

DAUGHTER OF THE CHURCH

In February 1813 a rather bewildered novice, Soeur Marie Madeleine, stood waiting with a donkey in one of the courtyards of the royal chateau of Fontainebleau. Behind her the magnificent lake and forests were whipped by the keen wind of the winter's day. Around her the gables, the pointed towers, the slim windows and curved buttresses of one of the loveliest chateaux in France etched an outline against the grey sky and distracted her attention from the cold. As she stroked the donkey's ears and felt the small hooves slip on the frosty cobbles, the associations of a royal past crowded in on her: Louis VII who had made the place his home; Francis I who had brought Leonardo da Vinci to enrich its halls and galleries; Mary Queen of Scots who had lived there during her brief marriage to Francis II; Henry of Navarre who loved the hunting in its broad forests; Louis XIII for whom it was a refuge from Paris. Fontainebleau had always been royal. Perhaps that was why Napoleon had chosen it as a suitable place of detention for Pope Pius VII. Soeur Marie Madeleine had little interest in the history of kings that was written into the very stones of the great palace, and even less in the interplay of power politics which had made the Pope the prisoner of the Emperor. Nor did she appreciate the paradox which had brought her, a country girl from the Pas de Calais, to one of the oldest of the royal residences. All she knew was that she had come with Julie Billiart, who was now somewhere inside the grey walls, kneeling at the feet of the captive Pope to offer him her own loyalty and that of the Congregation of Notre Dame.

This allegiance was affirmed at a moment of pain and anxiety, for Julie had just taken the final decision to withdraw from France and to develop her work around Namur. Amiens was closed at last, Bordeaux had been separated and independent since 1811, and the remaining French houses at Montdidier, Rainneville, Rubempré, Ambleville and Bresles were winding up their schools or preparing to transfer to Belgium. Julie went round these hard-pressed little houses in February 1813 and then visited Paris, probably on business connected with their suppression. In Paris, the Fathers of the Faith had given her an introduction which could be used to obtain an audience with the Holy Father and, losing no more time than was necessary to arrange for the journey, she had come straight to Fontainebleau with Soeur Marie Madeleine and the donkey. The audience impressed her deeply. The return journey was silent, a meditation on the crucifix which was the souvenir of her visit. Afterwards there were tears at the memory of it, the refusal to refer to it in letters and the one revealing remark that she had wept with the Pope over the troubles of the Church.

This journey to Fontainebleau was the most symbolic that Julie ever made. At a moment that was most difficult for the Church and for the congregation she affirmed Notre Dame's loyalty to the papacy in a way that was unmistakable and courageous. Unlike Roman pilgrims of today or St. Thérèse pleading with Pope Leo XIII, she was not one of a party; and what she did ran counter to the ideas of her day. She was an individual acting on her own

initiative, and going out of her way to emphasize devotion to the Church at a time when the popular concept of the Church was a mistaken one. Her homage to the Pope was more than a gesture, it was a commitment. By it Julie stepped out of the narrow framework of the eighteenth century, and identified herself with that divine view of the Church which is beyond time and the policies of men.

To appreciate the significance of her attitude, we need to see it against the background of her own times. It is important to remember that she never knew the Church strong and at peace. Throughout her lifetime it was the butt of criticism and attack, always on the defensive and gradually losing ground. Loyalty demanded an act of faith, and Julie's loyalty stood out as a refusal to conform to the anticlericalism of the age. Her faith was in opposition to the general trends in her own country and in particular to the rationalist mentality, the criticism of the hierarchy and the policy of the revolution, which by the 1790s brought about a crisis the like of which the Church has rarely had to face.

Rationalism constituted a serious attack on the faith. Sixty-six years before Julie was born, Bossuet, the great Bishop of Meaux, had foreseen the intellectual pride which would refuse to accept anything beyond what man's reason could prove. He had anticipated the scaling down to the merely human, the narrow complacency, the spiritual myopia that was to be the bane of the age of reason; and he warned against the pride that would make minds drunk with their own achievements, rejecting the faith and the Church as an intrusion on the license which it called liberty. To his friend, the Bishop of Avranches, Bossuet had written in 1685: "I can see a terrible struggle shaping for the Church." He was right. In the thought of the eighteenth century, man was his own god. His culture was the apotheosis of things human with hardly a reference to their origin and, if the fashionable patron of the salons and the coffee rooms could live his life without God, how much more easily could he dispense with the Church. External conformity cracked like a shell when belief in dogma and reverence for authority were destroyed. The fact was that the Church had come to be thought of as a legal or even as a political body, as an organization, an administrative institution, a purely human foundation with juridical privileges. As a human institution, the rationalists judged it and found it wanting. Appreciation of the Church as a mystery, as the channel of divine action in the world, as the presence of Christ among us, had almost wholly disappeared.

Circumstances peculiar to France further weakened the Church's position. There were in the first place two great trends which caused disunion in French Catholicism: Jansenism and Gallicanism. Jansenism was the cold, unlovable version of Christianity which made out that man was naturally full of grace before the fall and capable of nothing but sin after it. It was a religion of fear and formalism: it drew men away from the sacraments under the specious pretext that they were not worthy to receive them. It made its most wholehearted adherents, the nuns of Port Royal, "as pure as angels and as proud as devils!" It was a religion of gloom which turned Racine away from the theatre, but it gained

ground because it was a useful weapon in the campaign against the Jesuits and it played a considerable part in eighteenth century politics. Its complement, Gallicanism, was the mistaken policy by which the kings of France claimed special privileges from the Holy See, privileges so wide that they amounted to a Church of France rather than the Church in France. The Most Christian King appointed bishops, abbots, abbesses. He left bishoprics vacant or filled them with unworthy nominees. He named cardinals at his whim. Relations with the papacy were frequently strained as a result of royal pretensions; and on one occasion at least, during the reign of Louis XIV, the king was excommunicated. Jansenism and Gallicanism combined to keep the spiritual vigor of the French Church at a low ebb. Saints there were, of course, and St. Benedict Joseph Labre was one of them; but there was nothing to compare with the galaxy of seventeenth century saints and, if Julie had learned to assess a period by the spiritual heroes it produced, she must have felt that in her own day the glory had passed from the eldest daughter of the Church.

She may also have heard of scandals in the more ordinary sense of the word. There were cardinals unworthy of their scarlet, like de Rohan; non-resident bishops; bishops who were immoral or unbelievers; bishops who were simply seeking a career, like Talleyrand. There were the so-called court priests, sycophants who hung around Versailles in the hope of preferment. There was an ecclesiastical proletariat of poor priests, priests without vocations, uneducated, unprovided for, that was every bit as dangerous as its political counterpart. France had quantity but not quality among her clergy. We may admire the divine providence which guided a Curé of Ars safely to the priesthood without the inconveniences of searching examinations and high standards, but what defense is there for the system that let him through? The fact that one of those who slipped by was a saint does not justify the laxity of a screening which was meant to sift out the insufficiently prepared. Nor does the fact that Julie's personal experience was of good priests alter a situation in which a great many were not.

Moreover the Church was too closely linked in the public mind with the established order of things. Catholicism was in fact the religion of the state and the Huguenots opposed it to their cost. The Church's cult was privileged; she had her own courts, prisons and sanctions; she enjoyed financial independence, for she was immune from taxation and had large revenues from vast estates; she had a monopoly of education. Seeing her apparently unassailable and with interests vested in the old order, the man in the street began to class her with the oppressors. In attacking the one, he would attack the other. Moreover, he found the Church the object of subtle and destructive satire from some of the ablest writers of the day. Voltaire, witty, clever, light, polished, thoroughly entertaining with his limpid style and barbed humor, was anticlerical and militantly irreligious. His war-cry was: "Smash the infamous thing—and the "thing" was the Church. Rousseau was scarcely less dangerous. He was a romantic 'believer,' but his religion was his own, and Jean Jacques' God was Jean Jacques. It was even said by his enemies that, if he ever got to heaven, God himself would need to

step down for him! He was a firm believer in the essential goodness of man, a convenient doctrine that did away with original sin, and in the infallibility of conscience as a guide. If there was no sin, where was the need for redemption? If conscience was infallible, why attach importance to revelation? Jean Jacques could well dispense with both, and replace the supernatural by the sentimental.

It was the Church's tragedy that, in face of these grave and dangerous developments, she had popes of only average ability. It was not that the popes of the period were scandalous. On the contrary, they were all good men, honest and anxious to do their best; but, with the possible exception of Benedict XIV, they were inadequate in a situation which demanded moral and intellectual giants. They were not men of steel. There was no Gregory VII or Innocent III among them. They were unable to prevent the cynical removal of political and international affairs from the pale of Christian morality into a sphere where the balance of power was substituted for the principles of the Church. They could not even prevent the suppression of their own strongest defense, the Jesuits. Clement XIV, at bay owing to the combined pressure of the great powers, scribbled a signature from which the words *motu proprio* were conspicuously absent, and by it put an end to 800 colleges and schools, the American and Asiatic missions and the work of 15,000 teachers. He made suspect a great body of theological writing and removed the strongest support of the Holy See. No wonder that Voltaire, himself a pupil of the Jesuits, exulted! "In twenty years there will be no more Catholic Church," he said.

It looked as if he were going to be right when the revolution adopted a policy, first of hostility to the Church, and then of de-Christianization. The Civil Constitution of the Clergy, which set up a schismatic Church of France, was a new form of Gallicanism. The suppression of the religious orders struck a serious blow at education, and the worship of the Goddess of Reason in the cathedral of Notre Dame marked a rejection of God himself that was the nadir of the Church in France. The disaster seemed complete when Napoleon brought Pope Pius VII as a prisoner to Fontainebleau.

Against all this stood the stubborn faith of the peasants and the heroism of the martyrs, both steadfast sources of strength and the seed-ground for a remarkable group of new saints. The Church in France was far from dead; but it needed to transcend its nationalistic outlook, to renew the orthodoxy of its faith and to revive its sense of unity, its respect for the papacy, and the necessary collaboration between its clergy and its laity.

Julie's attitude to the Church was much more evident in what she did than in what she said. She belonged to the country, and to the north country. La Vendée, Brittany, Normandy and Picardy were the steadfastly catholic provinces, and Julie lived out an attitude to the Church which she had inherited from her ancestors. She rarely used the word 'Church,' though she often spoke of 'faith' or 'religion' in contexts where we would now speak of the Church. In her language

she was of her time. There was no mention in her writings of the Mystical Body of Christ or of the Church as the Bride, or of the family and people of God, or even of papal infallibility as such. But she lived these things and her actions were more eloquent than words.

Julie's loyalty transcended nationalism and cherished the unity of all Christendom. Yet there could be no doubt of her deep love for France and of her desire to save her own country first of all for the Church. She reminded the sisters that their work was to save the remnants of the faith in France and the word that she used was *débris*: the sweepings, the last scraps. She spoke of there being no priests left, of the suppression of the religious orders, of the unbelief in so many districts. She was concerned for France and frequently, often unexpectedly, showed a keen awareness of her own French nationality, particularly when she was in Belgium. She had a natural affinity with the two French bishops, Monsignor Pisani de la Gaude at Namur and Monsignor de Broglie at Ghent. For both, the sisters were *les dames francaises*. But, for all her patriotism, there was no shadow of the 'Church of France' in Julie's attitude. What she worked for was the Church of Christ in France, a Church that was supra-national.

Julie cherished the unity of the Church, and more especially that unity in faith which is orthodoxy. She was therefore a sure guide in matters of schism. In her day, as in Tudor England when consciences were troubled over the oath of supremacy, there were many who did not see what was involved in the attempt to set up a national Church. Right judgment in the matter was the fruit of sanctity and of the guidance of the Holy Spirit rather than of learning, and it is a fact that many priests swore allegiance to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy because they did not appreciate its real nature. When its Gallican aims became evident, they did not hesitate to retract. In the stand she made each time she met the threat of schism, it was clear that she was led by the Holy Spirit. She was firm when a schismatic priest was intruded into the parish at Cuvilly after the Civil Constitution of the Clergy had become law, and she upheld the persecuted Fathers of the Faith during the White Terror in Amiens. Her advice to Mère St. Joseph, who was pondering the possibility of letting the villagers at Gézaincourt attend the Mass of a schismatic priest rather than be deprived of the sacraments, was unhesitating. On no account were they to come to terms with schism. It was better even to be without the Mass. In Ghent, she sided openly with Monsignor de Broglie as the rightful leader of the Church, even when the prince-bishop was condemned by Napoleon and pilloried in his absence; and she was just as steady in her support of Monsignor Pisani of Namur when he incurred popular suspicion by not being pilloried. His friendship with the imperial minister Portalis saved him from the fate of his brother bishop. Julie's principle was always the same: to unite and to maintain unity in response to our Lord's prayer that all might be one. It must have been a great joy to her to see the success of her efforts to bring back to the unity of the faith a convent in Namur whose sisters had broken away in the schism of the *stévenists*. The Namur archives still keep

the account of the reconciliation and record how the sisters attributed their re-conversion to the unflinching efforts of Julie and Mère St. Joseph.

Julie gave the example of great respect for the person of the Pope as the Vicar of Christ. Her visit to Fontainebleau was inspired by her reverence for the papacy. She had prayers said for Pius VII throughout his captivity and when he returned to Rome in 1814 she braved human respect and had a novena of *Te Deums* made in all her convents and schools, even though the military situation was bad for France and fidelity to Rome was therefore suspect.

She gave the example too of working with the Church at every stage in her apostolate. In the early years it was with the Fathers of the Faith: Père Varin, Père Infantin and Père Thomas; later it was with the French bishops. Monsignor Pisani was always very fatherly. Sister Eulalie, who was first mistress at Namur when Mère St. Joseph was superior there, used to remark how glad Monsignor was to find himself understood, and how heartily he as a Frenchman welcomed a French congregation to his episcopal city. He used to come to the school frequently when the foundresses were absent in Amiens, and satisfy himself that all was well. He presided at First Holy Communions, distributed the prizes and went to great lengths both to bring new pupils and to develop the work. On her side, Julie referred all important matters to him, and did nothing without his approval.

With Monsignor de Broglie, too, her relations were excellent. The portrait of this remarkable man is preserved with those of the other bishops of Ghent in the cathedral of St. Bavon. It is a fine face: sensitive, vibrant, intelligent, with neatly chiseled features, rather small but alert, very direct and with that air of culture and detachment which is often found in the portraits of eighteenth century noblemen. There is no doubt that he had courage and vision and that he paid for his loyalty to principle by imprisonment in exile. Something of that otherworldliness is in his portrait, even though the coat of arms beside him is that of as worldly a noble house as any. Julie had a great admiration for him and, in spite of the intimidating approach to the ancient palace of the bishops of Ghent between the grim towers and moat of Count Robert the Devil and the medieval splendor of St. Bavon, she enjoyed going to deal with him about the foundations at Ghent and Zele. "I have no difficulty in telling him just what I think," she said. "He is so good, we could not have a better."

Julie's collaboration with the Church went deeper than good personal relations with the bishops. She was still loyal when relations with the Church's representatives were strained and she gave to Monsignor Demandolx, who caused her so many difficulties in Amiens, the same unswerving obedience that she gave to those who were kind to her. The doyen of Dinant could not follow her ideas about children; and M. de Sambucy, who failed to see the significance of her new concept of religious life, was quite out of sympathy with her; but they

both met only an obedience grounded on faith and the courtesy that came from her charity.

Her attitude to the Church was of the first importance because, whether she was aware of it or not, she was working to bring together the Church and the poor, and those whom she taught inevitably identified her with the Church. As far as they were concerned, the Sisters' commitment to a practical care for the lower social classes was commitment to the Church's care for the poor. They did not stop to analyze fine shades of difference. There may be a case for describing the Church of the Concordat as a canon lawyers' Church trying to establish a canon lawyers' new order in the world; but it is still true that at the humbler level of the man in the street there was a yet greater task to be done for the love of the Church, because the common man had to be brought home to ordinary people. Under the impetus of the Holy Spirit, Julie brought the Church into the new post-revolutionary world at the level which was going to be most vital to it. In collaboration with the hierarchy she was to work for the education of the poor and of the working class.

It is perhaps this aspect of Julie's loyalty to the Church which appeals to us most strongly today. She was a woman of her time with the background, the ideas, the opportunities and the form of expression proper to the eighteenth century; and yet she personifies to our world the fact that the Church is concerned for all men. Julie is as much the saint of the sick, handicapped, the ignorant, and the needy people of the third world as she is of the family, the classroom, the youth club and the college. She shows now as in the France of nearly two hundred years ago that the joys, the sorrows, the anxieties, the hopes and the fears of all men, and particularly of those who suffer, are the concern of the Church of God.