

ROSALIE RENDU

ROSALIE RENDU IN THE 19TH CENTURY

Jeanne Marie Rendu was born 9 September 1786 at Confort, a district of Gex in the Jura Mountains, France. She was the eldest of four girls. Her parents, simple living mountain people and small property owners, enjoyed a certain affluence and true respect throughout the area. Jeanne Marie was baptized the day she was born in the parish



church of Lancrans. Her Godfather by proxy was Jacques Emery, a family friend and future Superior General of the Sulpicians in Paris.

Jeanne Marie Rendu was three years old when the Revolution broke out in France in 1789. From 1790 it was compulsory for the clergy to take an oath of support for the civil Constitution. Numerous priests, faithful to the Church, refused to take this oath. They were chased from their parishes, some were put to death and others had to hide to escape their pursuers.

The Rendu family home became a refuge for these priests. The Bishop of Annecy found asylum under the assumed name of Pierre. Jeanne Marie was fascinated by this hired hand who was treated better than the others. One night, she discovered that he was celebrating Mass. She was offended that she had not been told the truth.

Later, in a discussion with her mother, she blurted out: *“Be careful or I will tell that Pierre is not really Pierre.”* In order to avoid any indiscretion on the part of her daughter, Madame Rendu told her the truth of the situation.

It was in this atmosphere of solid faith, always exposed to the dangers of denunciation, that Jeanne Marie was educated. She would make her first communion one night by candlelight in the basement of her home. This exceptional environment forged her character.

The death of her father, 12 May 1796, and that of her youngest sister, at four months of age, on 19 July of the same year, shook the entire family. Jeanne Marie, aware of her responsibility as the eldest, helped her mother, especially in caring for her younger sisters.

In the days following the Terror, people calmed down little by little and life resumed its normality. Madame Rendu, concerned about the education of her eldest daughter, sent her to the Ursuline Sisters in Gex. Jeanne Marie stayed two years in this boarding school. During her walks in town, she discovered the hospital where the Daughters of Charity cared for the sick.



She had only one desire, to go and join them. Her mother gave her consent that Jeanne Marie, in spite of her young age, might spend some time at this hospital. God's call, which she had sensed for many years, made itself clear: she would become a Daughter of Charity.

In 1802, Armande Jacquinot, from the village of Lancrans, confided to her friend that she was preparing to leave for Paris to enter the Company of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul. Jeanne Marie leaped at the opportunity and begged her mother to allow her to leave. Having consulted with Fr. de Varicourt, the senior priest at Gex, Madame Rendu, happy, but very emotional at her daughter's vocation, consented to her request.

On 25 May 1802, Jeanne Marie arrived at the Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity, rue du Vieux Colombier in Paris. She was nearly 17 years old! The reopening of the Seminary, (novitiate suppressed by the Revolutionaries) took place in December 1800. On their arrival, the travellers were welcomed by 50 young women in formation.

Jeanne Marie was very anxious to give her very best in this new life. Her health was weakened by the sustained mental effort this demanded and by a lack of physical exercise. On the advice of her physician and that of her Godfather, Fr. Emery, Jeanne Marie was sent to the house of the Daughters of Charity in the Mouffetard District for the service of the poor. She would remain there 54 years!

The thirst for action, devotion and service that burned within Jeanne Marie could not have found a better place to be quenched than this district of Paris. At the time, it was the most impoverished district of the quickly expanding capital: poverty in all its forms, psychological and spiritual. There disease, unhealthy slums, and destitution were the daily lot of the people who were trying to survive.

Jeanne Marie, who received the name Sr. Rosalie, made her "apprenticeship" accompanying Sisters visiting the sick and the poor. Between times, she taught catechism and reading to little girls accepted at the free school. In 1807, Sr. Rosalie, surrounded by the Sisters of her Community, made vows

for the first time to serve God and the poor. She made these vows with great emotion and joy.



In 1815 Sr. Rosalie became Superior of the Community at rue des Francs Bourgeois. Two years later the Community would move to rue de l'Épée de Bois for reasons of space and

convenience. All her qualities of devotedness, natural authority, humility, compassion and her organizational abilities would be revealed. *"Her poor,"* as she would call them, became more and more numerous during this troubled time. The ravages of a triumphant economic liberalism accentuated the destitution of those most rejected. She sent her Sisters into all the hidden recesses of St. Médard Parish in order to bring supplies, clothing, care and a comforting word.

To assist all the suffering, Sr. Rosalie opened a free clinic, a pharmacy, a school, an orphanage, a child-care centre, a youth club for young workers and a home for the elderly without resources. Soon a whole network of charitable services would be established to counter poverty.

Her example encouraged her Sisters. She often told them: "Be a milestone where all those who are tired have the right to lay down their load." She was so simple, and lived so poorly, as to let the presence of God shine through her.

Her faith, solid as a rock and clear as a spring, revealed Jesus Christ in all circumstances. She daily experienced this conviction of St. Vincent: *“You will go and visit the poor ten times a day, and ten times a day you will find God there ... you go into their poor homes, but you find God there.”* Her prayer life was intense, as a Sister affirmed, *“... she continually lived in the presence of God. Even if she had a difficult mission to fulfil, we were always assured of seeing her go to the chapel or finding her on her knees in her office.”*

She was attentive to assuring that her companions had time for prayer, but sometimes there was a need to “leave God for God” as Vincent de Paul taught his Daughters. Once, while accompanying a Sister on a charitable visit, she said to her: *“Sister, let's begin our meditation!”* She suggested the plan, the outline, in a few simple, clear words and entered into prayer.



Like a monk in the cloister, Sr. Rosalie walked with her God. She would speak to God of this family in distress as the father no longer had any work, of this elderly person who risked dying alone in an attic: *“Never have I prayed so well as in the streets,”* she would say.

One of her companions remarked that, “the poor themselves noted her way of praying and acting.” “Humble in her authority, Sr. Rosalie would correct us with great sensitivity and had the gift of consoling. Her advice, spoken justly and given with all her affection, penetrated souls.”

She was very attentive to the manner of receiving the poor. Her spirit of faith saw in them our “lords and masters.” “The poor will insult you. The ruder they are; the more dignified you must be,” she said. “Remember, Our Lord hides behind those rags.”

Superiors sent her postulants and young Sisters to be formed. They put in her house, for a period of time, Sisters who were somewhat difficult or fragile. To one of her Sisters in crisis, she gave this advice one day, which is the secret of her life: *"If you want someone to love you, you must be the first to love; and if you have nothing to give, give yourself."* As the number of Sisters increased, the charity office became a house of charity, with a clinic and a school. She saw in that the Providence of God.

Her reputation quickly grew in all the districts of the capital and also beyond to the towns in the region.

Sr. Rosalie knew how to surround herself with many efficient and dedicated collaborators. The donations flowed in quickly as the rich were unable to resist this persuasive woman. Even the former royalty did not forget her in their generosity: The Ladies of Charity helped in the home visits. Bishops, priests, the Ambassador of Spain (Donoso Cortéz), Carlo X, General



Cavaignac, and the most distinguished men of state and culture, even the Emperor Napoleon III with his wife, were often seen in her parlour. Students of law, medicine, science, technology, engineering, teacher-training, and all the other important schools came seeking from Sr. Rosalie information and

recommendations. Or, before performing a good work, they asked her at which door they should knock. Among these, Blessed Frédéric Ozanam, co-founder of the “Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul,” and the Venerable Jean Léon Le Prevost, future founder of the Religious of St. Vincent de Paul, knew well the road to her office. They came, with their other friends, to Sr. Rosalie seeking advice for undertaking their projects. She was the centre of a charitable movement that characterised Paris and France in the first half of the 19th century. Sr. Rosalie's experience was priceless for these young people. She directed their apostolate, guided their coming and going in the suburbs, and gave them addresses of families in need, choosing them with care.

She also formed a relationship with the Superioress of Bon Saveur in Caen and requested that she too welcome those in need. She was particularly attentive to priests and religious suffering from psychiatric difficulties. Her correspondence is short but touching, considerate, patient and respectful towards all.



Hardships were not lacking in the Mouffetard District. Epidemics of cholera followed one after another. Lack of hygiene and poverty fostered its virulence. Most particularly in

1832 and 1846, the dedication shown and risks taken by Sr. Rosalie and her Sisters were beyond imagination. She herself was seen picking up dead bodies in the streets. During the uprisings of July 1830 and February 1848, barricades and bloody battles were the marks of the opposition of the working class stirred up against the powerful. Archbishop Affre, Archbishop of Paris, was killed trying to intervene between the fighting factions. Sr. Rosalie was deeply grieved. She herself climbed the barricades to try and help the wounded fighters irrespective of the side they were fighting on.

Without any fear, she risked her life in these confrontations. Her courage and sense of freedom commanded the admiration of all.

When order was re-established, she tried to save a number of these people she knew and who were victims of fierce repression. She was



helped a great deal by the mayor of the district, Dr. Ulysse Trélat, a true republican, who was also very popular.

In 1852, Napoleon III decided to give her the Cross of the Legion of Honour. She was ready to refuse this individual honour but Fr. Etienne, Superior General of the Priests of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity, made her accept it.

Always in fragile health, Sr. Rosalie never took a moment of rest, always managing to overcome fatigue and fevers. However, age, increasing infirmity, and the amount of work needing to be done eventually broke her strong resistance and equally strong will. During the last two years of her life she became progressively blind. She died on 7 February 1856 after a brief acute illness.

Emotions ran high in the district and at all levels of society in both Paris and the countryside. After the funeral rite at St. Médard Church, her parish, a large and emotional crowd followed her remains to the Montparnasse Cemetery. They came to show their respect for the works she had accomplished and show their affection for this “out of the ordinary” Sister.

Numerous newspaper articles witnessed to the admiration and even veneration that Sr. Rosalie received. Newspapers from all sides echoed the sentiments of the people.

L'Univers, the principal Catholic newspaper of the time, edited by Louis Veillot, wrote as early as 8 February: “Our readers understand the significance of the sadness that has come upon the poor of Paris. They join their sufferings with the tears and prayers of the unfortunate.”

Il Constitutionnel, the newspaper of the anticlerical left, did not hesitate to announce the death of this Daughter of Charity: “The unfortunate people of the 12th district have just experienced a regrettable loss. Sr. Rosalie, Superior of the Community at rue de l'Épée de Bois died yesterday after a long illness. For many years this respectable woman was the salvation of the numerous needy in this district.”

The official newspaper of the Empire, *le Moniteur*, praised the kindly actions of this Sister: “Funeral honours were given to Sr. Rosalie with unusual splendour. For more than fifty years this holy woman was a friend to others in a district where there are many unfortunate people to care for and all these

grateful people accompanied her remains to the church and to the cemetery. A guard of honour was part of the cortege.”

Numerous visitors flocked to the Montparnasse Cemetery. They went to meditate at the tomb of the one who was their salvation. But it was difficult to find the gravesite reserved for the Daughters of



Charity. The body was then moved to a more accessible site, close to the entrance of the cemetery. On the simple tomb surmounted by a large Cross are engraved these words: *“To Sister Rosalie, from her grateful friends, the rich and the poor.”* Anonymous hands brought flowers and continue to bring flowers to this gravesite: a lasting yet discreet homage to this humble Daughter of St. Vincent de Paul.

Sr Rosalie Rendu was venerated by Pope John Paul II on 24th April 2001 and beatified on 9th November 2003 at the Vatican.

