

Anne Marie Javouhey's life shines brightly as an example of one for whom baptism became the challenge to putting faith in action. From a faith that sprang from the depth of her relationship with the God who created her in love, she heard the call to share in the proclamation of the Good News of salvation. She truly believed that as a human being who was also Christian, her vocation was to collaborate with God in the loving, creative process already begun at the moment of Creation—the same desire to collaborate that she recognized in the longing Jesus expresses to do the will of the Father. From her own deep passion sprang Anne Marie's desire to imitate Jesus in the pursuit of the Will of God.

The Letters of Blessed Anne Marie Javouhey are a wonderful source for exploring her understanding of this will. Through them we see the gradual evolution of her thought. She came to see that God's will is revealed, as she put it, 'one drop at a time'. Experience taught her that this will must be discerned and that this weighing of the pros and cons of a situation in the light of the Holy Spirit requires us to trust God even to the extent of making decisions contrary to the wishes of authority. Furthermore, God's will is revealed through people and events and often can be gauged by the success or failure of an enterprise. God's will can never be totally clear to us, so seekers must "walk by faith and not by sight" trusting in God's mercy.

The pursuit of an authentic understanding of God's Will began early in Anne Marie's life. Shortly after her clandestine midnight consecration to God and the service of the poor in her brother Etienne's barn (the French Revolution was raging) she faced her first crisis in an order from her father sending her to supervise the men he employed in a neighboring field. Struggling to help him understand her dilemma, she finally resorted to her pen. "I would love to be able to comply to your request

but a spouse of Jesus Christ must have no other care but to please him; she should have no thought nor desire but to do his Holy Will." (Vol. 1, L. 2) From her perspective, overseeing men laboring in a field would be contrary to her consecration as a virgin. Though her culture demanded a daughter's submission to her father, she understood that there was a higher authority which must be obeyed: her conscience. She was learning very early that discerning God's will is not an easy task and that sometimes, fidelity to that will involves overriding the desires of legitimate authority: in this case, her father.

Much later, it would be the bishop of Autun who would try to convince her that she should accept his total control of the congregation. Again, she resisted because circumstances made it clear that the congregation was meant to grow beyond his domain. "Having implored the Light of the Holy Spirit and reassured that I am guided only by the desire to glorify God and to seek the good of my community, sensing that I am animated by the most perfect submission and spirit of obedience toward your excellency, I feel obliged, to my great regret, to say in all humility but at the same time with all the freedom demanded by the role that is mine, unworthy though I am, that it is absolutely beyond the authority invested in me to sign the conditions your excellency proposes to me." (L. 453) This remarkable letter triggered fifteen years of struggle, misunderstanding, and sanctions, including two years of deprivation of the sacraments, all of which Mother Javouhey humbly accepted as part of the path upon which seeking the will of God was leading her. As a young woman, she went from one attempt to another to "do the Will of God" in ministry, failing each time. Goaded by the Holy Spirit, she nevertheless picked herself up and tried again until she finally understood that this was all part of God's plan for her. God's will was indeed being revealed to her "one drop at a time". Eventually she realized that those early experiences, that she and others had

## Anne Marie's Understanding of God's Will (Continued)

characterized as failures, were in themselves God's Will. They had provided the training she would need for the great work that lay ahead of her, constructing the groundwork of humility upon which this towering edifice would stand, insuring its success.

Seeking God's Will isn't just a question of asking, "Lord, what do you want me to do?" Even more, it's the willingness to surrender to what is: "When we belong to God we are no longer in charge of our wills; we must want what God wants and nothing else. Still, I greatly desire to see you and our dear children!" she continued. Pursuing God's will still leaves room for human feelings!" (Vol. 1, L. 237) Surrender to what is forms only one part of the equation. We also need to be convinced that God actually does use events and circumstances to achieve God's designs for us. Thus, she could leave a group of Sisters destined for Africa at Alençon when she discovered a group of mentally ill patients who desperately needed care. God's Will was made clear in the need of the moment. (Vol. 1, L. 171)

The early years were a tutorial in the process of discernment for Anne Marie, a time of learning to recognize and obey the Spirit moving in her, guiding her one step at a time towards the fulfillment of her life's work. That she learned the lesson well can be seen in these words written in 1831: "Every day we repeat, 'Lord, what do you want me to do?' God's will is revealed through the circumstances in which we find ourselves without having sought them out. We must walk along the path that opens up to us without worry. The one who leads us is leading us to our heavenly home." (Vol. 1 L. 237)

Over and over again Mother Javouhey demonstrated that she believed God's will was best accomplished in collaboration. Her letters show that this was how she exercised authority. For example, when Mother Rosalie, who risked losing the sight in her remaining eye, requested a replacement so she could leave the Isle of Bourbon and return to France, she responded, "Tell me what you think of the person

I am proposing without concern about my opinion because it is not founded on perfect knowledge." (L. 258)

In letter after letter from her mission outposts she assured the women she had left in charge in France that, being her collaborators on the spot and knowing all the facts, they were in the best position to make good decisions, and that she trusted them. "I admire your zeal and I thank God who uses poor creatures like us to do such great things." "I have the greatest confidence in her (Sr. Marie Joseph, whom she had left in charge); everything she does fills me with admiration and respect." (L. 148) To her brother Pierre, a constant support to the congregation, she wrote, "Do whatever is best putting all your trust in God." (L. 168)

Whether with government officials, lay persons in the colonies, or her own sisters, her deepest desire was to draw everyone into the great work of evangelization to which she was called. She begged priests to follow her to Africa and South America. She encouraged financial collaboration among the houses of the congregation, a practice that continues to this day. She rejoiced at the women who opted to join her community, and facilitated success in their ministry by providing them with training she herself had never received. She trained African youth to be lay collaborators in her work of education and through her efforts the first Africans from sub-Saharan Africa who were called to the priesthood were ordained.

As she herself had been grounded in the love of God and drawn by the Spirit into the great work of proclaiming the Good News, so too, by the example of her conviction did she draw others to do the same. And even today, we can affirm, "her light has not gone out in the night. She lives!" (Rule of Life) She lives in the thousands of Sisters and Associates all over the world who, like her, seek to follow Christ through the daily commitment to fulfilling God's great loving plan, God's Holy Will for over 200 years.

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