CHAPTER II
THE ADOLESCENT IN SEARCH OF HER VOCATION

It must be admitted from the outset that the details concerning Sister Rosalie's adolescence are sketchy and often contradictory. Having said that, let us now consider that brief but critical period of her life.

We have reached the year 1800 or 1801. Jeanne-Marie is now an adolescent. According to Mélanie several young men wanted to marry her. At the same time the gaps in her education became evident. The Revolution had ended and calm had returned to the Gex region. Religious women, who had been dispersed during the Reign of Terror, were once again coming together and turning their attention to the education of young girls. Such was the case of the Ursulines of Gex, known, since their return to their families, as the Dames Maçon. Once they were re-established, Madame Rendu confided her daughter to them to be educated. Biographers, as well as witnesses for the Cause of Beatification, differ as to how long she remained with them.

Just as the dates and the length of stay vary from account to account, so does the chronology. According to Armand de Melun, Madame Rendu placed her daughter with the Dames Maçon for two years to complete her education. Thus, she would have left Confort in 1800 at the age of thirteen.

However, according to Mélanie Rendu, Jeanne-Marie knew that her mother was acquainted with Sister Suzanne Palme, the superior of the Daughters of Charity of the Hospital of Gex, and the young girl asked her mother to take her there for a visit. Madame Rendu agreed to her request and made the thirty kilometer journey. Suspecting that Jeanne-Marie was considering the religious life, she probably thought it would not be to the Daughters of Charity as she felt that Jeanne-Marie would not like the sisters' religious garb, particularly the large winged cornette. To Madame Rendu's surprise her daughter was enchanted by it, saying it "suits me; it will hide my face."

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46 Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, Rendu, Positio: Sommaire, 85.
47 Melun, Vie de la sœur Rosalie, 8.
48 Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, Rendu, Positio: Sommaire, 85.
It is also Mélanie who tells us that, because she felt that Jeanne-Marie was too young, Sister Suzanne suggested that Madame Rendu place her daughter with the Dames Maçon, where she remained for a year. She added that Jeanne-Marie was fourteen at the time.49 Nevertheless, two things are certain. In 1800/1801 Jeanne-Marie left Confort for a boarding school in Gex run by the Dames Maçon where she spent a year, possibly two. Secondly, either before beginning her studies or during them, she met the Daughters of Charity of the Hospital of Gex, which had been founded by Saint Vincent de Paul himself shortly before his death in 1660,50 and was drawn to their service of those who are poor.

It would appear that the education Jeanne-Marie received at Gex and later at Carouge, near Geneva, was largely domestic. The young women were being prepared to be wives and mothers. However, the human and Christian formation was solid and in this climate Jeanne-Marie’s religious vocation took root.

There is agreement that Jeanne-Marie was a serious student who took readily to the semi-cloistered life of the Ursulines. Yet, despite her fondness and admiration for her teachers, she felt called to serve God and persons who were poor, as did the Daughters of Charity of the Hospital of Gex. Armand de Melun tells us that the young girl heard a canticle on the happiness of the Daughters of Charity in the

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49 Ibid., 85-86.
50 Desmet, Sœur Rosalie, 52.
service of those in need and that, in later years, she loved to repeat one of the stanzas.\textsuperscript{51} It went as follows:

\begin{quote}
The spittle and rags 
of a poor dying person 
are my jewels 
and my uplifted spirit. 
Approaching his bed 
all covered with vermin 
I feel born in my spirit, 
in the zeal which guides me, 
a divine strength.\textsuperscript{52}
\end{quote}

Notwithstanding the vague nature of these details, it would also appear that during this period Jeanne-Marie was in close contact with the pastor of Gex, Monsieur Pierre-Marin Rouph de Varicourt, who gave her spiritual direction and assisted her in discerning the will of God in her life. Because Jeanne-Marie was so young, the pastor encouraged Madame Rendu to send her to Carouge where “several pious and zealous clergymen” had established a boarding school for young girls run by “women of great merit.”\textsuperscript{53} Madame Rendu acquiesced and Jeanne-Marie continued her education there, as well as her spiritual journey, prior to entering the Daughters of Charity.

\begin{quote}
Mountainous area of Gex. 
Public domain
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{51} Melun, \textit{Vie de la sœur Rosalie}, 9.
\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Cantique de la Compagnie des Filles de la Charité}, AFCP, 8\textsuperscript{J}2 - Ro - Doc. 2\textsuperscript{nd}.
\textsuperscript{53} Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, \textit{Rendu, Positio; Sommaire}, 86.
After six months at Carouge, the future Sister Rosalie returned to Gex and began a six-month postulancy. This is a period during which the candidate shares the life and apostolic work of the sisters of the congregation that she hopes to enter. Considered a time of discernment, both she and they try to determine if the vocation is real, if the candidate is suitable for the life to which she feels that she has been called, and if the congregation can provide an environment in which this particular young woman can grow in her love and service of God and neighbor. While Monsieur de Varicourt continued to guide her, Sister Suzanne, as the local superior, assumed direct responsibility for Jeanne-Marie's initial formation.

Once again there are discrepancies in the documentation. What we do know with certainty, however, is that in the Register of Postulants 1801-1808, the original of which can be found in the Archives of the Daughters of Charity in Paris, we read:

**Arrival**

Gex, 13 February 1802. Sister Palme is proposing two postulants. One of them is 27 years old and appears to have a solid vocation. She is strong, knows how to read and write reasonably well, and to sew. She appears to be a good candidate with whom we hope to be satisfied. However, she could only contribute 300 francs and a trousseau as described in Sister Jacquinol[t]'s note.

**Arrival**

the second is 23 years old. She has exactly the same qualities and capabilities as the first and the same desire to enter our Company. Sister Mathieu.

Sister Rendu was also sent with the first two.  

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54 *Registre des Postulantes (1801-1808)*, photocopy of the original, in AFCP, 8J2 - Ro - Doc. 11.
It is interesting that no further details are given concerning Sister Rosalie. There is no apparent explanation for this omission.

But let us return briefly to the Hospital of Gex and to Jeanne-Marie Rendu before she arrived at the newly established Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity on 25 May 1802. Aside from the broad lines of the chronology, little is known of the evolution of Jeanne-Marie Rendu's vocation. What we do know comes largely from Armand de Melun, who probably heard it from Sister Rosalie herself. A confidant of Sister Rosalie's, he assures us that her initial thoughts of dedicating her life to the service of God and those in need dated from Jeanne-Marie's first communion in a cellar in Confort. Melun writes, "There were before the altar a priest [Father Colliex], who was preparing himself for martyrdom, and a virgin who promised God whom she was receiving for the first time, to love him all her life in the person of the lowly and the poor."55

Melun adds, "From the age of reason, Jeanne had thought of consecrating herself to God. None of the joys of the world attracted her. She wanted no part of its celebrations or glitter. At the same time, she felt drawn by its groans and misery."56 Her stay in Gex and Carouge, her contact with the Ursulines (Dames Maçon) and with the Daughters of Charity, her experience of both the contemplative life and the direct service of persons who were poor, and the spiritual guidance of Father de Varicourt, all combined to define and solidify Jeanne-Marie's calling.57 Thus it was that when she learned that her friend Armande Jacquinot, a young woman from Lancrans, was leaving to enter the Daughters of Charity in Paris, her own desire to give her life to God became clear. Melun tells us, "Jeanne no longer hesitated. She opened her heart to her friend and revealed her aspirations, her hopes, and her long prayers to obtain from God the grace to enter his service."58

Although she was not yet sixteen years old, Jeanne-Marie wanted to leave immediately for Paris with Mademoiselle Jacquinot. The latter tried to discourage her precisely because she was so young. She knew that her mother, too, would oppose this decision and her consent was an absolute requirement. So, "Jeanne went to

55 Melun, Vie de la sœur Rosalie, 7-8.
56 Ibid., 8.
57 Ibid., 9-10.
58 Ibid., 10-11.
her mother, told her of her vocation, which she had nurtured for a long while and which God was approving by providing her with an opportunity to follow it, and, on her knees, begged for her consent and her blessing.”

She was not to obtain it immediately. Prompted by “prudence and motherly love,” Madame Rendu argued against a vocation that she felt was not “solid” or “sufficiently thought out.” In the end she would yield to her daughter’s entreaties, but not without the conviction that “the trip, time, and distractions would dissipate the illusions of this first impulse and soon bring her daughter back to her.”

To that end, she gave Jeanne-Marie a letter for Father Emery, Superior General of the Sulpicians whose Motherhouse was only a short distance from that of the Daughters of Charity in Paris. He was the young girl’s godfather and a close friend of her grandfather. Madame Rendu had hoped that he would be able to convince her daughter of the “foolishness” of the step that she was taking.

Jacques-André Emery, S.S. (1732-1811),
Superior General of the Sulpicians – 1782-1811.
Godfather of Jeanne-Marie Rendu (Sister Rosalie).


And so they set out, these three young women from the Jura, to begin their lives as Daughters of Charity. Melun describes the tearful departure that, in later life, Sister Rosalie must still have remembered vividly. He says that the young girl, who bid farewell to her mother that day, did so with a desire to fulfill the will of God in her regard, but also with "a bleeding wound in her heart." Indeed, for mother and daughter, there was probably the vague realization that this was a final separation. They would see one another only once again and the pain would remain. Melun says that his friend:

...always felt keen sorrow for the loss of or separation from a person who was dear to her. Neither time nor the practice of resignation could ever lessen the suffering caused by separations. Her limitless charity could not replace any of her affections. It only increased her capacity to love and, therefore, to suffer in those whom she loved.61

Although Sister Rosalie lived only about thirteen years in her mother's home, it seems important to reiterate here that Madame Rendu was the strongest influence in her life during these formative years. Only six letters of Sister Rosalie to her mother have been preserved, although there were undoubtedly others. They all reflect her great love for her mother and the pain of their separation. In 1853 she wrote:

I share in your suffering. I am immeasurably afflicted not to be able to go to you and to tell you this in person. Yes, my dear and tender Mother, believe that I am making a great sacrifice and that it costs me dearly. I continue to hope that you will remain with us and that I will be able to give both of us this just and desired consolation.62

Sister Rosalie also speaks of her mother in letters to other family members. They, too, reveal her affection and her concern that her

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61 Ibid., 12.
62 Ibid.
63 Letter of Sister Rosalie to Madame Veuve Rendu, 9 September 1853, AFCP, SJ2 - Ro - Le 267.
mother be well cared for. She could not offer this care herself but she made certain that Madame Rendu had all that she needed.

What precisely did she learn from her mother that helped to make her the woman that she became? In many respects, the young girl was a reflection of the older woman. In addition to the solid, simple faith that feared nothing previously mentioned, there was the same generous, respectful outreach to persons in need. Mother and daughter shared themselves and whatever they had with others. At her mother's side, the child and the adolescent also developed a capacity to love family and friends. She imbibed her mother's quiet courage in the face of danger and her willingness to take risks. As she left the Jura for the last time, Jeanne-Marie Rendu had within her those qualities that would one day make her the "Apostle of the Mouffetard area," qualities that had been mirrored for her by her mother, Marie-Anne Laracine Rendu.

Marie-Anne Laracine Rendu (1769-1856).
Portrait painted by the pastor of Lancrans around 1850.
Archives, Daughters of Charity, Paris
Courtesy of Sister Mary Frances Barnes, D.C.