

**BICENTENARY OF THE FOUNDATION OF THE CONGREGATION
OF SAINT JOSEPH DE CLUNY
IN THE DIOCESE OF REUNION
1817 - 2017**

**Homily of Bishop Gilbert AUBRY
15 July, 2017 at the Cathedral of Saint-Denis**

**ANNE MARIE JAVOUHEY
STRATEGY FOR MISSIONARY DEVELOPMENT
*"The light will rise in the darkness" Isaiah 58: 6-10
"Your heavenly Father knows ..." Mt 6:25***

We are gathered here today for this bicentenary jubilee of the Congregation of Saint Joseph of Cluny's apostolic presence in Reunion. Let us take a look at how Anne Marie Javouhey was born into what was a difficult epoch in history. Indeed, we can really only understand the development of the Congregation in the light of the Foundress's spirituality

YOUTH AND THE POOR

Anne-Marie Javouhey was born into a very Christian family in 1779. It was a close-knit family and all shared in the work of the fields and prayed together as a family. Anne Marie was the eldest of four girls. Known as Nanette, she was very lively. She liked enjoyment and having fun. At harvest time there were the dances and 'farandoles' of Burgundy, no shortage of food, and wine flowed freely. It was not just hustle and bustle, but rather a festive occasion. At fifteen life was beautiful, with faith, family life, friendships, work in the fields and the Church all merging together.

In 1790, the French Revolution broke out. In 1793 ... the Reign of Terror spread everywhere in France. That was the state of affairs, it was really a terror that divided families. The neighbours were spying and denouncing each other, everyone was suspicious and the guillotine was there for some. The Church was divided. The Javouhey family welcomed refractory priests to celebrate Mass in secret in their homes. The climate of prayer was intense and it was in this general atmosphere that Nanette received an inner call to religious life. She was seventeen. Already, she was gathering children to teach them to read and to pray. At eighteen, in the presence of her family, she publicly declared her intention of consecrating her life to God in the service of youth and the poor. We see here the impetus and birth of a religious vocation.

Balthazar Javouhey, mayor of the commune of Chamblanc, did not appreciate the direction his eldest daughter wanted to take, not to mention drawing her three other sisters with her. The father of the family had other plans for his eldest daughter who was considered a good choice to found a family. Anne-Marie then wrote to her father: *"I cannot express all the grief I feel in seeing the way you are judging my actions. You know that I have given myself entirely to God: well then I must do His will in all things without considering my inclinations... can it be possible that since I want to do the will of God, you have ceased to be my father? No, you have too good a heart to act thus. I hope you will never cease to love a child who loves you"* (quoted by René Berthier).

This letter radiates the three theological virtues which constitute the framework of life for every Christian. Faith, hope and charity. Charity, that is, love that comes from God and returns to God with the radiance of love that has been engendered in our lives. I repeat the words of Anne-Marie Javouhey: *"You do not doubt ... I hope that ... You will never cease loving"*. What character. What strength of soul. What confidence in the work to be accomplished ... accomplish a work for God? No. That is not what it is about. For Nanette, it is a matter of accomplishing "the work of God" by doing not her will but faithfully accomplishing the "will of God," God our Father, Father of all human beings, Father of her father Balthazar. The words of Anne-Marie's letter touched her father. But it is finally the fatherhood of God that challenged the human fatherhood of Balthazar: he was called to collaborate in his daughter's mission to manifest the infinite

goodness of the Father of heaven for all men. Anne-Marie appeals to her father's heart, a heart that is "too good". Today, young people would say, it's just too much! Just as Father Balthazar would not refuse his children anything and especially Nanette, his favourite, how much more would the Heavenly Father not deny his children on earth, his four adventurous daughters courageously launching out on a great apostolic enterprise.

Little Nanette grew up. She sought her vocation. She discerned how to respond to her religious vocation. Indeed, in 1800 she was in Besançon. In 1803 she was at the Valsainte Trappists. In 1805, she had a providential interview with Pope Pius VII in Chalons-sur-Saône. But during the various searching she never doubted "the will of God." She knew the way to go because she firmly followed Christ, who said of himself "I am the way, the truth and the life, no one goes to the Father except through me" (Jn 14.6).

So the path of Anne-Marie and her three sisters was certain since Jesus Himself used these words: "*Do not worry so much, do not say- what are we going to eat? Or what are we going to do? Or what are we going to wear? All this the pagans seek. But your heavenly Father knows what you need*" (Mt 6: 33-34). In 1807: the Congregation was officially recognized. Two hundred and ten years ago this year. In 1817: the first missionary foundation was made in Bourbon - Reunion. Two hundred years ago.

Foundation in Reunion

In Bourbon - Reunion, the first community finally settled in 'Bout de l'Etang' in Saint-Paul. A small girls' school was opened. Anne-Marie Javouhey would have liked to come herself to Reunion. She wrote to Sister Marie-Joseph Varin, the first Superior in Bourbon in January 1818: "*I am half alive only I am so anxious to be there with you. I have caught the sickness of the country, a dark mood has overcome me. (...) Bring up the children well, let the parents be happy; Love them and they will love you, and you will do with them what you wish*". What does 'dark mood' mean? Anne-Marie cared deeply about the liberation of the slaves. She could not bear this abomination. Her love for Christ, her love for the Father of all human beings engendered in her an irresistible impulse to work for the liberation of blacks through the abolition of slavery. It should be noted that in the same year, 1817, the Brothers of the Christian Schools also arrived in Reunion Island and were involved in promoting the education of boys.

Anne-Marie was very attached to the Reunion mission having had a vision at the beginning of her religious life in which she was surrounded by children with different faces, including many blacks. She had never seen blacks ... and dared to ask another Sister about their existence. The Sister had replied that they did exist beyond the sea and very far away. The call of the ocean had its effect on Anne-Marie and this appeal was not reserved for Reunion only. The budding Congregation would radiate to many parts of the world. Anne-Marie Javouhey and her Sisters were developing a pedagogy of education that called for freedom for all and responsibility through a participative method where talents were identified and valued. The more able students helped the weakest. The pedagogy was put into action. The construction of buildings obviously called for the generosity of her father, Balthazar who always grumbled a little but put his hand in his pocket nonetheless. And there were also sponsors.

But the 'Mother Foundress' relied mainly on the political sense of those bearing responsibility for public affairs. The big output at the beginning would be for the purchase of the convent in Cluny, for ever-growing needs. Anne-Marie therefore had a 'philosophy' of public relations that opened doors to action. She showed a loving concern everywhere, using talents and skills to meet the various needs, urging people to face up to their responsibilities. Praying, analysing, and making decisions, moving forward faithful to the intuition of knowing when to depart. This intuition would be a springboard for action, and would sustain the venture through patient and persevering commitment. We could say that she was a mission development strategist, based on reading the signs of the times. The Holy Spirit was at work building a world of brotherhood and sisterhood in an increasingly global domain.

THE ABOLITION OF SLAVERY

From 1822 to 1824, she was journeying in Senegal. From 1827 to 1833, she would be in Guyana. Mana became a prophetic place, a Christian village, a big family. In 1836, at the General Chapter of the Sisters

of Saint Joseph of Cluny, she was re-elected Superior. A conflict broke out with the Bishop of Autun who wanted to take over the Congregation. She signed her submission but held on to her responsibility as Superior and had the Bishop prayed for. The Congregation would ultimately remain independent. From 1837 to 1843, she stayed in Guyana a second time and it was in Mana in 1838 that the first collective liberation of a large group of slaves was realized in French territory.

The love and freedom of the Gospel were of more importance than political decisions and the law. There was no political calculation on the part of Anne-Marie Javouhey. She with her Sisters experienced the fecundity of the Word of God when this Word is meditated on and lived as the salt of the earth and the light of the world. The prophet Isaiah had already proclaimed, *"Righteousness shall walk before you, and the glory of the Lord shall accompany you. If you call, the Lord will answer, if you cry, He will say 'here I am'. If you remove the yoke, the threatening gesture, the evil word from your country, if you give with a generous heart to the hungry and if you satisfy the desires of the unfortunate, the light will rise in the darkness and your darkness will be as the light of noon"* (Is 58: 8-10).

Louis Philippe's Government in France sought to abolish slavery. Experiences in French Overseas territories overlapped and came together: Anne-Marie Javouhey, Alexandre Monnet, Frédéric Levavasseur, Victor Schoelcher. Providence was at work. Louis-Philippe abdicated with the Revolution of 1848. In this struggle for human dignity, ideas that were already advanced did not retreat. So the emancipation of slaves progressed to the proclamation of the abolition of slavery in 1848. "Fraternity" came to complete the ideals of freedom and equality in the slogan of the French Republic. Until 1848, the ideal of fraternity was not there. However, much work remained to be done to truly realize this fraternity. But the basics were there. A turning point was taken. A beautiful turning point happened on the island of Reunion.

Anne-Marie died in 1851. She thus knew of the proclamation of the abolition of slavery. She could then rejoice in the full freedom of the children of God, in that plenitude of love that had always guided and sustained her throughout her life. As soon as she died, her reputation for holiness spread throughout the world. In 1950, Pope Pius XII beatified her in Rome.

We can ask ourselves what criteria Anne-Marie Javouhey used in order to arrive with certainty at understanding what was "the will of God"? In a book just published "A Road to Sanctity in the Church", Sister Suzel Gerard, a Cluny Sister, identifies four criteria found in the writings of Anne-Marie Javouhey:

- The first criterion is the rule (Constitutions): a rule already approved and that cannot be destroyed even a Bishop *"It is my compass, my safety, it must be that of all the Sisters of Saint Joseph"*.
- The second criterion that the ardent missionary offers is a rational one: it is *"the good and the prosperity of the work entrusted by God. Do not harm the work. And to do a good work, trust God who will not destroy another"*.
- The third criterion is *"the discernment of the will of God, the good that one can do to others. Find freedom in the midst and heart of slavery"*. We see, therefore, that we cannot separate love of God and love of neighbour.
- The fourth most important criterion for Anne-Marie Javouhey is what God inspires in prayer, it is intuition. *"All rational criteria must be sifted through intuition. Put ourselves under the influence of the Spirit and see if we are inspired by God to continue his work as he has begun it, or if he has changed his plans."* (Cf Suzel Gérard, pages 56 to 59)

OUR SCHOOLS

My dear religious Sisters of Cluny in Reunion, in the past your numbers enabled you to launch, support and carry out multiple works in various fields of the apostolate in the Church and in society. Sister Egyptienne, your provincial at the beginning of this Holy Mass, detailed the initiatives and achievements you have undertaken. In the 1960s, thanks to the numerous Sisters and successive generations of vocations you effected an active presence in your schools. Historically, you have been missionaries in Madagascar and Pondicherry. Today, with small numbers, you exercise the tutelage in your schools and in the High School and

agricultural college at Sainte-Suzanne.

As Bishop of Reunion and in the name of the diocese, I thank you, dear Sisters, for the fidelity and perseverance of the Congregation in a mission that was rooted in your Cluny charism. Catholic education in Reunion counts on you "to re-captivate the school" with Jesus Christ who is our compass for Humanity. I sincerely hope that all the partners of our Cluny schools commit themselves "to a way of holiness in the Church" so that with different talents, recognized skills, shared responsibilities, held and validated, each school is in harmony with its ideal of better living together as an "educational community". You are already doing it. May God give you the grace to persevere, to progress even more, to radiate. Indeed, in all our schools, there must be no power competitions between the various bodies of Catholic Education, whether in the same school, in a particular geographical area or in the whole diocese.

In order that our schools "re-energize the school", let us take into consideration what Jacques Balmand, Secretary General of Catholic Education, says: "This assumes that the absolute priority is always the children and young people in their diversity. This requires the deployment of a pedagogy conducive to the success of all, the implementation of an organization capable of responding to this diversity. This requires listening to the actors in the school system, hearing the parents, and making room for researchers. It takes a lot of enthusiasm and a lot of generosity." (Contribution of Catholic Teaching **For the School**)

Certainly, Sisters, you are reduced in numbers and you have become internationalized. Your poverty becomes wealth through the reception of differences. The reception of differences leads to thanksgiving, thanksgiving leads to abandonment in the hands of God, abandonment in the hands of God leads to trust. And then, the Cluny family does not mean the Sisters alone. There are the associates, past pupils, benefactors, friends who, in different ways, devote themselves and commit themselves so that the mission of the Congregation of Cluny will continue in time and develop, taking into account the needs, the aspirations of our time and the desires of rising generations. To all lay benefactors, I hereby address the thanks, encouragement and prayers of the entire diocese.

YOUNG GIRLS ... BE INVENTIVE!

Dear friends, I wish you all a joyous bicentenary celebration of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Cluny presence in Reunion. I think of Blessed Anne-Marie Javouhey and all the holy nuns of Saint Joseph of Cluny who are already enjoying the happiness of the Saints. To them too - and especially to them - I say thank you for the Church in Reunion Island and I ask for their support for new vocations. I ask them to call young girls - and there are some here - who are asking questions about the meaning of their lives. How to succeed in life? How to live in these times, our times ... like Nanette, who was lively, who liked to please, dance and have fun? Nanette, who prayed so well, and led others to pray. How take on a great cause, give yourselves to God, a cause that brings joy and happiness for the glory of God and the service of others.

Young girls, there is so much to invent, to create. There is so much to love that God trusts in you, to lead you further on, to lead you to make a success of your life. And if you feel the call to live religious life in a way different to what you see today and which may not fully suit you, then invent your way of being a religious. Invent it in agreement with the Church, in agreement with a Congregation that will welcome your project. Become religious by becoming cosmonauts. Reach for the stars and keep your feet on the ground. Become religious by becoming nurses, doctors, academics, researchers, teachers, teachers in schools. Visit patients in the hospital, be chaplains in hospitals and prisons! Be truck drivers or underwater divers. The horizon is wide. The sky is the limit, the earth is vast and the sea is deep. There is room for everyone.

But above all, do not forget to pray intimately every day with Jesus and to share the Word of God with others. And then, on the day of the Lord's resurrection, on Sunday, there is the Eucharist, there is Holy Mass. It is a source of love and energy that is unequalled. Do not forget to "talk with others". Anne-Marie Javouhey's "talking with others" is what we call today dialogue in teams, shared reflections, actions to be taken together. To you who are searching, to you also who feel doubts, I say "thank you". But know that God does not doubt you. He trusts you. And then continue on. Ask Nanette to help you and I ask her on your behalf. Advance. God loves you. Advance. Do you love Him? Advance. Jesus is saying to you: "Come and follow me". (Mt 19,21)

Monsignor Gilbert AUBRY, Bishop of Reunion Island