

***What reactions were there in Besançon
when Jeanne-Antide got the pontifical approbation
of the Rule for her Institute?***

Sr Christiane Decombe

After Jeanne-Antide had left France in 1810 many changes had taken place and the country she knew no longer existed!

She could no longer count on those who had supported her: Mons. Lecoq had died, the Prefect Debry had left Besançon following the fall of the Empire...

The **Royalists**, those who had fled the country and were now back, the **refractory priests**, who had refused to swear the oath to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy in 1790, and the **Catholics** afraid of the Revolution and its excesses, were obviously happy for the restauration of the monarchy with King Louis XVIII.

For many, the triumph of religion and the return of royalty were naturally associated!

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In the diocese of Besançon, **the refractory priests** were many.

Under the episcopate of Mons. Lecoq, **constitutional Bishop**, those on whom he could have counted had retired voluntarily.

At his death in 1815, the **General Vicars, old refractories**, took over the government of the diocese while waiting for the new Archbishop.

This would be a prelate of the Ancien Régime, **Mons. Cortois de Pressigny**, one of the most influential members of the clergy after the Restoration. Bishop of Saint-Malo under Louis XVI, he had refused to swear the constitutional oath.

He was asked by Louis XVIII to negotiate with the Holy See a new Concordat, for which he was granted the title of **Count and Peer¹ of France**.

When he was appointed Archbishop of Besançon, in 1817, he was 72 years old. His ministry will not be long, in fact he died in Paris on 2nd May 1823.

The General Vicars and among them **Abbot De Chaffoy**, were all, like their Archbishop, supporters of the **gallican spirit** – that means that in France, the Pope kept his spiritual primacy, but within the diocese the Bishop had the authority to decide on the internal affairs.²

¹ In the Middle Ages and under the Ancien Régime, the Peers were high ranking ecclesiastics and nobles to whom the King granted honorary or jurisdictional privileges. From 1814 to 1848, they were members of the Chamber of Peers, also called High Chamber.

² The Gallicanism is a religious doctrine and a political current, which aimed at keeping the Catholic Church independent of the Pope. It limits the Pope's power to the spiritual sphere and does not accept his role in the temporal domain. It even tries to limit the Pope's spiritual primacy while it favours the power of the General Councils, of Bishops within their dioceses and sovereigns in their kingdoms. Practically, this implies a strict

- *This explains the reactions of the Archbishop and of the clergy when the Foundress announced that the Rule of her Institute was approved by the Pope!*

Jeanne-Antide was right when she wrote: «*Those people, scorn and reject what our Holy Father has done, and they take it out on me.*»³

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Abbot De Chaffoy had met Jeanne-Antide in **Landeron** when he was returning to France in 1797, and he had appreciated her: «*You will take young women and form them as you have been formed ... You will do very well. It is enough to have courage and memory; and you seem to have them ...*»⁴

He had asked her to return to France «*I order you to return to France... to help us restore faith and morals in our diocese ... You must obey...*»⁵

He had supported the new foundation, he had encouraged it, when while blessing the house at No. **13 Rue des Martelots** he had also received the consecration of the first Sisters, he said in his speech: “*Behold, my dear daughters, your occupations are all included among the occupations of JESUS-CHRIST himself. You are going to continue His work, by doing what He did.*”⁶

***However, ... Jeanne-Antide, in the Rule of 1802, conferred the title of Superior General to an Archbishop who had sworn the oath, Mons. Lecoq !
The refractory priests, and especially Abbot De Chaffoy, will not forget it!***

- *This is a second reason which help us understand the attitude of the Archbishop and of his clergy towards the Foundress.*

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Coming back from his retirement Abbot De Chaffoy ⁷«*Man of God and of good advice*», found all his old prestige among the clergy of Besançon and in 6 years, from 1815 to 1821, he became the main figure in the diocese.

control of the French sovereign on Bishops' appointments and their decisions. It is an ancient doctrine which goes back to the XIV century. It opposes the Ultramontanism.

³ Letter to Sr. Geneviève Boucon on 16th September 1821. L.D. p. 360

⁴ Memorandum of Pure Truths. L.D. pp. 4-5

⁵ Memorandum of Pure Truths. L.D. p. 5

⁶ Speech given by Mons. De Chaffoy on 15th October 1800.

Cfr. Registre-Journal of M. Bacoffe 1800-1803 page 7. Archives at the Provincial House in Besançon.

⁷ Claude François Marie Petitbenoît De Chaffoy (1752-1837). He refused any ministry he could receive from a former juror Archbishop, he stayed with his family in Besançon at rue St. Vincent (now rue Mégevand) for the time Mons. Lecoq was Bishop. He made good use of his retirement writing: instructions, books, meditations all addressed to religious ... especially to the Hospitaller Sisters of the Holy Family for whom he was the spiritual director.

Before the arrival of Mons. De Pressigny, the **Chapter Vicar, Abbot Durand**,⁸ as head of the diocese became the Superior General of the Congregation.

Yet, he delegated **Abbot De Chaffoy** to represent him! After his appointment Mons. De Pressigny will confirm him in this role.

He, therefore, found himself at the head of the Community of Besançon with Sr. Marie-Anne Bon...

He will take his role at heart! While ... Jeanne-Antide was far from Besançon...

- *Right-hand man of the Archbishop, he may be considered responsible for the rejection of the Foundress and of the approved Rule, as well as for her expulsion from the diocese of Besançon...*

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From 6th January 1819, **Mons De Chaffoy** – appointed as Bishop of Nîmes in 1817 - came to the main house situated in Grande rue and summoned Sr. Marie-Anne Bon, representative of the Superior General, Sr. Christine Ménegay, Sr. Elisabeth Bouvard Councillors, and Sr. Marguerite Paillot Novice Mistress.

«I have read and studied the rules of your Institute ... I have called you to be part of the resolutions I have made. »

He developed in 5 detailed points his decisions: he confirmed the Sisters members of the Council in their role, he appointed two new councillors,⁹ and decreed: *«The council shall gather every Wednesday at 4.00 pm and I shall attend as often as possible. There shall be a register with all Council's deliberations **after their approval by the Superior General or his representative ...***

*What here established is temporary and shall last up to the time the Superior General will deem it suitable, in order to fulfil the full observance of the constitutions.»*¹⁰

Already two years earlier one could read: *«Our dear Sisters Christine and Marguerite judged that the Sister to whom our Mother delegated her powers, currently Sr. Marie-Anne Bon, had **the same power she had** or as well as a Sister appointed Superior by elections.»*¹¹

- *Thus, the authority over the Sisters of Besançon had swiftly been taken away from the Superior general who was in Naples, already in 1817, and even more evidently in the beginning of 1819.*

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⁸ Antoine-Emmanuel Durand de Gevigny (1742-1820), doctor in theology, member of the Academy of Besançon, and canon was the Chapter Vicar when Mons. Lecoz passed away. He administered the diocese from 1815 to 1819 realizing a great pastoral activity. He gave to Jeanne-Antide the letter dated 30th August 1818 which she will pass on to the Holy See in order to get the approbation of the Statutes.

⁹ Sr. Catherine Barrois, Sister Servant at Mandeure, and Sister Dorothee Mougins, Sister Servant at Battant, already councillors from 1817.

¹⁰ « Register of deliberations of the Council of the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of Besançon, under the Rule of Saint Vincent de Paul, from 1816 to 1826 » Page 5. Signed by « Abbot Dechaffoy » Archives of the Provincial House in Besançon.

¹¹ Id. page 2. Council of 24th June 1817. Archives at the Provincial House of Besançon

While Sr. Marie-Anne visited the establishments, Sr. Christine gave news to Mother Thouret who was far away about the Sisters' health, the official visit of the Archbishop who spent very little time in Besançon, the buying of a house to enlarge the first portion of «131»...

Her letters dated 17th July, 27th September 1819, were **still** marked by a sincere and grateful affection:

«For sometimes we did not have the pleasure of seeing Abbot Thouret, we saw his dear mother,¹² she is doing fine, we had news of Mr. Joachim by Sr. Brigitte¹³ who was in retreat... »

« I was sorry to hear about your sickness, I sincerely wish you that the Lord may support your health... »

Finally: *«Monseigneur De Chaffoy takes all possible care of our community. »*

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When Sr. Christine responded on 27th September to Jeanne-Antide's letter dated 16th August, she was not yet aware of the letter Jeanne-Antide had sent to Sr. Marie-Anne Bon on the 24th!

The pontifical approbation was granted on 23rd July 1819 and only on 24th September Jeanne-Antide announced it to her substitute in Besançon – That is the date when the news of the Approbation was confirmed¹⁴.

The letter addressed to Sr. Marie-Anne Bon was not found, yet it is the same letter Jeanne-Antide sent on 2nd October to her «very dear Daughters at the house of Bellevaux»¹⁵ and on 6th October, to the Sisters at Russey.¹⁶

Such letter is a cry of **joy and thanksgiving**: *«I invite you, my very dear Daughters, to join me in thanking the Good Lord who, through this approbation has consolidated our Institute for ever.»*

At the same time she announced that the Holy Father made some **modifications**: *«He gave to our whole Community the name of Daughters of Charity under the protection of Saint Vincent de Paul; he changed the vows and made many changes on the third part of the Rule. »*

As it was only in a letter dated 15th October 1819 that Canon Adinolfi invited Jeanne-Antide to come to his estate in Frascati in order to let her know the changes made by the Holy See to the Constitutions of her Institute, it is understandable that in the first letters sent to Besançon, she spoke of «many changes » in a vague way.

She also told the Sisters *«not to make the vows which were in use as they shall have the consolation of making vows according to the will of the Most Holy Father the Pope»* when she would come back.

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¹² Jacquette Chopard, second spouse of Jean-François Thouret

¹³ Sr. Brigitte Jeannot from Sancey

¹⁴ She announced it at the same time to Mons. Narni

¹⁵ L.D. p. 330-331

¹⁶ Archives at the Provincial House in Besançon.

Sr. Marie-Anne showed the letter to Mons. De Chaffoy... Her response dated 24th October, one month later, does not provide any hint of the opposition that is preparing for in Besançon. «*Finally our desires came true, our Holy Rule approved by the Holy Father, let us bless and thank the Lord ...*»

Besides she expressed the joy of seeing soon their Mother and of embracing her. «*O if we could know when this happy time of your return would come, to rejoice in advance at the thought of your presence...*»¹⁷

Was Sr. Marie-Anne sincere? It could be doubted because in Besançon everything was already in place to oppose Mother Thouret's return in authority.

Besides a letter identical to the one dated 24th is kept in the archives of the Provincial House of Besançon, yet the date on it is 26th October.

And the rough copy of this letter is handwritten by Mons. De Chaffoy!

- ***This shows how much the representative of the Superior General played a role in the relationship between Besançon and Mother Thouret !***

Mons. De Chaffoy visited Sr. Marie-Anne regularly, and when away in Paris he kept a regular correspondence with her – nine letters are still kept at the archives.¹⁸

Even though he had already been appointed Bishop of Nîmes in 1817, he remained in charge of all that concerned the Sisters of Charity, up to November 1821, when he received the Papal Bull .

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On 12th October¹⁹ Jeanne-Antide had **written to the Archbishop** who, actually had not yet been installed.

«*Last 23rd July, Our Holy Father the Pope Pious VII deigned to approve our Institute, our Rules and Constitutions, with some modifications he deemed necessary.*» New name, modification of vows and «*some changes in the third part of the Rule ...*»

She told him that she had already informed the Sisters and had told them that «*they would have the consolation of making the vows as our Holy Father had established*». She then asked the Archbishop not to admit any Sister to the profession before her return, which she thought to be near.

After the letter dated 12th October, received at his arrival in Besançon²⁰, very likely Mons. De Pressigny did not have the time to form his personal opinion about the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity and about its Foundress; however he was already **informed by Mons. De Chaffoy**, who had already written to Sr. Marie-Anne Bon on 27th September 1817: “*I shall*

¹⁷ Archives at the Provincial House in Besançon

¹⁸ Id. Letters dated 27th September, 13th October, 4th November, 10th November, without a date November or December, 10th December 1817 ; 7th February, 21st March, 21st August 1818.

¹⁹ L.D. p. 331-332

²⁰ Mons. De Pressigny, appointed Archbishop of Besançon on 20th September 1817, will take officially possession of his Chair on 1st November 1819. He came to Besançon only in 1821.

submit to the Archbishop a memorandum which will contain a chapter with the title «The Sisters of Charity»”.

In the following month of November or December he wrote: *«I can only tell him my ideas ... When he is in Besançon... you will or you will not speak to him about Mother Thouret, as you wish ...»*

So warned, the Archbishop answered to the Foundress the following 6th November, not only that *«no **change**ment shall take place ... I do not know the changes made; they might improve the Institute, but the improvement itself is a change, and a change, a modification, often bring inconveniences»*, and, therefore, *« I will forbid your being received, even for a single day, in the houses of the Sisters of Charity in the Besançon diocese. »*²¹

Jeanne-Antide immediately wrote to **Sr Marie-Anne** on 12th November. The announcement of the pontifical approbation on 24th September, with the announcement of few changes, had certainly been precipitated, due the joy it caused to her, and which she wanted to share with her daughters. *«... It has occurred to me on reflection that that could give rise to doubts»*. She mainly precised that Mons. Archbishop would keep on the Congregation the powers attributed to him in the Rules.²²

An identical letter was addressed to Sr. Marie-Anne and **her Assistants**²³ and there she explained: *«Perhaps, you thought, my dear daughters that I asked for the changes in the Rule, no, no, I never thought of it ... »*

She then thought necessary to announce directly to **Mons. De Chaffoy** the approbation received, and she did so in a letter dated 17th November: *«Although I think that our dear Sisters passed on to you the circular I addressed to them to announce God's great gift, I feel I ought to let you know of it with a personal letter. »*²⁴

She did not know, then, that ordered by the Archbishop, Mons. De Chaffoy had sent to all the communities a **printed circular** dated 5th November 1819.²⁵

With it he announced that the Archbishop *«Superior General of the **whole Congregation** of the Sisters of Charity of Besançon »* had *«expressly asked him to exercise his function when absent»* and he warned them *«that they could not adopt any innovation unless it was introduced by the Superior General [masculine] of the Congregation. »*

When addressing the Sacred Congregation in December 1819, Jeanne-Antide speaking about the Archbishop said: *«**He had a circular printed and signed by Mons. De Chaffoy**... »*

She was lucide!

The Sisters had to renew their vows on 12th October - Jeanne-Antide had asked the Archbishop to postpone it! Moreover, each one had been invited to answer personally to the De Chaffoy's circular, *«so that I may convey your feelings to Monseigneur. »*

²¹ Id. p. 333

²² Id. p. 334

²³ Archives at the Provinciale House in Besançon. Minute at the Archives in Rome

²⁴ L.D. p. 335

²⁵ Archives at the Provincial House in Besançon. The original is printed, the final part is handwritten by Mons. De Chaffoy. Cfr. L.D. p. 294 (French Text)

It was the faithful Sr. Elisabeth Bouvard who told Jeanne-Antide about this letter on 18th November, the day after receiving it – twelve days to send this mail!

She responded to the above mentioned circular in order *«to avoid the scandal caused by a division»* and affirmed her submission to the Archbishop *«while we wait for our manner of existence in France and particularly in the diocese of Besançon, to be definitively agreed between the Holy See and their Lordships the Bishops»*.

Besides, she expressed her satisfaction for the appointment of Mons. De Chaffoy in whom *«we have full confidence.»*²⁶

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The answers of the Sisters to the circular were sent between November 1819 and March 1820. We have the answers of Sisters belonging to 8 different communities.²⁷ How many other letters got lost?...

They all express their submission to the Superior General, Mons. Archbishop of Besançon, and of their gratitude towards his representative: *«we shall not receive any innovation concerning our holy status... »*²⁸

*« we shall not do anything, we shall not take any initiative without asking previously for your advice... »*²⁹

*« ... we declare that we shall not adopt neither the title of Sisters of Charity of Besançon, nor any innovation in our constitutions, unless it is presented by Mons. Archbishop... »*³⁰

*«It is with the greatest satisfaction that we learn from your letter dated fifth November, that Mons. the Archbishop put you in charge of directing our Congregation during his absence ... »*³¹

*« ...you have announced that you will continue to take good care of us, we can only thank God for it ... »*³²

The responses of the Sisters at Bellevaux in Besançon,³³ and in Thonon,³⁴ were passed on to Jeanne-Antide by themselves.

Two communities mentioned also the **Foundress**:

- The Sisters in Saint-Trivier: *«About the small changes which shall take place in our Congregation ... we are deeply convinced that all this will be regulated by the authority of Monseigneur the Archbishop and our Superior General [feminine], therefore, we submit to it with trust, already convinced that it will be for the greater glory of God ... »*

²⁶ L.D. p. 334-337

²⁷ Archives at the Provincial House in Besançon.

The Sisters in Gy: 22nd November 1819 ; in Lons-le-Saunier: 23rd November 1819 ; in St. Jean d'Ardières: 24th November 1819 ; in Landeron: 26th November ; in Mandeuve: 30th November; in Jonvelle: 8 December 1819; in Saint-Trivier: 13th January; in Bourg: March 1820.

²⁸ The Sisters in Gy

²⁹ The Sisters in Lons-le-Saunier

³⁰ The Sisters in St Jean d'Ardières

³¹ The Sisters in Jonvelle

³² The Sisters in Mandeuve

³³ 18th November 1819. Cfr. L.D. Page 294

³⁴ 10th January 1820

- The Sisters in Landeron, say that they « *had already been informed by our Superior in Naples, that God deigned to inspire the Sovereign Pontiff to approve our Holy Rule* » and they say that they are happy for the grace received from God; they are also happy about the choice regarding the representative of the archbishop to govern them « *That is why we submit willingly to all that you shall command us on behalf of Mons. the Archbishop... »*

Should we then think that many Sisters did not yet feel clearly the opposition? ...

It was not easy for them to see where the truth was. Mother Thouret was far away, and the Archbishop who had the authority as the Superior General enjoyed great esteem among the Sisters as well as Mons. De Chaffoy.

For them, the Superiors in Besançon and in Rome and Naples could only act in agreement!

Therefore, from **Thonon**, Sr. Basile Prince wrote to Jeanne-Antide on 10th January 1820: « *We come to write to you so that you may be informed about all that happened in Besançon ... I received the circular of Abbot De Chaffoy; it was not difficult for us to perceive **the small trap** set for our simplicity, and the Rev. Parish Priest showed it clearly to me; in my answer to Mons. De Chaffoy I protested our fidelity and obedience to our legitimate Superiors, to you and to our Holy Father. »*

It is a letter full of warmth and affection towards Mother Thouret while waiting for «*the joy of seeing and embracing you and of thanking you personally ... »*

And always following the advice of the Parish Priest she made long remarks to Sr. Marie-Anne, foreseeing «*the new storms threatening our Congregation; where are we heading to... ?... Let us not reject changes which we do not know yet, let us count on the wisdom of the Holy Father and of our poor Mother ... »*

Such letter full of common sense received an answer which Sr. Basile, did not pass on to Mother Thouret!

In the same line, and even stronger is the letter wrote by Sr. Pauline, Sister Servant in **Bourg**, who opposed a clear refusal: «*Our Mother has always been the first Superior General whom we shall respect ... »*

She could not submit to the Archbishop though dreading the consequences of such decision: being obliged to quit «*what I regard highly, the diocese of Besançon. »*

However, «*the establishments which are not within the diocese of Besançon no longer depend on it. »*

Between November 1819 and March 1820, Sr. Pauline had had the time to see the opposition raised by the authorities in Besançon against the Foundress.

She will leave the hospice in Bourg in order to remain faithful to Jeanne-Antide.

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It was only on 29th November³⁵ that Sr. Marie-Anne Bon answered to Jeanne-Antide's letter dated 12th November.

She informed: Mons. the Archbishop visited the community at the Grande Rue, **together with Mons. De Chaffoy whom he introduced as his representative:** «*Here is Monseigneur, to whom I give all my powers, to represent me before you, in my absence.... »*

³⁵ Archives in Rome

She added also all the **remarks made by the Archbishop about the changes** «*he had heard of, in our Rule*», that he was the Superior General, that neither the name should be changed nor the Rule approved by the government which then would cut off the agreed subsidies «*if the government knew that something has been changed and that we no longer are the Sisters of Charity of Besançon, it would withdraw the annual subsidy it gives us.* »

He is ready to write to the Pope if necessary! She also let Mother Thouret know that «*Mons. De Chaffoy wrote on behalf of Mons. Archbishop and under his eyes, a printed circular letter in which he told us **not to receive anything** which is not introduced by our Superior General, Mons. Archbishop.* »

She also reported the visit of Abbot Thouret.

Thinking of supporting his sister, he received an answer without any ambiguity: «*We responded to him, that Sr. Christine and I, were well submitted to our Holy Father and that we would do all that he may ask from us when we shall be **invited to do so** by Monseigneur.* »

➤ *This letter of Sr. Marie-Anne Bon dated 29th November, for its content and its words, and its formal closure: «respectful regards», announced the definitive breakup which no longer could be postponed.*

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In the beginning of December, Mother Thouret responded to the letter of Mons. De Pressigny dated 6th November, hoping to win his prejudices: «*The modifications made shall not trouble the conscience of the Sisters... they shall follow the same Rules ...* »

She wished to offer him clarifications about the reasons for the changes made. She stated that she had not asked for any change, she never had the least thought about it, and the Holy See might well give evidence of it.³⁶

Mons. De Pressigny did not respond to this letter, however, on 16th December, while writing to Mons. De Chaffoy, he told him, in an ironic way: «*I am as favoured as you are, I have received a second letter from Sister Thouret, answering mine, to which she responded like a doctor ...* »

He also added that he had written to Abbot De Sambucy, in Rome asking him «*to look for this Sister Thouret, and tell her **to stop meddling with the business of the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of Besançon in France**...* »³⁷

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Seeing that the opposition of the Archbishop did not cease, Jeanne-Antide **turned to the Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Regulars**, «*appealing on the dissensions raised by the House in Besançon.*»³⁸

³⁶ L.D. p. 297

³⁷ Archives at the Provincial House in Besançon.

³⁸ L.D. p. 299

She referred in a brief and precise way all the difficult points: change of name, the vows, the third part of the Rule. Then, she spoke of the content of Mons. De Chaffoy's letter, and finally she expressed her concern, not about herself, but about the unity of her Institute: «*It was spoken about appointing a Superior General [feminine] in France.* »

Naturally, the Sisters faced to such situation «*felt embarrassed and asked what they should do.*» That is why, concluded Mother Thouret it was necessary to provide an effective solution as soon as possible.

The Sacred Congregation responded by the **Brief dated 14th December 1819**³⁹: «*We confirm... the decree for the approbation of the Institute ... we approve it again ...*»

However, this document, which should have put an end to all discussion, will not succeed in re-establishing the peace.

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Strengthened by this confirmation, Jeanne-Antide wrote again to Sr. Marie-Anne Bon on 18th December.⁴⁰ It is a letter very delicate towards Sr. Marie-Anne: «*if you fear to trouble your conscience ...* »

She does not greet her only with «*respectful regards*», instead she signed: «*Your affectionate Sister Jeanne-Antide Thouret*» avoiding the use of the title of Superior General as in her letter dated 12th November.

Would she be able to touch the heart of Sr. Marie-Anne?

Her response on 6th January 1820 will state the separation: «*We cannot do anything but submit ourselves uniquely to the orders of Mons. De Chaffoy, we cannot deviate in any way from the will of Mons. our Superior General, since it is only through him that we may receive orders.* »⁴¹

➤ ***Another authority replaces that of Mother Thouret.***

Mons. De Pressigny wrote to Mons. De Chaffoy on 22nd February 1820: «*In my opinion there should be elections for the Sisters of Charity and the renewal of vows as soon as possible.*»⁴²

Mons. De Chaffoy after receiving, «*orders from Monseigneur the Archbishop*», addressed a circular to the Sisters on 11th March: he invited all the Sister Servants to attend a retreat beginning on 11th April in Besançon which should close with the pronouncement of vows.⁴³

At the end of the retreat **Sr. Catherine Barrois was appointed as temporary Superior of the Congregation.**⁴⁴

³⁹ L.D. p. 301

⁴⁰ L.D. p. 340-341

⁴¹ Id. p. 341

⁴² Archives at the Provincial House in Besançon

⁴³ Id.

⁴⁴ Id. «*Register of deliberations of the Council of the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of Besançon, under the Rule of Saint Vincent de Paul, from 1816 to 1826* » Page 29

Sr Catherine, for the first time, presided as Superior, together with Mons. De Chaffoy, the Council of 19th April.

Sr. Marie-Anne Bon remained a member of the Council where she could exercise her strong influence.

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Jeanne-Antide at the end of March or in the beginning of April sent a circular to the Sisters ⁴⁵ reminding them that «*it is the Rule approved by our Holy Father that is currently the only one now legitimate.* »

It is in these letters that we read: «*I am a daughter of the Holy Church, be it with me.* »

She waited for an answer. The worry continued.

She heard that they wanted to change the habit: «*What a scandal would this be for the public ... and what reason could we give?* »

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Mother Thouret addressed **the same circular to the Parish Priests**, asking them to pass it on to the Sisters advising them and committing them to submit to the Pope. She explains in a lucid way the object of disagreement because «*the Archbishop of Besançon could not have any authority in other dioceses.*» «*That is what strongly shocked their Lordships in Besançon.* »⁴⁶

Some parish priests, like the one in **Landeron**,⁴⁷ needn't impose anything, on the contrary, his job was easy because the Sisters were very much attached to the Holy See.

Others, rather hostile to Mother Thouret, did not pass on the letter, or else they did pass it on yet with such comments that the Sisters were influenced in their decision! The parish priest in **Mandeure** asked for the canonical evidence of the decision of the Pope:

«*It is necessary that the two authorities, you and Mons. the Archbishop of Besançon, be in agreement so to have them accept such changes ... Any clandestine procedure ... shall always be suspicious.* »

«*It is good practice that all that comes from Rome may be sent first to the Bishop ...* »⁴⁸

[It has to be said that it was only in July 1820, therefore, one year after the Decree of approbation, that Jeanne-Antide sent an authentic copy to Mons. De Pressigny. (Why did not the Holy See send it earlier so that the situation would be clear?)]

The Dean of **Neuchâtel** asked Mons. De Chaffoy to explain «*the cause of the different opinion between Mother Thouret and the Superiors in Besançon.*»⁴⁹ He investigated and found that «*the Sisters in Landeron, like their parish priest, strongly support Sister Thouret.* »

⁴⁵ Archives at the Provincial House in Besançon. Circular addressed to the Sisters in St. Claude on 28th March 1820, in Landeron on 4th April, of St. Ursanne on 11th April, in Vesoul on 14th April.
L.D. p. 342

⁴⁶ Archives at the Provincial House in Besançon. Letter of Jeanne-Antide to the parish priest of Saint-Ursanne. 12th April 1820.

⁴⁷ Archives in Rome. Letter passed to Jeanne-Antide by the Sisters in Landeron on 28th April 1820.

⁴⁸ Archives at the Provincial House in Besançon. Letter dated 2nd May 1820

⁴⁹ Id. M. Aibischer to Mons. De Chaffoy 16th May 1820

Meanwhile, they shall follow their current Rule, because «*no-one promised, you told me, to do whatever comes to the mind of this so called Mother Thouret.*»⁵⁰

When the Pope, in April 1820, granted the indulgences to the Sisters of Charity and to the inmates at Bellevaux, she communicated the news to the communities and to the parish priests. The parish priest in **Baume** while sending the letter of Jeanne-Antide to Mons. De Chaffoy ironically writes: «*Here is a new attempt of our dear Sister Thouret ... I neither thought I should nor could I comply with the request of delivering this letter to the Sisters in Baume, I did not even tell them...I will never be involved with such behaviours.*»⁵¹

* * * * *

A ray of sunshine in these turbulent months was brought by the letters of Sister Basile Prince who wrote on behalf of her community letters full of affection to her «*very dear Mother.*»⁵² And also by those of the Sisters in Landeron who stated their fidelity to the Rule approved by the Holy Father: «*I received yours with satisfaction seeing your feelings of submission...*»⁵³

She needed it, because the news kept coming charged with sadness, uncertainty and suffering.

The parish priest Beauchet, in Besançon, gave to one Sister in Thonon «*the only rule to follow in her behaviour*»: reject what the Archbishop reject «*otherwise you shall leave the old Congregation to join another one ...*»⁵⁴

In a letter dated 7th April, Sr. Basile informed Mother Thouret that that Sister left to join the community in Besançon, and «*Sr. Marie-Anne tells us that we only have two choices: to submit to the ecclesiastic Superiors or to leave the Community of Besançon.*»

Mons. De Pressigny wrote to Mons. De Chaffoy about Jeanne-Antide: «*I have learned to fear intriguing people, especially intriguing women, I fear the abuse this one could do since she was able to approach Cardinal Della Somaglia...*»⁵⁵

* * * * *

And the confusion seems to thicken in peoples' minds and hearts.

The **Sisters in Thonon** would like more information from Mother Thouret about the «*sad situation*»: «*Will the Holy Father change his mind? Shall those in Besançon be forced to obey?*»⁵⁶

⁵⁰ Id. M. Aibischer to Mons. De Chaffoy 25th May 1820

⁵¹ Id. Letter dated 29th June 1820

⁵² Letter dated 17th November 1819

⁵³ Archives at the Provincial House in Besançon. Response of Jeanne-Antide to the Sisters in Landeron, on 27th May 1820. L.D. p. 344-345

⁵⁴ Id. Letter from Abbot Beauchet, parish priest at Notre-Dame to Sr. Chavet, 12th March 1820

⁵⁵ Archives of the Archbishopric in Besançon. Letter written in Paris, 5th May 1820

⁵⁶ Archives in Rome. Letter dated 7th April

The Sisters in **Dole** wrote to Sr. Catherine Barrois: «*The parish priest does not approve our Mother ... I do believe I am a daughter of the Holy Church ... I assure you, my good mother, this causes me the greatest pain ...*»⁵⁷

Sr. **Elisabeth Bouvard**, still at Bellevaux, and still a Councillor, was in an untenable position. «*I am very sensitive to all the pains you go through,*» Mother Thouret told her «*... I leave you free to go to dear Sr. Basile in Thonon.*»⁵⁸

Some communities of the diocese did not dare to express their attachment to Mather Thouret, dominated not only by the Archbishop and by Mons. De Chaffoy, but also by their **confessors!** «*He told the confessors in Besançon what they should say to the Sisters ... that is why he told the Sisters to do as their confessors say.*»⁵⁹

Only **Abbot Filsjean** had the courage of defending her in an «**Explanatory Memorandum**» addressed to the Archbishop.⁶⁰

* * * * *

After these two sorrowful years, will the year 1821 bring peace, as Mother Thouret is finally coming back to France ?

Alas no! On the contrary!

Sr. Catherine Barrois answered only on 31st January to the wishes for the new year sent by Jeanne-Antide one month earlier, the **draft of this answer is in Mons. De Chaffoy's handwriting.**⁶¹ «*We submit ourselves to the representative of Mons. Archbishop ... we shall do exactly what we are told ...*»

Mons. De Pressigny responded to the Nuncio Mons. Macchi, in March 1821, making a list of complaints against the Foundress and concluding that he believed according to the testimony of «*all the good priests of Besançon that Sister Thouret does not have neither the virtues nor the qualities convenient for a Superior, and she does not even have those necessary to be a religious...*»

Before such opposition which she knew or which she suspected Jeanne-Antide's trust did not fade as it is shown by the **prayer she composed** at that time and that she carried on her all the time: «*O my God, alone great, alone holy and alone Omnipotent, whom no-one can resist, arise, show forth your goodness and your former mercies. Stand between me and my enemies...*»⁶²

and «*as I am innocent, God gives me the grace of feeling the greatest calm.*»⁶³

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⁵⁷ Archives at the Provincial House in Besançon. Letter dated 19th April 1820

⁵⁸ L.D. p. 348

⁵⁹ Archives at the Provincial House in Besançon. Letter of Jeanne-Antide to Sr Thaïs Duband, April 1820. L.D. p. 343

⁶⁰ Jean-Claude Filsjean (1766-1857). He helped Jeanne-Antide in the writing of the Rule in 1802. L.D. p. 131-142

⁶¹ Archives at the Provincial House in Besançon.

⁶² L.D. p. 143

⁶³ L.D. p. 360

On 8th August 1821, Jeanne-Antide wrote from Rome to Sr. Catherine to **announce her arrival**. Following the instructions received she immediately gave the letter to Mons. De Chaffoy who passed it on to the Archbishop.

The latter summoned Sr. Catherine: «*You shall respond to Madam Thouret that I wrote to her two years ago what you will repeat to her from me: I shall never receive her in any establishment of my diocese; I consider her to be simply a secular, and if, against my will, she would dare to present herself in any of the houses of your Congregation, I will, if necessary, call in the civil authority against her. And you, my Sisters, you will have no other way of thinking than mine.*»

The temporary Superior gave the response to Mother Thouret...⁶⁴

The same decision reiterated, was followed on 31st August 1821 by an **ordinance of the Archbishop** forbidding «*the Superiors of the houses of the Sisters of Charity of the diocese, to receive Sr. Jeanne-Antide Thouret former Superior of the Charity of Besançon.*»⁶⁵

➤ **Such solemn confirmation excluded Jeanne-Antide officially.**

Sr. Catherine had to inform the Sisters about this definitive interdiction.⁶⁶
The Archbishop understood that this would cost her a lot, yet she had to obey!

In a short letter dated 8th September addressed to the Sisters in the various dioceses, she wrote: «*our Sisters are free to belong to Monseigneur or to Our Mother. If one is for Monseigneur, she must be in his diocese; if for our Mother one shall be where she will deem it suitable, in Italy or in France.*»⁶⁷

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The reaction of **Sr. Elisabeth Bouvard** was categorical: Jeanne-Antide will always be received at Bellevaux: «*Come with no fear ... your establishment at Bellevaux is all yours.*»⁶⁸

A little balm on the wounds of this «*poor Mother*» as Sr. Basile had said.

The Sisters in Thonon did not hesitate to express their attachments «*... all your daughters are with you, you have our hearts, we all want you ...*»⁶⁹

«*My dear Mother, our Sisters and I embrace you tenderly ...*»⁷⁰

«*Sr. Séraphine is happy to be on our side.*»⁷¹

Others were troubled and suffered in silence, yet they remained obedient to the Superiors of Besançon: «*... I was sick in body and spirit, I was never able to look in a detached way at all the things God was pleased to make us experience ... faith alone could enable us to tolerate it,*

⁶⁴ Minute kept at the Archives of the Provincial House in Besançon. Letter of 24th August 1821. L.D. p. 355

⁶⁵ Archives at the Provincial House in Besançon. L.D. p. 337

⁶⁶ L.D. p. 357

⁶⁷ L.D. p. 359

⁶⁸ L.D. p. 359 Letter dated 9th August 1821

⁶⁹ Archives in Rome. Letter from Sr. Basile to Mother Thouret dated 4th June 1821

⁷⁰ Id. Letter from Sr. Basile to Mother Thouret dated 24th October 1821

⁷¹ Id. Letter from Sr. Basile to Mother Thouret dated 19th November 1821

however I feel that in spite of all the efforts I have already made, I will never overcome the rejection of living with ungrateful people ... I will remain submitted... »⁷²

The situation of the Sisters in Sancey was more than uncomfortable; in Besançon it was known that they remained «*openly attached*» to Jeanne-Antide, they forbade people to «*leave with them their girls.*» Even some postulants presented by them were refused!⁷³

Jeanne-Antide's niece, Françoise Joséphine Thouret, later called **Sr. Fébronie**, was a small pupil who spent six happy years at the Sisters' school at Sancey-le-Grand, she wrote in 1882: «*Sr. Marie-Anne ordered our Sisters in Sancey to send me away, because I belong to the Thouret!*»⁷⁴

Many Sisters wanted to follow Mother Thouret, yet she refused: «*I could easily make them happy, but I do not want to deprive the establishments and the poor of the good that our Sisters do.* »⁷⁵

Many left anyway.⁷⁶ Sr. Elisabeth already on 4th November 1820 had received from Mother Thouret «*sensitive to her pains* » the suggestion of joining Sr. Basile in Thonon. However, «*only in autumn 1821 she made the painful decision of leaving Bellevaux and Besançon.* »⁷⁷

Sr. Catherine Barrois presented the situation to Mons. De Pressigny referring to Jeanne-Antide in a harsh way: «*following the measures taken by Your Grace, about Sr. Thouret, and the existence of our Institute in your diocese, **this Sister** has also taken measures to take away from you the establishments situated beyond the limits of your jurisdiction, and we know that some of our Sisters, in your Diocese, have resolved to leave and join her.* »⁷⁸

However, according to the Constitutions, a Sister cannot leave in poverty and «*despite their desertion, we want to keep our religious affection for them*», therefore, the Superior asked for the permission of giving them some money.⁷⁹

This was a favour towards Sr. Agnès Bouvard and Sr. Philippine Mille who were at Crèche in Saône-et-Loire in the diocese of Autun.⁸⁰

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⁷² Id. Letter from Sr. Thais Duban dated 2nd January 1822

⁷³ Id. Letter from Sr. Brigitte Jeannot and Sr. Thérèse Ruisseau dated 31st December 1821

⁷⁴ Id. Note written by Sr. Fébronie 1882. However, the insistence of the Superiors in Besançon was delicate, so that young Françoise remained at the school up to her departure with her aunt Jeanne-Antide in 1823, when she was 11 and half years old.

⁷⁵ Id. Note written by Sr. Fébronie 1882

⁷⁶ Sr. Elisabeth and Agnès Bouvard, Philippine Mille, Anne Chouffe, Félicité Bontron.

⁷⁷ Mother Antoine de Padoue in «*Les premières compagnes de Jeanne-Antide* » page 61

⁷⁸ Archives at the Archbishopric in Besançon. Letter from Sr. Catherine Barrois to Mons. De Pressigny dated 7th October 1821

⁷⁹ Id

⁸⁰ Correspondence kept at the Archives in Rome. Letters from 10th May, 26th June, 6th, 10th, 12th, 27th and 29th July, 1st August 1822

Nonetheless, many houses outside the diocese of Besançon remained dependent on the Superiors of Besançon.⁸¹

This was not always easy for the civil authorities, for instance at the **Hospice of Bourg**, the administrators addressed the Superior in Besançon to express their astonishment that «*three Sisters had been replaced with no previous information to the administration. We heard that this was due to the action of a certain Dame Thouret and Sr. Pauline.* »

Actually, Mother Thouret had sent Sr. Victoire Bartholemot in Savoy for the new foundation in Saint-Paul, where she arrived on 29th October 1821.

The Superior in Besançon had to explain: «*It is about two years that the Sisters serving your hospice of charity separated from our Congregation... What Madame Thouret did in your hospice cannot be attributed to us. Mons. our Archbishop had strong reasons not to receive her in his diocese, yet she kept some establishments.* »

The Sisters then had to write a declaration of submission in order to be recognized as members of the Congregation of Besançon and be allowed to stay at the Hospice.⁸²

That is how the Hospice of Charity in Bourg remained dependent on Besançon.

* * * * *

1822... Jeanne-Antide is in France since July 1821...

Mons. De Pressigny kept his stubborn and firm position: «*I shall always reply as I have already replied ... I had reason to fear that her return to the houses of the daughters of Charity of Besançon would be an occasion for trouble and division.*»⁸³

«*I took advice from the Council I had established for the government of the diocese and ... I would act imprudently if I changed conduct...* »⁸⁴

Mother Thouret begged: «*I hope, Monseigneur, that you will retire the orders given against me.* »⁸⁵

She multiplied the attempts to save her Institute, to show her rights, yet «*He sent me a very rude answer ... He is a determined man, and will not listen to a word ... I came to Paris to try and do something. I have seen the Nuncio several times; he has received orders from Rome lately, confirming again the Brief of the Holy Father ... he groans to see the Bishops so little submissive to the Holy See... He says no, I will not.*»⁸⁶

⁸¹ Bourg, Le Landeron, Saint-Jean d'Ardières

⁸² Archives at the Provincial House in Besançon. Correspondence between the Commission of Hospices in Bourg and Sr. Catherine Barrois Superior in Besançon. Letters from 24th to 28th December 1821, 5th, 11th, 17th, 24th, 26th and 29th January 1822, 20th February 1822.

⁸³ Letter from Mons. De Pressigny to M. de Montaiglon dated 2nd May 1822. L.D. p.382

⁸⁴ Archives Municipales Modernes of Besançon. Respons dated 17th March 1822 from Mons. De Pressigny to the letter of M. De Montaiglon dated 14th March

⁸⁵ Archives in Rome. Letter of Jeanne-Antide addressed to Mons. De Pressigny from Thonon on 18th September 1821. L.D. p. 361

⁸⁶ Id. Letter addressed to Mr. Neyre from Paris, in December 1821. L.D. p. 362

The exchange with Mons. De Pressigny was one of the most humiliating for Jeanne-Antide, he refused his blessing, refused to listen to her who had knelt before him. The two people present were scandalised.⁸⁷

The last letters of supplication from Jeanne-Antide to Mons. De Pressigny dated 5th February, and 2nd March, (to which was attached her **Memoir of justification**, and a third one dated 18th June 1822,⁸⁸ remained all unanswered. In these letters, she was not afraid to say that «*Your Grace had been wronged.* »

The Nuncio wrote to Mons. De Pressigny on 17th February 1822⁸⁹ exhorting him to accept the apostolic Brief and make the Sisters observe it, but two days later he got a refusal as an answer, giving as main reason that Sr. Thouret had committed «*a crime... she dared to lie to the successor of St. Peter; she dared to slander before him a prelate generally honoured and esteemed.* »⁹⁰

About this Mother Antoine de Padoue commented: «Mons. De Pressigny could not admit, that what he reproached to Mother Thouret was to have passed the supreme authority in her Institute from Besançon to Rome. »⁹¹

To **register the Pontifical Brief**, dated 14th December 1819, by the government, «*It is not an easy business...* »⁹²

«*We are compelled to use precaution and prudence, because of Mons. De Pressigny, who is in Paris... If it was not for him, there would not be any difficulty for the government.* »⁹³

Jeanne-Antide's brother, **Abbot Thouret**, vicar at the parish of St. Pierre in Besançon, offered some **echoes** to the situation :

«*I know that the way of governing the Sisters in the Grande Rue is detested in your community* »⁹⁴

«*Monseigneur De Villefrancon thinks like the Archbishop.* »⁹⁵

On the contrary, «*the parish priest in Sancey is still favourably disposed.* »⁹⁶

And : «*by-law you are right ... that is what explains to me your peace ...* »⁹⁷

The **Sisters in Sancey** were desolated :

We received your letter «*with the tenderest affection ... we are heartbroken with the bitterest of pain to see that things are still at the same point ...* ». Anyway, they were happy to share in the cross of their Mother !⁹⁸

⁸⁷ Id.

⁸⁸ L.D. p. 365, 371 and 386

⁸⁹ Archives at the Archbishopric in Besançon. L.D. p. 367-369

⁹⁰ Id. L.D. p. 370

⁹¹ L.D. p. 359 (footnote in the French version)

⁹² M. De Gérando presented to the lawyer Macarel the Brief to be registered by the State Council, 17th January 1822

⁹³ Archives in Rome. Letter of Jeanne-Antide addressed from Paris to Canon Gallinari, 1822. L.D. p. 349

⁹⁴ Archives in Rome. Letter dated 9th April 1822

⁹⁵ Id. dated 12th March 1822

⁹⁶ Id. dated 24th April 1822

⁹⁷ Id. dated 8th January 1822

⁹⁸ Id. Letter from Sr Brigitte Jeannot and Sr. Thérèse Ruisseau dated 17th January 1822 to Jeanne-Antide

Besançon forced them to «*make the vows to be able to go back and not to be obliged to quit the habit, without knowing where to go ...*»⁹⁹

Ah! But «*they could change her of place and send her where they would like, however they could never change her heart and her feelings for our Mother ...*»¹⁰⁰

Jeanne-Antide had not allowed them to follow her: «*There we are, therefore, my very dear Mother, prisoners for a year ... I had to go to Grande Rue ... in my first **confession** I received the order of going to tell Sr. Catherine I acknowledged her as mother and superior ... I did it in spite an extreme repugnance ...*»¹⁰¹

Mons. De Chaffoy, from Nîmes, wrote to the Sisters in Besançon on 7th February 1822¹⁰²
«*What happens to Sr. Thouret? How far have you gone about this?*»

And to Sr. Catherine Barrois, on 10th November:

«*Mons. Archbishop had sent from Paris that he wanted to authorize you to appoint a Superior General [feminine], I applauded as much as I could to his determination ...*»¹⁰³

* * * * *

Actually, the new Vicar General, **M. Rivière**, who replaced Mons.De Chaffoy following his departure for Nîmes, sent to the Sisters a printed circular letter dated 1st September: «*The elections shall take place this year, on the coming 26th September, the day following the closure of the first of the two retreats.*» Then, he explained the procedure to be followed.¹⁰⁴

➤ «*Acts of the first elections*» 26th September 1822

«*Today twenty six September, one thousand eight hundred twenty two, were elected ... my very dear Sr. Catherine Barrois as Superior General of the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of Besançon, with the absolute majority of votes ...*»¹⁰⁵

➤ *The rupture, already affirmed in 1820 with the temporary appointment of a Superior [feminine], became official on 26th September 1822.*

Mons. De Chaffoy expressed his satisfaction: «*There you are well constituted, already out of the embarrassment of the return of Madame Thouret which hindered everything ... I think you have nothing to fear from Madame Thouret ...*»¹⁰⁶

* * * * *

⁹⁹ Id. dated 28th October 1822 to Abbot Thouret

¹⁰⁰ Id.

¹⁰¹ Id. dated 30th November 1822 to Jeanne-Antide

¹⁰² Archives at the Provincial House in Besançon

¹⁰³ Id.

¹⁰⁴ Id.

¹⁰⁵ Id.

¹⁰⁶ Id. same letter dated 10th November 1822

In conclusion, I would propose again the reflections of Mother Antoine de Padoue:

«She was separated from her daughters, yet she was received within a larger and universal fraternity, that of the Catholic Church.

Besançon remained closed in itself, yet Jeanne-Antide carried away by the breath of the Spirit went to end of the world ...

The Nuncio told Mons. De Pressigny: *«The good work of such Institute should not be limited to a single diocese, but be extended to the catholicity.»*¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Archives at the Archbishopric in Besançon. Letter dated 17th February 1822. L.D. p. 367-369