



*One Woman's Life ~*

*Many Women's Stories...*

*Compiled by  
Mary Campion McCarren FCJ*





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# Dedication

For all the women  
who have so generously allowed their stories to be used  
and  
for all women everywhere  
whose lives are marked by  
courage, love and service.

# Introduction

It is so easy to think of foundresses of religious orders as long ago people, people somehow different from ourselves. Their true selves have, over the years, become shrouded in myth and legend; they seem frozen in snapshot, offering only set pieces to our gaze.

But a simple re-telling of the story of Marie Madeleine Victoire reveals a real flesh and blood woman who lived and loved, laughed and cried, knew suffering and pain, felt herself called to reach out to others and to stay with them in their need. By interleaving her story with the stories of contemporary women, we see more clearly that, although born in Châteauroux, France, 21 September 1781, Victoire is surprisingly modern, sister 'under the skin' to women from around the world in the twenty-first century. Wife and widow, mother and daughter, single parent, struggler for justice, challenge to the *status quo*, loyal opposition of church authorities, believing in herself and in her conscience, secure in her God; in honouring the stories of women from around the world, women of different race, creed and background, we honour too their common sisterhood and rejoice in the giftedness they share with Marie Madeleine.

*And here is love  
like a tinsmith's scoop  
sunk past its gleam  
in the meal-bin.*

*(Seamus Heaney)*

## Her family

The extended de Bengy family into which Marie Madeleine Victoire was born was a large one. In addition to her immediate family she was surrounded by aunts, uncles and cousins. They were a happy, secure family, long established in Berry, France, where various members held distinguished positions in both church and kingdom. Then with the onset of the Revolution they knew hardship, prison and exile.

Gigi, as she was known as a child, was close to her parents. When she was one year old, her two-year old brother, Etienne, died and we can only imagine how doubly precious she was to her bereaved parents. She was nearly three when Claude was born, six when Angèle arrived and fourteen at the time of Philippe's birth. To him, she was always a second mother. She was his godmother and all his life he was aware of how she had tended and guided him.

Madame de Bengy was a wise and loving mother who showed herself courageous and persevering when her husband was imprisoned during the Revolution. She did not buckle under adversity, did not allow herself to give way to despair when faced with hardship and trouble. She divided her energies between working for her husband's release and bringing up their children in a secluded farmhouse to face their changed circumstances. Victoire she trained in the arts of housekeeping and homemaking but it was the example of her fidelity to prayer and her trust in God which remained with Victoire to the end of her life.

Victoire loved her mother, but it would seem that her father was the centre of her young life. When Madame de Bengy gathered her children to pray for their father's release, Victoire tells us that her secret prayer was that she might be imprisoned and die with him!

Her wish was not granted! Once her father was released the family moved from Châteauroux to Issoudun and the eighteen-year old, no longer 'Gigi' but 'Mademoiselle Victoire' embarked on the next stage of her life's journey.



She became friends with a girl about her own age, Constance de Rochfort. The two were inseparable, enjoying long conversations together pouring out their troubles and pleasures to each other. Together they went round the town, visiting people who were sick, helping people in need and volunteering their services at the local Hospice. Like any teenager fired with a sense of justice, Victoire was indignant to learn that those allegedly serving the sick at St Roch's Hospice were taking for themselves the food and wine meant for the patients. Even when she was a child, her family had been well aware of her determination, even stubbornness, and so no-one was surprised when she reported the abuses to the authorities and persevered with her case until things were put right.

According to the custom of the time, Victoire's father chose her bridegroom, Joseph de Bonnault d'Houët. Although it was decided upon by their parents, it was a marriage into which both Victoire and Joseph entered freely and gladly. Constance was well aware her friendship with Victoire would necessarily change and she knew too that Victoire did not see the matter as she did! *'I do not want to give up the joy of intimate talks with you simply because you have a husband. I have had a grudge against him for a long time, because he is the cause of our separation. What grieves me is that I am very much afraid that you do not share my feelings!'*

Victoire and her mother planned eagerly for the wedding. They made lists and embarked on shopping expeditions, choosing materials and patterns for the 'trousseau'. Silk, wool and worsted all figure in their letters, 'Mademoiselle Janette' was entrusted with the making of underclothes and 'six morning jackets of the finest cotton.'

There was general rejoicing over the marriage which took place in the vast Cathedral at Bourges, 21 August 1804. Her cousin, Claude, who married only three weeks before she did, wrote celebratory verses for the occasion.

Joseph and Victoire made an attractive couple as they took their place in the social life of Bourges where both their families were well known. They were happy too in their own home where they read together and prayed together; as Victoire and Constance had done, they visited the sick but Joseph also visited prisoners of war held in the city, providing food and comforts for them. He believed, as did his father-in-law, that *'the greatest riches one can have are the esteem and regard of one's fellow citizens; to merit it one must make oneself useful.'*

On one of these expeditions Joseph caught typhoid fever. For six months he was desperately ill and, despite Victoire's tender care, died less than a year after their marriage. His funeral with solemn Requiem took place in the Cathedral where they had married. The young widow was desolate and relied heavily on the care and companionship of her sister and sister-in-law.

## Her only son, Eugène

When she married Joseph, her father gave her the long low manor house at Parassy as her dowry. Surrounded by meadows, farmland and vines it was an idyllic spot. Joseph and herself went there the day after their marriage and now within two weeks of his death she went back, seeking to come to terms there with her loss. But grief was a luxury she could not allow herself for already she was almost eight months pregnant.

For her baby's birth it was seen as imperative that she return to the de Bonnault family home. Joseph's son and heir, Eugène, was born in Bourges, 23 September 1805.

Despite the loving care of her 'double family' Victoire suffered postnatal depression. She suffered from anxieties which made her fear the sleeping child was dead, from fears which made her have someone stand at the window to wave to her as she returned home, assuring her that all was well, and from nightmares in which she saw her own funeral. But gradually she recovered her equilibrium and again enjoyed parties, balls and theatres. Again she turned to the works she had undertaken with her husband and made such good use of her wealth that a murderer on trial in Châteauroux was quoted as having said there were three rich people in the town and two were to be killed - but not Madame de Bonnault. 'She', he insisted, with a note of approval, '*puts her money to too good use!*'

Joseph had told her, '*If God gives us a daughter, train her as your mother trained you*' and now she guarded jealously the formation of her son. Always aware of his loss she was unwilling to discipline him too firmly with the result that her mother-in-law threatened to intervene. Such a threat galvanised Victoire into action!

As she looked at Eugène, who according to his grandfather grew very like his father, she would have been so aware of what Joseph had missed in not seeing his son grow up and later in not knowing his grandsons. The interest with which she watched over them all as they advanced in their chosen professions, must always have reminded her that it was a joy Joseph had not shared.

Cousin Claude was nearby. His wife, Anne-Augustine, only a year younger than her new cousin, formed a close relationship with her. Their first child, Armande, was a year younger than Eugène and all her life she remembered the two young mothers delighting together at the antics of their children.

*'No more but e'en a woman...'*

*(Shakespeare)*

## Wives and Mothers

We said earlier that though destined ultimately to found a religious Order, Victoire was first a wife and mother, sharing the experiences and emotions of others.

As she went to Bourges Cathedral for her wedding, she was no different from many another bride in her hopes and dreams.

**Jane**, reflecting on her wedding day, is aware that though she speaks what seem like clichés about *'wanting to spend the rest of our lives together'* and *'embarking on a journey together'*, everyone who gets married must have some feelings in common... *'I know I felt absolutely, calmly SURE that I was doing the right thing... that Paolo was a good man, and that we were good for each other, brought out the best in each other. I felt very sure about the vows I was about to make...if nervous about having an audience watching while we said them...'*

Earlier her sister, **Clare**, had *'felt very certain that I was doing the right thing, and though I had nerves about being the centre of a big ceremony in front of so many people, I had no doubts at all that I was marrying the right chap... It has been ten years since we married, and I can honestly say neither of us has ever regretted it for an instant - in fact, for both of us, it has been the best thing we ever did.'*

Victoire wasn't to be given ten years but in the months she and Joseph were together, they understood what riches their faith brought to their marriage. So too over the years, **Anna and her husband** have grown together.

*'Together we made the Spiritual Exercises in Life. To live this experience personally yet together, is a great richness for our marriage. A source of peace and greater love. After 22 years of marriage we love one another more deeply, more completely, for God is more and more present in our life, through this common pilgrimage which has helped us discover many things about God, about ourselves, our marriage and what we have to live each day. A love which does not turn us in upon ourselves but sends us to the world, to others. And we are aware and grateful for this happiness which comes to us from God.'*

*I have not always been dancing in sunlight.  
There has been shadow too, death and  
Resurrection. Rehearsals for the  
Final curtain.*

*(Ann Lewin)*

*...still crying for my son.*

Like Victoire, **Maureen** has been called to accompany a loved one through terminal illness.

*My name is Maureen. Most people expect to die before their children, so I was in no way prepared for the long, painful death of my third son, Patrick, who was born gay and contracted the HIV virus. He died at the age of 33 from an Aids related illness.*

*The day Patrick told me he had been HIV positive for 2 years, I went through so many different emotions, in what seemed like seconds: shock, disbelief, anger, frustration, pity, helplessness. My darling son was going to die and there was nothing I could do to stop it.*

*Patrick taught me much; taught me too how to cope with everything. He had no anger towards the person he'd contracted the virus from; he was very positive about living with it and through him I also learnt to live and think positively.*

*For a time I wondered how God could create such a talented, compassionate, loving, gentle young man and then allow him to get this virus. But Patrick insisted it was his own actions that had done it.*

*Knowing I'd need someone to talk to in Adelaide, he gave me permission to tell my sister. We two and his sister Thérèse who lived with him in Melbourne were the only family members that knew, until, four years later, he began getting sick. Only then did he let me tell his other siblings.*

*Confidentiality is very important to someone with the virus; it's up to them if and when people are told, so Patrick's siblings were angry with him, and with me, for not telling them sooner; one niece was angry with me for not telling her before Patrick's death. At the time they did not understand that I had no right to tell them without Patrick's permission. What I experienced as unjustifiable anger was something else I had to cope with. But they understand now.*

*For the last year and a half of his life, I lived in Melbourne to help both him and Thérèse. He arranged for the two of us to attend grief support meetings, which helped, but not so much as Patrick did himself. Through him I met a lot of lovely people.*

*The pain of watching Patrick go from a healthy person who loved 'doing lunch', dinner, live shows, dancing, gym, shopping and helping others, to a young man who didn't have the strength to do any of these things was terrible. I would pray to God to take Patrick's illness from him and give it to me. I'd pray for a cure for the virus, if not in time for Patrick, then for others. As he got sicker, he lost everything he ate, and faded to a very thin, tired person, and I prayed for us all to have the strength to get through.*

*When he got weaker and was admitted to hospital, we talked about what Patrick wanted and he made me promise to carry out his wishes no matter what. In my presence, he made all the arrangements for the celebration of his life and chose the songs he wanted played that day. "When you walk through a storm" and "I'll be seeing you". I still can't hear those songs without becoming upset.*

*I returned to Adelaide for two weeks. Then Patrick rang to say he was going off life support, but would wait until we arrived. 'Don't forget your toothbrush,' he said. He rang me four times that day and repeated 'Don't forget your toothbrush.' I then had to phone his siblings and tell them his decision. It was very hard to do.*

*A friend picked up my youngest son and me from the airport and took us straight to the hospital, where we had a good chuckle because, after all Patrick's reminders, I'd forgotten my toothbrush!*

*Patrick's older sister was not there because each time she tried to board the plane she broke down and couldn't do it. She rang him several times a day. When my two other sons arrived the Doctor talked to us and explained what would happen when the life support was removed. Then we went back to Patrick's room and it was removed. I was crying inside: No, don't do it; let's keep him a bit longer, but that was a very selfish thought; he'd suffered enough pain and loss of dignity; it was time to let him go.*

*Patrick and some of the nurses had told us how sometimes people couldn't die because a loved one wasn't ready to let them go, so we told Patrick it was alright to go when he was ready. We, his family and friends sat in his room laughing and talking about old times, until, two days later, he went into a coma. It was the hardest thing we had ever had to do, just sit there and watch him leaving us. Friends and nurses said how strong we were, but they couldn't see how we were being torn apart inside.*

*The son I'd carried under my heart for nine months, whom I'd given birth to and raised, was fading away before my eyes and there was nothing I could do. I overheard a nurse in the corridor say 'I don't understand a mother like that, how could she do that.' I started to have doubts as to whether I'd done the right thing. I had power of attorney, I could have the life support reconnected, but then I remembered my promise to Patrick; everything had to be as he wanted, but even so, it took three years for me to get over my guilt feelings.*

*When the frustration of forgetting things, of always feeling sick and not being able to retain anything he ate or drank became too much for him, Patrick would crack up at me. As he said, he knew that no matter what happened I'd still love him and be there for him. Patrick had said he didn't want people talking at his*

*celebration of life as though he was an angel, as so often happens at funerals. I told him not to worry; I'd toss in how he could be a real pain in the neck at times. He laughed and said 'Make sure you do!' I did!*

*Most of the time, when he was older, he called me Maureen, because, as he explained to a couple of his friends once, "Maureen is my friend as well as my mother." These words of Patrick's and the last words he ever spoke to me, thanking me for being such a wonderful mother and friend, loving him unconditionally all his life, have given me a lot of comfort and peace, but the pain of never being able to hold him, kiss him, talk with him, will never fade.*

*It is very upsetting to hear comments such as 'It's a gay sickness', 'Gays deserve to get Aids', 'Aids is God's punishment for Gays'. Patrick used to tell me 'their attitude is their problem, not yours', but knowing that's true doesn't stop the hurt whenever I hear such words.*

*Every day I think of Patrick and miss him. The worst days are Mother's Day, birthdays, Christmas and Easter. He made them all such fun, happy times. The worst day is his anniversary.*

*My face smiles, but inside I'm still crying.*

## Widowhood

Although not ill like Joseph de Bonnault, **Peter** had spoken to his wife, **Phyl**, about his own possible death but when it happened his untimely and sudden death made her *'feel as though half of me had gone. The loneliness, the empty house, not hearing his bubbly voice, the quietness, made me feel so sad. I couldn't sit down and eat a meal for three weeks... I was devastated and heart broken. I kept saying – 'Why! Why! Why!' Peter had made so many plans. It just didn't seem fair. We had such a happy marriage. Thirty-three and a half years. He helped so many people in their different walks of life.'*

Phyl was not shielded by the same etiquette of mourning as Victoire but as she tried to resume her normal life *'people stopped me in the street, in the shops – people I didn't even know... One person passed in a car, saw me, stopped and then walked back to give his condolences. These gestures were very consoling'*. And for all widows there is the realization as they meet people and invite them to their home that: *'Now I am just a one. It is very hard going to a party, – entering and leaving by oneself'*.

Married in her native Indonesia at 19 years of age, **Margaretha** had two daughters aged 8 and 4 years, when she became a young widow. Her husband had been sick for more than 4 years before he died in 1986.

Ever since her marriage she had helped her mother-in-law sell fertilizer from a small kiosk and indeed from 1981 Margaretha herself had been the breadwinner. In that year her husband went to Kalimantan Island for a year, so she worked to support herself and their first child in another city in Java in a Catholic organisation that helps families.

When her husband returned he was mentally ill. For eight months Margaretha confided her eldest child to the care of her sister, and her baby daughter to the grandmother, so that she herself could work fulltime. For the next three and a half years she lived and worked in Yogyakarta. Her husband died suddenly in July 1986.

At first she lived with her mother-in-law, then she moved in with some unmarried women in a small house beside the centre where she worked. The next five years were a bitter experience for her as she struggled to live and work in crowded conditions with her two young children. Every night she cried herself to sleep. Her mouth broke out in ulcers which persisted for four months. Nevertheless she worked hard in the Social Apostolate for Families and educated her daughters.

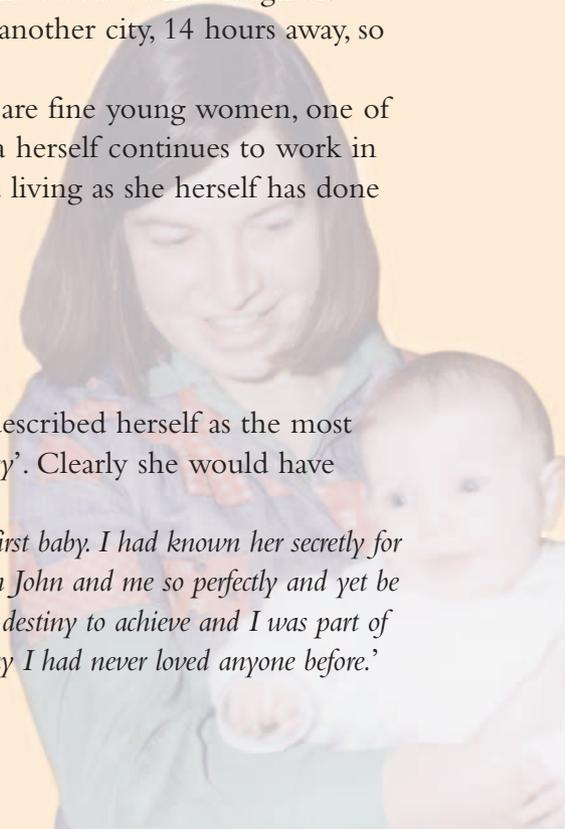
In 1997, she married again but her husband (a teacher) worked in another city, 14 hours away, so they rarely met after the marriage until he also died 8 months later.

Thanks to her determined and loving care, Margaretha's daughters are fine young women, one of whom has completed a post-secondary secretarial course. Margaretha herself continues to work in the social apostolate, helping 'little people' find simple ways to earn a living as she herself has done and to supplement their meagre incomes.

## Motherhood

In widowhood, Victoire found comfort in her son. Later in life she described herself as the most doting of mothers, and admitted she had loved him '*this side of idolatry*'. Clearly she would have recognized the feelings of **Pauline and Clare**.

For **Pauline** '*there has been nothing on earth like the moment of seeing our first baby. I had known her secretly for nine months but when she appeared it was such a marvel. How could she contain John and me so perfectly and yet be her own person apart from us? I knew she had her own life to lead and her own destiny to achieve and I was part of it. My priorities changed – everything changed – and I began to love her in a way I had never loved anyone before.*'



For **Clare** too *‘life changed immediately and irrevocably with Rory’s birth!*

*I was delighted to find I was going to have him, although somewhat worried about how on earth I would know what to do, never having been the kind of person to be into dolls and babies.*

*It was literally a case of love at first sight though. I held him in my arms, just moments after he was born. He still had his eyes closed, but then opened them for the first time as I held him, to reveal beautiful big dark eyes. Like everyone else, I had awful fears about anything being wrong with him, and it was a great relief to see this gorgeous, healthy child.’*

*Those fears too Victoire would have empathized with. ‘My child,’ she wrote, ‘was not yet a year old and sleeping so deeply in his cradle that I believed him dead and I woke him by shaking him so violently that he cried with fright. I was mad, yes mad about that child...’*

## Widow and Mother

Like Victoire, **Alejandra** had a baby after the death of her husband.

In Cordoba, Argentina, the couple had rented a house hoping to be able to buy it six months later. But they would have had to sell their car to make up the money and so gave up their plan. Four months later Gustavo was killed in a car accident. They already had a two-year old daughter and Alejandra was three months pregnant.

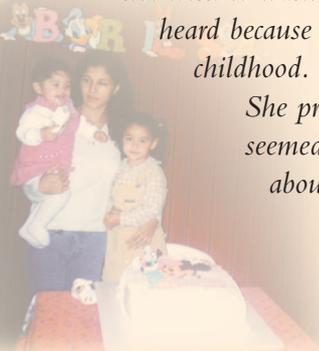
The daughter born to her is the image of Gustavo. She has managed to buy a house near her own mother – ironically with the money from the car Gustavo hadn’t wanted to sell!

Like Eugène de Bonnault, **John** was born after his father’s death. *‘Not now, not ever’,* he writes, *‘will I adequately imagine the depth of the loss my mother must have felt. Nor will I ever grasp the endless draining effort she must have seen ahead; first the pregnancy then the years alone to bring up my sister and myself.*

*Her pain was her own and not for sharing. She was a happy lively mother who worked the longest of hours and ran the happiest of families.*

*When I asked her how she felt about my birth she told me God had sent me so that she would not be lonely now that he had taken Daddy. She told me when I asked that when things were very difficult you might not wish to wake each morning but you do: God gives you grace to face another day. These things I heard because I asked: her pain was not for sharing. She shared only the joy with which she filled my childhood.*

*She prayed much and was through her life a communicant each day. She would spend what seemed to me long times in prayer. She told me, when I asked, that in these times she thought about Our Lord in the Garden. At the time I thought this strange: not now’.*



*Cheap gibes are made about a God who can  
Allow us to feel pain.  
But we learn sympathy for God-made-Man  
And touch eternal things again.*  
*(Elizabeth Jennings)*

## Befriender of those in need...

If there was one group more than another to whom Madame d'Houët felt drawn, it was children. In every child she saw Eugène; *'that string'*, she wrote, *'vibrates always with the deepest tones in my heart.'* She acknowledged that *'(her) mind followed him without ceasing'*. Like many a mother she kept all the letters he wrote from school with news of his health, the food, his friends, his lessons and tests, his simple queries about home, herself, his grandparents, Parassy and the state of the grapes. When he went to University in Paris she found a house and a housekeeper for him and was proud as any mother when she was able to write to a friend that he had done 'brilliantly' in his law exams.

Devoted to Eugène, her mind and heart went out to young people who did not have his opportunities. Ferdinand Jeantier who was always delicate and far distant from his parents, was in the School infirmary at the same time as Eugène. Both were sick with measles, Ferdinand so seriously that his life was feared for. Eugène's mother had gone post-haste to the School demanding the right to nurse him herself; she carried her point and took care of Ferdinand too. From that time, she treated him as a second son, taking him treats when she visited Eugène and taking him to Parassy each summer for the long holidays.

Her experiences in the hospice at Issoudun and her experiences in Bourges with Joseph had made Victoire sensitive to the plight of others and in her widowhood she continued to serve as she could.

As her husband had been, she was conscious of the needs and sufferings of prisoners. Many captured during Napoleon's Peninsular War were held at Bourges. Regularly she paid for bread to be sent to them and in 1809 went incognito, with the Daughters of Charity, to nurse some of them. She was now 28 years old but like Joseph, she too caught the pestilential disease. As soon as she recognized the symptoms in herself she asked Angèle to take Eugène to their mother's home and look after him there. Her last act before losing consciousness was to send her sister out to distribute alms to the poor on her behalf. She was delirious for two weeks and her life was despaired of. Unlike Joseph, and the Daughter

of Charity with whom she had worked, she recovered, but these experiences of illness made her over cautious for the rest of her life in what concerned the health of others.

When six Fathers of the Faith were invited to preach a mission in Bourges, Madame Joseph asked that they might be allowed to stay at her home in Rue Paradis. She persevered energetically with her request until all obstacles and difficulties gave way before her and she won her point. When the mission was over she invited them to spend some time at Parassy.

In 1813, thirty of the Italian churchmen who had been forced into exile by Napoleon arrived in Bourges. No doubt remembering how her uncles and cousins had been forced to flee during the Revolution, Madame d'Houët received seven of them into her home. They never forgot '*the acts of kindness and welcome which (we) received from (you).*' She not only housed and fed them but saw to their clothing and other needs. Later when Fr Varin SJ was hunted by the Napoleonic government, she kept him hidden at Parassy, and did not shirk the consequences of her actions.

In our own day, there is still the great need for companionship those walking the way of sorrow and abandonment. Visitors Groups are to be found in prison ministry some whose specific aim is to befriend women prisoners, especially foreign nationals who cannot enjoy the same visiting rights and privileges as other prisoners. In one British prison, **Shari** from Guyana has herself become a 'befriender' whilst serving her sentence. A group in Holloway, trained by the Samaritans, listen, support and encourage others in their need. In words with which Victoire would empathize Shari says: '*There is some purpose for me being here, and if I have not found it yet, I will probably find it before I leave, or shortly after. And I hope I can serve my purpose well.*'

Many a time, Victoire would be silent before the pain of other people, but her sympathy was always vibrant. Fourteen-year-old **Natalie**, grieving for her friend who had apparently taken her own life, was barred by her colour from entering the block of London flats where her friend's mother lives. When she met her on the street, the youngster didn't want to intrude on the mother's grief, '*So I just gave her a hug.*'

In Australia, **Margaret** found herself called upon to befriend her own son in his need. Her journey with him was painful but rewarding:

*When my son Mitchell turned up on my doorstep in 1989, obviously very ill, I believed him when he said he had flu and needed somewhere to stay for a few days. In reality he was suffering from heroin withdrawal. I had no idea at the time and in retrospect can only admire his strength and determination to kick the habit he had acquired in his teens.*

*Mitch had just been told that he had acquired HIV and although he didn't tell me then by the time he did tell me about two years later I had half suspected something was seriously wrong. He tried hard to change his lifestyle and live a good life, but his past kept catching up with him. It is very difficult for boys like Mitch to be accepted by 'normal ' society. He had a couple of absolutely disastrous relationships with ended up with him going to prison. When the time came for him to be released one of the conditions was that he stay with me. I can remember my fearful dread when he told me this. I didn't want him.*

*Mitch lived with me for the last four year of his life. He told me they were the best years he had known. We became very close.*



*I am only partly aware of the plan, the music, the theme  
Yet I feel that sometime I shall come upon it.*

*(Elizabeth Jennings)*

## What next?

At this stage of her life, Victoire would happily have defined herself by relationships. ‘Mother of Eugène’, ‘Madame Joseph’, ‘Mistress of Parassy’, daughter, sister, daughter-in-law. But from this circle which gave her identity and security, she was to be led by what she called ‘*a long chain of events*’ to something new.

The struggle to establish what God wanted was a hard one. Initially she was unsure whether she was to remain as she was, or to remarry. The latter was attractive and she was on the point of accepting an offer of marriage when she experienced intimations of something different. She had a sense that God wanted something different from her but had no clear sense of what it might be. Her growing prayer was that she might do what God would have her do, do it faithfully, do it joyfully.

Child, aging parents, refugees: to these responsibilities were added those of administrator. Landowner in her own right Victoire also held Eugène’s fortune in trust. Year after year she would go to Parassy for the grape harvest, Parassy where she had gone with Joseph immediately after their marriage and where she had gone with her sister and sister-in-law after his death. Its peace and beauty were always blessing for her and in time its memory became even more precious after she had offered safe hiding there to Joseph Varin of the Society of Jesus.

She first met the Jesuits when she enrolled Eugène in their College of St Acheul, Amiens in 1814. When the former Royalist soldier whose mother had been guillotined, was again a hunted man during ‘The Hundred Days’, Victoire offered him safe refuge at Parassy, even though, in her own words ‘*a dreadful thought came to mind. It seemed to me that if Father Varin came to my house, I would have to enter religion.*’ Despite her fears she did not withdraw her offer of hospitality. The Jesuit remained with her for five months and in his company she came to know more of the Society of Jesus, to imbibe from his conversation and practice its spirituality. As she began to follow a more ordered life of prayer and discernment, the quality in her character which her family knew so well (“*What Victoire wants, Victoire gets,*” her mother used to say,) was transmuted into a determination that what God wants, God should get.

One link in the chain taught her to trust. She was daily aware of what she calls ‘*terrifying details*’ of the army’s advance; in due course the troops entered the village and the officers arrived at her home. “*They did not even bother to reply to what I said but continued to speak and act as if they owned the house. I was terrified and prayed silently to the Lord with all my heart.*’ But her situation changed when the Colonel realized that she was the sister of Claude de Bengy with whom he had studied. “*I have to admit, Madame, that your position was more unpleasant and dangerous than you could have imagined.*”

She was to need great courage and trust in the years ahead.

Step by step, though never in a straight line, she followed what she believed was the path laid out for her.

One missionary priest whose advice she sought in Bourges, having listened to her account of herself gave as his opinion that *God wants your whole heart. You must give it to him without reserve.* This opinion was confirmed the following year, 1816, in Amiens when Father Sellier *urged me to lead a more perfect life and to make the vow of chastity. I positively refused to do either.* In her honesty Madame d’Houët came to acknowledge that on her return to Bourges she experienced *such utter weariness and distaste for amusement that I found it impossible to resume social life.*

Then on Trinity Sunday, 1817 as she was praying before Mass *quite suddenly and unexpectedly it was made known to me that God wished me to make the vow of chastity there and then, in his presence. What was asked of me appeared so clear and positive, that in spite of the strong natural aversion I had felt up till then, I no longer had the slightest objection... I readily and joyfully made the vow.*

She made it ‘immediately but conditionally,’ the condition being that she would renew it on a day to be approved by Father Varin if he agreed with what she had done.

It was six months later that he agreed but by that time people and events had so confused her that all her old fears came rushing back. *I positively refused. I said that if God called me to be a religious I would do so willingly but if I remained in the world, I did not wish to bind myself...* But she had long prayed to know what God wanted and to be strengthened to do it, faithfully and joyfully, as soon as it was made known to her. *I went to the church of St Geneviève and remained there a long time. Only God could change my heart and conquer my resistance. In his infinite goodness this is exactly what he did once more and accepted from me what a mortal man in a similar situation would undoubtedly have refused.* Returning to her rooms she confided to her Journal: *I have spent the evening sitting on the floor, weeping... I continue to have a terrible repugnance.*

With utter trust, on December 9<sup>th</sup> 1817, *before Communion I pronounced my vow ...at the same moment all my fears and misgivings vanished for ever. This day, the most beautiful of my life, has ever since been for me a great source of consolation and a motive for eternal gratitude.*

But ‘consolation’ did not mean pain and suffering were excluded from her life.

Father Varin SJ she describes as *this holy man who wanted at all costs to unravel what came from God and what might have merely sprung from my imagination.*

As early as 1816, Victoire tells us, she had received *a clear and consoling light that God wanted me in the religious state but not as a Carmelite as I had occasionally imagined, but working actively for the salvation of souls.* The attraction to Carmel, however, remained. The following year, within a week of the conditional vow of chastity, whilst *reflecting on the happiness of those who belong entirely to God and whose only occupation is loving and communing with him I regretted that I was not called to Carmel.* On June 13<sup>th</sup>, Feast of the Sacred Heart, that holy envy was further stifled when she heard from the crucifix over the altar the words: **I thirst.** *I was deeply moved by these words. I knelt in adoration and offered myself to God with my whole heart for all that he asked of me.* A few days later she realised that she was called to found a Congregation whose members would be companions of Jesus in the contemporary world.

Father Varin took seriously the responsibility of testing her vocation and on more than one occasion reduced her to painful tears. But she had learnt that in God alone was she to find strength. When the priest *said things which I no longer remember but which were so harsh that I felt I could not bear it, all I could do was to cry out interiorly 'Have mercy on me'. An interior voice, distinct and gentle comforted me: Courage my daughter; the time of trial does not last forever. Father Varin continued, but say what he would I was filled with unspeakable peace and confidence.* During a pre-Christmas retreat in 1817 she *'experienced great spiritual aridity and darkness'*. When Father Varin began his midnight Mass sermon with the words *'Rejoice all you who hear me for I bring you tidings of great joy'...* *I said to myself 'Let everyone else rejoice; I cannot. Then suddenly I felt myself completely transformed... I was inundated with unsurpassed and indescribable peace. My will was entirely changed and changed for ever.. I ceased to bargain with God... I was calm and resigned to everything that God asked.'*

Another quite different source of suffering was her family. Even after Father Varin had agreed that God was asking the foundation of her, she *was obliged to return to Berry lest my family should hear what I was doing and become anxious on my account. My mother and father-in-law would have strongly opposed me, especially the latter, who would have gone to Rome if necessary to prevent my taking such a step. Both died in ignorance of my project, a fact in itself actually astonishing for when the work had really begun everyone in Amiens knew of it and a number of people from Berry, all known to me, continually visited the town.*

In 1820 she was summoned from Parassy to her mother whose *death was a double sacrifice because my father who was now alone and knew nothing of what I had begun, insisted on my staying with him. Could I have had one wish in all my life, it would have been, above all else, to care for him and give him every possible proof of love. My heart was truly torn... My father could not understand. This sacrifice was for me, I believe, the greatest of all. On leaving him I was desolate and inconsolable.*

Father Varin had tried to convince her that she was called to join the Society of the Religious of the Sacred Heart. He brought pressure to bear on her by introducing her to the foundress, Sophie Barat, but in the midst of her struggle and sufferings, in the midst of doubts and uncertainties, as she wept one day in another garden, light dawned. *My name is Magdalen; I wish to be like my patron saint who loved Jesus her Master so truly that she ministered to his wants, and followed him in his travels and his undertakings to the very foot of the Cross. She and the holy women did not, like the Apostles, leave him in his hour of need, and throughout his public life they proved themselves his 'faithful companions'. I want a group of women religious who, with me, will bear the name: Faithful Companions of Jesus.* Victoire had reached her new identity.

Marie Madeleine she had been since baptism, Marie Madeleine she would be now in deed and truth, companioning with Jesus living in those he delights to call his sisters and brothers.

From that point on her struggle was not with herself, but with those who had been her support. Once she realised that her call was to found a Society of women religious, many clerics abandoned her even when they did not actively oppose her and in Rome itself she found enemies at work.



Throughout her life Marie Madeleine had a listening heart for those in trouble; supporting, enabling, empowering. She struggled to be a voice for the voiceless as she had been in Issoudun and in Bourges; a shelter for refugees and émigrés, champion and haven for exploited women and children.

After the sudden death of her husband, Peter, **Phyl** too struggled and prayed to know what God wanted of her.

*I always say God works in strange ways as he guides us on our journey through life.*

*When Peter died I felt like a fish bobbing about in the sea wondering “Why me?” “Why have I been left behind? What does God want me to do?” Gradually three interrelated happenings helped me to see more clearly.*

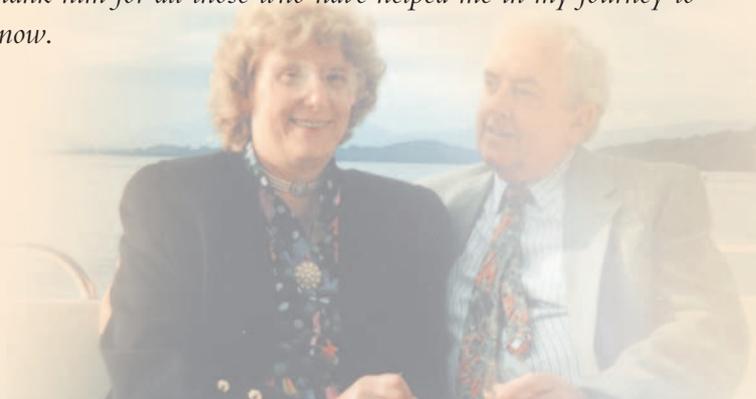
*The first big change in my life was when I joined the Parish Prayer Group and eventually it met in our house. The leader kept saying: ‘Keep putting your roots down deeper, Phyl’ and one day at the end of the prayer meeting, a great friend of Peter and mine, said ‘Phyl, the love you had for Peter you are now sharing among people.’ And I thought: God gave me such a happy and wonderful marriage; he wanted Peter so quickly and now I have to follow my path.*

*Next the prayer group members were invited to attend a retreat at the local Convent. I was very apprehensive as I had never attended anything like that but the parish priest encouraged me. I enjoyed every moment. My director opened so many doors. Now I can turn a gospel reading into a prayer relating it to our own need and bringing it up to the modern day. I thank God for this wonderful experience.*

*After the Retreat I was able to relax and listen to my inner self.*

*Then there were two short courses at the Convent. One on ‘Justice’ and one on ‘Women in the Gospels’. The first more than once mentioned widows and orphans and I felt inspired to help widows. I know at first hand that going through bereavement is hell. So many of my friends have lost their husbands so now I keep in close contact with them. I’m here now to lend a helping hand and to listen to the experiences and feelings and especially help those whose marriages have ended. They need so much comfort and support. The second course helped me to understand women’s place in the Gospel story and I feel I must go out and help women and widows to stand up for themselves in this male dominated world.*

*I thank God for my faith, for my happy marriage and wonderful family; I thank him for the love of the Sacred Heart and for the Blessed Sacrament; I thank him for all those who have helped me in my journey to come to the realisation of what God asks of me now.*



*'For most of history, Anonymous was a woman'*  
(Virginia Woolf)

## Courageous Women

In later life the words '**Courage and Confidence**' were always on Marie Madeleine's lips, a motto she had learned through experience; not only in the face of death and widowhood, of the challenge of bringing up her son alone, but also in the face of opposition and persecution.

Scripture speaks of 'the valiant woman'. Marie Madeleine earned that title and so do countless others in our own time, whose tales of courage and gentle perseverance bear ample witness to their courage and confidence. The cotton pickers and laundresses of Amiens and the women of the mill towns of North West England had a special place in Marie Madeleine's heart. The love was mutual. The stories which follow, honour contemporary women whose cause Marie Madeleine would have made her own, contemporary women whose lives touch those of today's Faithful Companion of Jesus. These stories from Indonesia would have touched her deeply.

## Ibu Yatimin's Story

*(In Indonesia, 'Ibu' sometimes shortened to 'Bu' means 'mother'. It is the correct way to address a married woman or a woman of marriageable age. 'Bapak' or 'Pak', meaning 'father' is the equivalent way of addressing a man.)*

Ibu Yatimin was born on December 20<sup>th</sup> 1960, the youngest of seven children, four girls and three boys. As a young girl she was called Kasinem which means 'love' but since her marriage to Bapak Yatimin she has been known by her husband's name: Yatimin, usually shortened to 'Bu Min'.

Bu Min's childhood home was in a small village outside Yogyakarta where her family made a living growing rice, chillis and sweet potatoes. As soon as she was old enough Kasinem joined the rest of her family working in the fields; she had no opportunity to go to school and therefore is unable to read or write. Her father, the village 'seer' and healer, died when she was seven and her mother two years later.

At the age of fifteen, Ibu Min married Pak Min to whom she had been promised by arrangement between their respective families. Pak Min, also orphaned at a young age, had had to start work as a

child since his family needed money; for him too, school had been out of the question. Straight after their simple Muslim marriage ceremony they moved to Yogyakarta and have lived in the same small rented home ever since, gradually making room for each of their seven children, two girls and five boys. There are just two rooms in the house, few belongings and no electricity, but their children are healthy, united, happy and obedient to Allah and because of this Ibu and Pak Min are filled with contentment.

Pak Min makes a living as a gardener, odd job man and night watchman. Ibu Min supplements the family income by working as a fruit and vegetable seller. Each day she goes to the market, the '*pasar*', to barter for her supply of vegetables, fruit, eggs and 'snacks'. Carrying her goods in a heavy basket on her back she walks around the streets of Yogyakarta selling all she has bought. She never returns home until her basket is empty by which time, most days, she has walked more than 15 km. Each day her hope is that she will recoup her '*modal*', her outlay, plus a small profit. If it's a bad day for selling and she cannot sell all her goods, at least her family can eat what is left so they won't go hungry. Bu Min has been selling from house to house for twenty-five years. Even when pregnant she did not stop work for fear of losing her customers. She worked until a few days before each baby was born and resumed selling within a week of the birth.

Her day begins at 4 a.m. when she gets up to begin cooking the day's food for her family. If Ibu Min manages to have rice with a small amount of vegetable and fish or meat once a day she is satisfied so long as she can feed her family. Her children leave the house to be in time for the start of school at 7 a.m.. Having finished her work at home Bu Min goes to the *pasar* to buy her day's supply of goods. By 2 p.m. she is already on her way to the homes of her regular customers hoping to sell any extra goods she has on the way. Usually she does not get home again until after 11 p.m. by which time the rest of her family are already asleep on the floor in the single bedroom, the girls on a mattress with Bu Min, the boys with Pak Min.

The only thing Ibu Min hopes and prays for is a better life for her children. Despite the fact that neither she nor Pak Min went to school they are determined that all their children will be educated at least to secondary level. Once their elder children leave school they will be able to find work and help to pay for the education of the younger ones. There is no hope of university but at least the parents hope that the children will not have to work as labourers or vegetable sellers.

Ibu Min is satisfied with her life because she knows that she and Pak Min earn enough to feed, clothe and educate their children. They hope eventually to be able to rent a slightly larger house so that their sons and daughters do not have to sleep in the same room. They would like their new home to have electricity. Their own relationship is a good one, they love their children and their

family is a happy one. They are supported by their Muslim faith and their Javanese culture which is deep and beautiful, rich in faith wisdom and gentleness. They derive comfort too from their children who are good natured, obedient and hard working.

With Allah's help, Bu Min expects to keep on selling fruit and vegetables until she is too old to carry her heavy basket around the streets of Yogya. And that, she hopes, will not be before her children no longer need her.

## Ibu Kris' Story

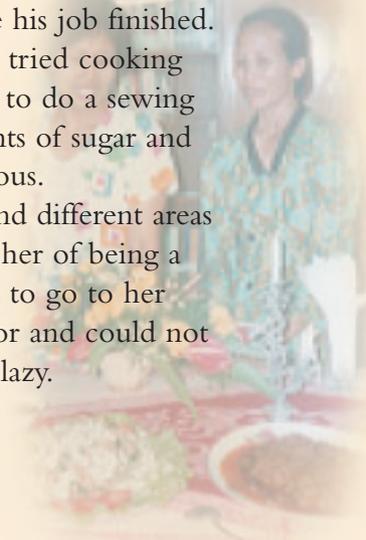
Ibu Kris has not lived with her mother and elder sister since she was three, though all still live in Yogyakarta. Her mother's marriage had been arranged and when Ibu Kris was three years old, her father (Muslim) left her mother (Christian) with two little children. Before and after her marriage the mother had done domestic work but the family for whom she worked went back to Holland and she was left, abandoned and penniless with two small children.

Ibu Kris was sent to her mother's younger sister in Bantul (near Yogya) and there she was brought up with her cousins. From time to time, she was taken to Yogya for a visit, but has never been close to her sister. Now Ibu's mother lives with the elder daughter and occasionally comes over to Condongcatur but never stays the night.

Ibu Kris, has never complained, never objected, never questioned – just got on with being amenable and doing what others told her to do. This is the result of her upbringing when she was always told 'not to be trouble or burden to anyone.'

She worked for a while and when she was twenty her mother and aunt decided that she should get married and it was arranged that Ibu should marry a Christian, a man of forty-five who worked for a transport company. They had very little money, and not long after the marriage his job finished. In a short space of time she had two children and struggled to make ends meet. She tried cooking small amounts of food to sell, but that was not a success. Then she borrowed money to do a sewing course and sewed from home, but that too failed. Next she tried selling small amounts of sugar and cooking oil from home. The pressure of trying to get enough to survive was enormous.

Her children had by now left school, but did not have jobs. Ibu Kris walked around different areas each day looking for work – to the extent that the security guards began to suspect her of being a thief and she would have to show them her identity card. Sometimes she was forced to go to her sister for help. The sister, by now well-placed, would scoff at her, tell her she was poor and could not manage her money, that her children did not have jobs because they were poor and lazy.



Then a local market opened up at Condongcatur so Ibu thought that there would be a chance to hire a small stall there and sell items of food. She sold her treadle sewing machine in order to buy the right to sit in the market and sell. But Ibu herself admits that she was not at all an astute business woman, and had been utterly naïve in thinking she could easily get back the small initial investment which she had borrowed. The enterprise failed and she had one more reason to think herself a failure. Back on to the streets to look for work!

During this time, Ibu felt very far from the God whom she saw as having abandoned her. She felt so aware of her poverty and struggle that she could not face going to church or meeting with the other churchwomen who seemed to have their lives together. Her poverty was exacerbated by the coldness of others. She was a timid, frightened person with no self-confidence. She saw herself as of no value or use, only a burden. She could not bring herself to speak to anyone, to sit at table or even take a drink with any of the community. Her own refrain was ‘*aku seorang miskin*’ (I’m a poor person.)

One day in her daily rounds she met Sisters who were moved by this frightened woman, crying, shaking, asking for work. Ibu never asked for a handout, but for work. They found a couple of hours work for her each day. Daily at first and then each week she took home her small amount of money as well as enough rice and sugar for the week and any fruit there might be in the garden. Then her husband died quite suddenly and there were many problems with regard to his tiny pension but the Sisters helped Ibu secure her rights.

Gradually Ibu’s self-confidence has grown and she has stopped crushing herself to the wall when people pass. There is a lightness in her step and voice. The Sisters community have been able to give her more work, her children have got jobs. She experiences security, acceptance, dignity and fun!

## Lola, from Argentina, tells her own story

*I left school at nine years old to go out to work as a domestic help. My family lived in La Banda but I was sent first, to Tucuman (a city 200 km. from La Banda) where the family treated me very well. Later when I was twelve, I was sent to Buenos Aires where I stayed with a cousin and worked as a domestic servant till I was eighteen. Then I got work in La Banda.*

*I met my husband and after a time was pregnant. We always had problems, especially because of jealousy and drink. A friend eventually suggested that we should start going to Church so we did. This coincided with the death of my husband’s thirteen-year old niece whom he loved very much and whose death caused him to go into a depression. Things improved when we each made our First Communion, then, after thirteen years of living together we got married.*

*For about two years, we lived in harmony, but then the problems re-emerged. By this time we had eight children. One day, two of the children went to play near a factory and Eric, who was six, fell into a mound of activated carbon left outside the limits of the factory ground. He was severely burned. There followed a time of terrible distress because I was five months in Córdoba with my son and the smallest baby, the ninth, fearing that my son might die because his legs were very infected, and thinking all the time of the others who were in La Banda. My husband sent messages to Córdoba, blaming me for our problems, and suggesting that I was simply wasting time sitting beside my son and leaving the other children.*

*When we returned to La Banda, the problems continued to the point that I decided to separate from him. We were three months apart then I went to Buenos Aires so that my son could have another kind of treatment. When we returned to La Banda, my husband begged me to return to him and promised everything would change. I agreed and thank God we have not had problems; it is so different to live in peace and without the problems that we had before. I was soon pregnant with my tenth child.*

*At last, my husband has a permanent job, which is a great joy for us, and we now have another child, who is called Margarita.*

*I thank God for the tranquillity that we now have. I know that we have to continue to struggle for our son - he still needs other operations, but things are very different now.*

## *Charlene too has struggled for personal growth and dignity*

*I was born in Lopez Jaena Town, near Ozamis City, in Mizamis Occidental, (Philippines), August 12<sup>th</sup> 1961, the eldest of ten children. We had a little land: a one hectare rice field which gave three crops a year, and my mother had a share in her father's land, where we had coconut trees and grew maize and sweet potato. We all had our jobs: cleaning the house, washing, cooking. I was usually assigned to the fieldwork. Each morning at 4.30 I used to take our three carabaos (water buffalo) to pasture them, before they began their work of ploughing. Then again in the evening. It took about an hour or an hour and a half for them to be satisfied. From Monday to Friday I went to school, and on Saturday and Sunday I did farm work. Our school hours were 7 - 11.30 and 1 - 4.30. I didn't know what tiredness was – when my father came home and said he was tired out, I didn't know what that was. I didn't experience it. A bit of rest, my sweat dried, okay, I can keep going.*

*We ate together. We were taught not to waste anything. My father said that if we wasted even one grain of rice our harvest would be lesser by one sack, but if we were careful, God would bless us with more harvest.*

*We were many – every two years we had another child. When mama told me I could not enrol for third year high school, so that a younger one could go to school, I was afraid to answer back. I said, “Yes.” But I was crying in the field.*

*One of my friends told the parish priest who offered me work in his office, preparing the lists for wedding and baptismal registrations. I learned to type with one finger. Sometimes I did all my typing on Friday evening so that I could be in the rice field at the weekend. If I was needed in the office on Saturday, I would sacrifice one school day to work in the field. I did my school projects at night. We did a lot of practical arts: I made a basket of string, a brush from twigs, a tray, a bedcover quilt, hand embroidery; I learned to crochet. I completed third and fourth years and graduated from high school.*

*Sometimes I had to stay off school to help with the harvest. The school made allowances – they understood my situation. I used to cry when I thought of my inability to study, when I thought of what I had lost because we had so many brothers and sisters.*

*Morning snack cost 15 centavos and we took rice and salted fish, wrapped in banana leaf for our lunch. Sometimes we ate sugar cane for our snack and took some to school to sell to other children or to exchange for paper or pencil. We also sold bananas, guavas and root crops.*

*I begged my parents not to arrange a marriage for me but to let me go to my aunt in Manila and study. I had saved 60 pesos from my morning snack money, for my studies. The boat to Manila was 270 pesos. My aunt was a teacher. I wanted to be a teacher.*

*In Manila I worked as a house helper with my aunt doing cleaning and childcare. I went to night school at Roosevelt College, to do Commerce. Then the tuition fee increased. By then one of my aunt's children, May, was doing fourth year in Fine Arts in the University of Santo Tomas, and another, Joy, was in fourth year high school. They could not afford all these fees, so I stayed back and became a full time unpaid house helper for them. I understood the situation. They were willing to send me home, but I didn't want to go home, so I decided to stay with them. We are still in touch; even now they send me used clothes and gifts of rice, sugar, coffee and milk. I'm very happy when they do! My daughter, Catherine, remarks how easily I am made happy by a little thing.*

*When I was 23 I took a husband. He was a houseboy nearby. If he was free he accompanied me to the market. He would carry the rice or gas for me. We didn't marry at first, in case we had problems. I didn't want him to work far away. Then Joseph and Catherine were born with only a year apart. So, I decided to take family planning advice. I knew that if I had a baby every year they wouldn't be able to study. Yes, it's nice to have many to help in the house, but I could not let them study.*

*For five years we lived in Marikina, Quezon City. Then in 1987 we went home but my husband did not know how to farm, so in 1988 we came back to Marikina and then to Payatas. The dumpsite was very small then. The Manila Continental Hotel and another hotel dropped their garbage near us. There were things we*

*could sell like towels and spoons, and lots of pig food. Even bottles brought a few centavos. I still get all my clothes from the dump, take them home and wash them. When my husband had no work I took him to the dumpsite too.*

*But when my children began to study, I was not so content. We had many expenses. The cost of rice went up every six months; jeepneys were expensive so we rode the dump trucks to go out of Payatas. Joseph found an earring and sold it for 600 pesos. He bought rice for us, pants for Catherine, a T-shirt and rubber slippers for himself. I took a government sponsored sewing course in Taguig. We kept some pigs, but the dump slid and three houses were buried. Some people lost everything except the clothes they stood up in. No one was killed but after that everyone's pigs got sick and died. One of mine survived and with that and some borrowing I bought a sewing machine. Now I have two pigs again. I always remember my father's words: "Be content with what God gives you. If you waste, it will be less, but if you take care of it God will give you more."*

*I still scavenge some nights for a livelihood, and I do sewing jobs. The Sisters employ me two days a week to help to follow up the vocational and high school scholars and to be a liaison.*



# Women at the foot of the Cross.

Marie Madeleine believed that the foot of the Cross would be the rallying point of her companions. **Joanna and Marie** most truly are faithful companions to their Inuit people.

*There stood at the foot of the Cross, his mother...*

*(John 19:25)*

It was February 25<sup>th</sup>, 1997 when Eric, then 22 went with a slightly older friend, David, from Hall Beach, to hunt caribou over the weekend. Eric's Mom, **Joanna**, was in Iqaluit when they left. They did not return on the 27<sup>th</sup> as expected. Joanna arrived back knowing that her son was somewhere out there 'on the land' and worried that he had worn only southern-made winter boots.

As each day went by anxiety increased. Then a massive search and rescue effort on the part of the community got into gear with 20 snowmobiles taking part and search planes used on 3 days. No one can imagine the pain of that vigil or the urgency of the prayer as each short span of daylight faded and there was still no news. Peter, a hunter himself, was not allowed to be part of the search, and stayed numb and more helpless as each day passed. Day after weary, anxiety-filled day ended so quickly and so fruitlessly. When dusk lowered on the 6th, her friends sensed that Joanna had lost hope of her son being found alive. She later admitted that she had surrendered him to God. It was now simply beyond hope that they could have survived in that bitter cold with the little equipment they had.

When they were mercifully found still alive in the early evening of the 7th, the relief and the gratitude were almost too much to bear. This was simply miraculous. They were kept in camp with the rescuers that night. The plane went to get them next day. David has had to have some toes amputated, but Eric, though having frost-bitten feet, intense pain, and being unable to walk for over a week, was able to keep his feet intact.

All the anxiety of a mother's concern was part of Joanna's agonizing experience. Mary, too, surrendered her son, Jesus, to death and to God's care.

Can anyone but a mother know the depths of this agony?

## *They came with spices to anoint the body...*

*(Mark 16:1)*

For years, when someone in Igloolik village is dying, **Marie**, mother of ten plus five adopted children, is there in attendance, doing what has to be done and being totally supportive for the sick person and for the family. They don't have funeral parlours up there so local people have to see to the washing and care of the body after a person has died. Following the death of a mother in her 40's after a lengthy bout of cancer in Hall Beach, Marie assisted the nurse in washing and preparing the body. They were in a hurry and did not have time to get the usual rubber gloves. It was difficult and nauseous work. The following day Marie's fingers were swollen with infection. For months, now, this infection has come and gone, in spite of treatment. Marie takes such repercussions in her stride.

A few weeks later a young man of Igloolik shot himself. The police took the body immediately to their garage. The mayor informed Marie that a member of the deceased's family wanted to see the body, and asked if she would see to making it presentable. Of course the body was frozen and would have to be thawed. Marie had never worked on a body in this state. After considerable difficulty she found another woman to help her. The work proved to be extremely difficult because of the condition of the body. They worked for many hours and had to take breaks as nausea overcame them. Yet they were willing to do this so that the family member could say a final farewell, the body clean, respectfully dressed with the wound discretely covered.

When all was done and they made the fact known, they were told that the person no longer wanted to see the body. It was a disappointment, but Marie's work is done out of respect and reverence.

It is such a tribute to her that when such difficult things are required, she is willing to put her own needs aside and be there for others, and that in a consistent way over the years. She is truly like Mary Magdalen and the other holy women who went to the tomb with their spices and oils to anoint the body of Jesus.

No astrology  
Is needed by me, I feel faith  
In such wise being, life and power  
(Elizabeth Jennings)

## Women of Faith; Discerning Women

Victoire was well aware of a tension between her call and her own desires and the older Marie Madeleine, whose life's journey as we have seen was far from straightforward, would well understand **Kelly's question: Am I following some curvy path God has made for me?**

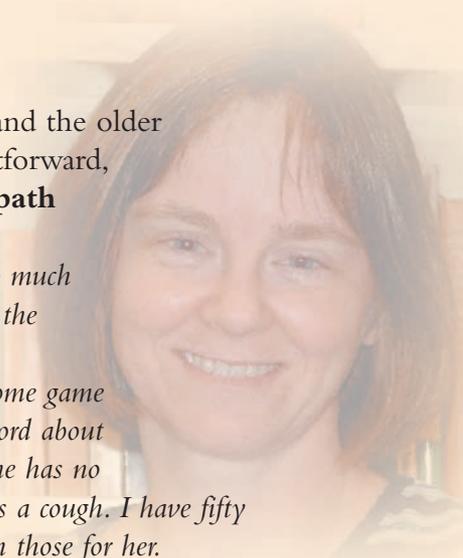
*I'm not sure I can write a story, because that implies a narrative order and I'm too much in the middle of it all to be able to give a clear plot line. So I'll just have to start in the middle of things.*

*Maria is vacuuming the living room because the kids left it in a mess last night, some game they were playing that involved shredding napkins. I'm waiting to hear from a landlord about an apartment she might get as well as from the co-signer she'll have to have, since she has no rental history or social security number or employment that we can list. Her baby has a cough. I have fifty dollars worth of checks for her in my pocket, earned by making tamales, so I can cash those for her.*

*Paula and Kurt are coming over today because we have no more room here but Claudia and Marthe have got to get out of the apartment where they've been staying with friends. The landlord says there are too many people in the apartment. Maybe they can stay with Paula and Kurt a while.*

*One of the kids asked me over breakfast how much it would cost to send his sister to reform school. His mom had left for her factory job at 5.30a.m. and I'm not sure she's able to keep up with the kids these days. I need to have an eye on them.*

*So how did I end up starting a Catholic Worker house of hospitality in St. Paul, Minnesota? I had decided, joyfully and after a lot of prayer that I was called to work in my home diocese, Knoxville, and I was looking for a way to combine my love of the Catholic Worker with my academic work in theology. When I finished my qualifying exams and was ready to start writing my dissertation, I had my sights set on Knoxville. But then an acquaintance called from St Paul, asking if I would come to teach part-time at the University of St. Thomas and help start a Catholic Worker in a Spanish-speaking neighbourhood.*



*I was devastated by the request. It was, undoubtedly, exactly the kind of work I wanted to do, but in completely the wrong place. I had felt certain that my desire to work in Tennessee was God-given, but the invitation to work in St Paul was so unusual and well-suited to my very odd interests that I read it as a call away from my natural desire for family and home.*

*The decision was very painful, and I cannot say I have ever felt at peace about it. I moved to St. Paul, and I have continued to worry that although I'm doing good work here, my first obligation is to my family in Tennessee, where my mother is carrying a heavy burden caring for my uncle, who has cancer, and my grandmother who is 94. So, having slowly gotten a house of hospitality off the ground here in St. Paul, I'm handing it over to other people and returning to Tennessee, without any clear career plan there.*

*Am I following some curvy path God has made for me, or did I move here because I mistakenly thought God would demand of me the sacrifice of my favorite dream? I cannot say. And it doesn't matter. All I can do is search my conscience, confess my sins, do penance and go on. I take great comfort in the church's faith that Adam's was a "happy fault;" that where sin abounds, grace abounds the more. I don't have to fear that I'm not on the "right" road. Thanks be to God, they can all be made right roads by the one who is the Way.*

In an age when it was not usual for women to be involved in business matters, Marie Madeleine Victoire was landowner in her own right and trustee of her son's inheritance. Writing to the Romans St. Paul places 'administration' among the gifts to be used for the building up of the whole Body. Its recipients can experience tension.

## Clare Ann's Story

Clare Ann is a woman of striking appearance; her height, her ready smile, her almost tangible spirit make her the kind of person people notice when she enters a room. Particularly in Yogyakarta where Clare Ann is currently based as Program Director for Mennonite Central Committee, Indonesia, she stands head and shoulders above the local people who naturally tend to be of small stature. To know something of Clare Ann's story is to meet a woman who also "stands out" as a person of deep faith and strong conviction. It has been her life's work to develop her relationship with God in ministering to others, both individually and as part of a dynamic spiritual partnership with Duane, her husband.

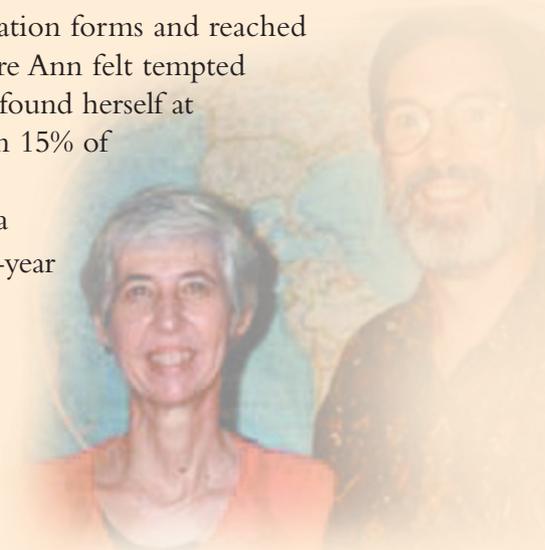
Originating from Fresno, California, USA, Clare Ann is from a Mennonite family deeply rooted in their faith and practice, of which one notable feature is their pacifism and their proactive attitude to peacemaking. Even as a child Clare Ann was aware of the stirrings of a missionary spirit within her. In Church they were often encouraged to serve Christ as missionaries and the fact that one of her aunts was a missionary in India meant that she grew up in an atmosphere that encouraged the idea of being “on mission”.

Clare Ann’s first degree was at Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas, where she majored in English. During this time she expressed the adventurous peacemaker within by spending some time on a Kibbutz in Israel, just one week after the end of the Six Days’ War. At University, Clare Ann met Duane her future husband. He, a Methodist, was from a military family and, at that point, a member of the Armed Forces. Eventually Duane became a Mennonite and a pacifist.

During the early years of their marriage Clare Ann considers that she and Duane lived at the level of a “spiritual plateau”. The sudden deaths of several of their close relatives and of six significant members of their Church within the space of a few weeks led them both through experiences of struggle to a new and deeper awareness of the God who was present and active in their lives. They started to cultivate their prayer lives more seriously, using books on contemplative prayer to help them. One afternoon each week they would go to a cottage out of town and spend the time in prayer and spiritual reading. They signed up for a class in the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary: “Prophets 2” and would spend several hours, two mornings each week, absorbed by the words of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel before speeding home in time for work.

The following semester, Clare Ann, as much to her surprise as anyone else’s, decided that rather than study in a protracted, piecemeal manner she would go for the “whole package” – a full time Master’s Degree from Brethren Biblical Seminary, Fresno. By this time Clare Ann and Duane had the added responsibility of a three-year-old son. As she filled in the application forms and reached the point where she was required to say why she wished to study Clare Ann felt tempted to write, “*I don’t know - in order to find out my calling*”. So it was that she found herself at the seminary studying alongside other women who constituted less than 15% of the total student population. Initially, she focused her study on Pastoral Counselling, thinking that this was the most practical choice for her as a woman. She would go on to become only the 6<sup>th</sup> woman in the thirty-year history of the seminary to obtain the degree of Master of Divinity.

Increasingly during her first year of study, Clare Ann began to be aware of a growing discomfort and sense of exclusion when so many



lecturers prefaced their input with the phrase: “When you are in ministry... when you are a pastor...” Half way through her second year Clare Ann knew that she was being called to be a minister. The driving spiritual impulse she had felt since her adolescence finally focused into a clear conviction and sense of vocation. She transferred from majoring in Pastoral Counselling to Pastoral Ministry. Following her graduation she served as Associate Pastor of a congregation and was ordained. About ten percent of ordained Mennonite pastors are women.

Duane, meanwhile, had similarly discerned a call to the ministry. In the year it took to close his law-firm he found a place at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary and Clare Ann was appointed Associate Pastor in a nearby church. Each of their decisions was thoroughly “tested” in prayer before they acted upon it. Since the early years of their marriage both Clare Ann and Duane had recognized the importance of promoting the growth of a contemplative prayer life and of nurturing their relationships with God. Subsequently, their service in ministry was constantly underpinned and supported by an ever-deepening spirituality.

Following Duane’s graduation from seminary, Elkhart, Indiana, they returned to California where they jointly began and ran a new church. It quickly became obvious that Clare Ann and Duane had a ministry not only to Mennonites but also to the unchurched and to those who felt marginalized by their own church because of marital difficulties and/or lifestyle. Whenever they could they tried to bring about reconciliation between individuals and their own faith communities.

After some years Clare Ann was appointed Conference Minister by Pacific Southwest Mennonite Conference. Though a part-time post, this is an administrative and pastoral position equivalent to that of a bishop in other denominations. At the same time as fulfilling this ministry Clare Ann felt a strong pull to work in the field of spirituality. She followed a Spiritual Guidance Programme and began to work as a spiritual director. A woman of enormous reserves of energy who desired to stay in active ministry, she continued to work as a pastor in church whilst at the same time teaching courses on spirituality in the seminary and studying for her Doctor of Divinity.

Some time later, having completed her Doctorate, Clare Ann found herself looking for additional opportunities for ministry in order to capitalize on the extra time once more available to her. She was aware of becoming increasingly less satisfied with her role as Conference Minister. Undoubtedly, her administrative role was of value but she found herself strongly drawn back to full time ministry. Clare Ann’s sense that it was time to look for new fields of mission was echoed by Duane and they entered into an extended period of discernment.

Initially it appeared to be God’s will that they remain in California, a culturally diverse field of mission. Clare Ann had been asked to think about accepting an appointment in an emerging

Methodist Church. As is their usual practice Clare Ann and Duane took time to pray and discern God's will in the decision. Subsequent events clearly revealed to them the course of their next few years. Early in 1999 they received news of a double appointment. Clare Ann was asked to take on pastoral responsibility for all Mennonite expatriate personnel in Indonesia and additionally to take on the role of Programme Director for Indonesia on behalf of Mennonite Central Committee (the relief and development agency of the North American Mennonite churches). Duane meanwhile was invited to develop and administer a peace centre at Duta Wacana Christian University, Yogyakarta. It was intended that Duta Wacana would become the base from which Duane, or others he had trained, would travel to different parts of Indonesia and work with local populations both in dealing with conflict and in the active promotion of peace and reconciliation. After a weekend of serious deliberation both Clare Ann and Duane felt that they were being called to Indonesia. Within a month of relaying their decision to Mennonite Central Committee they were on an orientation course and preparing to leave the USA.

Clare Ann and Duane are now settled into their new posts. Clare Ann is face to face with the ever-challenging will of God. She still longs to return to full time pastoral work and instead finds herself with an even greater administrative load! Currently, she has responsibility for the programme of Mennonite Central Committee in Indonesia, for relating to more than 80,000 Indonesian Mennonites, for all expatriate Mennonite "field workers" and their families and for Indonesian/North American Relations within the Mennonite Communion. She is learning to be satisfied with ministering to those who minister. Duane divides his time between administering the Centre for Peace and Development and his work as a proactive "peacemaker" which takes him continually to the "trouble spots" of Indonesia in search of peaceful solutions to situations of conflict.

Clare Ann and Duane, in their own quiet way, make a formidable team. In a discussion on the nature of Mennonite pacifism Duane once said: "Mennonites give feet to the work of peace. They live their faith on a daily basis." One would be justified in saying that Clare Ann and Duane "give feet" and daily witness to the Gospel. Truly people of prayer and discernment, individually and in partnership, they live as ministers of the Gospel of Peace with courage and imagination.

Clare Ann manages to find a sense of balance between the various elements that constitute her life as a woman of prayer in relationship with God: wife; mother; ordained minister; academic. Her life is not without sacrifice and pain; she has had to struggle and work hard. As an individual impelled by the desire to give her life to God in service of others Clare Ann is an exemplar of a woman on mission in her daily expression of strong, determined, practical love.

# Mary's Story

All her life, Victoire believed in the influence of one generation on another. She had experienced it herself and she saw it in the lives of others. **Mary** too is living witness to it. A Romanian, she grew up under Ceacescu and when asked to say something of how God has been at work in her life, spontaneously began:

*First, I think I should tell you about my Grandmother, because God started to work through her in me. She was a kind, loving person, who helped me to discover God in my early childhood. With her sweet voice, she used to tell her Grandchildren about the Son of God. We, the grandchildren, used to listen to her carefully and go with her to Church. The years passed. I grew up and I don't know how my relationship with God grew colder, being reduced to a belief in His existence. Even now I can't explain what exactly happened and the causes of this estrangement. I only recall the sadness I caused my Grandmother.*

*My parents didn't react in any way to my estrangement from God. They were 'lukewarm' too. Maybe they had good reason. As the manager of a big factory, my father was not allowed to enter a Church. I remember how our neighbours and acquaintances were often interrogated about my parents' doings.*

*Still my Grandmother went on taking part in Masses. Her relationship with God was close and profound. I have always admired her for her great faith, which remained unshakeable in spite of all the sufferings she had during her life. She continually prayed for each member of the family, for friends, people known and unknown to her. Perhaps her prayer has helped us through life. As for me, I know it has been the reason for my return to God.*

*I was of a rebellious nature, wanting everything; to be successful in my chosen profession; to be admired and envied by all around me. Even when all this was happening, I was not happy. Something was missing. I didn't know what and I didn't have the courage to ask anybody.*

*Then came the 1989 Revolution and with it the much desired Freedom. Obviously, every one understands Freedom in his/her own way. For me, the year 1989 was the beginning of a real search. I began searching in Asian teachings for what, I knew not, but what I most needed; the idea that we could be human beings, yet 'divine' in some mysterious way, because invested with supernatural powers; or again that there could exist a 'field of information' to which we attributed the name God. Many philosophies, I dismissed them one after the other.*

*However, God, in His great love, enlightened me. It happened as if in a 'flash'. I lowered my eyes to look at my Grandmother and I understood.*

*I felt bad about the time I had wasted and I promised to make up for it. I can now say that God is my closest friend. Even if I disappoint Him many times, He forgives me and loves me just as I am. How can I describe my relationship with God in just a few words? For me He is as it were a Diamond with many sparkling facets. Each day He reveals something new; something more and more radiant, more beautiful. As for me? I am as a child before Him, waiting with impatience to see yet another countenance of God.*

*Does the road wind uphill all the way?  
Yes, to the very end.  
Will the day's journey take the whole long day?  
From morn to night, my friend  
(Christina Rossetti)*

## Spiritual Journey

**Hélène** is a compatriot of Victoire; like her she appreciates family, faith, and spiritual guidance. Like her, she sings the praises of God!

*Yes it is good to sing the wonders of God, to praise the Lord!*

*I shall never finish thanking God my Father for his goodness. He had made me live again, that real life which has its source in the Heart of Jesus.*

*My story is simple. It begins when my parents passed life on to me. And God, from my conception, has given me a soul with a great taste for the spiritual rather than the material. My parents with their kindly, loving view left my garden to grow as it had been planted. They feared to destroy it. However at my birth I also inherited sin.*

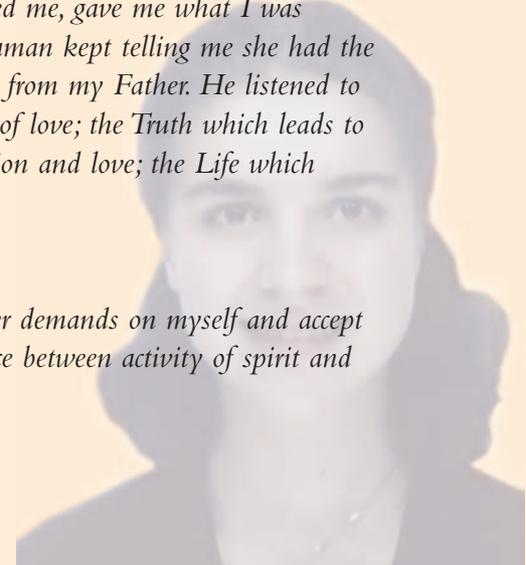
*I received a profoundly Christian education and whilst I was still quite small Maman explained to me the meaning of suffering. But in adolescence I wanted to discover a great love, true and strong. My friendships from childhood were passionate. Each time it was a real love story but I was always waiting for more than could be given me. So at the age of 17, the Lord allowed that scruples troubled me. I entered into self-analysis, I explored my being wounded by passionate friendships where I always wanted more.*

*Maman was my refuge; I was totally dependant on her. She reassured me, loved me, gave me what I was looking for from my friends. One day, when I was on the edge of depression, Maman kept telling me she had the phone number of a priest who could help. I accepted. And this father is a present from my Father. He listened to me, loved me, forgave me. He has shown me the Way which leads to the Source of love; the Truth which leads to self-knowledge but in God, in the beautiful mirror which reflects divine compassion and love; the Life which leads to the living of new life in the simplicity of love.*

*This healing has been progressive.*

*My spiritual father prescribed many medicines along the way.*

*He recommended the Vittoz method of relaxation which helped me make fewer demands on myself and accept the present moment as a gift from God. What a wonderful discovery! The balance between activity of spirit and of body has become clear to me. It makes things simple for me!*



*In Père Delbée's book, 'Croire à l'amour,' I discovered the love which I was seeking, the unique, the true; a love without limits, so much more faithful than mine! In 'The Wisdom of a Poor Man' by Eloi Lecler, the little phrase which my spiritual father uses is repeated: Love your poverty. In accepting my 'littleness' (the phrase of St Thérèse of the Infant Jesus), I am discovering the infinite mercy of the Father and the loving dependence between the Father and his well beloved daughter.*

*My spiritual director has also shown me how praise, present in each instant of my life, is necessary to keep me in touch with the presence of God within me, to help me unceasingly see and appreciate the signs of his love. And prayer is indispensable if one is to hear and welcome Love, to drink at the source, the Water of Life, my strength! Jesus makes himself truly present in silence, when the heart is totally disposed to listen to him, to contemplate him! From now on the sacraments are indispensable to my life .*

*And from all this healing is born the desire to witness by letting the Holy Spirit work. And being poor to the end of my earthly life, I wish to renew this conversion of heart each day with the help of my heavenly mother through the rosary, the prayer of the poor.*

*What joy to live this new life 'in the simplicity of Love.'*

## Sylvie's Story

Marie Madeleine begins her Memoirs by declaring that *the foundation of the Society was God's doing, who by means of a long chain of events finally made known his will.* As she records the events leading to the foundation she comments: *I give these details, dear Sisters, in order to show you that I have counted for nothing in the foundation of the Society and to let you see how God in his goodness did everything himself.*

Another 'journey' is that of **Sylvie Cochin**. Her life bears witness to Marie Madeleine's saying: *Le Bon Dieu a tout conduit Lui-même.*

Sylvie was born at Lille, in 1958, of a strong Christian family . She studied classics and then her artistic tastes directed her to the Faculty of the History of Art at Fleurs, then to the Ecole du Louvre. She came to Paris without the approval of her parents who from then on did not support her financially. To pay for her studies and learn languages, she became a model at the age of 20.

At 21 she became assistant press attaché, then press attaché and personal assistant to the grandson of Marcel Dassault, a position which involved much travelling for the next two years. Life smiled on Sylvie but she came to realise that up to then, she had lived much for herself and very little for others. Her life was going to change.

In 1982, at the age of 23, she married Augustin Cochin, chemist and physicist, the direct descendant of the only brother of Abbé Cochin, who founded the Paris hospital which bears his name, to receive and care for the poor. As the wife of Augustin, the eldest son of the Cochins, Sylvie received the title 'Vice-présidente de Dames pour l'Oeuvre des Jeunes Infirmes de St Jean de Dieu'. She had done nothing to gain this title: God had done it, she says.

This new office put her in touch with young people, aged 4 - 18, affected by genetic illnesses. From 1985 to 1988, Sylvie decided to devote one afternoon a week to visiting the sick at the Hôpital Necker. This apostolate answered her growing desire to serve God.

1988 marked another turning point in the life of this woman, happy and fulfilled in her husband, her children, her family and her friends. On 4 May she went to the Cochin Hospital for an emergency operation. While she was being wheeled down the corridors to the surgical block her gaze fell on the bust of the illustrious Abbé Cochin. She took this 'meeting' as an invitation to which she was not then able to give a response.

After her operation, she received a visit from the chaplain, Père Francois Coudurier, who asked her to explain the links between Abbé Cochin and herself. Spontaneously, he invited Sylvie onto his chaplaincy team. This was for her the way to respond to the invitation she had received a few days earlier!

After convalescence she gave up her visits to the Hôpital Necker so as to give herself to the Cochin chaplaincy. Père Francois sends her to the intensive care unit; there she meets cancer patients and AIDS patients and marvels at the spiritual journey of some of those she lovingly accompanies.

Sylvie is eager to catechise not only her own children but other youngsters too. For over ten years now she has been a Catechist, and it is a great joy for her to be able to lead a class of children to discover the love with which God loves them.

In October 1989, she met Denise, a patient at Cochin and continued to meet her each week after Denise had left hospital. She was for Sylvie a great example. Suffering from a chronic and developing illness, she had had 57 operations in 54 years. Her condition was difficult in every way because she was beyond medical help and had lost her independence; she was excluded from society and surrounded by sicknesses. Sylvie accompanied her during long years of struggle, growing with her in the understanding of Scripture so that Denise offered her sufferings with joy for the Communion of Saints. She lived as best she could after the example of St Paul: *I make up in my flesh what is wanting in the sufferings of Christ for his Body which is the Church.* Without ever rebelling, Denise suffered for Christ each day until her death, 18 August 1997.

At the Hôpital Cochin, Sylvie found Jean-Pierre, an AIDS sufferer whom she took into her own home. After a year he found work. Similarly with the help of her husband, she helped Jean-Michel. Off the streets and away from alcohol since 1993, now 40 years old, he has rediscovered his dignity, always thanking God for his life.

In 1996 homelessness increased in Paris. Sylvie was for a time the day receptionist at the St Vincent de Paul centre for homeless persons. A small team of volunteers welcomed people for a meal and followed up each one so as to be responsible for their health and their accommodation. Sylvie has not been able to keep up this time consuming work because she has been chosen 'Présidente du Comité de Dames pour l'Oeuvre des Jeunes Infirmes de St Jean de Dieu'. She devotes a great part of her life to that task.

Another to whom she devotes herself, is Hassan, a Moroccan of Berbere origin. Born in a very poor village in the Atlas Mountains, he is the youngest of seven children. At the age of four, he began to show signs of weakness. At seven he could no longer walk alone. His father learnt that he was suffering from muscular disorder. A fervent Muslim, a widower, he decided to seek treatment for his son in France.

Having entrusted his other children to his married brothers and sisters in Morocco, he came to Paris with Hassan, then 8 years old. The Brothers of St John of God received him and, exceptionally, kept him until he was over 18. Sylvie met him when he was 14, and felt that through Hassan, God was asking something more of her. With the full agreement of her husband, her children and Hassan's father, she decided to adopt him. It was a long and difficult legal process but eventually the Tribunal of Paris recognized the definitive adoption of Hassan on 21 September 1994. He was then 25 years of age, Sylvie 36. From then on she spoke of her 'three children' the eldest of whom was only 11 years younger than herself!

Since 1999, Sylvie Cochin has been 'Administrateur du Comité de gestion et d'administration du centre St Jean de Dieu' with all the responsibility which this involves. She organises the annual Fête, the aim of which is to publicise the wonderful work of the Brothers and to raise enough money to give the 175 young patients two days of pleasure as well as to provide funds for the treatment of those young people who are admitted free of charge.

Sylvie is calm and serene, knowing that God guides her in every way. She commends herself to Him to guide her life as he wishes. It seems that Sylvie Cochin has made her own that motto of Marie Madeleine: ***Le Bon Dieu a tout conduit Lui même.***

*Lord take my soul, but the struggle continues*

*(Ken Saro-Wiwa; last words before he was hanged 1995)*

## Struggle with the official church

### **Teresa's Story**

Theological reflection on lived experience was integral to Marie Madeleine's spirituality. **Teresa** here shares an experience and her subsequent reflection

*I have just come from teaching a class on 'Feminist Theology from the Third World,' where a student asked me whether there was Spirit-sustained communion outside of the church. My response came in the form of a testimony: my deep sense of being joined in solidarity and struggle with women all over the world who are committed to diverse women's flourishing. How could God not smile on such a communion of women? How could God's living Spirit not move among us?*

*I say this as a woman who has lived through experiences of fragmentation as well as communion in her church. As the first woman ever to do a post-doctoral degree in Liturgical Studies, I struggled with my church for several years to obtain the right to teach my beloved subject. After seven appointments to different Catholic theological Faculties in Europe, two Vatican refusals of the nihil obstat (that is, the official permission to teach), and the loss of my legal recourse to the highest Vatican court, I finally had to accept that I was not going to be admitted into the communion of those who taught liturgy any time soon.*

*Against this background, I believe that my mother named me wisely after St Teresa of Avila, the first (official) woman 'doctor', that is teacher, of the Church. I just hope that I don't have to wait 400 years, as Teresa of Avila did, for that official recognition of her teaching. But while waiting, I will continue to rejoice and celebrate my communion with all women worldwide struggling for women's rights.*

*And I will cherish the image of God struggling on our side.*

## Mary Magdalen

### **Annie's Story**

Marie Madeleine related to Mary Magdalen as companion and apostle of Jesus. **Annie** too relates to the same saint but from a different perspective.

The anguish of uncertainty, of struggling to find and follow what one believes to be one's personal vocation within the church is known today by many women. **Annie** is an icon painter whose struggle, like Marie Madeleine's, is reflected in her Journal, as she looks at the work she is doing.

*As for the mouths they were shut, but I feel the need for them to be open and screaming, but that's not what they are. They are both firmly closed, in fact they do not have mouths at all.*

*I do not have a voice!*

*Passion: an experience of poverty, powerlessness, injustice and oppression. In Gethsemane Jesus wanted to escape the cross, does my clay figure reflect a desire to escape the pain of working for the church? Does my second Christ "too smooth, not broken enough" reflect how I would prefer things to be for myself and even for Christ?*

*Am I struggling with an experience of my own powerlessness brought about by leaders in the church, a church to which I am committed?*

*I stand in the tomb while this goes on and decisions are made about my future and the future of what is very important to me... I stand in the tomb and wait knowing there is nothing I can do. I cannot determine the future.*

*The icon of the Bridegroom is where I am finding my spiritual nourishment these days.*

*St Augustine: Do not let my darkness speak to me!*

**FIDELITY OR TREASON?**

*Mary Magdalen did not abandon her search for him whom she had not found; and as she searched she wept, and the fire of her love re-kindled her ardent desire for her lost Lord. If she was the only one to see him then it is because she had persevered in seeking him. For perseverance lends strength to every good action.*

*Lord, let you Spirit permeate my living so that a life energy can be found for mission.*

When, in her dealings with Father Varin, Victoire found herself weeping copiously she would have understood why Annie copied from Clarissa Pinkala Estes, the following sentence. "*It was a time when the spiritual lacerations of profoundly exploited women were referred to as nervous breakdowns.*"

## Adelaide's Story

Like Marie Madeleine, **Adelaide** imbibed faith and practical Christianity from her family. Like her, she struggled with the inter-relatedness of various responsibilities; like her too she was led to experience the painful realities facing women in the Church when she laid before the authorities her hopes and dreams for her new Society.

Adelaide is a Catholic woman with a Master of Divinity from Duke (Methodist) Divinity School. Married with three teenage sons, she is also a chaplain at a Retirement Center, where she leads



Sunday worship, preaches, leads Bible study, and offers pastoral care of both residents and staff. In her parish, Adelaide is an RCIA catechist, a Eucharistic minister, a lector and a teacher of Religious Education. Catholic from birth, she struggles with her anger at a Church forbidding her ordination, when she feels a definite call to preach and to '*celebrate Eucharist with the gathered community*.' Her contacts with ordained Protestant women painfully remind her of the conflict she feels.

Born in Philadelphia, things Catholic became familiar to Adelaide both from family and through Catholic grade schools. She chose to attend a 'public' high school and so attended parish religious education classes.

Adelaide's maternal grandmother had two sisters who were religious, one a contemplative. This one, Aunt Anna, Adelaide remembers as 'a neat lady'. Her cousin Marion, a contemporary of her mother, was a Most Holy Redeemer sister with a PhD in Developmental Anatomy. She was a female rôle model giving encouragement to study science; Adelaide's Mom had a B.Sc. in Physical Chemistry and her Dad encouraged his daughter to pursue her dream of scientific study.

The eldest of 8, Adelaide took on the leadership role. Independent and skeptical by nature, she was always full of questions, and had a firm idea of what she wanted from life. Her clear career goals did not fit with the model of wife/mother that she saw around her but then when they were seniors in high school she met Chris! She played the guitar at Mass and he was a lector. They shared a common Catholic heritage and environment, and their faith was important to both. Chris was attending a Jesuit high school with a strong emphasis on community service, which was also part of Adelaide's life. Her grandmother had always been involved in community service, and both her parents went out of their way to help at Church, in the parochial school and providing assistance to elderly neighbors. Adelaide's Girl Scout activities also involved community service. Both sets of parents looked on with approval as Chris and Adelaide began dating.

Adelaide made sure that Chris understood her determination to pursue higher studies and a career in science. He accepted. They married in 1975, at the end of junior year in college. After graduation, he worked as an engineer and Adelaide went on for her PhD. A move to Washington, DC, was precipitated by Adelaide's decision to pursue post-doctoral studies at the National Institute of Health. Chris easily found another engineering job.

1982 brought the first son, Michael. Adelaide found that working full-time did not mesh with raising an infant, so she temporarily cut back to part time but when Brendan was born in 1986 she 'retired' to give her full attention to the children. A third son, Kevin, was born in 1988. Giving birth

and nursing the boys began to deepen Adelaide's understanding of Eucharist even as the complications and distractions of attending Mass as a family often made concentration impossible.

Gradually Adelaide got involved in school matters. She was a room parent, helped teach science classes after school, and eventually became PTA president. She found support in the groups of women that formed around children. Work with Boy Scouts strengthened the ties with the community. But in 1992 a job offer for Chris brought the family to North Carolina and that was difficult for Adelaide. She felt the loss of the support network and the activities which had sustained her. Boy Scouts provided a bridge into the new community and also facilitated the family's connection to the new church since the Cub Scout Pack was sponsored by their men's society. This seemed to lead naturally to more involvement in the life of the church.

After the death of her father in 1994 and a period of profound grief, Adelaide began to feel a call to make a renewed commitment to the Catholic faith. Their parish, St. Andrew the Apostle in Apex, North Carolina, is large and young. Adelaide became involved as a Eucharistic Minister. After discernment about what seemed to be a growing call to ministry, she did a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education and felt she had found her place. All the women she saw in ministry, however, were vowed religious. Where did she fit into this picture?

After the basic CPE unit, she enrolled at Duke Divinity School for an M.D.. North Carolina is only about 5% Catholic, so there is no Catholic college or seminary. Duke is the flagship Methodist seminary, and Adelaide found herself in class with Methodists, Baptists, Pentecostals, Episcopalians, and non-denominational men and women of faith. Gradually the call within her became a call to ordained ministry, and the agony of being a Catholic woman began to make itself felt keenly, especially when she saw classmates go through the process of ordination.

Duke requires at least two 'Field Education' placements for their graduates. Adelaide did one first in her home parish and found extremely painful the gap between what she felt called to do and what she was permitted to do by the Church. Her subsequent placement in a Retirement Community used her background in inter-denominational experiences and her training in medically related fields as well as providing a setting where her call to ministry is accepted and where she is able to practise it in almost all ways.

All of this takes time. Adelaide admits that her involvement with study and pastoral ministry sometimes creates a problem for her husband and children, who want her around more. It is important for her that her sons see models of women in ministry. She wants them to get used to the reality of both parents working. Though she feels some guilt at times, she does not feel too guilty because of the value of the boys seeing a woman who loves what she does outside the home while continuing to love them.

*'There is a rightness to what I'm doing even though I don't know where it will end up,' she says. 'Who I am as a minister is an integral part of who I am coming to be as a person. I never thought I'd be so sure of who I am.'*

*'I am happy when I'm working,' she states with conviction. 'In some ways, I'm a better mother when I'm working.... You stay a parent even when the needs of the small child are no longer there. Right now I am concerned about Michael's college application process even as I face papers and exams of my own.'*

She admits, though, that pastoral ministry is emotionally draining and leaves her less available emotionally for her husband and children. *'Life,' she says, 'is a continual juggling act, sometimes all the balls stay in the air, sometimes one or more falls down. Those times, painful as they are, often are times of the greatest growth.'*

*Over the past years, I have come to appreciate in ways that I didn't before, the strength of the Catholic faith. Even though to many of my friends and classmates, it would seem easy to switch denominations and receive ordination I have come to know that for me that is not an option. Even though I will not, barring a major act of the Holy Spirit, be able to celebrate Eucharist with any assembly gathered for worship or perform most of the other sacramental actions of the Catholic Church, there are times when I can envision ways in which I am becoming sacrament for those I minister with and to, giving of myself for them even as the Eucharist feeds me.'*

## Envoi

'Say to each one courage, courage and confidence. That is all that is necessary.' So wrote Marie Madeleine to Mother Maria Lebesque in 1830. '*Courage and confidence, but above all great confidence*' was a variation on the theme which appears almost invariably in every personal letter she wrote. Clearly it was the prayerful wish she offered others.

The women whose stories have been told here have that courage and confidence, the strength and trust which allows them to companion with their God and with those whose lives touch theirs.

We see in the stories told here women of differing cultures and creeds, strong women, valiant women, women experiencing marginalisation, inequality, exclusion, brokenness, suffering, isolation; women maintaining their dignity and that of their children; women consciously and courageously working for justice and the disadvantaged, challenging unjust structures, attitudes and behaviours.

To each and everyone Marie Madeleine still says: *Courage and confidence*, knowing that we in our turn are called to make a difference in the world.

