



A Woman for our Time

Venerable Marie Madeleine d'Houët... An 'older sister' who prays with us

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There have been ghastly images on our TV screens in recent weeks, but perhaps the most heart-rending are those of the premature babies in Gaza. One cannot begin to imagine the suffering involved. Giving birth in a war zone, parting from a new-born child and fleeing to an unknown future. This grief has no boundary and affects us all.

In a public audience in April 2021, Pope Francis reflected, *'One person's pain is everyone's pain, and one person's happiness is transmitted to someone else's soul. There is no grief ... that is borne in solitude, there are no tears shed in oblivion, because everyone breathes and participates in one common grace.'*

Pope Francis continues with a reflection on the communion of saints.

'When we pray, we never do so alone: even if we do not think about it, we are immersed in a majestic river of invocations that precedes us and proceeds after us. Contained in the prayers we find in the Bible, that often resound in the liturgy, are the traces of ancient stories, of prodigious liberations, of deportations and sad exiles, of emotional returns, of praise ringing out before the wonders of creation ... And thus, these voices are passed on from generation to generation, in a continual intertwining between personal experience and that of the people and the humanity to which we belong.'

The flight into Egypt of those 31 premature babies, is intertwined with our human story. The babies have low oxygen levels, one has an eye injury, several have low birth weight. Four of the mothers travelled with the babies but the status and whereabouts of the other parents is not known.

*'Prayer is always born again: each time ... we open our hearts to God, we find ourselves in the company of anonymous **saints** and recognized saints who pray with us and **who intercede for us as older brothers and sisters** who have preceded us on this same human adventure.'*



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Venerable Marie Madeleine d'Houët, the Foundress of the Faithful Companions of Jesus, is one such saint who intercedes for us as *'an older sister'* who has preceded us on this same human adventure.

Her story is one of joy and suffering, and a constant search for the better choice –and of growth in holiness. The story of her *'human adventure'* is miraculous - it is not explained in simply human terms.

Marie Madeleine experienced a longing to do good to others. This heart-felt **Longing** pulled and tugged her along the path of human adventure.

*She longed to be a **companion of Jesus** and though she didn't set out to found a religious congregation this is where her human adventure took her.*

*'And thus, these voices are passed on from generation to generation, in a **continual intertwining** between personal experience and that of the people and the humanity to which we belong'.* Pope Francis

A retired paediatrician who lives in USA and a friend of the FCJ Sisters, reflecting on her past experiences, writes...

"I see parenting as the hardest, most important job of all, the most important calling in the world, as well as the most rewarding.

In my medical practice, when I would follow the pregnancy of a mother and help in the delivery of her newborn, I was witness to an obvious miracle. Less dramatic but more profound is the courage, unconditional love, commitment and energy in the day-to-day, night-to-night care of the mother and father for their child. Marie Madeleine did not have the support and reassurance of her husband to share this responsibility and sometimes the worries. Long before establishing a new religious congregation, she learned about selflessness and dedication. Probably she was also humbled by the thought that God had entrusted this new human being to her care.

As a paediatrician I saw parents at vulnerable times -when their children were ill. It was usually an ear or throat infection; not infrequently a revisit after three days because "She won't take the antibiotic".

A single mother like Marie Madeleine may have help off and on, but usually not at night or early morning to help get the medicine down. Much more serious was the leukaemia requiring days of vigil and fear in the hospital while their child received chemotherapy. I will never forget the mother who, expecting to give birth to a healthy baby, delivered a baby with a serious congenital abnormality requiring lifelong special care. With help, the parents cared for and loved this child as their other two. What you see in such parents, underlying their love, is amazing grit and determination to do

what must be done. In the case of Marie Madeleine, there is the story of her son's stubbornness as regards learning to read. This went on for a while, until her mother-in-law declared that she would take charge. This opened Marie Madeleine's eyes to the need to be more stern with her son, and soon the reading improved! Every parent of a first born is on a steep learning curve about raising a child! In these years, and then during Eugene's schooling with the Jesuits, perhaps Marie Madeleine gradually realized the fundamental Importance of a good education for the full development of boys and girls.

Once I retired from doctoring, I worked in our local library. Almost every day I would see a father with his older autistic son, who lacked many basic communication skills. We all heard his vocalizations as his father took him to the books on farm equipment. "He likes to see pictures of combines and hay bailers. He wants to understand how the bailer ties the bales." Being a parent forces one to step out of one's selfish egoic needs and focus on another's needs. Not all parents are good parents, but most are. They are not perfect but they are saints. I would say that Marie Madeleine was/is a saint if only for her lifelong dedication as a mother and then grandmother."

Nancy Thompson USA

Advent, a time of waiting, will soon be here.

*This is a time for making the pathways
of the human adventure
a little easier
a time for making the
rough patches smoother.*



Marie Madeleine,
is an 'older sister' who has
preceded us on this
human adventure.

**Let us ask her to intercede with us,
especially for
suffering mothers.**