

INTO THE UNKNOWN: CLAUDINE'S JOURNEY OF FAITH,

1784-1818

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*The world cannot be discovered by a journey of miles,
no matter how long, but only by a spiritual journey,
a journey of one inch, very arduous and humbling,
and joyful, by which we arrive at the ground,
at our own feet, and learn to be at home.*

[Wendell Berry]

1. Introduction

Our bicentenary celebration calls us to fare forward, to journey with St. Claudine by entering her graced experience in the light of a 200-year history for our Congregation. It invites us likewise to move into an unknown future with hope, trusting as Claudine did that the good God -- origin, path and fulfillment of every human journey – will see us safely to its fulfillment. Journeying is one of the great themes in world literature and sacred texts of various religious traditions. We are familiar with the Exodus journey of the Israelites to the Promised Land, recalled in Christian tradition at the Easter vigil. It embodies the central spiritual experience of the Jewish community story, a passage from slavery to freedom, from oppression to new life in the Promised Land. It is the defining story marking our paschal celebrations. These Passover and Easter events remind us that, like Jesus who first passed through death to risen life, we are called to walk a long, “arduous and humbling” sacred journey to newness of life and spiritual freedom.

As Christians, we believe that God-with-us has entered our human story in Jesus. His journey in the Gospel stories is the model of our own: he shows us the path we are to take by leading the way: “They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them. . .” (Mk.10:32). When the disciples first asked Jesus where he lived, he answered:

“Come and see.” What he showed them, what they saw, was a road. He had no permanent “home,” no settled or stable pattern of existence to offer them. If they wanted to be with Jesus, they had to leave behind the familiar and comfortable past – their boats and their nets – and embark on a journey marked by uncertainty and doubt. Walking with this itinerant Jesus was a high adventure, to be sure. Being with him “on the way,” they had amazing encounters and new realizations of the journey’s vistas and challenges. But ultimately their road to discipleship led them to the way of the Cross on Calvary’s hill. Faced with their Master’s humiliation and agony, most of them fled from that path in fear. Later, seeing him crucified in shame, they would recall his words: “Whoever does not take up the Cross and follow me cannot be my disciple” (Mt. 10:38). The key to following Jesus was to remain with him “on the way.” As they humbly faced their dismal failure in discipleship, Jesus led them lovingly into a transformed relationship with him. It was another turn in the journey, offering them hope, new life, and a mission that changed the world.

The Resurrection accounts remind us that the journey continued beyond Calvary and Galilee into the world. With the disciples of Emmaus, Christians through the ages have come to know and follow the Risen Jesus “on the road,” in the breaking of bread at Eucharist, in the recognition of the Lord’s face and presence in others, especially in the poor and forsaken of the world. The journey requires letting go of what is false in ourselves in order to discover the truth of who we all really are: sinners, forgiven and loved by God in Christ, sent to proclaim this good news to all. Our saints and holy ones walked this path of spiritual conversion and transformation, each in his or her unique way. We know that apostolic religious life through the centuries has mirrored this paschal journey of Christ and his friends.

This essay traces the personal path of Claudine in the years leading to the foundation of the Congregation. It places her spiritual history within the larger story of her world and Church. It reveals the early road she walked as she came to know and follow the Lord in “joy of heart, liberty of spirit, confidence and generosity” [Rule of P.A., II, 1]. Finally, it invites us to feel again, to experience, what it was in Claudine’s world that brought forth from her heart an enduring, inventive love for those to whom she was sent, the love of the Heart of Christ for the least and the lost.

2. The Context of Claudine's Journey: Society and Church on Stormy "C's"

In the spiritual history of the Church and of religious life, new attitudes and revitalized lifestyles have usually arisen from the violent breakdown of existing forms. This pattern ensures vitality and flexibility, giving new life to traditions that gradually become identified, sometimes very comfortably, with secular social structures. In post-Revolutionary France, a society and church in ruins called for new responses from clergy and laity alike. How did Claudine begin to discover her apostolic vocation and mission in just such a situation of chaos and violence, a world and church in turmoil? Like hundreds of her contemporaries, she learned to refashion a vibrant form of apostolic community life from the ashes of the French Revolution and its consequences.

Silk and souls: this is one way of naming the world of Claudine. It was circumscribed by her city of Lyon with its monopoly on the silk industry and strong reputation in commerce. Its Christian tradition reached back to second-century saints and martyrs: Pothinus, Ireneaus, Nizier, Blandina and her companions, to name but a few. The devout clergy and laity of Lyon were justifiably proud of their reputation for piety, their devotion to Mary Immaculate, and their collaborative charity. Through confraternities and parish organizations the Lyonnais had set up an effective social response network long before the French Revolution. True to their eminence as industrial leaders, they organized a network of charitable response to the needs of the poor through a system of food distribution, shelters, catechesis, primary education in "*petites écoles*," and work-schools teaching manual skills. These traditions of social outreach were part of Claudine's heritage growing up in 18th-century Lyon, part of her family life and activity at their parish of St. Nizier, in the affluent heart of the city.

Claudine was "*une Lyonnaise dévote*," a woman who matured in a bustling industrial city and an urban Catholic community whose traditions shaped her apostolic vision and response. She was always at home in this city with its teeming population of about 100,000 persons. Throughout her life, Claudine never traveled more than twenty-five miles from Lyon, well-situated at the confluence of the Rhône and Saône Rivers. That geography had determined its history. As a Christian and spiritual leader in ministry, her gifts developed within the boundaries of a local church and culture, realities that mirrored the cataclysmic change affecting

France and the larger world. In a very real sense, her vocation emerged from the “stormy C’s” of **crisis, chaos, and confrontation** that marked France’s early nineteenth century. Claudine’s inner journey began in a time of crisis, continued through the chaos of revolutionary violence and came to fullness in an era of confrontation with changing religious and social values.

3. Setting Out: Encounter with Christ on the Way of Calvary [1774-95]

*We are pilgrims on the journey, we are travelers on the road;
We are here to help each other walk the mile and bear the load.*

The Servant Song

As she was familiarly known, “Glady” was born into a pious family of the *petite bourgeoisie*, the second of seven children and the eldest daughter. Her mother, Marie-Antoinette Guyot, was the daughter of a silk merchant in whose firm her future husband, Philibert, was employed. Close bonds of love and support united the family, as we discover in Claudine’s few remaining letters.¹ Her religious sensitivity, keen intelligence and strong personality were nurtured by early education at home and later in the boarding school at the ancient Benedictine Abbey of *St- Pierre des Nonnains*, where she began formal schooling at the age of ten. In the company of the nuns, novices, and other boarders, Claudine prepared for first Communion and Confirmation. She also received instruction in the knowledge and skills needed to manage a bourgeois household, along with needlework, embroidery and a sense of order. In this monastic, contemplative setting, she developed a deepening devotion to the Sacred Heart, Our Lady and the Blessed Sacrament, characteristics of the renowned abbey’s spiritual tradition. She recalled her years as a boarder with gratitude. From external appearances, this period of Claudine’s youth provided her with a peaceful and orderly existence. If we try to imagine her inner experience, however, we might consider that for this “all too sensitive Glady,” as one of her brothers described her, leaving home and family for long periods of time may have been difficult, with feelings of loneliness and abandonment that she would later come to recognize in others with insight and compassion.

All was not well beyond the walls of the abbey. For several decades, a social crisis had been developing in Lyon, largely due to the fluctuations in prices of silk and unrest among the poorer classes who suffered most from recurring natural disasters like droughts and floods. A series of political and economic changes led to crises in the silk industry that left 40,000 laborers without bread or work. Many

lived in dire misery. As the second largest city in France, Lyon's troubles reflected the larger picture in Paris. With the tensions brought on by the king's war debts leading to bankruptcy, luxurious spending among royalty and nobles, and the new thinking publicized by leaders of Enlightenment, the traditional "union of throne and altar" of Old Regime France was slowly crumbling. Politically and socially, the country was divided into three classes, called "estates": the clergy [bishops and some clerics], who were a privileged minority; the nobility, whose wealth dominated the political and social environment; and the commons, who represented the overwhelming majority of French citizens with little wealth, influence or power. The *bourgeoisie* were a new "middle class," wealthier than most of the third estate. As the century came to a close, Catholicism in France also showed signs of institutional decline, with fewer vocations to priesthood and religious life and diminished sacramental practice among the faithful. Many monasteries stood half empty. With their lives of prayer and separation from the world, monks and nuns were criticized as a useless, dying breed. Developing gradually over time, the social and religious crisis erupted into a civil war we now call the French Revolution. The Thévenet family felt the effects of these years of crisis in a succession of financial reversals, resulting in several moves to less affluent neighborhoods and a more modest lifestyle.

Claudine remained at the abbey until the outbreak of the Revolution in Paris in 1789, which marked the abrupt end of her formal schooling. Successive decrees of the National Assembly gradually suppressed all church goods and religious orders, claiming them as national property. Like other monasteries, *St-Pierre* lost its properties, a main source of revenue. The community of thirty-one nuns and their young charges were dispersed. Claudine's education took a radical turn as she witnessed the erosion and collapse of structures that had been forces of stability for generations before hers. These shattering events served as stark lessons by which she was led on a painful pilgrimage into the paschal dimensions of Christ's redeeming love.

4. Chaos: Revolution in Lyon

The Revolution's impact on Lyon was not immediately violent. On the whole, the citizens of Lyon remained loyal to the king and the Church. When the city was besieged by

revolutionary forces in 1793, they would rise up to defend it against one of the revolutionary governments. But a sense of growing pressure, opposition and repression crippled the citizens with feelings of helplessness. Antagonisms between the *bourgeoisie* and workers fueled a sense of frustration and anxiety on all sides. A weak, divided clergy seemed powerless to intervene.

In April, 1790, the General Assembly assumed power in Paris, dooming Catholic institutions to destruction. It hoped to abolish privileges the Church had enjoyed for centuries. It put in place a “constitutional clergy,” independent of papal authority and supportive of the revolutionary government. Bishops and clergy were to be elected rather than appointed by the pontiff. A series of civil oaths imposed upon bishops and priests required adherence to the new dispensation. Some bishops decided to consult Rome before accepting, but Pope Pius VI waited several months before sending his rejection of a “constitutional church” that excluded papal authority. The pope’s delayed decision was too little, too late: the horse was already out of the barn. Following the lead of liberal Paris, some dioceses gave conditional support to the new decrees. In many parts of France, however, royalist church authorities refused to recognize the constitutional government or its laws, and forbade all clergy, religious and laity to do so. There were, in effect, two churches: one known as “constitutional,” the other, “refractory,” or resistant. For a decade or more, France, known as the Church’s “eldest daughter,” suffered a church in schism, some of its members separated from Rome in doctrine and practice. The situation created crises of conscience for many ordinary Catholics who had no clear indication of which was the true church. The effect on clergy and religious was especially devastating. A period of progressive “dechristianization” of Catholic France was underway. The times became a testing ground for heroic faith and action. The Lyon archbishop, Yves de Marbeuf, went into exile. His replacement, the elected constitutional bishop, Adrien Lamourette, assumed official authority over the diocese. Priests who refused to sign the oaths were forbidden to exercise any ministry. Instructions were given that they should be denounced before tribunals. At one point, clergy were instructed to marry, as celibacy was considered “useless” to the new order. What to do? Marry and remain with one’s flock, or resist and leave them without sacraments? These were wrenching decisions; some priests and monks chose collaboration and compromise. In revolutionary times, things are never clear. Many resisting priests were banished; others were hunted down and incarcerated as traitors to the nation, while a heroic group exercised an

underground ministry at risk to their lives. When the religious orders were suppressed in 1792, their monasteries were emptied and goods confiscated as belonging to “the nation.” Monks and nuns chose exile or hiding, living under constant threat of denunciation or house arrest, fear of imprisonment or violent death at the scaffold. This dark time forged a generation of martyrs and saints, heroes of fidelity and courage, including the Carmelite community of Compiègne and several Sisters of St. Joseph, who were guillotined. The absence of clerics also provided for an increase in women’s leadership in apostolic activity.

All that year, the good people of Lyon watched in fear as the resisters, known as “refractories,” were dragged before tribunals. Ordinary lives were thrown into tumult at every level. Any assurance of stability and security from throne and church was gone. As jails filled to overflowing with suspects and prisoners by the spring of 1793, one word summed up the chaos pervading Lyon: “*La Terreur*.” Terror -- a term familiar to us in the 21st century, and a word that brought fear and anguish to the Thévenet household. Claudine’s father, the kind and generous Philibert, had suffered serious financial reverses ten years earlier. In July, as threats of violence bore down upon Lyon for resisting the new order, he decided to take the four younger children – aged 11 to 16 – to his sister’s home in Belley, a safer place in the countryside, hoping to return immediately. However, he was unable to re-enter the city until December because of increased military activity to force the city to surrender by placing it under siege for over three months. From August to October, 1793, the revolutionary army subjected Lyon to continuous bombardment and harassment; shortages of food and necessities were common. The two older sons, Louis-Antoine, 20, and François, 18, volunteered to join the resistance army of about 7000 citizens, and took up arms to defend their besieged city. Louis had already begun working in his grandfather’s silk business, while François was apprenticed to a printer. As the eldest daughter, Claudine remained at home to comfort and strengthen their mother and join her long, agonizing vigil for the safety of absent family members.

On October 8, their worst fears were realized. Overcome by the strength of its invaders, Lyon fell to the forces of the Convention Army, which decided to punish the rebellious city by destroying its walls and public buildings, and changing its name to “*Ville Affranchie*,” (the “liberated city”). The Thévenet brothers were among the resisters captured and imprisoned. In

November, Louis Guyot, Mme. Thévenet's widowed brother, was also arrested and jailed. When he was executed a month later, his two young daughters were left orphaned.

The terror of the Revolution had struck deeply into the family circle, a foreboding of the agony that would crush them even more after the New Year. In this atmosphere where all that had previously spoken of God's goodness and providence was absent, Claudine's apostolic journey came to life. The Revolution provided fertile soil for an initial expression of her mission: a ministry of consolation to those who were nearest and dearest.

5. A Church in Resistance

While its citizens rallied for political and armed resistance, Lyon church authorities struggled to maintain orthodox faith and remain loyal to Rome, providing forms of worship and needed services to the faithful, many of whom were imprisoned. Such activities were shrouded in secrecy to protect the heroic underground community that gave testimony time and again, to its deep conviction and lively faith. One of the most significant figures of church resistance in Lyon was the vicar general, Rev. Jacques Linsolas.² After his ordination in 1779, he had returned to live in his native parish of St. Nizier. As the Revolutionary crisis loomed, he organized a small secret society of young women, the *Demoiselles*. They were selected for membership on the basis of piety, virtue, discretion and loyal commitment to orthodoxy. In the rule he gave them at the outset, we catch a glimpse of the creative insight and zeal with which he hoped to counteract the schism and meet the needs of those affected by the chaos. These young women met every three weeks for prayer and planning. They emphasized the need for mutual support in works of piety and mercy toward the neighbor. As an elite group, they were being tested for the time of active persecution to come. While there are no records of membership for the *Demoiselles*, Claudine may well have been among them, since Linsolas ministered in her parish.

In 1793, Linsolas shared responsibility for diocesan administration with a zealous priest, M. de Castillon, who was soon captured, condemned and guillotined. Left alone to organize a church divided in itself and facing institutional collapse, Linsolas wished to "fortify the faith and have the consolation of reconciling many priests and people in schism." Once the revolutionary army invaded Lyon, he decided to utilize his *demoiselles*, expanding their services. They were

organized into three “sections”: messengers to imprisoned priests, religious and lay women; visitors to the sick in the hospital for the poor, the *Hôtel-Dieu*; catechists in various neighborhoods to prepare girls for First Communion. These activities required extraordinary discretion and courage; the risks involved were great, leading at times to heroic action and imprisonment. By 1794, the members added another service to about 300 women religious without any material resources: to visit and bring them food supplies every fortnight.

Claudine’s name is nowhere mentioned in the memoirs written by Linsolas years later, but circumstantial evidence is strong enough to assume she was a prominent member of this group during the Revolutionary years. Everything we know of her apostolic poise, her sure judgment, sensitivity, and strength of character as revealed in the Pious Association reveals prior formative experience. The self-assured leadership Claudine exercised as a mature woman points to earlier formation and participation in organized apostolic service. Exterior events had led Claudine to courage and maturity beyond her years, in a school of grief and sorrow that focused her response to Christ in his suffering members. With extraordinary boldness and self-discipline, she overcame natural fears and sensitivity to bring comfort to the marginalized of her society. When we consider the characteristic traits of the Pious Association she later co-founded and led, we see clearly reflected the style of organization, piety and charitable activity practiced in the *Demoiselles*: mutual support in service and active love for the Lord hidden behind the distressing disguise of his poorest and least ones. Claudine’s journey of faith now moved her along a yet more demanding path towards a pilgrimage of pardon where she would know a transforming encounter with her Crucified Lord.

6. Journey to Calvary

By the time her uncle, brothers, and possibly a fiancé were imprisoned in 1793, Claudine was no stranger to visiting the crowded, repulsive holes of prisons that had descriptive names such as “*la mauvaise cave*” (awful cave). Some anecdotes describe her in various disguises, visiting inmates and trying to get them released, even being forced to raise a glass “to the Republic” with a guard before she was allowed to see her beloved prisoners. Faithful to her brothers throughout their incarceration, she determined follow them to their dreadful execution on January 4, 1794, a cold Sunday morning. As she began the fearful walk to the killing fields

of *Les Brotteaux*, that “valley of the shadow of death” [Ps. 23], Claudine felt the anguish of Louis and François. Joining the silent line of dead men walking, she received their final messages for the family, preserved to this day. In that terrible moment, between sobs that shook her being, she heard words that plunged her into the mystery of Christ’s passion and death: “Forgive, Glady, as we forgive.” Perhaps the most powerful description of this scene is found in a theological reflection from the first full history of the Congregation, written almost sixty years after Claudine’s death. It invites us to journey with Claudine into the heart of her experience at the foot of the Cross:

“Weeping and more dead than alive, Claudine found the strength to follow the cortège. There she witnessed the fusillade, uniting herself with all her sister’s love to the souls of her dear brothers, passing so abruptly from life to death. At that moment of supreme anguish, the thought of Our Lord dying on the Cross with words of forgiveness on his lips was a light and support for her broken heart. The last prayer and only desire of her dear brothers . . . was like an echo of the words of her sweet Savior” (*Positio*, 538).

Sorrowful and steadfast, Claudine stood with Mary present on Calvary, “more dead than alive.” From what we know of her and the few references of this terrible time, we can imagine the impact of this event. Surely, her heart and spirit were broken. Any thought of a good and loving God, “*le bon Dieu*” so familiar in her youth, was now overshadowed by a universe of darkness. Nothing made sense anymore, and her religious world collapsed into emptiness, shrouded in grief and loss. Perhaps this lived experience of incomprehensible evil and suffering led Claudine to question the very existence of God. In and through these terrifying events, she may have felt in herself “the greatest misfortune” that compelled her response in later years: the silence, the absence of God. On that personal Calvary, Claudine encountered a crucified God, weak and powerless to save her loved ones. There she remembered the dying Jesus speaking words of forgiveness as “a light and support for her broken heart.” With time, she would welcome the grace of forgiving love offered her by Christ and her brothers. From the open, broken heart of Jesus, she would learn to let her broken heart open up to embrace the world and become a light and support for others. On the long and lonely road back to her shattered city and family, some part of Claudine was left for dead with her loved ones. Life was changed. What it would become was hidden. It would seem that she entered a long wilderness of silence

and sorrow. The shock of that awful day left her scarred in body and spirit. She suffered from head tremors and a sense of suffocation all her life, bearing in her body the marks of the Crucified Lord [Gal. 6:18].

It would take time for Claudine to venture out again on along the road of service. For the moment, she was a messenger of anguish, carrying home the brothers' letters and testament of forgiveness, sharing their last moments with a tearful family. When they later learned who had betrayed the boys, they could have brought him to justice and even capital punishment. They refused to declare his name, choosing to "practice pardon of injuries." Claudine's sentiments and promptings no doubt helped them heed the brothers' mandate and join her along the way of Christian forgiveness.

7. Seeking: A Journey of Compassion and Community [1805-18]

"Many things can be seen only through eyes that have cried." –Oscar Romero

Among the earliest documents of RJM history, the *Petit Manuscrit*, written by one of Claudine's first companions, summarizes her long silence after the horrific events of the Revolution. The family had moved in 1794 to the Rue Masson and the parish of St. Bruno, formerly the church of the vast Carthusian monastery in the working neighborhood of Croix-Rousse. St. Bruno became an important institution for Claudine in the next two decades as well as the birthplace of her apostolic ministry that flowered into a religious institute. While remaining at the heart of her family, Claudine emerged from her mourning with deeper longing, clearer vision and a developing sense of mission. She had become, like Jesus, a wounded healer. "Her heart's sufferings had been too great for her to seek any consolation henceforward except in God. As soon as order and liberty were restored in France, we see her giving herself completely to practices of piety and works of zeal. To do good, especially to the poor, became a need for her" (*Positio*, 502).

What met her eyes daily was a scene that made her weep and tremble: poor children in abjection and neglect filled the streets of Lyon. Almost every institution of the church that alleviated human need prior to the Revolution had been destroyed or severely damaged. What

resources were available to her, to anyone who wanted to restore order, “do good,” and attend to the desolation in their city? The material and spiritual ravages of these years called forth from Claudine’s heart a need to comfort and console, to heal and instruct those who had suffered most. She could not let the cry of the poor go unheard, for it echoed the impoverishment in her own soul. Acting out of her own weakness, she found renewed strength for the journey ahead. Beneath the external misery and squalor of so many that brought her to tears, Claudine was most distressed by their spiritual destitution: that poverty behind the poverty of those who might live and die without ever knowing God. Her deep anguish over this greatest of misfortunes issued in her greatest desire. It prompted Claudine to summon energies and resources for the healing of wounds inflicted by religious ignorance. The dimensions of her calling and the path ahead were taking shape.

Once the bloodshed ceased after 1794, a general atmosphere of mistrust and fear still surrounded the faithful of Lyon. Under the guidance of Linsolas, a system of underground “missions” had replaced the traditional parish structures. It emphasized strong lay leadership, organized activity, doctrinal strength and uniform liturgy and practice. In a real sense, this approach helped stabilize the church of silence in the immediate aftermath of the Revolution. We can imagine Claudine gradually becoming engaged in its apostolic activities while remaining at the heart of her family. Our documents shed no light on this period of her journey. We can safely assume that she helped repair the ravages of the Revolution by her continued participation in the group of *demoiselles*.

8. Pastoral Ministry at St. Bruno

In 1801, Napoleon’s Concordat with Pope Pius VII brought a ray of hope: it provided for some religious stabilization. Napoleon had little real interest in religion; however, he supported the reintroduction of formal religious structures in France as a practical means of restoring social order among the masses. In Lyon, the parish of St. Bruno was officially reopened in 1802. It became the focal point of Claudine’s apostolic endeavors for the next sixteen years. She was an active parishioner, fervent in zeal and good works that were expanding. Her

name appears on the parish register as a witness to baptisms and weddings. When a new parish Confraternity of Sacred Heart began in 1809, Claudine is listed at the head of its twelve founding members. The aim of this group was to promote spiritual growth through acts of reparation and Eucharistic adoration. Claudine's apostolic concerns were thus integrated into her contemplation of the Heart of the Lord as she continued hidden yet fruitful activity within the parish. It is notable that the names of her mother, sister, aunts and friends also appear in the register of the Confraternity. Claudine's power to attract others for good was evident, as well as her leadership qualities and organizational skills, prompting others to describe her as a "*femme de tête*" [strong-minded woman]. To the successive pastors of St. Bruno, she proved an invaluable associate of the priesthood in a ministry as diverse as the needs before them. From her intimate knowledge of the Lord's Sacred Heart, from her experience of a world in turmoil and constant change, Claudine had acquired a freedom of heart that could bend and adapt structures or programs to fit the services needed by her people and her times. She had learned to act flexibly, with singleness of purpose and simplicity of heart, ever ready to "let go" for the sake of God's glory and the service of those to whom she was sent.

9. A Community of Friends: the Pious Association of the Sacred Heart (1816-25)

The Napoleonic regime (1800-15) brought respite to people exhausted by the Revolution, but economic crises, food shortages and foreign invasions continued. Lasting peace was slow to arrive because of ongoing military conflicts. Austrian armies invaded France twice in 1814-15. Their soldiers were billeted in Lyon's residences, including the Thévenet home, bringing the total number of persons on rue Masson to nineteen. Early in 1815, Claudine's father died at the age of eighty. Familiar rhythms of sorrow, unrest and insecurity stirred in her heart: how might she continue in her charitable activities while remaining sensitive to other responsibilities and her mother's need?

Claudine's long experience of communal apostolic service confirmed her conviction that the best support to faithfulness in ministry is the loving help of friends who share similar desires and hopes. Having dedicated herself to alleviate the "greatest misfortune," she sought the consoling power of a loving community. "Together with many of her friends, she longed to relieve such great misfortune; she sought adequate means to free at least a few of these young

people from ignorance and form them for Christian living.” If doing good to the poor was a need for Claudine, so was the presence of others, of friends. Her zeal and example now extended beyond the boundaries of home and parish. Strong bonds of friendship, of mutual love for the Lord, and a shared longing to heed the cry of the most forsaken led her and her young companions toward a wider, more demanding apostolic horizon. Seven of these friends would pioneer the venture that came to be known as the Pious Association of the Sacred Heart --“*La Pieuse Union du Sacré-Coeur de Jesus.*” They were surely unaware that this small communal undertaking would find an echo far into the future.

10. Restoring Structures, Renewing Society (1814-30)

The abdication and exile of Emperor Napoleon put an end to the First French Empire and opened the way for the return of the Bourbon rulers of the Old Regime. When Louis XVIII reclaimed the throne in 1814, he ushered in a period of moderate rule known as the Restoration. As implied by the name, its aim was to put an end to revolutionary ideas or practices and return to the past order of church and society in France. While history proved this to be an impossible ideal, it gave the citizens a renewed sense of social and religious stability. For Church leaders, the aim was clear: “restore France to God and God to France.” They used every means at their disposal to reconstitute former structures in hopes of winning back a lost generation of the ignorant and indifferent. The papacy had suffered demeaning insults in previous years; now it could reclaim its role as a beacon of unity, truth, and freedom for the Church. Throughout the nineteenth century, the faithful would turn away from European revolutionary regimes and look to the pope as protector of Catholic tradition and doctrine. In France, this religious turn to Rome meant looking over the mountains, or “Ultramontanism,” a term that came to describe a more traditional, anti-modern approach in theology and practice. Fidelity to the Church of Rome was the hallmark of Restoration Catholicism, and it had strong support in Lyon. At the beginning the Rule for the Pious Association, the society aims “to remain firmly attached to the Roman Church and to die rather than renounce the faith” (*Rule*, Title I, Art. 2).

This period saw a resurgence of religious fervor and vitality, expressed in a multitude of activities, groups, and charitable works. Strengthened by years of clandestine activity, the faithful

of Lyon were well-prepared for institutional revival in their parishes and organizations. They proved as enterprising and creative as their priests and bishops, who depended closely upon lay initiative for every undertaking. In addition to restored parish societies and confraternities, Lyon turned to a dynamic network of groups tracing their origins and spirituality to a single lay association, “*La Congrégation*.” This was a Marian sodality with roots in the primitive Society of Jesus.³ At certain periods in French history, its members became involved in politically controversial issues and aroused suspicion from authorities. With the universal suppression of the Society in 1774, Jesuit institutions had been taken over by other orders and sodality groups had effectively disappeared.

In 1801, former Jesuit Jean Delpuits laid the foundations for a restored *Congrégation* in Paris, which flourished and spread rapidly. The following year, seven young men of Lyon met with Pierre Roger (1763-1839), a Father of the Faith, and established the *Congrégation de Lyon*⁴. Its aim was the glory of God, the veneration of Mary, and “our own holiness and that of our neighbor.” Inspired by the work of Jacques Linsolas, the Lyon sodality reflected his apostolic style in its organization and structures. On 8 December, 1802, Father Roger regrouped about fifty remaining *demoiselles* of Linsolas’ original society into a feminine branch of the *Congrégation*. Within the next two years, sodalities were in place for married men and women in Lyon, a “stirring Christian solidarity” encompassing every social and age group.

La Congrégation was a parent group for many charitable societies. They followed an Ignatian ideal of lay holiness in and through service of the neighbor. These “*filiales*,” as they were known, remained autonomous in their good works, but were linked to the larger *Congrégation* by bonds of a common spirituality and similar devotional practices. Each of the groups demonstrated similar characteristics: devotion to Our Lady under a chosen title; strong lay leadership; inviolable secrecy; mutual sanctification of its members by shared works of piety and charity. They were grouped for service according to “sections” for instruction, almsgiving, consolation, edification, etc. But the defining characteristic of all the *congréganistes* was their community ideal, summarized in the motto found in their rules: *Cor Unum et Anima Una* – the “one heart and one soul” of the early Christians (Acts 4:32). Several groups held their regular meetings in the retreat chapel housed in the former Carthusian cloister at St. Bruno, also the

center for Claudine's early apostolic efforts. It is more than probable that she and her friends had experience with *La Congrégation*, and that the Pious Association was one of its parish *filiales*. From the Rule and Minutes, clear parallels emerge, placing the Pious Association firmly in the lay Ignatian sodality tradition.

11. The Role of André Coindre⁵

When André Coindre arrived as a curate at St. Bruno in December, 1815, he was twenty-five years old, ordained three years earlier. A zealous and compassionate man, he often found abandoned children along the wintry streets. When he inquired about generous parishioners who could find them lodging and support, he was led to Claudine, who responded with her usual generosity and compassion. He recognized her qualities of leadership and spiritual maturity, forged in revolutionary times. To provide housing and support for little girls and so many others in need, Coindre suggested that Claudine and her friends form a parish charitable society based on the model familiar to many of them. Seven months later, eight young women gathered on July 31st, the feast of St. Ignatius, to elect officers and set objectives for their Pious Association of the Sacred Heart. The minutes of that meeting refer to "rules and practices of the Society" already in place, indicating a pre-existing group. Claudine was elected president, an office she held even once her religious community was underway.

Over the next nine years, Coindre was the animating force and spiritual director of the Association, attending their meetings and advising them in their spiritual and apostolic undertakings. He was esteemed by Claudine and the associates, not only as an ordained minister of God, but because of his wise apostolic instincts. Time and again, the Minutes praise Coindre as their God-given guide, "*to lead and direct us in ways that were so new to us, and whose prudent, gentle counsel has assured their success*" (July 31, 1818). With respect for his role, they were reminded that following Coindre's advice was fundamental: "*may his will be our one rule and conduct . . . only through obedience can we succeed.*" (Ibid.). When the time came to consider initiating a religious community to ensure the stability of their works, Coindre was the moving force behind their decision.

12. Claudine's Style of Apostolic Leadership

Undoubtedly, the Association developed from Claudine's heart and reflected her vision, clearly revealed in two documents of the Association: their *Rule* and the *Minutes* of their meetings from 1816-25. From these texts we gain rich insight into Claudine's gifts for mission. We witness her apostolic charism flowering in the Association and exercised with a freedom later restricted by norms for nineteenth-century women religious. A concrete expression of Claudine's hopes and aspirations, the Association bore the stamp of her call to walk the path of the poor through the felt presence of the Lord working through her. Reading her reflections and admonitions, we learn that that her sureness of purpose in the face of obstacles was sustained especially by a supportive community of friends: "When we go alone on a long and difficult journey, we soon grow tired and only have ordinary means of encouragement; on the contrary, when several are together, they go along with assurance, courage and fresh support" (Preamble to the *Rule*). Indeed, a striking characteristic of the Pious Association is its emphasis on **mutual support**. The associates were to seek holiness together, through the practice of virtues and the works of mercy. The Rule specifies their approach to charitable works in the four sections assigned. It stresses the inner attitudes they should strive for in their service: moderation, gentleness, joy of heart, and humility. The associates in the section for Almsgiving were to pay special attention to the "weakest, most shameful, most forsaken," refraining from judgment on the worthiness of the poor. Those chosen for Instruction "shall consider themselves fortunate to have the opportunity to make Jesus Christ known and loved"; they should speak of God briefly with joyful, open hearts: "Joyful virtue is cherished and leads others to God." In their apostolic outreach they were counselled to imitate Jesus, meek and humble of heart, the Sacred Heart in whose honor they were gathered. As leader and member of the Association, Claudine served as a model by her strength of character, her universal charity and care for the associates, her listening spirit and discerning heart. We see these qualities most clearly in the decision to establish the Providence of the Sacred Heart in the parish.

13. The Path Made by Walking: the Providence at St. Bruno (1817)

The first meeting between Claudine and Coindre had taken place out of concern for abandoned children. Attention and care for these "little ones" had high priority as the Association began its work. It quickly became clear that their limited resources did not allow

for an adequate response to all the needs before them. In the first annual president's report, Claudine presented the need for criteria and priorities to discern future apostolic choices. She reported that their limited finances dictated a choice or response: preference should be given to those who responded best to their spiritual and temporal assistance. Their outreach to young people had seemed the most beneficial and rewarding, which led Claudine to conclude: "I believe that we should devote ourselves to this work" (July 31, 1817). Their support was unanimous. The following day, the associates rented a cell in the Carthusian cloister to set up a workshop for poor girls, where they would find shelter from corruption and from the "dangers of the world." At first the house merely served as an overnight lodging for a few girls. Unable to dedicate themselves full-time to the work, the associates sought someone to live there, give the girls religious instruction, and orient them away from the streets to virtuous lives. By September, the Association entered into an agreement with the Sisters of St. Joseph, who sent two sisters to live in the shelter and supervise its organization. Within a year, the number of children had grown from seven to thirty. From that time on, the Providence was the primary apostolic work of the Pious Association, who continued to supervise its growth, oversee the progress and give it generous financial support until 1825, when it was transferred to the parish of St. Bruno and the newly-reorganized Sisters of St. Joseph.

14. Surrender to Mystery

On their second anniversary as a group, twenty-two associates met to celebrate their consoling experiences of a shared mission and a promising work begun with the Providence. Claudine knew the joy of fostering this dynamic group of young women whose desires matched her own. Still, the stirrings in some of their hearts called for a more total surrender to the Lord. Claudine felt this as well, but her aging mother and family responsibilities had held her back. Father Coindre called a special meeting for seven associates, including Claudine. His proposal was that they consider forming a new religious society, and indicated Claudine had been chosen by God as its leader – in short, a foundress. There is no record of their shared reflections that afternoon -- of their doubts, insecurities, or family pressures. We know that by the time came to begin a daunting new journey, Claudine felt unequal to its demands and uncertainties. She realized that canonical religious life would respond to their desire for more complete consecration, as well as to the need to stabilize and secure their response to needs. A religious

community would allow them to live more fully the Rule and spirit of the Association. In taking such a step, however, Claudine foresaw the personal cost to their apostolic freedom and fulfillment. Yet, in faith she heard the call of the director as a deeper call from God, and she would hold nothing back.

The night at *Pierres-Plantées*, October 5-6, 1818, is a crystallization of her inner struggle and tension, the agony and isolation she underwent, her feelings of futility and senselessness. She was forty-four years old, a dedicated lay apostle for over twenty-five years. Seven associates had been invited by Coindre to a new venture as a community. But as time drew near to break with the past, family and all that was dear, Claudine felt alone, in her personal Gethsemane. Until the end of her life, she would recall that “worst night” when in total darkness and from the depths of her poverty, she surrendered to the dark mystery of God: “I felt I had undertaken a foolish and hazardous enterprise that held no guarantee of success. On the contrary, it seemed destined to come to nothing” (*Positio*, 549). Yet, with St. Teresa of Calcutta, she knew that Christians are not called to be successful, but faithful. Though Claudine did not see clearly the path that lay before her, she chose to trust the good God who had led her to this juncture. She counted on the protection of Mary, her patron and sister in faith. Her most important work had begun.

Two hundred years later, Claudine’s faith journey into the unknown has become a global community of sisters, colleagues and associates of the Family of Jesus and Mary. Like her, we are invited again to follow Jesus on the roads where the poor and marginal call out, into an uncertain future, trusting that “when we no longer know which way to go, we have come to our real journey” (Wendell Berry). Where will it lead us?

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August, 2017/ Warwick, Rhode Island, USA

ENDNOTES

¹ Sixteen letters of Claudine have been preserved, all of them to family members. We can assume that she wrote as well to the communities in Monistrol and LePuy, the co-founder, Rev. André Coindre [1787-1826] and to the first generation of sisters. Unfortunately, this correspondence has never been found. Most of the family letters are collected in the *Positio* [333-63]. A U.S. edition, *Letters of Claudine Thévenet*, with introductory notes for each letter, was translated by Janice Farnham, RJM. Modern editions in French, English and Spanish appeared in 1993, prepared by M. Antonia Bonet, RJM, general archivist in Rome.

² Reverend Jacques Linsolas [1754-1828], was a native of Lyon. An outspoken monarchist, he preached open hostility to Revolutionary ideas and the constitutional church. In 1791, Linsolas was arrested for opening a Lenten sermon with prayers for the king, and subsequently banished from the city. He returned secretly a year later under an assumed name and led church life by organizing clandestine ministries and practice. As vicar-general in 1793, his concern was leading a faithful clandestine community. Linsolas' genius was his reliance on the leadership of laity, especially women, to support the "missions" he organized to provide itinerant priests with safe places for worship and liturgy. These lay groups offered religious instruction, visits to prisons and comfort to elderly priests and religious. After the Revolution, Linsolas was once again accused and arrested under false pretenses, and was exiled to the Papal States. He returned to Lyon in 1815 and wrote his own memoirs of the clandestine church. He was well-known among the many lay groups during the Restoration, serving as director of sodalities and societies of charity.

³ In 1543, the first companions of St. Ignatius formed a confraternity of young laymen "in honor of the name of Jesus." It was an elite corps, trained in the Spiritual Exercises and dedicated to works of mercy and charity. This was the forerunner of the first Marian Sodality at the Roman College – the *Prima Primaria* – organized in 1563 by the Belgian Jean Leunis, SJ [1532-84], for students in Jesuit schools. These sodalities extended throughout Europe and were active in Old Regime France, including the *Collège de la Trinité* in Lyon.

⁴ The Fathers of the Faith (*Pères de la Foi*) and Fathers of the Sacred Heart were societies of priests dedicated to following the Constitutions of St. Ignatius during the Jesuit suppression (1774-1814). They had a major influence on renewed Catholic life in the early years of the Empire. In 1814, Pierre Roger went to Paris and joined the reorganized Society of Jesus, becoming its first master of novices. For the most complete study of the Lyon Congrégation, see Antoine Lestra, *Histoire secrète de la Congrégation de Lyon* (Paris: Nouvelles Editions Latines, 1967).

⁵ André Coindre (1787-1826) was a native of Lyon and of St. Nizier Parish. After three years of seminary training in Lyon, he was ordained in June, 1812. He was a founding member of a diocesan missionary society of priests based at St. Bruno, *Les Missionnaires des Chartreux*. Their aim was to re-evangelize the diocese by preaching, catechesis and parish retreats. Known as a zealous and eloquent preacher, Coindre directed the Pious Association until 1825. Acknowledged and esteemed as co-founder of Claudine's religious congregation, he was its spiritual advisor until his untimely death. To staff the providences he established for boys in Lyon, Coindre founded the Brothers of the Sacred Heart in 1821, which has also grown into an international congregation.

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