



« I am not worthy
to untie the thong
of his sandal. »

Advent 2020 — Online retreat with Madame Acarie



1. Action and contemplation

a) Gift of self

In 1589, Henry III recognized Henry of Navarre [the future Henry IV] as his successor, but the public, predominantly Catholic, refused to have a Protestant sovereign. The latter therefore asserted himself through military means. Barbe went every day to Saint-Gervais hospital to treat the wounded who flocked to Paris: *“Although their wounds were extremely infected, it was her pleasure to clean and accommodate them.”* She prepared soups at home which she herself made them eat. She stood by those who were about to die, showing them the Cross and saying words so comforting that the soldiers demanded her presence. She prepared them to make a general confession so that they might die in peace or wish to amend their lives. From her difficult childhood, she retained a great sensitivity to the suffering of others.

Henry IV laid siege to Paris in May 1590, when the population was subjected to a terrible famine. Madame Acarie drew generously from the family reserves to distribute them to the hungry despite the protests of her mother-in-law. While the people went to the worst extremes to feed themselves, there was a phenomenon of religious effervescence: members of fanati-

cal leagues, such as Father Guincestre, parish priest of Saint-Gervais, established a form of theocracy; processions were organized in a climate of exaltation, which boosted the morale of Parisians. Surprised by this fierce resistance, Henry IV lifted the siege in the middle of August. Madame Acarie continued to care for the poor and the sick; she opened a house to enable women to get out of prostitution; she adopted six children abandoned at home by their mother and took care of their education until they had a job. She was concerned with social justice in the conduct of her staff and workers. To those who were astonished that she could look after her home so perfectly and have so many outside commitments, she replied: **“When you give your time to God, you find time for everything else. The spirit of God is not idle!”**

b) Mystical life

In 1590, during a morning Mass in the church of Saint-Gervais, she fell into ecstasy for several hours. Since the phenomenon was recurring frequently, she feared that it was the devil's fault. Doctors prescribed bloodletting, which exhausted her. She met Benet Canfield during the summer of 1592. This Englishman, a convert to Catholicism who had become a Capuchin, was an eminent connoisseur of Rhineland



mysticism: *"He removed all her doubts and made her see that everything that was happening in her was from God and from the effects of grace."* Until her death, she would be subject to ecstasies during which she thought she would 'die of sweetness'. From 1593 onwards, she experienced the sufferings of the Passion of Christ every week without having any visible wounds. Father Coton writes on this subject: *"She had the stigmata in her body in such a way that at certain times, especially on Fridays and Saturdays and Lenten days, she felt extreme pain in her feet, hands, sides, and head, as if someone had pierced them and had hanged her."* Madame Acarie then became continually united to Christ, bearing in her prayer a true passion for the salvation of sinners. Moreover, she lived in complete trust in God's Providence which guided her in everything she did. Her complete surrender to God gave her the courage to face difficulties that might seem insurmountable. In fact, she was entering the most trying period of her life. **"A soul can never do well if it does not throw itself as far as the eye can see into the arms of Divine Providence, because then God seems obliged by his promise to assist it."**

c) Faith in Providence

As early as 1588, the Catholic League overthrew Henry III and seized power in Paris. Pierre Acarie was a member of the Council of Sixteen, which ruled the city. While Barbe devoted herself to the wounded and hungry, her husband financed the insurrectionist government to the point of compromising his fortune. When Henry IV acceded to the throne in 1594, Pierre was condemned to exile. He gave his wife full power to manage his assets, or more precisely his debts! He had borrowed a lot of money; his creditors had seized all the couple's assets. Barbe's parents asked her to break up with her husband in order to preserve her dowry, but she refused to betray him; they in turn abandoned her so that she was reduced to extreme poverty. Barging

into her home, the officers remove the dishes from which she was eating her meal. She has to beg a family member on her knees to lend her enough to feed her six children, the eldest of whom is ten years old: she is told that they can earn their living at the shoemaker's shop! She then feels great joy at having to rely solely on God's Providence. Madame de Bérulle gives her lodging with Andrée Levoix in a modest house. She places her two boys in a secondary school, her two eldest daughters stay with some nuns, and the two youngest with relatives. Then, she faces the lawyers, putting up with the humiliations brought on by her social decline.

In addition, there were health problems. In June 1596, while returning from a trip on horseback to visit her exiled husband, she was distraught. Her foot remained caught in the stirrup and she was dragged by her horse. Peasants brought her back by cart amidst terrible suffering. A surgeon worked on her thigh for two hours to reduce a triple fracture of the femur without her showing the slightest complaint. In the months that followed, two falls broke the poorly healed fractures again so that she could no longer walk without crutches. Her infirmity didn't prevent her from resuming her legal proceedings. To those who were surprised by her courage, she declared that *"we must look to God, show him our weakness, and ask him for strength."* Her maxim was: **"Leave it up to Divine Providence as if there were no human means and work as if there was no Divine Providence."**

After four years of struggle, Madame Acarie succeeded in paying off the creditors and partially restoring the family patrimony. The turnaround was so spectacular that her reputation extended to the Court. Henri IV himself asked to see her! The Edict of Nantes having been signed and religious peace being restored, she obtained permission from him for her husband to return to Paris to their lovely home on the Rue des Juifs, of which she had regained possession.



2. Existence for God (Jn 1:6-8,19-28)

« There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. (...) This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said.

Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.. »

a) Hear the voice cry

Through all this, Madame Acarie took no credit. Like John the Baptist, she was entirely given over to the work of God: "Ah! we must love God who is so good, who has loved us so much! If we find difficulty in something, it is because we do not love God. ... When will we finally give him everything and reserve nothing for ourselves? Nothing is owed to us and we owe everything to God. So let us serve Him for what He is. ... How blessed we are to be able to do something for the **service of God!**" John the Baptist himself gave way to the one whose coming he was announcing. However, his prophetic activity attracted crowds to himself and he urged them to be converted: he believed in the imminence of the Reign of God. The religious authorities wanted to identify this man who was acting without a mandate on their part. John clearly told them what he was not, but remained evasive as to his real identity. He was not the Messiah, the thong of whose sandal he was not even worthy to untie. Nor was he Elijah, whose return was to precede that of the Messiah. Neither does he identify himself with the prophet foretold by Isaiah! **He defines himself as simply the VOICE that allows the WORD proclaimed in the past to resound today in the desert.** The voice doesn't exist for itself, but rather for the

word that it conveys! John the Baptist's identity is entirely based on his reference to this Word that God addresses to his people from the depths of the ages. He disappears behind the message because the only thing that matters is how the Word is received, which must be heard with all urgency in order to be converted. Madame Acarie, for her part, heard God's call through the cry of wounded or hungry men. To hear this call is to recognize it through events; it is to discern the response that the Spirit arouses in us; it is to obey the interior demand that then arises in prayer.

b) Make way for Christ

But the question keeps cropping up. If you aren't a prophet, why are you performing an act that is so typical of a prophet when you baptize? John again denies the importance of what he does by stating that he simply baptizes with water. By this gesture of purification, everyone is invited to recognize that he or she is a sinner in order to receive salvation. John's baptism doesn't save anyone, but it makes them aware of the need to welcome the Savior because only God can free us from our sin (cf. Mk 10:27). John the Baptist's identity disappears



again behind this new denial, in which he refers to a mysterious figure: *"Among you stands one whom you do not know."* Not only does John give way before the one he proclaims, but John refrains from defining this figure's identity: like God, this figure is unknowable; like God too, this mysterious figure stands in the midst of his people, not in the Temple of Jerusalem, but in the desert of the world. In doing so, John the Baptist does not try to conceal who the figure is, because John himself doesn't know, except through his mission. Being the precursor, he is aware that **our real identity comes only in the encounter with Christ**, in whom alone it is fulfilled. Only God knows who we are since he alone loves us with infinite love. Only He can reveal this to us in the light of our vocation in Christ. That is why true self-knowledge comes through forgetting ourselves in order to receive this knowledge from the only One who knows us. Madame Acarie lived this self-forgetfulness in prayer so deeply that she became identified with Christ even in the sufferings of his Passion.

c) Have faith in God

Hearing the call to make straight the ways of the Lord, and not our own, means giving up trying to save ourselves in order to welcome the Word that only God can fulfill; it also means putting our trust in God no matter what our human shortcomings may be. John the Baptist was born to a father who fell mute because he didn't believe that God could open a path of

life for a barren couple. The birth of John was marked by the fulfillment of that promise; his father's recovery of speech was marked by the sign of praise. (cf. Luk 1:20,64) John's life was thus

marked from the very beginning by the seal of the Word. John's life is entirely dedicated to Him, to the point of being only a voice at His service. While calling to make straight the Lord's ways, John himself is unaware not only of what those ways are but he is also unaware who it is that follows those ways. John the Baptist calls us to believe in this salvation which is impossible for humanity and whose realization no one can foresee. Madame Acarie experienced through her trials how faith in God's Providence opens a path, even in desperate situations, to anyone who believes that no word is impossible for God. This is never realized in the way we imagine it, but grace gives everyone who doesn't despair the opportunity to recognize how the Lord comes to us. This time of Advent calls us to renew our faith in the coming of the One who is unknown, who stands in our midst, consenting to be poor, since it is in this poverty that we join the One who for our sake stripped himself of his glory: *"How good and how sweet it is to have said farewell to the vanities of this age and to adhere to God alone, who never forgets us, who never fails us if we do not forget him, first."*

fr. Olivier Rousseau ocd (Avon convent)

3. Three spiritual practices for this week

- Have I discovered how God speaks to our hearts through the experiences and anxieties that others are going through ?
- How can we discover, through prayer and service, our true identity in Christ ?
- How does our faith allow us to believe that God always opens a way for us ?

4. Prayer starter

« I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord'. »
(Jn 1:23)



Pray each day of the week - 3rd week

Monday 14 December

« A star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel. » Num 24: 17

« O God of the Heavens, Prince of all the kings of the earth, who know all things, none of your creatures can flee from you »

God sees our needs, he loves what he has created:
through acts of interior adoration, I tell him again of my love.



Tuesday 15 December

« I will leave in the midst of you a people humble and lowly.
They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord. » Zeph 3: 12

« O more than admirable power, wisdom and goodness of my Lord and God, why am I not able to make every created being into a soul at will, and to build in every soul, especially my own, a heavenly Kingdom for You, in which You may find joy and peace, in exchange for all the pains and sorrows which You endured for me. »

(Prayer of Madame Acarie)

I prepare myself for the coming of the Lord with a humble and poor heart: are there things that I can lighten in my day, in my schedule, in my conversations (even interior ones) ... to refocus on God ?

Wednesday 16 December

« I the Lord do all these things. Shower, O heavens, from above, and let the skies rain down righteousness; let the earth open, that salvation may spring up... I the Lord have created it. » Isa 45:7b-8

« The world and the creatures within it is the great book in which one must learn to love the Creator. » (Apostolic Process)

Today, how can I take care of Creation, "our common home?"



Thursday 17 December

« O Key of David, opening the gates of God's eternal Kingdom. » (O Antiphon)

« Knock my God, knock at the door of our consciences, and make yourself understood. »

I offer my day so that hearts might be open to the grace of Christmas.

Friday 18 December

« He will save his people from their sins. » Matt 1:21

« Endless love, give yourself and we shall have everything ! »

It is God's love that purifies us: what do I need in order to live in greater intimacy with him? Can I take advantage of this weekend, the last one before Christmas, to go to confession, for example ?



Saturday 19 December

« Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. » Luk 1:13

« O infinite goodness, you who are my most gentle Redeemer, who came down from heaven to earth in order to reconcile me to your Heavenly Father ! » (True Exercises)

My heart sings praise to God, joy, and gladness for the salvation which is given to us.

