

"A woman of great virtue"

The Marist Fathers and Brothers had arrived in Oceania in 1837. Five years later, in 1842, two women of the Island of Wallis wrote an open letter to the women of Lyons in the name of all the women of the Island. The main paragraph read:

"We have already had proof of your charity and we are making one more request: if you love us, send us some devout women (some sisters) to teach the women of Uvea".

The letter was published in the journal called *The Annals of the Propagation of the Faith* in September 1843. Among those who read it was a mature woman named Françoise Perroton. For her, it was a call to action. She made two visits. The first was to Father Peter Julian Eymard who was Colin's second in command and director of the Third Order. Eymard did not discourage her, but knowing well the difficulties his Marist confrères were suffering in Oceania, as well as the recent martyrdom of Peter Chanel, he spoke to her of the difficulties, and advised her not to speak to Colin, who was opposed to sending women to that part of the world. Not deterred, Françoise made a second visit, this time to a sea captain, Auguste Marceau. She came straight to the point: would he take her on board his ship which was about to leave for Oceania, even though she had no money? The captain was a man of the world and a member of the Third Order. He said he would think about it. But Françoise had already thought about it, and was ready. She wrote to Marceau again. This time the captain's reply was positive, and on November 15, 1845, she set out on the "Arche d'Alliance" ("Arc of the Covenant"). She was 49 years of age at the time! On the same boat there were eight Marist Fathers, five Marist Brothers, and a few passengers. Although Françoise referred to her coming as "having caused a stir", not one of the Marist missionaries' letters even mentions her presence on the voyage, which lasted a year. The boat reached Wallis on October 23, 1846. Bishop Bataillon refused to welcome Françoise: he did not want any European women on the Island. The king took her under his protection, building a hut for her; and he sent three young women, including his own daughter, to live with her. Françoise lived alone on this Island for eight years. Then she lived on Futuna for four more years by herself. It was not till she had been those 12 years alone on the Islands that any company arrived. But her heroic generosity had been the beginning of a movement.

In October, 1846 Reverend Father Superior spoke to a lady who had come to see him and who wished to go to Oceania. Father Colin spoke to her in a kindly way, neither encouraging nor discouraging her, and he even told her that if she was going to embark he would gladly agree to see her. He recommended us strongly to follow the same approach. "How," he said, "could I take upon myself to send out women like that? God has not entrusted me with that task... Let no Marist ever say to these women 'Off you go.' But never let him discourage them either. The first would be imprudent and improper, the second might be opposing the will of God. For who knows his plans? I would not be surprised if he intended to make use of such a means."

The Mayet Memoirs

Women on the missions?

Mayet records several instances of women who spoke to Jean-Claude Colin about the possibility of going to the Mission in Oceania. Mayet noted Colin as saying, *"they have pursued me in order to get my consent"*, but he never gave it. When Françoise Perroton spoke to Julian Eymard about going to Oceania, Eymard advised her not to speak to Colin. Colin was informed, after the deed, of her departure for the Pacific, and he wrote, *"I cannot but admire the courage of Mlle Perroton whose zeal has urged her to go to Wallis Island. I did not have the pleasure of meeting her for I was not informed of her departure prior to her embarking, but I am told she is a woman of merit and great virtue."* In fact, it was only under the second Superior General that in 1857 women volunteers bound to the Third Order were to leave for the Islands. When she set sail in 1845, Françoise had no specific link with the Society of Mary. When she reached Tahiti, she learned that Eymard had enrolled her in the Third Order. She made Profession in the Third Order in 1858.

Final decision

Françoise Perroton's letter to Auguste Marceau was dated Summer 1845, and in it she wrote:

"My firm wish is to serve on the mission fields for the rest of my life, and you, Sir, are the only person who can provide me with the means of doing so by taking me under your care on a voyage that is so long and so expensive. Would that I had a fortune to offer! But, as you know, my resources are very meagre and the only thing I have of value is my good will.... I want merely to be taken on board your ship as a servant, if one is needed, and I can work in this capacity at whatever has to be done.... If you promise to take me on board, please be so good as to tell me what I must do to act to the best advantage, for I shall have to give notice to my employer and get ready for the journey. I don't want to make any blunders. At my age, one can't afford to act impulsively. No, I have given the matter much thought, and my decision is final."

Characteristics


Her first striking trait is her *strong character*. She was a resourceful woman who knew what she wanted. She showed that at the outset of her missionary vocation and during her 12 long years of solitude on Wallis and Futuna. She was able to stand up to Bishop Bataillon's authoritarianism when he tried to force the sisters to give up their direct apostolate and to raise chickens and pigs instead.... She showed her *audacity* in carrying out what she had decided on, and she was willing to *risk* everything to reach that goal; but she did so very *clear-sightedly*. Her letters reveal a good *sense of humour*. She could laugh, for example, at her poor head rebelling against learning the local language; she spoke of her prayers, "colder than a Lyon January". When it was hard to find mutual support in community, she immediately reassured her correspondent that "None of us has ever thrown a bottle or plate at the head of another sister."

Claudine Nakamura, smsm

If she could speak today . . .

Françoise Perroton was not one of the founding members of the Marist enterprise, but her act of daring in going to Oceania began a movement which in fact developed into a religious Congregation. If she could speak to us today, we might imagine her saying something like this:

"Certainly, it's true: I would never consider myself the foundress of a religious family. I came to Oceania by myself because I heard the urgent call of a group of women at the end of the world. And maybe that's the most remarkable thing about the Missionary Sisters: the Congregation didn't start because of some Founding person's insight. It began because of a clear call from a group of women. Yes, there were times when I wondered what on earth I had done with my life! Can you imagine what a leap in the dark it was for a woman of my age to go to the very ends of the earth for the sake of a mission? God alone knows how often during those long years of isolation I had to struggle against discouragement and even despair at the lack of results of my work. I used to say that I had come 20 years too late for such a life! But you know, when I look back, I realise that I had been prepared for this call for a long time. For many years – 20 or so – I had been involved in the Society for the Propagation of the Faith in Lyon, and with Pauline Jaricot's mission support group. No, I would never consider myself a founder. But I'm happy and proud to have launched a movement; it has been worth all those years of isolation and loneliness. I would never have dared to hope for the happiness of seeing what I see now. But you know, when I look at what has been the history of the Missionary Sisters, maybe the most remarkable thing is that the Congregation even exists at all!"



Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary are heirs of the pioneer sisters who were inspired by the example of Françoise Perroton and of those first Oceanians who, in seeing their way of life, desired also to give their lives to God for the service of mission.

Missionary Sisters' Constitutions Prologue