

“ALL THAT ASCENDS CONVERGES”

Two centenary names

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1. A brief presentation

I must confess that the proposal to write something on “*Claudine and Literature*” disconcerted me: Claudine/literature? What do they say...? Was it possible...? And, above all that the proposal was made to me?

I commented this with someone I trusted..., I was encouraged... On the other hand, I felt bad to deny giving this collaboration asked of me. And I began to think...

And I must admit that what I am presenting, sounds even to me as “an easy way out” as “a reassuring solution”, but I have not known how to be more resourceful or ingenious... Excuse me, understand and accept... And read, read...”*El Quijote*”, (The Quixote), since that is really worthwhile. Because the *Positio* is for us the basic book, and I believe it is very well-known; and greatly loved.

It is said that the first 40 years of life give us the text and the following 40, the commentary. I am already in the stage of the commentary. I have had the gift of being an educator-professor during almost another 40 years...

A companion from the staff on an occasion told me: “I have three clear things in my life: “*God, Cristina (his wife) and literature*”. I could also say, and I say it: ‘I have three clear things in my life: *God – Jesus and Mary – literature*. (Certainly among others)

I believe that I have lived passionately the call that Claudine felt “... to consecrate her life to the education of young people... and with the firm conviction of living a mission in the Church.

God with the face of Jesus – Jesus and Mary with the face of Claudine
and literature and hundreds of young people in the classroom year after year

And I, as humble Pygmalion, dreaming to make a reality the verse of the poet Pedro Salinas:

“Pardon me for looking for you so awkwardly, within you.
Pardon me the pain some time. /It is because I want to bring out from
you your best you”.

And thus, in this way that an authentic, joyful, positive, liberated and liberating life of others would be born. Because *“we are men by the word”*. Definitely, to be born to what is fully human. And from there, awaken the soul to all Goodness, to all Truth, to all Beauty; to transcendence... *“To make Jesus and Mary known and loved”*.

What I am going to say about myself is true, but it is not the whole truth of my life. Those who know me already know this. And those who do not, well, they do not lose much, though it would be a mutual pleasure to know one another...

I remember since I was a child reading everything that fell into my hands... “the fool” of the town of my parents, a good man, (because every town has a “good fool”), prophesized, that little girl, who read to him an imaginary letter and offered him a glass of water full to the brim without spilling a drop, would be a teacher...

I studied Romance Philology, Gallic sub-specialty, in the University of Barcelona. I had very good professors of Spanish Literature and I discovered the great French classics which interested me very much. My dissertation at the end of my career was on “The existential universe in the narrative of Julien Green”. The French professors were very didactic, very “academic” in their classes and when directing a work. For this reason and because the Spanish professor whom I would have chosen, certainly with another theme, was just going to spend a year in the United States and would not be able to direct me in the work of my dissertation, I chose the French theme. I continue to be a great lover of books and, of course, of reading them. And therefore, I greatly enjoyed my work to obtain that degree.

Then, I have had the good luck to teach Spanish Literature to boys and girls 15 and 18 years old. And, always, during the last year of the course to have the tutorial care, which allowed me to complete, not only the academic formation of each pupil, but, above all, their formation as a person open to the future. This is an added work but very pleasing, because of the views and opinions shared between the young and the adult, and because it created, many times, bonds of friendship, some of which resist time and distance. I have carried out my teaching task during many years in our schools of San Andrés (Barcelona) and in Fernando el Católico (Valencia), and giving some courses in San Gervasio (Barcelona) and in Zaragoza

In my work as a teacher, the means that I have had is the teaching of literature. And always doing this very carefully, knowing that *“what is important is to direct well the look of the soul”* (Plato). *“Because the eyes are made to contemplate beauty”* (Gaudí). I have noted down a

Platonic phrase illuminator of many of my esthetic and spiritual lived experiences: *“Because beauty, Fedón, notice well, only beauty is, at the same time, divine and perceptible”. This is why; the path of what is sensitive is the path that leads the artist towards the spirit*”. And the beauty of a text, the truth on life of a literary work, will lead them to be good persons. Because *“if the beauty which we contemplate does not make us better, then it is not beauty”* (Unamuno)

I say this because a desire which has motivated me in my teaching work has been to awaken, strengthen the sensitiveness of the pupils that I had before me. That beyond syntagms, morphemes, dates and works of the authors, they would be capable to open themselves to the beauty of the literary texts. And more: and to the human and spiritual depth that beats within many of them; to everything essential, great, sublime and true, to the mystery of life. *“Because like Beauty Life is a Mystery. The poet is the one who can advance ‘one degree’, in the shadow; and like that by the paths of the mystery of life, reaches Beauty, the road towards Truth. And to these should be added Goodness...”* Someone has said that the poets penetrate more in the science of realities than Philosophers because “they see” with the heart. *“What lasts is founded by the poets”* (Hölderlin).

And once more, Plato: “In seeing the beauty of earth, the artist becomes transformed with the souvenir of the true Beauty; he would like to set off and fly, but he cannot do it”. And even “if we would always look up to the sky we would end by having wings” (Flaubert). And, yes, I believe that I have seen some wings among my pupils....

In the young boy decided to become an architect, and wrote with great sensitiveness, anxious and worried he would ask me how he could unite the two vocations. (Today I could answer with the words of three architects –“RCR Arquitectes”- who have just been awarded the prestigious award Pritzker 2017: *“... it is necessary to create spaces that exercise influence on the sentiments, that awaken emotions, and this is obtained by a process of essentialness, that things are essential...”*). Or the two girls who, after reading *“Crimen y Castigo”* (Crime and Punishment), decided to become judges in order to impart a righteous justice (one obtained it...) Or the one who has already published two novels ... And the one who followed the call of the Lord in the Focolares...

We are preparing ourselves for the second centenary of the foundation of our Congregation (1818-2018), and we have just celebrated the fourth centenary of the death of Cervantes (1616-2016). In the middle of these two centenaries, we have this year 2017, of a hopeful and excited preparation.

Many years separate these two events and, nevertheless, since *“every good work was written yesterday”*, I do not think that it is foolish or nonsense to relate some values of a quality

literary work with the values of Claudine, some of the many that have emerged as we were commenting in class the work of Cervantes, “*Don Quijote de la Mancha*”. And since it is a universal work, one of the most translated and valued in the world, I believe that it can be valid for the different Provinces of our Congregation.

A preliminary note - The foolishness of Don Quijote is shown **only** when he speaks and acts as a knight errant; in everything else, he is a sensitive man, of wisdom and experience and of Christian faith. Perhaps some of his words which I am going to quote below, disconcert us. They are like a paradox: the fool knight errant speaks, but of some values that nobody who has good sense could reject

“Knight I am, and knight I will die, if such be the pleasure of the Most High. Some take the broad road of overweening ambition; others that of mean and servile flattery; others that of deceitful hypocrisy, and some that of true religion; but I, led by my star, follow the narrow path of knight-errantry, and in pursuit of that calling I despise wealth, but not honour. I have redressed injuries, righted wrongs, punished insolences, vanquished giants, and crushed monsters; I am in love, for no other reason than that it is incumbent on knights-errant to be so; but though I am, I am no carnal-minded lover, but one of the chaste, platonic sort. My intentions are always directed to worthy ends, to do good to all and evil to none; and if he who means this, does this, and makes this his practice deserves to be called a fool, it is for your highnesses to say, O most excellent duke and duchess.” (2nd Part; chapter XXXII)

And..., a question arises: Is it that every definitive, risky option, the one that involves the whole person, always presupposes some or much foolishness? Because Claudine, on that first night at Pierres-Plantées, “...it seemed to me that I had entered upon a foolish and presumptuous undertaking”. And to continue on something more familiar, Ignatius, convalescent in Loyola, reads Lives of Saints. And from a knight soldier and courtier, with a lady to whom to offer his gestures, he is converted, becomes “a knight according to the divine”, wanting to imitate the greatness of the saints.

In this article I simply, intend, to point out the extent or depth in the attitudes of a fiction personage (only of fiction?): *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, and of a real woman, who today continues to inspire our life: *Claudine Thévenet*.

2. Great attitudes of two centenary personages

2.1 Faith and trust in Providence

In contemplating the life of Claudine, the first characteristic that becomes evident is her faith. The faith received from her parents and sealed in her baptism, the following day

after her birth, in Saint Nizier, a Parish that had the roots of martyrs in the first centuries of Christianity. From that faith sprang trust in the goodness of God. Claudine and her brothers learnt it from their parents. There is correspondence between the last words of Claudine that we all know, and those of Francis, one of her brothers, before dying: “...*within 4 or 5 hours from now we shall be in the presence of God, before our good Father...*” In her education, the years that she spent in the Abbey of Saint Peter, approximately seven, were very decisive, influential to be educated in human knowledge and, above all, to grow in a solid, coherent and valid faith for her whole life. When I visited the Abbey, I sat in its cloister and I felt enveloped by the same serenity, silence and harmony that must have surrounded Claudine... Everything spoke to me about a Presence... the same that Claudine must have felt...

From this integral education will spring her human and Christian qualities of goodness, courage to face adversities, the capacity for organization, her unwavering trust in difficulties, and her heroic pardon in the death of her brothers.

This is why, when Don Quijote tells Sancho words like the ones quoted below, it is easy to remember the virtues of Claudine mentioned above, and almost with the same phrases which are dear to us: “God will provide”, “How good God is!” And a witness tells us that “her faith in Providence never failed”.

Now let us read what our knight Don Quijote tells us:

“I am the devoted servant of Our Lady, and my trust is ever in the infinite mercy of God our Lord.” (2nd Part. Chapter XVI).

“First of all, my son, thou must fear God, for in the fear of him is wisdom, and being wise thou canst not err in aught. “Secondly, thou must keep in view what thou art, striving to know thyself, the most difficult thing to know that the mind can imagine. If thou knowest thyself, it will follow thou wilt not puff thyself up like the frog that strove to make himself as large as the ox; if thou dost, the recollection of having kept pigs in thine own country will serve as the ugly feet for the wheel of thy folly.” (2nd Part. Chapter LXII).

Sancho the Good, mount thy beast and come along with me, for God, who provides for all things, will not fail us (more especially when we are so active in his service as we are), since he fails not the midges of the air, nor the grubs of the earth, nor the tadpoles of the water, and is so merciful that he maketh his sun to rise on the good and on the evil, and sendeth rain on the unjust and on the just.” (1st Part; chapter XVIII)

“So that, O Sancho, in what we do we must not overpass the bounds which the Christian religion we profess has assigned to us.” (2nd Part. Chapter VIII).
 “Leave it to God, Sancho,” returned Don Quixote, “for he will give her what suits her best; but do not undervalue thyself so much as to come to be content with anything less than being governor of a province.” (1st Part; chapter VII).

2.2 Education

“The poor man may retain honour, but not the vicious; poverty may cast a cloud over nobility, but cannot hide it altogether; and as virtue of itself sheds a certain light, even though it be through the straits and chinks of penury, it wins the esteem of lofty and noble spirits, and in consequence their protection” (2nd Part; Preface).

And Claudine instilled the same thing in her girls: “...she tried especially to inspire in them the love to do good, and for virtue and to make them know the principal duties of their state”.

2.3 The Welcoming Goodness

Never like today, is Claudine calling us to the acceptance of the weak and the vulnerable, the same that she exercised in her time. Goodness of heart for the more destitute of her time, the girls of the Providence, because they were small and because women. Small beings who could remain wounded in their soul more than in their body during their whole life. And she knew how to look for the healing for their soul and life, and to give them a realistic and far-sighted formation for the future of those girls. «She was just but good and those who were more faithful in fulfilling their duties and religious spirit, found in her everything that the heart can desire”.

And Don Quijote:

“Children, senor, are portions of their parents’ bowels, and therefore, be they good or bad, are to be loved as we love the souls that give us life; it is for the parents to guide them from infancy in the ways of virtue, propriety, and worthy Christian conduct, so that when grown up they may be the staff of their parents’ old age, and the glory of their posterity” (2nd Part; chapter XVI).

And, with simple humility, our knight will confess:

“My intentions are always directed to worthy ends, to do good to all and evil to none” (2nd Part; chapter XXXII).

And even more:

“whatever I may be, I thank heaven that it has endowed me with a tender and compassionate heart, always disposed to do good to all and harm to none.” (2nd Part; chapter XXV).

His neighbors will also confirm this:

“More, if it is true what is commonly said, that to have companions in work usually serves as a relief in it, with your mercy I can console myself, since he serves another master as foolish as mine. – Foolish, as well as courageous – answered the one of the Forest -, and more scoundrel or wicked than foolish and than courageous.

“I mean he has nothing of the rogue in him; on the contrary, he has the soul of a pitcher; he has no thought of doing harm to anyone, only good to all, nor has he any malice whatever in him; a child might persuade him that it is night at noonday; and for this simplicity I love him as the core of my heart, and I can’t bring myself to leave him, let him do ever such foolish things.” (2nd Part; chapter XIII).

And at the end of his life, the author writes of his personage:

“for of a truth, as has been said more than once, whether as plain Alonso Quixano the Good, or as Don Quixote of La Mancha, Don Quixote was always of a gentle disposition and kindly in all his ways, and hence he was beloved, not only by those of his own house, but by all who knew him” (2nd Part; chapter LXXIV).

The capacity for friendship is also a characteristic of our Foundress, beginning by her religious, and even with a person, who at a given moment, did not act honestly with her. It is said that she was “capable of maintaining a sincere friendship with persons”. Of one of them we read: The close friendship between Mlle Jaricot and Mlle Thévenet, one still in the flower of youth, and the other already fully mature, was like a marriage between grace and strength and it was to exercise a happy and fruitful influence on both of them”. (Positio, page, 544) Reading the letters to her family we also appreciate the great love that she had for each one and how she was attentive and concerned about what they lived.

And our knight Don Quijote agrees:

“though true and genuine friendship cannot and should not be in any way suspicious” (1st Part; chapter XXXIII).

2.4 *Simplicity*

At present, mass media or means of communication and social life, in general, “teach” us to value persons because of their economic situation, their fame, power, beauty, the sports’ victories and trophies..., the “I more than “you”. Today it is very easy to fall into the eagerness for leadership, to be “famous”- We know well the style of Jesus and Mary, inherited from Claudine (“Avoid the ridiculous pretension of wanting to appear as wise women”); value persons for what they are; because the greatest value of a person is, precisely that, of being a person; and even more: for what she may become. Claudine, by her simple and humble life, our “petite violette”, could make her own phrases like the following of our good knight Don Quijote: “It is usually said that

“self-praise debaseth” (1st Part; chapter XVI).

“Simplicity, boy! None of your high flights; all affectation is bad.” (2nd Part. Chapter XXVI).

2.5 *Patience and trust*

In the educational work it is necessary to work more, every day, on the self-esteem of our pupils. Apparently, they live in a comfortable culture, having solutions for everything. But as soon as you can dialogue with them, trustingly, there appear many fears, insecurities. Then it would be good to recall what Claudine said that “castles are not built in one day”. Give time to time, do not force things: “Patience, it will come” as Mother Foundress would say. And Cervantes: “Time will be given to time which usually gives a sweet way out from many bitter difficulties” (*La Gitanilla*).

I especially like the practical sense of life in Claudine in the fact of forming the girls to become good women who will know how to make use of everything in the house, (looms, savings...). And beginning with the formation in faith, which would give them the fundamental sense of their life, and then up to the point when they were qualified for a professional work which would allow them to live with autonomy and to be able to cover their basic needs. And our good knight Don Quijote:

“The enchanters may be able to rob me of good fortune, but of fortitude and courage they cannot.” (2nd Part; Chapter XVII).

In the changing world in which we live and the insecurity of the future, it is important that our young people have the capacity for reflection, to have the critical spirit of reality and of their own reality, that is to say, their self-knowledge, so that they will be able to discover their place in the world, according to their possibilities, their capacities, and always aiming at what is positive and for the service and the good of others. And the knight advises us:

“thou must keep in view what thou art, striving to know thyself, the most difficult thing to know that the mind can imagine” (2nd Part; Chapter XLII).

“What madness or folly leads me to speak of the faults of others, when there is so much to be said about my own?” (2nd Part; Chapter XXXVIII).

This presupposes a good dose of humility and simplicity, found greatly in Claudine. And when actions do not correspond to our good resolutions, “a true repentance is the best medicine for the sickness of the soul”, (*Persiles y Sigismunda*)

2.6 Responsibility

In a world in continuous acceleration, of vertiginous changes, it is necessary to maintain a high level of updating in all the dimensions of the person, as well as real contact with the world around us. Claudine offers us an extensive field in this quality. First, in herself, in all her life- And in concrete situations, for example, in her own decision to study in order to obtain the certificate or degree as Mistress of the Boarding School at the age of 48 years. And having gone ahead in this herself, she was more than authorized to recommend it to her religious: “Take care diligently to be up to date and to perfect yourselves more every day in your knowledge”. And Cervantes in the words of his knight anticipated himself in this attitude of responsibility:

“each of us is the maker of his own Fortune” (2nd Part; Chapter LXVI).

And more:

“Everyone is the son of his works.” (1st Part; Chapter IV).

2.7 Love

There is a especially significant and beautiful theme in the work, for educators and for young people: The theme of Dulcinea. Because all errant knights had to have a lover for whom to fight and to whom to offer all their victories. It is a Platonic, ideal love and, therefore, unattainable, unreal. But, *“what has been felt is always deeper, what has been imagined is always more beautiful...”* When the ideal becomes real..., the dreamed beauty is lost.- If the ideal is maintained, the beauty lasts, continues to exist... From this may arise the nostalgia that invades us when the dreamed reality beats alive in our hands and... we do not feel that we are filled to the brim.

Well, there is a chapter in the work in which Sancho discovers that the “high lady” in the thoughts of Don Quijote is... a pork salter!, a maid from his town, Aldonza Lorenzo. To which Don Quijote responds with great dignity:

“In the same way, Sancho, for all I want with Dulcinea del Toboso she is just as good as the most exalted princess on earth” (1st Part; Chapter XXV).

“Because I love her...”. “Love is what makes one be”, says the Philosopher. “You do not look like anybody else since I love you”, says a poet. And another one: “When you chose me /-love chose- / I came out from the great anonymity / of all, of nothing [...] and I was higher than the stars...” Almost no commentary is necessary... The air seemed to have stopped blowing in the classroom; the pupils in silence during some seconds and then rapidly started copying these verses on the page of their book, and then silently continued to look... one even felt some scruple to interrupt what was vibrating in the air...

We can easily recall the trust that Claudine had in some of those girls especially those who were not well gifted. “Leave her alone; she will be a pretty girl at eighteen years of age, you will see!... She used the adequate means of the time for an integral formation of each girl; patience in the process of each one; competence in the teachers. But above all, love, being solicitous toward each one, the concern and interest for their problems, their needs; providing for them healthy and happy amusements. “The surest and more advantageous means is to do good and make the girls around us happy”. Love is what makes us be... Love makes the best of us to come out and convert us into a unique person... You do not look like anybody else since I love you...”.

It is not strange that the girls of one of the courses printed a manifesto expressing the desire to find in their life a love as that of Don Quijote: total, faithful, unwavering,

motivator of all their actions... Or that a literary series of the television dedicated an episode imagining that the real Aldonza Leonardo, after the death of Don Quijote, finds out how she has been highly praised and loved in the heart of that knight whom she never knew. And she decides to launch herself on the road to continue the work of undoing or correcting the wrong, to impart justice, to defend the weak... As it is also said that at the time of the invasion of Spain by the troops of Napoleon, on arriving to Toboso, the French soldiers renounced to plunder or pillage the town in honor of Dulcinea. The force of myths...! (On the other hand it shows that they had read the work and knew the story). And with this, at the same time, the maxim or saying of Don Quijote was fulfilled:

“Now I declare,” said Don Quixote, “he who reads much and travels much sees and knows a great deal” (2nd Part; Chapter XXV).

And a surprise for Claudine (j): I allow myself to add a dimension for which, I am sure, Claudine would congratulate us, her daughters, for following her line of action in the historical today. It is our Third Priority, the JPIC:

“A committed way of life
with JUSTICE, PEACE and INTEGRITY OF CREATION”

“We see, with anguish, how violence and the lack of peace is growing in our world, as well as the abuse of the earth and the resources.

In the depth of this situation is perceived a rupture of the relationship with God, with others, with creation and with ourselves. The need to heal this rupture impels us to work to restore harmony and mutual care, for we know this is the desire of God for this world”.

A desire manifested already in Genesis when God made man the Master of everything created. Not to subjugate it, but to take care of it and to receive graciously, from nature, everything that he needs to live. “Your will be done on earth as it is in Heaven”. This commits us to social and ecological justice as sons of a Father who makes the sun rise and the rain fall for all.

Don Quijote assures us,

“Peace, the greatest boon that men can desire in this life” (1st Part; c. XXXVII).

And, who would not subscribe his words in the famous discourse of the Golden Age?

“Happy the age, happy the time, to which the ancients gave the name of golden, not because in that fortunate age the gold so coveted in this our iron one was gained without toil, but because they that lived in it knew not the two words ”mine" and “thine"! In that blessed age all things were in common; to win the daily food no labour was required of any save to stretch forth his hand and gather it from the sturdy oaks that stood generously inviting him with their sweet ripe fruit. The clear streams and running brooks yielded their savoury limpid waters in noble abundance. The busy and sagacious bees fixed their republic in the clefts of the rocks and hollows of the trees, offering without usance the plenteous produce of their fragrant toil to every hand. The mighty cork trees, unenforced save of their own courtesy, shed the broad light bark that served at first to roof the houses supported by rude stakes, a protection against the inclemency of heaven alone. Then all was peace, all friendship, all concord” ...” (1st Part; Chapter XI).

And I certify that the whole class agreed on this program...

And now begins the last chapter of the work of Cervantes;

AS NOTHING that is man’s can last for ever, but all tends ever downwards from its beginning to its end, and above all man’s life [...] At last Don Quixote’s end came, after he had received all the sacraments, and had in full and forcible terms expressed his detestation of books of chivalry” (2nd Part; Chapter LXXIV).

We read some of his last words:

“Blessed be Almighty God, who has shown me such goodness. In truth his mercies are boundless, and the sins of men can neither limit them nor keep them back!” (2nd Part; Chapter LXXIV).

And before the plea of his niece:

“The mercies, niece,” said Don Quixote, “are those that God has this moment shown me, and with him, as I said, my sins are no impediment to them” (2nd Part; Chapter LXXIV).

“The notary was there at the time, and he said that in no book of chivalry had he ever read of any knight-errant dying in his bed so calmly and so like a Christian as Don Quixote” (2nd Part; Chapter LXXIV).

We can evoke here the death of our dear Claudine... Serene, silent, in spite of the hard words that she had to hear... “*I almost burst into tears*”, she confided to the one who was at her side. It is sure that in her heart she forgave them. She learnt to forgive very young and maintained that virtue until the end... Abandoned to the mercy of God, she will leave us her most profound experience in her last words...

3. Conclusion

"All that ascends converges". This is what has been intended with this simple relationship between our knight errant and our dear Foundress.

That in our educational mission, in any field whatsoever, we always invite to look up, because *"art is not only contact with what is here below, but with what is above"*. Art, or the smallest reality, that of daily life, is always a message of beauty, and Beauty opens our sense, the heart, the soul, to Truth and to Goodness. And from there, to the Creator of all Beauty.

Young people are sensitive to challenges, to great goals, to put their life at stake for something. It is only necessary to find it. To find the precious pearl... Or to be found... Hopefully they will feel connected to this song inspired in our knight errant:

"Dream the impossible dream, fight the invincible enemy,
Run where brave did not dare, reach the unreachable star.
That is my destiny. "