

## A reflection on the person of Claudine and her charism in the midst of violence and persecution

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### 1. An introduction about myself and a description of the context from which I make my reflection

This article is written by me, Irene Stephen RJM, from the Province of Pakistan<sup>1</sup>. I am presently teaching at the Convent of Jesus and Mary, Lahore. I joined the Congregation in the year 2000 and since then have developed a great love for Claudine.

Claudine's religious vocation was born in the midst of war, violence and persecution. My religious vocation emerged in a country where violence, in the name of religion, is an acceptable and commendable fact. Violence and persecution did not make Claudine bitter. She generously

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<sup>1</sup> The Islamic Republic of Pakistan is a federal parliamentary republic in South Asia on the crossroads of Central Asia and Western Asia. It is the sixth-most populous country with a population exceeding 201 million people. (Census 2017)

responded to God's call by saying "yes" with full conviction. I answered God's call in a country which is a hub of religious fundamentalism and extremism. Here Christians,<sup>2</sup> other minorities as well as fragile Muslims are jailed, killed and burnt alive on account of their faith. They are falsely accused and persecuted over minor personal issues. No one dares challenge the authorities as all are familiar with the consequences. Should they challenge the status quo the result would be inevitable death. Persecution in this part of the world is without prosecution. As I write this article, I make my reflections on Claudine's life, charism, mission and the legacy she left to us, the Religious of Jesus and Mary. Violence and persecution in France, Pakistan and all over the world are things we are not unfamiliar with. Unfortunately they have, do and will continue to claim more lives. In spite of all horror and radicalism, Pakistan is the place I call home, the land where I encountered God and Claudine through the Religious of Jesus and Mary. I thank God for my beloved country, my loving family for nurturing my Christian faith, and my religious vocation.

## **2. An explanation of the fundamental keys of the proposal with which I approached the figure of Claudine, living and working in a place where many people face violence and persecution.**

Through her heroic and powerful act of forgiveness, Claudine decided to let go of resentment, grudges and bitterness. When people hurt, the usual thing is to hold on to personal anger, resentment and thoughts of revenge, but they do have the option to embrace forgiveness and move on healthily in life. Most of us have, at one time or another, been hurt by the words or actions of others. If we are not forgiving we are the ones who pay most dearly. Like Claudine, by living forgiveness, we can also embrace other qualities such as hope, peace and joy. In Claudine's life we see how forgiveness led her along the path of physical, emotional and spiritual well-being. If Claudine had not practised forgiveness in her life we, as RJMs, would not exist today.

"Claudine had spent her childhood and adolescence in the heart of a happy and exemplary family. When she was still a child, she assumed the responsibilities of an elder sister and looked after the little ones."<sup>3</sup>

In Pakistan many girls along with their families have spent happy times together because the joint family system makes life strong and beautiful and we cherish it. Unfortunately a number of these families have experienced violence too, and because of this they have lost parents and

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<sup>2</sup> Christians make up one of the two largest religious minorities in Pakistan, the others are Hindus. The total number of Christians in Pakistan is estimated at 1.6% of the population. Of these, approximately half are Roman Catholic.

<sup>3</sup> The Life And Time of Claudine Thevenet by Gabriela Maria RJM, p.124

loved ones. It is for this reason that young girls, like Claudine, have assumed the responsibility of caring for siblings and the remaining extended family members as the concepts of orphanages and retirement homes do not exist here. Families themselves take care of their feeble members.

Claudine along with her truly Christian family forgave the murderers of Louis and Francois.

“Grace took her even further and without knowing it, her attitude echoed that of B.L.de Argensola: ‘Forgiveness is not perfect unless transformed into love.’ Gladys’s forgiveness became love: love of God and love of neighbour.”<sup>4</sup>

Today, in Pakistan and around the world, the need for forgiveness to be transformed into love is particularly great. The desire for revenge is a more natural response. Forgiveness is a difficult virtue to practise. Claudine teaches us that forgiveness brings us closer to God and her example of forgiveness is very meaningful in our mission here amongst Muslims who form the majority of the population. She did not seek revenge, instead she forgave those who had killed her brothers. She was encouraged to do this as her brothers and family supported her strongly. Claudine’s brothers told her, “Forgive Gladys as we forgive.”<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately the families here, along with their relatives, seek revenge<sup>6</sup> as a first reaction and this mindset is passed from one generation to the next. Whereas, Jesus too teaches us, “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.”<sup>7</sup>

In Pakistan, Claudine’s character is a role model for all. Her charism of forgiveness has been, and is to this day, carried on through our example and our work in the field of education. Both education and the concept of forgiveness are underdeveloped in our country. Claudine’s preference for educating girls is constantly motivating us, to look after them and to prepare them as homemakers where they can sow the seeds of love and forgiveness. We teach them to realize that God is good and God wants us to be happy and not perform rituals out of fear of Him. Over the last two hundred years we, the Sisters of Jesus and Mary, have accomplished much through following the charism of our dear Mother Foundress.

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p.125

<sup>5</sup> Claudine’s brothers’ request through their letters.

<sup>6</sup> To take revenge in Pakistani culture is hereditary. To avenge is a sign of power and to forgive is considered weakness. (A short documentary , “A Girl in the River” by Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B4ddvK3r7NU>).

<sup>7</sup> The Lord’s prayer

It is easy to relate to Claudine's situation now as we talk about violence in our time. Though the causes of violence and persecution are different today from Claudine's time, the effect of the sufferings is the same. As Claudine was traumatized by the sight of her brothers' execution, in the same way many parents and children have seen the killing of their loved ones. Children in schools in Pakistan have lost parents and relatives in terrorist bomb blasts. Innocent people, including police officers and army personnel, have lost their precious lives through violence. In spite of atrocities like this we continue to instill Claudine's charisma of forgiveness through our apostolate in schools and in our pastoral work.

People are killed because of the lack of value placed on human lives, the lack of education and the narrow mindedness of many who are not open to change. A number of our youth, whom we regard as a symbol of a brighter future, are brain-washed by religious fundamentalists. Violence is brought on humanity in the name of God and for the promotion and protection of a religion.

Like Claudine, many are inspired in their own grief, to work for and devote their lives to the cause of right. One of our own past pupils was stabbed in May 2016, while picking up her younger sister from CJM Lahore. After recovering from her injuries, she became a voice for the voiceless. Here in Pakistan, and indeed in many countries of the world, we are living surrounded by violence and persecution. This is a situation similar to that which Claudine experienced during the French Revolution. Many children have been orphaned, many women widowed and sickness and misery are all around us. We breathe and live violence in our day to day lives.

Violence and discrimination are levied against religious minorities in Pakistan such as Hindus, Ahmadis<sup>8</sup> and Christians. Many people live in daily fear of violence:

Asia Bibi<sup>9</sup>, a poor Catholic mother, is presently imprisoned as a victim of a false blasphemy<sup>10</sup> charge.

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<sup>8</sup> The Ahmadiyya community takes its name from its founder Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, who was regarded by his followers as a prophet. Ghulam Ahmad saw himself as a renewer of Islam and claimed to have been chosen by Allah.

<sup>9</sup> [https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asia\\_Bibi](https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asia_Bibi).

<sup>10</sup> The action or offence of speaking sacrilegiously about the Prophet Muhammad and the Quran. Blasphemy is legally punishable by death and even unproven accusations can stir violence.

The Governor of the Punjab, Mr. Salman Taseer, a good Muslim, who showed kindness and compassion to Asia Bibi by visiting her in prison, was for that very reason assassinated by his own personal bodyguard who accused him too of blasphemy.

Due to a religious conflict which resulted in the lynching and burning of two terrorists, who bombed two churches during Sunday prayers and killed many, over forty Christian youth are still behind bars. On another occasion a radical Islamist group killed 73 Christians and Muslims in Lahore at Easter 2016. These tragedies have resulted in good being brought about for Muslims and minorities living in the country, as our churches on Sundays, mosques on Fridays and other celebrations are now protected by Pakistani police and Army forces.

The assassination of Shahbaz Bhatti<sup>11</sup> by religious fanatics, the only Christian in the Cabinet holding the office of Minister for Minorities, is a reminder of how dangerous it is to voice one's opinion about violence and discrimination.

One of the most brutal, deadly and shocking incidents of terrorist attack in Pakistan was when 151 school children were massacred at the Army Public School in Peshawar. Those parents and our nation have lost their children who were the hope of our future. In order to protect our pupils and teachers, since then schools all over the country have taken serious security measures to prevent such atrocities happening again.

Mashal Khan, a young Muslim Pakistani university student, was killed in April 2017 because his colleagues accused him falsely of blasphemy. It shows the brutality of the blasphemy law as it does not spare anyone from any walk in life.

Sectarian violence is common here where minorities do not have equal rights. Muslims being regarded as first class citizens enjoy more privileges than other such as better employment and education opportunities and as a result of this minorities Christians included are often tempted to convert to Islam in order to have better living opportunities.

As Claudine was horrified to witness the brutal death of her brothers, we are horrified with the violence that goes on around us. The lynching and burning in a kiln of a Christian couple Shama and Shahzad Masih<sup>12</sup> after being falsely accused of blasphemy is another example of violence. It left their three young children orphaned. It brings us, as a Congregation, great consolation knowing that one of our past pupils, Michelle Chaudhy, has taken upon herself to

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<sup>11</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shahbaz\\_Bhatti](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shahbaz_Bhatti)

<sup>12</sup> An illiterate Christian couple falsely accused of throwing away pages of the Quran.

educate and see to the needs of these children. We support her by our prayers and through monetary help.

In Pakistan the poor and rich alike have been targeted by extremists. Conflicts between the rich and poor in Claudine's time were believed to have been the reason for bringing about the French Revolution. Today the conflicts we experience are based on hatred and religious extremism but the common people in Pakistan dream of peace and harmony. Amid tensions and violence, it is still in our power to give and receive forgiveness in order to heal and be healed. We learn from Claudine that the one who is a victim needs to forgive first. Our hardships and troubles are never bigger than forgiveness.

### **3. An explanation of the key features of Claudine in what I looked at when I planned my work and how they are highlighted.**

One of the key features of Claudine that I take into account when planning my daily apostolate and pastoral care of youth, is her acceptance of those around her. Like Claudine, I show my preference for the children who are neglected, abandoned and among these the poor and needy. Along with the teaching staff we, the Sisters of Jesus and Mary, pay extra attention to pupils who have difficulty conforming to rules, who are physically or mentally challenged, or who may be less capable academically. Mother Foundress did not let discrimination or prejudice enter her generous heart which had room for everyone. She offered her daughters the following advice:

“The only preferences that I allow you to have, are for the poorest, the most miserable children, for those who have the most failings, the least good qualities; these children you must really love very much; pay great attention to them, make a great effort to do them good. Good mothers do this.”<sup>13</sup>

Like Claudine, during my conversations and meetings with the students in our care, I desire above all to bring them closer to God. In catechism classes my plan is always to increase their knowledge and love for God and neighbor. In the field of education we do not deal only with children and youth but with teachers and family members too. These people bring to us the tensions, problems and worries they encounter in their daily lives. They come to us to find solace. I, along with other JM Sisters in this Province, am always open to sharing their joys and sorrows. In 1999, when our Congregation celebrated 125 years of service in the field of education in Pakistan, *Thévenet Centre* was opened for children with special needs. It was marking

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<sup>13</sup> *Positio*, pp. 628-629

a milestone in showing love, care, dignity and acceptance of these little ones whom our society particularly rejects. Since then 214 children with special needs have benefitted from this institution located in CJM Lahore.

“Glady, only just twenty, knew no other pleasure in life except that of devoting herself to others: all her energies, her time, her money..... everything was for others. The desire to do good consumed her, and she dedicated herself to a task with even greater fervour if she thought it was a way of making reparation for the revolution’s evils.”<sup>14</sup>

In our schools the older girls are shown how to take an interest in, and how to care for younger pupils. In return the little ones look up to their seniors for that love and care. Like Claudine, we want the girls in our care to be confident, responsible and good homemakers. Together with our teaching staff, we make sure to instill in these girls motherly qualities. In character building classes, Claudine’s values are integrated into day-to-day living. The value of forgiveness is given the utmost importance as it is one of the most difficult and most needed values in our culture.

St. Claudine was a prayerful woman and wished her daughters to be prayerful as well. She strongly realized that prayer was essential to religious life and recommended it unceasingly:

“Without prayer one cannot maintain a spirit of religious fervour nor persevere in the practice of virtue. We must not neglect this sure means of salvation which can lead us to greater perfection and help us take giant strides along the spiritual way.”<sup>15</sup>

We teach and give example to our pupils to be prayerful people. By celebrating all the events and feasts of the various Creeds, and by integrating the customs associated with these feasts, we show our love and respect for each other. In our daily prayer we bring the needs, intentions, difficulties and the safety and protection of our teachers, pupils, workers and parents to the good Lord. We assure all those in contact with us of the support of our prayers. I strongly believe that due to our life of prayer, care, concern and above all love people approach us and bring their precious children and young girls to us. I thank Claudine for asking us to be mothers to these children. I firmly believe that we do reflect this motherly love and concern for them.

By writing this article I have come closer to the person of Claudine. I thank God for giving me this wonderful opportunity to be part of this project celebrating the bicentennial of the Foundation of our Congregation. In conclusion, I pray for God’s countless blessings on our

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<sup>14</sup> The Life And Time of Claudine Thevenet by Gabriela Maria RJM, pp. 126

<sup>15</sup> Positio pp. 108-109

Congregation and on its many and varied missions throughout the world. I bring before God all who suffer any form of violence particularly the silent victims of the many abuses in our society.

May all find God in their sorrows and sufferings, have the courage to accept God's healing touch and in return bring healing to others like them. We can be crushed beneath sufferings or, like Claudine, be lifted up triumphant in believing in the immensity of God's love and protection.

May our constant hymn of praise forever be: How Good God Is!

## **II. SUGGESTIONS FOR PRACTICAL EXERCISES THAT ALLOW THEM TO BE USED AS PASTORAL OR TEACHING RESOURCES.**

All that is revealed in this article is the reality and mission of the Religious of Jesus and Mary in Pakistan. Through the example of our lives and apostolate, we hold interfaith dialogue and dialogues of life with Muslims and other minorities living around us. We believe they are influenced by our way of living and our mission. Together with our pupils and teachers we work towards uplifting the lives of poor Muslims, Hindus and Christians without showing discrimination.

Values cherished by Claudine form the major part of all our school activities. We feel proud in saying that with great zeal and interest Christians as well Muslims pupils and teachers develop the desire to help those in any kind of distress. At the celebration of the bicentenary of the Foundation of our Congregation, we turn to St. Claudine Thevenet, our spiritual mother, to obtain from God the graces to help us organize activities through which we seek to find good in all around us.





### Offering Forgiveness

*Offering Forgiveness  
I've reached humanity  
crushed by violence and fear.*

*Offering Forgiveness  
I've reached children  
suffering the pain of discrimination.*

*Offering Forgiveness  
I've reached  
a road filled with challenges.*

*Offering Forgiveness  
I've reached a path  
unfolding, unending.*

*Offering Forgiveness  
I've reached God  
healing the wounds of many.*

*Offering Forgiveness  
I've reached the depth of Claudine's  
living the love of Jesus and Mary.*

*Irene Stephen RJM*

➤ **Questions for personal reflection and for pastoral and teaching sources:**

- ✓ How do you feel after reading this article?
- ✓ What were your perceptions about Pakistan before reading this article?
- ✓ Have you experienced injustice and intolerance in your life? In what ways?
- ✓ What do you feel when you see or hear of the sufferings of people around you?
- ✓ As part of or as an associate of the Congregation of Jesus and Mary, what would you do to bring peace, forgiveness, love and care into the lives of victims you encounter?