Notes from Province Assembly Presentation
Historical Context of Associate-Sister Relationship

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Please forgive me for repeating Pat Byrne's lines that "there is no straight line from past to present" and "all translation is interpretation" but they still influence what I say this afternoon. Pat invites us to stay in the 21st century but "lean over" to the 17th.

Also let me repeat - primary evidence of our foundation is slim. Some new views of things have come from Sr. Therese Vacher, who finished her PhD work in 1991 on the first foundation of Sisters of St. Joseph.

Anne Hennessey of Concordia, Kansas refers to the 17th century as a period of the "most remarkable mysticism." Activity of the rich laity apparently did have a trickle-down effect. Poor women would do less only because they were forced to work more for their own survival. Peasant women, however, became most neighborly because they shared communal ovens and washing-places. Middle and upper class women often joined on fraternities to combat boredom.

"Confraternities" of active noble women existed before and after 1650 as a possibility for women to work in religious ways if they were restricted by nobility, by marriage, or by their state in life from entering a cloistered convent. The early CSJs worked side by side with these women doing common tasks.

The great objectives of the French church (again according to Anne-Hennessey) were to convert the Protestants and to evangelize the "spiritually abandoned" Catholics.

The Devot was another group of Catholics that began in about 1600. They were active against heretics. Famous men (for the most part), including Francis de Sales, met regularly in Barbe Acarie's home in Paris. In struggling against the Jansenists, they promoted what we might call devout humanism. Their agenda included laypeople working with clergy.

The Jesuits were especially progressive and optimistic re: human liberty and divine grace, morally lenient re: questions which did not demand absolute certitude, and supportive of the autonomy of religious re: the authority of the local bishop.

Anne Hennessy stresses that it is essential to our history and our humility' to see ourselves as part of several movements. We don't have the pride of uniqueness.

The original CSJ group wanted to revive the spirit of the early Christians in service of each other and the dear neighbor without distinction. They defined holiness as the same for self and neighbor.

17th Century reality looked something like this: take 1630 for example; most writing was about Paris and it took 11 days to go from Paris to Lyon. So our foundational places were away from the hub. In 1645, the monarchy of Louis IV was absolute and the church was part of the unchanging social structure. The ubiquitous belief was that one's rank was ordained by God. Morality was preached as being faithful to the duties of one's state in life. There was no upward mobility. Rural peasants outnumbered the urban population 20 to 1: 90% of the people worked to support the lifestyle of the top 10%.

Priests in the country were one with the people so much so that there was no place for a healthy sacrament of reconciliation. Jesuits and Capuchins trained women in the Home Missionary Movement to help other women with prayer, charity and reconciliation, so that they would have an alternative to the awkwardness of seeing the parish priest.

The first six women that we name Sisters of St Joseph lived without cloister. So without specifying it in print, we can surmise that they met and talked with other women, that they tried not to separate themselves, that they were not known or bound by religious restrictions. The idea of hiddenness that we (looking back) interpreted as virtue is now explained to us by recent research as simply a fact. We do know that they were not recognized as "religious" in Le Puy four year after the foundation.

Spirituality for women in general grew and developed in the 17th century. Pious literature, spiritual direction, retreats for the laity and the spread of confraternities combined devotion and charitable action. Women were important because of their role in the home with children and servants. Child rearing was considered an obnoxious task and so some spiritual leaders cultivated devotion to the Child Jesus, intending to improve that situation.

Teaching congregations (a new hybrid form of religious life) emerged, but were never admired. Free schools had instant popularity and then problems were seen. The nuns needed too much space and support. They needed cloister; gardens, cemetery, and school, church - all walled. Their property was tax exempt and they needed funds and supporters.

Health care, on the other hand, was one of the concerns of the elite classes *and* being responsible for the needy was part of the Devot movement. "To do everything (all the good) that is possible" is a formula found in all major documents of the time.

What the Confraternities of lay women (first) and religious (later) brought to care of the sick/poor was sanitation, concern for diet, fresh air and religious pictures to stimulate devotion. Toward the people, they brought individualized treatment, a view of the sick as representing Christ, and care of the sick as a means of their own sanctification. Aid was spiritual, medical, hygienic and nutritional.

The women who came forward in Le Puy were fortunately it seems to be connected with Fr. Jean Pierre Medaille and Bishop Henri de Maupas. In 1648, de Maupas reopened the Hospice of Montferr and with Frances Eyraud (who later is listed as one of the first six Sisters of St. Joseph). The bishop seems to be a genuinely holy person; he refused· other Sees and renounced his inheritance from his famous father. The inscription on his tomb reads: "Father of the Poor." Medaille, also, was truly pious, holy and peaceful – not a forced vocation. As the eldest son, he was out of sync with tradition when he entered the Jesuits. (First sons usually inherited all the wealth· and other sons joined religious orders.) The Medailles were of the judicial class and were devout political activists. Also all young Jesuits worked in hospitals (not at desk jobs but under someone else) in their early years in the Society of Jesus. They also worked in their houses, especially at cooking, and usually taught boys for some time before being released for mission work of evangelization or preaching.

Following the example of Ignatius, who gathered pious men to help with charitable works at every Jesuit College, most Jesuits would always be working with lay people. Jean Pierre Medaille may have done more work with women than the technically allowed because one letter from the General to his local superior questioned his involvement with "I know not what group of women." Feminine Confraternities, following the general climate of the time, included Eucharistic devotion, "doing everything" possible for good, feeling called to holiness, and meeting in small groups for prayer.

Definition of terms:

- Hopital - a place for the confinement of vagabonds, beggars and the marginal
- Hotel-Dieu - for care of the sick, injured and the dying
- Maladerie - small houses for the poor, itinerants, sick and dying

Many women dedicated themselves to hospitals (some for life). It seems clear that devout lay women were doing work of extraordinary charity. What Sisters of St. Joseph may *have* contributed to these women as they joined in this already existing work of God was a spiritual awareness; perhaps a pattern of prayer and spiritual exercises.

We don't know if Francoise Eyroud was a Sister at the time of being listed as someone at the Hopital in Le Puy, but it seems likely. There are many records of her family as benefactors to the Hotel Dieu in Le Puy. She was about 40 years old in 1650 and obviously had been working years before we have a listing of her name. However, at age 72, when she dies, she is listed as "Superior of the House of St. Joseph in Le Puy."

Clauda Chastel was a widow whose husband was a soldier who died in the service before 1647. Her dowry was 800 livres, which was very good. 800 livres was not enough for a cloistered order, though. One would have brought 3,000 to 8,000 for Visitation. Clauda is the only one of the first group to have brought a dowry (that we know of), and she was one of the firsts that could write.

Marguerite Burdier was probably 25 in 1650 and her father is listed with the title "Monsieur" indicating above average social status. Marguerite was the last of the 6 to die and (according to Pat Byrne) had the greatest influence on local St. Joseph communities.

Anna Chaleyer was born south of Le Puy and seems to have no social connections. In an undated parish census she is called a "Third Order Sister." However, when she died at age 90 in 1694, she was buried in the chapel of St. Joseph. For me, this is information that adds to my own continued use of the terms "maybe" or "might have been" when referring to who was "in" and who was not.

Anna Brun was probably about 15 when she came to the community. She *might* have been an orphan because no one speaks for her in the Act of Association, despite her very young age. We know she died in Le Puy in 1685 at about 50 years old and was listed as "Superior, Sisters of St. Joseph."

Anna Vey's father promised a small dowry if his daughter should enter the community. She seems to have come but it is not known if she stayed *in* the community.

The first Sisters stayed in the house of Lucretia de La Planche for "several months." She was the wife of a Protestant gentleman and we know that she had a least one son. Lucretia helped the Sisters in every way she could and is named a key element in the foundation: Her husband became a Catholic on his deathbed in 1653.

The most fascinating one to me is Marguerite de Saint-Laurans who is from a noble family. She never signed the Contract of Association. (Which was the formation of the group officially.) She is listed as the one who came to l'hopital de Montferr and in 1648 after Francoise has asked the Board to send "someone who knows how to read and write." Father Medaille was Marguerite's spiritual director (so I leave you to make your own deductions from that fact.) This Marguerite (sometimes listed as Margo) was still at the Hopital at Le Puy in 1654 (and was taken by one writer as foundress with Medaille and superior of the community!) We know she was an educated woman, lived with the Sisters for at least 6 years, but now we know that she never joined the community. Records note that she eventually became a hermit and wrote for the clergy.

Sr. Therese Vacher's search in 1991 indicates that there was an early expansion of houses; the community was growing quickly. 27 houses in 5 dioceses are listed in 12 years and others certainly existed which are now understanding that their holiness is connected to the holiness of the dear neighbor. Also, houses were never called convents because "convent" was a monastic term.

Agreges may have survived through the centuries in what came to America as "lay" Sisters. The U.S. hated the distinction, and Bishop John Ireland refused to allow it in St. Paul.

In Part One of the Constitutions, Sisters are told to "recite the Office of the Blessed Virgin on Sundays and feast days only." This has less to do with effective prayer and more to do with the foundational focus on the neighbor. In fact, chanting the Divine Office would take about 5 hours a day and they couldn't take that time.

Part two of the Constitution names the purpose of the congregation and the means for guiding it was to this end. The purpose is "to unite in a body of religious or of associees and agreges, all those dedicated to God in the world and to perfect those souls more and more in the holy service of God." AND (as Jesus would say "the second is like it") to provide for all the spiritual and temporal needs of the dear neighbor." No needs are excluded.

Part three states, then, **"in order to better succeed in this holy enterprise it (the congregation) aspires to establish *or* to direct everywhere, holy Confraternities of Mercy capable of bringing great good to the Church of God, everywhere."**

The Confraternities were what we might see as closest to our 21st century Consociates, Associates and Ohana. The original foundation seems not to have ever done without them and, I wonder, who actually joined whom because Confraternities exited well before 1650.

Part Four of the Le Puy edition of the Constitution listed under "Rules for the Superior and the other Officers," 14 people including the Spiritual Assistant who will be mistress of novices and the Directress of the Confraternity of Mercy who met with laywomen. These laywomen were engaged in works of mercy and in their own spiritual growth.

A significant fact in this part of the Constitution is that both groups (novices and laywomen) were formed in the same way. Directions are laid out for the Spiritual Assistant about how to guide the novices and the Directress of the Confraternity is referred to those pages for her directions. "She should read and apply to the administration of the Confraternity the rules of the Spiritual Assistant: (See Constitutions for the Little Congregation, translated 1969, p.30 refers to p.21)

Medaille was always saying, "You are called to the Great Virtue." And he means *love.* Pat Byrne presents some thoughts and questions: A community seems to emerge out of shadow.

Did Medaille write the Constitutions and did Marguerite Burdier help? Did the women connect through Medaille or were they together first? Maybe some pious women didn't want to be religious. Maybe it was Medaille who saw them as religious. He seems not to have intended to "found" a group.

Many Jesuits were writing Maxims, but the term "dear neighbor" is visibly different. Was the Confraternity of Mercy formed in the style of the Sisters or were the Sisters formed in the style of the Confraternity?

What conclusion do we draw from this dynamic of Confraternity women being trained as novices?

How do we define vocation?