



« Let it be with me according to your word. »

Advent 2020 — Online retreat with Madame Acarie



1. Ecclesial fruitfulness

a) The reputation of the "Acarie salon"

In 1599, life resumed in the Acarie mansion. The couple had to rebuild after years of separation. Barbe, 33 years old, was still a beautiful woman, but she could no longer have a sexually intimate relationship with her husband because of her infirmities. Pierre, for his part, was a humiliated man; he had known disgrace and ruin, while his wife benefited from an exceptional radiance. Embittered and idle, he became an authoritarian, all the while supporting her unreservedly in her undertakings. Barbe chose to obey his every demand.

After the failure of the "Holy League", she knew that true weapons are of a spiritual nature. In that same year, she was graced with a vision of the Virgin and Child sitting on a resplendent throne placed on a podium with three steps. Father André Duval, her confessor, testified to the fact that Mary then taught her everything regarding the degrees of spiritual life. **Indeed, she demonstrated an astonishing capacity for discernment, such that eminent personalities came to consult her.** She declined the invitation of Marie de Medici to become her confidante. Her salon became the headquarters of the Catholic Reformation.

Religious (Benedictine and Carthusian monks, Capuchin friars, and Cistercian reformers who were known as the Feuillants), theologians, professors from the Sorbonne, secular clerics, magistrates, influential ladies at court, pious women from the bourgeoisie, and even the King's confessor met there. Pierre de Bérulle, Francis de Sales, and Vincent de Paul were regular guests. Discussions centered on the paths of union with God, but also on the situation of the Church that had been bled dry after the Wars of Religion: how to bring about a renewal of both the clergy and religious life? André Duval, her confessor, declares that *"in her time, nothing notable was done for the glory of God about which she was not first told, or asked for her opinion."*

She had reached that state where communion with God is lived out in action as well as prayer. Her life was entirely submitted in docility to the inspirations of the Spirit, as Father Duval testifies: *"She undertook, being in the world, very great things, but she was never in a position to resolve or carry them out unless she clearly recognized it as God's will. If she recognized that the divine sentiment did not correspond to her own, or if, after thinking about it carefully, she remained in doubt, she would give up her sentiment or suspend the execution [of her plans] until God had fully clarified it. This*



was seen not only in the foundation of the Carmelite and Ursuline Orders but in several other particular works, which she never undertook if she did not see or feel in herself that this was God's will. Even when she spoke of some matter, she was often seen to stop short, and sometimes to turn back, recognizing that the Spirit and will of God were not radiating in her soul, but persuading her otherwise, or leaving her perplexed. (...) A very great and particular virtue prevented her from saying or doing anything against the opinion or feeling of the one who was the only object of her love and her inner master."

b) Foundress of Carmel in France

Among the plans considered in her salon was that of introducing the Carmelite Order in France, recently reformed in Spain by Teresa of Avila. Jean de Brétigny, a priest from Normandy whose family roots were in Spain, had been working on this plan without success since 1583. He then translated the works of Saint Teresa into French, which appeared in 1601 and were republished several times due to their success. The devout Parisian could read, among other things, in *"The Way of Perfection"* (Chapter 1, no. 2), what Madre Teresa wrote in 1566, the year of Barbe's birth, about the Wars of Religion: *"At that time news reached me of the harm being done in France (...) The news distressed me greatly, and, as though I could do something or were something, I cried to the Lord and begged Him that I might remedy so much evil. It seemed to me that I would have given a thousand lives to save one soul out of the many that were being lost there. (...) As a result, I resolved to do the little that was in my power; that is, to follow the evangelical counsels as perfectly as I could and strive that these few persons who live here do the same. I did this trusting in the great goodness of God, who never fails to help anyone who is determined to give up everything for Him."*

In 1602, Saint Teresa appeared in a vision to the one whose birth may have been an answer to her prayers! She entrusted to Barbe the mission of introducing the Carmelites to France: *"Just as I*

have enriched Spain with this very famous Order, so you, who are restoring piety in France, strive to bring the same benefit to this country." However, the theologians who Barbe consulted advised her to *"put it out of her mind"* because of the breakdown in diplomatic relations between France and Spain. Seven or eight months later, Teresa reiterated her appeal, assuring Barbe in a new vision, that the foundation would be done! This time the theologians were convinced. Barbe made presentations to two princesses, who asked for the King's permission; the King granted it, against all hope! That same year, during a visit to the sanctuary of Saint-Nicolas-du-Port, Barbe went into ecstasy as she prayed near the relics of the saint. She was called by Teresa to become a Carmelite as a lay sister. This is disconcerting to her because it was so incongruous with regard to her culture and social position, but she would try to respect the demands of this vocation when the time came.

Barbe created the team in charge of bringing the Carmelites to France. Since the Spanish Carmelite friars were persisting in their opposition to the foundation, she convinced Pierre de Bérulle to go to Spain himself to lead the negotiations. Armed with letters of recommendation from the King and supported by the Nuncio, Bérulle obtained six Carmelites formed by Teresa herself: Anne of Jesus (Lobera), Anne of St. Bartholomew, Isabel of St. Paul, Isabel of the Angels, Eleanor of St. Bernard and Isabel of the Conception. During this time, Madame Acarie monitored the progress of the construction site for the first Carmel in the Faubourg Saint-Jacques in Paris. She also created a community for young women who wished to become Carmelite nuns in order to prepare them for this work. **After an epic journey, the Spanish Carmelites were triumphantly welcomed in Paris on October 15, 1604.**

Two months after their arrival, the success was such that it was necessary to open a second Carmel in Pontoise on January 15, 1605. More foundations quickly followed one after another with the help of Madame Acarie: Dijon (late 1605), Amiens (1606), Tours (1608), Rouen (1609), Châlons and Bordeaux (1610) ... At the same



time, she asked Madame de Sainte-Beuve to found the Ursuline order, intended for the education of young girls. She also supported her cousin Pierre de Bérulle for the foundation of the Congregation of the Oratory of Saint Philip Neri in France. She supported the reform of various monasteries while taking care of her house and caring for her husband whose health was deteriorating.

c) A work of the Church

This astonishing fruitfulness was prepared by providential events, whether it was the years when Madame Acarie had to take on all of the family affairs by herself or whether it was the mystical graces through which she was led to commit herself to Church reform. Now, she receives all things from Christ both in prayer and in action. Christ first realized his filial identity through the mission received from the Father: as a Person, he is Son of God. He incarnates this divine identity in human existence by accomplishing in a filial manner, in the world, the will of the Father. **To receive Christ, the Word**

made flesh in our humanity, is to receive from him both the grace of our filial adoption and the grace of being able to commit ourselves to the service of others in obedience to God.

In prayer or action, Madame Acarie thus experienced the unification of her life by receiving everything as a gift of grace. Only one thing is necessary:

to allow oneself to be led by God, hence her extreme vigilance in discerning the action of the Holy Spirit before undertaking anything. It's not so much a question of doing beautiful things at the risk of finally seeking one's own glory, but of losing one's life so that God might accomplish his own work, a work that's measured not quantitatively by its visible importance, but qualitatively by the divine love that is its source. Only that which is received as a gift from God is lived in truth. The gift certainly calls for a response, but this response appears to be the inner necessity of committing oneself to the service of God by remaining free of all self-concern. The condition of love is this freedom lived as an interior requirement, as obedience to what is not only given but recognized as God's gift.

2. The Annunciation to Mary (Lk 1,26-38)

« In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, *'Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.'* But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

The angel said to her, *'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.'* Mary said to the angel, *'How can this be, since I am a virgin?'*

The angel said to her, *'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.'* Then Mary said, **'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.'** Then the angel departed from her. »



Mary exercised her freedom in a unique way by accepting the supreme gift, the gift of the Son of God: *'Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to your word'* [Angelus Prayer]. The Angel introduced the coming child as the heir to God's promises through the dynasty of David. But the fulfillment will exceed the promise: He will be called Son of the Most High! Mary accepts then, trusting in spite of her doubts about her ability to understand the Lord's will. She can't know precisely what this YES involves, and yet this ignorance does not violate her freedom. Mary doesn't say YES to the meaning of a word that is manifestly beyond her understanding, but rather to God in whom she places all her trust. By welcoming the announcement of this child in a positive way, she says YES to what is given by accepting not only the unknown that represents every unborn child but also the unknown of this gift that comes from God himself. From the moment of the awakening of his or her freedom, every human being is called to say YES to the gift of life, but the grace of faith in Christ allows us to recognize in this gift, the gift of God himself. In listening to the Word of God, this YES to life becomes a YES to God. From then on, human life has no other meaning than God: he will be called Son of God. By welcoming this child, Mary says YES to an existence entirely related to God.

We are also called to consent to our life as an existence that has no other meaning than God, Word made flesh, the only Word in whom all life finds meaning and fullness. We are called to discover the meaning of our life in Jesus Christ. *"How can this be?"* We have no other answer than the one given to Mary: it is the work of the Holy Spirit and of the Power of the Most High, which surpasses all that we can understand. However, this cannot be done without us: we must make the leap of trust to welcome this Word in the precariousness of our human condition. Christmas is a call to live this radical act of trust, this YES of true freedom to become, following the example of Mary, responsible for the divine Word. God calls us to this and fills us with his favor for this, as soon as we consent to be inhabited by his Word, to open our hearts to Him: in a world full of uncertainties, God comes to meet us. Preparing for Christmas means learning to listen to this Word that emerges in the midst of the ups and downs of our lives. To welcome this God who speaks to man is to discern the gifts that he gives us and to respond to the many calls that they represent. Life is a gift and love is the acceptance of this gift in trust and acceptance of the unknown: Christmas calls us to welcome the gift, which is given to us not only in the gift of life but in the divine Life in the birth in our own flesh of Emmanuel, God with us.

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3. Three spiritual practices for this week

- Recognize the gifts that God gives me for the service of his work.
- Discern the calls that resonate within me as an inner demand.
- Through my YES to life recognized as a gift from God, to say YES to the gift of Life that God gives me in his Son.

4. Prayer starter

« Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word. » (Lk 1:38)



Monday 21 December

« In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country. »
Lk 1:39

« We should be at peace with ourselves when some charitable action presents itself, and always be ready to leave all our devotions for it. »

At this time of Christmas, what action and work can I do to help the needy ?



Tuesday 22 December

« The Mighty One has done great things for me,
His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. » Lk 1:49-50

« Ah my God of Mercy!
How thou deignest to look upon thy poor creature, what mercy ! »

How is Mercy translated in me, how does it transpire in my acts, words... ?

Wednesday 23 December

« Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. » Lk 1:57-58

« O Almighty God, Creator of Heaven and Earth, thou who art my Life, all my Good, and my Felicity, I desire to give thee infinite praise and blessing for thy benefits since my birth and that it has pleased thee to redeem me, O my Beloved !»

I give thanks to the Lord for the beautiful things He has done in my life that I can recall with Him today.



Thursday 24 December

« The Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. » 2 Sam 7:1

« Tell me then, O my soul, will you not be blessed, if you can find rest with your God, and say in truth: He who created me has found repose in my tabernacle. »

God dwells in us. How can I bring God to those around me whom I will welcome for the holidays ?

Friday 25 December

« So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. » Lk 2:16

« A God, a God, stooping down to become a child out of love for us! When then will we be little in our own eyes, to imitate the Holy Childhood of our Lord ? »

I contemplate my Savior in the manger... humility of love, childlike spirit:
I let my heart be invaded by the goodness of the Heart of God,
who became so tiny because He loves me.



« La sainte famille », Reynaud Levieux, 1651

