



Brief Sketch of the Life of

! MARY EUPHRASIA

Cover Picture:

**MODERN REPRESENTATION
OF ST. MARY EUPHRASIA**
by a French Canadian Artist

LARGE RED CIRCLE:

Encompassing St. Mary Euphrasia's head represents the energy which she experiences from being deeply rooted in God and having a strong faith vision.

**FEET FIRMLY PLANTED ON THE GROUND
AND TAKING LARGE STRIDES:**

Indicates that St. Mary Euphrasia is firmly grounded in reality. She is singleminded and eager in her response to this reality.

DIRECTION:

St. Mary Euphrasia moves towards the crushed, bruised and wilting poppy, like Jesus the Good Shepherd, who "looks for the lost one, brings back the stray, bandages the wounded and makes the weak strong".

HANDS:

Her hands are reaching out in a gesture of encouragement "Live and Grow" (*Ezech. 16*). The hands are large symbolizing her great tenderness and desire to nurture.

BRIEF SKETCH OF THE LIFE OF MARY EUPHRASIA

The story of Rose Virginie Pelletier begins in the island of Noirmoutier off the northwest of France, where she was born on 31st July 1796. Her father was the local doctor and she was the eighth of nine children. Julian and his wife Anne (nee Mourain) were both of Vendee, a land passionately loved by all who were born there. Being Vendean was synonymous with being Catholic and fiercely loyal to religion at a time during the French Revolution when the Church was being suppressed and abolished.

The Pelletiers, who formerly lived in Soullans on mainland France, were suspected of having harboured a priest, who would not take an oath of fidelity to the government to relinquish his attachment to the Holy See. They were imprisoned on the Island of Noirmoutier for three months in 1794 along with other "suspects". On their release, Dr. Pelletier was forcibly appointed a member of the Revolutionary Control Committee. This obliged him to reside on the Island, where he set up house with his wife and family and continued to practice his profession.

Today, this tiny island of Noirmoutier is a very popular tourist resort, measuring fourteen miles from one end to the other and six miles across. On one side the island is covered with profuse vegetation and there are lovely walks and sandy

beaches. At the other side the island sternly faces the Atlantic. At the dawn of the nineteenth century it was quiet country, almost drowsy, an abode of peace.

When they settled on the Island the Pelletiers had seven children, the youngest born in 1790. Following a space of six years, their eighth child Rose Virginie was born. The parents administered baptism in its simplest form. They considered themselves privileged, when a year later a priest came to the Island and behind closed doors gave the full rites of the Church to several children, among them Rose Virginie. In 1792 their family was completed with the birth of their ninth child, Paul.

From about 1800 on, the persecution of priests was relaxed and some of them came back to the island. They restored the sacramental life for the people and provided education for boys. But there was no provision for the education of girls.

Anne engaged an elderly lady to teach the younger children the old-fashioned "Three R's" and they managed to learn them though their instruction was rather spasmodic. Rose Virginie passionately loved the sea and was never so happy as when she was playing on the shore. When she was twelve, Ursuline sisters came to the island and she attended a regular school for the first time. The sudden change from the old, easy, care-free life was trying, and she missed the familiar roaming about the Island. The Sisters found her open-minded, and generally well conducted. But she was unusually high-spirited, impulsive and not always easy to control.

Rose Virginie was only nine years old when death struck the family for the first time. Her sister Victoire-Emilie who was almost fifteen fell dangerously ill and died. The family was devastated. The parents told their children that they must not grieve too much because the will of God is always what is best for us, and Emilie had surely gone to God.

In the autumn of the following year, while Rose Virginie was intent on preparations for her first Holy Communion, her father died at Noirmoutier, after a brief illness, aged only fifty-four years. To say that it was a blow to his wife and children is to say little. The shock was so sudden, so unexpected, that they could scarcely believe it was true.

There followed the whole upheaval and sequel of loss and change which often results from the sudden death of the breadwinner. Anne, worried about giving her children an education that would fit them for life, decided to leave Noirmoutier and to go back to Soullans on the mainland. Rose Virginie who was at heart an island-girl, was inconsolable at the thought of leaving this beautiful place, every corner of which was home to her. But her mother held firm even though she too was deeply grieved. Soullans proved however to be another step on the road to further separations.

Anne made arrangements for Rose Virginie to go to a boarding-school at Tours, run by her friend Mademoiselle Chobelet a member of the Christian Association. To go so far away and to be separated from her mother, was intolerable anguish for

Rose Virginie. She was terrified when her mother brought her to Tours, at the age of fourteen. The strange cold huge building and the frigid, austere air of the Directress did nothing to make her feel at home.

There were no school counsellors in those days, but one young teacher did notice the girl's sorrow. She was Pauline de Lignac who reached out to her and showed her sincere interest and affection. She owed much of her later development to the formative influence of this relationship. The deep mutual understanding was the chief consolation of the pupil during the four long, hard years which she spent at the boarding-school. The other was one of her classmates Marie Angelique Dernee: both these girls came from the same part of the country.

In the summer of 1812, a heart-broken letter came from her mother, saying that they had just lost Andre-Constant, the eldest son, upon whom all the hopes of the family rested. It was a terrible blow to Rose-Virginie. But she could not foresee then that in less than a year one of the greatest bereavements that can come to anyone, would fall to her lot. In June 1813, news came that her mother was dead. Through some mischance, the terrible message did not reach her immediately. Anne was already buried when Rose Virginie became aware of her death. Rose-Virginie was crushed with grief and could not cope with the thought that she would never see her mother again.

Rose-Virginie was now close on seventeen and

decided to leave school and go back to Vendee to those who were left. However, there was something new to be reckoned with: her brother-in-law had been appointed her legal guardian and he refused to give her permission. And so in a state of utter desolation and grief, she had to endure another year at school.

That same year her first and closest school friend, Angelique Dernee left school to join the Carmelites in their convent of Tours. She often asked Rose Virginie to go with her to join the contemplative sisters, but, Rose's interests lay elsewhere. Close to the school in Tours, there was a convent which the boarders passed on their way to the Cathedral. This house was known as "The Refuge" and held a particular fascination for Rose Virginie.

The house of "Refuge" was run by the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity, a congregation begun by St. John Eudes in Caen in 1641. John Eudes was a missionary who wanted everyone to experience the love of God. As a preacher he was able to touch the hearts of many people, including women who were trapped in prostitution. They challenged him to do something concrete to help them. He tried various means and finally when everything else failed, he established a congregation of sisters particularly dedicated to the service of women and children in difficulty.

Rose Virginie had an opportunity of seeing the Refuge Sisters close at hand when the boarders from the school were invited to serve at a special dinner given to the girls in their care. She felt the

work of these sisters was the most worthwhile thing anyone could do in life. Their attempts to provide healing experiences for wounded people impressed her. She decided that she wanted to join this Congregation when she finished school.

However, she hadn't bargained for the amount of opposition which her decision evoked. The School Directress was shocked that one of her pupils would want to do this kind of work. Being a Carmelite or Sacred Heart sister would have been acceptable, but not Refuge. Her sisters and brothers and particularly her guardian took the same line. The only family support came from an old aunt. Following several stormy sessions, she eventually won the permission of her guardian to enter the Refuge provided she did not make first vows until she was twenty one.

On October 20th 1814, Rose Virginie joined the Refuge at Tours with no family members to bid her farewell. Only the School Directress was there to see her off. Rose Virginie joined what was in fact a community of elderly war-weary sisters. They had been dispersed at one stage during the revolution and had to hide and wander for safety. The majority had been imprisoned. They all bore the marks of the sufferings they had endured and were tired and worn out. Rose Virginie admired them for the steadfast and faithful women they were.

Ten months later Rose Virginie received the habit and her religious name Sr. Mary of St. Euphrasia. (*In Greek Euphrasia means beautiful speech*).

During her Novitiate she studied Sacred Scripture intensely and revelled in this. Though the work was taxing, yet she loved the challenge presented by being with the girls. She eagerly responded to the formation which she received in this period. On September 9th 1817 she made her First Vows and was given responsibility for the work with the girls. Eight years later, when she was not quite 29 years of age, she was greatly surprised to be unanimously elected Superior of the Refuge. She would not have asked for this position, but now that God was calling her to it, she brought to it all her energy and vitality. Quickly she set about improving the premises for the sisters and girls and developed the quality of the service given at the Refuge.

Her first major innovation was the establishment of a contemplative group of sisters within the congregation. This responded to the direct request of some of the girls who wanted to become sisters. Their role was to be one of prayer for all those in need, especially those being helped by the Congregation.

The numbers wanting to avail of the services began to grow, as did the numbers wanting to join the Congregation. The people of Tours were proud of the great House of the Sisters and the Refuge became widely known almost as a civic institution. Mary Euphrasia, seeing this surge of new life, began to wonder if she was doing enough. She would like a multiplication of the good already effected. This would mean opening more houses. She wanted to make sure this was God's Will and

prayed ardently for a sign.

The sign came in the form of an urgent appeal from the city of Angers, begging her as Superior of Tours, to use every effort to open a House of Refuge in that city where it was so badly needed. She brought this request to the Community Council, but was shocked and felt unspeakable sorrow and chagrin when every sister present was opposed to the plan. They felt their house was doing well and they were all busy and content. All they asked was to be allowed to remain quiet in their little corner and die in peace. They all shrank back at the prospect of the unknown.

Mary Euphrasia had a deep, inner conviction that this foundation was the will of God and this gave fire and a persuasive quality to her words. Eventually she gained the consent of the sisters to explore what was proposed at Angers. The exploration was successful and in June 1829 the house was started in what was formerly an old factory, with the blessing of the bishop and the substantial help of Count de Neuville (*whose mother had left money for the cause*) and Countess d'Andigne.

Mary Euphrasia called the house at Angers by the title of the Bon Pasteur (*Good Shepherd*) partly to revive the ancient name which was used by a former institution, but mainly because of the tender mercy of the Good Shepherd of the Gospel, who had always meant so much to her as a revelation of His love.

Having spent two months with the new community at Angers, she returned to Tours where she found the sisters quite annoyed that she had been away so long. For the next two years she was torn between requests from the community at Angers saying things were not going well and they needed her, and the sisters at Tours telling her that her place was with them. In 1831 she was appointed superior at Angers and it was with much anguish and uncertainty that she dragged herself away from Tours, which had been her home all of her religious life.

Mary Euphrasia set about developing the work at Angers and reconnecting with helpers and benefactors, many of whom had withdrawn over the previous two years due to lack of encouragement and appreciation. Vocations too began to flow towards the Good Shepherd. Seventeen novices were received in October 1831. She also founded a branch of the Contemplative Sisters. With the help of Count de Neuville a new church was built and dedicated in 1834. An extra dimension of the work was begun with a prevention-type service for young girls who were living in morally unhealthy environments.

At one stage Mary Euphrasia found herself in the situation of needing a professed sister for an important office but had none to supply. She appealed to Tours for help and was unconditionally refused. Then she asked the Nantes Refuge but got the same reply. She began to wonder about having a common Founder, a common Rule, one and the same purpose, and then living so hemmed in by one's

own interests, that one could not stretch out a helping hand to a sister-house in need? St. John Eudes had founded his houses as separate and autonomous entities. Why, she asked, were there so few houses of Refuge after a century and a half of time had elapsed?. Now it was beginning to dawn on Mary Euphrasia that this kind of organisation was not the best for the expansion of the work. She saw that the weak point was the segregation and aloofness of the houses. She believed that a Generalate, which united all the houses, was the answer and Count de Neuville strongly supported her in this.

The inspiration for the formation of the Generalate was to be her greatest joy and at the same time her greatest sorrow. Some sisters saw the unification of houses as an attempt on the part of Mary Euphrasia to get more power and have more people subject to her authority. Sisters, clergy and bishops turned against her and various and intriguing attempts were made to prevent her going ahead. Her good name and reputation were lacerated. There were others who were deeply convinced of the justice and reasonableness of Mary Euphrasia's desire for a generalate including two strong clerical champions in Rome. She suffered intensely from the opposition, but through it all was utterly resigned to the will of God.

Getting approval for the establishment of the Generalate was a long drawn out affair, which involved dealing with the bureaucracy of the Vatican. Eventually Mary Euphrasia addressed a letter directly to a Cardinal, and so came in contact

with Cardinal Odescalchi who was to be an effective supporter. In January 1835, the petition that all the houses of the Good Shepherd founded in the universe should be under a General Government was granted by Rome. The Congregation was henceforth known as that of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd of Angers. Houses which did not attach themselves to the General administration continued to be known as houses of Refuge.

From the moment the Order was declared to be under a general government, demands for foundations began to pour in, and at the same time the number of vocations multiplied. Mary Euphrasia was now sure that it was the Will of God that the Good Shepherd should expand and multiply its works of mercy. For the next thirty three years, she laboured tirelessly as she responded to one request after another to open houses in France, Europe, United States, Latin America, Asia, Oceania, and Africa. Three of these were in Ireland - Limerick, Waterford and Belfast. At the age of sixty-six, Mary Euphrasia expressed envy of her missionary daughters. If only she could be with them. "Ah", she said "if I were thirty, nothing could hold me back!"

Sorrows and joys alternated almost without interruption in Angers and the new houses. There were difficulties connected with each of the foundations and a great deal of hard work, but this was seen, not as something to be shunned, but as one of the chief means of poverty and penance in the Congregation. Sickness also took its toll of generous

sisters. "Great crosses bring great graces" Mary Euphrasia often repeated.

One of the greatest crosses endured by Mary Euphrasia for twenty six years was the vehement opposition which she experienced from the bishop of Angers, Bishop Angebault. He wanted to exercise rights as "Superior General" of the Congregation. When the constitutions of the order did not go along with this, he became very obstructionist. This placed Mary Euphrasia in situations of distressing conflict, because of her devoted loyalty to the Church, and yet she had to resist when church authorities were in opposition to her. At other times she was being ordered to do one thing by the local bishop and something else by Rome. Her conscience was put in grave tribulation and anguish by the impossibility of obeying two higher superiors who ordered two exactly opposite things. The secular clergy tended to avoid her as one who had incurred their bishop's displeasure. Being a Vendean, brought up in an atmosphere of respect and love for the clergy, she suffered cruelly to see priests turn against her. Rome of course upheld her, but Rome was far away. Ardent prayer alone sustained her. "Pray, be silent and hope" became her motto.

Mary Euphrasia's last years were very lonely. The bishop's unrelenting opposition contributed to this. Also, there were many vacant spaces around her, caused by the death of beloved sisters and friends. Added to this, her own physical condition caused her much suffering. It was only at this late stage that the results of an accident on her way to

Angouleme in 1842 came to light. The coach in which she was travelling overtired and she was pinned under other passengers. The fall had produced a massive bruise in her right side. This had caused her much suffering, and in time degenerated into a cancerous tumour. She was never free from pain, and towards the end of her life this caused her intolerable agony.

In May 1867, she became seriously ill with pneumonia. There seemed to be no hope of recovery, but she rallied round and resumed her work again. She was now Superior General of 3,000 religious in 110 convents, divided into sixteen provinces. With her extraordinary affection, she was able to share the joys and sufferings of each of these.

In March 1868 it was obvious that her liver was affected and that the cancerous wound was too advanced to benefit from medication. A nurse dressed and bandaged it daily. She steadily grew worse during Holy Week. On her death-bed she remembered the names of all the one hundred and ten foundations and sent them her blessing and her love. On her last day, April 24th 1868 (*the Friday after Good Shepherd Sunday*) she sent for several of the superioresses who were at Angers, and named one of them prioress of Miserghin in Algeria. She then dictated a letter to the Bishop of Oran: "With almost my last breath, I send you a superior for Miserghin". At around 4.00 p.m. she collapsed, and quickly said "Goodbye my daughters, Goodbye dear Institute". These were her last words. She closed her lips and eyes but for two more hours the slow, painful breathing continued.

The entire community was crowded into the room in silent prayer. Peacefully, and without any struggle, she stopped breathing around 6.00 p.m.

It is not easy to sum up the life of Mary Euphrasia. Perhaps it is best understood in terms of her own wish for her sisters: "You will effect no good, my dear Sister... until you become animated with the thoughts, sentiments and affections of the Good Shepherd... and live His way of life".

She loved the Good Shepherd and that love was the power which motivated her and flowed into everything she did.

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