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**LETTER FROM THE GENERAL SUPERIOR TO THE ORDER
FOR THE FOURTH CENTENARY OF THE DEATH
OF BLESSED MARIE OF THE INCARNATION (1566-1618)**

Dear brothers and sisters in Carmel,

Three years after the fifth centenary of the birth of our Mother Saint Teresa of Jesus, Carmel celebrates the fourth centenary of Blessed Marie of the Incarnation, also known as Madame Acarie. This approximation is due to the special bond that existed between the Blessed Marie and St. Teresa. In fact, St. Teresa appeared to Madame Acarie in 1601, then in 1602, asking her to implant her Reform in France.

A Teresian Vocation

Why did St. Teresa address herself to this married woman, mother of six children? Madame Acarie had known the Spanish reformer for some months through reading the book of her "Life" translated into French in 1601. Recognizing the depth of this foundress of communities, she remained nonetheless reserved regarding the exuberance of mystical phenomena. She certainly esteemed Teresa as a mystic and her impassioned commitment for the cause of the Church. Hadn't she founded St. Joseph's at a time when she had learned of the wars of religion begun in France in 1562? The request of Phillip II to monasteries to pray for unity in the Church had deeply resonated in Teresa's heart as she herself witnesses towards 1565:

At that time news reached me of the harm being done in France and of the havoc the Lutherans had caused and how much this miserable sect was growing. The news distressed me greatly, and, as though I could do something or were something, I cried to the Lord and begged Him that I might remedy so much evil. It seemed to me that I would have given a thousand lives to save one soul out of the many that were being lost there...All my longing was and still is that since He has so many enemies and so few friends that these few friends be good ones. As a result I resolved to do the little that was in my power; that is, to follow the evangelical counsels as perfectly as I could and strive that these few persons who live here do the same. I did this trusting in the greatness of God, who never fails to help anyone who is determined to give up everything for Him. (W.1.2)

At this same time, in fact, the one who whom Teresa called 35 years later to found the reformed Carmel in France was born. Barbe Avrillot was born February 1, 1566 in Paris in a rich family of the nobility of the robe. For thirty years she lived in a land where six wars took place with disastrous consequences as much from a social perspective as well as religious. She married against her will at the age of 16 to a 22 year old man, Peter Acarie, a rich and fervent Catholic engaged in the Party of the

League for the defense of the Catholic monarchy. Thus, she found herself in the heart of the conflict linked to the last of these civil wars (1588-1594): her husband was one of the 16 members of the insurrectional government installed in Paris in 1589 after the assassination of King Henry III. During this period, she lived an intense spiritual life after a conversion in 1587 that stirred up within her a taste for prayer and concern for the poor.

Following the failure of the League and the accession to the throne of Henry IV in 1594, Pierre Acarie was exiled. Having invested his personal fortune to support the League, he left his wife to face the creditors who confiscated their goods. Thus began four years marked by misery, solitude, juridical battles, and health accidents. Deploying an extraordinary energy, Barbe succeeded to establish her husband's social situation in such a way that she became a celebrity in Paris. Queen Marie de Médici would have liked to have her as a confidante, but Madame Acarie refused out of humility. The King himself sought to meet her. Already in contact for some years with the great spiritual leaders because of her mystical life, her salon became a meeting place of the spiritual elite. A great number of men of the Church and the laity came to discuss with her spirituality, projects of reform, and foundations. In this way the foundation of the Oratory or the Ursulines by Madame Sainte Beuve may have come about. She was also in relationship with future founders such as Saint Francis de Sales and Saint Vincent de Paul.

Barbe Acarie's concern thus joined St. Teresa's great project expressed in the *Way of Perfection*: to restore the religious spirit of France not by weapons, but by prayer. Teresa of Jesus, after having ordered her twice to bring her Reform to France, appeared to her again in 1602 at the shrine of Saint Nicholas of Port to ask her to become a Carmelite nun with the status of a lay sister! This she did in 1614 after the death of her husband, pursuing from this time onwards an intense activity at the service of different monasteries and accompanying the quick extension of Carmel in France. Her spiritual director and first biographer, André Duval, wrote that nothing important was done in the Church in France that did not pass through her.

A Witness of Humanity

The first mark of the work of God in this woman was the way in which she assumed the wounds of her childhood. Her mother made a vow to the Virgin Mary to dress her daughter in white until the age of seven in order to save her after having lost several children at a young age. At the age of ten her mother placed her as a boarder with the Poor Clares. The Sisters noticed that Barbe had an upright conscience, an inflexible desire for the truth, a profound sense of sin, and an ability to overcome herself. She had a faithful friendship with Andrée Levoix, a poor boarder of the monastery who became her confidant and servant. Andrée was among the first of three French women to enter Carmel.

Barbe would have liked to become a nun, but her mother brought her back at the age of 14 in view of marriage. She wanted to be a nun with the Augustinian hospitalers. Faced with her daughter's resistance, her mother mistreated her harshly. She refused to see her and submitted her to the cold of winter to the point that her foot froze. She imposed marriage on her at the age of sixteen. These are the only traces of the relationship between mother and daughter we have because nothing has come to us about her early childhood, or the period following her marriage. Her mother appears only on the notary act by which Barbe renounced her inheritance at the time of her mother's death. We don't even have witnesses regarding her relationship with her three brothers. Concerning her father, Barbe became close to him towards 1602, a little before his death. During the dark years when she was plunged into poverty, she didn't receive any help from her parents and her brothers. This lack of

family affection resulted in great sensitivity towards the suffering of others and a remarkable capacity to forget herself. She was always extremely discreet regarding herself, especially in what concerned her amazingly rich mystical life. Her indestructible attachment to the Virgin Mary shows that she found in Mary her true mother.

She experienced a period of human fulfillment in the family of her in-laws. Fulfilled by the extremely rich family, Barbe shined in Paris high society where she was nicknamed "the beautiful Acarie." Her mother-in-law had such a friendship with her that her husband was jealous. Barbe learned to truly love this man that she did not choose. She gave him constant attention, enduring the authoritarianism that he manifested in his old age. Her husband loved and admired her. Just as she supported him during his involvement in the League, he gave her an unbelievable freedom and financed her works. However, he was uneasy regarding her popularity. He became demanding towards her, justifying himself by saying that he had a mission to sanctify her!

She poured out upon her six children the affection that she had not received, and at the same time, taught them the gift of self and an unfailing attachment to the truth. Far from modeling the authoritarianism that she had suffered, she was carefully vigilant that they choose freely their own direction in life. Marie, Marguerite, and Geneviève entered Carmel, a path for which the quasi-monastic upbringing given to them by their mother certainly predisposed them. Nicholas married and had two children, for which their grandmother had a special affection. Pierre became the Vicar General of the Bishop of Rouen and worked for the canonization of his mother. Jean became religious in a modest priory, but we don't know what became of him later on. Barbe was particularly concerned about her sons Nicholas and Jean whose trajectory was problematic.

Undoubtedly she received from the Poor Clares, in addition to a solid Christian education, the affection she lacked in her family. It is impressive to see the richness of heart this woman manifested forgetting in God the wounds of her own story and dedicating her life to others. Her dedication to her family was lived with an astonishing modern sense of respect for the other and their freedom. At the same time, she employed considerable activity towards the poor, and among them, prostitutes.

Woman of Action and Mystic

The young married woman, beautiful and admired, let herself be tempted for some time by the spirit of the period: beautiful dresses, sensitivity to the admiration that her beauty drew, reading voluptuous novels such as *Amadis de Gaule*. Her husband became worried and replaced them in the library with spiritual books. In one of them, Barbe read a sentence attributed to St. Augustine: "*Te avaricious is the one to whom God does not suffice.*" This reading in 1587 provoked a spiritual upheaval compared to the one St. Teresa experienced at the foot of the suffering Christ. This sentence resonated in the same manner as the celebrated Teresian formula: "*God alone suffices.*" She repeated this phrase throughout her life; so decisive was this spiritual experience for the rest of her existence.

This was translated immediately into an intense charitable commitment that found an opportunity to be expressed in 1589 with the inflow in Paris of the wounded from the war coming from Sedan. Then there was the assistance brought to the poor threatened by the famine at the time of the siege of Henry of Navarre in 1590. During this same period she had an intense mystical life beginning in 1591 the intensification of which concerned her family who had her treated with bloodlettings. In 1592, she met Benoît de Canfield, a spiritual man of Rhineland-Flemish inspiration who authenticated the:

graces. In 1593, the invisible stigmata was added to the frequent ecstasies and made her suffer each Friday until her death.

The banishment of Barbe's husband in 1594 took place at the time she was living intense experiences God's presence. She was less than 30 years old when she had to suddenly face an extreme poverty related to the ruin of Pierre Acarie. Returning on a horse from a visit to her exiled husband, she suffered a fall that cost her a triple fracture of the femur. She was marked for life by the handicap that resulted. During this period of misfortune, she was abandoned by her own family and suffered contempt from those who had been her admirers. Without allowing herself to become disheartened, she revealed exceptional talents to defend in court the rights of her spouse. Thus, she learned the mechanisms of civil society that was a preparation to the action that she would have to take later on as foundress of monasteries.

Reestablished with her own in their private hotel on rue des Juifs, the Blessed Virgin appeared to her in 1599. This began a stage of her prodigious ecclesial influence through her salon that all of Paris designated as "the Acarie salon." After the apparitions of Teresa, she occupied herself directly with the construction of the first Carmel financed in part by Pierre Acarie. At the same time, she created the Congregation of Saint Geneviève to prepare young women for Carmelite life. She organized, without being able to participate herself, the expedition charged to seek in Spain the daughters of St. Teresa formed by the Madre. Then she accompanied the foundations of the new Carmels that rapidly followed. There were 24 in France by the time of her death! She gave evidence in all this to a heightened sense of responsibility and of unshakable faith in providence. *"She left to divine Providence as though there were no human means, and worked as though there was no divine Providence."*

In 1606, at the end of a serious illness that included a coma, she awakened with a spirit of ingenuity and the freshness of a child that surprised those around her. Beginning from this period, her humility and confidence in God doubled, she manifested a love for Jesus in the mystery of his childhood in a manner that announced Therese of the Child Jesus. It seems that through this intensive regressive episode she was reconciled with her own childhood. Spiritual childhood began to take up an important place in her life of faith.

Carmelite

Pierre Acarie died on November 17, 1613 after a painful illness during which his wife assisted him affectionately. After having settled the estate, Barbe, forty-eight years old with precarious health, asked for the grace to be admitted as a lay sister in one of the poorest Carmels. After her request was accepted, she went to give thanks at the Abbey of Longchamp where in her youth she had desired to become a nun. She was received into the Carmel of Amiens on February 16, 1614 and received the habit on April 7. This woman so well known in Paris thus became a lay sister with the name of Marie of the Incarnation. She helped in the kitchen as much as her disability allowed. With the agreement of the prioress, she exercised a ministry to the sisters who requested her. She pronounced her solemn vows on April 8, 1615. Elected prioress unanimously, she refused the office in order to remain faithful to her status as a lay sister. The elected prioress didn't consider her disability and forbid her to continue counseling the sisters.

The Superiors decided to transfer her to Pontoise under the pretext of a healthier climate, but also to save her. Received with fervor on December 17, 1616, she was authorized again to give counsel to

the novices as well as to the prioress. Being opposed to the vow of servitude to Jesus and Mary that Bérulle demanded the Carmelites to pronounce, a conflict resulted that she bore silently. She didn't say anything in particular of the suffering that her last meeting with the one to whom she had been so close caused her. She wanted to be "*the last and the poorest of all.*" Her sisters admired her obedience and her charity, while her union with God was reflected in her whole being. During these four years in Carmel, she edified her sisters by her humility, her zeal for the fulfillment of the Rule, the ardor of her charity, and her love for God.

She was struck with a paralysis on February 7, 1618. Subject to convulsions, she suffered terribly. At times she seemed lost in the abysses of divine love and appeared unresponsive to everything, only repeating: "*What a merciful Lord! What goodness to a poor creature!*" Her last hour approaching, she was brought Viaticum on Holy Thursday, April 12. She arose again on Holy Saturday and heard Mass. At three in the morning on Easter Sunday, she received Holy Communion, and died on April 18, while Monsieur Duval, her confessor, administered to her Extreme Unction. He turned toward the community and said: "*At this instant that I am speaking, the deceased is already enjoying the sight of God.*" It was Easter Wednesday. She was fifty-two years old. Outside the rumor was rapidly spreading: "*The saint has died; the saint has died.*"

Obedience and Freedom

Barbe did not choose the marriage that was imposed upon her at the age of 16, but after a period of fierce resistance to the will of her mother, she decided to recognize it as God's will. This obedience was not ceremonial as witnessed by her sincere love for her husband to whom she manifested her affection with remarkable fidelity. From the beginning of their union, Pierre and Barbe lived a truly conjugal love despite inevitable tensions. They witness to the solidity of a love founded more on commitment towards the other than on feelings. Their experience can shed light on the issues of marital fidelity.

Through her harsh upbringing, Barbe became accustomed at an early age to poverty and physical suffering. She submitted calmly and gently to the will of her unjust mother. She knew how to deprive herself, especially when it was a matter of helping the poor at the time of the famine during the siege of Paris. Her asceticism was linked to her attention to others and was lived out through concrete dedication. She was sensitive to the misery of others and did not perform mortifications as end in itself.

She assumed the vicissitudes of an existence she did not choose: the ruin of her exiled husband after his political failure, a fall from a horse that left her handicapped for the rest of her existence. Her acceptance of these misfortunes has nothing to do with resignation as shown by her courageous action to overcome trials.

She didn't even choose to be a Carmelite, and certainly not a lay sister. She who was so cultured and who had exercised so many responsibilities responded, nevertheless, to this call communicated by St. Teresa herself. She embraced with amazing radicality this humble state in two communities where she lived. She never complained about the harshness of her prioress in Amiens to whom she obeyed in everything. She left us with a singular witness of humility in forgetfulness of self and gratitude for the love of God.

Her witness invites us to recognize that the fundamental exercise of freedom consists in receiving life as a gift from God. Christian freedom does not consist so much in the choice of one's existence as in a childlike life characterized by the gift of self to God in every circumstance. Freedom is complete when we are fully engaged in the choice that is made, whether it is a personal choice, or if it is accepting out of love what we did not choose.

The modern autonomous will leads to opposing obedience and freedom. Blessed Marie of the Incarnation shows us that true freedom is not acquired in deciding for oneself or in freeing oneself from all authority, law or external constraints. The free act is not defined by the capacity to choose, but by the capacity to give oneself entirely to what we have chosen. Freedom consists in discerning the will of God in the reality of existence in order to accomplish it with all one's heart out of love for God. This obedience to God opens the heart to the infinite mystery of Love. Therefore, there is no greater freedom than that of being able to offer oneself in response to this Love. Such is without doubt the most precious testament that Blessed Marie of the Incarnation has left us.

Posthumous Life

She did not wish to leave us spiritual writings, believing that this was not her mission. She burned the treatise on "*the interior life*," that she had written. We only have from her a few letters and spiritual notes entitled by her biographers: "*The true spiritual exercises of Marie of the Incarnation composed by herself. Very fitting for all souls who desire to lead a good life.*"

Her body having been buried in the monastery of Pontoise, miracles multiplied around her tomb. As the request of her son Pierre, vicar general of Rouen, her cause for canonization was opened in 1622. The chest containing the process was sent to Rome. Lost along the way, it was discovered in Lyon decades later. The cause was thus forgotten and taken up again at the initiative of the princess of France, in Carmel, Mother Thérèse of Saint Augustine (1737-1787). During the French Revolution, Pope Pius VI wanted to support the Catholics of France in the midst of the trial they were undergoing. Thus, he declared Blessed Sister Marie of the Incarnation on May 24, 1791. He saw in the beatification of this eminent woman engaged in the service of Christ and of the Church the consolation of his Pontificate. May the example and the prayer of Blessed Marie of the Incarnation be for us a source of consolation and of true freedom in Christ. "*Oh my very good God, place in me the spirit of charity and of gratitude towards you. What is there in heaven other than you, and what have I wanted on earth other than you? You are the God of my heart and my inheritance for eternity.*"



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