

Jeanne Antide in BELLEVAUX

To you ...
To you who believe in friendship
To you who cherish the future of Creation
To you who believe in a more solidary and fraternal world
To you who roll up your sleeves in the face of need
To you who seek to look upwards

We can take the passage from the basic text of the FJA, on service to the poor.
In the certainty that one's daily lifestyle in the family and in the workplace, the way one uses money, leisure time and the consumption of common goods, contribute to the impoverishment or growth of people's well-being, cause or remove situations of injustice, promote or prevent environmental disaster.
The Friend is called to consider the poor as his family and friends and to serve them through voluntary work in collaboration with the **Sisters of Charity** or other ecclesial or social organisations.



Naturally, service to the poor is sustained by regular attendance at the Word of God, prayer and also attention to current events.¹ This shapes our heart, our outlook and our sensitivity to the situations of poverty.

And also returning to the life of Jeanne Antide, understanding the places and context at the time of the foundation of the Institute or the openings of various community during her life, can enable us to discover what animated her and thus help us to rediscover or strengthen some of our attitudes, as Lay Friends of Jeanne Antide, engaged in a service or voluntary work.

We will focus more on the foundation of Bellevaux, which was a real challenge for Jeanne Antide and where she was able to put her organisational skills to good use and affirm the dignity of the people who had been confined the institution.

I- II The historical context:

We cannot fail to present the context at the time when Jeanne Antide was called to Bellevaux

I-1 Political and social context

A new government at the beginning of the 19th century: the Consulate, then the Empire (1804); in the organisation of society that had suffered so much during the French Revolution.



A Prefect was appointed in each French department, who had in his hands the various powers: legal, administrative and military. Debry is appointed for Besançon. He undertook to reconcile and pacify his territory of the divided French who have supported one or the other party. During his first mandate, he gathered those who had taken the oath and those who had not before the assembly of the notables of the communes and summed up his advice in the phrase: **'Preach only the Gospel, preach it only in the church and outside it, practise it'**... Debry collaborated in a work of reconciliation whose advantage was increasingly recognised. If he considered the division among

priests a scandal, he wanted to believe that, apart from a few irreconcilables, all would soon be in agreement’.

With the signature of the Concordat, a second figure stepped in, so to speak, to continue this work of pacification and unification of society: the bishop. Monsignor Lecoq is an elderly constitutional bishop from the west of France. He and Debry know each other well: in fact, they came from the same region.

➤ **A new spirit**

To guarantee a certain peace that was being consolidated, it was necessary to put order and organise the care of the destitute. The government appealed to religious institutions not primarily out of conviction, but mainly out of economic necessity.

Since his arrival, Debry has been alarmed about the situation in Bellevaux:

‘An abominable disorder reign in Bellevaux. The porter and the jailers are without activity and without energy; the inmates are without discipline and without restraint. Every day shouts alert the neighbourhood that the inmates are fighting and killing each other. The guards rush in. But, composed as he is today, he makes the fighters laugh. The municipal administrators are asked to come and restore calm; their authority is despised; they are shamed and insulted. It is no longer a house of justice and detention: the condemned remain there only as long as they like not to leave... Ten of them, of whom the least guilty would have been hanged ten years ago, escaped a short while ago and only four were caught; the other six steal in the countryside and murder on the first day in the woods or on the roads. What’s more: the doorman and the jailers seem to intend to facilitate the escape of the convicts. They go into the streets to walk with them and into particular houses; they have the insolence to lead them to my house; they abandon them afterwards on their good faith ...’ writes the Government Commissioner to the courts, report of 4 Germinal year VIII by A. M. Nodier in 1800.

The latter sends Mayor Daclin a measure about Bellevaux and proposes to begin to put order in this chaos. Daclin proposes to bring in ‘**charitable ladies**’. In saying this, he thinks of Joan Antida and her companions who had just started charitable works in Besançon.

There, after the Revolution, it was not obvious to bring in ‘religious women’. The mayor and the prefect preferred to speak of ‘**charitable ladies**’. Under this title (charitable ladies), therefore, GA and her daughters are accepted and recognised. A ‘convention’ will specify the role of the nuns, their number and organise in detail, the future life of the establishment.

I-2 The Bellevaux House

In July 1802, therefore, a few months before Jeanne Antide entered Bellevaux, a list of guests was compiled:

State of the inmates in the house of detention and begging at Besançon (Bellevaux) at 12 Messidor in the year 10 (1 July 1802)

BOYS:

Females: 14 from 1 year to 12 years of which 10 children of convicts and 2 orphans

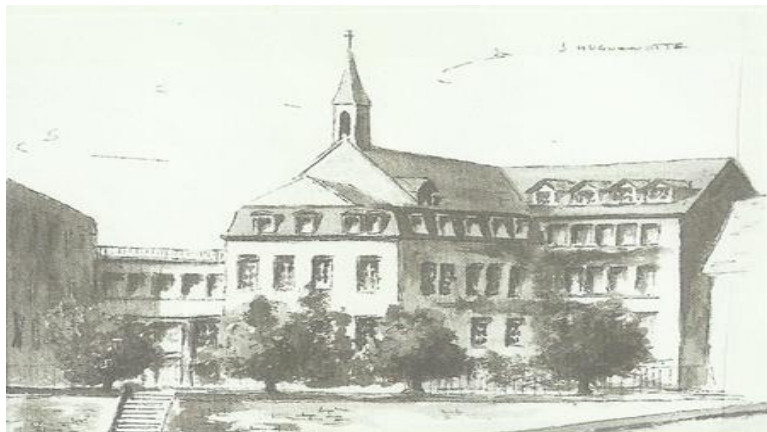
Males: 22 from 4 months to 15 years of which 16 children of convicts and 1 orphan

1 found on the public road in Dijon

Total: 36

DEMONS :

Women: 4
Men: 9
Total: 13



INDIGENTS :

Women: 13 from 28 to 85 years
Men: 9 from 47 to 71 years
Total: 22

CONVICTED :

Women: 63
Men: 50
Total: 113

GRAND TOTAL: 184 persons

This is what Sr Rosalie tells in her Manuscript

‘A large house formed two in the same enclosure: one for men, the other for women. Both were inmates of all ages, as a result of criminal or correctional judgments. Such disorder reigned there that the house **was compared to the antechamber of hell.**

The city authorities no longer dared to enter it without feeling a great fear of being killed; the priests who went to visit the sick in danger of death, were not sure of coming out alive; either because of fear, or because of the contagious disorder that reigned, the inmates were subject to malignant fevers and often died’. LD p.563

Sr Rosalie makes some further clarifications on the context: ‘Before Sister Thouret took charge of this house, there were some men who made the inmates work for their own benefit and paid them almost nothing for the work they did, indeed they mistreated them...’ LD p. 566

It is, therefore, of all this that Jeanne Antide will take charge, or rather take care!

1-3 1802: a significant year for Jeanne Antide and the emerging institute

In 1802, GA spent two months at Dôle in solitude, silence and praying to the Holy Spirit, in an arduous effort to recall the elements of the Rule of the **Daughters of Charity** with whom she had lived in Paris, in order to give a foundation to her little company, writing the 1802 Rule in collaboration with Abbot Filsjean.

At the end of this endeavour, she received a new appeal for the Bellevaux prison: 'Having finished writing the Rule, she received a letter from Besançon, inviting her to return as soon as possible because they intended to entrust her with the great house of Bellevaux, Rue du Petit-Battant, in Besançon. And then she left'. LD p. 565

Having received an appeal and no doubt knowing the sad reputation of the house at Bellevaux, JA dared to face prison. With six other sisters, she settled in that 'cloaca' as the prefect Debry called it: 'Sr. Thouret was not frightened by all this: she took six of her Daughters with her and went there full of confidence in God,' Sr. Rosalie tells us.

II- The arrival of Joan Antida and her companions at Bellevaux:

We possess several accounts of the arrival of Joan Antida at Bellevaux:

The one of the Bacoffe

'On the 23rd of September 1802, first grape harvest at eleven o'clock in the morning, Mr. Prefect Jean Debry solemnly installed the new Administration of Bellevaux and our new Sisters who have taken charge of the leadership of this hospice, in the presence of the Archbishop, Monsignor Claudio Lecoz, the Council of the Department, the municipality, in the midst of a picket of gendarmes.' Notebook of M. Bacoffe p 29

That of Jeanne Antida herself

'Arriving from Dôle in Besançon, the Prefect asked us to settle in a punishment house, called 'Bellevaux', in Besançon, occupied by men and women of all ages, detained following court and correctional sentences. The Archbishop was present at the installation with the Prefect and some gendarmes to instil respect in the prisoners and submit them to us...' From the '**Memorial of Pure Truth**' in LD p. 476-477

That of Sr Rosalie

'... . The Prefect of the city wanted to personally establish them in that house. To this end, he had the other authorities accompany him and an armed picket to impose himself on and awe the prisoners. The Prefect addressed everyone in a firm tone: 'Here are some **charitable ladies**, whom I establish to direct you, to offer you their care in health and illness: you will respect them. Here is the Superior: you will obey her, do you understand?'. They replied: 'Of course, Mr. Prefect! '. 'Well then, be thankful and calm; may I never have to hear anything unpleasant again! '. The mayor of the town gave Sister Thouret a thousand francs to temporarily meet the expenses of the house.' MSR. LD p. 565-566

III- Jeanne Antide and her companions at Bellevaux

Various decrees of the Prefecture or extracts from the Register of Resolutions of the Administration of Bellevaux enable us to know in part how the Sisters lived. A regulation of the Prefect established the different tasks of the Administrators, the staff and the Sisters.

The Manuscript of Sr. Rosalie SR from p. 564 to (p. 569 recounts the early days of the Sisters' presence in Bellevaux and the immediate and **appreciable** changes brought about by Jeanne Antide, in accordance with the convention established with the Authorities. The Sisters transformed the lives of the residence in each area. It should be noted how Jeanne Antide aided by the provision of

the convention takes care of all the needs of the person and ensures that they are met in the best possible way:

However, with Bellevaux Jeanne Antida diversifies the forms of service but also the way of serving. It is no longer a question of living for the poor, visiting them, welcoming them, but of a life with the poor and this: daily! It is undoubtedly the particularity of the Institution when the Community lives within the Institution itself, at the same pace as the people.

- **Such proximity** that one runs the risk of being swallowed up and assimilated into the same group with which one lives. And that is precisely what the first companions of Jeanne Antide considered in this new adventure! (MSR p. 565-569). **Sister Thouret's daughters**, were very frightened and they secretly planned to leave that house. The recluse women, to discourage them, railed against them, saying: 'Oh! if you were exemplary young men, you would not have come here! No doubt, you are bastion youths.... This house is not at all for honest girls. Since you have come here, it is proof that you are not. Those good young nuns were very distressed to hear such things. Weeping, they went to Sister Thouret: 'Mother, we can no longer stay here; we are losing our reputation. Those women tell us this and that.... It is too hard to be treated as the vilest, the most shameless young people, while we have always been honest'. To them he replied: 'It is true: this is what gives you merit before God and also before men, who know your honesty very well and are convinced of what such women are capable of... They are people of filth, of abjection, of sin and crime, who try to defile you, to discourage you, in order to make you leave and to be able to begin the wicked life again with the men who are imprisoned, as before. We all suffer for the holy name of God, for His sake, to prevent crimes, for the salvation of our neighbour. The good God sees everything and knows everything; he will know how to properly reward us, to help us: and this must be enough for us. Let us take courage! Let us trust in God: he has means to remedy everything'.

- A service that implies poor living conditions: (SRM p 564)

'At this time, there was only one room for her and her daughters. The administrators brought in three rented beds, which they spread out on the floor every night, thinking that this was only temporary accommodation while waiting for more beds, which never arrived. Sister Thouret will buy them out of her own pocket, sending back the rented ones.'

However, as can be seen, Jeanne Antida did not hesitate to go to the expense so that each of her sisters would have the 'simple necessities'.

- For service, Joan Antida uses the necessary means: she does not hesitate to use money so that people have food and can work. She did not hesitate to introduce innovations and new techniques for this service: for the prisoners' food, the state only passed on bread and water, part of the product of the prisoners' work served to improve the ordinary. In the autumn of 1802, Jeanne Antide introduced a new method of cooking invented by Rumford (an American physicist) and disseminated by Cuvier (a native of Montbéliard), a kind of pressure cooker. The soup portion was distributed. 7 cts.

- **This service takes into account the basic needs of the person:**

- Physiological needs: decent food, hygiene, care ... 'From the moment she set foot in this great house, she ensured that it was all very clean'.

Need for security satisfied through order, structure: 'She fought and made them fight against the disorder of the lowest vices; and those who were very dangerous, who did not want to correct themselves, she told the Administration about them, who gave the order to put them in the black prisons for some time, for a penance, in order to correct them and to stop the advance of evil.'

- **Need for self-esteem**, consideration, dignity recognised through work and education.

Spinning and weaving work, wages paid. Teaching children: 'She had the sons of the prisoners taught by a master and the daughters by a mistress.'

- **Spiritual needs:** 'She established for evening and morning prayer in common between men and women. There was no chapel, no priest: Sr Thouret had a room repaired and an altar placed in the middle so that men and women could be separated; she had it blessed and invited a priest to celebrate Holy Mass daily. The men and women attended, and preaching and catechism was provided on Sundays and feast days with the help of the chaplain and others. Sister Thouret took care to hear the confessions of the sick and healthy inmates; with the work of her Daughters, she encouraged them in spiritual readings, morning and evening prayer, **recitation** of the rosary, instruction, and preparation to receive the holy sacraments of the Church. He made them console themselves, lead them to God, to the spirit of penance; to make holy use of their sufferings to redeem their sins, to sanctify themselves and save themselves through an honest life and a holy death.'

Here we find the two dimensions of service, according to Jeanne Antide: **temporal and at the same time spiritual service.**

IV- Consequences of the sisters' presence at Bellevaux

What will be the consequences of the sisters' presence at Bellevaux, after these promising beginnings? First of all, they are important for the prisoners and the sisters living inside the prison, but they are especially important for the congregation and its development **in this time of renewal of social and political life in France**. It is a time in which questions are being asked about situations to which answers must be found, a time of reactions and decisions that will have important **repercussions** in the life of the young congregation.

However, the Prefect does not cease to praise himself for having called the Sisters to Bellevaux. 'The Prefect replied to the Minister that after he had established the Sisters of Charity there, the expenses were much less, and that they had already saved the Government several thousand francs, and that the prisoners were better fed and infinitely better treated from every point of view; that they had restored this house to good order and to the satisfaction of all; that she received in return nothing but food, no clothing, nor any other advantage: finally, that their virtue and zeal were admirable. In other words, all previous contradictions had come to an end.' MSR. LD p566

Debry would write to the Minister of Worship in 1806:

'... It is to their zeal, well-directed, enlightened, I may say, that I owe the re-establishment of order, of a wise economy and of a truly agreeable regime, in a building in our city known under the name of Bellevaux.'

V- Consequences for us today

- **Bellevaux remains a symbol, a model place in which to recognise the primitive identity of the Sisters of Charity in its origins and activities:** to respond to all appeals, in favour of all kinds of poor people, in whatever situation they may find themselves, in order to meet God and show them the way that leads to God: 'But the services that the Sisters will render to the poor will not be limited to temporal needs, nor to the care of the health of the body: the salvation of the soul! That is what they will have at heart above all that which will animate all the ardour of their zeal, that to which they will devote themselves prudently, constantly and tirelessly...' RV 1807 p.69-70
- **Bellevaux also remains a symbol of Jeanne Antide's way of working.** Mother Thouret does not work alone. In Bellevaux, as was already the case for the distribution of broth in the

Battant district, Jeanne Antide works closely with the civil authorities, the prefect, the mayor, the administrators. GA establishes or arranges for conventions to be established with the administrations and is accountable to both civil and religious authorities. (cf. conversation with curate Bacoffe. LD p. 582-583).

And after the Prefect put the Sisters of Charity in charge, it is recognised that the management of Bellevaux has improved and that the residents are treated better and cared for with love... Bellevaux is no longer regarded as a prison, little by little it becomes a **'charitable institution'**.

From the very beginning Jeanne Antide has been able to collaborate with the ecclesiastical and civil authorities for the good of the poor. Jeanne Antide never considers itself the 'owner' of the works of the Congregation. Certainly, when it becomes necessary to defend them, she will give her all, but she will never do it for herself, but for the good of the poor.

For almost 15 years, there is no longer a religious community in Bellevaux, but it continues to function as a public **EHPAD** (hospital establishment for dependent elderly people) But long before their departure, the sisters set up a group of volunteers to help with meals and fraternal visits. This group continues to this day in the form of an Association.

CONCLUSION:

To conclude, I will focus on the gaze of Joan Antida, not so much that of the portrait that we all know and that sometimes impresses... but on her inner gaze that makes her act. Let us therefore return to the Gospel passage of the Good Samaritan. Seeing... feeling... acting...

No suffering left Jeanne Antide indifferent.

It is important to emphasise the words Jeanne Antide uses to express the feelings that dwell in her heart:

'It is a very precious duty and very dear to our hearts to save a poor and abandoned youth from ignorance and vice. Destitute girls will be the object of our most ardent zeal, of our most attentive and tender charity'. LD 215

Very precious duty: total commitment

The goal of our most ardent zeal: the need for love

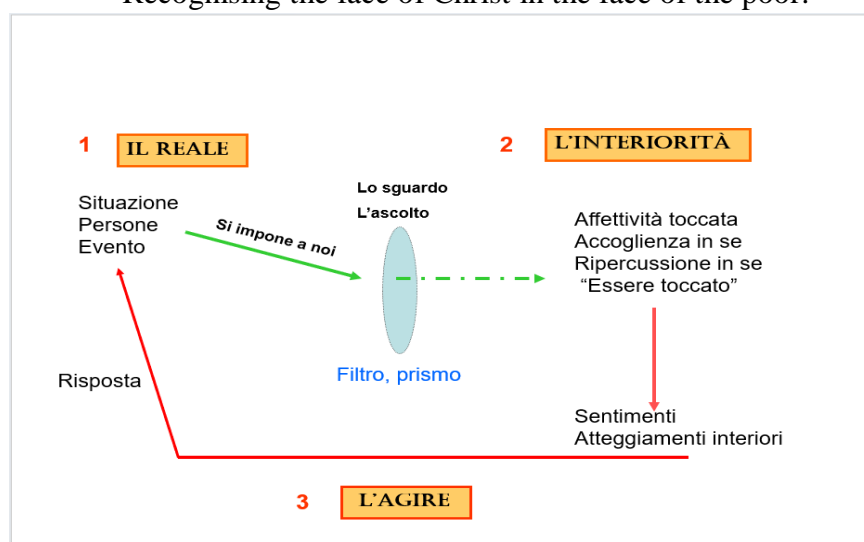
Our most attentive charity: professional conscience (knowing how to do)

Tenderness: attitude of heart (knowing how to be)

He has a **gaze of faith modelled on the spirituality of Vincent de Paul:**

- Recognising the face of Christ in the face of the poor.

- To continue Christ's mission, to cooperate in God's work



➤ The gaze - listening:

Tender gaze and listening are

- **the place of our relationship with the world, reality, people**
- **the place and means of the encounter**

The gaze prepares the action, gives rise to the decision.

➤ **In the re-reading:**

It is important to take up the following three aspects:

- the real: events, situations, persons
- what they arouse in me: affectivity, inner attitudes
- How I respond in my actions: Word, attitudes, gestures, actions

Jeanne Antide's gaze is a gaze that sees, that engages the hands, the intelligence and the heart, the whole being.

It is a gaze that makes one go towards the other: at home, in the shallows in Naples

It is a gaze that seeks to re-establish order, goodness, joy, truth.

It is a gaze that hopes in the other.

It is a gaze that lets you see, that offers the poor to God's gaze and that offers God to the poor man's gaze.

Reflection for an exchange in your local groups:

- What is new for me in this presentation?
- Is there a point that I personally consider essential?
- What essential point do I consider important for our Friend of Jeanne Antide group?
- How can it help me to live or re-read my service, my voluntary activity today in a parish, as a Church or in an association?
- What are the challenges today in your cultural, social, ecclesial and religious context, to live more and more in collaboration with the sisters?
- And with civil and religious authorities?