

« Keep awake ! »

Advent 2020 — Online retreat with Madame Acarie

« O most glorious Virgin Mary, most sweet mother of our Lord Jesus Christ, my good Advocate, have mercy on me, a poor and miserable sinner. O most excellent Lily of the shining and admirable Trinity, I beg you to pray for me so that through you I may embrace your dear son Jesus Christ with perfect love, and that I may be made a soul according to his heart. » (True exercises)



1. Watchful virgin

Virginity and watchfulness: two Marian virtues that prepare us to welcome the Lord in poverty and need. Watchfulness, to which Jesus calls us, requires that form of virginity that consents to our radical powerlessness in the face of God's coming in our flesh. Madame Acarie experienced this virginity, which is faith in the Word of God who is capable of fulfilling his promise of communion and love.

Barbe Avrillot was born in Paris on 1 February 1566, **marked with the seal of the Virgin**. Her parents, Nicolas Avrillot and Marie Lhuillier—having lost three children at an early age—promised to consecrate the surviving child to Mary: “They vowed to make her wear white until the age of seven in **honor of the Blessed**

Virgin”. The child, therefore, wore white clothes made from “a fabric common to people of inferior quality” as a sign of her **Marian consecration**. In this extremely rich family, she received poverty as a distinctive mark. Thus consecrated to Mary, little Barbe was baptized in the church of Saint-Merry on the 2nd of February, the day of the **Purification of the Virgin**. Her mother would then have three sons, but since her family abandoned her during her trials, we know nothing about her early childhood outside of this consecration: at the age of seven, her mother took her to the **shrine of Notre-Dame de Liesse** to place her white garments there.

a) Virginity and God's choice

Around the age of ten, Barbe was entrusted to the Poor Clares of Longchamp where her aunt



Isabelle Lhuillier was a nun. There she learns “to savor the spirit of devotion, to serve the Blessed Virgin and to meditate on the decades of the rosary from which she received great graces, continuing this devotion for the rest of her life.” She is initiated in the recitation of the Office of the Blessed Virgin and the meditation of the mysteries of Christ based on the Rosary. She will recite the rosary daily, even at midnight, since she has received so many graces through it. Later, the simple mention of Mary’s name would suffice to make her enter into recollection. By now she is thriving so well in this monastic life, where she undoubtedly receives more attention than she did in her own family, that she becomes aware of the call to consecrate herself to God as a nun. The vow of virginity, through the renunciation of all sexual relations that it entails, inscribes radical poverty in the flesh with a view toward a fruitfulness of which God alone is the source.

Such was the meaning of this virginity, through which the Virgin Mary associated herself with the hope of Israel’s poor (Lk 2:25,38): to await the coming of the Lord is to watch in prayer without being able to do anything except hope in him. To persevere in this watchfulness, Mary lived in the light of God’s promises: God is faithful to his Word. Physical virginity has meaning only if it leads to this watchfulness that proceeds from a heart unified by the desire for the Kingdom. It is a response to a call, faith in the promise, a commitment to be faithful to the one who chooses us first. Virginity is indeed the mark of being chosen. It is an awareness of belonging to God because he first desires that we live for him. **Every baptized person, conscious that he or she has been chosen, is called to achieve this virginity thanks to which the heart belongs only to God.**

b) Virginity and conversion

However, any expectation passes through the crucible of disillusionment, because the reality of what happens never corresponds to what was imagined. For Barbe, the disappointment

was brutal and swift. Against her will, she had to agree to follow another path than the one she desired: her mother didn’t entrust her to the Poor Clares to make her a nun! At the age of 14, she forced her to leave the Monastery of **Our Lady of Humility** so that she might marry a rich man. Barbe resisted fiercely, pursuing an ascetic life in her family: although she wasn’t a nun, she wanted to be a nun in the service of the sick. To break her will, her mother imposes harsh deprivations on her, to the point that she will have a frozen toe amputated because of the cold she has to endure in the winter.

She certainly relied on the Virgin, then, who she always considered as “her ordinary refuge in all things.” In faith, she finally consented to be married at the age of 16. So, she committed herself with all her heart to follow a path that she did not choose. She made a truly spiritual decision, as shown by the way she gave herself entirely to the love of her husband and then to her six children. She conveys to them her attachment to Mary, as one of her daughters testifies: “Every feast day of the Blessed Virgin, we went to visit the church of Notre-Dame in Paris. She fasted in her honor on all the vigils and Saturdays of the year, even those on which the holy Church allows us to eat meat, from Christmas to the Purification. She encouraged all those in her family to have devotion and recourse to the Blessed Mother of God ».

The Lord never comes according to our expectations. Mary, less than any other person, could not imagine how God would visit her, nor even what Simeon’s prophecy meant about her pierced heart (cf. Lk 2:35). **Virginity of the heart means consent, not only to our powerlessness concerning the coming of God but also to our ignorance concerning the manner of his coming.** In this respect, the life of Madame Acarie is exemplary, so much so that through the most tragic events or the most astonishing graces no human plan will be of any avail. For the time being, the unexpected thing is the fulfillment that she enjoys among her in-



laws, where she is pampered as she never has been in her own family. Nicknamed "*la Belle Acarie*" ["the beautiful Acarie"] by the Parisian society where she shines with all the brilliance of her youth, the watchfulness of the nun is now that of a mistress of the house attentive to the care of her family.

c) **Virginity and faith in the impossible**

What was unexpected for Madame Acarie was the realization of her desire for consecration in the very heart of this secular lifestyle. Beyond our desire for consecration to God, it is truly God who consecrates ourselves to Him! This is what happened during her conversion in 1587 when she heard this sentence in the depths of her heart: "*He is indeed a miser for whom God does not suffice.*" **As a married woman, she can live in that spirit of virginity which consists of loving the Lord with all her heart, with all her mind, and with all her strength** (cf. Deut 5:6)! Consecration is not based on the gift of self, but the openness of the heart to God's gift of himself to us. This is why virginity is both the condition and the fulfillment, because God's gift does not suppress it, but consecrates it.

And so it was for Mary herself, whose virginity was mysteriously consecrated by her motherhood: having become a mother through the action of the Holy Spirit, she is more virgin than ever, while her heart now belongs entirely to God through the exercise of her divine motherhood. The Holy Spirit so perfectly 'virginizes' Mary's heart that he preserves it from the fantasy of omnipotence: conceiving the Son of the Most High could have exposed her to dizzying greed. Let us remember Eve who declared at the birth of Cain that she had "*acquired a man through the Lord*" (Gen 4:1), thus taking possession of this son by setting Adam aside. On the contrary, Mary, pure and free of all covetousness, sees herself more than ever as the humble handmaid of the Lord in the face of the

impossible that is accomplished in her. More dispossessed than ever, she is confirmed in her virginity through the conception of this Child who belongs only to God.

Mary understands that this human impossibility, "*I have no husband*" (Lk 1:34), is the condition of God's action, as the Angel confirms to her by giving the example of her cousin Elizabeth: this aged and barren woman has just conceived in her old age, because "*nothing will be impossible with God.*" (Lk 1:37) Mary's consent consists in believing the word that the Angel declares to her: "*Let it be with me according to your word.*" (Lk 1:38) Her faith primarily isn't in God's omnipotence, but in the fact that nothing can prevent God from fulfilling his Word: "*If we lack faith, he remains faithful to his word, for he cannot reject himself.*" (2 Tim 2:13)

God's almighty nature is a Love that keeps its word; he is not a magician! It is precisely out of love that God renounces solitary omnipotence, binding himself irrevocably to his creature through the covenant. If man frequently speaks and does not act, this is not the case with God, for whom to speak is to act (cf. Gen 1:3,6,9...). God speaks, not because of a power he has to do everything, but in the name of a love that keeps its word. God goes so far as to speak Himself into our flesh through this divinely filial Word, His only Word capable of completely fulfilling His Fatherly love for our humanity. Mary believes in this Word of God, and the Word becomes flesh, and humanity opens itself to the unthinkable communion with God in his Son. God chose her as a virgin precisely because of the impossibility of her conceiving. Mary, poor in everything, consents in faith to this 'impossible', which is not impossible for God. **Every true mission is based on this yes to the impossible, thanks to which the work of God is accomplished under the movement of the Holy Spirit.**



2. Virginité et vigilance

« **Beware, keep alert** : for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all : **Keep awake !** » (Mk 13:33-37)

Virginité, entendue comme consentant à l'impossible, nous donne une vraie acceptation de l'appel de Jésus, **"Beware, keep alert"** (Mk 13:33), un appel qu'il renouvelle en Gethsémani : *"Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation."* (Mk 14:38). Jésus s'adresse à ceux qu'il a choisis pour être ses disciples, non parce de leurs capacités, mais afin que l'impossible que Dieu accomplit par lui puisse se réaliser en eux. Rien d'autre n'est demandé d'eux que d'attendre ce qu'ils ne peuvent imaginer, sans perdre espoir. Jésus vient déconstruire toutes les formes d'attente humaine en évoquant l'effondrement du Temple, la guerre entre les nations, la persécution des disciples, et même le secouement du cosmos. **Seul le mot de Jésus demeure!** (cf. Mk 13:31) Il est impossible pour nous de concevoir le Royaume qui vient, mais il est déjà en train de se réaliser dans le cœur qui garde la veille sur son mot.

Quelle que soit la tâche confiée pour ce temps d'absence, chacun doit se tenir à la porte pour l'ouvrir au Maître quand il viendra : **"therefore, keep awake."** La mention des quatre veilles de la nuit souligne combien cette veille doit être permanente. Rien n'est dit sur la façon dont le Maître

viendra parce que ce n'est pas une question d'imaginer un scénario, mais de rester éveillé.

Keep awake, signifie garder le mot de Jésus dans son cœur en obéissant à la routine humble de la vie quotidienne : ce mot apporte déjà la présence de celui qui se tient à la porte (cf. Rev 3:20).

Keep awake, pour rester disponible aux événements que Dieu n'a pas prévus, plus grands que nos projets humains : rester éveillé est ainsi le signe de la liberté et de l'amour.

Keep awake, signifie garder un cœur comme celui de la Vierge, capable de croire l'impossible accomplissement qui dépasse tout désir : la promesse est accomplie dans notre pauvreté.

Keep awake, pour être comme l'argile dans les mains du potier, à travers les épreuves de l'existence ainsi qu'à l'ouverture à l'incalculable générosité de la vie.

Keep awake, oser croire la promesse de Dieu à nous : communion avec lui et participation à sa vie ! **Nothing will be impossible with God for the fulfillment of his loving purpose.**

3. Trois pratiques spirituelles pour cette semaine

- Prendre conscience de mon élection en renouvelant mon désir d'appartenir totalement à Dieu.
- Consentir à ma pauvreté afin d'accueillir le Royaume.
- Croire en l'accomplissement de l'impossible dans la fragilité de mon existence.

4. Prière de début

Chaque semaine, nous suggérons que vous vous concentriez sur un verset de l'Écriture ou une phrase de la Bienheureuse Marie de l'Incarnation :

« *Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.* » (Mk 13:31)



Pray each day of the week - 1st week

Monday 30 November

« Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed. » Mt 8:5-11

« We must always, at all times and in all encounters, throw ourselves into the arms of our good Father who is God, and abandon ourselves to his mercy. »

(Sister Marie of the Blessed Sacrament, de Marillac (Pontoise) witness at the Apostolic Process)

I begin this time of Advent by placing myself under the Lord's good and loving gaze, without fear.



« Le Christ et le centurion » Sebastiano Ricci
1726-1729



Tuesday 1 December

« With righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth. » Is 11:1-10

« The humble soul is always energetic, always ready to undertake great things, but trusting in God and not in oneself; for it expects nothing from itself, but everything from God. »
(Sister Marie of the Blessed Sacrament, de Marillac (Pontoise) Apostolic Process witness 102, folio 727.)

As I begin my day, my work, at the beginning of a meeting, I place myself with trust in the hands of the Spirit who is at work.

Wednesday 2 December

« It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation! » Is 25:6-10a

« The soul that loves God despises all things that are beneath God, for He is the soul's only relief and the joy of our hearts. »

Throughout the day I can repeat to myself words of praise, like:
"God, my joy, and my delight !



Thursday 3 December

« Trust in the Lord forever, for in the Lord God you have an everlasting rock. » Is 26:1-6

« Lack of trust attacks God's Mercy, which is His most needed attribute on earth, and about which the Chosen Ones will sing eternally in heaven. »

What are my fears right now? I present them and offer them to the Lord, in confident faith: yes he is my Savior !

Friday 4 December

« According to your faith let it be done to you. » Mt 9:27-31

« Whoever does not entrust himself entirely to God's Providence with boldness and joy will never make any progress in the service of God. »

Lord, increase our faith that we may see the wonders You can do.



Saturday 5 December

« When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. » Mt 9:35 - 10:1

« Open, my beloved Jesus, the gates of your Love, I wish to enjoy it so as to please you. » (True exercises, p. 144)

I pray for someone who needs God's Mercy.

