



« He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. »

Advent 2020 - Online Retreat with Madame Acarie

« I offer You, O my God, my aforementioned will, for I desire never to do or follow it; I therefore surrender it totally to Your will, so that I may no longer have any will of my own. I offer myself with the desire of carrying out completely whatever the blessed Holy Spirit asks of me. » (True Exercises)



1. Obedience and freedom

a) Being a wife

Barbe's life is decisively oriented through the act of obedience she makes at age 16 when she marries Pierre Acarie, Viscount of Villemore, Lord of Montbrost and Roncenay. This decision is the fruit of a spiritual journey as evidenced by the resistance she first put up against her mother: **she manages to recognize the will of God in that of her parents, thus transforming submission to men into free obedience to God.** Finally becoming a nun at the end of her life, she confides how much it had cost her: *"To enter religion is to receive much from God. But to remain in the world with the disposition and desires that he has given you, is, I believe, to give him much in return."* Her whole spiritual life will be marked by this act of self-denial trusting in God, whose fruitfulness she will experience. This act was truly free, as witnessed by the sincere love she felt for her husband: Pierre and Barbe learned to love each other by building their union not on a spontaneous passion, but on a mutual commitment.

Pierre, aged twenty-two, offers his wife a pleasant life in their Marais mansion, where she has many servants. In addition, Pierre's mother cherishes her daughter-in-law to the point of sometimes making him jealous. Barbe now enjoys an affection that she had not known in her own family! This happy young wife leads a dazzling life in the salons of the capital where she is nicknamed *"la Belle Acarie."* An accomplished mistress of the house, she shares her devotional exercises with her boarding school friend and hired chambermaid, Andrée Levoix. Their spiritual communion is so deep that they confide all their faults to each other. Andrée will become the first French Discalced Carmelite, but for the time being she will assist Barbe in the education of her children.

b) Transmitting life

The care that Mme. Acarie takes for the six children she gives to her husband in the space of eight years is exceptional at a time when grown-ups would just dump them on tutors. Her strict pedagogy is in line with the education she received, but judging by the love her children showed her, it was compen-



sated for by the affection she showed them. She is demanding of them especially in terms of obedience and renunciation of one's own will, and in having a sense of self-sacrifice and attachment to the truth. However, she raises them with care to respect their freedom "so that they may follow their vocation to whatever state Providence calls them." Freed from what she herself has suffered, she allows each one to choose his or her own path:

Nicolas married Marie d'Huguenat in 1606. The couple will have a little Mary for whom Grandmother will have a particular fondness. Pierre will become Vicar Judicial for the Archbishop of Rouen in Pontoise. Jean will enter the eremitic Order of Grandmont and will be prior at Meynel-lez-Mafflier from 1610 to 1645. Each of the three girls chose Carmel, the path to which their quasi-monastic education had predisposed them: Mary of Jesus was sub-prioress at the Carmel of Amiens in 1615 when her own mother made profession there. Marguerite of the Blessed Sacrament made profession in the Carmel of Paris in 1607. Geneviève of Saint Bernard made profession there in 1609 and would later be sub-prioress of the second Parisian foundation on rue Chapon.

c) Choosing to love

For the moment, Madame Acarie, not having forgotten her adolescent desire to be "Sister Augustine," puts herself at the service of the poor and the prostitutes. But her later life will present her with endless opportunities to renounce herself through obedience to the circumstances of life: the failure of the "Catholic League"¹ in 1594 will cause the exile of her husband and the seizure of his property so that she will find herself plunged brutally into misery; a horse accident will cripple her, and when

1. The "Catholic League," a.k.a. the "Holy League," was a military alliance created by French nobles in 1576 to fight against the Protestants who had just been granted freedom of worship by King Henry III.

her social situation is finally re-established, she will be drawn into an unexpected adventure in the service of Church reform. Finally, in a revelation, Saint Teresa of Avila will call her to become a Carmelite, and what's more, as a lay sister! In all this, her main ambition will be detachment from herself in order to labour exclusively for the work of God: with *"attentiveness to God, conducting oneself with the greatest simplicity and openness, awareness of one's imperfections, conversion of heart, not trying to achieve goodness by one's own efforts, but making room for grace."*

Mme. Acarie's consent to marriage thus constituted the starting point of a life dispossessed of self. **This act was decisive for the formation of her spiritual identity.** This challenges us at a time when freedom is willingly understood as freedom from all constraints. In reality, it is necessary to distinguish three degrees in the exercise of freedom. The first lies in the possibility of choosing what concerns us. The second corresponds to the capacity to take responsibility for the good of others and to assume the subsequent obligation. We then pass from a self-referential freedom to a relational freedom. The freedom exercised either through choices or through responses to the demands of others transforms our personality, but in spite of everything it represents a process over which we retain control. The third degree, on the other hand, constitutes a severance, inasmuch as it is a divestment of self through grace and a response to God's initiative. The exercise of this freedom implies consenting to simply saying "here I am!" by abandoning oneself to God so that his will may be accomplished. It is made possible by the **freedom to believe** in his infinite love, **to hope** for full communion with him and **to desire to love** him with all one's heart.

Freedom thus progresses until it takes on the look of unconditional obedience based on the love of God. In light of this grace from God, every other choice is put into perspective: freedom is no longer exercised primarily



in the possibility of choosing, nor even in the exercise of one's responsibilities, but by living for God no matter what path or manner of response. It is not possible to avoid this interior necessity without also denying oneself, to the extent that this freedom can be exercised through the conditioning, limits and hardships of life. Christ testified to his sovereign freedom by accepting to submit — out of love — to the most terrible constraints: *"From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."* (Mt. 16:21) Jesus saw it as an absolute requirement to assume the consequences of the mission received from the Father to the

end: it was impossible for him to escape from it without denying himself as Son. This interior necessity based on love allowed him to assume with complete freedom the extreme sufferings of his Passion.

After having thus lived in obedience to God, following submission to her parents, to her husband, to life events, to the Church, Barbe acquired an authentic freedom, that of no longer belonging to herself. The greatest freedom is the ability to give oneself to God in obedience by consenting to what we have not chosen as well as to what we have chosen: *"Henceforth, O my God, I am completely yours; this is why I make so bold as to request not only Your gifts and graces, but also Your very self... »*

2. The Word in the beginning (Mk 1,1-8)

«The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'" John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

a) The promise in the beginning

Authentic freedom originates in a call from God and in the inner demand that leads to obeying that call. Indeed, responding to the revelation of love is our most powerful desire. The Gospel of the Nativity according to Saint Luke places the origin of this revelation under the sign of the birth of a Child. The Gospel according to Saint Mark puts forth another beginning, that of the Blessed Annunciation of Jesus Christ, Son of God. **This beginning is an unprecedented resonance of the Word of God in the heart of**

our humanity. A multitude of announcements prepared the way. **It is renewed each time we allow ourselves to enter into the Word.** The beginning of the Blessed Annunciation comes from the depths of the ages by way of the prophet Isaiah. God has been preparing his people since time immemorial to welcome his Son by announcing the promise: he will send a messenger to open "his paths," for God himself will come to liberate his people. Through this promise, God offers man the possibility of authentic obedience: all of Judea and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem head towards John !



b) Obedience to the Word

The promised messenger makes the call resound in the desert, *"proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."* The acceptance of the promise leads to a radical change of perspective: it is no longer a question of following one's own paths, strategizing how to live our lives according to our own views, but of preparing the ways of the Lord so that he himself may be our guide on the way to salvation. This requires first of all recognizing our sin, our refusal to obey the Law, to consent to the limits of our human condition. We must turn our backs on worldliness and head for the desert. **The primary sin that Scripture denounces from the first pages of Genesis is in fact that of covetousness: a rejection of the limits, leading to not respecting one's body or others;** a violence which generates an all-powerful will, forgetting God's gift while under the influence of greed... But desiring a freedom that only God can give, all leave their paths to be baptized in the desert by John the Baptist, whose own life testifies to the refusal of all covetousness.

c) Freedom and baptism in the Spirit

Then the beginning of the Blessed Announcement resounds in a renewed way: *"The one who is more powerful than I is coming after*

me." The promised messenger becomes the announcer of the one who *"will baptize with the Holy Spirit."* While John can call us to prepare the way of the Lord, he, however, is not worthy to untie the strap of the sandals of him who baptizes in the Holy Spirit. John could not make this act of a slave, for there is as much difference between baptism with water and baptism in the Spirit as between a human act and a divine act. The Son alone baptizes in the Holy Spirit, which is the fullness of life and communion with God. Baptized ourselves in this Spirit, we have received the grace to die to sin in order to live in Jesus Christ (cf. Romans 6:11). This is the source of our life in God. To prepare the ways of the Lord is to drink from this source in order to live as children of God. It means entrusting to the action of the Holy Spirit received in baptism the guidance of our life in the Father's will. In view of such a vocation, we can do nothing but believe, hope and love the one who alone can unite us to him. For this, he joins us in our human condition of infinite poverty. It is our glory if we consent to welcome in it the prodigious birth of the Son: he who baptizes us in the Holy Spirit makes our poverty his dwelling place !

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3. Three spiritual practices

- To receive the ever-new appearance of the Word into my life in order to be captivated by the grace of the beginning.
- With this in mind, to what degree am I called to prepare not my ways, but those of the Lord ?
- To remember my baptism in the Spirit in order to draw from it the freedom to live according to God's will.

4. Prayer starter

« What have I to seek in heaven and on earth, if not to please my God and surrender myself entirely to him ? » (True Exercises)



Monday, December 7 – Immaculate Conception

« Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear!" » Is 35, 4

« If we find difficulties in something, it is because we do not love God. We must never tire of giving thanks to him ! »

Meditating on today's readings and the text that touched me most, I can ask myself: how do I draw strength from the Word of God ?



Tuesday, December 8

« Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you. » Lk 1,28

« O most glorious Virgin Mary, most sweet Mother of our Lord Jesus Christ, my gracious advocate, have mercy on me, a poor and miserable sinner. »

The Virgin Mary is close to me: she accompanies me, stronger than sin... this certainty accompanies me throughout the day.

Wednesday, December 9

« Come to me, all you that are carrying heavy burdens. » Mt 11, 28-30

« If we seek only him, our consolation will be complete. (...) Courage my Mother, life is short and the reward eternal. » (translated from Vie de Mme. Acarie, Bernard Sesé, p. 116)

Relying on God gives strength: I entrust to Him the burden that worries me at the moment, to live it with Him.

« Retour du fils prodigue »,
Pompeo Batoni



Thursday, December 10

« Then you shall rejoice in the Lord; in the Holy One of Israel you shall glory. » Is 41, 13-20

« You are my pleasing Light and the only Joy of my soul. »
(Vie de Mme Acarie, B. Sesé, p. 143)

Throughout this day, I open my heart to praise and turn my negative thoughts into thanksgiving.

Friday, December 11

« I lead you in the way you should go. » Is 48, 17-19

« My God, who are You and who am I? You are my Beloved, You are the life of my soul; enliven me, I beg You. » (Vie de Mme Acarie, B. Sesé p. 45)

How the Word of God of this day enlivens me and makes me bear fruit ?



« Arrivée du Christ à Jérusalem », Pietro Lorenzetti, 1320



Saturday, December 12

« Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths: All flesh shall see the salvation of God. » (Gospel Acclamation)

« Prepare my heart, Lord, prepare my heart. »

Will my interior openness to the coming of God be a light for my brothers and sisters?