

The Almond Tree Blossoms In Silence

Ms. Josephine Leela & Ms. Sophia,
Department of History,
Holy cross college, Trichy.

At the dawn of the 18th century, Napoleon Bonaparte, who had been appointed as the First Consul in the French government determined to initiate a concordat with the Holy See. He was more pragmatic rather than religious in executing his plan. Hence he recommended that there should be a religion for the people and that should be in the hands of the government. That was because he believed that religion would be the most effective instrument which could be used to make the people obedient and loyal to the government. He was also in favour of forming women congregations to take care of the destitute women, widows and victims of the wraths of the French Revolution could be accommodated safely. Subsequently, a treaty was signed between the government and the Papacy on the 16th July, 1801. It was not only a political event but a providential one since our Mother Foundress had already been born in the same year on the 29th of May.

Our Mother Foundress Claudine Echernier was, as she wanted to say, only an instrument placed by divine providence in the hands of Fr. Peter Mermier who persuaded her to found the congregation of the Sisters of the Cross of Chavanad. She never had the plan of founding of a community neither in her youth nor even when she shut herself alone in a small room to serve God in a more committed manner. Her zeal, which was by no means small, made her surrender herself without reserve to the good pleasure of God and to sacrifice her life entirely to her 'Holy Director'.

It is characteristics of great-hearted persons to discover the principle needs of the times in which they live and to consecrate themselves to it. Yes, our Mother Claudine was one such person. She was ever ready to serve the torn society according to God's will. She had acquired the maturity of judgement beyond her age and condition. It was with this mission and vision that she founded

the Congregation of the Sisters of the Cross of Chavanad, rooted firmly on the soils of Chavanad in Savoie in 1838.

Savoie, then a part of the Kingdom of Sardinia, later on was annexed to the French kingdom. After the overthrow of the monarchy, it was brought under Napoleon Bonaparte. Though Napoleon paid no special attention to this place, he had to pass through this place several times for official and personal purposes. The frequent 'pass-by' visits of the Consul were itself a blessing in disguise to the city. It was developed and improved to suit the interests of the Consul.

The land in Savoie was not easy to cultivate and one had to strain every nerve to reap a scanty harvest. Noted for ruggedness and roughness, the land of Savoie produced hard-working and tireless people. The Savoyards, a little reserved and tenacious if not stubborn, were positive and realistic. They learnt a great lesson that nothing can be given for nothing. Success is possible only the cost of perseverance.

The people of Savoie had to go for other works livelihood and had even sent their children as domestic servants to the houses of the rich people in the neighbourhood. They had to find out all possible means to earn money to pay the taxes, tolls and excise duties and above all, to meet the basic needs of the family members. This was exactly the situation that prevailed at the home of Francois and Anne Echernier in the hamlet called Feternes, which was also known as "vers le creux". They had nine children. Of them, five survived and Claudine was the eldest among them.

When Mother Claudine was 15 years old, she lost her mother and had to shoulder the responsibility of looking after her younger ones. She had to lead a life of sacrifice and trial. Brought up in poverty, accustomed early in life to hard work, tried by affliction and misfortune, she acquired distinguished qualities like selflessness, devotion, love for work and sincere piety. She had a virtue, shining with a special brilliance, which included all the above qualities and the zeal to make the good God known and loved.

The congregation of the Sisters of the Cross of Chavanad, which was found by our Mother Foundress with a humble beginning, is now found in different parts of the world. It has its

branches in sixteen countries and four continents. Our great Mother Foundress left behind her most precious treasure – the ‘congregation’ – for the daughters of the Cross and her noble virtues for the whole of mankind at large and the Holy Crossians in particular. Yes, indeed it is the sacred duty of every Holy Crossian to imbibe those virtues and pass them on to others. That is the most fitting tribute we could pay to beloved Mother on the occasion of celebrating her death anniversary.

How our Mother Claudine, in her association with God and others, exhibited her noble virtues and stood an example to others is given in the following passages.

Perseverance

Mother Claudine had a great desire for learning to read and write. When her masters refused to give permission, she made an agreement with her little friends. They agreed to look after her flock and she made use of that time to learn. Within a very short time, she was able to read fluently.

Selfless Love

Having lost her mother at the age of 15, Mother Claudine shouldered the responsibility of caring the household and bringing up her brothers and sisters. All her earnings were spent for the family. She made them pray in the morning and evening and saw to that they were all fed and clothed. She was a good mother to the younger members of her family and a dutiful daughter to her father. She even stitched wedding clothes for her future step mother. Thus she was testimony to the words of the Bible in the book of 1 Corinthians Chapter 13 verses 4 to 7:

“Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; bears all things, believes all things, endures all things.”

Generosity

When on one occasion she overheard the priests of her parish speaking about the apostolic sessions of those priests who went from parish to parish reviving the Christian Spirit through

preaching. She wanted her parishioners, with whom she integrated herself very much, also to have the same benefits. Taking her scanty savings, she requested the parish priest to accept it to meet out the expenses for a mission conducted by these new apostles. Fr. Delalex, the then parish priest, was very much moved by her generosity and accepted the offering. Thus she never hesitated to rise up to the occasion as it is found in book of Deuteronomy chapter 10 verse 12:

“What does the Lord your God require of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul”

Humility

Our Mother Foundress had such a humble estimate of her image that she never pretended to be something great. But her faith and confidence in God elevated her to the position of the Superior of the congregation, which she accepted through obedience. She often said to the people that without the help of God she could not have reached such heights. Whenever she felt that she was not needed for finalizing certain matters, she abstained from appearing on the scene. People often heard her saying that, having been poor, her desire was to live and die poor and for the poor. She is one of the best examples for Jesus’ words in the book of Mathew chapter 5 verse 5:

“Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth”

Poverty

The desire for worldly things never attracted our Mother Foundress. As a child, as a young girl or as a nun in the convent, everywhere and always, Mother Claudine Echernier kept herself detached from everything and practised the virtue of poverty in all its perfection. Her clothes were neat and clean but patched with small pieces of clothes. She even used the shoes and stockings that were discarded by others. She lived such a simple life till her death and stood as a classic example to this noble virtue.

Obedience

“Obedience is the mother of all virtues”

goes the saying. One of her inmates expressed that among all the virtues practised by our Mother, obedience was the dearest to her. She practised it with utmost care and all its perfection.

Romans chapter 5 verse 19 says:

“For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one man’s obedience many will be made righteous”

As an imitation of Jesus Christ, Mother practised this virtue and made the good God known to others.

Zeal

The astonishing quality of our Mother was the religious zeal which she revealed in all her thoughts, words and deeds throughout through her life. She had been instructing, edifying and winning souls to glorify God. To cite an example to prove this fact, her words to the Novices about this are quoted here:

“The religious life could be compared to a book, there must be sentences; between these sentences there are full stops, the semi-colons and the commas. Well, you have found this book ready-made; you must learn to read it properly. When you read, you must carefully take note of the punctuations; you will be at mistake if you do not make suitable pauses. And you will say to yourself, ‘When I see one of these signs, I must stop’. It is the same with religious life. The punctuations are the virtues taught to you. When you fail to follow any, you make a mistake in your religious life. So, pay attention to all the commas and full stops of religious life, meditate on them and be a worthy Sister of the Cross.”

Love of Jesus Christ

Mother Claudine loved our Lord Jesus with an ardent and generous heart. During the span of 30 years of her religious life, she had immense happiness in receiving Holy Communion daily. At Chavanad, no one had seen her missing mass. She spent long times sitting in front of the sacrament and shedding tears meditating on the sufferings of Jesus Christ on the Cross. Sometimes, she spent the whole night in the Church failing to even notice the sacristan closing the doors. Such incidents were so common that they went unnoticed among the nuns. As per the verse 24 of Colossians chapter 3:

“Knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance, for you serve the Lord Christ”,

she carried Jesus within herself. He was her life according to the words of St. Paul.

Chastity and Modesty

Chastity and modesty were the twin virtues which were repeatedly taught to the daughters of the congregation. She always emphasized that by virtue of purity of heart, one could win the souls. Winning souls could be the best way to glorify God. Her firmness in well-doing caused it to be said that the grace of God will be filled in a heart that is pure.

Faith

Faith was the driving force of our Mother Foundress. She had the marvellous mind of seeing God in all things, creatures and events, in everything and everywhere. She was always ready to listen to the words of God with such respect and deep spirit. Amidst all trials and sufferings, she remained calm because she relied completely on the powerful hand of God who sustained her all along. She said:

“We can be tossed about but not overturned, I am confident about it...”

“To do the will of God in everything”

was her maxim and code of conduct. She counted everything in life exclusively on divine providence. Yet she never allowed the human means let down by reason and obedience.

“It is the good God who has done everything”

-Claudine Echernier