

Mother Claudine : A True Shepherdess who exemplified the Qualities of the Great Shepherd

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Introduction

Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father – and I lay down my life for the sheep.” (**John 10:14, 15**) Jesus is called the Great Shepherd (**Hebrews 13:20**) (**1 Peter 5:4**) and He was prepared to come and be a sacrificial lamb that we might be accepted by the living God. (**John 1:29**).

Jesus came to preach the good news to the poor, to release the oppressed, to comfort all who mourn and to provide for those who grieve and HE came to heal the sick, to raise the dead, to take up our infirmities and carry our sorrows, and much more. (**Isaiah 52:13 – 53: 12; Isaiah 61:1-3; Luke 4:18, 19**) The people of God need to continue this work today. God- called and appointed leaders, in particular, need to take up the work of Jesus, carrying out on His behalf. “Many are called; but few are chosen” (**Matthew 22:14**) . Who are the God- called persons? The scripture says “And they that are with Him are called, and chosen, and faithful” (**Revelation 17:14**). **Mother Claudine Echernier** who walked with Jesus throughout her life rightly proved herself to be a God-called person. Her passion was to walk in the footprints of her Master, Jesus Christ – the Great Shepherd. She never forgot that Jesus is the ultimate example of the type of character God wants His people to be **Mother Claudine Echernier**

“Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their ways of life and imitate their faith”. (**Hebrews 13:7**).

On seeing the outcome of the excellencies of Christ imitated by the poor, pious, energetic and devoted follower of Christ who built an empire for our Lord in 16 countries of 4 continents, one can blissfully say that Mother Claudine Echernier was a real example of Christ to the flock that was lovingly entrusted in her hands. Her main aim was to develop a more Christ – like character as she always held Jesus as her role model. Character is not given to a person just like that; it is developed over time as we yield our life to God and His word, and as we discipline our life to do His will. (**2 Peter 1:3-11; Hebrews 6: 1-3**). In fact, we all have a fallen nature which is often lazy and which fights against the ways of God. To overcome this, we need to replace it with a Christ-like character that will walk with God, no matter what. The more Christ- like a person is ,

the more usable and available to God he will be , and the more fruitful and effective for God he will be. (**John 15: 1- 17**). Our Mother Claudine ‘s deep desire to be a Christ – like person had no doubt proved that she was a perfect vessel fit for the Master’s use. Her unquenchable thirst for doing His ministry with everlasting love has resulted in the formation of a great congregation of thousands of followers with a mission **to reveal to all people the merciful love of the Father and the liberating power of the Paschal mystery.**

Mother Claudine Echernier : A True Shepherdess

“Then Jesus said to His disciples, “whoever wishes to come after me, must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.” (**Matthew 16:24**). As a little village girl who had to take care of her family, early at the age of 15, (Chapter III , p.15), all Mother Claudine could understand was to surrender herself totally at the feet of her Master and lovingly carry her cross and follow Him. This great quality is well exhibited in many incidents – her patience to undergo surgery on her broken leg without any sedation, her immediate return to her ill- equipped room when the Daughters of the Cross said that the open air was very good and breezy(**Page 329 of the Family Annals Book 1,Chapter III**) and working at the fields even when she was the Superior and advanced in age (**p.330**). These are only very few of a great number of instances when she willingly agreed to carry her cross.

“Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care” (**I Peter 5:2-4**). As a true follower of Jesus Christ, how our Mother Claudine emulated the qualities of the Great Shepherd can be seen in the following pages. An attempt has been made to compare the qualities of Mother Claudine with the qualities of a true Shepherd.

Rationale for calling Mother as a true Shepherdess

1. A true Shepherd goes before his sheep preparing the way for them to follow:

Leaders need to be pro-active and need to discover the green pastures by going ahead of their sheep, and then they need to assess them to see if they are good and right for their sheep. They also need to lead their sheep to quiet, restful waters which they have examined and found to be clean and pure for their sheep.All these qualities are best found in our Mother’s life.

- When the washer woman who ill treated the Daughters of the Cross fell ill , our Mother stayed with her and looked after her till she died. This act of love shows that she was always ready not only to forgive others but also to reconcile with them. (**page 122 of the Family Annals Book 1**).

Her example and instructions served her Daughters as a rule of conduct in their contacts with the people of the world. Her only aim was always to secure the glory of God and the salvation of souls by her good example and edifying words.

2. Know their sheep

Good leaders realize that people are more important than numbers. Mother Claudine took all efforts to know the Daughters of the Cross, so that she could relate to them; so that she could discern spiritual times and seasons in their lives.

- Jeanne Belleville, a Daughter of the Cross belonged to a respectable and good Christian family of Chavanod. Mother Claudine could find that she possessed remarkable talents and a great faith in our Lord. She also could see that Jeanne was a very good teacher who had a great ambition to serve the Congregation, but had some weaknesses. Mother's talks on Divine love with her and the confidence reposed in Jeanne brought great changes in her life. The way in which Mother made her realize the Great call by giving up the vanities of life is remarkable. In the pretext of shaking hands, Mother wisely removed the ring, Jeanne was wearing on her fingers. (**Chapter IV, page 89 of the Family Annals Book 1**)

- As the Daughters of the Cross were very young and needed recreation and merry making, Mother encouraged them to be happy during their recreation time. Infact she permitted the young sisters to have innocent amusements. She encouraged them to sing devotional songs and she herself sang with them a devotion which was an inspiration to others. (**Page 113 of the Family Annals Book 1, Chapter IV**)

3. Direct their sheep

One of the main functions of a shepherd is to prevent their sheep from going astray. Sheep, if lost, usually do not try to rejoin the flock – they just wander around aimlessly, eating whatever is available.

- As Mother did not have any place to stay at Annecy, she had to travel everyday from Annecy barefoot to Chavanod (6 Kms apart) just to give guidance to her daughters. Though it was difficult for her to travel every day, she enjoyed doing it. Because what was important for her

was that the sheep of her flock should not fall into sin due to lack of constant watch. (Page 118 of the Family Annals Book 1, Chapter IV)

4. Guard , protect and fight for the sheep

Leaders need to understand the signs of the times and to always be watchful for enemy attack; and they need to be able to ward off these attacks.

- When the Daughters of the Cross were ridiculed and even at times stoned by the people of Chavanod because of their poverty and the menial work they were doing, Mother used to comfort them by assuring them that their reward was there in Heaven and they should not be discouraged . She did not seek protection from the world but from above and she kept on encouraging the daughters by saying that they had to rejoice as the insult and humiliation from the world for His sake was pleasing to God. “You will be hated by all because of My name, but it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved”. (Mathew 10:22).The result was that the insults were stopped and the Sisters could do their work peacefully. (Page 119 of the Family Annals Book 1, Chapter IV)

- When the daughters had to be sent to different places to teach in schools, Mother often accompanied them and stayed for a fortnight or even longer in those places to see that they had sufficient means to survive there. What a different meaning for the term - ‘sufficient’ in Mother’s and the Daughters’ dictionary – one bed , no chairs, no kitchen utensils, not even a room in an apartment, no salary but only voluntary fees from generous hands. (Page 123,124 of the Family Annals Book 1, Chapter IV)

The following holds true for the Daughters of the Cross (Mathew 10:9,10.)“Do not get any gold or silver or copper to take with you in your belts — no bag for the journey or extra shirt or sandals or a staff, for the worker is worth his keep.”

With nothing in their hand but only the unshakeable faith in their heart under the guidance of Mother, they taught in schools , visited the sick, gathered the young girls and women and shared the word of God with them. Their poverty shone with all its splendor and they were happy in their poverty. (Page 124 of the Family Annals Book 1, Chapter IV)

5. Give their life to their sheep

Jesus laid down His life for us, and leaders need to follow His example and lay down their lives for their flock. (**I John 3:16**). Leaders should then inspire their flock to do the same for each other

During the French Revolution in 1848 , when two intruders tried to enter into the Community , Mother rang the bell loudly and bravely . On hearing the bell , they ran away quickly. This shows the valor and vigilant nature of Mother Claudine. (**Page 135 of the Family Annals Book 1, Chapter IV**)

6 .Be committed to their flock

A true shepherd has to take care of the needs of the sheep under his care.

- Once Mother preferred to stay in the ill-equipped farm house just to accommodate a sick sister in her room. (**Page 149 of the Family Annals Book 1, Chapter IV**)

5. Unite their sheep

The body of Christ needs to function as an integrated, interrelated, interdependent whole. Unity is necessary for this to be possible and for the body of Christ to be effective and fruitful. Leaders should therefore, look out for disunifying factors and deal with them as the Lord directs. They should also continually encourage unity and admonish members of their flock whenever its unity is a threat. (**I Corinthians 1:10; Romans 15:5,6; Philipians 2:1-5; Psalm 133:1-3**)

It is the shepherd's job to keep the sheep together and to go after the one who is lost (**Mathew 18: 10-14; Luke 15:3-7**). Some sheep have a habit of wandering and the shepherd needs to know how to deal with this type of sheep. These people may need encouragement (if they are hurt, insecure or disillusioned) or discipline (if they continually complain and refuse to settle and , therefore , are beginning to unsettle others; or if they are just seeking attention). Mother never ignored these types of people, but rather went after them and discerned the Lord's ways to overcome the problems, thus enabling each person to become a fruitful member of the group.

Divided and scattered sheep are easy prey for the enemy. It is important that any shepherd unite his flock and keep them together. With this in mind, we will look at four helps that a leader can use to enable unity-

(i) Leaders should be confident in their relationship and fellowship with the Lord, and seek approval from Him and not from other people. If leaders do not do this, they will encourage faction in their flock.

- When the Daughters were forced to buy a property for their shelter, Mother vehemently opposes that idea saying that they preferred poverty to all the gold in the world. The most astonishing virtue of Mother was that she made all the Daughters to make a Novena (prayer) so that Fr. Mermier, their Superior too would oppose this move. When they heard that he too was not for this, she made everyone sing the canticle: Let us praise forever, The goodness of the Lord. **(Page 144 of the Family Annals Book 1, Chapter IV)**

- Finally when the property was purchased and she was questioned as to how she was going to repay the debt, she made a wonderful statement "Oh! Father, I did not even think of that, I acted through **obedience**, and now I rely on **Providence**." **(Page 148 of the Family Annals Book 1, Chapter IV)**

(ii) A leader must allow God's grace to grow and flow among the members of your body and put the past behind you.

- Mother's pilgrimage on foot in complete prayer and meditation to La Salette at her old age and declining health shows her thirst for visiting her patroness Mother Mary is remarkable.

"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith;" **(2 Timothy 4:7)** Mother's death was so glorious that her gaze was habitually fixed on her crucifix and on the picture of the Sacred heart. If they spoke to her about worldly things, she did not reply; but if there was a question of spiritual things she spoke much and showed gratitude. They could see her moving lips, but could not understand anything other than these words: Jesus, my Jesus! **(Page 384 of the Family Annals Book 1, Chapter IV)**

(iii) A leader must allow the flock to see and feel God's love in your life as leaders.

When Mother's fractured leg had to be operated without giving any sedation to her, Mother holding the Crucifix on her hand refused any help from anyone and accepted the suffering calmly saying that she loved to bear the cross as Jesus allowed Himself to be nailed on the Cross. Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. **(Mathew 16 :24)**

(Page 158 of the Family Annals Book 1, Chapter IV)

(iv) A leader should maintain relationship with God, because all leaders need to feed on God and draw strength and encouragement from Him on a daily basis. Otherwise , they will dry up and become disillusioned when the going gets tough.

- Mother was often seen shedding tears in front of the Blessed sacrament and before the Crucifix. And also during the span of 30 years she had the happiness of receiving the Holy Communion every day. Her concentration was so great in the holy place that she never knew what was happening around her. It happened to her many times that she passed the whole night in the church..(Page 393 of the **Family Annals Book 1, Chapter IV**) "I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread also which I will give for the life of the world is My flesh." (**John 6:51**)

-leaders should actively pursue peace in order to maintain and restore unity.

6. Feed their sheep

The main diet with which the leaders should feed their flock is the Word of God. They should encourage their people to obey it and they should set the example of obedience to it themselves. They should also encourage their people to spend time with God and His word; and again they should set the example in this area (**John 6:51; I Corinthians 10:3,4**). God's people need to be fed with the right diet in order to grow and mature in Christ ; so that they are satisfied spiritually in, and committed to, their organization , and in order to be fruitful and effective for God.

7. Comfort their sheep when they need it:

A shepherd needs to be able to comfort a sheep by pulling a thorn from its hoof or by cutting its wool so as to prevent it from over-heating and becoming diseased in the summer. Mother Claudine did the same. She took all efforts to discipline those who followed her and helped them to overcome any unproductive areas in their lives (**Hebrews 12:5-13**)

From a letter from Fr. Mermier we see that Mother felt sorry for dismissing a Daughter . This shows that she never compromised on the exemplary life of the Community. "If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private « (**Mathew 18 :15**) (Page 220 of the **Family Annals Book 1, Chapter IV**)

A shepherd cannot take the day off when he is on duty. He has to be alert all the time. Leaders need to do the same, because the enemy often attacks when we least expect it. Likewise leaders ,

need to be able to provide a good spiritual home for those who follow them – a place where they feel secure, loved and protected; and a place where they can get the help they need, when they need it. Mother Claudine was one such leader.

God's leaders need to know what type of leading, the group and individuals in it, need at any particular time. Sometimes the leading needs to be firm; and at, other times, it needs to be gentle and patient (**Jeremiah 3:15**). Leaders, however, should never drive their flock or put too much pressure on them, because this will cause those they lead to be insecure and it will wear them out, resulting in a demotivated group of people.

- During French Revolution in 1848, Mother was not at all disturbed having strong faith in the Divine Providence. But as a true Shepherdess she could not afford to expect the same from everyone. So, she told her daughters to be ready for any emergency gave freedom to the Daughters to return home, if they wished.

(Page 134 of the Family Annals Book 1, Chapter IV)

Conclusion

Mother Claudine was a fruitful fig tree whose seeds are sown in the form of Holy Cross Congregation all over the world and whose fruits are manifest in the different works of charity which they do for the greater good of humanity. She indeed trod on the path shown by our Lord with fortitude, bore her cross with forbearance and obeyed her master with perfect submission. Her exemplary life and demeanour exhibits how well she has succeeded in being an obedient sheep of the Great Shepherd as well as an excellent Shepherdess in guiding the flock on the way to God's kingdom.