823, LD 391-392.

¹⁵ J-A Thouret : "*Circular to the Sisters in France*" 2nd October 1819, LD p. 284-285 French version.

followed faithfully. One copy of the Circular letter containing the submission he had demanded from the Sisters saying: «*You shall respond so that I may be able to let your feelings be known to Monseigneur*»¹⁶, had been sent to Mother Thouret by Sr Elisabeth Bouvard. She explained the reasons which had pushed her and others to accept such orders: "*For the general good of the community and to preserve our flock*"¹⁷. Her letter expressed the real attachment of the Sisters to the Prelate: "... *we have always considered him our father and first Superior, from whom we first received the bread of the Word of God, on the occasion of the Benediction at the birth of our Community. We have full confidence in him*"¹⁸.

No doubt Sr Elisabeth had not foreseen the consequences which would follow; her letter showed the wish of the Sisters to avoid the division of the Institute within the diocese, which would certainly have caused more dramatic consequences.

Mgr de Chaffoy could not but agree with Mgr de Pressigny, who in turn to keep his office had to be loyal to the royal power, and avoid foreign alliances. Fearing that the return of Mother Thouret could diminish their influence on the communities, the two prelates wanted to avoid falling in disgrace with the government and lose the office of Bishop. They also feared that the authorization got from the government for the Institute by Jeanne-Antide in August 1810 would be taken away with the change of denomination asked for by the Pope. In fact, the authorization withdrawal certainly would be followed by that of the subsidies granted by the Emperor for the support of the Institute¹⁹.

With this fear, Mgr de Chaffoy had warned the Sisters: "*I must also warn you, on the occasion of changes in the name, "Sisters of Charity of Besançon", which was given you or in the Constitutions according to which you received an authorisation from the government, changes you have heard spoken of, that you must not adopt any innovation whatever if it is not presented to you by the Superior General of the Congregation (the Archbishop)*"²⁰.

In this way while protecting the interest of the Institute the two prelates protected also their own personal interest. Such an attitude was perfectly coherent with their personal opinions. The Gallican spirit, to which they rallied, revived during the Restoration and urged to consider the political interest as the supreme value, to avoid mixing religious questions with political interest, to refuse any external intervention, and especially that of the Holy See in the State's affairs. Among the "organic articles" contained in the Concordat of Napoleon, the Restoration had kept one which strengthened the central power and in particular the fact that no text could be published without being approved by the government²¹. That is why one of the aims of

¹⁶ Mgr de Chaffoy "Circular" 5th November 1819 addressed to all the communities, and quoted in the letter of Sr E. Bouvard LD p. 294-295 French version.

¹⁷ Sr E. Bouvard "Letter to Mother Thouret", LD p. 337.

¹⁸ Sr E. Bouvard, her "Letter of submission" and that of the Sisters of Bellevaux to Mgr de Chaffoy 18th November 1819 LD p. 337.

¹⁹ "Manuscript of Sr Rosalie", LD p. 602.

²⁰ Mgr de Chaffoy "Circular" 5th November 1819, quoted in the letter of Sr E. Bouvard 18th November 1819, LD p. 335-336.

²¹ Concordat of 8th April 1802, art. 77.

Jeanne-Antide's journey to Paris was to have the Papal Bull approved by the French government in order to publish and enforce it.

In the same way, for the people of Besançon, both clergy and lay people, there could not be true obedience without referring to the representatives of the established order, faithful to the King chosen by God to govern the country and faithful to the ecclesiastic Superiors officially appointed. The Pope could not influence neither the internal organization of the State nor that of the dioceses. In Besançon nobody could understand how the Pope could approve the Institute without referring to the local authorities; so they thought that it was Jeanne-Antide who should submit.

Besides, Mgr de Pressigny did not approve the fact of not having been directly informed about the approbation obtained in Rome²², earlier than Mother Thouret. He also reproached her of not informing him about her request for the approbation, before addressing directly the Holy See. Moreover, there was the suspicion that she had pressurized the Pope against Mgr de Chaffoy. Jeanne-Antide will explain herself on all these points - 6 points – in her "*Memoir of Justification*"²³.

The Circular letter was sent only to the Sisters in Naples, also because the situation of that community demanded it. The fact that Jeanne-Antide, at the end of the text, questioned the Sisters' behaviour makes us think that things were not going so well even within the communities: "*How can you tell God you love Him when you always want to satisfy and serve yourselves? And that you love your neighbour when you lack charity and do not want to sacrifice anything, and you make yourselves unbearable ?...* ".

We can see here the care of Mother Thouret in keeping in touch with Naples, reassuring the Sisters that she would return. Being often sick, perhaps she feared not to be able to make the journey back: "*We must hope to meet again*"²⁴, she wrote to Sr Geneviève Boucon to reassure her on 31st August while traveling. She tried to communicate the best of herself to the Sisters in order to keep them attached to the essential; that is their **sanctification**.

Two post-script

The copy of this Circular letter written by Sr Rosalie was completed by two post-script.

The first post-script informed about the death of a young Sister: Sr Thérèse Bardari, aged only 18, her death had certainly deeply affected Mother Thouret and the community in Naples.

With the second post-script, in a completely different tone, Jeanne-Antide imposed and defended herself; she affirmed her role and mission as the Foundress, her right and duty to present them the Rule approved, and to act in order to organize the Congregation according to

²² Mgr de Pressigny "*Letter to Mother Thouret*" LD p. 332 and J-A Thouret : "*Letter to Mgr the Archbishop of Besançon*", LD p. 331-332 and 346.

²³ J-A Thouret : "*Memoir of Justification*", LD p. 372-376.

²⁴ J-A Thouret : "*Letter to Sr Geneviève* ", LD p. 3576.

the new Rule; she expressed also her readiness to leave to another Sister the office of Superior General, according to the result of the elections, thus responding to the accusations of Sr Marie-Anne Bon who had claimed that she wanted to be elected for life²⁵ .

The Sisters in France, however, had not been forgotten. Concerned not to let misunderstandings settle, Jeanne-Antide had prepared for them a shorter circular letter saying the same things without mentioning if it was addressed to all the communities or only to those established in Savoy, although she never sent it²⁶.

What do we learn from the Circular letter dated 2nd December 1821?

About facts and events we learn little from this letter. Mother Thouret wrote about *spiritual things*. She did not say anything about the purpose of her journey to France and the hope of defeating the prejudices of the Archbishop of Besançon, she expressed only her intention of "*doing the holy will of God*".

What was for her at that time the "*holy will of God*" which had taken her so far and had asked from her so many sacrifices? She had used the same expression much earlier when writing to the Solitaries of Father Receveur and she was about to leave them: "*I am leaving you to go and do God's will*"²⁷ ? And had she not told Mgr Lecoz in 1812: "*I have penetrated the will of God and His plans and have submitted myself to them*"²⁸. Who had told her God's expectations from her? What compass had she used? What star had led her then? She answered these questions by saying: "*In all, I have taken counsel from God, from the circumstances and the time*"²⁹; she said also that "*to be sure of the will of God in everything it is necessary not to have prompted it in any way!*"³⁰ And again: "*Sister Jeanne-Antide never did what she liked*"³¹.

Mother Thouret had started her journey due to the circumstances we know, after praying and asking for advice from wise people.

Yet, if the text was addressed only to the Sisters, the tone of the letter, charged with anxiety, and the hints at her suffering make us think that Mother Thouret was going through a hard time. We can imagine that the Sisters in Naples knew the purpose of her trip to Paris, but she did not say anything of the painful and dramatic events that overwhelmed her. Did she do so out of prudence or did she not want to impose on them such a great pain? Most likely the reason was that she was writing a Circular letter at the end of the year, and she wanted it to be about spiritual matters. She was the Mother, the Foundress, the one responsible for the Sisters. In the Circular

²⁵ A de P. Duffet: "*The first companions of Jeanne-Antide*" quoting the "*Letter*" of Sr M-A Bon p. 21 ()

²⁶ A de P. Duffet: "*Note of introduction to the Circular*", LD p. 95.

²⁷ Sr R. Thouret: "*Manuscript of Sr Rosalie*", LD p. 61.

²⁸ J-A Thouret: "*Letter to Mgr Lecoz*", LD p. 296.

²⁹ id

³⁰ J-A Thouret: "*Circular letter of 1812*", LD p. 198.

³¹ Joachim Murat: "*Decree*" 26th February 1810, art 2, quoted by Mother Thouret in her "*Letter*" of 20th December 1811 to the King of Naples. LD p.278-284

she reminded them of the duty and demands of their Christian and religious vocation, showing the way to be followed, advising or questioning their conscience.

Mother Thouret always wanted to be close to the Sisters in Naples. Very sensitive to the affection and sadness shown by the Sisters at the time of her departure, she tried not to show her feelings to support their courage. That is why she spoke briefly about what she had done for them, mentioning all the material and spiritual support she had provided for them. She did not recall the past to boast or to reassure herself. She reminded them of all the tenderness and care she had had for them, not for her satisfaction but to help them live in the best possible way their Christian vocation. We can think that the relationship with the Sisters in Naples became stronger after the rejection in Besançon.

After the affront she had received in France by the clergy and by the Sisters, Jeanne-Antide felt the duty of turning towards her daughters in Naples. In the letter she expressed the deep affection she had for them: "*You have always been present to me by my poor prayers*". However, she also reproached them with vigour, yet with great maternal goodness too. Her words show the trust she had in them as well as the great wish of seeing them follow the way which leads to heaven. By presenting Sr Thérèse Bardari, who had just died at a young age, as a model she encouraged them to make good use of time, as death may come at any time.

The rest of the Circular was an invitation to the Sisters to make the **examen of conscience** and an **exhortation to let grow** their trust in God, their attachment to the Rule and to the Superiors, and to **search for holiness** alone. That is not surprising! Often Jeanne-Antide's Circular letters addressed to the communities at the end of the year were like an examen of conscience considering the time passing, and inviting the Sisters to get ready for death. She reminded them of the necessity of accepting sacrifices and suffering with love, in order to follow Christ, according to the Holy Gospel.

For instance, Jeanne-Antide offered a personal portrait of Saints, through which we can see how she understood holiness and the invitation to persevere on the same journey in spite of difficulties and falls. Holiness is not reached through rigour or the multiplication of penance; holiness is possible only following Christ, refusing sin, and being humble: "*The Saints followed our divine Master; that is what made them arrive in Heaven: there is no other road. They were sensitive and weak as we are. They quietly hardened themselves against themselves, against sin, against the world and the devil ... they humbled themselves. And if they sometimes fell, they got up again and were not discouraged; they began again to run in His service with a greater agility than before, with a livelier joy and a holy confidence in God...*". Should we see in this description a self-portrait? Her spiritual experience? It is what she truly wished for the Sisters.

The letter closed with a **sublime profession of faith in and love for Christ** in which Mother Thouret translated her way of carrying her heavy cross with the constant concern of inviting the Sisters to have no other aim, other model, other desire but Christ: "*Let us look only to Him, think only of Him, desire only Him, live only for Him*". Christ was at the centre of her spiritual life. Her heart, her spirit and her action were turned onto Him because He alone could lead to the Father, to the poor, to the Church and to her Sisters.

However, together with the intense wish of Mother Thouret for the holiness of the Sisters in Naples, we feel also a **certain anxiety**. What was Jeanne-Antide afraid of? Did she not trust fully Sr Geneviève Boucon, who replaced her while she was away? Was she afraid of never going back to Naples? – her health or the circumstances could prevent her from returning! – if that was the case, would the Sister risk to neglect their spiritual life and stop searching for holiness with fervour? Or else, due to her absence would they put a distance among themselves and the Foundress? Being under local political influences, under the pressure of envious and jealous people, would they risk taking the same route, chosen by the Sisters in Besançon, and separate from her and from the Institute?

It was not just a bad dream! Jeanne-Antide remembered well the difficulties faced in 1811 and 1812, when the King of Naples, Joachim Murat, had thought possible to give autonomy to each religious community in his kingdom³². The consequence would have been the suppression of the office of Superior general and, therefore, the separation from Besançon of the communities established in the kingdom of Naples. Mother Thouret had fought to show that the Decree could not be compelling for the Sisters of Besançon.

She also knew that since long time the municipality wished to take possession of the monastery of Regina Coeli and that prince Cardito wanted to "*accommodate there the College of surgeons who worked at the Incurables' hospital*"³³. Jeanne-Antide had fought to prevent that plan to be put into action: "*The governors of the Hospital have tried to get from the Government 9 rooms inside our house ... this cannot go with our Institute*"³⁴. Therefore, would not the Prince use the pretext of her absence, if it would last longer, to realize his plans?

Again in April 1821, Mother Thouret had not accepted to give to the religious of Saint Peter of Pisa part of the house of Regina Coeli because she said: "*no part can be separated in it, as it is all occupied by the large number of Sisters and novices we have; and it would not be proper for other people to live in our house, especially men*"³⁵. It was, therefore, necessary to keep in close touch with this community, watching over it and supporting the Sisters.

What portrait of Jeanne-Antide do we get from the Circular Letter 1821?

Before the threats coming to her from many parts, Jeanne-Antide let emerge the deepest feelings which moved her at such a troubled time, in which hope and disillusion, humanity and spirituality, suffering and holiness got mixed up. She was only 56, yet she had great experience!

What is immediately striking, is the **liveliness and intensity of the letter** - few paragraphs – in which affection, benevolence, and confidence got mixed up with a **certain rigour and severity**,

³² Joachim Murat, "Decree" 26th February 1810, art 2 quoted by Mother Thouret in her "*letter of 20 December 1811 to the King of Naples*", LD p. 278-284.

³³ J-A Thouret: draft autograph of a "*letter addressed to the Secretary of State of Internal Affairs*", LD p. 268-269.

³⁴ id

³⁵ J-A Thouret: "*Letter to the Cardinal-Archbishop of Naples*" 20th April 1821, LD p. 353.

even though, after her signature, Jeanne-Antide, with an astonishing delicacy feels the need of being pardoned: "*My dear Sisters and Daughters in Jesus-Christ, if you have seen something in me which is not a good example, pardon me and forget it for the love of God. O my children, do not be afraid to humble yourselves and correct your faults*".

However, over all the text, the Foundress in a very natural way addressed the Sisters in Naples with the reassuring tone of someone in authority. She was the responsible Mother who gave advice, warned and constantly referred everything to God. In fact, it was in the name of Christ and the Gospel that she asked the Sisters to question themselves, and to consider their actions before God and the Congregation, starting from their first promises: "*Remember that when you asked to be received into our Institute, you were asked ... if you were resolved to obey always, to give up your own will, to renounce the world and yourselves ... to be entirely for God and His service as Christians and true Daughters of Charity: and you all replied, Yes, you were so resolved*".

What appeared through the liveliness of advice and warnings was the **spirit of a woman suffering in her heart and sensitivity**, and whose suffering was as deep as that of a mother who lost a child. Even though she could not say it openly, we can guess that she was heartbroken for herself and also for the Sisters in Naples as well as for those in Besançon. The latter were stuck between two authorities: hers and that of the clergy. She knew about the pressure exerted by Mgr de Chaffoy on the conscience of the Sisters through his Circular letter of 5th November 1819³⁶ and through the confessors' advice. Jeanne-Antide felt forgotten, rejected by those who had asked her to work for the "*restoration of faith and morals in the diocese*"³⁷ of Besançon. Why did things get to this point? What was her fault? However, she did not leave her mission.

Jeanne-Antide was a woman **wounded within**: she had been deprived of her dignity as a woman, a religious, a Foundress, and a Mother. Mgr de Pressigny had written his sentence already in November 1819: "*If, dear Sister, you have the spirit of God, you will not risk by proposing new regulations, troubling consciences and introducing division where peace reigns and causing the loss to your country of the good that you yourself have procured for it*"³⁸.

Two years later, in his Ordinance of 31st August, did he not confirm his cruel decision?³⁹ Had he not given an irrevocable and unjust judgment on Mother Thouret in his answer to the Pontifical Brief addressed to the Nuncio in Paris?

Mother Thouret was **wounded in her mission**. Her work was for her "*the work of God*"⁴⁰. Therefore, she expected that God, as He had done in the past, would come without delay to her

³⁶ Mgr de Chaffoy "*Circular to the Sisters of Charity*" 5th November 1819 quoted by Sr Elisabeth Bouvard, LD p. 335-336.

³⁷ J-A Thouret: "*Memorandum of Pure Truths*", LD p. 5.

³⁸ Mgr de Pressigny: "*Letter to Mother Thouret*" 6th November 1819, LD p. 332-333.

³⁹ Mgr de Pressigny: "*Ordinance*" 31st August 1821, LD p. 357-358.

⁴⁰ J-A Thouret : "*Circular Letter 1812*", LD p. 190 and "*Prayer*" LD p. 143

help and deliver her from her enemies, as she was right, thus she prayed: "*Show forth your goodness and your former mercies*"⁴¹.

But it was clear to her that the Lord had given her **a new impossible mission**: that of convincing the clergy of Besançon and in particular Mgr de Pressigny and Mgr de Chaffoy about the universality of the Church, the primacy of the Sovereign Pontiff within the Church of Christ, acknowledging the partiality of their point of view and the impossibility of seeing their expectations come true. What they wanted was to have again a clergy respected and powerful in the country, attached to territorial limits like the world's leaders, with no trust in Providence, without taking into any consideration the role of lay people and in particular of women within the Church. At the cost of great suffering Mother Thouret had to keep her initial conviction that the word she had believed to be the will of God for her was still the same and that it involved the spreading of the Institute in other nations.

Jeanne-Antide did not rebel against the injustice suffered. She could not help the suffering caused by that situation: "*No one can sanctify self without suffering*", that was her conviction. Her suffering was due to the apparent failure of her efforts to give stability to the Institute, by getting the guarantee of the approbation by the highest authority of the Church; she suffered for the Sisters who were also heartbroken by the need to choose between two authorities, knowing that refusing to "*obey*" to the local authorities they would have been deprived of their "*habit*"⁴² and compelled to leave the Congregation! Those orders, confirmed by the confessors, regarded their conscience. She suffered because the government would stop granting its subsidy to the Institute, if its name was changed and if it was connected to foreign powers. How could then they support the Sisters of Charity beyond the French borders? Her suffering was due to the concern of giving scandal to the public with their lack of unity within the Institute besides the immediate damage for her and her Sisters; she suffered at realizing that even an Archbishop did not accept the authority of the Pope! She suffered also at seeing the community of Naples as vulnerable as the others.

Should we conclude that Jeanne-Antide loved suffering? Not at all! Yet, suffering is the journey chosen by Christ and followed by the Saints. One cannot pass from earth to Heaven without a complete detachment from all that belongs to earth, without: "*extirpating what perhaps in you is opposed to*" our holy vocation as Christians and as Sisters of Charity and with the Grace of God "*always serve with the fervour and purity of intention which God demands from us!*".

From there came the magnificent prayer written in 1821 which she carried constantly on herself to avoid feelings of vengeance, contempt, and condemnation towards the Archbishop and the clergy of Besançon. She found refuge in God and in his holy will, even when she no longer understood his plans⁴³.

The main difference between Jeanne-Antide and those who persecuted her was the fact of choosing to let God totally lead her life, in her choices as well as her decisions. That meant that

⁴¹ J-A Thouret : "*Prayer*" 1821, LD p. 143-144.

⁴² Sr Elisabeth Bouvard : "*Letter to Mother Thouret*", 7th September 1821, LD p. 359.

⁴³ J-A Thouret : "*Prayer*", 1821 LD p. 143-144.

although pursuing aims of great value: the service of the poor, the good of the community and of the Church, the respect of the Law, they were never an absolute for her, who always placed the Lord above all of them. What she called the "*will of God*", was a space of total freedom in which she let God, loved above all, act and lead the events, through her, for the good of all. Jeanne-Antide lived in the world, she accepted the world and people as they were, yet she was not conditioned by any ideology. **She was free** before the sovereigns, whoever they may be, Napoleon or Louis XVIII, Joachim Murat or Ferdinand, she was also free before Mgr Bacoffe or Mgr Lecoq, before Mgr de Chaffoy or Mgr de Pressigny, before Sr Marie-Anne Bon as well as before Sr Victoire Bartholemot⁴⁴, before the poor, whatever their age, sex or nationality: "*In whatever country they are, they shall be equally dear to us*"⁴⁵.

Jeanne-Antide's spirituality

What strength enabled Jeanne-Antide to keep going, neither revolting nor giving up? What were the pillars of her spirituality?

In this circular letter Jeanne-Antide manifested all her humanity as well as all her trust in the merits of Christ on the cross. Her spirituality appeared well rooted in the **mystery of the Incarnation and of Redemption**, that meant that she was able to find God in daily life, in her faithful fulfilment of her duties, in her ability to live in the present, in her getting up again whenever she had fallen, in her purity of intention, in her seriously getting ready for the time of death. We can see a personality completely turned towards Heaven, yet at the same time very much down to earth. The whole text speaks to us of God, of Heaven, as the target to reach, as the only sure and important thing in our earthly life. Yet Heaven must be conquered! That is why Mother Thouret proposed Sr Thérèse Bardari as an example: "*She sanctified herself, she won a place in Heaven*".

Another strong point in this letter is the **spirit of universality** expressed by Jeanne-Antide. For the sake of peace and of her tranquillity, she could admit the need of letting live two Institutes. One in the diocese of Besançon, the second one in Savoy and Italy! But she never accepted this possibility! Her ideas of Church and catholicity were too strong. Her vision about God and the Church could not accept the separation of the Institute.

The portrait of Saints traced by Jeanne-Antide is very realistic. She presented them as "*sensitive and weak as we are; they quietly hardened themselves against themselves, against sin, against the world and the devil*". What she highlighted as a means to acquire holiness was the **constant effort of trusting in God** who, step by step, enables to overcome all obstacles: sin, the world and devils, because God is at work. That was her direct experience.

Her holiness is particularly evident in **her attitude of poverty and mercy** before the suffering that struck her. She neither accused nor looked for vengeance. We may well guess that she had forgiven wholeheartedly the Sisters in Besançon, as she did not express any resentment or reproach towards them. Purity of intention was her antidote against evil. However, Mother

⁴⁴ Sr Victoire Bartholemot, 1st Provincial Superior of Savoy

⁴⁵ J-A Thouret : "*Circular Letter 1812*", LD p. 190-201.

Thouret with great lucidity was able to indicate Mgr de Chaffoy as the main cause of all that was happening.

She could have called for the intervention of the State's authority against the wrong condemnation she had suffered and the interdiction of going back to France, in order to run the Institute she had started. She certainly had the right to do so. Mr de Montaiglon hinted at it in his letter to Mr de Raimond, in March 1822, and highlighted the evangelical reason which led Jeanne-Antide not to make use of that possibility: "*If our three Sisters were not afraid of scandal and did not wish to avoid it with all the humble means which religion inspires in them, they could appeal to a secular court, the Council of State, against the order which forbids them to enter their Community. But the way of gentleness are those prescribed by the Gospel, and, faithful to the obedience which they owe to the pastor given them by Providence, they wait with resignation for him to be enlightened ...*"⁴⁶.

Her holiness was manifested above all in her **attachment to the person of Jesus-Christ**. We may think that the advice given at the end of the text is the expression of what she was experiencing deep down and that she wished her daughters to experience. There, she found strength and consolation: "*Let us look only at Him, let us think only of Him, desire only Him and live only for Him*".

This invitation recalls the motto on top of the Circular letter: "*God alone and only God!*". Yet it is different from the "*God alone*"⁴⁷ she used in her correspondence with the Sisters, in fact we can feel here her deep solitude as well as her unshakable trust in God. God alone was her only support in the torment that assailed her, as it had happened also on the way back from Germany to Switzerland, where she walked alone, holding on to God alone, heading towards an unknown future: "*She said to Him: "You know that I seek You only, and that I am known only to you, ... I do not know where I am going or what You want of me ..."*"⁴⁸. We know that God was waiting for her in Landeron to entrust to her a mission. **Another mission was waiting for her in 1821, that of manifesting the holiness of the Church.** No other way to earn Heaven than accepting the Cross following Christ.

What advice did Jeanne-Antide give to the Sisters in Naples ?

To the Sisters in Naples for whom she had great esteem Jeanne-Antide gave advice in the form of a will.

First of all "*refuse Him nothing ... to be entirely for God and His service as Christians and true Daughters of Charity*", that is the secret of happiness. To follow Christ and have nothing dearer than Him is the secret to achieve unity of life and find joy in the midst of contradictions and the worst of trials.

⁴⁶ Mr de Montaiglon, "Letter to Mr de Raimond" 21 March 1822, LD p.379-381.

⁴⁷ J-A Thouret : "Circular Letter 4th March 1809", LD p. 177

⁴⁸ Sr Rosalie Thouret "Manuscript", LD p. 66.

Mother Thouret described also the attitude to have when serving, so to avoid tiredness, boredom and exhaustion: "*fervour and purity of intention*". Finally, she advised to be ready for the coming of death without delay, because nobody knows either the day or the time. It is important to be ready for meeting the Lord at any time.

Jeanne-Antide completed this paragraph with an explanation about the mandate of the Superior General. She claimed strongly her role as the Foundress of the Congregation: "*It is I as you know, who, with the help of God, founded that Community where you are, and made it what it is. I consolidated it in every way, most recently by our Holy Father the Pope who has put on it the final seal. It is I who gave you the Rule and fixed the every-five-years ...*". From there, as a consequence, she was able to state her right and duty to follow its development: "*It belongs to me to organise it and to initiate elections, look at the Rule if there is question of legal forms. I want to do it, not in troubled times but when peace and tranquillity have been restored*".

Thus, Jeanne-Antide firmly opposed the plans of Sr Marie-Anne Bon and the actions of Mgr de Chaffoy. The latter in Besançon had already renewed the Council of the Congregation and wanted to organise elections before the return of Mother Thouret⁴⁹.

Then, Mother Thouret made some reflections on her way of understanding her office as the Superior General. If she claimed the title of the Foundress, she did not wish to remain in charge longer than the time of the mandate indicated in the Rule. She saw in troubles and persecutions a sign of the "*work of God*".

What does JA say to us, Sisters living in the XXI century?

As we have just discovered, this Circular is interesting for us for more than one reason. It confirmed the role and the position of Mother Thouret arriving in France to work at the re-establishment of the unity within her Institute. Because of her suffering Jeanne-Antide becomes even more dear to us. Her love for the Church, the Cross, and the Institute appeared clearly in all its depth. In 1821 she wrote to her daughters in Naples, yet her example and her advice, as they appear here, do not concern only events and people of the past, they may still say something to us too.

Certainly, we are not in the same difficult situation Jeanne-Antide had to face in 1821. We are not called to choose between two authorities, we do not have to situate ourselves within a divided Community, and we do not have to face the different opinions of Ecclesiastic Superiors.

However, we may question our commitment. Conflicts about the authority may take place among the representatives of the Church, the Country and the Congregation!! How could we, then, keep manifesting our love for the Church and our concern for unity? How could we make

⁴⁹ Mgr de Chaffoy "*Circular Letter 11th March 1820*" quoted by A de P. Duffet "*Notes*", LD p. 305 French Version.

known the role of women and religious in our society and in the Church, keeping in mind that Jeanne-Antide in her humility, already two hundred years ago, was able to give it full relevance?

We could ask questions about our belonging to a Congregation, and the meaning of suffering; our vows could be misunderstood. It is easy to forget that following Christ involves some sacrifice and renunciation.

Perhaps, with the passing of time, weariness overcomes us weakening our zeal for the mission. Responsibilities may become burdens and we try to avoid the challenges or the conflicts of our time.

The explicit and wise advice of Jeanne-Antide about discernment are always valid at all times and everywhere: always refer to the Rule consolidated by the Church which indicates sure routes; respect the role of people who have responsibilities at any level; never make decisions "*in troubled times*"; instead wait for "*peace and tranquillity to be re-established*"; those in power should retire when the time has come; accept difficulties and even persecutions as the lot of those who seek good, who want to belong to Christ and be like Him.

Each one of us may feel that some of the words of Jeanne-Antide fit well her situation. Even within ordinary life, when nothing extraordinary happens, her words may bring a message. They remind us of the purpose of our vocation, they give us new enthusiasm, and they enable us to make the effort required.

Then, "***God alone***", meditated and loved, will be the infallible criterion for our choices.