

« CLAUDINE, THE FRENCH CONNECTION »

ANNE-MARIE DEROCHE

Lycée Jeanne d'Arc

- Remiremont – France

http://www.scolalor.org/jdarem/jeanne_darc/projet_educatif.php

Personal presentation

Born in 1948 in a small rural town in the centre of France, my parents brought me up in the catholic tradition that was required in this background. I've always kept deep inside me the part of mystery and the pure joy felt in my childhood, when I went to Sunday Mass with my paternal grand-mother. However, my mother, a teacher of the state, compulsory school (law of 1885 promulgated by Jules Ferry and reinforced by the law of 1905 concerning the separation of the Church from the State) and trained at the Teacher Training College was quite soaked up by republican principles, quite, at that time, close to anticlericalism according to me.

So I was the product of these two influences and though faith spread through all my person, I had an inherent suspicion regarding the Catholic School with a contract with the State as I was aware of all the strain between the two institutions.

I completed all my studies within State School and the first part, in a single class managed by my mother. I have never been a good pupil; I have never felt comfortable there and I have never felt I could match the “mould” in which all the children were supposed to fit in if they did not want to be labelled bad pupils. So I have never been able to follow traditional studies. In the schools I went to, I never had the opportunity to meet the person who could have spoken highly of me and I could not either in my family whose most members were teachers. So I was quickly steered towards vocational education, for lack of intelligence, they said, and I was myself convinced that I could do nothing else. It seemed to me, all these years that only the marks and, sometimes, your background were important; At least it was what I felt. All the same I passed my baccalaureate in medical secretariat, followed by a degree in nutrition. I finished with my studies in 1970.

I got married at the end of 1970, my husband was starting his studies in engineer in Epinal where I followed him, and our first daughter was born a year later. So that my family could live, I had to find a job. At that time, nutrition was a new practice and the jobs were rare. So I accepted,

for lack of anything better, to be a substitute teacher in various state schools in the regional education authority for three years though I had promise myself I would never be a teacher. I must say that I felt the same unease as a teacher as I had as a pupil.

The look we took at the young people or at least the perception I had of it, did not suit me and I would probably have not remain a teacher if I had had to stay in a state school. In fact, the intellectual structure did not suit me. I sensed that each child, whoever he was, could benefit from a kind look, and that school should allow everybody to make the most of their talents. My view was the same for the adults in the educational team: each of them should be able to develop what was the best in them and make the pupils, their colleagues and all the school profit by it.

The way the Congregation entered my life

In 1973, I could not get a job in a state school and neither one as a nutritionist My husband was going on his military service; I had to work. Then, a kind secretary at the Education Centre offered me a job for the school year at the 'Institution Jeanne d'Arc' in Remiremont. After some hesitation because of my past, the common sense drove me to meet the Headmistress 'Soeur Directrice'. It was my first contact with the Catholic educational System and at the same time with the Congregation of Jesus and Mary.

I was rather anxious when I arrived but the headmistress, a nun, knew how to make me feel at ease quickly; she knew through her attitude, how to make me hope that this job could suit me. What she expected seemed clear to me in regard to the skills as well as to the attitude of humanity towards the Young, the guidelines were clear. She entrusted me with the job of cooking and nutrition teaching; the maintenance of the rooms in the branch "Technical employee of community"; the training of pupils who were, for most of them, in school difficulty, guided there by default, often coming from underprivileged background, or even from an orphanage. This public really touched me. So, full of hope but of questioning too I joined the institution: I felt able to make sure that my pupils could show their skills, but would I be able to behave in harmony with an institution of which I ignored all the codes? What did the nuns expect as they held all the important posts?

Apart from the certainty that Jesus is my fellow traveller, I did not know anything about the demands in relation to religion. So it's with interest and sometimes amazement that I could observe how an establishment under contract with the State, in which you are accountable to the Local Education Authority but in which the Congregation of Jesus and Mary gave 'the tempo' on

the way to organise the ministerial instructions and at the same time the behaviour concerning the pupils and the community of the adults.

The working system of the religious community filled me with surprise and admiration. How could a headmistress, a nun, responsible for a group of teachers, a group of pupils, educational and service staff become the maid of a community in which her decisions as a headmistress could be talked about and even questioned at the committee meeting of this Community, The Superior was never the headmistress of the school. What humility and what faith all that needed!

I was very surprised when, after my second year at school, I was asked to be the principal head teacher of the upper sixth in the course and, at the same time, to be the Coordinator of the whole training programme. I became the first lay person to be part of the '*Conseils de gouvernance*' (governing boards) when all the other members were nuns. I learnt the 'concept of assistance' this task was voluntary, outside school time. This method of working taught me how to share difficulties, the way of multiply the solutions and the adapted choices to every case, it was about the discovery of team working and of the religious pastoral care policy inspired by the Congregation in this school. That was what led me to know more about the Nuns' motivation. Who were they inspired by, How has the Community been born? I was totally aware that people could live their faith in different ways, so for them to follow whom? Why as teachers? How has this school been born? And that's at this point that from meetings with the Nuns, from reading, from seminars in Lyon, I got to know Claudine Thévenet, her Charisma and her charitable organization I very quickly agreed with and that guided me until these present days.

Some years later, I was asked to be part of the '*Conseil d'administration*' (board of directors). Highly instructive, these years allowed me to understand that financial administration directly influenced the educational policy and so the school religious pastoral care policy. Later, the regulations changed and teachers were not allowed to be part of the board of directors any longer. At the same time, the number of nuns decreasing, several lay persons were invested with the job of '*Coordinatrices de niveau*' (level coordinators), and therefore paid for. Then I was in charge of all the '*Secteur Sanitaire et Social*' (healthcare and social sector) and still of the '*Employées Technique de Collectivités*' (Technical Employees in Community). As part of this, it seemed to me necessary to anticipate the introduction of Courses meeting the needs of our Society and to open a Training Programme for Home Support Workers for the elderly and the handicapped, with then, an enlargement for families in difficulty. This anticipation allowed us to keep this course when it became Academic training ten years later, and then it allowed us to keep the option for the '*Bac Professionnel Sanitaire et Social*' (vocational high-school diploma in health and social work) up to now.

In 1992, the Headmistress asked me to be responsible for “the pastoral animation” of the school. Though I had always taken part in the offered actions, in celebrations, and so on ..., for me it was a staggering demand, as not coming from the innermost circle, I did not feel at my place in this function so founding for the school. I expressed my hesitations to the Sister who managed to convince me and I agreed to have a one-year fixed-term contract. So that year I had in charge the organisations of the Feasts to celebrate Claudine Thévenet’s canonisation. Meanwhile, I could improve my knowledge on her, supervise all the working groups, as the whole the educational community had committed to suggesting different events with, as the high point, a performance in Rome, recounting Claudine’s life. One of my daughters prepared the choreography and the other danced! Such an intense moment that persuaded me to go on with my pastoral mission. It allowed me to attend several seminars in Lyon and in London, some theological trainings in Paris, some times of resourcing, in this context, I went to the Youth Summit in Quebec. Finally, I went to Romania with a group of young high school students for summer work as I have seen three Jesus and Mary nuns go to open a school there. This experience was also a great moment of sharing, openness and self-gift.

After our return, for the first time, the school leadership was left to a lay person, even if the small Community continued to live on site. Until September 2002, the Diocesan Director offered me then to be the Head of an Elementary/Junior High School under the diocesan tutelage. I accepted this job in all simplicity, wishing to enforce all the rules received from Claudine.

However, I had, at the same time, a part-time job as a teacher at Jeanne d’Arc, as I was in charge of preparing pupils for them to become home carers, and so I could to keep in touch with the reality on the ground. I stayed there until 2008 and when I was thinking of my retirement, I was called at the Diocesan Authorities to continue the work as the Responsible of the Diocesan Pastoral Department, the post holder, I had worked a lot with, had just died unexpectedly. I fulfilled my mission until 2011. However in 2009, the official Diocesan Director was ill and there again our Bishop asked me to replace him. I worked in team with him and a colleague who was in charge of junior high school and I continued the rather heavy job waiting for me. Apart from diocesan animation, I was asked to redefine the policies of the Catholic School in the Diocese, to have them approved by our Bishop, to redefine the regional policy connected to the other regional Dioceses, to establish a job description for the new Diocesan director and finally to organise his recruitment in collaboration with the Secretary-General of the Catholic Education Office. My colleague and I wanted to limit our action until the successor’s arrival. Finally all that with the pastoral animation as there too a new successor had to be found.

For another two years, to the new Diocesan Director's request, I was part of the tutelage team to allow us to make our Establishments known to newcomers. In 2012, I finally retired and now I devote my time to my children and my five grandchildren.

Claudine Thévenet's part in my reflexion and in my approach to education

After reading, studying, listening to, I must admit that what caught my attention and motivated my behaviour was certainly the sentence delivered by Claudine's brothers: "forgive as we forgive" and above all the meaning given in Sister Jeanne Marie Horny's book on Claudine Thévenet: "to forgive, it's to rely on what happened in order to find ways to find a new orientation, it's to change direction to open some future".

This sentence reinforced my first intuition that here it was not the same as elsewhere and that I could sweep away my school pains and act differently. I remember that, when a young teacher, I always tried to ensure that pupils loved me, but it never works.

After thinking about this sentence, I told myself: "you are wrong, it's you who must love each of your pupils in the same way and then "God will provide""...

From the day that I arrived at the 'Institution Jeanne d'Arc' and from the first contact with the Head Sister, I knew that something different was happening for me. For the first time, I felt welcomed, my skills were appreciated and people trusted me to have the responsibility of pupils they really cared about. Or at least that is the way I felt it. The Sister knew through her attitude, through her kindness while announcing her expectations, in terms of competences but also in terms of human positions towards the pupils and all the community, how to define a course of action that touched me deeply. From that point on, I felt responsible for giving a specific, kindly answer to all the young who would be entrusted to me, whoever they might be and particularly those who required most attention.

Then, being accepted as Coordinator, the only lay person among all the Nuns has reinforced my first idea that something was working differently. That led to my questioning: What was motivating these Nuns to the point of having given their life to God, that I could understand, but through education? Who had formed the first community? Why, in which circumstances? All questions that I asked the Nuns of the Congregation who suggested some texts, some discussions, some time spent in prayer, some meetings with other congregations, and seminars in Lyon. It allowed me to find some answers to Claudine Thévenet's Charisma and little by little to understand it thoroughly and to live it in my personal and professional life.

It was a lay commitment following Claudine Thévenet

In fact, when working with the nuns, I experienced a sense of selflessness, of humbleness. The work we did was for the common good; powerless but quite responsible; following Jesus and Mary for the love of each other.

What was very important for me too, was that contrary to the fact that, in my childhood, my faith was somehow unreal; it was becoming completely incarnate in this place, in a social reality, in accordance with Claudine Thévenet's life, I could act.

And to be able to act, we must work a lot too, without being discouraged and trusting Jesus, faithful to the Gospel.

Work is not really easy I understood then what teamwork means:

- ✓ Taking into account every colleague's skill, leading them to develop them and placing them where it is the most suitable for them.
- ✓ Sharing ideas, accepting that ours are not exclusive and that even sometimes not as good.
- ✓ Taking into account our diversified public, coming from the Society as it stands at a given point, knowing how to assess the needs and trying to meet them.
- ✓ Being open to the world: our visit in Rome for Claudine Thévenet's canonisation showed me how worldwide her action is. The Exchanges and the Assistance that we can provide one another are considerable.

I could implement these rules of life especially in the way of opening up our pastoral action to the Parish; to the Chaplaincy in State Schools; to Youth Movements. Similarly, in my action as a Headmistress by developing Specific Training for children with difficulties such as dyslexia; and by training the teachers in this welcome.

Finally, concerning the diocese, by making all the Headmasters work together so that everyone had their place in the Diocese, small schools and big ones helping each other.

My participation in the Board of Directors allowed me to notice that the financial management of the school had a direct influence on the school life and that the concern for the other was at the heart of all the decisions.

- ✓ The Other as a socially privileged pupil and the Other as a underprivileged pupil: through the adaptation of the schooling fees, the introduction of a solidarity fund, and so on ...

- ✓ The Other as an adult, by giving the most underprivileged ones a job, an occasional material aid, staff training ...
- ✓ The Other in the choice of selected trainings, educational assistance introduced ...
- ✓ The Other by helping other establishments of the community in difficulty ...
- ✓ With a permanent feature which is to let your eyes always linger on the most underprivileged, and that, through my professional life, has never left me.

Conclusion

The re-reading of my career allow me to measure once again to what extent Claudine Thévenet has been an example and has guided my decisions and the way I lived my responsibilities. My entire life, in the way I saw the others, in the commitments I could have made, professionally and personally, and even today with my family, is still marked by her.

At Christmas, last year, I received our Bishop's greetings:

“The Son of God was born poor in a barn, let the light of the Nativity comfort our hearts and open our doors, so that every man in this world can to find a place where to live and a path of hope”

I think he was referring to the immigrants of course, but I thought that, as far as I was concerned, Claudine Thévenet had been the instrument chosen by God for me to find the place that suited me in this world.

Bibliography

Horny Jeanne-Marie: Claudine Thévenet Lyon 1774-1837 Edition Médiapaul 1993