

In the Horizon of Grace

For a servant, pilgrim, synodal Church

'I am a daughter of the Church; you be one with me'

From the Basic Document of the **FJA Movement The Courage of Charity**, we are invited to consider the 'presences' that animate Mother Thouret's spiritual home as fundamental for the Friends: God Alone, Jesus the Good Samaritan, the Holy Spirit the source of God's charity, the Church servant and poor, Mary, St Vincent.

Today we want to immerse ourselves in our 'home' which is the Church, with those existential consequences that the Basic Document emphasises:

FRIENDS of Jeanne-Antide

- We are a living part of the universal Church and through the congregation of the Sisters of Charity we receive the vocation and mission of 'Friends of Jeanne-Antide' in the world.
- We offer our concrete contribution to the local church, according to our possibilities, trying to keep alive the attention to the geographical and existential peripheries.
- We try to know and deepen the Church Documents (Encyclicals, Exhortations...)
- We love the Church, we pray for her and her leaders, without forgetting persecuted Christians.

As we always try to do, within our formation journeys, we will let ourselves be questioned by the life of Jeanne-Antide and by the challenges of today's history, fervently wishing to find in the Word of God the profound truth of our personal and FJA Group life. Because we need to 'know how to stay' in our realities motivated, enlightened, convinced of the inspiring vitality of Scripture; aware that it is daily life where faith, hope and love take shape. Or, where they wither away.

There is a way of dealing with daily life that is flat, repetitive, resentful, fearful...in a word, remaining focused on **the 'little self'**. There is an evangelical way, however, celebrating daily life, with its outbursts and retreats, whose centre of gravity is the fidelity of God's grace, it is the incarnation of Jesus, it is the **energy of the Holy Spirit**, it is life as a shared journey in the Church and with our brothers and sisters in humanity.

Let us therefore ask Mother Thouret, so that her way of celebrating daily life may warm our hearts, inspire us and keep us company.

11 April 1799, Besançon: in February of that year, Jeanne-Antide had resumed contact with one of the priests who had returned from forced emigration, whom she had already met in Le Landeron, Switzerland, in the summer of 1797. **And she had been encouraged to finally implement the missionary priority of the diocesan church of Besançon:** 'To work to re-establish faith and good morals according to the example of Saints Ferréol and Ferjeux', the first evangelisers of Franche-Comté, sent by Saint Irenaeus of Lyon at the end of the 3rd century.

'Faith and good morals': it is therefore a question not only of making known and deepening what we believe in, that is, the contents of faith, but of fostering the embodiment of faith in our 'customs', that is, in our way of being in the world, of relating to relatives and neighbours, of planning our days with their priorities, of managing money, of educating our children, of collaborating with our colleagues, of getting involved in social work, in politics, in respect for Creation, in the context of our living, working and leisure... Because **'customs'**, that is, our way of being, are the most authentic expression of our faith.

It would not have been enough in the days of Jeanne-Antide and her first companions, just as it is not enough today, to teach doctrinal content. The Church exists not for its own sake, but to allow faith to be incarnated in the dynamics of personal and collective life. The challenge is to encourage the embodiment

of faith through the daily reception and internalisation of the Grace of God that makes a Christian life mature in each of us. In challenging, complicated contexts, bearing the wounds of the past, even adverse ones.

After the meeting in Besançon with the priest, in fact, "Sister Thouret went to settle her affairs [in Sancey] and returned to Besançon to start the planned school for young girls in a rented room located on Rue des Martelots.

It began on 11 April 1799. The school became numerous in a few days.

It welcomed all schoolgirls equally, showing no outward predilections because of the opinions of the time and the Revolution, whose wounds were still alive.

The parents and daughters were delighted: they came to school with joy'.

Even for Franche-Comté, too, the end of the century coincided with the conclusion of the long period of social, political and cultural upheaval of the French Revolution. The Vicars General of Besançon were very clear that the time had finally come to restart community liturgical life, in a changed context. catechesis, assistance, pastoral work in the environment (rural, school, hospital, prison, etc.), In short, the life of the Church, which had had to endure persecution, suppression, clandestinely, and had found itself on two opposing sides, traversed by a profound ecclesial fracture, the one to which the Foundress refers when she speaks of the 'wounds still alive'.

Those open and painful wounds still had their own political-religious reasons. However, the unanimity of the Christian faith, which had characterised Franche-Comté for centuries, was profoundly undermined by the adoption of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy due to French Revolution: a serious rupture was established within the diocese of Besançon, which from 1791 to 1801 had been governed by bishops, vicars and constitutional priests, who, with the oath on the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, had created a national church of priests and bishops paid by the state, with only a 'spiritual' reference to the pope. While the church 'refractory' to the oath - Catholic, Apostolic, Roman - had been forced to organise itself across the border in Switzerland. This ecclesial rift had involved bishops, parish priests, curates, religious men and women, down to the last faithful in the diocese. Everywhere, the tensions between the two affiliations - constitutionalists on one side and refractory on the other - had led to bitter consequences: the refractory Catholics, the majority, had relied on the priests who had emigrated to Switzerland, whose border was only a few kilometres from Besançon. The constitutionalists had been able to count on the arms of the National Guard.

Jeanne-Antide had been severely mistreated and finally had to expatriate to Switzerland for choosing not to participate in the cult of the constitutional priests. During the period of the Great Reign of Terror, she had been an active member of the network of refractory Catholics, priests and faithful, especially women, who - in defiance of arrest and the death sentence - had celebrated Mass, heard confessions and baptised, clandestinely. But by then the Revolution had abandoned its de-Christianising will: it was time for social and religious reconciliation.

11 April 1799: a school class for girls opened its doors in rue des Martelots, in Besançon, to "re-establish faith and good morals in Franche Comte". It was necessary to start again from the new generations, taking into account, however, the "wounds still alive due to the opinions of the time and the Revolution". It was simply not possible to turn the page. Sensitivity and patience were needed. It was necessary not to remain anchored to intransigent positions, as had been necessary during the Revolution. It was necessary to rediscover within oneself, under the action of Grace, the healing energies of forgiveness, consolation and acceptance.

For a Church that serves

Finally, **on the morning of 11 April 1799, the girls** were welcomed by Jeanne-Antide, in the newly inaugurated school with a new look and a new pastoral attitude: 'showing no external predilections' about their respective family connections like sworn or unsworn. Jeanne-Antide, and later on with her the first companions, tried to make the girls enjoy going back to school together, the pleasure of being able to learn to read, to write, to do arithmetic, to savour the new-found freedom of being able to know and love God and to pray to the Father of all. This would ensure a new beginning under the sign of rediscovered social harmony and pacification with respect to religious affiliations.

This is the first **'service' that the Church, especially** through women's religious life, was called to offer. So while some of the clergy of Besançon withdrew into the nostalgic environment of the refractory faith, refusing to enter into dialogue with the new 'concordat' context imposed by Napoleon, Mother Thouret and her first companions embarked on a new and courageous path, destined to provoke criticism, and placed themselves at the service of religious reconciliation, in the name of God, Father of all, and of the Gospel of Jesus, in which the other is never an enemy, a competitor, an obstacle and a threat.

In Jesus and in the first apostolic communities, the enemy is never the other man, but our **'little self'**, that is centred **on itself**, on its own needs, its own convictions and views, anchored in its habits; our **'little self'** that defends itself, resents, argues, gets nervous, gets impatient and problematises. However, we are not, prisoners of our **'little self'**: because by the virtue of God's grace that unifies us, harmonises us, directs us, opens paths and gives us a future through His life-giving, beneficent and regenerating love. God Himself matures in us an open, available, attentive, a generous, free, solicitous and ready self. But He cannot not do without us. Mother Thouret would say again, we must **'collaborate with the Grace of God'**, welcome it, internalise it and share it.

One of the faces of love is precisely respect for the diversity of the other, of the other: refractory? Monarchist? Jacobin? Sworn? Love is a space of freedom that we provide so that the other can be fully himself, without having to wear masks to deserve our love. The atmosphere created in the first class of rue des Martelots makes us savour, even two centuries later, a sense of trust, of hospitality, of protection, which smells of the Holy Gospel of Jesus Christ.

'I am a daughter of the Church, you too be so with me' was already kept in Jeanne-Antide's heart as she welcomed the girls in that first class: that welcoming greeting was an act of courage in the name of the Church and in the hope of 'making church', together with those little girls and their families. Giving primacy to listening to the pain of the wounds caused precisely by opposing church affiliations.

Her heartfelt cry, addressed today also to us FJA, 'I am a child of the Church, you too be one too with me', was already in Jeanne-Antide's thoughtful wandering around the desks, in recognising in the eyes of the schoolgirls the suffering for the tensions they suffered, in sustaining in them and in their families the hope that the human being, despite the destructive forces of which he is capable, is open to the regenerating power of Jesus' Resurrection.

In a context in which, starting from the social ‘little me’, it seems that the destructive reasons of weapons, the disruptive effects of nationalism, the entrenchment of privileges won at the expense of denied rights, the power managed not to govern but to increase its own power, our choices that end up in the hands of the state or social media corporations...as FJA we want to take a stand and put ourselves at the service of the sprouts of pacification, reconciliation, justice, rights and duties for all. And if there are no sprouts, let us be the ones to sow them, with courage and determination, counting on the transformative energies of Christ's Resurrection, which, by the power of the Holy Spirit, are already poured into the cosmos forever, but need the life of each of us to be active and fruitful.

For a pilgrim Church

Jeanne-Antide was fully aware that she was in the classroom, alongside those little girls, in the name and on behalf of the Church, better still, so that the little girls could experience a reconciled and reconciling Church. The ‘Roman Catholic Apostolic Church’ to which Jeanne-Antide, during the revolutionary excesses, had repeatedly proudly declared her belonging, was not a historical achievement, nor is it today. The ‘**Catholic**’ Church is a destiny, the ultimate horizon of our journey, under the action of Grace. The Church is a pilgrimage, on a journey in which unity and diversity, Catholic universality and limiting narrowness, triumphalism and obscure and grave sins, fidelity to the Catholic tradition and a quagmire of heresies are mixed together. And much more. The Church, to use a powerful Pauline metaphor, is ‘**a clay pot that holds a treasure**’ (2 Cor 4:7).

Jeanne-Antide loved the Church of her time, she suffered for it and with it, for its being a ‘**clay pot that holds a treasure**’. That class in rue des Martelots was her first test ground to put herself at the service of the ‘treasure contained in vessels of clay’ that is the Church. Teaching how to read, write, do arithmetic, think for oneself, go deeper, teach how to pray, attend the parish, teach how to let oneself be touched and moved by the needs of others, by their suffering, their fear, their bewilderment, teach how to share joy and festivity....**as one does in every context of life, is to contribute to the progressive edification of humanity, to its fullness in Christ, in the Holy Spirit. The Church is a work left unfinished by Jesus of Nazareth.**

The history of the Church, like the history of each one of us, of our families, of our relationships, makes us continually aware that each one of us is a ‘clay pot’, that life is not linearity without ruptures, it is not wholeness without deficiencies, it is not consistency without contradictions, it is not light without shadows, it is not regularity without inconsistencies, it is not logic without asymmetries. It is with these inconsistencies, ruptures, shadows, contradictions, asymmetries, that we always have to deal with: because they are in us, in others and in reality, in the Church. They are in the difficult relationships and we experience with others, in the misunderstandings of our languages, in the distances that separate people who have lived together for years. They are the sign of our pilgrim condition that is always humble, poor and in constant search. They constitute the complexity in which we are immersed, now inhabited by the dead and **Risen Christ**. Complexity that we are called to inhabit, **with the energies of Grace**.

The unfinished work left to us by Christ, the Kingdom of God, of which the Church, despite being a **clay vessel**, is the sacrament-sign-instrument, is a Kingdom that can and must make history even in the midst of great contradictions; a Kingdom of God, for which as a charismatic family of sisters and lay FJA, we are called to put ourselves at the service every day, striving to

witness with our lives the transforming and humanising power of **Jesus' dream and way of being.**

A dream to be contemplated with the Gospel in our hands and ‘at the feet of the crucified Jesus, from whom we draw all the necessary strength’, as Mother Thouret loved to do. Her existence totally immersed in God Alone, at the feet of the Crucified until the last moment, shows us that the foundation of faith, its principle, its root, lies in the fact that Jesus speaks to us, that Jesus touches us, that Jesus heals us, that Jesus washes us, that Jesus perfumes us. Faith is exposing ourselves daily to contact with Jesus. Jesus, in fact, shares with us the strength with which **He loved us even unto death.**

In order to put on the new man in Christ, day after day: that is open, welcoming, dynamic, lively and free, **we are to expose ourselves to the Grace that makes us Christian, which is to work on the ‘little self’** that is rigid, resistant, bound, inflexible and closed. It is not given spontaneously and it is not given in an instant. Our whole life unfolds in the progressive welcoming of God's grace: if we could welcome all of God's grace in a single moment, we would be equal to God! Instead, as we pilgrimage, we learn, moment by moment, to recognise and welcome God's continual comings and goings in our little history, **to internalise them, to share them.**

In the continuous pilgrimage, in the luminous passages and in the dark tunnels, on the way to open horizons and along winding and uncertain paths, Mother Thouret testifies to us that it is God's grace that moves our steps, that shows us the directions, that heartens us in the stops, that nourishes us in the restarts, in a word, that ‘consoles’ us. It is the grace of God that always offers us new gifts, new possibilities of life and regeneration not yet welcomed, but they are always there at hand, to be recovered, welcomed, internalised, lived and shared. Let us welcome it, personally, **as FJA and as Church.**

For a synodal Church

In the historical period in which Mother Thouret lived, we spoke of ‘adherence’ to the Church, a form of belonging to the Church based on adherence to a very precise doctrine and to a community defined in its forms, rites and rules. Today, we talk about in terms of ‘entrustment’, in a register of reciprocity: the Church makes it possible for our faith, that is, our entrustment to God, in Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to be incarnated in personal and collective life. And we, as each baptised person, is entrusted the mission of the Church - the existential incarnation of faith - by entering into dialogue with the new questions of the men and women of our time, with the conditions of the context in which we find ourselves living.

In the face of challenges that affect everyone, there is no other way for the Church to continue to dialogue courageously with the contemporary world, as it has done for centuries. Even during the Napoleonic empire, even during the Restoration. Each time she was convinced that it has something New, something unprecedented, to share, to do, to announce, for which to involve others more and more. In Mother Thouret's time, the Church did not pull itself out of history. In particular, as we have seen, it did not pull itself out of women's religious life, in the knowledge that it had something missing at that time. Something precious that was for the common future.

Today, as FJA believers, we too have something precious to offer: the strength of the charism received from Jeanne-Antide, that is passed on to her daughters and which lay Friends have also drawn on for decades now. And we are called to offer it and share it in a synodal style. Sharing a charism requires an ecclesial context: it is not indoctrination or an exchange of views, thoughts, opinions. The acceptance and interiorization of a charism is a vital fact, innervated with communion, acceptance, sharing, consonance of hearts, harmony in decisions and choices, a task that is demanding. Together, under the action of the Spirit. Living a charism cannot take place outside an ecclesial context, just as it cannot take place outside the swirling flow of history and its challenges.

With the whole humanity, we are a community of brothers and sisters advancing towards the same horizon, seeking together to respond to the challenges **‘of the changing epoch’**. Going out and walking together. Exodus and Synod. Two crucial and programmatic terms for Pope Francis.

Even the history of lay movements: like confraternities, Third Orders, branches of consecrated laity, associates - tells us that the future of a lay movement does not lie in its number, nor in its consistency and visibility, but in the ability of its members to transmit and communicate a spirit, imbued with such a charismatic force as to involve others in this collective dynamism; without centring those who feel moved by this same charism on themselves, but around the Church and society. Mother Thouret, under the guidance of the Spirit, managed to tune in to the challenges of society, which had emerged from the storm of the Revolution, so that the Church - which was struggling to recover from its internal fractures - could carry out its mission of serving the life-giving encounter with God's love of the little girls **in rue des Martelots or Regina Coeli, of the soldiers in the Hospital of the Visitation or the inmates of the Incurables, of the inmates of Bellevaux and of the daughters of good families in Naples...** This is what we, FJA, are called upon to do today in the various parts of the world. In a multi-cultural, multi-religious context, or one of religious indifference. We are not unequal; we walk with the Church and in the horizon of life-giving Grace.

In the Word of God with one's life

From the Second Letter of St Peter the Apostle - **2 Peter 3:11b-15a, 17-18**

Beloved, what should your life be in holiness of conduct and prayers, while you await and hasten the coming of the day of God in which the burning heavens will be dissolved and the burning elements will melt away! For we, according to his promise, await new heavens and a new earth, in which dwells righteousness. Therefore, beloved, in the expectation of these events do all things that God may find you in peace, blameless and undefiled. Consider the magnanimity of our Lord as salvation. You therefore, dearly beloved, have been warned: beware lest you, too, fail in your steadfastness, overwhelmed by the error of the wicked. Instead, grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory, now and in the day of eternity. Amen.

Personal reflection on the text

I try to mirror myself in the passage of Scripture that the second letter of Peter offers us trying to make it enter into dialogue with Mother Thouret's experience and with my own existential situation, which asks me to come out of the **‘little me’** towards a life in holiness of conduct.

What has significantly challenged me?

Why?

What existential questions do I feel addressed to?

In our Local Groups

We can take time to share our answers to the questions below, by dedicating a meeting to each of the Focus Groups proposed below. The objective of each Focus Group is to transform the question from **'What do you think'** to **'How can we take it on together?'**. Starting from the Focus Group theme, each Local Group is invited to:

- organise the animation of the initial and final prayer
- identify other contributions - ecclesial or cultural - that can help,
- create a welcoming and non-judgmental climate. The Focus Groups are not spaces for discussion, they are environments that would like to be inspired by Mother Thouret's class, inaugurated on 11 April 1799, where one exhales a sense of trust, of hospitality, of protection, which fragrance of the Holy Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Focus Group

1. Approaches to life: between flexibility and faithfulness - to explore what might be the right balance between a society that demands flexibility and a church that demands faithfulness.

- Share an experience of your own of flexibility to face everyday life and inhabit the present
- How do you react to the multiple memberships of the youth world? What do you feel? Why?
- Share one of your experiences of fidelity that makes your life project possible
- From what, from whom or on what occasion was this promise of fidelity born in you?

Which Gospel page helps us to re-read and offers another insight to our experiences of faithfulness and adaptability?

2. Perspectives on life: between isolation and bonds - as society pushes us towards indifference and individualism, life asks us to relate.

- When do you feel the need to isolate yourself, to remain indifferent? Why?
- What are the most significant bonds in your adult life?
- Have you ever felt the need to break a significant relationship? What did you feel? Why?
- What are the struggles and what are the consolations of the bonds that are most meaningful to you?

Which Gospel page helps us to reread and offers another insight to our experiences of isolation/indifference and vital bonds?

3. Horizons of life: between pluralism and choice of faith - as we live in a world full of faiths and religions and it seems that one is worth the other

- What is your relationship with other religions? Have you ever been seriously confronted with people of other spirituality?
- What is your reaction to the multi-religious scenario and the scenario of religious indifference?
- What is your image of God? And your relationship with prayer?
- Where and when do I feel witness to the Christian faith? Share an experience.

Which Gospel page helps us to re-read and offers another light to our experiences of religious pluralism, religious indifference?