

The Adventurous Nun

The Story of Anne-Marie Javouhey. 1779 - 1851.

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[Anne-Marie Javouhey was beatified in 1950.]

Not many of us, in our youth, have played cat and mouse with an unjust police force. Few of us have hidden priests who are hunted because of their unswerving fidelity to their Religion. Not many teen-agers have taught Christian Doctrine at a time when this was forbidden by law, but, to these charges, Anne-Marie could plead guilty. Who was Anne-Marie?

Blessed Anne-Marie, born on 10 November, 1779, at Jallanges, was the fifth of ten children. Her father, Balthasar, was a well-to-do farmer; her mother, Claudine, a very holy woman. As a teenager, vivacious Anne-Marie, or Nanette as she was called, loved dress and dancing and young men's company. There was a touch of dare-devil in her, which readily came to the surface, especially during the Revolution, when she frequently risked life and limb. She was devoted to St. Bernard and St. Martin. She arranged an oratory in her home and a small chapel dedicated to St. Anne in her garden. More important, she founded the Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny, was beatified by the Church, and, in the words of Pope Pius XI, was "the first woman missionary".

Vigilant Nanette.

Our story opens during the French Revolution in Chamblanc, where her family lived. Nanette used to teach Catechism because the nuns were either in exile or in hiding. On one occasion her father, disapproving of his daughter's daring enterprise, sneaked up on the unsuspecting class to demonstrate how easily she might be caught, but his daughter had devised a method of vigilance. Suddenly she was teaching Arithmetic. Angry at being outwitted, he forbade her to carry on this practice in the barn. She never disobeyed the order. Instead, the orchard, the garden, the fields and the road became the classroom, and her prayers became more devout.

The fury of the Revolution grew, and Fr. Ballanche, a hunted priest, found refuge in the Javouhey home. Seventeen-year-old Nanette passed those spy-filled days accompanying her father, who talked business while she moved among the people, arranging rendezvous in old barns, where they might hear night-time sermons, confess their sins, and attend a dawn Mass. Since she was a great organizer, she used to send her brother, Etienne, and Jean Petitjean, the young man who hoped to marry her, on mysterious trips in the Javouhey cart. Under piles of potatoes and hay, Fr. Ballanche used to lie, while souls, hungry for spiritual guidance, awaited him in some lonely place. She taught the younger Javouhey children to spy, just as today the Communists train children to spy on their parents and friends. The difference was that the Javouhey children spied to preserve life, and if any faithful priests were in the area, Nanette was bound to know.

A Dash of Danger.

One night, the scream of “Open the door in the name of the Republic!” horrified the Javouhey household. There was no time to bundle Fr. Ballanche into the attic. Nanette took the initiative: “Into the cupboard quickly.”

The fugitive slipped in, swinging the door behind him, but the latch did not catch. Meanwhile Nanette opened the front door, and four men entered, demanding the priest. Confidently, the deputy announced that he would have to arrest Balthasar, who, shocked at his sudden helplessness, heard his daughter chuckle at the whole idea. Her father could not produce a priest out of thin air. So she invited them to search the house — which was exactly what they intended.

As the search was beginning, the unlatched door creaked open. Of all people, it was the deputy who caught it, and he was about to peer into the cupboard, when Nanette suggested that her father ought to bring out the wine: “Later we can help them search for the priest.” One wonders what old Balthasar was thinking as his daughter asked him to share his wine with the men who had come to arrest him. He must have been paralysed at the sight of her taking the deputy’s coat and putting it in the cupboard. This time she shut the door firmly.

At long last, the deputy was satisfied by the Javouhey’s behaviour. They were too calm to be hiding a priest. A search would be useless. So, to end the momentous occasion, brother Pierre returned the deputy’s coat, but left the cupboard door wide open. We are told that the deputy stared at the cupboard. So did the Javouheys. He left with his escort and without his prisoner.

Today, priests are still being hunted. There are more than one thousand million people crushed, captured behind the Iron and Bamboo Curtains. Pray for them and the Church of Silence; for those in concentration camps and prisons; for the unknown nuns, brothers and priests who labour to the end. It is we who are the silent church. [Thank God the Iron Curtain has fallen, but the Bamboo Curtain over China, North Korea, Vietnam, Laos and Cuba is still in place. There are many other places where religious freedom is not possible, especially in fanatical Moslem and Hindu regions of the world.]

Spouse of Christ.

One day, shortly after the priest-hunt, the daring girl revealed her true colours. “Father, I want to be a nun,” she admitted to Fr. Ballanche. The priest encouraged her, but wondered what the future held for a nun at a time when all the convents were closed. Her father, of course, had other plans for his Nanette and told her so. That any girl should become a nun was one question but that this girl should be his daughter was quite another. Yet, to his rebuff Nanette had an answer. She began a barrage of letters to her father. “My dear father, not all your refusals discourage me. I think you would tear my heart out, to make me stop wanting to lead the religious life,” and again “I have promised God to devote myself altogether to the service of the sick and the education of little girls.”

So finally, very early in the morning of 11th November, 1798, a small group of people gathered secretly in an upstairs room. They knew that the girl, dressed as a bride, had just completed a private retreat, and now they witnessed her taking of vows. Her three sisters envied her, promising that they too, would be as “happy as you are now”. Her fellow villagers were pleased, but thought that none of the usual convents they had known before the Revolution would suit this vivacious young Mademoiselle.

The Test.

Nanette was happy, but the events of the next few years were unexciting to relate and cruel to bear. In 1799, Napoleon Bonaparte directed a coup d'état, and the religious crept out of exile. After another struggle with her father, Nanette entered the Convent of the Daughters of Charity, but there she went badly. Her mission to God was clear, but the kind of mission was not. She preferred to be apart from the other members; she lost her appetite. She could neither sleep, nor read. She lost weight, she was losing her vocation, but on she prayed.

One night while kneeling in distress at her bedside, she asked: "Lord, what would You have me do? Make Your will known to me." She promised obedience to God, even if it meant having to live her whole life in the dark coal-hole, which was near her room and terrified her. A voice answered her pleading: "You will accomplish great things for me." A few nights later, disturbed from sleep, she was horrified to see her room crowded with coloured children of races she did not know, and in the middle stood a nun in a strange habit. "These are the children God has given you. He wishes you to form a new Congregation to care for them. I am Teresa (of Avila). I will be your protectress," spoke the strange nun.

This vision occurred in 1800. We twentieth [and twenty-first] century folk must see visions too. There were once 3,000 street urchins who roamed the alleyways, living on theft and vice. Mario Borelli had a vision. He became Don Mario who lived with them and won their hearts so as to win their souls. [Read Morris West's *Children of the Sun: The Slum Dwellers of Naples* (1957) (US title: *Children of the Shadows: The True Story of the Street Urchins of Naples*), for a fuller account of this modern hero.] Visions are not always so clear as Anne-Marie reported: "I seemed to see — was it a dream? Was it just my imagination? I don't know — a multitude of children; poor, sick, weeping, commending themselves to me and reaching out their arms to me. What especially struck me was a multitude of blacks, men, women and children, calling me 'Dear Mother', and they were so unhappy that they left for ever afterwards the most vivid impression on me."

Failure.

Next time Balthasar visited the convent, he found his 20 year old daughter dressed to return home. The villagers had been right after all. Balthasar thought that now his daughter would listen to him, but he was disappointed. Instead, she opened schools and orphanages, and although funds were always insufficient to supply enough food and furniture, Nanette managed to keep these places open, at least for a time. Of course, enduring poverty was far from pleasant for Nanette. At one school she had to sleep on the floor and the conditions were so bad, that horrified curates returned prospective pupils to their homes. And each project that she started failed, and each failure depressed her. The life to which God was calling her would brook no depression, so she entered the Trappistine Convent called "The Monastery of the Holy Will of God". This title was to become the motto of her own Congregation, one day.

Already she had experience in the direct apostolate with the Daughters of Charity, and by the end of the Trappistine novitiate, she had the solid spiritual formation, necessary for her own peculiar vocation. So she left the Trappistines. The day of her own Congregation was at hand.

Strengthened by the Trappistine training, Nanette took on more and more work in schools and orphanages. Her sisters joined her and with financial help from their father, they began to succeed. Soon, other devoted women helped them and they became known as the Sisters of St. Joseph. So, on 12th May, 1807, nine young ladies, including Balthasar's four daughters took vows. Nanette retained her baptismal names, Anne-Marie, while her sisters became Marie-Therese, Marie-Joseph,

and Rosalie. They chose their motto: "The holy will of God." The Mother Foundress was 28 years old, and the world awaited her works.

I Have Come to Serve.

Restoration of souls, and sometimes of buildings, became the job of Mother Superior as the Congregation grew. After renovating the disused diocesan seminary in Chalon, the nuns lived there for almost three years, when Spanish prisoners of war were sent there. The nuns cared for what became a prison-hospital, where all types of infectious diseases spread. Reverend Mother herself caught typhus but she recovered. Finally, there was no room for the nuns. They migrated to Rue des Rats and then later (1812) to the historically famous monastery at Cluny, where, in 910, [Saint] Berno founded the original Benedictine Abbey. This Convent at Cluny became the Mother House of the Sisters of St. Joseph until 1849. Hence their title "of Cluny" was complete. About this time, a minor eruption occurred when Anne-Marie's nuns used the Lancastrian system of education, in which older pupils acted as monitors and taught groups of 10 what the teacher had taught them. Here was an excellent way to educate large numbers of poor children, for whom the number of books and teachers was inadequate. The system was criticized, however, because it was foreign (English) and was supposed to lead to indifferentism. Despite the adverse criticism of the nuns, the administrator of the Paris diocese; confident in the Congregation's ability, had a Governmental school placed in their care. So successful was the system in the school that Anne-Marie and her Congregation received unexpected acclaim, and she became an authority overnight.

Anne-Marie also took on many diverse tasks. She opened up workshops and a small hostel for people of modest fortune, a home for war widows and a girls' orphanage. Even the foundation of a preparatory seminary is attributed to her.

Senegal.

Meanwhile, the Congregation was spreading outwards. France looked to its colonies and the Congregation looked to the colonists. So Senegal (West Africa), a very primitive and unpleasant place, was the first mission to be chosen. Its two settlements, Goree Island and St. Louis were surrounded by silent bush, where unpredictable natives wandered. So poorly equipped was the hospital, that there were no blankets, beds, eating utensils or mosquito nets. No one even prepared meals. It was simply a place where wretched Africans went to die. In the end, Sister Rosalie had to abandon her plans for schools, and concentrate all her efforts on improving the hospital. Indeed, the Colony was in such a deplorable state, that Anne-Marie could not resist the temptation. "The climate of Senegal is very unhealthy, I must go there myself." she said.

Ship smells and sailors' shouts farewelled her at the port. She heard the harsh rasp of block and tackle and she saw men hurrying to their different tasks, before the ship set sail. Men barked orders. Men struggled under the weight of heavy stores. Men swung from ropes and climbed ladders, while the officers surveyed the whole scene. Sailors talked, argued and swore as passengers streamed aboard. Anne-Marie's blue habit was part of that colourful chaos, in which nameless people pushed and shoved their way to some unknown destiny. On board, she felt the ships floor beneath her feet rise and fall on the gentle swell. There was not long to go.

Anne-Marie Sought Souls.

Then came the time which thrills sailors and landsmen alike, for who could not love the sight of billowing canvas, caught by a sea breeze, or the rolling of a ship as it lunges and slumps across

ocean waves? That day, men and women, with their hearts set on the future, cut themselves off from the rest of the world. Some sought fame. Some sought fortune. Anne-Marie sought souls.

At Senegal, some months later, Anne-Marie was overjoyed at meeting her sister Rosalie again, and she admitted that she had often cried since her departure from France, but she had also laughed, though not so much. "I have taken a certain amount on myself; our good Master has added a little of his own — but things have settled down."

Typical of Anne-Marie, she moved up the Senegal River through 50 miles of jungle to Dagana, a trading-centre, where few whites had been, and founded a Mission Centre there. She had great hopes in native missionaries and yearned for a native clergy, but the poor example of the whites contradicted her holy life. After treating her for a tropical disease, one doctor wrote: "I have seen her at work; she is a saint. I am too old to see her in the calendar; but you will."

At the request of the British Governor, she visited Gambia, a British Colony which was used mainly as a dumping ground for hundreds of slaves taken from Moorish vessels. Anne-Marie refused to proceed until their degrading situation was improved. Finally, she left one Sister at Gambia in charge of these improvements, while at the insistence of the British Governor, she moved on to Sierra Leone, together with a girl, Florence, whom Sister Rosalie had freed from slavery.

Freetown.

Freetown, Sierra Leone, was no haven, with only one doctor (who was often called away from the town) and a very filthy dilapidated hospital. Untrained as she was, Anne-Marie spent those days caring for wounds, setting broken bones and dispensing medicines. The nights went in weaving mats for beds and improvising rags for blankets. Corruption had spread its evil tentacles here too, since the British had first dumped 400 slaves from Moorish vessels and imported 30 prostitutes from London to increase the population. The mulatto elite took control, and slavery broke out, among those who had once been slaves. Work was despised. Theft became a way of life. Despite this, the Mother Superior could only say: "Oh, how can I thank God for having brought me here! I feel so happy in being able to do so much good, and soothe so much suffering. If I had only six Sisters with me, what an amount of good could be accomplished!" About the slaves she wrote: "If only I had enough money to buy them all and set them free. I will never rest until this slave traffic is ended and they have all gained their freedom."

Yellow Fever.

Three months slipped by, when a sudden wave of yellow fever swept through the Colony, changing the hospital into a morgue. The Governor conscripted workers to cart away the dead. The doctor arrived to help her, and despite the grave risk of contagion, she fought the battle against disease for two months, until it struck her down. Then, somehow, through the constant care of Florence, that native girl, and against the doctor's predictions, the nun recovered. By then, the battle against yellow fever had ended.

One month later, still so weak from the fever that she had to be carried on board, she retracted her steps and found, to her horror, that she had left a trail of desolation in her path. The nun who had remained at Gambia was dead, while the Mother Superior of Goree Island had proved incapable. One nun had rejected her vows and deserted; a second had died unattended. With the urgent message for more nuns and better training sent ahead of her, she returned after two years in Africa to more strife in France. The Congregation needed her steady influence.

The Nuns' Mutiny.

Back in France, Anne-Marie found herself with a mutiny on her hands. The trouble had sprung up in the French Colony of Bourbon, the island of Reunion, in the Indian Ocean, where an unfortunate nun had taken upon herself the position of superior. Because sailing-ships took five months to reach the island, the nun had ample opportunity to convince nuns, priests and officials of her position as superior, before the newly appointed nun arrived. The usurper was so stoutly defended, that after a year's fruitless waiting, the real superior returned to France. At last, fully aware of the situation at the Colony, Anne-Marie sent her own sister Rosalie to take control.

Sister Rosalie herself met with great opposition, including an attempt to disband the Congregation. Ironically, the usurper, who intercepted the mail addressed to Rosalie, as she had done with Rosalie's predecessor, received the beautiful letter from Anne-Marie: "Do not let yourself be taken in by sadness; you will be capable of nothing when you are downhearted. God will judge; we must work."

But neither the opening of another's mail, nor the influence of governor or priest could hold back the wrath of the mother-country. After some time, Rosalie's position was confirmed through both government and ecclesiastical channels. The storm clouds had blown over.

Holy Hurry.

Expansion was the theme of the day and the Cluny nuns spread from Africa, westwards over into the Caribbean and South America, and to the East, heroic work was being done at Pondicherry, in India. Almost simultaneously, the Church approved of the Congregation's new rules as the Congregation's members swelled to 500 scattered throughout 18 houses in France and the Colonies.

In France, a new mission was taking shape — nursing the mentally sick. The asylum of St. Yon at Rouen, was to become the shelter of 1,350 patients, nursed by 170 Sisters. At Alencon, 80 lunatics, of whom 15 were extremely violent, together with 50 other misfits who were indiscriminately caged with the lunatics, moved Anne-Marie to action. Overcoming her repulsion at their screams, their nakedness and their unpredictable behaviour, she, with 17 nuns and her brother, pacified a jungle of savage human beings. The "Angels in blue" had won another victory.

About this time, despite her own depressing work, Anne-Marie wrote to her niece, Sister Clothilde, who was trying to patch up another's failure: "Come, my dear; pluck up heart; shake off your enemy indolence which tells you fairy-tales; don't listen to the pride which lurks beneath the (humble) violet; pride that is so afraid of failure, that people may laugh at it. Pay no attention to 'What will people say?' none whatsoever."

The Colonial Nun.

One of the French Colonies, Guiana was too hot, too wet, too rugged, too disease-ridden for anything else but a penal institute on Devil's Island. It was occupied by officials, merchants, speculators, paroled or escaped convicts and the usual group of nonentities who drift towards places where the conscientious arm of justice only reaches with difficulty.

Colonizing had not been successful in this area. In 1823, the Government had set up a colony of 164 trades-men and farmers along the banks of the Mana River, some 80 miles from the capital, Cayenne. Five years later, the number had dwindled to one family, reduced to the poorest conditions. Realizing its inability to cope with colonization, the French Government turned to

Anne-Marie. The result was that 86 laymen and 36 nuns sailed on two ships for Cayenne in 1828. Anne-Marie was to direct the Colony as the Government desired, but she intended far more. She knew of the Indian tribes in the area, the hundreds of slaves imported from Africa, and the wretched lepers nearby. She had hopes of bringing teen-age orphans, the sad remains of the Napoleonic wars, from France, so that they could settle down to a new life, once the Colony was on its feet. This extraordinary nun, however, did not live in a whirl of dreams. "I am taking you to Purgatory," she warned her helpers.

Once at New Angouleme (Anne-Marie's new Colony) the farmers and tradesmen all obeyed the nun and lived a community life, rising for 4 o'clock Mass and stopping work at 10 o'clock because of the oppressive heat; the Angelus and dinner were at noon. Schooling was for European children, and for Indians and Africans if they so desired. Particular times were set aside for community and individual works. For Sisters, Colonists and natives the time-table was the same. All worked for the betterment of the Colony and all were responsible to one person — a 50 year old woman, a nun, and, many believe, a Saint.

The Colony advanced so well, that Anne-Marie was able to leave, for a short time, to inspect two other Mission Stations on the Caribbean (Guadeloupe and Martinique) but when she returned, she found that 10 settlers had left. Brother Pierre had inclined to be dictatorial. Also, the old antipathy which dogs human nature, arose in the baby Colony. The whites objected to their children being taught in the school beside black children. Anne-Marie was firm: "I am here, remember, more as a missionary of God, than a missionary of France." The African children remained.

The Lepers.

We frequently read of lepers in the Bible, but the biblical terror has been so often repeated in our readings that it has become rather remote from our own lives. Damien, the leper-priest, [now canonized,] described leprosy more vividly: "Discoloured patches appear on the skin, especially on the cheeks, and the parts affected lose their feeling. After a time, this discoloration covers the entire body; then, ulcers begin to open, chiefly at the extremities. The flesh is eaten away, and gives out a fetid odour; even the breath of the leper becomes so foul, that the air around is poisoned with it... Sometimes, I feel no repugnance, when I hear the confessions of those near their end, whose wounds are full of maggots." Yet, even Damien admitted: "The smell of their filth, mixed with the exhalation of their sores, was simply disgusting, unbearable to the newcomer. Many times, in their huts, I have been obliged to run outside to breathe fresh air."

In our own times, one of Anne-Marie's followers describes a frightening scene, soon after she arrived to work among the lepers at Ducos, New Caledonia: "The cook himself, is a patient and has not enough of his fingers left to stir his miserable pots. His face is completely destroyed and he has no lips. He cannot prevent his saliva from falling into the dishes. Because of his leprosy, he cannot feel the heat and so there are many burns on his poor feet and arms."

Deplorable Condition.

It was for people like these, with grotesque and vile-smelling bodies, that Anne-Marie brought her nuns across the seas. The lepers' condition was particularly deplorable as when she arrived, very few had managed to build grass huts, and so the strong, salty winds bit into their sores. Food was scarce and fresh water rare. It is little wonder that suicide was their only escape from a wretched, lawless life, where all kinds of immorality were practised.

One can imagine Anne-Marie's joy when she was able to liberate the hundred lepers from their desolate prison. It was a goal which had taken three years to achieve — three years of brick-making, of floating the bricks by raft down the Mana River and back up the Acarouany to the proposed site; of mending clothes; of donating great stores of food supplies to tide the lepers over the unsettled period, before their own vegetable gardens could produce. Certainly, the colonists made great sacrifices for the lepers, thanks to the encouraging and ever-sacrificing Anne-Marie.

In Troubles and Distress.

At the main Colony, success was not conspicuous. Letters from those settlers who had deserted began arriving, and within a year, only two families remained. So in 1833, Anne-Marie left the New Angouleme Colony and its failure. "From the looks of things, you would not think that I had done anything at all." Five years' work seemed lost.

If she left failure at the Colony, she turned towards trouble in France. The Bishop of the diocese where the Congregation was founded had taken it upon himself to become its Superior-General, and he was perfectly satisfied to use any means he could, to gain his end. Apparently, French bishops, at that time, believed that a bishop had such a right, when the Mother House of a Congregation was in his own diocese. Who was the Bishop of Autun? To the faithful he must have been a sad sight. Born a marquis, commissioned in the French army at 20, he became a priest after two years' study, and four years after his seminary training, became Bishop of Autun. He had important friends, and the Church was to suffer as a consequence. Indeed, the struggle was to rage for 18 years between the bishop and the foundress. The story of this trouble makes sad reading and becomes far too involved for such a short biography. Suffice to say, Anne-Marie suffered much during this period at the hands of this man. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, still persecuting the prophets!

Meanwhile, much agitation was occurring over the issue of slavery.

A Second Try.

At last the conscience of the world was feeling chafed. In 1831 a Bill freeing slaves was passed. Immediate liberation was impossible, as this would place a financial strain on the various of the French Colonies' budgets, especially in the Caribbean area, so a seven-year probation period was decided upon, during which the slaves were to prove themselves suitable members of society or be returned to slavery. Back in French Guiana, 500 slaves walked off the plantations and headed to Cayenne, the capital, where they were put on the Government pay-roll and sub-leased back to their old plantations. They needed to learn how to use freedom. In 1835 the Government sought what they had been looking for, Anne-Marie — a person who could teach the slaves. Very soon they agreed that a colony should be set up, not on the New Angouleme site, but on the Mana plateau, which was cooler, less muggy, and closer to the leprosarium on the Acarouany. As there were only three years left before the probation expired, the Government suggested that two more years should be added. Everything was supplied — even priests and a doctor. Anne-Marie had complete charge; such was the confidence Government officials had in the 56 year old Cluny foundress. As King Louis Philippe exclaimed: "Madame Javouhey is a great man."

En route for Mana, she inspected the religious houses at Senegal, and remembering that most of the 500 probationers were men, she gathered 60 African women and brought them to Cayenne — a matter which our own Australian Government neglected when they began extensive migration for young European males. Naturally, the French Governor was aghast. Five hundred unruly problems were enough, without increasing their numbers. Even the captain distrusted the slaves and was

afraid to take them on his ship. Yet by the end of 1836, 520 Africans were safely installed in the Colony.

Mana.

Life at Mana was much the same as it had been at New Angouleme. A town took shape, complete with houses in well-planned streets, a chapel, a clinic, a convent for the nuns, and a dormitory for the unmarried women. Naturally, the social life had its rules and regulations, as any hostel must.

Settling the town was not Anne-Marie's only task. Large areas of land had to be cleared and divided into suitable blocks for the slaves soon to be freed. They dug irrigation channels and planted bananas and manioc (a plant with a tuberous root, similar to a parsnip), so that when the farms were finally occupied they would already be producing crops and would have a four months' rice supply. The Colony added to the competition of the plantation owners by providing small monetary rewards for successful harvesting of crops, while slaves, still to be freed, fled to its protection. On one occasion, while Anne-Marie was visiting the leprosarium, the owner seized his slaves, seeking refuge at the Colony, and burnt one of them alive. When Anne-Marie returned to the Colony, there was no vessel to take her to Cayenne, so she completed a forced jungle march of 50 miles, by a route now known as the Javouhey road. Yet all was in vain. As the Governor pointed out, how does a court proceed when a black man is on trial before a white judge, white jury and white witnesses? Such jungle justice is not strange to our civilized times either. In 1964, some men were tried for the lynch-murder of three civil rights workers in America. On examining the bodies of the victims, a pathologist stated: "I have never seen bones so severely shattered, except in tremendously high-speed accidents, such as aeroplane crashes." Negro leaders doubted if any of the accused would be convicted for this atrocity, because of the all-white jury. They were right. The murderers were acquitted and became heroes. More and more twentieth-century Anne-Marie Javouheys must step forward [as must twenty-first-century versions too]. [Historical footnote: In 1966 eighteen individuals were tried for the 'Mississippi civil rights workers murders' case (sometimes known as the 'Mississippi Burning' case). Seven were convicted, and after appeals served between 3 and 6 years as their sentence. In 2005 one other (regarded by many as the true ring leader) was sentenced for 20 years on 3 counts of manslaughter.]

Disaster Averted.

If civil rights defenders are called "nigger-lovers" today, they were called negrophiles in her day. Anne-Marie was accused of being one such person, and for a variety reasons, plantation owners, bishops and priests united in an attempt to remove her, yet, strangely enough, each attempt was blocked by the arrival of some Government personage. Although still unaware of the unison and collaboration of her enemies, she was moved by the Holy Spirit to make a drastic change. She ordered Sister Rosalie to return from Senegal to France as Superior-General. This unorthodox move actually saved the Congregation from disaster.

The scandalous behaviour of her enemies makes poor reading in this story of love, so I have avoided it. Nevertheless, the following will serve to demonstrate the hatred her enemies bore her. One night, before leaving the leprosarium, a native warned her that one of the rowers of the boat in which she would return, was paid by the colonists to upset it and thus drown her, as she had not learnt to swim. Despite the warning, the lone white woman sat for four hours, head bowed in prayer, as always on this trip, and nothing extraordinary happened that time when they rowed from the leprosarium to Mana. The would-be murderer had faltered because of her fearlessness.

Slave of the Slaves.

Then came the joyful day, 21st May, 1838, when, after Mass, 185 slaves were emancipated. As one of them admitted: "We are free now, but we will never be free from the debt we owe you. We can only repay you with this promise: you will never be ashamed of us." We are told that on receiving their charters of freedom, the freed men immediately handed them to Anne-Marie, the one person they could trust, but to their simple minds, the proof of their freedom was not the parchment, but the right to wear boots. The comical expressions accompanying the effort to fit into the boots which Reverend Mother had provided, added to the joy of the occasion. "If you could only see this population, whose aspect was so formidable and uninviting just two years ago," she wrote to Rosalie. "It is today so changed, so edifying and, for the most part, so virtuous that I cannot but see how truly it is the work of God."

In 1841, Mana was truly prospering. Four hundred slaves had been emancipated. Anne-Marie's irrigation channels had saved and produced the only bumper crops in Guiana during a severe drought, and, surprisingly enough, a convict at Devil's Island whom she had met on her trip to the lepers, had now been liberated, and was supervising the rum distillery. The Mana community paid for a long shed, in which were four big vats, and a little railway joining the distillery with the canefields. About 200 other liberated slaves moved into Mana, which, without a single policeman, was quiet and law-abiding. Everyone was literate, and children received full education. It was to the nun who organized this idyllic settlement, that Bishop Guillier, aided in his beliefs by the sickening behaviour of his fellow colonists and the unreliable reports of Anne-Marie's chaplains and the grasping Bishop of Autun, announced that this "white Queen" and servant of the devil must put aside her religious habit or suffer excommunication. No Communion! No Confession! Anne-Marie was excommunicated.

In Disgrace.

For two years Anne-Marie, who had crossed the world and suffered so many times for God, remained in disgrace, a scandal to all. We are told that this holy nun used to take long walks in the scrub, long lonely walks, while she conversed with the Master. "When I think of what has happened to me here, and I realize the weaknesses behind it all, I have to laugh — and sometimes I have to cry," she admitted. We are told that natives unexpectedly disturbed her in tears, yet a peaceful serenity remained with her always. She was no doleful creature; she had a smile for everyone. Under it all, the devil had managed to bring her very low. He never broke her. "I am always happy, even amid worries and contradictions. Sad I may be at times, but my heart is always buoyant. May my example be a guide to you always. Bear all for the love of God and thus you will find consolation and peace of soul."

The years were fleeing into the past. The Government would not finance another such colony nor more schools for the black children, and so Anne-Marie's stay at Mana ended. It was a sad farewell; a ship in the river surrounded by an ocean of bobbing canoes, in which the people, she had raised from slaves to free men, saluted her. They followed her ship down to the river-mouth. They could never forget her.

Now and At the Hour.

Over 60 years old, she returned to France, where a bishop, appalled at her excommunication, freed her from the punishment, and the whole world recognized her greatness. The Queen visited her twice. Bishops, priests and laymen honoured her, and her Congregation grew and spread. She had

over one thousand followers, but a few powerful enemies. The Bishop of Autun (France) still combining with Bishop Guillier (Guiana), realizing that his chances of controlling the Congregation were dwindling, set about to destroy it. One of his priests warned the 80 postulants and novices at Cluny that it was sinful to obey the orders of any of the Superiors — namely those who were loyal to Anne-Marie. All but seven of these young nuns stood by their Foundress. Next, the Bishop of Autun secretly scattered reports to all the bishops in whose dioceses the Congregation had houses. Bishop Guillier's unfounded charges against Anne-Marie were of course included; only after a long time was Anne-Marie informed of the plot to defame her, and then she refuted the charges. The bishop continued his manoeuvres.

The Revolution of 1848 clutched France in another death-grasp, but Anne-Marie moved safely through the fighting. She organized the Sisters into a kind of ambulance-brigade which cared for the wounded. Two of the Cluny houses were offered for the children of the fathers who had fallen in the riots. The atrocities eventually ceased, but in their wake came a plague of cholera, and the old nun, almost 70, replaced nursing Sisters who had themselves been infected. At length the plague ended. "O my God, I thank you for the sorrows and crosses you have sent me. How good You are."

The Ageing Heroine.

During these last few years, when she was almost always sick, the elderly heroine drove herself harder and harder. There was still so much to be done: "If I don't work, what would I do with myself?" People came: to her for advice; she was so united to God, that to speak with Anne-Marie "was like speaking to God". "Let us love truth, straightforwardness. The truth may hurt sometimes, but never does harm." Often during the bitter winter months of 1850-51, Mother General was heard to say: "My task is finished; the work I was called to do is done." Yes, it was done. Yet she longed to do more. She had planned to go to Rome to finalize matters for her Congregation, but as she grew feeble, she realized: "I have another journey before me, which I must make alone." So it was that on 15th July, 1851, the Mother General of 1,200 followers and Foundress of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny, Anne-Marie Javouhey died. She was 71 years old.

It is easy to write of the glorious days which followed — the miracles performed through her intercession, the papal declaration of 1908 acclaiming Anne-Marie Venerable, the formal day of Beatification, 15th October, 1950, but the fame and glories of "the woman God loved" seem far away and unrelated to us who have the battle to fight, promises to keep, souls to save and God to be glorified.

It is unnecessary to enumerate her virtues. Possibly her total forgiveness of the bishop, who for 18 years, worked to topple her labours, speaks for itself. Only half-an-hour before her death, she said to Sister Rosalie: "We ought to think of His Lordship as one of our benefactors. God made use of him to try us, when, as a rule, we were hearing round us nothing but praise." In the month between his death and hers, she prayed for the repose of the soul of "that good bishop". Such was her complete forgiveness.

The Modern Anne-Marie.

If Anne-Marie was a light in yesterday's darkness, where are today's lights? Just look at the present darkness. War is just round the corner, and the last major one (World War Two) involved mass slaughters of soldiers and civilians. At the same time millions of Jews were butchered, simply because they were Jews. If the world suffered through Nazism then, we have Communism now; Communism, which cages men by a Berlin Wall, nests of concentration camps, a vigilant spy

system and armed guards. Behind the 'Bamboo Curtain' the situation is as bad as in the worst days of Stalin. Communists infiltrate into religion and set man against man and religion against religion. Ironically, the thoughtful who point out the trickery of this ideology are despised and known as fanatics, as fools and as dramatists. And Catholic Italy, France and South America are falling prey to this sinister disease. Have we no fear for the world in which nearly half the people are starving? We build more siloes to house unmarketed food and some greedy business men would prefer to dump produce into the sea rather than risk a drop in the market-price — or feed the starving. Have you no fear for the world?

Racially speaking, atheism is victorious. The down-trodden Negro in America and England, or the abandoned Chinese in Hong Kong bears witness to this. And all about us, people on the street, in the paper, over the wireless and television, and on the screen flaunt a way of life which is both seductive and degrading, while we sit back, supposedly innocent, self-satisfied, and I fear, tainted. These are challenging times! We, Catholics, are the light of the world, where is our light? People are spiritually dead, we give them no truth. People are starving, we give them no food. People are ignorant, we give them no knowledge. People are hated, we give them no love.

What is Your Vision?

What is your vision, kind reader? Is it to be an Anne-Marie Javouhey in your own right? A light in the darkness? In Australia we need more Anne-Maries to staff the family cottages for orphans, the hospitals where our sick lie, and the schools where our children await the truth. The various Catholic Action Groups all grind to a halt, if certain people with the mind of Anne-Marie Javouhey do not come forth. And what of your family, young mother and wife; what of your fellow-students, Catholic pupil; what of your fiancé, young lady; what of that afternoon-tea circle, old lady; what of the people about you, Catholic of the 1960's, [and you, too, Catholics of the twenty-first century,] if you don't spark off their imaginations, so that they seek good? Spur yourself to live for others and whip others into action for the world. What challenging times!

Spur yourself to live for others and whip others into action for the world in which 66 per cent of the people are the under-privileged and so many of them are non-christians as well. Perhaps you have a vision of coloured people as Anne-Marie once did? Then go to them. You can, you know, as a Lay Missionary! Whatever your skill, can you give a few years of your life? Spread the Good News of Christ everywhere. It is too good, too full of hope and certainty to be left unknown. Spread this Message as Anne-Marie did among the Africans. Become another Anne-Marie with the nurses, teachers, carpenters, plumbers, farmers, mechanics, pilots, doctors, dentists, orderlies and builders who are, even now, blasting their way to future glory. In her time, Anne-Marie accomplished her mission, but the times have rolled on. Now the coloured people look to us. What challenging times!

If only we realized that while we ponder about our lives, the destiny of souls is hanging in the balance; the whole of Eternity is poised; the lives of people yet unheard of are waiting, and the children yet unborn are depending on us while we hesitate on the brink. Why suffer an inferiority complex when the world is waiting for us, needing us? The gates have swung open; the green light is flashing; time for action has come.

Is It You?

I am also writing to someone else. Is it to you, young woman, between the age of 16 and 30? An ardent love, an overwhelming desire to be a religious is not a requisite for a religious. Simply a desire, the will to do something worthwhile with your life, to accomplish something which will

leave an unforgettable mark on the world, or a desire to bring God, goodness and happiness to an unhappy world is all that is needed. Feelings do not count. Your act of the will does. Simply say: “Yes, Lord.” “Yes,” to the various works of Anne-Marie Javouhey which have spread into our times. Her followers battle for Christ in classrooms and mission villages; in hospital wards and leprosaria; in orphanages and mental homes and in caring for retired ladies. These “angels in blue habits”, these Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny, go wherever they are needed and they are needed everywhere. With 118 convents in Europe, 26 in Asia, 92 in Africa, 63 in America and 16 in Oceania, the spirit of Blessed Anne-Marie has reached Australian shores, where there are only three houses. Two of these are convents with a seminary.

“Go and Make Ready For Us, He Said, To Eat” — Luke 22:8.

The Sister’s life in a seminary is to co-operate closely in the training of tomorrow’s priests. Perhaps her life may not have the attractions of other vocations, but it has what all other’s lack: an intimate connection with the priesthood. It is nothing less than carrying out what Mary, our Mother, did for the first Priest. For the Sister cooks, sews, nurses, sets the students’ tables and prays for the priests of the twentieth and [twenty-first] century, as truly as Mary did for Christ, in the first century. Mary was never in the public eye, but she was always nearby, when she was needed. So too, the Sister’s most important work is not what men may see or weigh or measure, but her Masses, prayers and sacrifices which she offers for the future priests.

Then, when Ordination day comes, she shares in a mother’s joy, for she has somehow replaced the seminarian’s natural mother, and she has shared in Mary’s spiritual motherhood. The Sister knows that these young men, whom she has helped, even by her own shining example, are, at Ordination, priests forever, and they will always remember her in every Mass for the rest of their days.

The seminary Sister also knows that today’s chores are not only caring for the future Christs out in the dining-room, but, united with the sufferings of the crucified Saviour, are giving strength to Mother Rose who labours in an Indian hospital despite 180 m.p.h. winds and floods; courage to Sister Othilde, who, for 30 years, has heroically nursed the lepers of New Caledonia; consolation to the young Vietnamese soldier who lies mortally wounded in a rice-field; faith to the doubting convert; hope to the weary negro; love to the parent and child; patience to the priest and perseverance to the seminarian. Be sure that wherever good is done on earth, where an unbelieving soul humbly submits, where a loving parent joyfully accepts his own child’s handicap, where a sick person rolls in agony but trusts in the Holy Will of God, where you, reader, have success when you did not expect it, be sure that this grace, from God, was not inspired by your own good works, but by the offered seconds, minutes, hours and days of nuns like those in a seminary. Truly their convent is a powerhouse — no wonder, within the seminary, it is a peace within a peace. No wonder the gaiety of these nuns exposes the falsehoods of the grim, morose caricatures of convent life, which ignorant men love to portray in films and books.

There is accomplishment in the nun’s day and she knows it. Perhaps you, young lady, are destined to be another Mary, a Sister Marie-Therese or Assumpta, or even a Mother Camillus or a Mother Joseph. If so, I congratulate you on your destiny. And I suggest that all people, who live unspectacular lives, can accomplish extraordinary wonders if they, like the Sisters, offer the grace of every trivial act for some lofty motive. Passing through the doorway, racing for the train and glancing at a watch are all actions which can be coated with graces. So perform them with a will. One day you will be surprised when you are rewarded for the good that you have done. Lucky you!

Certainly very many people, religious and lay folk, are fighting a good fight, as all Catholics must. We are all conscripted to rout Satan on the dusty basketball court, in the sunlit church, before the inky typewriter, in the smoking compartment, down the lonely alleyway, within the convent walls. All of us are comrades in the war of all wars. We should do well, then, if we were to remember the words of General Javouhey, as she was once called in a riot-torn Paris street: “Come, my dear. Pluck up heart. Shake off your enemy indolence which tells you fairy-tales. Don’t listen to the pride which lurks beneath the (humble) violet; pride is so afraid of failure and the people may laugh at it. Pay no attention to ‘What will people say?’ none whatsoever;” and: “Never, never lose heart. Remember that Heaven is the prize and eternity is unending.”
