

MARIE MADELEINE D'HOUËT AND THE JESUITS

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THE VENERABLE Marie Madeleine d'Houët founded the Society of the Faithful Companions of Jesus in Amiens, France in 1820. Today, in their bicentenary year, the Faithful Companions are remembering and retelling the story of their origins, and in doing so they are coming to a deeper understanding of some of the circumstances that shaped that story.

Through her contact with a number of Jesuits from the College of Saint Acheul in Amiens, Marie Madeleine gradually became convinced that God was calling her, as she put it, 'to be Jesuit'.¹ She did not mean formal membership of the Society of Jesus—today she would probably have said 'Ignatian' rather than 'Jesuit'—but she was strongly attracted to the Jesuit Rule, admiring the fruits she saw that it had produced in those who lived by it.

Knowing this, Marie-Félix Folloppe SJ, a member of the Saint Acheul community, gave her a summary of the Jesuit *Constitutions*, saying, 'I am sure God wishes you to embrace this Rule and wishes me to give it to you, although that is something that is usually forbidden. Copy it, and do not speak of it; when the time comes, you will have it at hand.'² Marie Madeleine did copy this summary, and when she drew up the Rule of Life for her own Society, she ensured that it conformed to that of the Jesuits, only omitting, as she said, '... all that regards the sacred ministry and the sciences'.³

For the Faithful Companions of Jesus, this episode has become part of their shared remembrance of Marie Madeleine's commitment to the wisdom enshrined in the Jesuit Rule, which she saw as the firm basis upon which her Society could grow and flourish. Within the framework of that Rule, her vision was that she and her companions would respond to

¹ Marie Madeleine d'Houët, *Mémoires and Memoirs*, edited by Mary Rose Rawlinson and others, translated by Patricia Grogan and Susan Cawley (London: privately printed, 2018), 21.

² D'Houët, *Mémoires and Memoirs*, 47.

³ D'Houët, *Mémoires and Memoirs*, 239.



Marie Madeleine d'Houët, by Henri Pinta

As a result, for many years the expansion of the Faithful Companions of Jesus in France was severely restricted, and Marie Madeleine was obliged to close a number of her French establishments.⁵ At the same time, she was well aware that her struggles with the Gallican clergy were intensified by the Jesuits, who, though they did not support the Gallican position, nevertheless used their influence to increase the bishops' fear that the Faithful Companions would be prepared to act independently of their wishes.

Fraught Relationship with the Jesuits

Not long after Marie Madeleine's death in 1858, the sisters introduced the Cause for her canonization. Following normal ecclesiastical procedures, they requested written evidence of their foundress's sanctity, and more than a thousand depositions or sworn testimonies were collected and

the 'I thirst' of Jesus through the apostolate of education, retreats and missions.

However, in spite of Marie Madeleine's desire to respond to her calling wholeheartedly, the early years proved to be complicated and challenging. Many of the difficulties she faced were caused by the volatile political situation in France, which had been intentionally de-Christianised and torn apart by the Revolution of 1789. Her problems were exacerbated, however, by the hostility of a number of powerful Gallican bishops, who were not slow to show their disapproval of the foundress and her Society.⁴ As

⁴ Gallicans wanted a strong measure of independence from Rome, and sought to restrain the Pope's authority in favour of that of local bishops. Marie Madeleine took the opposite stance: she acknowledged and accepted papal authority before that of the local French bishops and clergy.

⁵ These closures led her to look for suitable locations in other parts of Europe, and eventually she went to London, and later to Turin, Switzerland and Ireland, where she set up schools and orphanages.

eventually printed in a document known as the *Positio*.⁶ A surprising number of these testimonies refer to the hostility of the Jesuits towards the Faithful Companions, which continued even after both the Society and its name had received full papal approval.⁷

Perhaps part of the problem was Marie Madeleine's own personality and character—she was reputed to be very strong-minded, a trait apparently not appreciated by the Jesuits of her time. This perception is confirmed by Marie de Bussy fcJ (1813–1895), the third Superior General, who in her testimony includes a quotation from an unnamed Jesuit: 'Madame d'Houët has such a strong will that if she wanted to be named Pope, she would succeed!' But strong will or not, after the foundation of her Society, Marie Madeleine made little headway with the Jesuits.

What she wanted was permission for her congregation to follow her modified version of the Rule of St Ignatius '... because this Rule seems to us to be the best adapted to lead to perfection. One would wish the Reverend Jesuit Fathers to be less possessive of this holy Rule.'⁸ The Jesuits, however, were not open to dialogue on this issue, and the longed-for permission was indefinitely deferred. The name of the Society was also a bone of contention, but in this case Marie Madeleine apparently decided to press on regardless of Jesuit censure. A testimony submitted by a certain Madame Jeanne de Roquefeuil makes this abundantly clear:

The name 'Faithful Companions of Jesus' displeased them [the Jesuits], since it was very similar to their own designation, and carried with it a kind of compromise that they did not want to accept. However, Madame d'Houët never thought herself obliged to defer to the opinions of the Jesuit Fathers on this matter.

Jeanne adds a significant detail about her friend's connection with the Jesuits: 'She never had any intention of following them slavishly; there is something military about the Company of Jesus according to the spirit of its Founder, and this was always foreign to the mentality of Madame d'Houët'.⁹

⁶ *Beatificationis et canonizationis servae Dei Mariae Magdalenae de Bengy vice-comitissae De Bonnault d'Houët fundatricis Societatis sororum fidelium sociarum Jesu. Positio super validitate processuum* (Rome: Guerra et Belli, 1937) (hereafter *Positio*).

⁷ Leo XII, in 1826, issued a *Brief of Praise* for the Society, and Gregory XVI a *Decree of Praise and Approbation* in 1837. Both these popes formally authorised the name Faithful Companions of Jesus.

⁸ D'Houët, *Mémoires and Memoirs*, 356.

⁹ *Positio*, volume 1, 24. The original Spanish name, *Compañía de Jesus*, was Latinised as *Societas Jesu* and became in English the Society of Jesus. The name remains *Compagnie de Jésus* in French and *Compagnia di Gesù* in Italian.

Persistent Jesuit Opposition

In her testimony, Anna Ennever fcJ (1826–1895) sums up in a single sentence what she considers to be the fundamental reason for Marie Madeleine’s difficulties with the Jesuits: ‘They could not believe God would call women to follow the rule which he had given to Saint Ignatius for his Company’.¹⁰ Other entries make the same point, and I am drawn to them not simply because they make it clear that the Jesuits made our foundress’s life extremely stressful, but because these men seemed dismissive of a project which in many respects they themselves, through their spiritual guidance, had initiated.

In his testimony, Canon Constans d’Auvergne writes that Marie Madeleine was only too well aware of this anomaly:

Madame d’Houët told me that once when she was explaining to Père Varin how difficult it was for her to get her work off the ground because of problems raised by the Jesuits, she reminded him that it was he who had taken the initiative in her regard. Père Varin responded: ‘You will never have more persistent adversaries than ourselves’. But he added, ‘Keep going all the same ...’.¹¹

By turns, she was encouraged by these men, then ‘tormented’ (her word) by them, before finally being abandoned by them.¹² Maria Mollet fcJ (1852–1935) quotes an example of the bitter Jesuit opposition to which the Faithful Companions were subjected: ‘Père Guidée SJ said to Mère Marie de Bussy that he would turn young women away from entering with us. “If I go to Nantes”, he said, “it will be to destroy the Society of the Faithful Companions of Jesus”.’ These were strong words indeed.

Though in her heart Marie Madeleine was unwavering in her desire that her Society’s Rule of Life should be based on the *Constitutions* of the Society of Jesus, once the hostility of the Jesuits became so marked, she seemed to accept the impasse and no longer continued to struggle for permission to use the Jesuit Rule. Finding herself caught up in the intricacies of arrogance, canon law and church politics, it was only with God’s help that she was able to retain her peace and serenity in those arid times.

¹⁰ *Positio*, volume 1, 79.

¹¹ D’Houët, *Mémoires and Memoirs*, 29.

¹² D’Houët, *Mémoires and Memoirs*, 29.

A Frustrating Relationship: Marie Madeleine and Joseph Varin SJ

In the early days, several French Jesuits, including Louis Sellier, Marie-Félix Folloppe and Julien Druilhet, played a significant role in the life of Marie Madeleine (then a young widow with a school-age son) and in the discernment of her future vocation. In *Faithful Companions of Jesus* legend, however, the one with whose name we are most familiar is Joseph Varin. Anna Ennever writes of Marie Madeleine's frustrating relationship with this man:

The Servant of God showed great fortitude in enduring the painful ordeals which marked the beginning of the Society. She had chosen Père Varin as her director, and sometimes he pushed her forward, sometimes held her back, showing her that what she believed to be the will of God was no more than an illusion.¹³

In her testimony, Marie Joseph Bouque fcJ (1817–1897) quotes Marie Madeleine's own view of Père Varin: 'He was the gentlest of men, but he made me suffer greatly'.¹⁴

Born in 1769, Varin was twelve years older than Marie Madeleine, and he died at the age of 81 in 1850, eight years before her. He it was who had first suggested to her that God might be calling her to religious life, and he saw fit to test her vocation by putting her through many trials. In the appendix to Marie Madeleine's *Memoirs*, there is an additional note under Père Varin's name. While 'the holiness of this zealous priest' is acknowledged, the early sisters were in no doubt that his guidance of their foundress left much to be desired:

He never clearly understood God's designs in her regard and was inclined to discount the extraordinary lights with which she was favoured. He spared no effort in persuading her to join the Society of the Ladies of the Sacred Heart, which he had begun in 1802. On Holy Thursday 1820 he finally authorised her to attempt a foundation.¹⁵

In her testimony, Maria Mollet fcJ writes that Père Varin, having vigorously obstructed Marie Madeleine's attempts to strengthen her Society in its early years, from 1823 onwards made virtually no further contact with her or the *Faithful Companions* for the rest of his life.¹⁶

¹³ *Positio*, volume 1, 73.

¹⁴ *Positio*, volume 1, 75.

¹⁵ D'Houët, *Mémoires and Memoirs*, 283.

¹⁶ *Positio*, volume 1, 129.

At the beginning of the first volume of a lengthy history of the Jesuits in nineteenth-century France, there is a full-page engraving of Père Joseph Varin.¹⁷ Unsmiling, he is sitting in a relaxed manner, eyes cast down, arms serenely crossed over his middle: he could be praying, reflecting or perhaps listening attentively to one of his numerous directees. One wonders if the author of this history, Joseph Burnichon SJ, by placing that picture at the start of his book, even before the introduction, wished to highlight his perception that Père Varin dominated French Jesuit history during the nineteenth century, or at least in the years covered by volume 1: 1814–1830.

Perhaps, in his eyes, Varin, who had been an active member of the Fathers of the Faith and who formally became a Jesuit novice at the age of 46 in 1814, the year of the restoration of the Society of Jesus, symbolized the élan of the Jesuits in France after 41 years of suppression.¹⁸ Certainly, Père Varin's name appears frequently in the book, with the author paying tribute to his 'spiritual insight' and applauding his 'special gift'

for helping future foundresses of religious institutes (the Society of the Sacred Heart, the Sainte Famille Congregation, the Notre Dame Sisters) to 'discover' their vocation.¹⁹

To the reader from the Faithful Companions of Jesus, it is rather galling to find that only twice in the course of this long historical record is the name of Joseph Varin linked with that of Marie Madeleine. Burnichon mentions the fact that during the 'Hundred Days' in 1815, (when Napoleon, whose government



¹⁷ Joseph Burnichon, *La Compagnie de Jésus en France : histoire d'un siècle, 1814–1914*, 4 volumes (Paris: Gabriel Beauchesne, 1914–1922).

¹⁸ The Fathers of the Faith were a group of priests founded after the suppression of the Jesuits in 1773. Their way of life was based on the Jesuit model and its members had the explicit intention of entering the Society of Jesus when it was restored. As they travelled through post-Revolutionary France, attending to the spiritual needs of the people, the ministry of these priests was condemned by Napoleon and several of them were placed under house arrest.

¹⁹ Burnichon, *Compagnie de Jésus en France*, volume 1, 106.

censured the ministry of priests and religious, briefly returned to power before his final defeat at the Battle of Waterloo), Père Varin, being obliged to keep a low profile, had found refuge in a manor house, not far from Bourges, belonging to a certain Madame de Bonnault d'Houët. He adds that this lady had later founded the Society of the Faithful Companions of Jesus in Amiens. Her Rule, he says, borrowed from that of St Ignatius, was approved successively by Leo XII in 1826 and Gregory XVI in 1837.²⁰ He recognises that Père Varin and several of his Jesuit colleagues had been 'very actively' involved in the beginnings of the Faithful Companions, but ends by saying, somewhat dismissively:

Indeed, the venerable foundress, having received from Père Varin the initial motivation to follow God's call, found herself in some disagreement with him in establishing this Society, which seemed to him to replicate that of the Sacred Heart.²¹

Burnichon appears to accept Père Varin's view that the Society of the Faithful Companions of Jesus was not really needed, nor does he make further mention of our Society.²²

A Cry from the Heart

Marie Madeleine's reaction when the Jesuits were actively hostile towards her and her Society was truly heroic. Faithful Companions of today might well find it hard to admire her humble acceptance of the way they treated her, and I am probably not alone in saying that I would prefer her to have been more assertive, as indeed she had been in an interview with the Jesuit Superior General in Rome in 1837.

She suffered deeply from their harshness and lack of understanding, but she did not blame or condemn them. There is one handwritten document, preserved in the Faithful Companions of Jesus archives, in which Marie Madeleine expresses something of the deep anguish she

²⁰ It is true that both these popes granted formal approval of the Faithful Companions of Jesus Society and of its name (see note 7 above) but, owing to pressure from the Jesuits, the Holy See deferred definitive approval of Marie Madeleine's Rule.

²¹ Burnichon, *Compagnie de Jésus en France*, volume 1, 107.

²² Some years after the publication of his book, the author must have been invited to submit a testimony for Marie Madeleine's Cause. This is what he wrote: 'In the course of my studies for my work on the History of the Company of Jesus in France in the nineteenth century, I came across a reference to the Servant of God. Concerning Père de Bengy, of the Company of Jesus, victim of the Commune, I came across a picture of his aunt, the countess [sic] de Bonnault d'Houët. I have to say that at the time I had not been particularly drawn to look more deeply into the work of Mme d'Houët and I was completely unaware of her difficulties with the Society of Jesus.'

felt on account of the long-drawn-out animosity of the Jesuits towards her Society. Perhaps she thought her words would never see the light of day, but Mary Magdalen Harding fcJ (1877–1928), from her reading of the archival material available to her, discovered this brief text and included it in her testimony. I quote it here, almost in full:

We owe much to the Jesuit Fathers who created or formed us, but we owe them still more because far and wide they have pursued us, persecuted us and driven us out; I feel this more than I can say: they have humiliated us, separated us from everything, and in doing so, have forced us to place our hope in God alone The Jesuits persecute us in these ways: 1) by turning the bishops against us, before or as soon as they arrive in their dioceses; 2) by preventing those who wish to give themselves to God from entering with us; 3) by doing the same thing in the case of parents wishing to send their children to us as boarders God seems to have placed the Jesuit Fathers at the doors of all our houses as vigilant guards, to prevent the world, its pride and its illusions, from entering them Finally, since in following our Lord Jesus Christ we must be persecuted and carry the cross, it is expedient that it is the Jesuit Fathers who give us this cross to carry, for we respect them too much to complain about them, and when we feel we want to do this, their virtue, which is so well-known, and the high reputation they enjoy, completely prevent our doing so The Sisters Faithful Companions of Jesus have the honour of most humbly saluting the Fathers of the Company of Jesus, and they beg them on bended knee to kindly ask God, on behalf of the Sisters, for the spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ which animates them—and without which our beautiful name would be meaningless—so that the Sisters may bear, as they do, the fruits of justice and holiness for themselves, for the children in their schools and for all that it will please God to ask of them²³

A Wider Perspective

A wider perspective on this rare outpouring of sheer grief and hurt on the part of Marie Madeleine is given in a later entry in the *Positio*, written (possibly in the 1930s) by Yves de la Brière SJ (1877–1941). The following is an excerpt from this long testimony:

The opposition of the Jesuit Fathers was motivated by the fear of appearing to favour a type of foundation that St Ignatius had always refused to accept and which, since his death, the Company had perseveringly rejected: the institution of a religious family which

²³ *Positio*, volume 1, 153–154.

would be as it were a female counterpart of the Company of Jesus. Fathers Varin and Sellier visibly feared being accused of encouraging such an attempt in any way. Hence the extreme severity of their treatment of Madame d'Houët and the Faithful Companions of Jesus—a severity in keeping with the austere, firm and inflexible traditions which characterised the bearing and the method of religious direction of these former Fathers of the Faith. In the next generation, not only did the painful relationship between the Jesuits and the Faithful Companions of Jesus completely disappear, but a sympathetic and regular collaboration was established between the two religious families from then on, wherever an appropriate occasion presented itself. At the time, the measures taken were an attempt to preclude error and confusion, canonically and verbally, between the two religious Institutes For a hundred years, religious needs, social needs, and general customs have seen the creation of numerous women's congregations, inspired by the rules of St Ignatius ... and indeed on many points their rules are literally the same. These congregations, though not affiliated to the Company of Jesus, are in a consistent way clearly evolving within its zone of spiritual influence. In short, what the virtuous foundress of the Faithful Companions of Jesus desired has today been achieved by many female teaching or other congregations, and this seems absolutely normal, natural and legitimate. It addresses the authentic demands of the good of souls in the face of new ways of living and new circumstances.²⁴

In concluding his testimony, de la Brière suggests that Marie Madeleine's long, painful experience of Jesuit opposition had its own spiritual reward: it made her more humble and helped her develop the heroic virtues that are a clear sign of sanctity!

The Early Faithful Companions and the Jesuits in England

Anastasia Magill fcJ (1855–1945), in her testimony, makes an interesting point about what certain Jesuits outside France thought about the French Jesuits' treatment of Marie Madeleine.²⁵ She states that, in England, she had herself heard some of them criticize Père Varin, whose doubts and hesitations about Marie Madeleine's foundation were motivated, she says, by 'the concern of the Jesuit Fathers not to allow a work distinct from theirs, and above all a community of women, to infiltrate their Company'.²⁶

²⁴ *Positio*, volume 1, 158.

²⁵ Jesuit hostility towards Marie Madeleine and the Faithful Companions of Jesus was strong in France, where it all began, but the approach of the central leadership of the Society of Jesus in Rome was equally unyielding.

²⁶ *Positio*, volume 1, 116.

It seems that some of the English Jesuits even went so far as to tell Anastasia that they were ‘shocked by the behaviour of their French brothers’. However, when the Faithful Companions went to London in 1830, at first they found the Jesuits there guarded and unhelpful, as they had been in France. Maria Mollet offers a reason for their unfriendly attitude. She says that the then Jesuit Provincial in England, Father Edward Scott, ‘was unfavourable to us for some time, and later apologised for this, saying: “I was following orders”’. From then on, Father Scott encouraged the sisters very much and said one day to Mère Julie:

Do not be surprised at the interest I take in your Society, for on seeing you for the first time I heard an interior voice which said to me: ‘Welcome these persons warmly, they will do good. God has sent them for the good of this country and for his glory.’²⁷

A rather surprising detail comes from Marie Joseph Bouque, who adds the following note to her testimony: ‘One day, a Jesuit Father who was preaching a retreat in England told us that Père Varin was very happy about the prosperity of our Society’.²⁸

By 1850, the year of the restoration of the Roman Catholic hierarchy in England and Wales, the Faithful Companions were settled and well regarded in London (in Somers Town and Isleworth), and in Liverpool (as they were, too, in Limerick, Ireland). Cardinal Nicholas Wiseman, the first Archbishop of Westminster, who, according to Père Stanislaus’ biography of Marie Madeleine, ‘was a staunch and loyal friend to the Faithful Companions of Jesus’, warmly welcomed religious men and women into the Diocese of Westminster, and counted on their support as he tried to build up the newly recognised Catholic community.²⁹

He was particularly appreciative of the energetic pastoral and educational strategies of the Jesuits, who set up missions in different parts of the country. In a letter to the editor of a Scottish newspaper, *The Dundee, Perth and Cupar Advertiser*, dated 3 December 1850, the anonymous writer (a Catholic, but clearly not an admirer of the Jesuits) makes an astonishing statement: ‘London now swarms with Jesuits, male and female—the latter, termed Faithful Companions of Jesus, have a convent in Isleworth, near Richmond’. What is interesting here is that

²⁷ *Positio*, volume 1, 116.

²⁸ *Positio*, volume 1, 75.

²⁹ Father Stanislaus, *Life of the Viscountess de Bonmault D’Houet, Foundress of the Society of the Faithful Companions of Jesus, 1781–1858* (London: Longman’s Green, 1916), 172 note 1.

in London, in Marie Madeleine's lifetime, the Faithful Companions of Gumley House, Isleworth, were evidently seen as female Jesuits! Père Varin had died earlier that year—one wonders what he would have made of such an appellation had he read this letter

'If God Is for Us ...'

The Faithful Companions of Jesus are called to 'stand at the foot of the cross ... to be one with Jesus in his thirst for the coming of the kingdom'.³⁰ These words reflect what Marie Madeleine had said, not long before the foundation of the Society in 1820:

My name is Madeleine; I wish to be like my patron saint who loved Jesus her Master so truly that she looked after his needs and accompanied him in his travels, even to the foot of the Cross, with the other holy women who did not, like the apostles, abandon him but proved to be his Faithful Companions.³¹

In her life there is abundant evidence that her response to God's call brought consolation, but also much suffering. Many of the difficulties she experienced could not have been unexpected—they were all part of the normal complications that anyone must face in starting something new. What was incomprehensible to her was the relentless opposition of the French Jesuits to a project to which they had initially given their support.

After her second visit to Rome in 1837, having consulted the Pope, she no longer felt obliged to seek the guidance of these men as she had done so meticulously until then, and Jesuit hostility, though it continued, seemed to affect her less forcibly. Seeing the success of a great number of the Faithful Companions' apostolic endeavours, together with the expansion of her Society that took place in later years, she knew that *le bon Dieu* had walked with her, guiding her, directing her. 'If God is for us, who is against us? ... Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution ...?' (Romans 8:31 and 35)

Marie Madeleine's desire for her Society to use the Jesuit *Constitutions* was not fulfilled in her lifetime nor, indeed, for many decades afterwards. It was not until 1983 that the then Superior General of the Jesuits, Pedro Arrupe, granted the Faithful Companions of Jesus permission to

³⁰ *Constitutions of the Faithful Companions of Jesus* (Broadstairs: FCJ, 1985),

³¹ D'Houët, *Mémoires and Memoirs*, 61.

incorporate the essential elements of the ten-part Jesuit *Constitutions* into their Rule of Life. Accordingly, Marie Madeleine's first version of the Faithful Companions' *Constitutions* was completely revised and, with some modifications, finally approved by the Holy See and the Jesuits in 1985. In 2020, after more than thirty years of using them, Faithful Companions of Jesus sisters recognise with gratitude that they have received great benefits from the Ignatian tradition and from the Jesuit *Constitutions*. Yet they are also keenly aware that, as women, they respond to and live the dynamic of those *Constitutions*, written by a man for men, according to their own experience and sensibilities, and that they are still in process of absorbing and interiorising them.

Animated by the interior spirit of the Society of Jesus, the Faithful Companions' seed was planted in the soil of post-Revolution France: it put down roots, and gradually grew from tiny shoot, to sapling, to young tree, to mature tree with a firm trunk and many branches. Over two hundred years not all the branches have flourished, and some pruning has taken place, but all through those years the roots have been tended—it is through them that the tree draws nourishment—and there has been new growth, new apostolic endeavours, new ways of responding to God's call.

So our bicentenary is a time for shared remembrance, and we rejoice in what the Faithful Companions have, by the grace of God, been able to accomplish, in spite of strong opposition in the early years; but it is also a time for looking towards what will surely be a very different future. Our identity is expressed in our name, and as Faithful Companions of Jesus we know there is nothing intermittent about faithfulness—it is a relationship that continues. We are 'on mission' when our life (who we are) and action (what we do) prophetically point to, promote and make visible the Reign of God. With the Jesuits, we share the mission of the universal Church: to proclaim the Good News of God's love revealed in Jesus Christ. Today, we live in times of great change, as Marie Madeleine did in her day, and like her, we believe that *le Bon Dieu*, who led our Society in the past, is leading us now, and will lead us in the years to come.

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