

My Reflection on the Psychology of Claudine Thévenet Today

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From early childhood, Claudine lovingly called Glady by her siblings, was cherished and had a joy filled home life. She grew up with six siblings and many cousins and relatives who loved her very much and showed her great affection. A united family that was well off but not with luxuries, they reached out to those who were suffering and helped them. In this atmosphere of love, joy and reaching out, Claudine the eldest daughter and second of a family of seven children, grew up with self confidence and self esteem yet with humility and tenderness. She was gifted with precocious intelligence and developed a personality which was marked by deep sensitivity and great strength of character. Her family--- a haven of security, gave her enough self worth in order to surrender all of herself to the Lord and for service to others. She took on home responsibilities from an early age but without assuming authority and devotedly cared for her four younger siblings. One of whom must have mispronounced Claudine to sound like Glady, by which name she came to be familiarly called at home. Her parent's background and qualities, founded on firm Christian teachings, were responsible for her traits and character as a facilitator. Claudine had an incredible gift of seeing God's goodness and love, and of praising Him in all that she did.

In spite of her self confidence and sense of responsibility, she was self effacing, unostentatious, modest and gentle, characteristics which led the family to refer to her lovingly as the 'little violet'. The flower that is not seen easily but spreads its perfume – one senses it before one sees it. Claudine used to care for the needs of others, and performed duties before she was even asked to do them, never expecting recognition or gratitude. She was truly humble and good and hence was deeply loved by all.

Mrs. Antoinette Guyot Thévenet her mother, wanted her eldest daughter to be educated in a good institution, so the young Claudine of 9 years was sent to St. Peter's Abbey as a boarder. She profited much from this education, having learned besides

academics, order, sewing, weaving and mending. All this would help her later in life, when she envisaged a similar education for the young orphans.

At the age of 15 years, Claudine had to return home from the Abbey, due to troubled political times. There were no regrets that she had to leave the boarding school which she loved, but she gave herself totally to the family. There were shortages in the family as their economic standard was lowered. Her father and brothers were now working for others. But despite their more modest lifestyle, the family did its best to continue to help the poor. She felt the anxiety of her parents and gave them unconditional support. She accepted the situation with serenity and calm, but it changed the direction her life would take. Claudine learned to do the same as her mother and the sisters in the Abbey had done—help the poor. This trait of caring for the less privileged, continued in the Association of women, where Claudine along with other young women, helped the needy; and later as a Religious, where she encouraged her sisters to give priority to the most needy among the poor.

In spite of unsettled times, the Thévenet family continued to be faithful to the Church. Claudine took it all in a spirit of faith and followed the teachings of the Church and the directions of the Pope and the legitimate clergy. The entire family was faithful to the Church, accepting ecclesiastical authority and did not panic. All these situations helped Claudine to develop a sense of discernment, solid faith, docility and readiness to follow God's voice when called upon. She always remained calm when faced with difficult situations.

When she was 19 years old, in 1793, and the political trouble became worse, Claudine's father took the four younger children to his sister's home in Belley to leave them safely out of Lyon. Unfortunately, he was unable to return, as the city was blocked. Claudine feared the worst, but had to keep up the spirits of her mother and brothers. Forgetful of her own doubts and fears, she was anxious about her father's safety. With her two brothers enlisting to fight for the city, Claudine was alone with her mother, not knowing if her brothers were safe. The anxiety was great because her mother was preoccupied by the absence of her two sons as well as her husband; it was Claudine who, with maturity far beyond her age, calmed her, and reassured her that all would be well. She had to hide her own worry and fear, not to upset her mother. Alone, she bore the challenging task of worrying about the fate of her two brothers, showing

her sense of duty and responsibility as the eldest daughter. One evening, after there was fierce fighting, she went out into the streets to see if her brothers were among those killed or wounded, to reassure her mother and herself; she searched among those killed. Claudine had to take important, challenging decisions. What anguish it must have been for a young lady to do this alone and what courage!

That was the evening her brothers returned home – a relief for Claudine and her mother to have the boys in the house. This relief was temporary as they continued their exploits and they were caught and cast into prison. Mrs. Thévenet's brother too was imprisoned for the same reason. The suffering of both women is understandable, but Claudine took it upon herself to sustain the hope of her mother by visiting the prison to see her brothers. On returning, she would reassure her mother of her brother's well being and bring her their messages. This task required courage, great prudence, self-effacement and humility for it had its dangers, perils and risks. Her sense of responsibility towards her mother goaded her on and sustained her determination. Her humility and simplicity kindled confidence in God to carry out this task. In order to win over the guards of the prison, Claudine dressed and behaved like a peasant woman, and laughed and joked with them, even sharing a glass of wine with them – a deed she detested but undertook, only to gain access to the prison to visit her brothers and uncle.

Fortunately, the father was able to return and did his best to save his two sons. However Claudine continued to visit her brothers risking being recognized by the guards as a lady and not a peasant woman. She reached inside herself to find the courage and the resilience to keep going even if she failed. This risk was worth taking for the sake of her brothers and parents. The day she was expecting her brothers' release because of the testimonial of the Revolutionary Committee denying the denouncement of her brothers, she was aghast to see them taken to their execution. Her uncle had been killed a fortnight earlier. With courage, Claudine approached them, to be nearer to them. She heard Louis say 'Gladly forgive as we forgive.' She followed the sad procession with thoughts only for her brothers and not for herself. They needed her nearness so she stayed on. Once arrived at the square, the prisoners were lined up and the shots rang out. Her brothers did not die from gun fire, but were clubbed with the butts of bayonets. It was torture for her but as usual, she always thought of others and put their feelings before her own, this was her sense of duty and self forgetfulness.

This gruesome vision stayed with Claudine for the rest of her life. It was her 'terror' as she called it and it would keep resurfacing giving her acute headaches and undermining her health. Yet she sustained the moral force to pardon with faith knowing that God would never desert her.

On returning from her visit to prison, she did not have to explain nor could she give details to her parents to avoid making them also suffer. The letter was sufficient for them to realize the consequences. Claudine kept these events in her heart and suffered over them alone. She helped her parents to overcome their grief courageously forgetting her own sorrow.

Even though her father was at home, it was Claudine who visited the prison till the end. She preferred to put herself at risk and peril rather than her father. Young as she was, it seemed that Claudine was protecting not only her mother, but offered support to her father as well to face the rude shocks of life. When her father died in 1815, Claudine was alone with her mother, as the younger siblings had all left the home by then. She was unfailingly patient with her and tenderly devoted to her needs. Again we see in Claudine an acute sense of responsibility and kindness as the eldest daughter of her grieving parents.

From then on, at the age of 19, Claudine directed her attention, talents and time to doing good work in her parish, sincerely, discreetly and quietly. Along with other young ladies, she helped those in need, especially the young. There was no time for brooding or self pity.

Claudine engaged herself in a number of works in her Parish of St. Bruno. Fr. Coindre, the new Curate of her Parish saw in this lady, the outstanding capabilities of great service and leadership at the same time, one who was gentle, supportive, intuitive and nonjudgmental. She was an intelligent woman with a good head for organizing. In 1816, Fr. Coindre led them to form the Pious Association of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. She was the President and thus maintained the accounts and kept the minutes of each meeting meticulously until 1825. With Fr. Coindre's help, she drew up the rules for the Association. The Association did works of mercy and charity in the parish with tenderness and compassion. Many young ladies in similar situations like Claudine, losing someone or other of the family during the Revolution, joined the group to do service to

others. This went on until Claudine was about 42 years old. She made reparation for all the harm done during the revolution and tried to make the love of God known. Her devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary deepened.

In 1818, Fr. Coindre proposed to the group of ladies that they form a Religious Congregation. Claudine accepted this without protest, as she saw it as God's Will and a confirmation of the first call she had felt in 1794, when her brothers were killed, and which she would feel again, when she left her home. It was God's Will first and service to others followed.

Her family accepted that she founded a Religious Congregation. She was now 44 years. On 5th October, 1818 when she informed her mother that she was leaving home, it caused her distress and anguish, especially to see her mother's reluctance to let her go. Her mother was alone as her other children had left home long before. This was Claudine's dark night, a night of desolation. The people of the neighbourhood mocked and laughed at her and ridiculed her for having begun a Congregation of Religious sisters. Fr. Coindre encouraged her to continue and she did, working with great zeal. She had now to seek ecclesiastical approbation. With the help of Fr. Coindre, Claudine started drawing up the rules and writing down the Constitutions. Unfortunately, Fr. Coindre was transferred to another parish, and later, died before she finished them. This must have disturbed her and caused her anguish but her strong personality, together with her deep faith in God, sustained her. She bore this great loss heroically and continued her work.

Besides the orphanage she had opened in the Cloister of St. Bruno's (looked after by the Sisters of St. Joseph), Claudine opened one at Pierres Plantées, where she took little girls from the age of 7 and trained them until they were 21 years. At times, her compassion made her admit children of even 2 years. She taught them the love of God as well as reading and writing and gave them a professional training in silk weaving. This would serve them to work with dignity and earn an honest living. She respected their pace of learning and gave them the option to do extra work during their free time in order to put aside some funds for their dowry and their future. On finding a larger accommodation in Fourvière, Claudine bought it, in order to have more space for the orphan children. She also started a boarding school for children of richer families to maintain the orphanage, showing her qualities of good management and foresight. She

gave each girl her space to develop, and tried her best to follow them up when they had finished with her. Each child experienced her deep love and gentleness. The girls loved their Mother St. Ignatius, the name she took as a Religious Sister. They showed their appreciation by giving her a life sized crucifix which is still in the garden of Fourvière.

In order to run this school, Claudine along with other sisters had to take some exams and prepare for them at the age of 48 years. She succeeded. There was always scope to improve their education. With the children, the sisters were recommended to bear everything with patience, gentleness and compassion, placing their trust in God. She encouraged her sisters to maintain their zeal in doing Christ's mission. She also recommended them to work with simplicity, prudence, reserve and self restraint--- qualities that she practiced. Her determination and undaunted spirit is perceived in these events

The works of Claudine continued to spread first in France and after her death, in the world. She readily accepted a boarding school offered to her in Belleville. This led her to envisage a separate province, with a sister in charge. When the Congregation was to be fused with another, Claudine vehemently opposed it. She succeeded in getting the Approbation for her Congregation in 1825. Claudine's simplicity, modesty and wisdom did not permit her to be affected by this; she did not pride herself on obtaining the approbation. Claudine was a prayerful woman who trusted God. She did nothing without Mary. God even worked miracles through her, when she confided her worries to Him. Her simplicity made her put her total trust in God in all things. She accepted His will and did her best to follow it with zeal and dedicated her life to doing good until her death.

During the insurrection of the silk workers in 1834, Claudine again faced troubled times on the Fourvière hill. Their house with the boarders and orphans, was occupied by the army for three days. Yet she remained calm and serene and this inspired the others too not to panic. Surely Claudine was anxious and preoccupied as the troops wanted to take over the Providence, which had a strategic position on the hill; yet she hid her fears and sustained the others by assuring them that all would be well. Fr. Rey, the Chaplain was a great help. He found the Sisters generous, broad minded, simple and humble, and he admired these qualities, most especially their goodness to the poor orphans.

By now, Claudine was 60 years old and seemed to be getting ready for the end. She was putting everything in order to make it easier for her successor. She was unable to finish the Constitutions she had begun writing. She suffered much emotionally, but bore it patiently and did not let her community see her suffering. Her health too was not too good. She witnessed the death of sisters who were younger than she was, of children of the orphanage and in her own family. Being very sensitive, this touched her, she fell ill and her health deteriorated, yet her mental faculties were sound. She continued to advise her sisters forgetful of herself. When she got very ill and was confined to bed, she showed no visible signs of stress when she was addressed harshly by the new Chaplain Fr. Pousset. She did not speak as she was in a semi conscious state, but after a few days they heard her clearly say 'How good God is!' These were her last words, confirmation of a life lived in and for God. On 3rd February 1837, Claudine breathed her last, at 3.00 in the afternoon. She was canonized on 21st. March 1993.

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QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Brief Introduction about myself:

Melba Rodrigues RJM, Province of Delhi, India . I have been a Religious for 45 years. At present working in Collège Jésus-Marie, Yaoundé, Cameroon for the past 7 years and previously in Ekpoma, at Mount Carmel School, Nigeria, for 2 years.

My family is Catholic, originally from Goa, but I was born and brought up in the city of Mumbai. I am the youngest of 9 children, one other of whom is also a Sister of our Congregation, Sr. Dorothy.

A teacher in the JM Schools in India before I joined Jesus and Mary, I studied for a year at JM Montreux, Switzerland and another at JM Alicante, Spain.

I have a Masters in Psychology from the University of Delhi and a Doctorate from the same University. I have been a Professor in Psychology and a Counsellor in Jesus and Mary College, New Delhi; and in St Bede's College, Shimla, for a total of 30 years, 20 of which I was Principal.

Having been on the Executive Board of the International Federation of Catholic Education (IFCU) for two terms, I have visited several Catholic Universities world-wide, for meetings and to present papers on Aspects of the Indian and Oriental System of University Education.

It was a privilege for St Bede's to receive the *Ex Cordae Ecclesiae* medal from the General Secretary IFCU, Paris, on the occasion of its Centenary celebrated in 2004, when I was Principal.

2. The Fundamental Keys of the Proposal with which I approach the person of Claudine in encountering people psychologically:

I am presenting the Fundamental Keys **according to the modern Personality Psychologists**, :

- a. the background and events which formed her broad general traits
- b. a description of how she acted in the events of her life and
- c. who she is – her identities in her responses to her life situations:

→ in her early life,

→ as a teenager,

→ as a young lady at home and in society and as a committed person – lay and religious.

3. Claudine's key features:

- a. her incredible gift of seeing God's goodness and love and praising Him in all she did.*
- b. she was humble and good and hence deeply loved by all.*
- c. her own education led her to envisage a similar education.*
- d. gave priority to the most needy.*
- e. remained calm when faced with difficult situations.*
- f. took important challenging decisions.*
- g. her humility and simplicity kindled confidence in God to carry out the tasks.*
- h. her sense of duty and self-forgetfulness.*
- i. helped others, forgetting her own grief.*
- j. sense of responsibility as the eldest daughter.*
- k. her devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and Immaculate Heart of Mary.*
- l. her desire to make God known and loved.*
- m. bore losses heroically.*
- n. qualities of good management and foresight.*
- o. determination and undaunted spirit.*
- p. accepted God's will and did her best to follow it until her death.*
- q. her goodness to the poor.*

- A. Her qualities of head and heart. – acquired at home and through her education.
- B. Her experience of God as good. - through her happy home life and her role as eldest daughter.
- C. Her (formal) education. – helped in her design of education of the young girls especially to the poor.
- D. Her sense of responsibility to her family and to the under-privileged of society.

4. Practical Exercise to be used as a Pastoral or Teaching Resource.

Present the Life of OMF through our own living besides sharing her life story with them and...

- a. Lead children to experience the goodness of God through Claudine's example and our own, making them feel loved and wanted.
- b. Acquire and practice virtues : Be simple, humble, kind, calm, self-forgetful, leading children to be the same.

- c. Practise a sense of responsibility, duty, confidence, good management and acceptance of God's Will in all circumstances of life, taking challenging decisions.
- d. Have and show a preference for the poor—following them up in their School and later life too.