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A Monday afternoon in December. An unexpected request from the Mother Provincial for my collaboration with some publications in preparation for the Bicentenary of the Congregation and in particular for my story, as a lay-person with a knowledge of and commitment to the charism of Saint Claudine Thevenet, to offer a personal reflection on my experience of christian life and the influence that Claudine's charism has had on my christian vocation; in other words to share the way the charism of Claudine has influenced me.

At first I was somewhat frightened by this request, but as I do not know how to say "no" and my feelings of gratitude towards the Congregation of Jesus and Mary make it impossible for me to refuse, I accept the challenge, even if a little overwhelmed by the thought of such a task, fear and doubts when I ask myself if I will be able to respond to the expectations placed on me. I do not find it easy to write and question the literary quality of my work. I find it difficult to express my feelings, even if those who know me well say that I communicate easily. So I undertake this challenge, feeling rather like Moses and Jeremiah, overwhelmed by the responsibility placed on me, but trusting that God will inspire my words, in order that they may serve as a witness to others. So why not try?

One thing both encourages and comforts me, something about which neither I, nor those who know me, can harbour any doubts and that is that Claudine and "Jesus and Mary" have had a profound influence on my life, my being and my personality - I owe all that I am to "J.M". When I look back and re-live the important moments of my life, I can see that each one has, in some way been influenced by my relationship with the Congregation. This is why when I speak of myself and my experience as a Christian, I have to involve Claudine and "Jesus and Mary". Such a forceful declaration may seem to be pretentious and arrogant, but it comes from my innermost being, as and how I have felt and lived; my existence and "J.M" go hand in hand.

I have always been aware of God's guidance and that He led me along various paths to "J.M". I have also always thought and, indeed, am convinced, that God has had a plan for me in "J.M" and when I think back the following words echo in my head "I chose you before I gave you life

and before you were born I selected you ...” (Jer. 1:5). It is evident that God wanted me in “J.M” and that it was His plan for me to be there.

I was born in a town near Barcelona, the eldest of four children. My family moved to Barcelona when I was six. My parents could not find a school able to receive all three of the daughters they then had – my brother was born some years later – so we were all admitted to different schools; I went to a public School and the ‘middle’ one to a local school run by some Sisters: Jesus and Mary – Claudine Thevenet. Two years later all three of us were pupils at this school. I was then nine years old and, ever since, my life has been unfailingly linked to “J.M” and Claudine.

It was there that I received my faith: my parents were not believers and not one of us three girls had been baptized. During my school years my christian vocation grew and developed and little by little I became aware of a personal vocation or purpose in life, that was to be an educator in “Jesus and Mary”. It is the vocation of those who, like Claudine believe that education can be an element of transformation in society and that it is possible to educate children and young people in Gospel values, wanting to help them to know and love Jesus and Mary. All of this can be done according to the charism, the educational style of Claudine Thevenet- her way of doing things.

At school the Jesus and Mary Sisters aroused in me the desire to know and love Jesus and His mother Mary. Soon after our enrolment in the school and at the age of eight, nine and ten respectively, my sisters and I received Baptism and made our first Holy Communion. My parents were always respectful and tolerant and accepted their daughters’ wishes and so we then became part of the great Christian family.

At same time, when the “J.M” Sisters gave me the desire to know and love Jesus and His mother Mary, another woman, this time of the eighteenth century, Claudine Thevenet, became part of my life. During my school years I came to know this extraordinary person, her life and the origin of the Congregation. She lived her christian vocation and profound faith at a time of great disorder and unrest, as the so called Old Regime in France was followed by the Revolution and economic disaster; years of pain, fear, faith and forgiveness. Little by little I came to know what Claudine was like and to have a better, deeper knowledge of her personality.

She was “above all, a woman rich in spiritual wisdom. She was strong in times of trial because she was happy in hope. She prayed with perseverance and attended to the needs of the poor, gladly and lovingly. She hastened to take in orphans and young girls who wanted to earn their living respectably or receive a sound moral and intellectual education. In short she exemplified the ideal christian as described by St Paul in his letter to the Romans,(12, 3 – 20)”

(Gabriela Maria RJM: The Life and Times of Claudine Thevenet: Introduction, XI)

Claudine was a warm hearted woman of faith, the faith that enabled her to come to know God as love, as life, as father. From her great heart came the compassion that she felt for children, the most vulnerable and defenceless in society. Her strong faith and big heart led her to create and develop a project for the christian education of the children and young people of her time.

With all this, and together with my own Christian formation, I came to a better knowledge of this model and example of christian life, Claudine Thevenet. I absorbed the details of her story: “Gladly, forgive as we forgive”, the Providence of St Bruno, the 3<sup>rd</sup> February, Fourviere, Father Coindre, Mary St. Ignatius, the lowly violet, “How Good God Is”. In the context of my school life and academic development, all this, together with other things, became part of my experience; forgiveness, commitment, loving service, gratitude, goodness and solidarity.

My school years were filled with good and happy experiences: memories of names, faces, persons and the great gratitude I felt towards the Sisters and teachers who, throughout these years were forming me, so that, helped by their witness and example, the charism of Claudine gradually took root. So many Sisters influenced me and form part of my personal history, so many names that I cherish in my heart, people that are unforgettable because they are part of my life story. All these women had come to know, like Claudine, the goodness of God, to whom they had committed themselves, in order to live this love and goodness and place it at the service of others- in concrete terms through the education of children and young people;

As I have already said, my school years were very happy ones for me. My school became my life, my family, my home. The Sisters made me feel happy, loved and welcome and appreciated. Thirty years later, nothing has changed, I still feel that “Jesus and Mary” is my family, my life my home.

The years passed and as I grew and matured, a question began to worry me, what does God want of me? What is my plan of life? There were many questions, many doubts and many conversations with the Sisters, many thoughts and prayers. Does God want me to be a Religious?

The time came for me to choose my university studies, to decide on the direction my life was to take. Among the possibilities available to me one, teaching, was especially attractive. Perhaps my future, my life’s work was to be in the world of education? The years in “J.M” had influenced me so much that I decided to direct my future towards the world of education, like Claudine, like all the Sisters who had accompanied me during my formative years. Although, at that time I was

not yet fully aware that it would be there, in education, that I would find my true vocation and find fulfilment.

What I did however, see clearly at that time, was that “J.M” was part of my life and that I did not want to relinquish my links to the school and the Sisters. This was why, even if by now I was at university, I maintained contact with them - my family. I took part in camps, extra-curricular activities, clubs, excursions, Easter youth rallies – anything so as not to lose touch.

Slowly I came to see more clearly what God wanted of me, what His plan was. He wanted me in “J.M”, but not as a Religious. So , I completed my university studies and the following year, by chance, luck or the guidance of Divine Providence, I was teaching in “Jesus and Mary”, in my school, my home, my family. What more could I want?

The desire to give myself for others, my gratitude and my willingness to serve – words that define me as a person, and the legacy of my formation in “J.M” – provided me with the means to place myself at the service of others. What I experienced, what had been taught and passed on to me, I could now pass on to others. I could place my gifts and values at the service of others, just as others had done for me. From this moment I understood my vocation, God’s plan for my life to work in “J.M”, to educate children and young people. So little by little I absorbed and adopted the “Jesus and Mary” style of education.

Claudine Thevenet wrote nothing about pedagogy, she did not leave a manual for educators, but she left the example of her life, a life-style, a way of doing, of being, a few words here and there. It is her way of being and her unique character, her values and profound faith and Christian vocation that characterise her style and method of education. A woman with a sound faith that fills her life and everything that she – the hidden violet – does, but also an enthusiast for the work of education, concerned and responsible for on-going formation, aware of the importance of team-work, patient and always willing to trust others, concerned for and attentive to the personal needs of every child. All this was characterised by a pedagogy of prevention, which values effort and the work of each individual, a strong feeling for justice; a special preference for the weakest, the most vulnerable and those in the greatest need. All this was to be done in the family atmosphere that would permeate everything; Claudine’s style of education comes from her way of approaching others and maintaining relationships with them;

The fundamental attitudes that mark the educational work of Claudine Thevenet were faith in God and in people and a charity without measure or limit. Her gift of making what is good also agreeable and attractive, even her mere presence, her intuitive ability to understand others, her

prudence, common sense and good judgement, were all qualities that were matured in her by experience and gave all her undertakings a unique character. Her purpose in life was to prepare young Christian women to assume their responsibilities and to live with dignity.

It is a style of education that responds to an ever-changing society, that promotes culture and provides an integrated formation that attends to each individual person, with confidence in their abilities and everything oriented towards the future, these are the characteristics of the educational charism of the Congregation of Jesus and Mary.

All those who share this charism and method of education remember Claudine's words:

“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 and make a great effort to do them good. Good mothers do this. God who sees all, counts all and blesses all, until the time when He will say to you: “Whatever you have done to the least of my little ones, you have done it to me. Come and receive your reward”. (Positio: Roma 1981, pp 628-629)

This is the pedagogy of Claudine Thevenet; such is the style of education in “Jesus and Mary”. Therefore to be a “J.M” educator implies both responsibility and co-responsibility. Throughout the 200 years of the life of the Congregation, the Sisters of Jesus and Mary have remained faithful to the charism that is characteristic of their schools. We too, the lay teachers, have received this mission, have made it our own and we feel that, together with the Sisters, we share and are jointly responsible for this mission, the work that was undertaken by Claudine Thevenet.

A carved wooden statue of Claudine is to be found in many of our schools. It portrays Claudine in the religious habit with two little girls, the two orphans whom Father Coindre found abandoned and shivering in the cold and did not hesitate to take to Claudine, who, in her turn, had no doubts about caring for them. The year was 1815, her love and compassion for these abandoned children was to be the beginning of the Providence of St. Bruno, the seed from which would grow the Congregation of Jesus and Mary. Let us draw closer to this statue. Let us look at the hands and faces of the children. The older one looks at the younger one and has her arm around her. The little one looks up, with a trusting smile, as Claudine holds her hand and gathers them in her arms. Claudine's face and hands express gentle peace and kindness. Today those hands are our hands, my hands, those of each and every teacher in “J.M”, we who have followed her example and committed ourselves to the Christian education of our students. Today, all those of us who love Claudine and the work that she started, wish to continue her undertaking,,

maintaining her charism and adapting ourselves to new situations and an ever- changing in society.

Thirty-six years have passed and I still work in “Jesus and Mary”, my home, my life, my family, When I first arrived I was nine years old and now, at the age of 45, I am happy to work and live-out my vocation and life’s work in this school. In the course of the various responsibilities that I have assumed in this time, (teacher, tutor, organiser of the pastoral programme, principal) I am happy to dedicate my life and all that I am, to the passing-on of what received and to follow the path initiated by Claudine (Matt 10.8 ) “What you have freely received, freely give...”

What you have been reading is not literature or fiction. This is my life, my experience, my life-story, my witness to the fact that the charism of Claudine Thevenet has profoundly affected me and defined the person that I have become. But I am sure that it could be the experience and testimony of many teachers who, today work in “J.M” schools and who, like me, have found in the exercise of their profession, their vocation as a “J.M” teacher, with its characteristic style, one influenced by the charism of Claudine Thevenet. It is the testimony of all teachers, who, like Claudine, dream and believe that, from the school, we can transform the world and teach our pupils that a better one is indeed possible.

The fact that the mustard seed, planted by Glady, has flourished in spite of difficulties and obstacles was a sure sign of its authentic goodness. It grew into a great tree which has extended its branches across the whole world. It will surely continue to bear abundant fruit as long as the life-giving sap of Claudine's message continues to flow in every institution, in every mission, in every person with whom we live and share Claudine's charism.

(c.f. Gabriela Maria RJM: The Life and Times of Claudine Thevenet, Introduction p XII).

I finish, therefore ,with the words of the Gospel, words that I learned as a small child and that are realised in all of those who continue to foster the seed planted by Claudine:

“Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed.

But if it dies it produces many seeds.” (Jn. 12: 24).

Praised forever be Jesus and Mary!