



Heritage Statement of the Sisters of St Joseph of Cluny

Anne Marie Javouhey founder of the Sisters of St Joseph of Cluny was nine years old when the Paris mob stormed the Bastille and barely fourteen when the French royal family were beheaded. Her response even at that young age was to help hide fugitive priests. At the same time she saw the importance of education and she began to gather the young children of the village for catechism classes. As an added incentive to attendance she also provided games and entertainment.

She had a dream at this time in which Sr Teresa of Avila showed her children from different races whom God wished to confide to her care. That dream sustained her all through her life.

In the aftermath of the revolution she was appalled by lack of education available to children and the number of orphans that had no one to care for them. Her father helped buy buildings – one in Cluny – and it was here with the help of her sisters and a few like-minded companions that she set up her Institute in 1807 under the patronage of St Joseph.

She introduced the Lancastrian method and her schools multiplied not only in Burgundy but all over France. Her father's money was not limitless so she set up Boarding schools hoping these in turn would help pay for her poor schools.

Her success led to a request from the French Government to travel to the French Colonies to organize schools and hospitals. St Teresa's dream was coming true and she went willingly. She earned the enmity of the colonists by insisting that she was called to provide education and health care for the indigenous people, irrespective of colour or creed, as well as for the settlers. She held fast to her resolution in spite of calumny and persecution.

Even to read the list of places visited is striking – Reunion, Madagascar, Pondicherry(India) Senegal Sierra Leone. Gambia, South America. Everywhere she went she brought the Gospel of Christ with its message of service and respect for others. In Senegal she loved discussing God with the Muslims and she admired their piety.

In 1831 the French Government passed a Bill abolishing slavery. This was not an unalloyed success as the slaves without training or education were unable to enjoy their newfound freedom and were even

more vulnerable to exploitation. Understandably they often reacted to this exploitation with violence. Anne Marie believed that with proper education and training free slaves could be productive members of the Community.

She persuaded the French Government to buy land in French Guyana and received permission to set up a project to prepare the slaves for freedom. With the help of the sisters and skilled artisans, the slaves were taught the 3 r's as well as agriculture, carpentry, distilling (they established a small distillery) and all the other trades necessary for a happy, dignified and productive life. The project was a success despite constant harassment from the plantation owners.

In 1850 Anne Marie was invited to Ireland "to teach the poor and the well-to-do" She agreed with all her heart "if we could some good there".

The Sisters finally came to Ireland in 1864 and their success was attributed to the broad curriculum provided (French, German, Italian, Music, Art and Science) and their faithfulness to Anne Marie's dictum to "love the children.....and make a great effort to improve their education and raise it to as high a degree as possible.).

Cluny schools following in the footsteps of Christ and Anne Marie continue to foster respect for the other, coupled with high standards and a sense of responsibility for those less well off in any part of our world . www.sjc.ie