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Notable Daughters of Charity (2): Sister Rosalie Rendu (1786-1856)

BY FRANCES RYAN, D.C.

True development, in keeping with the specific needs of the human being—man or woman, child, adult or old person—implies, especially for those who actively share in this process and are responsible for it, a lively awareness of the value of the rights of all and of each person.

Sollicitudo Rei Socialis (1987)¹

In the Pope's recent encyclical, he calls us to the concern for the authentic spiritual and human development of each person. One cannot but help to reflect on the life of Sister Rosalie, a Daughter of Charity, to see incarnated a sincere response to this call in her life lived for the genuine concern for others, especially the holistic development of the poor, particularly those most in need.

Jeanne-Marie Rendu was born at Comfort, a hamlet in that part of France called Gex, in 1786. She was the oldest of four girls in the Rendu family. Her mother, Ann Laracine, became a widow after nine years of married life.²

Beginning in 1789 France suffered first from the Revolution and later from the Napoleonic wars, which caused much oppression and turmoil in the country. "Although in its beginnings, the French Revolution was not an anti-religious movement, there was a strong hostility to religious congregations, especially those of men. Partly, this was a residue of anti-Jesuit antipathy, partly a result of Enlightenment that thought the vows, especially chastity and obedience were unnatural ...

¹John Paul II. *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (New York: St. Paul "Books and Media", 1987), 59-60.

²Viscount de Melun, *Life of Sister Rosalie* (Norwood: Plimpton Press, 1915), 1.

The real tragedy of the French Revolution was the catastrophic blindness of the French monarchy and ruling classes, both of which failed to see the pressing need for true reform."³

During this time, Jeanne-Marie witnessed the dangers her family accepted in order to give aid to priests. This aid included the bishop of Annecy, who took refuge in the Rendu house and became for Rosalie, "Peter, the gardener," her friend. Rosalie's mother attempted to explain to her the Reign of Terror and how King Louis XVI and Queen Marie Antoinette had been guillotined. The bishop of Annecy needed the Rendu's protection.⁴ At an early age, Rosalie learned the care and concern for others, particularly from the life of her mother. In later life Sister Rosalie, remembering the example of her mother, would find refuge for the archbishop of Paris, Monsignor de Quelen.

Jeanne-Marie attended boarding school with the Ursulines and then, eager to help the sick suffering, worked in the hospital at Gex. There she met Mademoiselle Jacquinet, who revealed to Jeanne-Marie her plans to enter the Daughters of Charity. In the hospital at Gex, Jeanne-Marie saw a portrait of Vincent de Paul and the words underneath the picture which read, "The Daughters of Charity will have for their cell, a hired room: for their chapel, the parish church: for their cloister, the streets of the city, the homes of the sick, and the wards of hospitals: for their grate, holy obedience and for their veil, holy modesty."⁵ She also felt called, but at fifteen years and eight months, her family, particularly her mother, found it difficult to see her go to the Daughters of Charity.

25 May, 1802, found the two young women, Mademoiselle Jacquinet and Jeanne-Marie in Paris at rue du Vieux-Columbier, where they began their life in the Company. Several months later, Jeanne-Marie was placed under the direction of Sister Tardy at rue des Franco-Bourgeois Saint-Marcel (now Boulevard Saint Marcel) in the Mouffetard district where she would spend her life among her beloved poor. Jeanne-Marie was given the name Sister Rosalie. While in the seminary, she became anemic and those guiding her decided to send her, when she was ready to be missioned, to this section "where Mansard roofs

³Stafford Poole, *A History of the Congregation of the Mission 1625-1843* (Santa Barbara: 1973) 347-48.

⁴Daughter of Charity, *White Wings and Barricades* (New York: Benziger Brothers, Inc., 1937), 1-19.

⁵*Ibid.*, 38.

were many," in order to restore and preserve her health. She was destined to stay there and breathe the air of the Mansards for fifty years.⁶

When the Company was authorized to wear the habit again, (the Community had been legally dissolved and dispersed), Sister Tardy requested the habit for Sister Rosalie in these words: "Our young Sister Rosalie Rendu has charmed our community. Despite her young age, she has the temperament to handle difficulties. She works hard. I ask you, Most Honored Mother, to give her the habit. Let me have her."⁷

At the age of twenty-eight, Sister Rosalie became sister servant to replace Sister Tardy. One year later, in 1813, Frédéric Ozanam was born in Milan, Italy. He would later go to Paris to study in the university and there meet Sister Rosalie in a humble parlor which stands today on rue de l'Épée-de-Bois.⁸



Sister Rosalie Rendu

⁶Ibid., 47.

⁷Anonymous, "Brief Notes on Sister Rosalie Rendu and Frédéric Ozanam (1813-1853)" (unpublished: Evansville: Mater Dei Archives, 1988) 1.

⁸Ibid.

The link was Monsieur Emmanuel Bailly. There was a bond in their mutual concern for others that united Sister Rosalie and Monsieur Bailly, professor of philosophy and director of *The Catholic Tribune*. He wrote on one occasion in 1833: "I am sending you two young men who have left our history conference ... Their charity is spirited, but they are young and impetuous. They have already committed themselves to certain praiseworthy acts but in little harmony with their possibilities. They have already distributed their winter provision of wood. They need direction. You alone, my mother, are qualified to guide them. Their names are Monsieur Ozanam and Monsieur le Taillandier. Both are students."⁹

Sister Rosalie gave Ozanam a slip with the names of three families for him to visit in their homes.

God has already given you spiritual wisdom or you would not be sacrificing your precious free day to His poor. Because you see Christ in His poor, I know you will approach each one you visit with humility as His servant. Always remember, messieur, that if we had been through the hardships they have had to meet—if our childhood had been one of constant want—perhaps, we, too, would have given way to envy and hatred, as I must admit have many of the poor in this quarter. Be kind and love, for love is your first gift to the poor. They will appreciate your kindness and your love more than all else you can bring them.¹⁰

Ozanam became more involved with the poor. The idea of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society was born from the gathering of these friends. Bailly became the first president over Ozanam, Auguste le Taillandier, François Lallier, Paul Lamache, Félix Clave, and Jules Devaux. They held the founding meeting of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society in 1833.¹¹ Sister Rosalie knew how to influence others in the service of the poor.

Sister Rosalie's humble parlor, located in the House of Charity, can still be seen on rue de l'Épée-de-Bois between the hospice and a dispensary, old landmarks that have been respected because of her charity.¹² A friend that often visited Sister Rosalie was Grandpa Thibault, an eighty-year-old river sailor. He is described as a good-natured, jovial, carefree character as simple as a child. Widowed, he lived quietly for some years but was quite lonely. One day he met a blind printer who had fallen into poverty. Grandpa Thibault befriended him, but his

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰James Derum, *Apostle in a Top Hat* (St. Clair Michigan: Fidelity Publishing Co., 1962), 54.

¹¹"Brief Notes," 1.

¹²*Echoes*, January 1953, 29.

peevishness and ill-humored disposition would not allow the blind printer to accept help. Having been brought to Sister Rosalie's parlor, the blind printer still refused help. Sister Rosalie then asked if he would help her by advising young children waiting in the adjoining room for some counsel on a choice of a trade and the conditions of the apprenticeship. He thus became "master of his trade" again and related to the youth the road of work he had pursued in his younger days. After this incident, Grandpa Thibaut and the blind printer did chores and errands for Sister Rosalie. Little by little, the printer became the oracle of the district telling about the great battles of the Republic and the great events of the Revolution.¹³

Some of the advice that Sister Rosalie gave those that would help with the poor was: "A poor person is more touched by kindness than by material help. One of the best means of influencing them is to show them consideration." To the Daughters of Charity that worked with her, she said, "If you wish to be loved, you must love, and if you have nothing to give, give yourself."¹⁴

In the Revolution of 1830, particularly in the days of 28-30 July 1830, Sister Rosalie was very involved with those who had suffered from the Revolution. On 31 July 1830 Charles X was deposed and replaced by the duke of Orléans, who, on 9 August 1830, was proclaimed king under the name of Louis Philippe. There had been many lives lost on both sides, and Sister Rosalie found many of the poor wounded and in need of help. The Saint Marceau Quarter was "a chosen theatre for cholera."¹⁵ Doctor Royer-Collard was attempting to minister to a cholera victim being carried to the Mercy Hospital when rioters were about to kill him. He turned to the crowd and said, "I am the friend of Sister Rosalie!" The words affected the crowd and it gradually dispersed. The stretcher with the cholera victim continued to the hospital, and the doctor was saved from the crowd.¹⁶

With the outbreak of the Revolution of 1848, the archbishop of Paris, Monsignor Affre, mounted the highest point of the barricade in Faubourg Saint Antoine to speak of peace. When a musket-shot rang out, the archbishop fell to the ground mortally wounded. Word arrived

¹³Ibid., 31-34.

¹⁴*Echoes*, February 1926, 47.

¹⁵*White Wings*, 88.

¹⁶Ibid., 92-93.

to Sister Rosalie, who was cautioned by another sister to be prudent. Accompanied by Sister Melanie, Sister Rosalie made her way through the crowd. With a quick, firm step and aided by the stalwart shoulders of first one, then another, she mounted the barricades, the white wings of her coronet furling above the crowd. Standing on the barricades between the two factions, she looked into the sea of faces so changed by hate. "Stop this shooting! Haven't I enough widows and orphans to care for now?" Though the fighting continued for some time in other sections of the city, the struggle was over in Saint Marceau.¹⁷

The rich and the poor were welcomed into her humble parlor for counsel and assistance. She said, "A Daughter of Charity should be a resting place upon which the whole weary world may lay its burdens!"¹⁸

In 1852 two gentlemen came to Sister Rosalie and presented her with the Cross of the Legion of Honor given "to the mother of the poor." The decree read:

On the Proposal of the Minister of the Interior
Seeing the valor, devotion, and admirable charity that have characterized the long life of Mademoiselle Rosalie Rendu (In Religion, Sister Rosalie), Superioress of the House of Charity, No. 3, Wooden Sword Street, Paris, conducted by the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, the Decoration of the National Order of the Legion of Honor is conferred upon Sister Rosalie Rendu, Daughter of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul.

Given at the Tuileries, February 7, 1852.

Louis Napoleon¹⁹

In 1853 Ozanam died, a loyal friend to Sister Rosalie. On February 1856, Sister Rosalie herself was dying of pleurisy with inflammation of the lungs. There was a dream that Sister Rosalie recalled:

One night I dreamed that I stood at the judgment of God. He received me with severity and was about to pronounce my sentence to perdition, when suddenly I was surrounded by an immense throng of persons carrying old shoes, hats, and clothing which they showed to God and said, "She gave us all these things!" Then God looked at me and said, "Because you gave all these old clothes in My Name, I open heaven to you. Enter, for all eternity!"²⁰

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 93.

¹⁸*Echoes*, February 1926, 47.

¹⁹*White Wings*, 155.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 161.

At eleven o'clock, 7 February 1856, Sister Rosalie died. In the cemetery of Montparnasse, by request of the poor, Sister Rosalie was buried separately from the Daughters of Charity. The inscription on her grave reads: To our good mother, Rosalie, from Her grateful Friends, the Poor and the Rich.²¹

Since the Second Vatican Council the Vincentian community has called its members to discern "those most in need" in our society and the Church challenging us to work for authentic spiritual and human development of others. The beatification cause of Sister Rosalie Rendu, which is now under way, gives us pause and memory of one whose life modeled it so beautifully.

²¹Ibid., 167.