

Coming to the end 2020, with the promise of vaccines and infection rates going down in some areas and the rates go up in others, we are concerned about a new mutation of the virus. We have mourned and are still mourning those who have died. We do our best to support those who are bereaved, exhausted medical personnel and others who serve, we contribute to organizations reaching out to those in need.

We might well ask, when will it end? What will the end be like? And what is God's Will for me in all this?

Blessed Anne Marie did not live through a pandemic, though in her day tropical diseases were lethal and she nearly succumbed in Sierra Leone. However, her life was punctuated with seemingly unsurmountable obstacles, some political like the revolutions in France during her lifetime, others personal. She did not set out to overcome them all, for she knew that her call was to collaborate with God in his great loving plan. That was her understanding of God's Will. That was her dream. Her dream gave her a broad vision, challenged her to use all her gifts with courage, and allowed her to patiently suffer persecution when there was no way out.

When the government of France conferred on Anne Marie the project of preparing African slaves for freedom as citizens, her dream of realizing God's loving plan guided how she designed the parameters of the project, down to the smallest details.

Upon her arrival in French Guiana, Mana consisted of only 15 little houses. In two years, it was a bustling village housing over 500 people. It consisted of housing for single men, single women, mothers with children, homes for married couples. There was a hospital, a general store, a school, a chapel, a convent, and a variety of occupations – a bakery, black smith, tailor, shoemaker, etc. – served the population. All were invited to religious instruction and to celebrate the sacred liturgy.



An artist's interpretation of Blessed Anne Marie sowing seeds near Mana.

During her time at Mana, she confided in a letter,

“So far the results have exceeded my expectations, and I have walked with a firm step, leaning on the staff of faith and charity, supported by the One who comforts as I suffered such injustice.

“Often, O my God, I have called for your support, when sweat ran down my forehead and anguish tortured my mind; you have strengthened me; it is you, O my God, who opened the ears of the mighty and the righteous to the voice of the humble girl who left her father's cottage in clogs, to fulfill the mission you gave her” (Letter 357)

Each home had space for a vegetable garden, and each family received fields for planting outside the village. The fields not only fed the population, but contributed to a stable cash economy.

Her dream not only included attention to immediate needs such as food, shelter, and security. The structure she created for the future free citizens who would self-govern their town included education, job training, and high moral standards. Her beloved Africans gave witness to her success when, in 1849 the freed Africans voted for representation in the National Assembly in Paris. Their descents are proud today of their free city, and its unique heritage.

Yes, Anne Marie realized great accomplishments in Mana, but she worked through one wave after

Living in Through a Pandemic (Continued)

another of challenges as well as persecution. Upon her arrival, a French priest whom she had trusted, tried to persuade a number of sisters to defect and go with him back to France. With kindness, she won them back: none left. The colonists down-river were so set against her that they even bribed a boatman to toss her into the river to kill her. She sat silently praying the rosary as they moved up the river. He didn't, he couldn't kill her. The colonists' anger went so far as to spread vicious rumors about her not only in French Guiana, but back in France, where they were printed in the newspapers.

And, last but not least, the bishop of the diocese of Autun, in which Cluny is located, convinced the papal delegate in French Guiana to excommunicate her. She was deprived of the sacraments for two years, until she returned to France and had the ban lifted. This is the woman who told her sisters: "I am at peace. That is my compass."

2020 has been a year like no other for all God's Creation. With confinement policies, worker layoffs, and restricted travel, scientists tell us that pollution has decreased in many areas. Deforestation rates have been reduced in some areas, and increased in others.

Suddenly, our lives were changed. We worked from home, limited our social gatherings, shopped quickly for essentials, and were drawn into a variety of online platforms that allowed us to stay connected. "Zooming", "Skyping" and other platforms became a regular part of our lives. Children were confined to home for learning, and teachers struggled with the learning curve to provide quality classes, while parents struggled without child care options.

Early on, supply chains failed, and basic necessities became unavailable for many. There was the expectation, however, that the need for quarantines, travel restrictions, restaurant and store closures would be relatively short termed. As the weeks wore on and the number of patients increased, hospitals were overwhelmed, and medical staff became exhausted, and many of them also became ill and/or died of the virus.

As summer came, we knew COVID-19 was still infecting millions, but it did seem for a while that the "curve was flattening". With the end of summer came the reopening of schools and universities, the Labor Day weekend and with them a higher infection rate. Before new measures could take effect on this spike, the Thanksgiving holiday resulted in an increased spread of the virus. Even areas that seemed to have escaped a spike in the spring were now struggling.

We all personally know someone, or perhaps many who had the virus, and most of us know one or more people who died with it. Even if we cannot see the terrible economic impact in our immediate neighborhoods, we can imagine what is happening. We are saddened, we grieve, and we fear for ourselves and others. And well we might ask: when will it end? and What can I do?

If Anne Marie were here today, she might say to us as she said to her sisters while the 1848 revolution of the Commune was raging in Paris, "We find God's will in the circumstances we have not sought out." Wow!

These were words of wisdom learned, not in a mystical revelation, but through the waves of trials and dangers to herself and to the congregation for over 40 years since its founding in 1807.

Certainly, we did not seek out the circumstances in which we find ourselves as a result of the COVID 19 virus. Yet, we know that God is here with us, and desires that we join in God's loving plan for our Common Home and all who dwell in it.

Anne Marie would remind us that "God's loving providence goes before us," that we should place our trust in it, and that "Only what is good, and helpful, life giving, and fruitful can be God's Will, because that is God's loving plan to gather all into one great loving communion."

Anne Marie would say: "What is happening around you? Love is calling you right where you are, only asking that you do what you are able to do, and ready to support you, whatever happens." And, she would add: "Always trust that the One who has called you is faithful."

For more information about the Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny click here:

Province Website: www.clunyusandcanada.org

Province Facebook Page: <https://www.facebook.com/clunyusacanada/>

Cluny Congregation Website: <http://sj-cluny.org/?lang=en>

Cluny Global Concerns: <https://www.facebook.com/ClunyGlobalConcernsCommittee>