
Rosalie Rendu

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Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

Sister Rosalie Rendu, a seventy-year-old Daughter of Charity who had spent nearly her entire religious life within the narrow confines of perhaps the poorest area of Paris, was buried with all the trappings of a state funeral from the church of Saint-Médard on 9 February 1856. The government laid aside its prohibition against the public display of religious symbols as those who were rich as well as those who were poor, those who were powerful as well as those who were voiceless, joined the silent procession behind the crucifix leading her remains to Montparnasse Cemetery. Religious and government officials, who frequently had little in common, forgot their differences for a few hours to pay tribute to this humble woman. The mighty and the downtrodden wept together. The following day Parisian newspapers of widely diverse and opposing political and religious persuasions described the singular event and paid tribute to the woman who had occasioned it.¹

During this year, 2006, we celebrate the 150th anniversary of her death. A steady flow of visitors continues to come to her grave. Many leave flowers or small marble plaques expressing gratitude and testifying to the truth of the inscription on the tomb, "To our good mother Rosalie, her grateful friends, the poor and the rich." An avenue in the area of the French capital where she labored bears her name. The occasional newspaper article still recalls her accomplishments. A recent book on the XIIIth arrondissement, which in Sister Rosalie's day was part of the administrative district where she devoted her life to the service of those in need, is dedicated quite simply "To Sister Rosalie."²

On 21 August 1997, Pope John Paul II beatified Frédéric Ozanam, the principal founder of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul,

¹ Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis Sanctorum Officium Historicum. Parisien. [Beatificationis et] Canonizationes Servae Dei, Rosaliae Rendu (in saec.: Ionnae Mariae), Societatis Puellarum a Caritatae (1786-1856), Positio Super Virtutibus et Fama Sanctitatis (Rome, 1993). [Within this document there are three separate paginations: Positio Biographie Documentée, 1-318; Exposé des Vertus, 1-61; Sommaire du Procès Ordinaire de Paris (1953), contains the testimony of witnesses, Examen des Ecrits, 1-93.] Positio, 256-271. Note: Throughout this text we will try to use more personal expressions for "the poor" such as "those who are poor" or "persons who are poor" where syntax permits, or, unless the origin of the expression, such as Sister Rosalie's "beloved poor," dictates otherwise. There can be no doubt that Sister Rosalie saw all those who came into her life as persons.

² Jean-Jacques Lévêque, *Vie et histoire du XIII^e arrondissement* (Paris: Hervas, 1990), iii.

at Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris. In his homily, the Holy Father evoked Sister Rosalie's name. He stated, "The bonds among the members of the Vincentian Family have been strong since the origin of the Society because it was a Daughter of Charity, Sister Rosalie Rendu, who guided the young Frédéric Ozanam and his companions toward persons who were poor in the Mouffetard section of Paris."³

But who exactly is this woman who was herself beatified on 9 November 2003? What does her life have to say to men and women of our era who, regardless of their socio-economic status, seek to reach out to those in need?

Sister Rosalie's first biographer, Viscount Armand de Melun, declares, undoubtedly with exaggeration born of admiration, that his friend and collaborator of nearly 20 years was "at the origin of all of the major social welfare undertakings" of the first half of XIXth century France.⁴ Indeed, the mere cataloguing of her accomplishments in modern social works reveals a woman of extraordinary creativity and energy. Through her tireless service to those whom society in general had seemingly abandoned and her ability to involve youth and elders, wealthy benefactors as well as those in need in this work, she proved herself a worthy daughter of the founders of the Daughters of Charity, Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac. However, as with Vincent and Louise, there is the danger of losing the person behind the actions, of being so dazzled by the magnitude of their achievements that the spiritual and human motor that drove them disappears.

Such has often been the case with Sister Rosalie. The numerous texts that have appeared since her death portray her heroic deeds on the barricades during the revolutions of 1830 and 1848 or at the bedside of the sick during the cholera epidemics of 1832, 1849, and 1854. They also recount in detail the numerous works that she founded for those who were poor. But Sister Rosalie, the woman, is far more and far less than the sum of her actions. If she has something to say to the men and women of today, it is precisely because of the person she became by the grace of God and by her response to that grace.

³ *Discours du Pape et chronique romaine, "Béatification de Frédéric Ozanam,"* Notre-Dame-de-Paris, 22 août 1997 (Paris, 1997).

⁴ Armand de Melun, *Vie de la sœur Rosalie, Fille de la Charité*, 13^e édition (Paris, 1929), 118.

Sister Rosalie's service of persons who were poor is certainly of major importance and is the reason she continues to be remembered. Nevertheless, the woman behind the works is the person we must come to know if her life is to have any lasting meaning for us and for our epoch.

Such is the purpose of this new biography. While acknowledging the debt owed to previous works, particularly that of Armand de Melun, which is the essential basis of all subsequent texts, because of its historical accuracy and eyewitness accounts, the present work will attempt to draw a spiritual and human portrait of this extraordinary woman. To that end, considerable emphasis will be placed on Sister Rosalie's correspondence. Previous biographies have made little or no use of her letters. These writings, however, provide valuable insight into the character and personality of this humble woman who spent almost her entire life as a Daughter of Charity in the Mouffetard district in Paris' Latin Quarter. The response to her Beatification, both in Rome and in Paris, demonstrates that her example and message continue to reverberate in the minds and hearts of those who are seeking to relieve the plight of those who are poor and abandoned at the dawn of the XXIst century.

With that in mind, we now turn to the places, people, and events that formed Sister Rosalie and to her own words as found in her correspondence or cited by those who knew her well. Using all available documentation, it is our hope that we can weave a tapestry that will reveal the true portrait of Sister Rosalie Rendu, the woman, the Daughter of Charity, and the servant of all who needed her assistance, be they persons who were rich or persons who were poor.