

Aging in Jesus and Mary

And accompanying the sick in the infirmary

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INTRODUCTION

Like so many others, our congregation is aging. Like many experts in the field of aging, we repeat that aging is not a disaster when we recognize the richness of a human life.

In this year of the bicentenary how not to wonder about this stage of life that can be so rich and so beneficial for our congregation, the Church and the whole of humanity.

In the first part, we will look closely at the phenomenon of aging which does not spare our congregation. In the second, we will see how rich can be the last years of all human life. Then, we will conclude on a message from Mother Foundress on how to better live every moment of life given to us.

A. FIRST PART: CLAUDINE AND AGING¹

Aging has been extensively treated in recent years. There are many books, newspaper articles and television programs besides research and teaching in universities to better understand this inevitable phenomenon.

In a first step, we will see what our Foundress inspires us about this stage of life, then we will summarize the last discoveries in gerontology, to finally go to the essentials to know, a spirituality of aging peculiar to our congregation.

¹ Author's presentation: Anne Robichaud, R.J.M. Since 1980, my studies have focused on aging and ethics: doctorates, one in psychology focuses on the motivation of the elderly and the other in philosophy, on the responsible autonomy of the elderly person; university degrees, one in gerontology and the other in health ethics, human rights and morals. Professional work: Having created and directed the first gerontology programs and a Center for Studies on Aging at the University of Moncton. I also chaired the Advisory Committee on Aging and the Advisory Council on Aging for the Government of New Brunswick; represented the Government of Canada at the United Nations on the issue of aging and served on the National Council for Ethics in Human Research. In 1989, I created the program "Autonomous aging in Community", in the Archdiocese of Quebec (1990-1993) - which is an exhaustive study measuring the autonomy of 3,717 sisters aged 65 to 100 years and was followed by a teaching program to maintain their autonomy.

1. The courage to age well

Among the many characteristics of Claudine's life, it is impossible not to recognize her courage. Since the "forgive as we forgive", of his brothers going to the shooting, "the servant of God gave the absolute priority to the virtue of charity and the virtue of prudence, taking the latter in the direction of courage, del 'intelligence put at the service of a very high goal of charity'.²

Where did his courage come from, if not from his heroic faith? "The testimony of faith given by the Servant of God in painful situations (...) is certainly marked by a note of heroism because it was open, social and continuous³. "That's why we sing with pride:" Vaillante lyonnaise, with a great spirit of faith, noble French heroic ".

As a nun of Jesus and Mary, how can one not be moved by the question: how would Claudine like to see her daughters grow old? Of course, the economic, political and religious context is no longer the same as at the time of the Foundation. However, the fact remains that in our highly industrialized societies, courage is more than necessary to age well because our living environments are gearing up to put the elderly into disappointment and continue to advocate euthanasia and assisted suicide.

As a responsible woman, Claudine would certainly not like to see her nuns move slowly to the chair and then the bed because they do nothing to prevent the evils of aging and worse, because they are victims of some indifference existing in their surroundings.

As long as there is life, there is hope. Besides, the word old age begins with the word "life". And to be alive is to be active. What a beautiful lesson gives us the little Therese who even while suffering, responded to those who were pitying her fate, "I walk for a missionary".⁴

2. The requirements of aging well

Aging is a normal stage of human life. However, "discourses about old age are such that we come to consider it as something painful, like a test, whereas, as says Michel Philibert, pioneer of gerontology : tomorrow I'll be a little older or I'll be dead⁵

²Relation and Votes of the Special Congress, July 19, 1977, p.29

³Relation and Votes of the Special Congress, July 19, 1977, p.9.

⁴Extract from: "The Carmel in France" <http://www.carmel.asso.fr/Je-marche-pour-un-missionnaire.html>

⁵See Michel Billé: "Re-enchant old age" in <http://generationcare.fr/michel-bille-reenchanter-la-vieillesse/>

For this step to be successful, aging specialists are increasingly advocating three tips for aging well⁶: healthy eating, physical exercise and intellectual stimulation.

Following Claudine, we can only want to remain valiant until the end by respecting the requirements of:

a. *Eat well.* Our congregation has always been keen to give the sisters a healthy diet. Let's take advantage of the talents of our sisters (dieticians, nutritionists, nurses, biochemists, and others) and ask them to share their knowledge in order to check our menus, and to give us community and individual advice on *how to age in health*.

b. *Doing physical exercises.* We are at the age where we do not have to count our steps. Walking is the best exercise and costs nothing. Professor Henri Péquignot liked to repeat "that the bed and the chair are the worst enemies of the elderly"⁷. You must know how to take advantage of fitness classes given on television or in seniors' organizations. In addition, we are constantly able to help do the housework, clean the house, go for a walk in the fresh air, accompany a sister who has difficulty standing up and other exercises essential to the maintenance of the remaining energies.

c. *Stimulate our intellectual capacities.* Take an interest in what is going on in the world, read the writings of the Holy Father, specialists in religious life and health and discuss them with our sisters. It is our duty to study the history of our Congregation and to write our story of life, telling all the small details of the houses in which we lived so that we never forget our origins - which can help us guide our apostolate. future.

3. For a spirituality of aging.

In this year of the Bicentenary, we could together develop a spirituality for aging, worthy of the spirit of our Foundress.

How not to draw from Claudine's life some milestones that would help us to live the last stage of our life. We could think about:

⁶Pequignot, Henri (1993) *Autonomy*, p. 1-81

⁷ Pequignot, Henri. (1993) *Autonomy*, p. 74

a. *Faith in Providence.* Those who had the privilege of living in Fourvière, could have touched a finger to the faith of our Foundress who with very few means and in the worst social context and religious of France, built a great and beautiful work. What unshakable trust in God! And let us add, what a model for us who are at a time when we are degenerating and, where old age is so often devalued.

b. *The spirit of praise* "To see God in all things and all things in God" is also to live in a spirit of praise. In a world where hope is too often absent, the rediscovery of the goodness of the Creator present in his creation and in people, gives meaning to life and invites to give thanks. Claudine made her religious and apostolic life "a praise of glory to the Lord."⁸

c. *The search for the will of God.* "She prayed and put her trust in God, and in Mary (...) and stood firmly united to the holy will of God"⁹ This constant search for the will of God is the way that allowed her to read the signs of the times and to discern the designs of God for her. And it's still the best way for us living in the 21st century to read the signs of the times and find the will of God therein.

d. *Recognition towards our Congregation* Live every moment thinking of the privileges that are constantly offered to us, especially the material security and the humanity of the care given to us.

e. *A spirit of mutual aid.* Go out to meet others and not to hide within the walls of our convents and our rooms, so as not to have any problem and escape the misery that exists around us.

f. *Resilience.* Accept old age as a gift from God with his handicaps and problems and show the world the immeasurable value of the elderly and the hidden face of aging humanity.

As a worthy daughter of Claudine, let us reflect on the *message of hope* that we must transmit to all the elderly people of this world. Thus we will not be able to forget her last words: "How good God is!"

⁸See "Way to God" in http://voiemystique.free.fr/clauidine_thevenet.

⁹Relation and Votes of the Special Congress, July 19, 1977, p40.

¹⁰Chiasson, Laurentine, r.j.m. (1981) "If the Grain Dies". p. 149

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- "Way to God" in http://voiemystique.free.fr/claudine_thevenet "(Unfortunately, I do not know who wrote this article).

B. ACCOMPANYING THE SICK IN THE INFIRMARY:¹¹

We have very few writings and testimonies showing us the attitude of Mother Claudine towards people limited by age and / or illness. But those who have been preserved show us that her sensitive and compassionate heart was deeply touched by the miseries of his sisters or sick family members, as it was for the children of the Providence or the boarding school and for the poorest of her time.

We will first see how Claudine rubbed shoulders with sick people: her family members, orphans, religious sisters, or others. Then we will meet her, touched herself by sickness. Finally, we will continue to witness the compassionate kindness that our Mother Claudine invites us to live in our daily lives with the sick people entrusted to us.

1. Claudine rubs shoulders with the sick:

Until 1818, Claudine Thévenet took care of her aging parents and her two aunts, sisters of her mother who lived with the Thévenet family, in rue Masson, since 1794. One of them, Aunt Antoinette died in 1833, at the age of 100, rare at that time. After leaving the house, Claudine continues to surround them with her affection and to visit them often.

Most of the 16 letters addressed to her family members show her attentive to the sufferings of her family: she inquires about their health, comforts them in their illnesses and bereavements, assures them of her prayers and gives them advice full of faith and solicitude.

¹¹Presentation by the author: Lorraine Maheu, R.J.M. After working for 35 years in primary and secondary education, I did some secretarial and accounting work.

For the last 3 years, I have been responsible for the community of the Provincial Infirmary of the Religious of Jesus and Mary of Sillery in Quebec . Twenty-five nuns aged between 77 to 103years currently belong to it. The average age is 90 years . During the last 3 years, I had the privilege of accompanying and leading 21 sisters to the door of Heaven.
Lorraine Maheu, R.J.M.

During a long illness of her sister Elizabeth, she welcomed her to Fourvière from May 1823 to November 1827. In a letter, her nephew, Claudius Mayet speaks of "her kindness to us (members of his family), her tenderness especially to our mother, of whom she was a great consoler, of her delicate friendship, of her prayers ... My aunt's heart brought her back to life! He concludes. (Pos 487)

In their visits to the sick, members of the Association of the Sacred Heart, section of consolations, show great solicitude for the suffering, surrounding them with affection, listening to them with patience and kindness, bringing them encouragement, moral support and spiritual comfort, preparing them for death, if necessary. Similarly, when a member is ill, the regulation provides for a visit and provides all necessary assistance.

Mother Claudine has always been concerned about the health of her "little ones". She is committed to ensuring a healthy living environment, open airy spaces for games, sufficient hygienic conditions, a nourishing and appetizing diet to make up for the deficiencies they suffered. The generosity of her mother's heart increases when one or the other falls seriously ill. The doctor is immediately called and everything is done to provide all the necessary care and the best medicines. We remember, among other things, how little Eugenie was surrounded or when, at the end of her resources, Jeanne Portier was brought to Notre-Dame de Fourvière from where she was brought back cured. (PP 338-340 and 473-474) Even if they say they are "happy to die to go see the good God", what pain for Claudine, to see 21 of her dear children leave one after the other. (Pos 576)

Even if the History of the Congregation does not mention it explicitly, it can easily be supposed that the "Mother" had the same concern for her sick nuns and many of them found themselves in the infirmary in those years when prevention and treatment of sicknesses was less well known and mortality was high. On the advice of the doctor, Claudine does not hesitate to change the diet too austere to which our first mothers were subjected. (Pos.633)

During her life, Mother Founder saw 22 of her nuns die, most of whom are under 35 years old. Mother Saint-Ignatius is still very much affected. The loss of precious collaborators on whom she had built great hopes for the future of the Congregation is evoked in one of her letters to her niece Elisabeth Mayet: "The Lord sends me many crosses this year and tries me out. by many sacrifices; I will be happy if I take advantage of it to atone for my sins and sanctify myself "(Pos.336). No doubt, she spent many

hours in the chapel, before the Eucharistic Jesus , or in her room, in front of a statue of the Blessed Virgin, begging them to heal her sick as she did for Father Coindre during his illness.

In the first rules we read: "The infirmary must be regarded as the sanctuary of the suffering Jesus. "It will be placed in the most convenient and healthiest place in the house. "

"The health supervisor will be careful to discover the sufferings or infirmities that shyness, too much zeal, and more often self-esteem tend to keep hidden. "

"The nurse will treat the sick with respect, gentleness and charity; always approach them with an open and happy face. "(PCR 91.134-135)

2. Claudine herself affected by illness:

Until 1794, Claudine had a strong physical constitution. The painful events she was going to experience will affect her health for the rest of her life. Frequently, she will suffer from severe headaches. She still has a trembling of the head and difficulty in breathing, that she calls "her terror". These discomforts, which are accentuated with the years, do not prevent her from going about her usual occupations and from facing with energy and courage, all the adversities that life brings her. Could this experience of fragility of health make her sensitive, caring and compassionate towards her relatives who are suffering?

In 1828, with two other nuns, she fell seriously ill. She is the only one to recover while her 2 sisters much younger than she, will die. From then on, her health remains precarious. During the year 1836, her headaches increase, she feels her strength decline. She puts her affairs in order, preparing for the big departure. In late December, her condition deteriorates more and more, she must stay in bed. "She preserves to the end her patience, her peaceful abandonment to Providence, her touching solicitude for her dear daughters. When the pains are more acute, she seizes a statuette of the Virgin, placing it on her head while praying internally. (Pos 621-622)

On her death bed, she thinks of her daughters, her dear Congregation: "The Lord will provide for everything" "A superior is still in Heaven". She received with piety the "last sacraments" after having welcomed with serenity and humility the harsh admonition of Father Pousset. Her last words: "How good God is! echo her experience of the goodness of God that has animated her whole life that she now gives to God in surrender, praise and thanksgiving.

3. The spirit of Claudine always present at the Infirmary in 2018:

To tell the truth, I had never stopped to think how Mother Claudine could inspire me in my mission in the Infirmary. It was only natural for me to use her and her pedagogy during my consecrated years of youth education. But on closer examination and re-reading the life of Mother Foundress, I realized that her spirit also joined me in this particular mission to people weakened by age and / or illness.

It is Claudine's compassionate kindness that touches me the most in her approach to the sick. Like her, we draw from the hearts of Jesus and Mary, listening, patience, gentleness, delicate attentions, comforting words to accompany the good care provided by the staff of the Infirmary.

Our sick sisters also feel united to the spirit of Claudine in their desire to do the will of God, their trustful abandonment to Providence, their patience to accept their limits and infirmities, the offering of their sufferings for the intentions of the world, for the Church and the Congregation. The recourse to the Virgin Mary encourages and comforts them daily. Charity, fraternal mutual help, unity among them are a force and a powerful support to welcome one another in their fragility. They cultivate praise and thanksgiving by recognizing the goodness of God present in their lives. With them, we love to sing: "How good God is! "

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CONCLUSION

How not to be proud to belong to a congregation whose Foundress manifests an integral respect for the active or sick human person - this respect which is the very foundation of the ethics of which we speak abundantly today.

By studying more and more the work of our Foundress, not only will we find the balm to heal the inevitable losses that come with age but also the alleviation of our sufferings and our sorrows of not being able to serve as much as before.

As Claudine's worthy daughters, let us reflect on the message of hope that we must convey to all the elderly in this world. Thus we cannot forget her last words: "How good God is "

This is the testament left to us by our Foundress.

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