



REFLECTIONS ON THE EUCHARISTIC LETTER

Part 1

**“Write the vision down,
inscribe it on tablets to be easily read,
since this vision is for its own time only.” (Hab. 2:2-3)**

The Eucharistic Letter is a living tradition. The fifty-year old Jesuit priest, Jean-Pierre Medaille penned the vision of God’s ‘little design’ in 42 very carefully crafted paragraphs of *The Eucharistic Letter*. It is now believed by the latest research (Nuns Without Cloister, Marguerite Vacher, SSJ, 2010) that the original Eucharistic Letter was sent in 1660 by Father Medaille to Marguerite Burdier, one of the first six founding women, who was at that time, the superior of a community house in Tence.

Just 10 years earlier, the Congregation of St. Joseph had been established canonically and legally as a new form of consecrated life, living outside the cloister. *“Within a decade, the small congregation established in the Velay had grown considerably, to 22 houses in four dioceses: 16 in the diocese of Le Puy, 3 in Vienne, 2 in Lyon and 1 in Clermont.”* (Vacher, p.96)

But the birth and growth of these early communities brought its own challenges and crisis. It wasn’t long before *“problems connected with the very nature of the vocation and the elasticity of its structures”* began to emerge. Manuscripts tell us that there were differences in expression of this new way of life amongst the country sisters and the town sisters. The tensions and confrontations originated from the differing points of view among the sisters themselves. It was within this climate of new beginnings that Pere Medaille, their wise spiritual guide, received this inspired vision of the ‘little design’ way of life and shared it with Sr. Marguerite.

For whatever reason, The Eucharistic Letter was not received, at least not in this particular form and was not circulated, or rarely, among the communities. Hence, 'le petit dessein' remained largely unknown to the the Sisters of St. Joseph. *"It might have been perceived primarily as a personal message and therefore more or less rejected for use by the group. Perhaps it was thought to be too close to the Company of the Blessed Sacrament. Some houses might have felt cramped by the notion of not being legally recognized. All that is known is that Marguerite Burdier, in order to work toward "the double union," was content to keep this letter as a treasure in her heart and in her records, without imposing it."* (Vacher, p. 109)

**...eager for its own fulfillment,
it does not deceive;
if it comes slowly, wait...**

Yes, we have waited for the fulfillment of this original vision of The Eucharistic Letter to be proclaimed. Over time our consciousness has evolved and circumstances within ecclesial structures and sociocultural realities have shifted and we have matured into an important critical threshold. After Vatican II when all religious were challenged to return to the Gospel and the 'original inspiration' of their founders, research began in earnest and translators presented us with all the written documents bequeathed to us by Jean-Pierre Medaille.

According to Marguerite Vacher, *"When Father Medaille wrote the Letter in 1660, most of the existing houses were very small, with as little outward appearance as Jesus in the Eucharist. This he saw as gain: "How happy our Institute will be if it maintains this spirit of littleness, humility and self-emptying."* (p. 106)

After 10 years of witnessing the first development and fruits of these early communities, Fr. Medaille seems, upon reflection, to get an insight into the future. In The Eucharistic Letter, he reiterates and expands the mystical aspects of littleness, hiddenness and self-emptying love.

Even from these early beginnings and throughout the 3+ centuries, two interwoven paths for this Medaillan spirituality have manifested and evolved. One group followed a more structured, institutionalized way of life, with more socially recognized and canonically approved religious life that had larger houses, superiors, public canonical vows and ministerial apostolates (Constitutions, the Congregation of St. Joseph). The second remained in hidden, small groups and were not legally or canonically recognized as religious. They chose to pursue holiness of life along with apostolic service as an expression of their baptismal consecration to Christ. It is understandable that over the decades and centuries our sisters have grappled with “*the impossibility of imagining that the vocation of Srs. Of St. Joseph could be lived without the usual forms of religious life.*” (Vacher p. 167)

Throughout the years, the gift has been a spirit of unity and charity in all the diversity of forms; a unity that springs from our sharing in the love of Christ that has gathered us together as one. Certainly, this absence of The Eucharistic Letter in our hands for more than 300 years challenges us to seize the moment and respond wholeheartedly.

(to be cont'd in the next issue..)

REFLECTIONS ON THE EUCHARISTIC LETTER

Part 2

For come, it will, without fail. Hab 2:2-3

This mystical-prophetic document is pure gift of the Spirit for our NOW time. It belongs in our evolving story in the 21st century. Can we declare that this is ‘*the time*’ for the Little Design vision to be fulfilled as Habakkuk proclaims?

Let us nourish our hopes from the counsel given us by Fr. Adrien Demoustier, S.J. who spoke at the Le Puy Assembly (Oct. 12, 2000) during the week of celebrations for the 350th Anniversary. In his theme presentation entitled: A Congregation without a Congregation, he reflected on his own thoughts since he

wrote his first commentary on *The Eucharistic Letter* in 1968. Seeing the reality unfold from a 32-year perspective, he is bold and daring in forthrightly calling us ... to prepare for the birth of the future!

“Essentially and primarily religious life is associative and not hierarchical. The model of union and fusion, the only one experienced so far, has proved fruitful and vitalizing; however it is not the only solution possible. In the long run, it does not solve the problem since it maintains the “old model” of the Congregation with a Superior General. With the trend in decreasing numbers becoming permanent, this could lead to a grouping of all kinds of ‘originalities’ into one congregation”.

Father Demoustier challenges us to be courageous and mature enough to face this Paschal hour in our history and prepare for a ‘congregation without a congregation’. This must be embraced from within a powerlessness and a self-emptying that is willingly accepted . . . at least by a small number of members. *“The central portion of the Eucharistic Letter takes on a precise meaning. It is a question of actively facing the ‘death forms’, their mutation/disappearance, to make way for a new birth.”*

Realizing that this is our “perhaps in time” moment, we invite you to return to the Source and revisit *The Eucharistic Letter* at your kitchen tables all around the globe. Who knows what the Spirit may create? What resonates? What is birthing within you...within the circle of spiritual seekers around you? *“To be able to accept ‘these new ways’ requires detachment from the priority given to those we had inherited from the past, and which were a blessing”.* Adrien Demoustier, SJ

This wonderful ‘coming together’ of history and vision is further celebrated in the conclusion of Sr. Marguerite Vacher’s book *Nuns without Cloister* (English 2010). It’s an open invitation to revisit our understanding of The Little Design as compared to the founder’s original inspiration:

In the time since Vatican II, it has become possible to rediscover and reconstitute the complete heritage of Father Medaille. Over the centuries, external conditions, especially in psycho-social and juridical realms, limited the full realizations of his insight. Changes now experienced on multiple levels – not the least in historical

understanding – have put all the cards back in our hands. For Sisters of St. Joseph, this provides the prospect of discovering through the life lived by women of their own time, genuine forms of fidelity to their vocation. (Nuns Without Cloister, p. 319, English, 2010)

Could this all be in the plan of God, in the Divine Design, that this text would be prophetic and meant to be realized in some future time? Yes, long decades after a flourishing religious life of the Sisters of St. Joseph all across the continents of the Earth, we are revisiting this original document with new eyes and new hearts. Is this the time for the ‘*something new*’ to be born beside or with the ‘*something old*’ that we have known and carefully nurtured for some 360 years?

The Sisters of St. Joseph have carefully treasured this *Eucharistic Letter* as part of our rich heritage. A marvel to some of us, is that we are being used ‘as instruments’ in its rebirth in this Millennium ... because here we are ... in this now moment, eager to share “*the lavish grace*” with as many great lovers of God as possible. In this larger Christ-consciousness, we see, everything belongs! In a oneness paradigm we all share the Beams of Love. Let us stand up and claim ... this is our “perhaps in time” moment! We acknowledge that some Sisters of St. Joseph along with many spiritually mature women and men scattered around the globe, are feeling a call, a strong Spirit-nudge, to explore “the Little Design” way of life with other spiritual seekers in their respective neighbourhoods. These ‘animators’ are helping bring to birth as many small pockets of Little Design Communities as the Spirit might wish to establish ... yes “throughout the whole church”. (E.L.)

Rosemary O’Toole, CSJ , Sister of St. Joseph in Canada (Peterborough)