

From Vendée to the ends of the earth



**Sister Marie de la Croix
(1831 – 1908)**

Missionary in New Caledonia

Marie Cécile de Mijolla, smsm

and Amelia Tufale, pfm

*(for the chapter on the birth of the
Congregation of the Petites Filles de Marie)*

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Translation into English - Julienne Hayes-Smith, smsm

Rome, 2008

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FOREWORD

The particularly rich personality of Sister Marie de la Croix and the remarkable work that she accomplished in New Caledonia are obvious reasons why other writings have already been devoted to her. Thus, between 1930 and 1950, Mother Marie de la Merci Marnas wrote several booklets tracing the major outlines of this extraordinary life.

Preceding the writings of M. M. de la Merci, but less known because it was never published, is another biography for which we are indebted to Fr Jean Pionnier, Marist Missionary in New Caledonia. He arrived in Nouméa in 1870. On many occasions at Saint-Louis, he met Sr M. de la Croix for whom he had deep admiration. That is why, at the beginning of the 20th century, shortly after her death, he undertook this writing in which he provides information about her not found anywhere else, and that only a contemporary could know. That explains the special interest of his biography.

He had access, as also did M. M. de la Merci, to a certain number of documents - mainly letters - preserved either in Nouméa or in France, from which he very frequently quoted. However, he does not appear to have had at his disposal in its entirety the considerable amount of documentation now found in the archives of the Archdiocese of Nouméa, those of the Marist Fathers in Rome, or those in our own archives, also in Rome.

Primarily and principally, this documentation consists of numerous letters of Sr M. de la Croix (more than 600) that have fortunately been preserved. Her main correspondents were Fr Victor Poupinel, visitor general of the Oceania Missions until 1870, then general councillor in Lyon; Fr François Yardin, mission procurator until 1872, and his

successor, Fr Gabriel Germain. The letters to Fr Poupinel, by far the most numerous, have a very special interest. Sr M. de la Croix had complete confidence in this priest, whose outstanding qualities had won her heart. Living in very great solitude, especially during the first years of her missionary life, she needed to express herself, to confide in someone, and with him she did so unreservedly.

Between 1866 and 1871, she also wrote several very interesting letters to Mother Marie du Cœur de Jesus, foundress of the congregation of Our Lady of the Missions, to which Sr M. de la Croix belonged for a few years. The religious of this congregation very kindly gave me copies of this correspondence preserved in their archives (ARNDM).

From the 1880s onwards, Sr M. de la Croix's communications with the priests in France ceased, but she continued to write. Consequently we have in our general archives a whole set of letters written to the *Petites Filles de Marie*¹, her former novices. There we discover her motherly concern and the depth of her interior life.

After she left for Belep in 1892, it was to Sr Marie Saint-Anne, who replaced her at Saint-Louis, that henceforth until her death, almost every month, she wrote letters full of trust, giving details of her new life.

The documentation does not stop there. In their correspondence with the general administration in France, the priests in New Caledonia who had dealings with the sisters, for example, Frs Pierre Rougeyron, provicar until 1874, and Jean-Baptiste Vigouroux, parish priest of Saint-Louis, and likewise Bishop Ferdinand Vitte and Bishop Alphonse Fraysse, vicars apostolic, often made reference to Sr M. de la Croix. Lastly, the minutes of meetings of the Bishop's

¹ Little Daughters of Mary.

Council and the official publications of the vicariate provide some very interesting information.

Quotations from Sr M. de la Croix's letters are frequent throughout the following pages so that readers are provided with the direct contact they no doubt desire. However, as this is not a critical edition, in a few cases corrections have been made in the passages quoted, mainly in punctuation, to make the text easier to understand. Sr M. de la Croix wrote in great haste and did not reread her letters because she did not have the time. That is why it has been necessary to add a coma or a full stop occasionally...

Except for very rare exceptions, the spelling in common use today has been adopted for place names, always with the aim of facilitating understanding.

Since the aim of this work is not at all the same as that which governed the choice of letters and extracts of letters in the four volumes of *Our Pioneers - from their correspondence*, it is not surprising that, in many cases, the texts used are not the same.

As abundant as is the documentation concerning the missionary years of Sr M. de la Croix's life, it must be recognized that the same is not true for her first twenty-seven years, lived in France. There are some gaps that it has not been possible to fill despite research carried out in the places where she lived, namely La Roche-sur-Yon, Bordeaux and Lyon. On several occasions assumptions have been made that may in the future prove incorrect... This explains why the first chapter is notably shorter than the others, as also the beginning of the second.

A dual system of references has been adopted. For the notes at the bottom of the page alphabetical letters are used to give facts needed in order to understand the narrative. The notes at the end of each chapter are more technical in nature:

they give the reference number of the document from which a particular piece of information has been taken, Arabic numerals are used.

A bibliography used in writing this work is found at the end of this book. At the end, several documents of particular interest are included as appendices.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all those who, in one way or another, have helped me in my work. I shall mention only a few, while assuring the others that I do not forget them.

Thanks to Bishop Michel Calvet, Archbishop of Nouméa, I have had free and unrestricted access to the particularly valuable diocesan archives. Father Carlo Maria Schianchi, archivist at the Marist Fathers' generalate, welcomed me in Rome and responded to my requests for information in a fraternal way that I greatly appreciated. Several photos used in this work are from the collections in these two archives.

My thanks also go to Sr Judith Moore, our congregational leader, who encouraged me to bring this work to completion; to Sr Mary Emerentiana, archivist at our generalate, who has always responded with exactitude to my numerous requests for further details, and to Sr Catherine Jones who, during her years in Lyon, obtained precious information for me.

I owe very special gratitude to Sr Marie Hélène Tutugoro, superior general of the congregation of the Petites Filles de Marie at the time, who passed on to me the documents preserved in the archives of the congregation that I wished to consult. She also immediately agreed to my

superior's request for a PFM to be involved in this work. Sr Amelia came to the community on several consecutive Wednesdays and we discussed the task in light of the documents available to us. She then did an excellent job in writing the pages concerning the beginnings of her congregation.

I am grateful to Sr Margaret Ryan who accepted the thankless task of preparing the manuscript for printing, Sr Julienne Hayes-Smith who was entrusted with the English translation and Sr Marie Lamerand who read it and offered suggestions.

Finally I would like to express my gratitude to my friend, Christine Giesecke, teacher of history-geography at Marie Reine College at Thabor (New Caledonia), who was so very kind as to reread the manuscript and make all kinds of useful comments and observations.

Marie Cécile de Mijolla
Nouméa, 14 May 2006

Post-scriptum

For several years Sr Amelia's health had been causing us concern and finally, to our great sorrow, she died on 4 February last year. She will not have the joy of taking in her hands a copy of this book to which she made a valued contribution but she has entered into eternal life.

February 2008

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

AAN	Archives of the Archdiocese of Nouméa
AEM	Archives of the Missionary Childhood or Holy Childhood
AMO	<i>Annales des Missions d'Océanie</i>
APF	<i>Annales de la Propagation de la foi</i>
APM	Archives of the Marist Fathers
APM ONC	Marist Fathers' Archives, Vicariate of New Caledonia
APM OP	Marist Fathers' Archives, Province of Oceania
APM VM	Marist Fathers' Archives, Villa Maria Fonds
ARNDM	Archives of the Religious of Our Lady of the Missions
ASM	Archives of the Marist Sisters
ASMSM	Archives of the Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary
BERV	<i>Bulletin ecclésiastique et religieux du vicariat</i>
BONC	<i>Bulletin officiel de la Nouvelle Calédonie</i>
CA	<i>Communication administrative</i> (du vicariat de N. Calédonie)
CE	Episcopal Council (Vicariate of New Caledonia)
OPS I	<i>Our Pioneer Sisters from correspondence 1836-1885, Vol. I, First Departures (1836-1860)</i>
OPS II	<i>Our Pioneer Sisters from correspondence 1836-1885, Vol. II, Older Sisters and Newcomers (1861-1865)</i>
OPS III	<i>Our Pioneer Sisters from correspondence 1836-1885, Vol III, Older Sisters and Newcomers (1866-1873)</i>
OPS IV	<i>Our Pioneer Sisters from correspondence 1836-1885, Vol. IV, Beginnings of the Third Order Regular (1874-1885)</i>
OPS V	<i>Our Pioneer Sisters from Legislative texts and documents of an official character (1855-1932) Vol. V</i>

PFM	<i>Petites Filles de Marie</i> (Little Daughters of Mary)
RNDM	Religious of Our Lady of the Missions
SM	Society of Mary
TOM	Third Order of Mary
TOMMO	Third Order of Mary for the Missions of Oceania
TORM	Third Order Regular of Mary
Fr	Father
M.	Marie
M.	Monsieur
M. M.	Mother Marie
Mlle	<i>Mademoiselle</i> , Miss
Mme	<i>Madame</i> , Mrs
R.	Reverend(s)
Sr(s)	Sister(s)
St(e)	Saint(e)
Arch. dép.	Archives of the Department of
cf.	from the latin <i>confer</i> , compare
doc.	document, documents
etc.	<i>et cetera</i>
ibid.	<i>ibidem</i> , in the same book or passage
man.	manuscript
n.	note, notes
no	number
op. cit.	<i>opere citato</i> , work already cited
p.	page, pages
s.	<i>sequiturque</i> , following
suppl.	supplement
t.	tome
vol.	volume, volumes



Sr Marie de la Croix - about 1885



Sr Marie de la Croix - about 1899

INTRODUCTION

“Let us go on to the neighbouring towns,
so that I may proclaim the message there also;
for that is what I came out to do.”

(Mk 1: 38)

The journey from Poum, in the north of New Caledonia, took place without incident. The sun shone brightly, but was not scorching: it was too early and the sea was like glass. About 9 o'clock the barge reached Wala.

Wala Bay, on the island of Art, the southernmost of the Belep islands, stretched out in front of us, from the Sainte Croix peninsula on the left as far as Cap Saint-Joseph on the right. The houses, nestled among the coconut palms and banana plants at the end of the bay, now shelter the entire population of the island.

Halfway up and slightly to the right stands the dispensary and the school. A little higher up, but this time to the left, is the shining white church which seemed to be welcoming us. It is full of light and the view over the ocean from its porch is magnificent.

A small cemetery with old graves, recalling a painful episode in the history of this island, is below and to the left of the church: it was the leprosy patients' cemetery. Many of those who were brought to Art in 1892 never returned home and were laid to rest there.

On the hillside, behind the church, lies another larger cemetery, the parish cemetery. In the middle of it is the tomb of Sr Marie de la Croix who also came to this island in 1892, but to care for those leprosy patients. She remained at Belep

after their departure in 1898 and died there ten years later, on 9 August 1908.

Her very simple grave is well cared for: the Petites Filles de Marie do not forget their debt to her. Was it not she who opened the hearts of the first young Melanesian women, who formed, guided and encouraged them, giving birth to a flourishing religious congregation?

The following pages attempt to retrace the life of this woman, who, in the 19th century, among the Marist pioneers in Oceania, was a missionary of remarkable qualities and a religious of unfailing courage and deep faith. They also aim to tell how this little person from Vendée went to the ends of the earth to announce the love of the Father and of his Son Jesus.



**La Roche-sur-Yon: Place Napoléon showing St Louis' church
where Pélégie was baptised**



Our Lady of Verdélais

CHAPTER 1

THE YEARS OF PREPARATION

I. CHILDHOOD AT LA ROCHE-SUR-YON

Sister Marie de la Croix, born Pélagie Phelippon, first saw the light of day in a little town nowadays called La Roche-sur-Yon, in the heart of La Vendée, between Nantes and Bordeaux, in the west of France.

1) La Roche-sur-Yon, her birthplace

During the Middle Ages this little town was nothing more than a rock surmounted by a castle with some houses grouped around it, overhanging the Yon [*River*]. It was not spared the vicissitudes of history as during the Hundred Years' War the castle was taken by the English.

Over the centuries La Roche-sur-Yon developed very slowly. In 1790, when the Constituent Assembly suppressed the provinces of the Old Regime and established the departments, the population of the area still numbered only eight hundred.

Though well situated in the middle of the department of La Vendée,^a in a wooded area, its name was not put forward to become the administrative centre. Rather, preference was given to Fontenay-le-Comte, further south, capital of Bas-

^a During this period, three departments came into being from the province of Poitou: La Vendée, bordering the Atlantic Ocean, Les Deux-Sèvres to the east of La Vendée and La Vienne still further east.

Poitou since the thirteenth century and an area where commercial and handcraft activities had developed.

The jolts of the Revolution did not spare La Roche-sur-Yon which experienced several uprisings: in 1792 the Vendéen peasants met the national guards, who came to arrest the priests who refused to take the oath,^b with blows of scythes and pitchforks. The following year when Paris decided to resort to conscription in order to confront the foreign invasion,^c the peasants of the whole region once again rose up. The people also took part in the revolt of the Chouans whose religious and political convictions were opposed to the republican ideas coming from Paris.

In 1804, by order of Napoléon I, emperor of France, the administrative centre of La Vendée was transferred to La Roche-sur-Yon. Town plans were drawn up and gradually carried out: a network of roads spread out from the new capital baptised 'Napoléon'. Just as the nineteenth century had seen several political regimes in France, the name of the town also changed. And so it was that when Pélagie was born on 16 July 1831, the town was called Bourbon-Vendée, indicative of the full restoration of the monarchy.

Bourbon-Vendée was then a small administrative centre of about 20,000 inhabitants. Today a statue of the founder of the city, Napoléon mounted on a horse, stands in the middle of a beautifully proportioned central square, adorning it. But

^b In 1790 the Constituent Assembly in Paris had passed a decree instituting a clergy independent of the Holy See. Ninety percent of the Vendean clergy refused to take the oath which was required of them and became 'refractory'.

^c The downfall of the monarchy and the death of Queen Marie-Antoinette led France into war with Austria. As a larger army was needed to fight the invaders, a decree for the enlistment of 300,000 men was passed.

at that date the square was called Place Royale; the statue would be erected only in 1854.^d

2) Pélégie's family

- *Paternal family*

Research on the Phelippon family in church and civil registers of La Roche-sur-Yon has allowed us to go back as far as the mid-eighteenth century when this family appears to have already been firmly settled there. Pélégie's great-grandfather, Maître Pierre Phelippon, was practising there as an apothecary, that is a pharmacist. Married to Mlle Marie Braigue, he had a son, also named Pierre, who was 'sergeant of the principality', and who, on 13 August 1761, married Mlle Marie Bignoneau whose late father, Maître Pierre Bignoneau, was a '*Bourgeois*'.^e In July 1762, a daughter, Marie Rose Thérèse, was born into this family, then on 8 March 1764, a boy, Pierre, who was baptized the same day. This was Pélégie's grandfather.¹

Pierre Phelippon, the third with this name, married Victoire Augustine Legay, daughter of Jean and Marie Jeanne Baritaud, in about 1790.^f She was originally from Pouzauges, to the east of La Vendée, a place more important at that time than La Roche-sur-Yon. The couple had two children: Marie, born on 2 September 1791, and Pierre Auguste Joseph, born

^d On the fall of the Second Empire in 1870, the town went back to its original name of La Roche-sur-Yon and the square is now called Place Napoléon.

^e No doubt in the etymological sense of an inhabitant of the town (bourg).

^f Because of the Revolution the registers are very incomplete. There is no trace of this marriage either at La Roche-sur-Yon or at Pouzauges. We suggest 1790 as the date of this marriage because a daughter was born into this family in 1791.

on 8 *prairial* of the year 9, that is to say, 28 May 1802. This was Pélagie's father Pierre Phelippon.

- ***Maternal family***

The Gouyneau or Gouineau family were also originally from Poitou, but from the department of Les Deux-Sèvres. Jacques Gouineau, a tax collector, married Marie Louise Renée Bariteau in the mid-eighteenth century. Henry Aimé Grégoire was born of this union on 9 May 1753, at Coulonges les Royaux^g in Les Deux-Sèvres and was baptized on 11 May. He was Pélagie's grandfather.

On 12 *frimaire* of the year 4, that is 3 December 1796, Henry Aimé Grégoire Gouyneau married Marie Louise Pélagie Guignard, daughter of Louis Victor and Louise Dalleau, at Saint Jean d'Angély in Charente Inferieure.^h The following year, on 11 *brumaire* of the year 5, in other words, 4 November 1797, they had a daughter whom they named Marie Pélagie Antoinette. She was Pélagie's mother. At that time Henry Aimé Grégoire gave as his occupation - merchant.

At this point two facts need to be noted: Pélagie's maternal grandfather was no longer a merchant but an imperial public notary at the time of his death at Saint-Savinien in 1813. And the name of her maternal grandmother, whose father was himself a notary, was Guignard de la Morandière according to her death certificate in Bourbon-Vendée in 1824. Originally from Bournezeau in La Vendée, she was declared a 'refugee' at Saint-Jean d'Angély at the time of her marriage in 1796. So this was a family marked by the Revolution.

^g Today known as Coulonges sur l'Autize.

^h Today known as Charente Maritime, in the south of La Vendée.

- *Nuclear family*

The marriage of Pierre Auguste Joseph Phelippon, a landowner, and Marie Pélagie Antoinette Gouyneau was celebrated in Bourbon-Vendée where the two spouses were living, the civil marriage on 21 October 1827 and the religious marriage the following day, 22 October. The ceremony took place in the church of Saint Louis which faces the Place Royale. A dispensation from ‘the impediment of blood relationship to the third degree’ had to be requested. In fact, Victoire Legay, paternal grandmother, and Henry Aimé Grégoire, maternal grandfather, were first cousins: Victoire’s mother, Marie Jeanne Baritaud, and Henry’s mother, Marie Louise Bariteau, were sisters. The spelling of the family name is not the same, but at that time variations between one register and another, one act and another, were common.¹

At the time of her marriage, Pélagie Gouyneau was an orphan: her mother had died at Bourbon-Vendée in 1824. By contrast, Pierre’s mother was still alive: the ‘Phelippon widow’ signed the marriage certificate alongside the two spouses. Other signatures indicate the presence that day of Pierre’s cousins: Goupillaud, Roulin, Pertuzé, and Grolleau whose names are found on other civil documents. The name of Pierre’s sister, Marie, who had married Ambroise Plaire in 1820, and the following year had a daughter, Victoire, Pélagie’s first cousin, does not appear on the document. Sr M. de la Croix never speaks of her in her letters but then references to her family are very rare.

A boy was the first born in this family: Alphonse arrived on 21 September 1829. Then, on 16 July 1831, followed Phelinda Pélagie Augusta, the future missionary, who was baptised at Saint Louis two days later. Her grandmother held

¹ Thus on the religious marriage certificate of Pélagie’s parents, ‘Gouineau’ is written, but the bride signed ‘Gouyneau’.

her over the baptismal font and her godfather, a first cousin of her father, was Augustin Goupillaud.

Two other children were born in the following years: Arthur in April 1834 and Léonce in March 1836, but they both died at very young ages, Arthur a few months old in September 1834 and Léonce in February 1838 when he was not yet two.^j

3) Early education

The Phelippons lived in Morisset Street,^k in the oldest part of the town, between the Yon [*River*] and the Place Royale. They were fairly well off since, at the time of the 1836 census, two 18-year-old girls also lived there, certainly at the service of the family.

It seems that Mme Phelippon, Pélagie's mother, wanted to give her children a good, solid education. "*This Christian mother, a woman of talent, energy and solid piety, never gave in to the whims of her dear child,*" we read in a little handwritten document² that gives some examples of this severity. Whereas the servants had good beds with feather pillows, Alphonse and Pélagie had to be content with straw mattresses. On winter mornings, after their prayer, the two children used to break the ice outside; then they had their breakfast standing up. After that they left for the community school with the poor children. However, their mother completed their formation at home: she taught them Latin.³

Their father had a much softer heart and easily spoiled his daughter, but Mme Phelippon knew how to put things in

^j In Appendix 1 at the back of the book, copies of Pélagie Phelippon's birth and baptism certificates can be found.

^k Now called: *rue de la Poste aux lettres*.

order. When he offered her a pretty white hat, or a pair of good quality shoes that Pélagie admired, they were quickly given to children in need. At that time Pélagie was 6 years old! Later in life, Sr M. de la Croix would never forget the strict education received from her mother which prepared her so well for the difficulties and renunciations of missionary life in the 19th century. On 17 April 1893, she would write in her journal: “*Today, the 39th anniversary of my mother’s death - my whole day offered for the repose of her soul.*”⁴

It was during these years that the desire to give herself entirely to God took root in Pélagie’s heart. In 1869 she wrote:

*I promised God before I was 6 years old to die a religious. To die a religious was really the form of my vow. For I said in my simplicity: if my parents force me to marry, I will ask God to make my husband die so that I will belong to him in spite of all.*⁵

II. ADOLESCENCE IN BORDEAUX

At the end of the 1830s, M. and Mme Phelippon with their two children left Bourbon-Vendée and went to live in Bordeaux. The exact date of this move is not known but at the time of the 1841 census the family was no longer in Bourbon-Vendée.⁶

1) Why this departure for Bordeaux?

Fr Yardin, procurator of the Marist Missions in Lyon, who had known Sr M. de la Croix well in 1858, before her departure for Oceania, succinctly gave the reason for this move when he wrote: “*Her father had a very good position at Bourbon-Vendée; he lost everything and was taken in by M. Carogon-Latour at Bordeaux.*”⁷

Bordeaux at that time had regained its 18th century prosperity. After the difficulties caused by the continental blockade of the Napoleonic era, the reputation of its wine, going back to the Middle Ages, was reaffirmed and its maritime commerce developed thanks to the Indian Ocean colonies.

Already during the preceding century the town was endowed with squares and grandiose edifices. The programme could resume: it is from this period that dates, for example, the beautiful esplanade of the Quinconces. That could explain why M. Phelippon would have gone to Bordeaux rather than to Nantes which was much closer to Bourbon-Vendée but did not experience the same rapid economic development.

2) Pélagie as a boarder with the Dames de la Foi [Sisters of the Faith]

When Pélagie was about ten years old, the age when children made their First Communion at the time, her parents entrusted her to the Dames de la Foi, or the Dames de Saint-Maur, no doubt in order to help her prepare well. These sisters then had a boarding school at No. 10 Cheverus Street in Bordeaux where they took in girls from high society. There Pélagie stood out because of her intelligence; she topped her class and won all the first prizes. She was loved by her companions and her teachers.⁸

A priest of the diocese, Fr Langalerie¹ used to give religious instruction to the boarders every Monday. He had noticed Pélagie because of the clarity of her responses.⁸

¹ This priest was named Bishop of Belley in 1857, then, in 1871, Archbishop of Auch where he died in 1886. (Information supplied by Fr Veissier, archivist of the diocese of Bordeaux, in 2003).

It was no doubt during this period that she wore the crinoline^m to which she refers in a letter addressed in 1865 - 20 years later - to her friend Fr Forestier who teased her: “*I had to wear a crinoline,*” she wrote jokingly, “*and I am too happy to have let go of it to take it back again.*”⁹

Among the religious who taught her there was one for whom she retained a very particular fond memory: Mother Sainte Melanie. In November 1858 she wrote to her from Sydney¹⁰ and she sometimes mentioned her in her letters. In 1871, when Fr Victor Poupinel, visitor general of the Missions, arrived back in France, he went to Bordeaux and visited these sisters. When Sr M. de la Croix heard about it, she wrote to him: “*So my dear teacher St Melanie is still alive. Oh! How sweet is the debt of gratitude!*”¹¹ A year earlier she had already expressed this gratitude toward all the sisters, affirming that she retained “*an indelible memory of their kindnesses*”.¹²

3) The death of her father and grandmother

As happy as were the memories she kept of the Dames de la Foi, it was during this period that she had the sorrow of losing the father who loved her so much. The family was living at Petit Pont Long Street¹³ and M. Phelippon, who was then aged 43, was employed at the General Revenue Office.ⁿ Sr M. de la Croix never made any reference to this death, which can be considered premature even if in the 19th century life expectancy was on average shorter than in our days. Was he sick? We can only suppose that. But this death on 12

^m The crinoline was a bouffant petticoat with whalebones or steel hoops that held out the skirt; it was in fashion during the Second Empire.

ⁿ In our days, the General Treasury.

December 1845 deprived the family of a very necessary source of revenue. A long time afterwards, from Ile des Pins, Sr M. de la Croix, writing to a friend, made this quite distressing confession expressing the sufferings she had undergone in Bordeaux:

*I have cried so much in my life that my eyes now moisten for nothing, but there is a little shudder in me that says more than a tear.*¹⁴

Some months later, on 11 March 1846, it was her grandmother who passed away at Bourbon-Vendée. Sr M. de la Croix spoke once of this grandmother in a letter to Fr Yardin: “*Know this, my good Father*”, she told him,

*the little daughter of Madame Phelippon is well and truly dead, so never again accuse Sr Marie de la Croix of being related to her in any way.*¹⁵

Whatever one might make of this astonishing reflection, if it is put together with other information Fr Yardin gave in 1858, when he explained the reason for the family’s departure for Bordeaux: “*Her grandmother fought the good fight alongside of Charrette,*” it can be concluded without risk of being mistaken that this lady had a strong personality ... and that her granddaughter had someone to contend with!

4) Teacher and educator

That same year, 1846 - or the following year, we do not know exactly - Pélagie completed her studies and left the boarding school at Cheverus Street. Nor do we know when she opened a small school which, it seems, achieved rapid success. Sr M. de la Croix referred to this school in 1872. By then she had already been at Saint-Louis in New Caledonia for several years. Fr Poupinel, already briefly mentioned, put her in contact with the Sisters of the Présentation of Mary

who had a house in Verdélais, very close to Bordeaux. She wrote to this priest:

I am very fond of Mlle Rivier's daughters;^o one of my pupils is a religious¹⁶ with them; she is the first one whom I have given to the good Lord.¹⁷

So the school certainly existed and functioned for some years but, as it did not have official authorization, Pélégie had to close it.

Likewise at a date that cannot be given exactly, (in the 1850s ?), Pélégie became governess for a Spanish girl whose family had taken refuge in Bordeaux. In the middle of the 19th century, the Spanish monarchy went through a troubled period. After the death of King Ferdinand VII, his daughter Isabelle, a minor, was proclaimed heir to the throne, in spite of the Salic law,^p and that, to the detriment of Don Carlos, the king's brother. This resulted in some mayhem, uprisings and the exile of many people including the Albizu family, prominent people in Spain, who came and settled in Bordeaux.

Was this family aware of the closure of Pélégie's school? Did they know that her qualities as an educator had been appreciated by the parents who had entrusted their children to her? One can only raise the question. What is sure is that Pélégie found herself entrusted with responsibility for the education of their daughter, Trinita, an adolescent of "indomitable character" who "had exhausted the patience of thirteen teachers".¹⁸ And she succeeded extremely well at her task, to the parents' very great satisfaction. She would not forget the years she spent with that family.¹⁹

^o The reference is to the foundress of this congregation in Bourg-St-Andéol, in L'Ardèche.

^p The law that excluded women from the throne.

From New Caledonia she would remain in contact with Trinita for whom she recognized a feeling of “*unwavering affection*”²⁰ for several years, until her marriage in 1864 with the Grand Chamberlain of the Queen of Spain.²¹ The obvious consequence was that the young woman went to live in Madrid and Sr M. de la Croix sent wishes that she be “*happy, a good spouse and a good Christian*”.²² Then all correspondence with Trinita ceased.

5) Father Charlot

To die as a religious was, as we have seen, Pélagie’s profound desire since her childhood. So it is understandable that she wanted to receive spiritual guidance. She made an approach to Fr Charlot. It is not known when and how she came to know him but the fact is that there developed between them a solid and deep friendship, marked by respect on her part, a friendship that would not cease until the death, in 1894, of this priest whom she venerated.

François Charlot, who was born in Bordeaux in 1808, was firstly, from 1834, curate of Notre Dame parish in Bordeaux, then parish priest of Cadillac-sur-Garonne between 1847 and 1854. At this date, no doubt in autumn for the re-opening of the university, he returned to live in Bordeaux because he was named professor of Ecclesiastical Law in the Faculty of Theology. At the same period he also became an honorary canon of the cathedral of Saint André.²³

Did Sr M. de la Croix get to know him during her boarding school years? Cheverus Street is situated in the centre of Bordeaux, not far from the church of Notre Dame where Fr Charlot was curate until 1847. Perhaps the meeting took place only when he was parish priest at Cadillac, between 1847 and 1854. This hypothesis seems the most likely; in fact in 1865, Sr M. de la Croix wrote: “*He [Fr*

*Charlot] does not know my brother, and hardly knows if I have one.*²⁴ Now, at the end of the 1840s her brother Alphonse was doing his military service in Algeria, then he joined the army. Again in 1865, this time to Fr Charlot, she wrote: “*Cadillac still has a prominent place in my memories.*”²⁵ In addition, in 1861, she made it clear to Fr Yardin:

*It is not only a holy friendship that links me to this worthy priest; it is gratitude and the ever-living memory of my mother who venerated him with good reason.*²⁶

Mme Phelippon, it must be remembered, died in the spring of 1854.

The trip from Bordeaux to Cadillac ought not to have been a problem; a railway line connecting them was inaugurated in the middle of the 19th century.²⁷ There was likewise a connecting link by the river Garonne.

Upon her departure for Oceania in 1858, Sr M. de la Croix took the decision to break all ties with France, except with the Marist Fathers.²⁸ She had much difficulty in keeping this resolution, notably with Fr Charlot from whom a letter, the first, reached her at the beginning of 1859, when she had barely arrived in New Caledonia. A year later, in April 1860, she expressed her regret at not having replied to her old friend; she reproached herself for her lack of gratitude and wanted to be forgiven.²⁹ Thus commenced a fairly regular correspondence; at least during the first twenty years. Fr Charlot wrote to Sr M. de la Croix about every two months and she, too over-burdened with work, responded scarcely once a year.³⁰ But on several occasions she expressed her joy over this correspondence with her “*venerable friend*”³¹ who wrote to her “*with such affection*”.³² In this way he kept her abreast of what was happening in France: “*All the issues of the day are broadly outlined; it is my newspaper,*” she wrote in 1870.³³

From the 1880s, as the priests in Lyon had died or departed elsewhere, we no longer know if this “*good old friend*” was able to continue to write as often, but the contact was not broken off. Thus, in 1889, Sr M. de la Croix wrote to Agrippina, the future Sr M. St Jean who would be her companion at Belep:

*Fr Charlot has written to me and was responding to you, delighted with your letter [...]. You will easily see that he has grown old, 82, I believe! [...] Hold on to the words of this good old man as the words of a Saint who so loves the good Lord that he also loves all those who serve this Divine Master.*³⁴

In 1893, writing to Sr M. Anne, Sr M. de la Croix deplored that since her departure from St Louis for Belep several months earlier, she had not had time to write a word to her “*old Fr Charlot*”.³⁵

On 14 January 1894, when he had just celebrated his eighty-sixth birthday, Fr Charlot died in Bordeaux.

6) Verdélais and the Marists

About ten kilometres from Cadillac, to the north-east of Bordeaux, a sanctuary dedicated to the Blessed Virgin - Verdélais - has existed since the 12th century. At that time a modest oratory sheltered a statue of the Virgin guarded by a hermit, right in the midst of the forest. Then, after the hermit came some monks who built a real chapel and a monastery. Over the centuries the chapel and monastery were looted, destroyed and reconstructed on many occasions. The statue itself disappeared. It was replaced at the end of the 14th century by the one which can be venerated today.

In the 17th century some houses were constructed around the sanctuary and the village of Verdélais came into existence.

For about a hundred years some Celestin monks provided hospitality for pilgrims who began to flock there, most of them coming from Bordeaux. The church and the monastery were enlarged and embellished. But after this period of splendour came the Revolution and its accompanying misfortunes: the buildings fell into ruins again and animals came to graze within the cloister.

By the 19th century and the return of calm after the turmoil, pilgrimages resumed and the chapel, rebuilt from its ruins, became also the parish church of the village. It was then that the Archbishop of Bordeaux, Cardinal Donnet, who had done his seminary studies in Lyon and knew Fr Colin, the founder of the Society of Mary, appealed to the Marists. They arrived in Verdélais on 18 August 1838 and took on responsibility for the pilgrimages and the parish. However, since 1836 the Fathers had received from Rome the task of evangelizing the western part of Oceania. Several groups of missionaries had left for there, among them Fr Chanel who died a martyr in Futuna in 1842.

A Bordelais by adoption, Pélagie came on pilgrimage to Verdélais. Was it Fr Charlot who, knowing her desire for religious and missionary life, sent her there the first time? She always loved to pray in this sanctuary, to place herself before God and to ask to know his will, and she prayed through the intercession of Our Lady of Verdélais. She was at that time *“one of the most active enthusiasts for the schools of the East”*.³⁶ She herself wrote in 1866: *“The missions were the object of my constant desires for eight years before I came here.”*³⁷

7) Alphonse, Pélagie’s brother

Among the priests at Verdélais, the names of Frs Lagniet and Gay are listed. The former, Fr Benoît Lagniet, was in

Lyon in 1858 when Pélagie arrived there: this will be taken up again in the next chapter. As for Fr François Gay, it seems that Pélagie had known him more personally and had spoken to him of Alphonse, her “*dear brother*”³⁸ who was going to cause her so much worry. She would correspond with him for several years.³⁹

During her stopover at Villa Maria, the Fathers’ procure in Sydney, at the end of 1858, Sr M. de la Croix was bitterly disappointed; there was no letter from her brother waiting for her there.³⁸ Her suffering was so obvious that Fr Yardin, from Lyon, wrote to Alphonse’s colonel whose regiment was in Italy at the time. The response was such that the priest did not communicate it to the sister despite her complaints.⁴⁰ And her brother’s silence continued.

Over the months in her letters to different priests, Sr M. de la Croix frequently mentioned him. In 1861 - is Alphonse on leave? - she learnt that he was passing through Paris, and she asked Fr Gay who, it seems, was well “*within reach*” to get in touch with her “*unfortunate brother*”.⁴¹

Finally, in July 1865, Sr M. de la Croix had the immense joy of receiving a “*good, simple and charming*”⁴² letter from Alphonse, which would be followed by a second one in August. After a time in the garrison in Algeria, Alphonse had left the army in July 1863. He went to Bordeaux, had several Masses offered for their parents, and even got married. Finally, he obtained a job in the administration of the railways and lived at Passy, in the suburbs of Paris.

The following year, therefore in 1866, Sr M. de la Croix’s joy was replaced by great bitterness. We do not know what happened but she told a priest that she no longer wished to write to her brother and that he should not go to see him any more.⁴³ There is another allusion in 1867 in order to thank Fr Goujon, whom she had known well during her time in Ile

des Pins, for prayers offered for Alphonse.⁴⁴ Then nothing further. She would never speak of him again.^q

8) The last years in Bordeaux

- *Madame Phelippon's death*

But let us return to Bordeaux in the 1850s, certainly the period when Pélagie was governess in the Albizu family. Her mother, who lived at 49 Arès Street,⁴⁵ did not live there all alone. When the family had left Bourbon-Vendée, a servant had accompanied her and remained faithful to her to the end.⁴⁶ Mme Phelippon also had some friends to whom Sr M. de la Croix very occasionally referred. In 1859 she mentioned a Mme Espinasse, “*a charming woman, pious and charitable*”⁴⁷ whose family she had known since her childhood. Above all she spoke several times of a Mme Cuvelier of whom she was very fond and who “*offers her a multitude of things for our missions*”.⁴⁸

On 17 April 1854, nine years after her husband, Mme Phelippon died. She was then 57.^r The following day, 18 April, she was buried in Chartreuse cemetery, the big cemetery of Bordeaux, in the “*common plot*”.⁴⁹ In November that year Pélagie, in her own name and that of Alphonse, “*quartermaster sergeant ... of the 45th Infantry Line Regiment ...*”^s made the declaration of succession, which was required

^q According to Fr Pionnier’s biography of the Sister (Bibliography, p. 341), Alphonse and his family, having left for Algeria, would have perished in an uprising (manuscript, p. 264).

^r According to the death certificate, Mme Phelippon was 53 but our research proves that she was born on 04.11.1797 at St Jean d’Angély (photocopy in SMSM archives). Why was she made 5 years younger? Perhaps because her spouse was born in 1802.

^s Information for translation provided by Duncan Miles:
<http://www.napoleonicassociation.org>

at that time. Pélagie and her brother were her only heirs, but she did not possess anything.⁵⁰

- ***Pélagie leaves Bordeaux***

Henceforth no family tie retained Pélagie in Bordeaux. The only remaining concern was to complete her work with Trinita Albizu, and also, no doubt, to organize her own future. At Verdelais she had surely heard talk of Mlle Perroton's departure for Oceania in 1845. Could this commitment satisfy someone who aspired to missionary life, but also to religious life? Then, at the beginning of 1858, the priests spoke to her of three young women who had just embarked and were going to join Mlle Perroton in Futuna, the very place where Fr Chanel had given his life. This was an endeavour that would allow a religious congregation to be organized once there had been some experience of missionary life.

Pélagie's decision was quickly taken. By 1858 Trinita had grown up and no longer needed her. The desolate family tried to hold her back but to no avail. After a quick trip to Bourbon-Vendée to settle her affairs,⁵¹ Pélagie took the train for Lyon. She would not see Bordeaux again.

ENDNOTES - CHAPTER 1

- ¹ Arch. dép. de la Vendée - microfilm 2E 191/1 - BMS 1737-1774
- ² This document without a title is conserved in AAN 116.9
- ³ In chapter IV we will see how Sr. M. de la Croix knew how to translate some Latin words written by the Pope on a blessing sent to the children of Saint-Louis.
- ⁴ *Journal de S. M. de la Croix*, 17.04.1893 - ASMSM 210.6 (handwritten copy)
- ⁵ Croix-Poupinel, 19.11.1869 - APM VM 227 (OPS 111, 545)
- ⁶ The registers of the census in the municipal archives of Bordeaux, at least for this period, are in poor condition; it is impossible to find any ordinary information.
- ⁷ Yardin-Poupinel, 17.08.1858 - APM OP 418 (OPS I, 88)
- ⁸ cf. document, endnote 2 above
- ⁹ Croix-Forestier, 01.03.1865 - ASMSM 221.51
- ¹⁰ cf. Croix-Yardin, 08.11.1858 - ASMSM 221.3
- ¹¹ Croix-Poupinel, 12.08.1871 - ASMSM 221.2
- ¹² Croix-Poupinel, 06.02.1870 - ASMSM 221.2
- ¹³ cf. Death certificate (photocopy conserved in ASMSM)
- ¹⁴ Croix-Berset, 01.07.1861 - ASMSM 224.6
- ¹⁵ Croix-Yardin, 20.02.1859 - ASMSM 221.3
- ¹⁶ Underlined by the author
- ¹⁷ Croix-Poupinel, 08.01.1872 - ASMSM 221.2
- ¹⁸ cf. document, endnote 2 above
- ¹⁹ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 11.11.1861 - APM VM 227
- ²⁰ Croix-Poupinel, 05.07.1863 - APM VM 227
- ²¹ cf. Croix-Forestier, 03.04.1865 - ASMSM 221.51
- ²² Croix-Charlot, 29.08.1865 - ASMSM 226.5 (handwritten copy)
- ²³ Information provided by Abbé Veissier, diocesan archivist, in 1997; his letter is conserved in ASMSM.
- ²⁴ Croix-Forestier, 01.03.1865 - ASMSM 221.51
- ²⁵ Croix-Charlot, 29.08.1865 - ASMSM 226.5 (handwritten copy)
- ²⁶ Croix-Yardin, 09.08.1861 - ASMSM 221.3
- ²⁷ Information given by M. Le Goff, of the Amitiés Généalogiques Bordelaises, in a letter dated 15.09.1998, conserved in ASMSM.
- ²⁸ cf. Croix-Yardin, 20.02.1859 - ASMSM 221.3

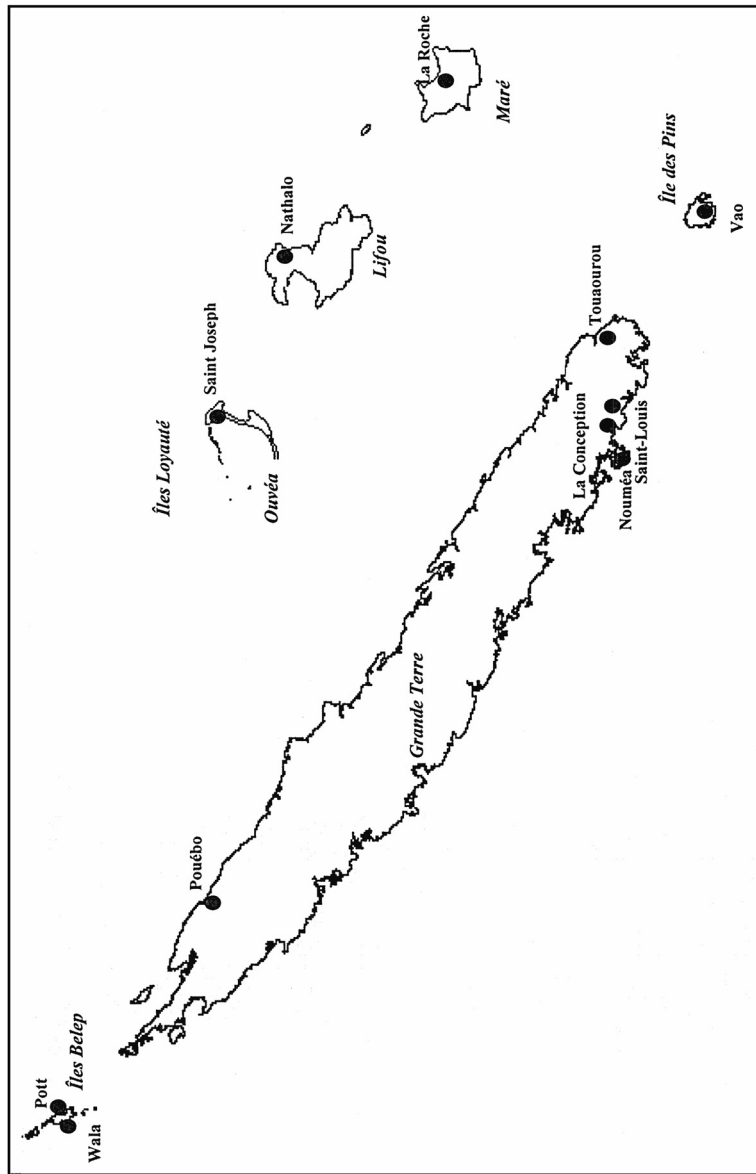
- ²⁹ cf. Croix-Yardin, 19.04.1860 - ASMSM 221.3
- ³⁰ cf. Croix-Yardin, 30.09.1865 - ASMSM 221.3; also Croix-Poupinel, 20.05.1872 - ASMSM 221.2
- ³¹ Croix-Poupinel, 03.06.1870 - ASMSM 221.2
- ³² Croix-Poupinel, 23.04.1875 - ASMSM 221.2
- ³³ Croix-Yardin, 16.09.1870 - ASMSM 221.3; also Croix-Poupinel, 11.07.1872 - ASMSM 221.2
- ³⁴ Croix-Agrippina, 24.04.1889 - ASMSM 223.33
- ³⁵ cf. Croix-Anne, 07.04.1893 - ASMSM 223.2
- ³⁶ Poupinel-Yardin, 17.05.1861 - APM OP 418
- ³⁷ Croix-M. du Cœur de Jésus, 29.06.1866 - ASMSM 223.1 (handwritten copy)
- ³⁸ Croix-Yardin, 08.11.1858 - ASMSM 221.3
- ³⁹ These letters have not been conserved
- ⁴⁰ cf. Croix-Yardin, 19.04.1860 - ASMSM 221.3
- ⁴¹ Croix-Yardin, 05.07.1861 - ASMSM 221.3
- ⁴² Croix-Fabre, 21.07.1865 - ASMSM 221.4
- ⁴³ cf. Croix-Forestier, 29.08.1866 - ASMSM 221.51
- ⁴⁴ cf. Croix-Goujon, 13.10.1867 - AAN 116.9
- ⁴⁵ This address is found in the death certificate (Photocopy ASMSM).
- ⁴⁶ cf. document, endnote 2 above
- ⁴⁷ Croix-Poupinel, 08.10.1859 - ASMSM 221.2
- ⁴⁸ Croix-Yardin, 04.09.1859 - ASMSM 221.3
- ⁴⁹ Register of burials in the cemetery of La Chartreuse - research done in October 2000.
- ⁵⁰ Declarations of successions, Vol. 68, n° 541, 25.11.1854 - Arch. dép. Bordeaux (photocopy ASMSM)
- ⁵¹ According to Pionnier, *op. cit.*, p. 29, she would also take this servant back to her country.



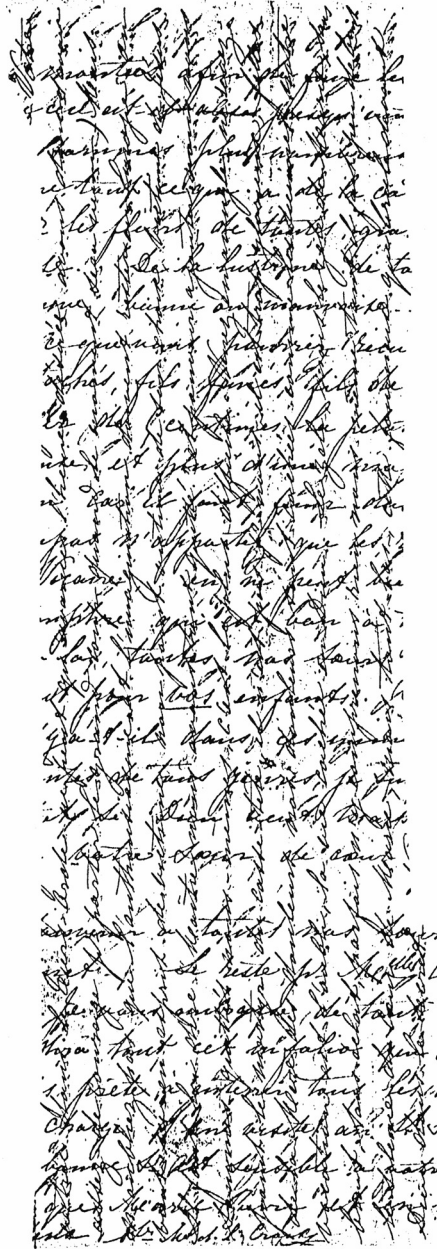
Our Lady of Fourvière



Villa Maria, Sydney, where Sr Marie de la Croix spent a few days in November 1858



New Caledonia: Places lived in and visited by Sr Marie de la Croix



[...] Your entry into the Third Order can only advance the desired hour; then it is for you to have enough courage to take the great decision when the moment comes. But don't forget that your enthusiasm and imagination must stay in Europe. We come here in the spirit of a victim, not a victim of our own choosing, a victim of Jesus. We have to say: "Master I have left all" and then be able to add; we have left ourselves, that is the most difficult. Come blindly, don't dream of martyrdom by the blow of an axe, that is not for us, that is too glorious. Daughters of the Mother of Sorrows, our sufferings like hers are hidden. Our vocation is to be unknown, hidden in God. Our zeal, the quiet zeal of Mary without fuss, sometimes not understanding anything ourselves, it is all done so quietly. Our silence should be the silence of the heart of Mary, but deep down that furnace that burns before God in secret [...].

Extract of a letter from Sr Marie de la Croix to her friend, Julie Berset - 5 July 1861

CHAPTER II

DEPARTURE FROM FRANCE AND THE VOYAGE (1858)

1) The stay in Lyon (Spring of 1858)

- *Arrival*

On a beautiful spring day in 1858, Pélagie alighted from the train which had brought her to Lyon. At that time, not quite 27 years old, she discovered the city, situated between the Alps and the Cevennes, at the junction of the Saône and the Rhône, far from Bordeaux and her birth place in the Vendée.

It is impossible to be more exact about her arrival date. What is known with certainty is that she had already been accepted in April. Fr François Yardin, procurator for the Marist Missions in Lyon, writing to Sydney, spoke of two women who were asking to leave for the missions, one of whom was a “*teacher from Bordeaux [...] who has a good education*”.¹ Was Pélagie already in Lyon at that date? We do not know. In any case, her stay there was to be a brief one, about three months. She would not have the time to experience the rigours of a continental climate, but it was there that she would seal her life’s fate.

- *Visit to Father Favre, Superior General of the Marists*

Welcomed at the station no doubt by Mademoiselle Caroline Sauvin, a friend of Fr Charlot,² Pélagie made her way to Puylata. Situated on the Fourvière hillside, overlooking the Saône, Puylata was the mother house of the Marist Fathers, and at this period, the residence of the superior general, Fr Julien Favre. The previous year, he had taken the

decision, and accepted the responsibility, of sending three young women to Central Oceania.^a In this way he was responding to the pressing requests of the priests who had been waiting a long time for a response.

Having set out at the end of 1857, the first three “Ladies of Charity”,^b as it was decided to call them then, were still on the way. It was therefore not possible to learn anything from this initial experience, but from New Caledonia, where this departure was not known of, there was a request to send religious women who “*would be able to do an immeasurable amount of good*” by taking care of the sick and providing young girls with the education and formation that would lift them out of the “*low status in which paganism has placed them*”.³ The superior general, whose extreme prudence could not be questioned, had asked Fr Yardin to choose two or three persons who would, in their turn, be ready to set out. These would be from among the many requests with which they were “*overwhelmed*”⁴ since the news of the first departure had spread.

This is when Pélagie comes in.

Without fear of being badly mistaken, we can imagine that she, with heart pulsating, climbed the hundred and forty-four steps⁵ which, from Mount Saint Barthélemy and the caretaker’s lodge, led up to the superior general’s office. One can also suppose that Fr Favre, after having taken note of the letter of recommendation that the very shy young woman gave him on behalf of Fr Charlot,⁶ spoke to her about the

^a This apostolic vicariate then comprised Wallis, Futuna, Tonga, Samoa and Fiji and was administered by Bishop Bataillon.

^b Sr M. de la Miséricorde, Sr M. de la Pitié and Sr M. de la Sainte Espérance disembarked on 30 May 1858 on the island of Futuna where they met Mademoiselle Perroton.

difficulties of the undertaking to which she desired to give herself.

- *At the convent of the Sisters of Jesus and Mary*

In order to test her vocation⁷ and give her some semblance of a religious formation, Fr Favre asked Pélagie to spend some time with the Sisters of Jesus and Mary, whose novitiate was just opposite the original chapel of Fourvière. These sisters had missions in the north of India. Was that not a clear pointer to confiding this candidate for missionary life to them? Mother Marie Thérèse, the superior general, took this task to heart. Many years later, Sr M. de la Croix expressed the gratitude she felt towards her:

*I shall never forget the holy and maternal strictness of this worthy mother. We were making a novitiate with her for an order that wasn't her own and she always manifested towards us exceptional generosity.*⁸

The 'us' in this quotation indicates that Pélagie was not alone at the Jesus and Mary convent. Straightaway⁹ she was given as a companion for this novitiate of a few weeks, another young woman who was going to leave with her. This was Clotilde Viannay a cousin of the Curé of Ars, Jean-Marie Vianney.¹⁰ Having entered the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul in 1837, she was trained as a nurse and practised her nursing skills in several countries in the eastern basin of the Mediterranean. However, in a fit of impulsiveness¹⁰ in 1855, she left her community and returned to her family in Lyon. Three years later, on hearing people speak of departures for Oceania, she came and knocked at the door of the Marist Fathers.

Besides the formation emphasizing asceticism and penance given by the sisters at the Jesus and Mary Convent, Pélagie and Clotilde received a daily visit from two Marist

Fathers who came “to give them a conference”.¹¹ No document reveals the content of these conferences but it can be supposed that the Marist spirit was included. At the bottom of a page in one of her prayer books Sr M. de la Croix would later write: “*I am passionately in love with the hidden life.*”¹² Both of them must also have been given a copy of the *Manual of the Third Order of Mary* which was to be their ‘book of life’ for many years. One of the priests was Fr Yardin. In his role as mission procurator, was he not directly involved in the choice and sending of the sisters? The second priest was Fr Benoît Lagniet, local superior at Puylata at the time, but as he had previously lived in Verdélais, he knew Pélagie.

2) The ceremony of 6 July

A departure of missionaries for New Caledonia was in preparation: three priests and three brothers were on the list and it is very likely that the “*two ladies on retreat at the Jesus and Mary Sisters in order to decide their vocation*”,¹³ would join the group.

- *Marie Virginie Jacquier*

A third person whose candidature had been known and accepted since May¹⁴ would accompany them “*if she has time to put her affairs in order*”.¹⁵ This was Marie Virginie Jacquier. What made her different from those who had set out in 1857, and the two who were preparing themselves at the Jesus and Mary convent, was that Marie Virginie, who was thirty-three and a half years old, had been a member of the Third Order since 1856. Daughter of a farmer in the Jura, she had come to work in Lyon. She had a great devotion to Mary and also a great desire to give herself to God, but “*not having enough money to take a vow of poverty*”,¹⁶ as Fr Yardin wrote in May 1858, not without a touch of humour, she had

remained a lay person, becoming a Marist tertiary until the day when “*driven always by an interior desire greater than myself*”,¹⁷ Marie Virginie asked “*to follow her first desire to work for the salvation of young Caledonian girls*”.¹⁸ Fr Jean-Baptiste Jacquet, director of the Third Order, urged Fr Yardin to accept her: he knew her, he knew that, despite her meagre education, she would all the same render great service in the missions. Moreover, since the Ladies of Charity were not yet a canonically established religious congregation, she did not need a dowry in order to become one of them.

- ***The Sodality of Christian Virgins***

On the morning of 6 July 1858 - a Tuesday that year - Pélagie, Clotilde and Marie Virginie, all three of them, gathered in the chapel at Puylata, beside the room where the TOM sodalities had their meetings. In the 19th century, everything was very structured: mothers of families entered the sodality of Christian Mothers and the young girls that of the Little Daughters of Mary. Young single women over 25 made up the group of Christian Virgins. It was this group who that day filled the chapel and surrounded their companion, Marie Virginie, and the two other sisters. All three were wearing a new habit: a black dress and cape with a blue border, blue also were the cord around the waist and a finer cord around the neck on which was hung the Third Order medal. Finally, a white bonnet with crimped edges, as then worn by women of modest means in the region of Lyon, completed this habit. There was no veil: they were not Religious.^c

^c It is noteworthy that only the three who were setting out were dressed in this habit: they no longer considered themselves as simple lay women living in the world.

- ***Father Jacquet's sermon***

After Mass and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, Fr Jacquet spoke. He addressed “*a moving exhortation*” to the congregation in order to explain the meaning of the step the sisters were taking. Here is a short extract from it:

*These three sisters are about to leave us to go to the end of the world [...] Rising above the weaknesses of human nature, [they] are happy to leave everything to face all the fatigue, all the dangers, all the sufferings, all the work, all the sacrifices of the apostolate. Let us therefore rejoice with them and bless the Lord who can inspire such courage in those whom He calls.*¹⁹

Then addressing those who were leaving, he said, “*The love of all your brothers and sisters in Mary follows you, their good wishes will accompany you everywhere.*”¹⁹ After that he invited Pélagie and Clotilde to pronounce their consecration as novices in the TOM.^d They then received a new name by which they would henceforth be called. Pélagie, who had expressly asked for this name, became Sister Marie de la Croix, and Clotilde, Sister Marie de Bon Secours. Marie Virginie, who in the sodality of Christian Virgins was called Sr Marie Rose de Lima, changed her name to Sister Marie de la Paix.^e

The ceremony, which concluded with the singing of the Magnificat, left a lasting impression on the hearts of the

^d This word ‘novice’ does not have the strict sense that we normally give to it. Received into the TOM, the sisters entered the Marist family as secular tertiaries, remaining lay people in the eyes of the church.

^e This change took place at the superior general’s request: another woman, belonging to the Third Order of Jonzieux, was preparing to leave for Wallis and she had been known as Sr M. Rose de Lima for several years already.

young women who were present. A few days later, one of them expressed it in this way:

*We have only been able to see very little of these good sisters, and yet given the little that we have seen, we are sincerely attached to them and our hearts are entirely devoted to them and we feel truly sorry to separate from them.*²⁰

Sr M. de la Croix would never forget it either. After her death, an account of the ceremony, written no doubt by a tertiary of the sodality, was found among her papers. This piece of paper, discoloured by time and with folds half torn, had surely often been reread by the sister.^f

3) Vow of obedience

Meanwhile, the departure date was approaching. During these final days a number of events took place, at least one of which assumed special importance. As the sisters in the first group had done, those departing committed themselves by a vow of obedience. We do not know for sure the exact date^g but the fact is verified. Fr Favre referred to it in a letter dated 16 July. He wrote:

*I nearly forgot to mention that the Sisters of Charity have taken the vow of obedience. [...] A vow of obedience to the apostolic vicar in the mission, and for the voyage to me and to those whom I will designate to issue orders.*²¹

^f The complete text of this document can be found at the end of the book, Appendix 2.

^g According to Sr M. de la Croix's letter to Fr Poupinel, dated 11/14.07.1872 - ASMSM 221.2, it was very likely 16 July 1858.

This vow of obedience was not insignificant, especially if it is linked with the fact that henceforth the three Ladies or Sisters of Charity had a new name by which they were known and wore a habit.^h The question must be asked: are we dealing with Religious, yes or no? Or to put it another way, was Pélagie realizing her desire to be a Religious?

A second less important fact nevertheless warrants attention: the sisters were photographed in their habit. Sr M. de la Croix, who had been happy to send a photo to Trinita Albizu, would remark some months later, when a veil had been added to this habit, that her “*portrait*” was no longer accurate.²² Unfortunately no copy of this photo has come down to us.

A few days before 19 July, the date fixed for the departure,²³ Sr M. de la Croix fell ill; a severe attack of angina necessitated the doctor being called and he advised that her departure be delayed! Her consternation can be imagined! Sympathizing with her, a friend from Lyonⁱ promised to make a novena at Fourvière in order that she could depart.²⁴ In face of Sr M. de la Croix’s pleadings, the priest assured her that he would allow her to leave in spite of the doctor’s advice and she took such good care of herself that the illness did not develop.²⁵

^h Whereas the ‘ordinary’ tertiaries rarely called one another by their Third Order name and did not wear a habit.

ⁱ This young woman, Julie Berset, was a private member of the TOM. No doubt this was how she and Pélagie had met each other.

4) Beginning of the voyage

19 July finally arrived. The eleven missionaries - three priests, five brothers^j and the three Ladies of Charity - who were going to New Caledonia, plus Raphael, a young Rotumian returning to his country, were not the only ones to set out from Lyon. Fr Yardin accompanied them to London, as well as several Marist sisters who were going to found a community in the British capital. They all took the train as far as Paris²⁶ where they stayed just a short time. Then, given their number, they split into two groups: the first, under the leadership of Fr Yardin, left on 22 July and went aboard at Boulogne-sur-mer. The following day, the second group, led by Fr Emprin, took the same route but when, at Boulogne, the travellers, including our three Ladies of Charity, presented themselves at the wharf for embarkation, it was to discover that the ship had left already! Sr M. de Bon Secours took it very badly. Despite the extra expenses, Fr Emprin had to rent a carriage to get to Calais where they boarded a ship on Saturday evening. *“The sea was dreadful”*, wrote Fr Yardin,

*they all paid for their tardiness and instead of arriving at 9 o'clock in the morning they reached London only at 2 o'clock in the afternoon.*²⁶

It was a half hour's walk to reach the Marist Fathers' residence where the other travellers were waiting with a certain amount of anxiety. On Sundays London streets are empty. Tired and hungry, the six late-comers *“each with an umbrella in one hand and a little bag in the other”*, claimed the middle of the road and walked along together, taking an hour to cover the distance.²⁶ When the travellers finally arrived, they again experienced the humour of Fr Yardin who

^j They were Fathers J. B. Fabre, J. B. Gilibert and A. Emprin and Brothers Germanique, Barthélemy, Joseph, Gabriel and Annet.

made the most of this adventurous journey by laughing although he felt like being angry!

5) The crossing from London to Sydney (27 July - 30 October 1858)

The following morning there were the goodbyes. Fr Yardin accompanied those departing as far as Gravesend, the port of London, to ensure that they were all properly settled in their cabins, then he left them... However, it was only on Monday 27 July that the *British Merchant* set sail for Sydney.

- *Occupations*

The voyage would be long: 95 days. At that time neither the Suez nor the Panama Canal existed. The ship sailed directly south, following the African coast. The first part of the voyage went well. Besides the crew, the boat was transporting some twenty passengers, including our missionaries. As they did not speak English, or very little, their communication with the other passengers was rather limited. Soutanes and religious habits had been packed away in their suitcases: they were sailing on an English boat. But for all that, the missionaries did not forget that they were Religious: they accorded an important place to prayer during their enforced leisure hours. Many religious exercises were held in common. The sisters knew how to occupy themselves: “*They worked constantly when they were not ill,*” remarked Fr Fabre, the superior of the group.²⁷

- *Sea sickness and misunderstandings*

Once they had rounded the Cape of Good Hope, they found the Indian Ocean rougher than the Atlantic. The *British Merchant* had to confront several storms and seasickness raged, striking in particular Fr Fabre and Sr M. de Bon

Secours who was a cause of concern for the two other sisters.²⁸ On account of her age and her having been a Daughter of Charity before, she had been designated superior. On 8 September, when a novena to obtain fidelity to their religious and apostolic vocation drew to a close, it was impossible to say Mass as everything was tossing and turning on the boat.²⁹

However, harmony did not always reign among the sisters. Fr Fabre put it down to “*the antipathies, the inexperience of a common life, the influence of the sea, the inexperience of the director*”.³⁰ On her part, Sr M. de Bon Secours noted that

the cross sometimes troubled the peace and calm and at such times, succour was often powerless,

and she regretted that “*the practice of the important and gentle virtue of obedience, [...] is not sufficiently known and loved*”.³¹

Sr M. de la Croix also gave her point of view: “*You remember that Sr de B(on) Secours and I were not very congenial, nothing has changed, on the contrary,*” she wrote to Fr Yardin; and she confided to him her difficulty in obeying: according to her, what the sister commanded her was neither fair nor reasonable.³²

- ***Are the sisters Religious?***

Another preoccupation of the sisters during the voyage, and especially of Sr M. de la Croix, was to know just what their status was. In the letter to Fr Yardin quoted earlier, she recounted:

One day when our Father Fabre, in speaking to us, was very embarrassed to know whether he should say Sisters

or Madams, I asked him “Oh well, what are we then?” “Amphibians”, he replied. And the word was never lost.

Fr Fabre also recalled this anecdote. He did so in the following terms:

As they continually kept asking me about the type of life in Caledonia and wishing to know if they would be religious or secular members, I told them that they would be both Martha and Magdalen, you will be both religious and seculars, you will be amphibians. This word made a hit; Sr de la Croix wanted only to be an amphibian.³³

- ***A retreat on board***

On board ship they could laugh and joke but they could also be serious. During the final week of the voyage, when they were in Bass Strait, between Tasmania and Australia, the missionaries, seriously and with recollection, made a three-day retreat consisting of three meditations a day. In the morning Fr Fabre presented the threefold goal, as human being, as religious and as apostle. Fr Gilibert, at the end of the morning, exposed the obstacles to these three goals: sin, lack of mortification and half-heartedness. In the evening Fr Emprin set forth the three powerful means [*to holiness*]: prayer, religious obedience and zeal. The retreat concluded on the evening of 25 October with a sermon on the Blessed Virgin, and an act of consecration made by the participants.³⁴

Then there remained five more days of sailing.

6) The stop-over in Sydney (30 October - 18 November 1858)

On 30 October at 8 o'clock in the morning, the ship entered Sydney harbour. Soon a tug guided it to the wharf and the passengers once again stood on solid ground. They could

also offer heartfelt thanks for this voyage “*blessed abundantly and protected by the Blessed Virgin*”.³⁵

- ***Villa Maria and Father Poupinel***

The visitors had soon arrived at Hunters Hill, the area in Sydney where the priests had set up their procure which they called “Villa Maria”. The procurator at that time was Fr Jean-Louis Rocher who would hold that position until 1864, showing himself always welcoming and at the service of the missionaries [*priests and brothers*] as well as the sisters.

At Villa Maria, Fr Victor Poupinel resided with him. In actual fact, this priest was often absent as the duties of the visitor general of the missions which he had been carrying out for more than a year, meant that he was sailing back and forth throughout the south west Pacific, the area confided to the Marist Fathers’ since 1836. It was he who, in December 1857, had asked for religious women for New Caledonia with which he was then becoming familiar.

Having returned scarcely a month from a voyage around the vicariate of Central Oceania,^k Fr Poupinel was there at the entrance to the property to welcome “*this dearly beloved group*” and to invite them to go to the chapel. Together “*before the Blessed Sacrament and the picture of the Blessed Virgin*”³⁶ they all thanked God for this “*crossing which had been very beautiful and very happy, without any accidents or, at least, none worth mentioning*”, in Sr M. de la Croix’s estimation.³⁷ “*Mary’s protection was visible,*” she added a little further on in the same letter.

It was the eve of All Saints. In Europe the beautiful season had long since disappeared and the rigours of winter

^k Following the arrival of a group of missionaries including the first Ladies of Charity whom he had taken to Futuna.

were beginning to be felt. So it was with some surprise that the travellers discovered that in Sydney it was springtime.

The vines and the orange trees are in flower, spreading a sweet fragrance all around the place; the verdure that covered the earth and the first fruits of the season, delighted them, carried them away,

wrote Fr Poupinel in a letter to France. He also added, “*A pious soul, admiring the beauty of God’s creation, celebrates his glory and goodness with joy.*”³⁸ And that even more so for the sisters who began to see an ardent desire materialized: “*Are we really at Villa Maria, they said; would this not be just a dream?*”³⁸

- ***The sisters wrote letters***

Some mail that had arrived by steamboat was waiting for them and they replied to it. On 8 November Sr M. de la Croix wrote a long letter to Fr Yardin. She very quickly passed over the voyage “*about which there is nothing much to tell anyway*”, then assured him that her health was excellent, that she had had “*absolutely nothing apart from my normal sickness*” and that she had “*begun to eat like a glutton. [...] The honourable doctors of Lyon will indeed be tricked: for sure, I was to die from my sickness*” she declared, referring to the illness which struck her in Lyon a few days before her departure. She acknowledged too that she was sad not to have any news from her brother. She mentioned her joy at having met Fr Poupinel: “*How pleased I was to find in him the revered and always dear Father Yardin,*” she assured him. “*I am going to put myself completely in his, or rather in their, hands and follow their advice in everything.*”³⁹ Straightaway she could recognize this exceptional man’s qualities. She would never regret having placed her complete confidence in him. She also wrote to Fr Favre, to her friends in Bordeaux and to Fr Gay of Verdelaix.

- ***Father Poupinel gets to know the sisters***

Fr Poupinel did not take long to realize with whom he was dealing. Certainly Fr Favre and especially Fr Yardin had spoken to him of the obvious qualities of this sister. Already on 16 November, when Sr M. de la Croix had been able to open her heart to him and confide to him her difficulties, especially with Sr M. de Bon Secours, he wrote to Fr Yardin:

I am pleased with her, with her generosity. Poor child! It is not by mistake that she is called Sr de la Croix. She will have much to suffer. All will go well if we know how to guide her, draw on her faith, her zeal, the need to be devoted that obsesses her. But I am confident that she will succeed because her love is immense, and Our Lord, who will not allow himself to be outdone in generosity, will strengthen her and enable her to triumph over all her trials. I shall take care of her, I assure you. I will recommend her to Fr Rougeyron.^{1 40}

The next day, he wrote this to Fr Favre:

As for the sisters, each of them is good and has very laudable qualities. But Father, how different their characters are! [...] Sr M. de la Croix who seems to live outside her body, who constantly aspires to perfection, who is headstrong and desires to be led only by reason and faith, has a great deal to suffer because of her extreme emotional sensitivity.⁴¹

Over the course of the years, Sr M. de la Croix would indeed have great sufferings to bear, but she would always be able to count on the help and understanding of Fr Poupinel.

¹ Fr Rougeyron, as provicar, had at that time responsibility for the vicariate of New Caledonia.

- ***Welcome by the friends of the priests***

There was certainly no question of having the sisters stay at Villa Maria. As the stopover in Australia was meant to be quite brief - it would in fact last two full weeks - no attempt was made either for them to be given hospitality by a religious community. A Catholic lady of the parish, Mrs Mickles, whose home was very close to the Ryde church served by the priests, gave them hospitality, striving to make their stay as pleasant as possible.⁴²

From the letter Sr M. de la Croix wrote to Fr Yardin on 8 November, we learn that the French community which gravitated around the priests at Villa Maria gave them a delightful welcome and did all they could to provide whatever would give them pleasure. And yet the writer avowed that her dream would be to remain hidden in the peaceful nest of Villa Maria! They were invited to a meal by the French Consul. They made a visit to the "Sisters of Charity", Irish religious, who had lodged the first group of sisters at the beginning of the year and spent forty-eight hours with the English Benedictines of Subiaco, three leagues away from the procure where these Religious had a boarding school. The superior of these sisters, Monsignor Gregory, who was also vicar general of the diocese and a great friend of the Marists, insisted on receiving them himself at Subiaco and showing them around the house. There Sr M. de la Croix met Mother Scholastique and became friends with her: they would remain in touch by correspondence for a long time.

- ***Profession in the Third Order of Mary***

On Thursday 11 November at 7 o'clock in the morning, a ceremony of an altogether different kind took place in the Villa Maria chapel. Sr M. de la Croix, and Sr M. de Bon

Secours made profession^m in the Third Order of Mary. This was followed by the consecration to Mary,ⁿ for the three sisters this time, and the writing of their names on a ribbon preserved in a silver heart,^o a tradition that would be faithfully followed over the years by the priests, brothers and sisters passing through Villa Maria on their way to their respective missions.

7) End of the journey

Their stay in Australia ended on 18 November. At midday that day, the brig named the *Phantom* weighed anchor for New Caledonia. On board were the ten missionaries⁴³ joined by Fr Poupinel who profited from the opportunity to go and visit the priests in New Caledonia, and Fr Forestier, who had come to Sydney on mission business and was returning to La Conception. The sisters wore their habit. Besides, it seems likely that they also wore it in Sydney⁴⁴ but Fr Poupinel had added a veil to it⁴⁵ as he wanted them to look more like Religious. He did not hide his regret that, for New Caledonia, where there was no need to fear the “*clamourings of the Protestants*”,⁴⁶ an organized religious congregation had not been chosen, as he had requested in agreement with the governor.

The *Ave Maris Stella* sung with full voice as they left Sydney harbour did not prevent them from very quickly having to face adverse winds and meet up again with an old

^m Same comments concerning this word, as for the word ‘novice’ used earlier on: see p. 48, note d.

ⁿ This consecration composed by Fr Poupinel was first used by the first group of sisters, in April 1858 (cf. OPS V, doc. 39).

^o This heart had been offered to Fr Poupinel before his departure from Lyon in 1857, by Marie Virginie Jacquier.

travelling companion - sea sickness! But nothing could cast a shadow over the lively spirit and joy of the travellers, “*those whom Mary guides and protects are safe*”.⁴⁷ So the voyage went well. On the deck they discussed what they had read⁴⁸ and sang hymns as well as Sunday vespers. The ship’s captain, a compatriot and old friend of the priests, participated in the common prayers, as did a young Frenchman whose sentiments were pleasing to everyone.⁴⁷

The end of the voyage came quickly. About 8 o’clock in the morning of 2 December, a fortnight after having left Sydney, they traversed the passage through the reefs. The *Phantom* reached the calm waters of the Caledonian lagoon through the Boulari Channel and, leaving Port-de-France^p a little to the north, headed straight for Mont Dore and the bay of La Conception.

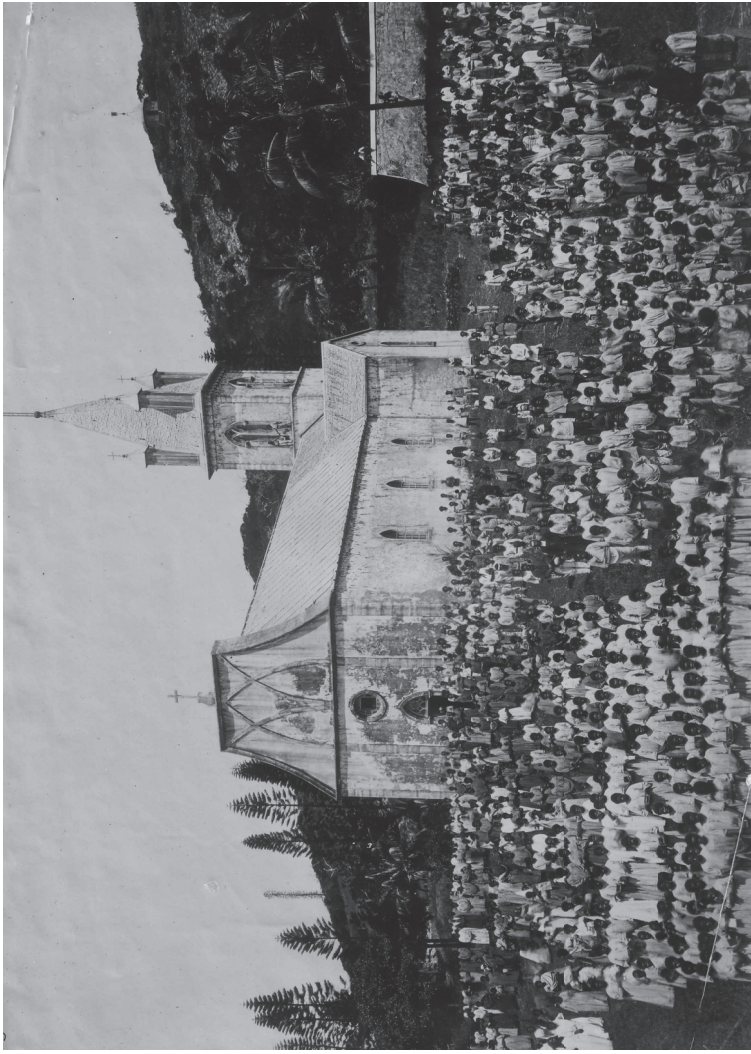
Leaning on the rails of the ship, the *Phantom’s* passengers were there, gazing at this land unfolding before their eyes, the leaf houses of the settlement in a line along the shore, the humble chapel where the Lord dwelt. It was for Him, for His glory and the salvation of souls that they were there. It was in this country that Sr M. de la Croix was going to spend the fifty years of a particularly fruitful missionary life.

^p Port-de-France became Nouméa in 1866 to avoid any confusion with Fort-de-France in Martinique.

ENDNOTES - CHAPTER II

- ¹ Yardin-Poupinel, 16.04.1858 (OPS I, 71)
- ² cf. Croix-Charlot, 29.08.1865 - ASMSM 226.5 (handwritten copy)
- ³ Poupinel-Favre, 09.12.1857 (OPS I, 51)
- ⁴ Yardin-Poupinel, 16.04.1858 (OPS I, 71)
- ⁵ cf. Pionnier, *op. cit.*, p. 41
- ⁶ *ibid.* p. 42
- ⁷ cf. Lagniet-Chavas, 17.06.1858 - APM Verdelaix, letters of the Motherhouse
- ⁸ Croix-Denyse, 12.08.1902 - ASMSM 223.2
- ⁹ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 30.10.1859 - APM VM 227
- ¹⁰ cf. Favre-Poupinel, 16.07.1858 (OPS I, 87, §1)
- ¹¹ Croix-Denyse, 12.08.1902 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹² cf. Pionnier, *op. cit.*, p. 53
- ¹³ Yardin-Rocher, 17.06.1858 (OPS I, 82)
- ¹⁴ cf. Yardin-Poupinel, 16.05.1858 (OPS I, 77)
- ¹⁵ Yardin-Rocher, 17.06.1858 (OPS I, 82)
- ¹⁶ cf. Yardin-Poupinel, 16.05.1858 (OPS I, 77)
- ¹⁷ M.V. Jacquier-Poupinel, 16.05.1858 - APM VM 212 (OPS I, 77a)
- ¹⁸ Yardin-Poupinel, 15.05.1858 (OPS I, 77)
- ¹⁹ Meeting 06.07.1858 - ASMSM 253
- ²⁰ Melle Camus-Poupinel, beginning of July 1858 - APM VM 212
- ²¹ Favre-Poupinel, 16.07.1858 (OPS I, 87, §2)
- ²² cf. Croix-Yardin, 08.11.1858 (OPS I, 107, §3)
- ²³ cf. M. St Ambroise-S. M. Joseph, 27.07.1858 - ASM
- ²⁴ Croix-Berset, 01.07.1861 - ASMSM 224.6
- ²⁵ cf. Pionnier, *op. cit.*, p. 58
- ²⁶ Yardin-Poupinel and Rocher, 18.08.1858 - APM VM 211
- ²⁷ Fabre-Yardin, 05.11.1858 (OPS I, 104)
- ²⁸ cf. Fabre-Yardin, 05.11.1858 (OPS I, 104)
- ²⁹ cf. Fabre-Favre, 04.11.1858 (OPS I, 102, §2)
- ³⁰ *ibid.* §4
- ³¹ Bon Secours-Favre, 04.11.1858 (OPS I, 103, §5)
- ³² cf. Croix-Yardin, 08.11.1858 (OPS I, 107, §1)
- ³³ Fabre-Yardin, 05.11.1858 (OPS I, 104)
- ³⁴ Fabre-Favre, 04.11.1858 (OPS I, 102, §4)

- ³⁵ Poupinel-Favre, 03.11.1858 (OPS I, 101)
- ³⁶ Poupinel-Sœurs du TOM de Lyon, 13.12.1858 (OPS I, 112, §2)
- ³⁷ Croix-Yardin, 08.11.1858 (OPS I, 107 - unpublished passage)
- ³⁸ Poupinel-Sœurs du TOM de Lyon, 13.12.1858 (OPS I, 112 - unpublished passage)
- ³⁹ Croix-Yardin, 08.11.1858, (OPS I, 107 - unpublished passage)
- ⁴⁰ Poupinel-Yardin, 16.11.1858 - APM OP 418
- ⁴¹ Poupinel-Favre, 17.11.1858 (OPS I, 110 - unpublished passage)
- ⁴² cf. Poupinel-Sœurs du TOM de Lyon, 13.12.1858, (OPS I, 112 - unpublished passage)
- ⁴³ There were only four brothers; the fifth remained in Sydney.
- ⁴⁴ cf. Poupinel-Yardin, 06.11.1858 (OPS I, 105, §2)
- ⁴⁵ cf. Croix-Yardin, 08.11.1858 (OPS I, 107, §3)
- ⁴⁶ Poupinel-Yardin, 26.10.1858 (OPS I, 100)
- ⁴⁷ cf. Poupinel-Sœurs du TOM de Lyon, 13.12.1858 (OPS I, 112 - unpublished passage)
- ⁴⁸ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 6.03.1860 (OPS I, 184 - unpublished passage)



The Church at Vao, Ile des Pins

(The photo is old but undated. The sisters' house which is not shown, is to the left of the church and did not exist in Sister Marie de la Croix's time. This church, consecrated in 1860, is the oldest church in the territory).

CHAPTER III

THE FIRST YEARS IN NEW CALEDONIA (1858 - 1864)

This land of New Caledonia that she discovered, is situated off the east coast of Australia. It is a continuation of the archipelagos that run along the north of this continent and with them constitutes Melanesia. The first Marist Missionaries arrived there in 1843. They landed at Balade, in the north-east of the island, and from there, not without difficulty, they gradually spread out over the mainland - 400 kilometres long by 50 wide - and onto the islands which surround it: the islands of Belep to the north, the Iles Loyauté to the east and Ile des Pins to the south. In 1853, by an act of taking possession signed at Balade, the archipelago was made a French colony. Over the years, the unfolding history of colonisation was not always a glorious one. New Caledonia being so far from Europe, it was difficult for the French Government to understand the situation and take appropriate actions. The Kanak population and the missionaries paid the price of this on many occasions.

I. LA CONCEPTION (DECEMBER 1858 - MAY 1859) FIRST JOYS, FIRST SORROWS

1) Arrival at La Conception

As the bay of La Conception, in the south-west of the main island, was not very deep, there was no question of the *Phantom* coming in close. When it dropped anchor, it was still about four and a half miles from the shore.¹ Two whaling ships therefore came to collect the passengers, who were relayed from a hundred metres offshore by men who put the

sisters down on the beach, thus saving them from getting their feet wet.²

Fr Pierre Rougeyron, one of the first group of missionaries, was there on the shore to welcome those arriving. Named provicar of New Caledonia in April 1853 on the death of Bishop Douarre, first Vicar Apostolic, he had resided at La Conception since October 1855, date of the establishment of this settlement.^a He had come there with a group of Christians from Balade and Pouebo, whose conversion had made their life difficult in their tribes, in the midst of a population that was still not yet evangelised and often hostile.

In February, June and July the following year, 1856, other groups came to join them, from Balade and Pouebo, but also from Touho and Wagap, tribes situated on the north of the east coast, on the main island, south of Pouebo. Some of them settled a few kilometres away from La Conception and founded another settlement there which took the name Saint-Louis.

The neophytes, however, came running from all sides to welcome the priests, brothers and sisters. They were happy at the return of their missionary, Fr Forestier, and discovered, no doubt with some astonishment, these European women who had disembarked, the first sisters to come to their country.^b Not without a certain amount of admiration, Fr Poupinel wrote of them:

^a This term is used here in a very broad sense: the families who came together at La Conception and at St Louis never put their belongings in common, as was the case in the settlements founded by the Jesuits in Paraguay.

^b The Sisters of St Joseph of Cluny arrived at Port-de-France in August 1860.

*[...] they would work for the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls. [...] They showed no weakness but real courage, and as they placed their feet on shore they said to themselves that they were coming to give themselves entirely to their work regardless of what it might cost them.*³

2) Initial contact with the local people

The first visit made by the sisters was, as would be expected, to the Lord, who ‘dwelt’ at that time in the modest chapel seen from the boat: a poor straw hut which brings to mind the stable in Bethlehem.⁴ The following day, 3 December, feast of St Francis Xavier, benediction of the Blessed Sacrament was celebrated in gratitude for the joyous arrival of the missionaries.

Fr Poupinel recounted that after the ceremony

*The neophytes sang a hymn in their language and we sang another one in French. The sisters sang in their turn, something that was new in the sense that no woman had yet sung in the church; in public opinion her status is not yet high enough for that. The presence of sisters will be very useful, very effective in completely restoring women’s position. When we describe to the sisters the customs and practices of this country which render a woman a vile slave in her own eyes, as also in the eyes of men, they exclaim “Oh the poor unfortunate creatures! And compassion moves them to devote themselves even more for them.”*⁵

The challenge was set! The sisters knew the task at which they were going to have to labour. Sr M. de la Croix, since it is about her that we are concerned, immediately set to work, with all the courage and energy of which she was capable.

3) Occupations

The sisters were temporarily lodged in the priests' house while awaiting repairs to be made to the stone house planned for them. Situated at the top of the hill overlooking the bay, it had been occupied until recently by the military;⁶ around it were grouped the people's leaf houses.

And they got down to work:

Even though lack of knowledge of the language curbs their zeal and hinders their charity, [...] Sr M. de Bon Secours is already surrounded by patients and her family is numerous. Sr M. de la Croix is already seeking out the young girls, whom she loves and finds intelligent. Sr M. de la Paix busies herself with all kinds of things, is ready for anything,

wrote Fr Poupinel with satisfaction.⁵

At the end of February, Sr M. de la Croix wrote again - her table being an upturned packing case - a long letter to Fr Yardin, in which she gave many details about her situation and what she was doing. The place where she spent her days was

a horrible corridor made of branches of trees, badly lined with the bark of the niaouli,^c where the rain is pleasantly refreshing.⁷

In the mornings she would get the children to read “*while teaching them a hundred and one little things which will be developed later*”, and in the afternoons she gathered as many women as her “*stable*” could hold: reading, sewing and conversation easily filled in the time. While the young women

^c The niaouli is a small tree found in abundance in New Caledonia. Its white bark is frequently used to make the walls of dwellings.

learnt French, she herself began to learn the language of Touho which was her lot. She was happy to explain:

*The Blessed Virgin, who is our mistress, has already won the hearts of these people for me; children and women crowd affectionately around me. When finishing class, it is necessary to repeat the signal ten times. I always give it regretfully.*⁷

As she had no teaching materials available, she had to make everything and write out everything, which took her so much time. So she asked the priest to send her some materials for teaching reading, graded reading books, some spelling books and even little story books.⁷

In the same letter, she also expressed her joy in assisting the dying and decorating their dwelling for the reception of the sacraments. She had even assisted at the “*baptism of a dying man who is today walking about!*”⁸

4) Acclimatisation and heart felt emotions

Naturally these varied occupations did not prevent the sisters from paying the price of the New Caledonia climate. They had arrived at the very hot season, the worst time. “*Sr M. de la Croix*”, remarked a priest,

*has paid rather dearly for the pleasure of scratching a mosquito bite: her arms and legs are quite swollen.*⁹

Without mentioning the fleas, there was also prickly heat^d and the risk of infection. Sr M. de la Paix, who had a finger decorated with a magnificent whitlow, had to have it incised

^d An itchy rash that Europeans often get during the hot, humid season in the tropics.

with a stroke of a lancet! Nevertheless, still in her letter to Fr Yardin, Sr M. de la Croix was not afraid to say:

*Nothing in mission life is the slightest sacrifice: climate, lodging, food, clothing and the rest. It is an opportunity for merit that God has taken away from me and I wonder if there was ever a time when these things mattered to me.*¹⁰

On the contrary, she felt intensely happy at finally having reached her destination. Already, on arriving in Australia, she had written:

*I was overflowing with joy. It was impossible for me to express or even to realize myself what I was experiencing.*¹¹

In February, from La Conception, she expressed herself in even stronger terms:

*I have, therefore, nothing but things that concern me personally to recount. And first of all what I felt when I put foot on this promised land, and at the sight of this people for whom I have given myself even to the very beating of my heart. To tell you what passed within me is impossible, it is inexpressible, almost incomprehensible even to myself. Nothing or almost nothing of it appeared on the outside. That is normal for me, besides, that day I didn't seem to have a body. For several days I could neither speak, nor cry, nor eat, nor sleep. I don't know if I even thought.*¹²

These lines, which cannot be read without some astonishment, give some idea of how very sensitive a person she was, and might make one quiver at the thought of the sufferings that lay in store for her.

5) A procession at La Conception

On Sunday 13 February, when Fr Poupinel was soon to leave, a beautiful ceremony took place at La Conception. A procession made its way towards the church, with banner, cross and lighted candles, a big first in New Caledonia! Sr M. de la Croix's pupils were wearing the dresses they had sewn with her. Boys and girls held lighted candles. Among the men of the settlement, the leaders carried the fourteen pictures of the Way of the Cross. Preceded by a contingent of soldiers, the procession entered the church with the greatest dignity. Fr Poupinel remarked on "*the decorum shown by these good people throughout the whole duration of the procession*".¹³ The pictures were installed in their places and Benediction concluded the church ceremony, but not the feast. During the social evening, in beautiful moonlight, these "*dear neophytes*" some of whom had not forgotten their stay in Futuna,^e prepared and sipped *kava*^f on the terrace of the priests' house. Everyone was happy with this family feast.

It was on the same day - but at what time? - that the blessing of the sisters' house took place. The "*old barracks*"¹⁴ turned into a convent, was given the name 'Saint Mary's', but the work on it was not finished and the sisters could only take up residence there on the last day of February. Sr M. de la Croix wrote this description:

^e When the first missionaries, who had arrived in 1843, had to leave Balade and Pouebo in 1847, they took with them some young men who would spend about a year in Futuna, where they were baptized before returning home.

^f Kava is a drink prepared from a plant, the '*piper methysticum*'; it is drunk on important occasions in some Pacific islands.

*We do not lack anything, I even fear being too rich, so I would like to find myself in my stable [her classroom] where this illusion is no longer possible.*¹⁵

6) First difficulties

On 15 February the sisters accompanied Fr Poupinel to Port-de-France; his stay had come to an end and he needed to get back to Sydney.

In fact, this was not the first time the sisters had been to Port-de-France. During the very first days after their arrival, thanks to the kindness of the captain of the *Thisbe*, a boat was sent to collect them from La Conception. The captain himself welcomed them at the foot of the gang plank of the military ship and he showed them around. He invited them to assist at the prayer service of the crew, and after dinner he himself escorted them back to land. This particular captain^g showed himself to be kind and attentive. He had accommodation arranged for the sisters in the Government hotel which had not yet been occupied and received them at his table with the chief officers on shore. A strong breeze having cooled the air down, they went back on foot and without severe fatigue.¹⁶ Evidently, the sisters returned happy from this outing!

The second trip to Port-de-France did not have the same festive character. Sr M. de la Croix felt the pain of this departure so much the more since her situation in community was becoming difficult. It has been noted that she had received a good education, was intelligent and cultured, her conversation was pleasant and she had a strong personality. Her success with the women and children was obvious. In

^g The Commanding officer at the time was Captain Testard who died in China some years later.

contrast to her, Sr M. de la Paix scarcely knew how to read and write, and suffered from not being able also to teach class. Sr M. de Bon Secours, who remained the superior, had difficulty accepting such an outstanding companion whose brilliance could not but be noticed. As a result there was much pettiness and suffering, so much so that on returning from Port-de-France on 16 February, Sr M. de la Croix whose fragile health was badly shaken, had to interrupt her work.

At the beginning of March, the captain and several officers of the *Thisbe* came to spend the day at La Conception. The ship's doctor, who was among the party, quickly noticed Sr. M. de la Croix's unhealthy appearance and asked to examine her. The treatment prescribed permitted her to get back to her students quite quickly, but her "*illness*" had "*been reactivated, worsened* ", she wrote to Fr Poupinel.¹⁷ She told him that she accepted sufferings of soul and body and she assured him that she did not have "*the slightest feeling of bitterness towards anyone.*" However, the fact remained that there was much tension in community.

7) Decisions of Father Rougeyron

This situation worried Fr Rougeyron who took Sr M. de Bon Secour's complaints very seriously - did she not go so far as to reproach Sr M. de la Croix for spending too much time in the evening in the confessional with Fr Forestier? - and he put the blame on Sr M. de la Croix. Did the qualities he recognized in her unconsciously make him afraid?

So he proceeded to take decisions. On 3 April he added two supplementary chapters to the Rule Fr Poupinel had given the sisters on 6 December, soon after their arrival, the same Rule that had been promulgated in Futuna some months

earlier.^h In four chapters, Fr Poupinel had reminded the sisters that they were the privileged daughters of Mary, who had come to Oceania in order to extend the reign of Jesus Christ, and that their life, through the vow of obedience, must be that of Religious. In the fifth chapter, Fr Rougeyron insisted - something that was already said in chapter 4 - on the obligation which the sisters had to be extremely vigilant in their relationships with the priests and brothers and, in the sixth one, he explained what mutual charity must be in community: the sisters are all equal, they avoid causing pain to one another, they have the greatest mutual respect, they ask pardon and give it in cases of failure, they avoid impatience and bad moods...

A second decision followed the first. Since the sisters could not live together, he separated them. The provicar explained this at length in a puzzling letter he wrote to Fr Poupinel on 29 April.¹⁸ While passing through La Conception, a priest from Ile des Pins, Fr André Chapuy, assured him that on that island, a sister would have plenty to occupy herself. The provicar therefore sent two sisters there, because according to the rules,ⁱ a sister could not be alone. At La Conception one sister sufficed to do all the work and this would be an exceptional situation while awaiting the arrival of other sisters. The characters of the three sisters were diametrically opposed, he continued, and for some time now Sr de la Paix and Sr de la Croix had taken a dislike for each other so it was Sr de Bon Secours and Sr de la Croix who went to Ile des Pins! Sr de Bon Secours had promised to make up for the past and to live on good terms with Sr de la Croix. They were both sickly, they would take care of each other.

^h For the complete text of this rule and the supplement added by Fr Rougeyron, see OPS V, p. 15-22.

ⁱ Canon Law forbids religious women to live alone.

The priest added that this decision annoyed Sr M. de la Croix who would have preferred being alone on Ile des Pins, but

*I overlooked it since you stressed so strongly your opinion that this sister should not be alone.*¹⁹

her health left so much to be desired that it did not seem that she could live long.²⁰

II. ILE DES PINS (MAY 1859 - AUGUST 1864) A GIFTED EDUCATOR

This small island, called 'Kounie' by its inhabitants, is the most southern of Melanesia. At that time its beauty didn't attract the cohorts of tourists who visit it today! It welcomed the Marist Missionaries in August 1848. Seven years later, in 1855, the High Chief, Kaoua Vendegou, accepted to be baptised on his death bed, a baptism that was followed by many others. When the sisters arrived, on the evening of 3 May, the feast of the Finding of the Holy Cross, as Sr M. de la Croix pointed out,²¹ almost all the people were baptised. It remained for the missionaries to teach them how to live as Christians. It was to this task that Sr M. de la Croix would commit herself, with all the dedication and generosity of which she was capable.

1) Welcome by the priests

On 2 May 1859, exactly five months after their arrival in New Caledonia, the two sisters set out. The evening before, they had left La Conception to board the *Syx*. This was the first heart-wrenching experience for Sr M. de la Croix who confided to Fr Poupinel:

*I didn't shed any tears or anything else, but I threw myself into the Heart of Jesus, preferring his will to anything else, cost what it may.*²²

However, the women of La Conception were able to express their grief:

All the women threw themselves on the ground, a great sign of sadness, crying out: we are very ill because of your departure, and they burst into tears,

Sr M. de la Croix wrote to Fr Yardin several months later.²³

The *Styx* was a steamship obligingly put at the disposal of the provicar so that he could make the rounds of the missions. It weighed anchor early the following morning. On its way, it would leave the sisters at Ile des Pins.

Having disembarked in the bay of Vao on the morning of 3 May, the *Styx's* passengers soon arrived at the mission, situated a few hundred metres from the shore, at the foot of a hill. There lived the two priests who, because of the rapidity of events, were not forewarned of this arrival.

The superior of the mission was Fr Prosper Goujon who had been on the island since the first days of its evangelization. His only dream was for the happiness of his people who loved him dearly. But contrary to his companion, Fr Chapuy, he did not think the time had come to establish a community of religious women on the island. His surprise was therefore as great as his displeasure and he very clearly declared that he did not want the sisters! All the authority of the provicar was needed so that, in the end, having been coerced and compelled, he withdrew his refusal.²⁴ Perhaps for the sake of helping him accept this decision, Fr Rougeyron offered him the opportunity of a tour of the vicariate with him. Consequently, both of them departed on 5 May, leaving to Fr Chapuy the task of looking after the sisters.

Happy that they were there, he endeavoured to prove it to them. When he was not absent, which happened often enough, he did not hesitate to pay them frequent visits. Did he not tell them that he regarded their arrival on the island “*as a blessing of Providence*”?²⁵

2) Winning over Father Goujon

When Fr Goujon returned a month later, he was in the same state of mind. In his stubbornness, he never went to see the sisters and “*was visibly opposed*” to all the tasks the sisters undertook “*for almost a year, and this was almost admitted by him two weeks ago*”, wrote Sr M. de la Croix in November 1860.²⁶ Nevertheless, in the same letter she affirmed that, for her part, she still had the highest esteem for Fr Goujon. She certainly merits something for that!

Even though he remained hostile, he was fundamentally upright and could recognize people’s qualities. In September 1859, he wrote to a priest, “*Sr M. de la Croix, although suffering, takes a delightful interest in her class and all her tasks.*”²⁷

In April 1861- when the sisters had been at Kounie almost two years^j - the situation was much more relaxed: Fr Goujon did not hesitate to ask Sr M. de la Croix to carry out a mammoth sewing task in preparation for the Corpus Christi procession. In scarcely more than a month and a half - the feast of Corpus Christi fell on 30 May that year - assisted by her girls, she had to make twelve cassocks, twelve pairs of trousers, twelve surplices, albs, cinctures, baskets for the

^j At this date, as will be seen later on, the second sister was no longer Sr M. de Bon Secours.

flower girls, a canopy etc. etc.!... Everything was ready on time.²⁸

For his part, Brother Michel set up a victory arch made of greenery in front of the school with the aim of “*reuniting all the children around the Divine Master*”.²⁹ But the weather was so bad that day that the procession could not go out of the church!

All the same, in the face of so much work and good will, little by little Fr Goujon changed his attitude and gave up his prejudices. In mid-June, on the eve of his departure for the newly-founded mission of Touaourou^k, he gave Sister a free hand to do whatever “*she wants to do for the mission, gathering the women together on Sunday and all the rest*”.³⁰ Finally, a few months later, Sr M. de la Croix noted that “*Father Goujon is very much at ease with me and has great simplicity*.”³¹ He came to visit the classes and proposed to the sisters a trip to the little island where the boys were in the process of cutting timber for their future house. “*We went there with all our children, we were a very joyful fleet*”, was her comment upon returning from this outing. And she explained: “*Father was so relaxed and friendly that it was impossible not to respond to his politeness*.”³¹

Henceforth the priest was won over to accepting the presence of the sisters. In July 1863 he himself wrote to Fr Poupinel:

*For my part, I thank the good Lord every day for having sent me as assistants and as models these two angels of virtue; and I truly hope that he will allow me to keep them for a long time for my edification and for the wellbeing of the country.*³²

^k Situated to the south of the mainland, on the East Coast, Touaourou always had a privileged relationship with Ile des Pins.

3) Father Rougeyron holds onto his prejudices

The first years of Sr M. de la Croix's time on Ile des Pins also had a shadow cast over them by Fr Rougeyron's attitude toward her. He remained very prejudiced and did not want her to forget why he had not left her at La Conception. Before leaving Kounie to continue his visitation in May 1859, he had a meeting with the sisters and specified each one's tasks. He took advantage of this occasion to tell Sr M. de la Croix that he forbade her to learn the local language: she was not to use this "*to encroach on the duty and the rights of the priests!*"³³ From this it can be understood why, in her correspondence on different occasions she used expressions of disillusionment such as "*the little scandal of my status*" or, in the same letter addressed to the superior general in 1861, "*these two years of deportation and public penance*",³⁴ or to Fr Poupinel, "*by means of humiliation I must learn humility*"³⁵ and "*I am on the Index of the whole vicariate.*"³⁶

Passing through Ile des Pins in June 1862 and noticing how well the school was functioning and Fr Goujon's satisfaction, the provicar even revoked his ban on learning the language: he allowed Sr M. de la Croix to learn that of Kounie!

4) The sisters settle in

Upon their arrival in Vao, of course no accommodation had been foreseen so, as at La Conception, the sisters were temporarily lodged in the presbytery, in a small room on the ground floor of the stone house³⁷ constructed soon after the missionaries' arrival in 1848. The room made available for the sisters was furnished with a large table, on which, in the evening, two mattresses were spread out for the night.³⁸

Since this situation could not continue for long, Fr Chapuy attended to the matter, and in the following weeks, in June or July,¹ Sr M. de la Croix was assigned to “*the little old workman’s hut where [Brother] Prosper used to store his organ,*” at the foot of the woods, and Sr M. de Bon Secours to a similar cabin built for her in the middle of the plateau.³⁸ An “*old pointed hut named the Parnasse*” which would serve them as refectory and ironing room was also put at their disposal.³⁹ These two ‘huts’, Sr M. de Bon Secours tells us, were

*situated [...] on the slope of the mountain which is behind the Fathers’ house, that is to say, at the foot of their beautiful forest.*⁴⁰

- ***Visit of a ship’s captain (August 1860)***

At the beginning of August 1860 - so a year later - Sr M. de la Croix was occupying the same areas, but she was alone. Sr M. de Bon Secours had been called back to La Conception a few months earlier. Sr M. de la Croix, therefore, received the visit of a captain of a ship that called in at Ile des Pins. Having come to greet the priests, after the meal he was taken by them to the sister’s place. He wrote to a friend:

*[Her dwelling] is situated a bit higher up than the priests’, on the slope of a hill; it is reached by a staircase dug out of the earth and by a small path closed off by a turnstile that only allows one person through at a time.*⁴¹

Because the priests had livestock they had to prevent the animals from going through there.

¹ At the beginning of June 1859, the sisters were still living in the presbytery.

Having climbed up the path, one comes out onto

*a long platform about 300 feet in length and 50 feet wide^m [upon which] are constructed two huts made of planks and covered in thatch; [...] one of them contained a small bed, a wooden chair and had around it a plank shelf on which were some books of piety. In the other hut, the one she called her kitchen, her shop or her study, there was a bit of everything, but above all a large table made of planks on which she teaches the girls to iron.*⁴¹

A large leaf house in the form of a bee hive, the same one in which the priests lived on their arrival, allowed the sister to accommodate the dozen young girls who lived with her.⁴²

- ***A stone house***

It was only at the end of 1861 that work started on a stone house for the sisters. Since March, Sr M. de la Croix had a new companion; it was the wish [*of those responsible*] that both of them be provided with more suitable accommodation. The site of this house occasioned some discussions. Fr Goujon would have liked it to be constructed on the mountain where the sisters had their leaf houses,⁴³ so some distance from the presbytery which adjoined the church, but finally the decision came back to what Frs Poupinel and Rougeyron had foreseen and what the sisters preferred. In November 1861, to the right of the church and behind the presbytery, a “*gallant mason*” named Forcade, who had come from Port-de-France and “*wants to do something for the good Lord*”⁴⁴ set to work. He refused any payment.

^m That is about 90 metres by 15.

The constructionⁿ did not advance quickly as the priests had little time to dedicate to manual work and the men of Kounie did not yet have training. In July 1863, “*the sisters are still living in their miserable shacks*”, regretted Fr Goujon.⁴⁵ Finally, in November of that same year, the work was well enough advanced for them to move into their new house.⁴⁶

5) Community and solitude

But let us return to 1859. As noted above, the two sisters who had arrived in May had difficulties in living together and Fr Rougeyron knew very well that in putting them both on Ile des Pins, he was not solving this problem. Before setting out to sea again to continue the visitation of the vicariate, he had spelt out their respective duties and informed them that there would not be a superior in the community: they would depend directly on Fr Goujon.⁴⁷

During the first weeks, when they were each busy with their own tasks, they came together again for the night in their room at the presbytery. Sr M. de la Croix was often very weary as she had spent the day with groups of children and longed for real rest, time for peaceful contemplation. For her part, Sr M. de Bon Secours had experienced quieter days and was more on her own. When evening came she wanted to talk.

[...] *And that is when one has to go for a walk or prattle on about nothing, and she who refuses this little act of self-denial makes the other suffer despite her good will,*

remarked Sr M. de la Croix in all simplicity.⁴⁷

ⁿ This is not the present house situated on the left of the church and constructed in 1882 - 1883.

- ***Departure of Sister Marie de Bon Secours***

On 1st October, with the departure of her companion, Sr M. de la Croix was alone. At that time she wrote to Fr Poupinel:

With the exception of my table which is well and truly empty, of a third class which I am giving to the men, and of the care of the chapel,^o nothing has changed for me.⁴⁸

To Fr Yardin she declared at the end of this same month that she was “*in no hurry to have a companion*”.⁴⁹ At Vao did there not reign “*a great peace, such a good sense of oneness between the priests and the worthless sister whom you know?*”⁵⁰

Alone on her mountain, and almost without visitors, she “*tastes a solitude that is more complete and sweeter than ever*” and rested from her work, hearing her mother tongue only in the French spoken by her young girls.⁵¹ Walking the hundred steps on her platform, she could contemplate the sky, the land and the sea.⁵² It was a magnificent view. In October 1860, she explained to Fr Yardin:

*In order to understand this word alone in all its spiritual sweetness, you have to taste it at the end of the earth on a semi-savage island, a lone sister alone with Jesus and Mary. What delight! A life of apostolic zeal and of Carmel, can two more beautiful vocations exist together?*⁵³

- ***Sister Marie de la Présentation's arrival***

16 March 1861 saw the end of this solitude of almost twenty months. Fr Poupinel brought to Ile des Pins the companion whom he had long desired to give her. Marie

^o These were the occupations of Sr M. de Bon Secours.

Brait, who had become Sr Marie de la Présentation, 27 years of age at that time, was the daughter of a naval officer. At Toulon she had received a less cultured education than Pélagie Phelippon and had never taught class. She therefore had much to learn from Sr M. de la Croix, which was a little difficult to accept at first. However, the tension of the first months disappeared quickly enough, and soon a deep and solid affection based on reciprocal esteem grew between the two sisters. This enabled them to live and work together for the greatest good of the children confided to them.

6) Spiritual dimension of this life

Alone or in community, Sr M. de la Croix did not forget that she was - or desired to be - a religious. This dimension was an integral part of her life.

- *Reading resources*

Thanks to Frs Poupinel and Yardin, she had the use of spiritual books and devoted time to reading them. Thus she was able to give herself to “*a regular and in-depth study of prayer*”, thanks to Fr Maîtreperrière’s book^p which “*really delights me*”.⁵⁴ She read the works of St Teresa of Avila, criticizing the “*poor translation*”^q which “*seems sometimes to diminish the force of this saint’s thoughts*”.⁵⁵ She thanked Fr

^p Fr Maîtreperrière, a Marist, was Provincial Superior, Novice Master and Assistant to the Superior General.

^q From 1854 onwards, Fr Marcel Bouix, a Jesuit, published a translation of the works of Teresa of Avila which was judged more literary than faithful (cf. *Histoire spirituelle de la France*, Beauchesne, 1964, p. 309). This is the work that Sr M. de la Croix had at her disposal.

Poupinel⁵⁶ for sending this “*beloved book of Fr Muard*”.^r She asked him for *L’Evangile medite de Duquesne*^s and M. Olier’s work *l’Introduction à la vie et aux vertus chrétiennes*.⁵⁷ She was grateful to him for nourishing her “*lukewarm soul by sending her book after book*”.⁵⁸ When she didn’t like an author, she could say so:

Three works of Fr. Huguet^t have come from far away not to be read. I have never liked the writings of this father, today less than ever; do not send anymore,

she wrote to Fr Yardin.⁵⁹ She liked to read biographies. While that of St Rose of Lima did not please her too much, on the other hand, she appreciated those of St Elisabeth of Hungary, of Blessed Margaret Mary Alacoque - “*I have loved her for such a long time*”⁵⁹ - of Sister Marie de l’Incarnation (Madame Acarie), of Marie Eustelle.^u “*I now understand her being one of your heavenly friends.*”⁶⁰ Besides, Fr Forestier had put his library at La Conception at Sr M. de la Croix’s disposal, but we don’t know what books were on the shelves.⁶¹

^r Fr J. B. Muard spent some time with the Marists and became a friend of Fr Poupinel. Originally he was from the Benedictine Abbey of La Pierre-qui-Vire. A biography of this priest was published in 1854, a year after his death.

^s Abbot Arnaud Duquesne published in 1773 *L’Evangeline medite pour tous les jours de l’annee suivant la concorde des quatre evangelistes* (12 volumes). This work enjoyed great success and several editions were published. Today, in the presbytery library at Vao, Volumes 1, 3, 5 and 7 of the 1836 edition can still be found.

^t Fr Huguet, a Marist, published many works and spread devotion to St Joseph.

^u Marie Eustelle Harpain lived at the beginning of the 19th century. Her writings, edited in 1853, reflect a life of profound mysticism centred on the Eucharist. She died at the age of 28.

- ***Retreats***

When opportunities arose, she took part in preached retreats. At the end of August 1860, a particularly important celebration took place at Vao. The provicar blessed the church dedicated to Our Lady of the Assumption, the first stone church in the vicariate. For this occasion, the *Saint Pierre* brought to Ile des Pins, not only the provicar but a good number of priests whose presence ensured the splendour of the ceremonies. The festivities actually lasted three days because the Stations of the Cross were also erected, catechumens were baptized, a church bell blessed, a statue of the Blessed Virgin, gift from Fr Poupinel, was inaugurated, and the sacrament of confirmation was given to four hundred and thirty-five Christians.⁶²

Before separating, the priests and brothers made a retreat and Sr M. de la Croix joined them. Having begun on Tuesday evening, the retreat finished at Mass the following Sunday. At the offertory those on retreat renewed their vows. After that, at Fr Rougeyron's request, Sr M. de la Croix also renewed her "*two poor vows*" regretting not being able to "*add the word perpetual to that of obedience*".⁶³ In July 1858 in Lyon, as mentioned earlier, she had committed herself by the vow of obedience. As for the second, it could only be a private vow, no doubt that of chastity. From the way in which she spoke to Fr Poupinel about it in September, he was aware of it.

Scarcely a year later, in June 1861, at the request of the two sisters, Fr Xavier Montrouzier who was staying at Ile des Pins, preached an eight-day retreat in which the brothers also took part. During that week, the priest gave the retreatants five conferences a day.⁶⁴ In mid-July, when Fr Forestier made a stopover at Vao, Sr M. de la Croix showed him her retreat notes as he was her director.⁶⁵ These notes have not come down to us.

7) Education of the girls and boys

Even if Sr M. de la Croix sometimes wrote as if disillusioned, “*This place can only be occupied by a poor girl from whom God expects nothing*”⁶⁶ or “*I suffer from not doing any good here*”,⁶⁷ her qualities as an educator, already evident in Bordeaux and then at La Conception, were affirmed during her time at Kounie.

- *Already a school in 1850*

Before her arrival, the priests had already begun a small school. In 1850, some boys whose liveliness Fr Chapuy had noticed, were coming to the mission to learn to read but everyone knows that perseverance is not natural in children. These boys became discouraged and soon stopped coming.

- *Students and mistress*

Hardly had she arrived, than Sr M. de la Croix again took up this particularly important work. She gathered some children, boys and girls, as well as some women, in a “*wooden plank house built by the government*”⁶⁸ which was placed at her disposal. Soon she had 163 students - 103 children and 60 women - who came every day. After Sr M. de Bon Secours' departure, she salvaged a weekly class of 100 men which would be stopped some months later because it was judged to be useless.⁶⁹ The school for women also closed in May 1860 due to Fr Goujon's decision. It was the period when he feared that the sister had too much influence on them!

Since she was not allowed to learn the Kounie language, she taught in French. As at La Conception, school supplies were totally lacking. She had neither blackboard nor sticks of chalk. “*For a year all the lessons come from me, not from a*

book, or a sheet of paper,” she wrote in 1861.⁷⁰ Very promptly she asked Fr Yardin to send her

*a table of metric weights and measures pasted on to cloth, plus some reams of the usual kind of school paper and lots of rather thick steel pens with pen holders.*⁷¹

The ‘ship’s captain’ who made a stopover at Ile des Pins in August 1860, added another interesting piece of information concerning this matter. The sister, he said, had made reading charts and set up an ingenious system for learning to count:

*Numbers are hung from nails, then the number places are changed to give new numbers that the students must then name.*⁷²

She was happy in the midst of her children and she said so:

I find my children more beautiful than all those I have seen when they have been washed squeaky clean and inspected by me, their skin is shining and their little white fringe makes a line on the black background. When my 110 toddlers, seated like Europeans on benches, arms crossed, head held up, like the children of the Brothers of the Christian Schools in France, and my little girls modestly grouped in a circle around me; when at the same time they all sing in unison, every morning before class, the verse of a canticle that I have taught them:

*Yes, I will, oh gentle Mother!
Right to my final breath
Serve you and please you,
Live for you and die for you!*

*No, I cannot repay the bliss I experience. I think Mary must look on my children with kindness.*⁷³

It seems to me that this quotation is worth including despite its length.

- ***The school supplies arrive!***

When Sr M. de la Présentation arrived in March 1861, the organization of the school was changed. The new sister took the class of the youngest children (84 boys and girls) and Sr M. de la Croix was responsible for the older ones (about sixty).⁷⁴

The school supplies had also arrived. Provided with paper, pens and pen holders, she could finally - almost two years after the school had started! - teach her pupils to write, which was "*a crowning joy for them*".⁷⁵

While passing through Ile des Pins, Fr Poupinel paid a visit to Sr M. de la Croix in the midst of her pupils: "*I have attended her class,*" he wrote to Fr Yardin in May 1861, "*How interesting it is!*"⁷⁶ In November, she sent her girls' first letters to him in Sydney. "*The thought, the expressions are theirs,*" she told him, "*the spelling is mine, but in six months I shall be able to give them a dictation.*"⁷⁷ For reading, she used the catechisms of Lyon of which she had only seventeen copies⁷⁵ but she asked Fr Yardin for the *Livre de lectures courante* in four volumes, one for each season.⁷⁸

From 1862 onwards,⁷⁹ the boys and girls were separated into two schools, each group having two hours of class five days a week.

8) Mary's haven

- ***Education***

To teach is good but it is also necessary to educate. Sr M. de la Croix knew this well. She wrote in 1861:

*The care of the young people was indispensable, especially among peoples recently converted. Without education, there is no lasting mission, no solid Christians.*⁸⁰

That is why, from 1859, she asked for a house where she could gather the girls around her: and she drew up plans for social evenings: games, pious stories, readings once they knew how to read.⁸¹

Mary's Haven, as she wanted to call it,⁸¹ came to birth quietly and in poverty. A dozen girls, then about thirty, stayed with her, but the shack they lived in was so dilapidated in 1861 that it has to be admitted that it had fallen into ruins: it was deserted even by the rats!⁸²

These children had to be fed. How could this be done when the box for the provisions was empty? As a friend from Sydney had offered a sum of money, Sr M. de la Croix set aside a large part of it for buying sacks of rice.⁸³

In October 1861, she was distressed because "*the haven is still languishing for lack of a building*".⁸⁴ Two years later, when the sisters took up residence in their new home, right beside it another with very solid mud walls was under construction.⁸⁵ Nevertheless good was still being done and the children profited from all that the sister taught them.

- ***Sewing and religious formation***

The afternoons - classes were held only in the mornings - were well occupied. In the sewing workshop, it was full speed ahead making liturgical decorations when preparations were under way for a big feast such as the blessing of the church in 1860 or the feast of Corpus Christi in 1861, but also clothes (shirts, trousers, jackets, blouses, hats ...) were made for the priests of New Caledonia;⁸⁶ the linen of those on Ile des Pins was taken care of, clothes were made for the girls and their

families⁸⁷... Obviously everything was sewn by hand at that period.

When there were sick people to visit, Sr M. de la Croix always took some girls with her. She also taught them catechism, prayers, songs, and in the evening she gathered them together for “*semi-serious recreation*”. She would tell them bible history stories with the aid of pictures and she noted with joy: “*These evenings attract several young women, that’s my desire*”.⁸⁷

On the island, it became a title of honour to be a little girl of the Haven. So much good was done that the priests gathered the boys in the ‘House of Good Hope’. Sr M. de la Croix recognized that her heart overflowed with love “*for this cherished part of responsibilities that are solely mine*”.⁸⁷ She was happy when she was surrounded by her girls who “*come into her little room like a swarm of bees*”.⁸⁸

9) Sister Marie de la Croix’s girls

Among these children, there were some whose names are known and through them the value of the education they received can be recognized.

- *Hortense and Caroline*

Let us speak first of Hortense, the eldest daughter of the High Chief Kaoua-Philippe Vendegou. Not having a son, he had decided before his death that Hortense would marry her cousin Samuel, the future High Chief. That is why this little girl, who must have been about 11 years old when the sisters arrived, was entrusted in a very special way to Sr M. de la Croix who took care to inculcate in her good values. This “*outstanding pupil*”, whom she found to be very intelligent,⁸⁹ this “*little Majesty*” who became very interesting,⁹⁰ she kept at

table with her in order to teach her good manners.⁸⁹ Sr M. de la Croix did not hide her anxiety when Hortense was invited to Port-de-France to take part in the festivities of 15 August:^v so many dangers lay in wait for her there!⁹¹ She almost always took her to visit the sick and taught her to work like the other girls. Despite her rank, Hortense sewed her dresses and those of her little sister, and her reward was to place flowers on the altar of the Blessed Virgin.⁸⁹

Caroline was a cousin of Hortense, a Vendegou also. She was a catechumen when the sisters arrived and was baptized in 1861. An intelligent girl, she served as interpreter whenever a priest who did not know the language of Ile des Pins was passing through and wanted to carry out his ministry. She also knew how to care for sick people. When Sr M. de la Croix was prevented from going herself, she did not hesitate to send Caroline to them on her own, and she carried out her task very well.⁹² Her short life was to be a real ascent towards the Lord. We shall speak of her again a little further on.

- ***Pélagie and Julie***

All the priests would have liked to have a Sister M. de la Croix in their mission: she was asked for on Ouvéa, at Belep, in Pouebo... Fr Fabre, her travelling companion, who worked on Lifou, tried another solution: in 1861, he sent her two girls, both orphans and catechumens, who received the names Pélagie and Julie on the day of their baptism. They would have to return to their island three years later when the school was closed due to administrative problems. Having become good spouses and mothers, their theoretical and practical knowledge would be admired.⁹³

^v During the Second Empire, that day was kept as a holiday in honour of Napoleon III.

- ***The work of the Propagation of the Faith***

In 1862, Sr M. de la Croix took another initiative: she told her girls and the people she met about the movement of the Propagation of the Faith, already established at La Conception. She did this with such conviction that the people of Kounie all wanted to give their 'ten cents' and the movement was officially established on Ile des Pins on Sunday 7 September.⁹⁴ Some days later, a whole group of people set out for La Conception: Hortense, her mother, the regent Ti-Jerome and several young girls from the Haven were going to place the sum collected in Fr Rougeyron's hands. That practice continued over the following years. In 1864 the alms collected amounted to the sum of a thousand francs.

10) Pettiness of the civil authorities

- ***Arrival of Governor Guillain***

The results obtained by Sr M. de la Croix were so obvious that, more and more seriously, [*those in charge*] foresaw a central school for all the girls of the vicariate being confided to her care. The difficulties of communication with Ile des Pins immediately eliminated any possibility of establishing the planned educational centre at Vao. Saint-Louis, right close to La Conception, thus on the mainland, was therefore envisaged as the site, and plans started to be drawn up.

Because of circumstances external to the project, these plans were to materialize sooner than foreseen. In fact, the arrival of Governor Guillain in June 1862 was the beginning of numerous difficulties for the mission. Well known to be anti-clerical, this Governor, who was also jealous of his authority over the Kanaks would do everything in his power to destroy what the priests were trying to build up.

- ***Difficulties on Ile des Pins***

On Ile des Pins, there had already been a foretaste of these troubles in 1860, with the arrival in January of Monsieur de Soye, named special commandant of the island. Indeed, in a threatening way, he ordered Hortense to live at home and not with the sister so that her subjects would know where to find her, and he forbade her to speak to the missionaries.⁹⁵ Reproached in higher circles, this over zealous commandant had been rather rapidly recalled to Port-de-France⁹⁶ and life had returned to normal in Vao, but the warning had been clear.

- ***Interference of the governor***

The difficulties caused by Guillain's interference were much more serious and affected numerous spheres of activity in the entire vicariate. These pages will only deal with matters directly concerning Sr M. de la Croix's work, that is to say, the schools.

In November 1862, the governor, accompanied by his wife, paid a visit to Ile des Pins. Prudently, Sr M. de la Croix had taken the precaution of sending some of her girls, including Hortense, to Ile Ouen. He came, in fact, with the intention of taking Hortense to Port-de-France so that there she would receive "*an education which the Marist sisters, despite their piety, could not give her*",⁹⁷ he himself declared to Fr Goujon. Madame Guillain, however, paid a visit to the sisters and was obliged to recognize that "*it would be impossible to try and do better*".⁹⁷ The plan was dropped, but not the hostility.

11) Departure

On 15 October 1863, a decree was published in the *Bulletin Officiel de Nouvelle Calédonie*⁹⁸ requiring, as from 1

January 1864, authorization from the Government of New Caledonia in order to open a private school, along with possession of a certificate of qualification to be able to teach there. Since she was late in being informed of these requirements, on 6 December Sr M. de la Croix wrote to the Director of Internal Affairs^w to inform him that, while awaiting the authorization she was soliciting, “[her] school will be temporarily suspended as from 1 January”.⁹⁹ This was the beginning of an exchange of letters which would cease in June 1865, so obvious was the intent not to give in to the sister’s repeated petitions.^x

During 1864, Fr Poupinel visited New Caledonia. It was decided to bring the sisters together at Saint-Louis for a retreat¹⁰⁰ which took place during October.¹⁰¹ However, in August, Sr M. de la Croix received a letter from M. Mathieu, the colonial secretary,^y requesting her to come to Port-de-France so as to present herself before a three member committee appointed by the governor, if she wished to obtain the qualification without which she would not be authorized to open her school.¹⁰²

This is why, Sr M. de la Croix left Ile des Pins on board an outrigger canoe with Ti-Philippe, brother of the Regent, at

^w In the colonial administration, this was the title of the head of administration placed under the governor’s direct authority.

^x Between December 1863 and June 1865, Sr M. de la Croix wrote 15 times to M. Gilbert-Pierre, director of internal affairs, then to his successor, M. Mathieu, and received 10 replies. - File in AAN 158.1 which contains the drafts written by the sister and the originals of the responses.

^y At the beginning of 1864, the Ministry of Internal Affairs had become the Colonial Secretariat, whose colonial secretary, M. Mathieu, showed himself as unpleasant as the governor in regard to the mission.

the helm. On the morning of 29 August, with a favourable wind, the canoe put out to sea. Hortense, the girls, the local people, everyone had come down to the shore. This departure saddened them, but they hoped the sister would return in a few weeks.

Sr M. de la Croix herself was in a state of “*miserable uncertainty*” about the future.¹⁰³ She suspected she would not come back, that a page of her life was closing. Her heart was torn. However, she still held on to the joy of having devoted herself to the local people:

*The children were being educated, the women learnt to sew, the sick were visited and cared for and the love of God was penetrating the souls of all.*¹⁰⁴

It was in these terms that Sr M. de la Croix herself, several months later, summed up her activities at Kounie.

ENDNOTES - CHAPTER III

- ¹ cf. Poupinel-TOM Sisters in Lyon, 13.12.1858 (OPS I, 112)
- ² cf. Pionnier, op. cit., p. 77
- ³ Poupinel-TOM Sisters in Lyon, 13.12.1858 (OPS I, 112)
- ⁴ cf. Pionnier, op. cit., p. 78
- ⁵ cf. Poupinel-TOM Sisters in Lyon, 13.12.1858 (OPS I, 112 unpublished passage)
- ⁶ cf. Pionnier, op. cit., p. 79
- ⁷ Croix-Yardin, 20.02.1859 (OPS I, 120, §2)
- ⁸ *ibid.*
- ⁹ Rocher-Yardin, 29.01.1859 - APM VM 448
- ¹⁰ Croix-Yardin, 20.02.1859 (OPS I, 120 - unpublished passage)
- ¹¹ Croix-Yardin, 08.11.1858 (OPS I, 107 - unpublished passage)
- ¹² Croix-Yardin, 20.02.1859 (OPS I, 120, §1)
- ¹³ Poupinel-Central Councils of the Propagation of the faith, 31.03.1859 - APM OP 418
- ¹⁴ Forestier-Favre, 10.09.1858 - APM ONC 208
- ¹⁵ Croix-Poupinel, 07.03.1859 - APM VM 227
- ¹⁶ cf. Poupinel-TOM Sisters in Lyon, 13.12.1858 (OPS I, 112 - unpublished passage)
- ¹⁷ Croix-Poupinel, 07.03.1859 - APM VM 227
- ¹⁸ cf. Rougeyron-Poupinel, 29.04.1859 (OPS I, 125)
- ¹⁹ *ibid.*, §4
- ²⁰ cf. Poupinel-Yardin, 07.05.1861 - APM OP 418
- ²¹ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 05.06.1859 (OPS I, 133)
- ²² *ibid.* - unpublished passage
- ²³ Croix-Yardin, 04.09.1859 - ASMSM 221.3 (OPS I, 133- unpublished passage)
- ²⁴ cf. Bon Secours-Poupinel, 02.06.1859 (OPS I, 132)
- ²⁵ Croix-Poupinel, 05.06.1859 (OPS I, 133)
- ²⁶ Croix-Poupinel, 07.11.1860 (OPS I, 209)
- ²⁷ Goujon-[Rougeyron?], 27.09.1859 - AAN 87.2
- ²⁸ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 21.04.1861 - APM VM 227
- ²⁹ Croix-Berset, 01.07.1861 - ASMSM 224.6
- ³⁰ Croix-Poupinel, 01.08.1861 - APM VM 227
- ³¹ Croix-Poupinel, 12.10.1861 - APM VM 227

- ³² Goujon-Poupinel, 02.07.1863 - APM VM 227
³³ Forestier-Poupinel, 04.08.1862 - APM ONC 208
³⁴ Croix-Favre, 24.07.1861 - ASMSM 221.1
³⁵ Croix-Poupinel, 21.04.1861 - APM VM 227
³⁶ Croix-Poupinel, 19.08.1862 - APM VM 227
³⁷ cf. Bon Secours-Poupinel, 02.06.1859 (OPS I, 132)
³⁸ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 05.06.1859 (OPS I, 133 - unpublished passage)
³⁹ *ibid.*
⁴⁰ cf. Bon Secours-Poupinel, 02.06.1859 (OPS I, 132)
⁴¹ Letter from the ship's captain to a friend, [August] 1860 - APF t. 33, pp. 114-117
⁴² *ibid.* p. 117
⁴³ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 21.04.1861 - APM VM 227
⁴⁴ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 11.11.1861 (OPS II, 257 - unpublished passage)
⁴⁵ Goujon-Poupinel, 02.07.1863, APM VM 227
⁴⁶ cf. Palazy-Poupinel, 23.11.1863 - APM VM 227
⁴⁷ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 05.06.1859 (OPS I, 133 - unpublished passage)
⁴⁸ Croix-Poupinel, 08.10.1859 - APM VM 227.
⁴⁹ Croix-Yardin, 26.10.1859 - ASMSM 221.3.
⁵⁰ Croix-Poupinel, 30.10.1859 - APM VM 227.
⁵¹ Croix-Poupinel, 15.05.1860 - APM VM 227.
⁵² cf. letter from the ship's captain, *op. cit.*, p. 114
⁵³ Croix-Yardin, 23.10.1860 - ASMSM 221.3
⁵⁴ Croix-Poupinel, 05.06.1859 (OPS I, 133 - unpublished passage)
⁵⁵ Croix-Poupinel, 30.10.1859 - APM VM 227
⁵⁶ Croix-Poupinel, 08.10.1859 - APM VM 227
⁵⁷ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 06.03.1860 and 25.09.1860 (OPS I, 184, 202 - unpublished passage)
⁵⁸ Croix-Poupinel, 18.04.1860 - APM VM 227
⁵⁹ Croix-Yardin, 23.10.1860 - ASMSM 221.3
⁶⁰ Croix-Poupinel, 12.10.1861 - APM VM 227
⁶¹ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 25.09.1860 (OPS I, 202 - unpublished passage)
⁶² *ibid.*; see also note: Why the Marist miss. ... - AAN 87.1, p. 8

- ⁶³ Croix-Poupinel, 25.09.1860 (OPS I, 202)
⁶⁴ cf. Montrouzier-his parents, 06.09.1861 - AAN 9.3
⁶⁵ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 01.08.1861 - APM VM 227
⁶⁶ Croix-Poupinel, 15.05.1860 - APM VM 227
⁶⁷ Croix-Poupinel, 25.09.1860 (OPS I, 202, §2)
⁶⁸ Croix-Poupinel, 05.06.1859 (OPS I, 133 - unpublished passage)
⁶⁹ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 06.03.1860 (OPS I, 184)
⁷⁰ Croix-Berset, 20.04.1861 - ASMSM 224.6
⁷¹ Croix-Yardin, 04.09.1859 (OPS I, 151 - unpublished passage)
⁷² Letter from the ship's captain, op.cit., p.117
⁷³ Croix-Yardin, 04.09.1859 (OPS I, 151 - unpublished passage)
⁷⁴ Croix-Berset, 20.04.1861 - ASMSM 224.6
⁷⁵ Croix-Berset, 20.04.1861 - ASMSM 224.6
⁷⁶ Poupinel-Yardin, 07.05.1861 - APM OP 418
⁷⁷ Croix-Poupinel, 11.11.1861 (OPS II, 257 - unpublished passage)
⁷⁸ cf. Croix-Yardin, 13.07.1862 (OPS II, 281 - unpublished passage)
⁷⁹ cf. Forestier-Poupinel, 04.08.1862 - APM ONC 208
⁸⁰ Croix-Berset, 20.04.1861 - ASMSM 224.6
⁸¹ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 30.10.1859 - APM VM 227
⁸² cf. Croix-Poupinel, 01.08.1861 - APM VM 227
⁸³ cf. Croix-Rocher, 28.07.1861 - APM VM 227
⁸⁴ Croix-Poupinel, 12.10.1861 - APM VM 227
⁸⁵ cf. Goujon-Poupinel, 02.07.1863 - APM VM 227
⁸⁶ cf. Bon Secours-Gilbert, 01.07.1859 - APM Dossier Gilbert
⁸⁷ cf. Croix-Berset, 20.04.1861 - ASMSM 224.6
⁸⁸ Croix-Poupinel, 30.10.1859 - APM VM 227
⁸⁹ cf. Croix-Berset, 01.07.1861 - ASMSM 224.6
⁹⁰ Croix-Poupinel, 06.03.1860 (OPS I, 184)
⁹¹ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 05.07.1863 - APM VM 227
⁹² cf. Croix-Poupinel, 01.08.1861 - APM VM 227
⁹³ cf. Cdt Trèves-Works of the Holy Childhood, 13.05.1866 - AEM Océanie C 699
⁹⁴ cf. Hortense-Poupinel, 12.09.1862 (OPS II, 291); also Croix-Poupinel, 23.09.1862 (OPS II, 293)
⁹⁵ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 06.03.1860 (OPS I, 184)
⁹⁶ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 18.04.1860 - APM VM 227
⁹⁷ Forestier-Poupinel, 02.12.1862 (OPS II, 299)

⁹⁸ BONC 1863, p. 236 - copy conserved in AAN

⁹⁹ Croix-Director of the Interior, 06.12.1863 - AAN 158.1,
handwritten draft - ASMSM (copy)

¹⁰⁰ cf. Poupinel-Yardin, 22.07.1864 (OPS II, 339, §2)

¹⁰¹ cf. Croix-Abbé Charlot, 29.08.1865 - ASMSM 226.5 (copy)

¹⁰² cf. Mathieu-Croix, 07.07.1864 - AAN 158.1

¹⁰³ cf. Croix-Berset, 27.09.1864 (OPS II, 348)

¹⁰⁴ cf. Poupinel-Yardin, 22.07.1864 (OPS II, 339, §2)



Father Favre



Father Yardin



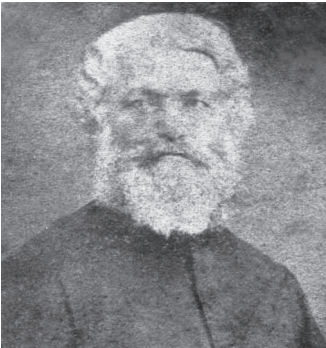
Father Poupinel



Bishop Vitte



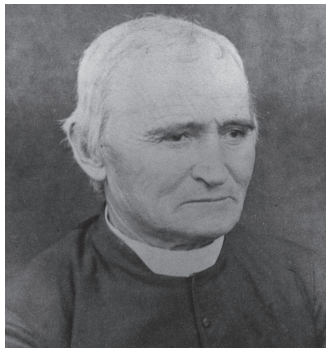
Bishop Fraysse



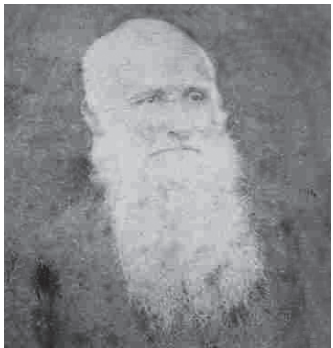
Father Rougeyron



Father Goujon



Father Vigouroux



Father Villard

CHAPTER IV

THE FIRST YEARS AT SAINT-LOUIS (1864 - 1874)

1. DIFFICULTIES WITH GOVERNOR GUILLAIN

At the end of 1855, Rear Admiral Louis du Bouzet, governor of the French settlements in Oceania,^a had given some land in the Bay of Boulari to the mission. This enabled the settlement of La Conception to be founded immediately and, as early as March the following year, that of Saint-Louis, situated a few kilometres further south.

1) The mission of Saint-Louis

- *Father Vigouroux*

In November 1859, Fr Jean-Baptiste Vigouroux took charge of the new settlement, and virtually never relinquished it.^b This man from Auvergne who had arrived in Oceania in 1848, was a remarkable missionary. Without neglecting the spiritual dimension of his apostolate, he provided Saint-Louis with considerable material means. Through the revenue thus accrued, it was destined to come to the aid of mission stations deprived of local resources.¹

His first concern was to move the mission from the seaside location where the priests had first settled and to

^a New Caledonia was separated administratively from Tahiti in 1860.

^b Fr Vigouroux was parish priest of Nouméa from the end of 1869 to the end of 1870 and spent six months in the New Hebrides (Vanuatu) in 1891. He died at Saint-Louis in August 1898.

establish it a few hundred metres away, on the ridge where it still is today. In a very short time, with Fr Chapuy's help, he diverted the flow of the river Thy and dug a canal beside which a sawmill was set up. This was in constant use as everything had to be constructed: houses, schools, farm buildings, churches and even a boat for the mission.

- *Arrival of Sister Marie de la Croix*

When the canoe from Ile des Pins bringing Sr M. de la Croix and her travelling companions approached the shore of Saint-Louis on 30 August 1864, they certainly did not see much as they arrived "*when it was almost night*".² It was not until the next day, therefore, that she could view the setting in which she was going to spend the twenty-eight most productive years of her life.

Plantations covered the plain. Under Fr Vigouroux's direction, some boys learnt how to make them profitable. The farm had a dairy herd and some sheep.³ For a church, there was as yet only a large leaf hut but construction was about to begin. At the end of November the boys started sawing the timber; during 1866, workers started the masonry; and on 8 September 1868, the new church was blessed. These works did not prevent the construction of a sugar refinery which functioned even before it was completed in 1867. It was located beside the sawmill.

A little further on, the priests' solid, spacious house was built, and still a little further, overlooking the area, the church that Fr Rougeyron described in 1869 as the most elegant in the colony. In reality, there were not many churches in the country at this time!

We do not know where the sisters' house was situated!^c... but it existed. It was built in 1863. It was a wooden house, with a thatched roof and a floor.⁴

2) The first weeks at Saint-Louis

- *The stay at Port-de-France*

After getting over the fatigue of the voyage,⁵ Sr M. de la Croix went to Port-de-France during September 1864. She spent forty-eight hours there, given hospitality by the Sisters of St Joseph of Cluny whom she did not yet know. They had arrived in New Caledonia only in August 1860.^d She took advantage of her time in Port-de-France to pay a visit to the president of the commission before which she had to present herself. This Monsieur Danican-Philidor, who had been the paymaster for several years in the colony, was a very good Christian and a friend of Fr Forestier. He received her with great respect.⁶

The two days at Port-de-France also brought her much joy. Here is her description:

During this time, it was just a continual procession to the Sisters' place. The Kounies employed on the government work-sites came to see me; not only the people of Ile des Pins, but the Touaourous, the people from Ouen, and several local people whom I did not know at all but who, introducing themselves as catechumens, certainly had the right to shake my hand.⁷

And she added a little further on in the same letter:

^c On "the mountain" according to a letter of Sr M. de la Croix to Fr Charlot on 01.08.1867.

^d The boat which brought the sisters stopped for a day at Ile des Pins but as they stayed on board they did not meet Sr M. de la Croix.

Since I have been at Saint-Louis, every Sunday I have had as many as 12 of these young boys spending the day at the mission.

- ***Arrival of Sister Marie de la Présentation***

On 1 October, her companion from Ile des Pins arrived. Sr M. de la Présentation came for the retreat and to present herself, also, before the commission in order to obtain the required certificate of qualification. This obviously meant that Sr M. de la Présentation would be in charge of the school at Vao, and therefore that Sr M. de la Croix would not be returning.

On 3 October the retreat began in which seven priests, six brothers and the sisters participated. Several months later Sr M. de la Croix wrote to her friend, Fr Charlot, that during those grace-filled days, *“Each of us forgot the time and consoled ourselves spiritually with the thought of eternity and the happiness of sacrifice.”*⁸

- ***The certificate of qualification***

The retreat concluded on 9 October. Two days later the two sisters went to Port-de-France to take the famous exam.

Neither success nor humiliation could disturb me, so sure was I that Our Lord would be glorified out of it all,

Sr M. de la Croix confided in the letter just quoted above.

The commission was composed of three members: besides the Paymaster who presided, there was also Fr Henri Artignan, vicar of Port-de-France, and the Director of the Office of European Affairs. Not without a touch of irony, she added also,

Nothing was omitted in the exam, except the page of writing. The administration should surely have known from my correspondence that I knew how to write.

Both the sisters were unanimously approved, and two weeks later Sr M. de la Présentation set out again for Ile des Pins. For Sr M. de la Croix, weighty matters were beginning.

3) The community

In June 1863, Sr M. de Bon Secours had been the first sister to occupy the wooden house. The following month she opened a small school there replacing that of La Conception. In November, Sr M. de la Sainte Espérance^e who had just arrived in New Caledonia because her health had not stood up to the climate of Central Oceania, joined her. At the beginning of 1864, it was Sr M. de la Paix's turn to come and live at Saint-Louis. These three sisters Sr M. de la Croix found on her arrival on 30 August.

Having been named to be Sr M. de la Présentation's companion, Sr M. de Bon Secours embarked with her for Ile des Pins. Sr M. de la Croix became superior at Saint-Louis, having, as Fr Vigouroux wrote, "*as a help and as a penance Sr M. de la Paix and Sr M. de la Sainte Espérance*".⁹ From Sydney, Fr Poupinel also, knowing the three sisters well, could not resist confiding to his friend, Fr Yardin:

I would ask you all to judge Sr M. de la Croix very favourably please. I have admired her during these recent times. We have imposed the harshest sacrifices on her and she has accepted them with true religious

^e This sister was one of the first group of pioneers who set out for Oceania in November 1857.

*courage. She has a great deal to suffer from her dear companions.*¹⁰

Sr M. de la Croix was very discreet concerning these community difficulties and spoke of them only once, in 1866, to Fr Poupinel, in whom she had complete confidence. She wrote:

*What can I say in the situation I am in? Charity obliges me not even to cast a glance around me. My situation seems to me indescribable. Oh, which of you gave me this impossible lot that you should have foreseen?*¹¹

Sr M. de la Ste Espérance was really sick, subject to crises that made any kind of community life very difficult. She herself was aware of this and asked the provicar to place her alone at La Conception. Her proposal was finally accepted. At the beginning of 1867 she was put in charge of a small school there and succeeded very well with the young girls confided to her. She died in 1872, having just turned forty-one.

Sr M. de la Paix, as mentioned already, had only minimal education which made her feel very frustrated. She also would have so much liked to teach, to have her turn in charge of a house!... This joy would be accorded her. At Pouebo, Fr Jean-Marie Villard, who had already gathered some girls, was clamouring for a sister to take care of them. In February 1867, she also left Saint-Louis to go to Pouebo where she would remain for many years.

Sr M. de la Croix, however, was not left alone. Sr M. de Bon Secours who had arrived sick at the beginning of that same month of February remained there until September. She went back again to Ile des Pins but returned at the beginning of 1868. Then, having been named for Ouvéa, the northern most of the Iles Loyauté, she went there after the retreat at Saint-Louis at the end of August.

Several times Sr M. de la Présentation also spent longer or shorter periods at Saint-Louis in order to obtain treatment for a persistent sore throat. The friendship between these two sisters had its ups and downs. A few blunders on either side explained the clashes in their relationship but they were dispelled quickly enough. Their joy at seeing each other again triumphed over all their sensitivity. In October 1871, Sr M. de la Croix could write in all sincerity: “*How happy we were during the 17 days she spent here!*”¹²

4) The school remained closed

If Sr M. de la Croix did not speak, or very seldom spoke, about her companions, by contrast she alluded more often in her letters to the difficulties she encountered with the colonial administration. The famous certificate of qualification obtained with distinction in October 1864 did not for all that remove every obstacle. Dated 12 October,¹³ it was sent to her only at the end of the year. The schools of Ile des Pins and Saint-Louis had by then remained closed for a year.^f

However, the authorization to reopen the Saint-Louis school was refused in January “*on the pretext that, in order to go there, the people would be obliged to migrate*”¹⁴ because Sr M. de la Croix was requesting a school for boarders as well as day pupils. The desire was to educate girls there from all parts of the mainland and from the islands, not only those from nearby areas. Now this plan did not please the governor at all, nor any more so the colonial secretary whose

^f A copy of this document, which came with a letter from the colonial secretary dated 24.12.1864, is preserved in ASMSM 235. The sister acknowledged reception of it on 01.01.1865 - (rough copy of this letter in AAN 158.1).

anticlericalism was even stronger, if possible, than the governor's.⁸

At the beginning of 1865, Sr M. de la Croix pleaded repeatedly with this Monsieur Mathieu in order to obtain the desired authorisation. By January 1866,¹⁵ a year later, she had still met with delaying tactics such as “*this matter is being looked into*”.¹⁶ Fr Forestier, sent to Paris to set forth all the difficulties the Mission had to face since Governor Guillain's arrival, had, however, written in February 1865:

*[The Ministry in Paris] recognizes that the local people have the right to put their children in whichever school seems best to them. They want the Saint-Louis School to take as many students as our resources permit.*¹⁷

But things were not heard in this way at Port-de-France, where the ministry's directives remained inflexible.

With the hope of moving things on, Fr Rougeyron, in May 1867, composed a “Draft Agreement” addressing all the points being disputed. Concerning education, he suggested:

*The Governor, while waiting for something better, will authorise the Missionaries not to open schools as such,¹⁸ but to prepare the way for future teachers, by enabling them to popularize the French language and, to that end, to give some indispensable lessons in reading and writing, without, of course, any outside regulations, nor inspection by the authorities.*¹⁹

This Agreement was to sleep in a drawer at the governor's office while the schools remained closed. It was necessary to await his departure in March 1870, and the arrival of his successor, the ship's captain, Eugene Gaultier de

⁸ The text of the decree, dated 3 January 1865, authorising the sister to open a school for day students only, can be found in Appendix 3.

la Richerie, the following August, for the situation to be rectified and the Marists to be able to resume their normal activities including the schools.

II. OUR LADY OF THE PROVIDENCE

1) Sister Marie de la Croix's educational work

It is easy to understand that these years for Sr M. de la Croix's were difficult as her desire was thwarted in providing the young Caledonians with an education such as she had given so well at Ile des Pins and to form "*an army of catechists and little apostles*".²⁰ She wrote in 1866:

*People and things in this country seem to combine to turn things upside down. The works are being held up so much and are getting nowhere on account of the persecution of the government [...] that their ruin doesn't seem far off.*²¹

Fr Vigoroux did not judge the situation in the same way. From the end of 1864 he maintained:

*Not being able to have classes does not prevent the Sister of the Cross from inspiring the girls with her spirit. Already their behaviour in the chapel has changed a great deal.*²²

And in 1870 he confirmed that "*the good she does for the little Caledonians is extraordinary*".²³ Already in 1866 Fr Rougeyron himself had admitted it when he remarked seriously: "*Sr de la Croix is doing good at Saint-Louis.*"²⁴

2) Number and origin of these children

When Sr M. de la Croix had taken charge of the place in October 1864, there were twenty-four girls.²⁵ During the following years, even though the school remained closed, this number kept increasing. In October 1868 they numbered about fifty, “*most of them orphans and children of pagans*”;²⁶ sixty in December 1870 - and it was often necessary to refuse new applicants,²⁷ - but by then the school had reopened.

The girls were from different areas of the vicariate - Païta, Nakéty, Borendi... and were often brought by the priests to Saint-Louis. Thus, in January 1867, Fr Chapuy arrived with ten girls from Wagap; in the course of 1872, Fr François Beaulieu sent seven small girls from Maré, and at the end of that year, Fr Rougeyron returned from a visitation with twelve more girls from Wagap. A good group came from Touaourou and Ounia, in the south-east of the island. Fr Villard, who was the pastor of these tribal groups in 1872, wrote to Fr Poupinel at this time: “*All the girls in my parish from the age of 5 or 6 until they are married, are at Saint-Louis,*”²⁸ such was his desire to give these children a good education. He was sure they would receive that from Sr M. de la Croix.

3) A day at Our Lady of the Providence

What went on at Our Lady of the Providence, as Sr M. de la Croix had named the house?²⁹ To reply to this question, a distinction has to be made between two periods: before and after 1870, namely before and after Governor Guillain's departure.

- ***Before March 1870***

A *Rule for the Sisters' Apostolate at Saint-Louis* written by Sr M. de la Croix, gives information about the first period.³⁰

On week days, after Mass for the older girls, there was a “*light breakfast*” and a half hour set aside for studying catechism, at 7.30 they left for work in the plantations until midday, except for Mondays and Wednesdays which were laundry days. At midday there was lunch followed by recreation. At 2 o’clock everyone gathered for catechism and at 3 o’clock it was time for sewing, mending or ironing. At 5 o’clock, there was free time followed by a visit to the Blessed Sacrament; then came the hour for dinner and recreation. At 8.30, after evening prayer, the girls went to bed in silence.

Saturday was taken up with cleaning the chapel^h and the house. In the afternoon, while strolling around and relaxing, the children gathered firewood for the kitchen.

After the departure, at the beginning of 1867, of Sr M. de la Paix who used to accompany the girls to the plantations, and of Sr M. de la Ste Espérance who taught them sewing, Sr M. de la Croix got help from “*some girls who were quite intelligent and dedicated*”,³¹ chosen from among the older ones.

In the midst of all these activities, Sr M. de la Croix still found time to send the children to visit the sick, to care for and instruct the women, to prepare the dying for the last sacraments and be there when they received Holy Viaticum.³²

It can be seen that no time was allotted for reading or writing, or any kind of teaching, except catechism. However, Sr M. de la Croix took some liberties vis-à-vis the governor’s

^h That is to say, the leaf hut; the church was still being built.

decrees. She wrote in March 1868 that she had Caroline give reading classes and exercises of memorisation³³ since she herself was not able to do that, and a few months later, while repeating that she still could not give classes, she added:

*I teach in secret, giving a lesson to one small group of children, then to another, using those who know a bit to teach one another.*³⁴

In June 1870, when the governor had left and freedom had returned, Fr Villard spoke of the “*immense progress*” the boys of Saint-Louis had been making for two months, thanks to Brother Elie’s lessons.¹ He continued his letter:

*The girls are much further advanced, given that they have been with the sister for a long time. They have been able to read ‘for ages’ and how they have learnt to write in four months is astonishing.*³⁵

He went on:

*Yesterday, I assisted at the class on principles of grammar; I couldn’t get over my astonishment: it was the fruit of only two month’s work. This morning I attended an arithmetic class: counting, reading, writing with ease and following principles surprised me greatly, but when these children managed to explain the metric system, I didn’t know how to restrain my astonishment.*³⁵

One wonders if mental arithmetic exercises and other activities leaving little or no material evidence, should not be added to the reading classes! Didn’t the sister have the possibility of keeping back sometimes one group, sometimes another, from the morning work in the plantations? We have

¹ Brother Elie Raffegeau, who arrived in New Caledonia in February 1870, wanted to be a priest but due to severe headaches, he had to stop his studies. He then devoted himself as a coadjutor brother.

just seen how, in 1867, she wanted some prayer books for those of her girls who knew how to read. In February 1870, when the governor was about to depart, she spoke of “*18 who read well*” and “*are ‘crazy’ about*” the *Messenger du Cœur de Jésus*, a magazine received from France, and she added, “*the difficulty in giving classes has delayed writing lessons until now*”; two lines further on she spoke of a pupil whose writing “*is still only scribble*”.³⁶

- ***After March 1870***

Once the school reopened, things would take another turn. As well as the education and formation they were already receiving, Sr M. de la Croix was going to be able to give all her girls, older and younger, the instruction they so badly needed.

A new rule, again drawn up by Sr M. de la Croix, was put into action.³⁷ Entitled “*Rule of our little Providence*”,^j it gives information about the changes introduced in the running of the house. For sure, they still needed to go to the plantations, to do the laundry, iron, sew, mend, prepare meals...; but formal classes finally found their place: reading, writing, counting, learning the intricacies of French grammar. A quarter of an hour’s study - time after supper was set aside for assessing the day’s results, as well as singing lessons for everyone twice a week.

Still the only sister in the house, Sr M. de la Croix obtained assistance more and more from the most capable of the older girls who were named on Sunday evenings for the coming week. According to this rule, the tasks were distributed as follows:

^j The complete text of this rule can be found in Appendix 4.

Details of the duties confided to our girls:

*Three girls for the general supervision of each dormitory.
They are changed only in case of bad behaviour.*

*A supervisor for the children who do not go to Mass
because they are very little or frail. She also will get
them up each morning and watch over their prayers and
personal hygiene.*

*The catechumens who do not attend Mass do the
housework with the class teachers during Mass.*

Two supervisors for the midday recreation.

Two cooks for the 'Providence' - one supervisor.

Two cooks for the Mission.

Two class teachers.

A laundry supervisor.

A mistress in charge of mending.

A mistress for the ironing.

Three teachers for reading and catechism.

*Five children responsible for the altars and the care of
the church for the week.*

- ***The priests' satisfaction***

In 1872, Fr Villard did not hide his satisfaction or his admiration. From Touaourou, he wrote to Fr Poupinel:

*Something that is greatly contributing to the
improvement of my parish, and which you will easily
understand, is the education given at Saint-Louis to the
young girls.*³⁸

A little further on he added, speaking of Sr M. de la Croix:

*God gives her all that is needed to civilise in a Christian
way these poor Caledonian children. In all simplicity and
knowing the reason, I can tell you I do not find that
anywhere else.*

Knowing the antagonism between the provicar and the sister, in the same letter he continued speaking about the girls who had returned to the tribal group a few months earlier:

Rev. Fr Rougeyron needed to come to Touaourou to recognize the good that is done at Saint-Louis. He questioned them in French on the catechism; he was surprised at their confidence and learning and their hymns. So he could not refrain from telling them: I am very pleased with you.

4) The feast of Saint Peter in 1872

One fact illustrates well the quality of the work accomplished by Sr M. de la Croix. The feast of Sts Peter and Paul is celebrated, as is well known, on 29 June. It was therefore the feast of Fr Pierre Rougeyron. In 1872 this feast was celebrated with greater splendour than usual because in preceding years “*for one reason or another*”, he was always absent. Sr M. de la Croix wrote:

This year his humility had to give way to the force of circumstances obliging him to be at La Conception,³⁹

his normal residence. At Saint-Louis, both the boys and the girls were busy preparing the feast. They learnt a song “*with a magnificent tune*”, a congratulatory message was written, and on the evening of the 28th everyone set out for La Conception: priests, brothers, boys and girls, everyone except the sister who was confined to bed because of poor health. When they returned, however, she was given all the details of the celebration, a “*real family feast*”, during which a senior girl^k of the Providence read the greeting she herself had composed.

^k The reference is to Louise, about whom more will be said in the following chapter.

From the foot of her bed, Sr M. de la Croix was able to read the rough copy of it and this was her comment: “*In this simple little congratulatory message, I find a beautiful delicacy of spirit and expression.*”⁴⁰ For clarification she continued: “*I did not change a single word, except one that wasn’t French.*”¹ A little further on, she added:

M. Laborde, our journalist, who was at the feast, having heard and read it, found it hard to believe that it came from a Caledonian brain. I was told that he had added: ‘I have on several occasions seen things, letters or other pieces of writing, composed, so it was said, by the children at Saint-Louis, but I didn’t want to believe it and, no one believes it, you can be sure’.

Indignant, she concluded:

*My good Fr Poupinel, if you were there, I would ask you to tell me because my girls’ letters, which I have so often sent you, would then do more harm than good around you.*⁴¹

5) Her authority

Like a responsible and clear-sighted mother, Sr M. de la Croix could also say that her girls were not always good. This was how she spoke of them the day a parcel whose contents were destined for them arrived from France:

The pictures are very pretty and will greatly please our girls, but since they have not been well behaved this evening, I have punished them and they will not see these precious pictures today. What’s more, I have told them that I will tell you this. They have just gone to bed with

¹ This congratulatory message can be found in Appendix 5.

*heavy hearts; they will never be able to believe that I have kept my distressing promise to tell you they are not well behaved! But then, that will do them good.*⁴²

A month later, a new incident: the girls refused to obey the orders of a senior and falsely accused her. Sister intervened rapidly:

*To cut out jealousy at its roots, [...] I had to clamp down and in doing that I saw acts of virtue unheard of in this country. Scholastique^m had asked for pardon without wanting it to be known that she was the victim, and the others made amends to her in a moving manner.*⁴³

These facts reveal the interest Sr M. de la Croix had in her girls; each was important to her as an individual. She explained how at the end of the morning “*you should see the ingenious way each one gives me an account of her behaviour and her work when she returns*” from the garden, the dairy, the kitchen or the laundry.⁴⁴

She also tried to take into account that she was not in France, but in Oceania, realizing that “*an overly European type of education would not be mentally or physically suitable for them*”.⁴⁴

III. CHRISTIAN FORMATION OF THE CHILDREN

No doubt Sr M. de la Croix had it even more at heart to make true Christians of her girls. For that goal too she did not spare herself. Educating them in a faith very new for them, she used methods very strongly resembling the active methods thought to have been invented a century later. ‘*The Rule of*

^m This is the name of the older girl. There will be reason to speak of her again.

our little Providence’ as well as her letters to Fr Poupinel give some information about this.

Each day, at the end of the morning, an hour was set aside for religious instruction, except on the two days reserved for singing classes when they learnt all the new songs⁴⁵ of ‘Garin’.ⁿ In the evening after supper, during the time for assessing how they had done in their studies that day, the older girls did some “*spiritual reading*”. On Sunday mornings, when they came back from Solemn Mass, all groups studied the catechism. The rosary and litanies of the Sacred Heart were recited early afternoon and, after their walk, they participated in the Office in the church, certainly Vespers, and made a visit to the Blessed Sacrament. A list of “*Prayers and devotional practices in use in our little Providence*” completed the Rule. The exercises of piety that were very much in vogue in the 19th century, such as vocal prayers throughout the day, litanies, months dedicated to this or that saint, had their place there. During Lent, a “*Clock of the Passion*” suggested an offering for each hour.

1) Eucharistic adoration and devotion to the Sacred Heart

Besides daily Mass, the children paid visits to the church during the day. A time of adoration was fixed for those who had chosen a day and, as the rule stipulated, “*on Saturdays*” there was, “*adoration for the little ones and those who do not have a particular day*” under the supervision of two who were adoring the Blessed Sacrament. Concerning this time of adoration, Sister recounted the following fact to Fr Poupinel:

ⁿ This collection of songs was used in France for a very long time; it was still being used in the mid 20th Century. Fr Garin, a musician-composer, was a Marist.

*Marianna, a little 8 year old girl, who has Thursday, had been very sick yesterday, sick enough to have to stay in bed. This morning I saw her in her place in the row, at 5.30 am Mass. She was so pale that I was anxious during the whole Mass, but didn't dare to send her back because she was praying so hard. On returning from Mass, I asked her why she slipped in among the others when I did not want her woken up, knowing she was ill. Taken aback, Marianna, looking at me with an angelic face, replied simply: 'Sister, I got up because it was my day!' Treasure this response in your heart, Father.*⁴⁶

In the 19th century, devotion to the Sacred Heart was widespread throughout France and especially in Vendée, where in 1800, Fr Coudrin had founded the congregations of the Sacred Hearts (Picpus)^o. The devotion was also strong at Saint-Louis. The month of June each year was marked in various ways. In 1872, the feast of the Sacred Heart, on 7 June, was celebrated in this way: during the Solemn Mass, all the children received Communion. During the day the girls “made continual visits” to the church “to entreat this Heart who so loved humankind” on behalf of the church, the Pope, France, Caledonia, the Society of Mary, their benefactors...; and in the evening, during Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, there was the traditional consecration to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.⁴⁷

In the church there was an altar dedicated to the Sacred Heart; throughout the year the children took turns to be responsible for decorating it with flowers.⁴⁸ In 1873, Sr M. de la Croix asked Fr Poupinel to send her some pictures of the Sacred Heart,⁴⁹ a small visible sign that appeals to children of every era and country.

^o Before Fr Coudrin, St Louis-Marie Grignon de Montfort had popularised this devotion in the west of France.

2) Devotion to Saint Joseph

Sr M. de la Croix also instilled in her girls a deep love of Saint Joseph. On several occasions during the years 1869, 1870 and 1871, in her letters to Frs Yardin and Poupinel, she mentioned money saved in order to buy a statue of this saint. When Fr Chapuy gave her one - a rather small but very beautiful one! - she wanted to have an altar built, and requested a cross and candlesticks to adorn it. In June 1873, she sent Fr Poupinel the texts of several consecrations, copied by her but composed by her girls at the end of March, because, as she explained:

I committed them to making a little act of consecration to this revered saint whom they love so dearly. In order to learn how to formulate a little prayer, a thing unheard of in this country, I gave them the time for writing, and an hour later my table was covered with pages that I could not read without shedding tears of gratitude.⁵⁰

3) Devotion to the Blessed Virgin

Needless to say, Mary was not forgotten. In 1871, when Br Alexandre^p was seriously ill and people at Saint-Louis were very upset because they loved him greatly, Sr M. de la Croix had recourse to the Blessed Virgin:

I have prayed, prayed as hard as I could, I put my entire 'army' of little ones to pray and it was Our Lady of the Angels whom we invoked. They were really little angels praying to her. They covered over my malice and our

^p Br Alexandre Devès, from Ardèche, was in charge of the boys at St Louis from 1865 to 1874.

*good mother had pity on us. [...] O our beloved mother, what do we not owe her?*⁵¹

At the same time as she sent Fr Poupinel consecrations to Saint Joseph, she included consecrations to the Blessed Virgin written in May of that year because, as she declared in her letter: “*Mary is the Queen, the Mother and the Mistress of this Providence*”... Our Lady of the Providence!⁹

The fervour and conviction of the mistress were such that all the girls - those who were baptised as well as catechumens - entered wholeheartedly into this movement. In 1868, Fr Rougeyron had observed this; in a report to the Society of the Holy Childhood, he had written:

*What is admirable in the children whom she forms, is their unostentatious piety, their modesty and constant cheerfulness. It is obvious that they are happy and that they appreciate the care given by a sister, who is far from being easy on them, desiring above all to make them into true Christians; but they sincerely love her.*⁵²

4) Attachment to the Pope and to the Church

This love for the Church and its saints that Sr M. de la Croix knew how to communicate to her pupils was accompanied by true loyalty to the Pope. At the end of the sixties the ‘Roman Question’ was a current issue causing much anxiety in France among believers who practised their faith. They could not understand why the Pope should let go of his States and lose Rome, his capital, because a unification movement was stirring in the Italian peninsula. Did not the

⁹ The texts of a consecration to St Joseph and another to the Blessed Virgin are in Appendices 6 and 7.

pope's moral and spiritual authority rest on the temporal power he held?

Sr M. de la Croix kept herself abreast of the situation as much as she could through reading, when she had the opportunity, *l'Univers*, a conservative and 'ultramontain'^r magazine that the priests received from France. She prayed and encouraged people to pray much for Pius IX. Knowing that funds were being collected to help him financially - an army costs a lot of money! - she sent a small sum of money to Fr Poupinel in September 1869, asking him to see that it got to the Holy Father.⁵³

- ***First Vatican Council***

In February 1870, having heard of the convocation of the Vatican Council, she spoke of it to her pupils, as well as about a new fund-raising, launched this time to help cover the travel expenses of the Bishops who were least well off financially. The girls were unanimous in saying: we want to send our contribution! Despite the poverty of the house, it was decided to take 100 francs from their money and send it to Fr Poupinel whom they knew had to go to Rome during the following months. One girl, little Marguerite, wrote to the priest: the letter and money were sent with the recommendation to place their hearts "*at the feet of the sovereign Pontiff*", to tell him how much he was loved at Our Lady of the Providence at Saint-Louis, and to obtain from him a special blessing.⁵⁴

They were filled with joy when they heard how Fr Poupinel had accomplished his mission. Sr M. de la Croix thanked him in August 1870:

^r Catholic France was divided into two at that time: the 'gallicans', generally liberals who wanted a strong national church, and the 'ultramontains', who recognised the Pope's authority beyond national borders.

*Oh, what joy, dear Father, and how overawed we were on learning that my girl's little shred of paper had passed before the eyes of Pius IX.*⁵⁵

Some days later, on 26 August to be exact, the Sister received, along with a letter from Fr Yardin, the papal blessing so much desired. It is easy to imagine the joy of the whole little community in seeing the few words in Latin - which she could translate - written by the Pope and followed by his signature! The news was so extraordinary, so unheard of, that it reached some missions, provoking joy and deep filial piety.⁵⁶

- ***Proclamation of the Republic (1871)***

The Council, stopped by the Franco-Prussian war which erupted in July 1870, had the time to proclaim the dogma of papal infallibility before participants were dispersed. This news was welcomed with joy by Sr M. de la Croix who had her girls recite a "*credo of gratitude*".⁵⁷ This joy, however, was mingled with anxiety: because of the war, the soldiers who were defending Rome were recalled. "*Who will protect Rome?*" was her worry.⁵⁷ In fact, Rome fell in September 1870 and the Pope lost all his States.

In April 1871, when France was invaded and the Republic proclaimed, the Sister and her girls were twice as fervent. She wrote at this time: "*Since the misfortunes of the Pope and France began, my girls and I have been making a kind of perpetual adoration*"⁵⁸ which she described in great detail. Numerous prayers marked the day; among others was a 'plea for pardon' that was said in a loud voice every hour in class and even at night in the dormitory, if there was someone who was not asleep when the clock struck the hour.

In August of the same year, on the feast of Saint Peter in chains, the children organized a day of adoration and of

prayer for the Pope because “*Peter is in prison*”.⁵⁹ In 1872, March, “*the month of Saint Joseph, the Protector of the Church*”,⁶⁰ was celebrated “*with unaccustomed splendour and intensified devotion*” and during June, “*blessed month of the Sacred Heart*”, the same fervour was experienced “*with everyone praying for the Pope, France and the Church*”!⁶⁰

IV. OCCUPATIONS AND NOTEWORTHY EVENTS

1) Varied occupations

- *The kitchen*

Sr M. de la Croix, surrounded by her girls, had her days well and truly filled. True, she did not go to the plantations or the garden, but she was “*in charge of the cooking*”,⁶¹ and she was not satisfied at telling the cooks what to do. She wrote during the annual retreat in September 1868: “*I meditate on the salt and pepper of my dishes which I season with as much devotion as possible.*”⁶²

In the midst of the trials which assailed her, she no doubt sometimes wondered if she was of any use in Caledonia, apart from making the soup,⁶³ but she quickly took hold of herself and assured Fr Yardin:

If you knew how happy I am to serve our priests, our brothers, everyone in fact. It is truly a joy. This happiness, you will say, does not give me culinary skills; that is true, but I have made progress,

and a little further on, she added:

*Several of those who are suffering come to the cook and unload there some of their worries.*⁶⁴

It was obviously a joy for her to be able to give service also in this way.

Among the priests, there was one who was not happy seeing her spend so much time in the kitchen. Fr Lambert wrote that to her in 1873 and Sr M. de la Croix relayed it to Fr Poupinel:

What luck [this priest had written to her], he^s will tear the pots and pans away from you, and in providing you with some support by giving you other sisters, the Bishop will give you back completely to your children and you will occupy yourself solely with their education.⁶⁵

- ***Sewing***

Sr M. de la Croix and her girls also had a lot of sewing to do. In July 1865, a trunk containing some patens^t, a banner and some sashes that the girls there would put on their white dresses on procession days, was sent to Lifou.⁶⁶ It was also Our Lady of the Providence girls that took care of the Saint-Louis boys' clothes and made the soutanes of almost all the priests of the vicariate.⁶⁷ In December 1868, Fr Jean Baptiste Gilibert, missionary on Belep, received some short cassocks and surplices and Sr M. de la Croix invited him "*to make as much use of our sewing needles as you like*".⁶⁸ In 1870, Fr Villard asked the sister to make the uniforms for the children in the choir.

This work gave Sr M. de la Croix the right to some remuneration, which she accepted, "*sure that, even after a salary, the mission would still be saving money.*"⁶⁹ The money thus gained allowed her to make a few purchases: in July

^s A reference to Bishop Vitte whom Rome had named vicar apostolic of New Caledonia in April but whose name was not yet known in the vicariate.

^t A paten is a stiff, square piece of linen used to cover the chalice during Mass.

1868, it was a sanctuary lamp for the church to be blessed in September.⁷⁰ The following year, she was able to complete the sum of money needed to buy a statue of Saint Joseph, again for the church.⁷¹

- ***Poultry yard***

Rearing pigs and hens also provided some income. To the extent that the hens laid eggs, books could be bought⁷² and a subscription paid for the review greatly appreciated by the girls, *Propagateur de Saint Joseph*.⁷³ Sometimes looking after pigs and hens meant a considerable amount of extra work for the sister, for example when the older girls, having completed their time of formation, returned to their tribal homes. In December 1871, she wrote:

*I don't have a spare moment. All my big girls have left, the last of them during the past few days. I cannot cope with teaching, doing housework, cooking and the rest, not to mention a sty with numerous pigs which form part of my herd.*⁷⁴

- ***Nursing***

The fire of 1867, which will be described later, revealed another occupation that Sr M. de la Croix, until then, had not mentioned in her letters: she was in charge of the infirmary and cared for all the sick of the mission. As the pharmacy had vanished in the flames - “*it was not possible to save a single bottle*”⁷⁵ - she very promptly asked for arnica, orange flower solution, liquid ammonia and sulphur powder to be sent to her⁷⁶ for how could patients be cared for in case of an epidemic if there was nothing?⁷⁷

Finally, two brief items of information contained in a letter of November 1866 deserve mention. Sr M. de la Croix spoke first about the catechism class she gave to a group of

women and a few lines further on, no doubt during a moment of discouragement, she reiterated:

*Let it be well known that I am doing nothing at Saint-Louis. I do not know the villages. With all my time stupidly spent, there is none left for me to do some good in the neighbouring areas with our girls.*⁷⁸

With so much work, how could she still find time to go and visit the Melanesian villages and the colonial settlers of the neighbourhood?

2) The fire of 1867

During those ten years, there were some events that broke the monotony of the days. For example, two cyclones, at the time called ‘violent tempests’, brought their share of destruction and problems in March 1865 and March 1872. During the first one, the sisters’ house collapsed, the girls’ dormitory was damaged and the plantations disappeared into the river... Thanks to Fr Vigouroux, “*who combines modesty equalling his dedication with a flair for architecture*”,⁷⁹ the damage was repaired and little by little life returned to normal. The second cyclone was accompanied by torrential rain which “*penetrated the walls to the extent that they were simply sponges*”.⁸⁰

- *Father Vigouroux’s watch*

At this period, and since the fire of 1867, the Sister and her girls lived in huts, with walls made from the bark of niaouli trees. This fire, which broke out early in the morning of 19 July, had even more serious consequences. It was caused by the imprudence of a girl who put her lighted candle too close to the hay in the dormitory. Sisters and children had time only to escape: the fire spread with “*frightening rapidity*”.

“Clothes, books, all kinds of things [...] religious insignia, cinctures, rosaries, medals” all vanished in the inferno, and even “a little pharmacy that was well enough equipped”,⁸¹ the usefulness of which has been noted. But what the sister lamented most of all was the loss of a watch which Fr Vigouroux had lent her. She used to keep it under her pillow at night. On several occasions in her letters she asked Fr Poupinel to buy another one, precisely since a priest in Caledonia had given her some money. When the watch arrived three months later, along with a box of medicines, Sr M. de la Croix thanked the priest profusely:

*Oh! What inner joy you have brought me, especially because of the watch. My God, how kind you are good Father; there is no one else who says and does things with such exquisite kindness, that indescribable quality of the heart which touches the heart.*⁸²

- ***Sister Marie de la Croix's books***

She also felt keenly the loss of her books, among them twenty hand-written exercise books of her class lessons which were the “fruit of many years of observation and experience”,⁸¹ In September she received two books Fr Poupinel sent her: *l'Évangile médité*^u and *la Perfection chrétienne*^v “which are certainly very welcome in a burnt-out library”, she commented in thanking him.⁸³

She also lamented the loss of her *Little Office of the Blessed Virgin*, which she could no longer pray, it having been burnt like everything else. She added:

^u The work of Fr Duquesne referred to in Chapter III.

^v No doubt this refers to the books (12 vol.) entitled *The Practice of Christian and Religious Perfection* by Fr Alphonse Rodriguez, a Spanish Jesuit of the 16th century.

It is with real filial confidence that I would ask you to replace my beloved books: my Bible, my precious Bible, the beloved works of Saint Theresa by Fr Bouix,^w Olier, his life, his works, the life of Fr Coudren, which was my favourite.⁸³

A few lines further on, in the same paragraph, it was a question of the “*educational books*” that she would like for her girls, specifying that she liked the teaching of the Little Brothers of Mary, and also a dictionary which she had been awaiting for ten years.

In mid-October, she wrote to Fr Goujon:

I am obliged to ask you for the ‘Life of the Saints’ by Fr Croiset^x that I left with you when leaving. I do not remember having gifted it to you, although I never would have thought of asking for it back, if the one loaned to me had not suffered the same fate as everything I possessed.⁸⁴

No doubt Fr Poupinel took care to replace the books.⁸⁵ In March 1869, Sr M. de la Croix, while thanking him for some apples sent by a Brother at Villa Maria, also thanked him for a Medical Manual which gave her great pleasure. She added: “*You know how to do just that!*”⁸⁶ In July 1872, she again asked him for a Bible to replace the one he had sent her just before the fire and which she missed more and more each day.⁸⁷ When she received it in May 1873, along with other books, her simple acknowledgement was, “*Many, many thanks.*”⁸⁸

^w Fr Marcel Bouix was a Jesuit professor already referred to in Chapter III.

^x A Jesuit (1656-1738), author of numerous spiritual books.

Fr Yardin, for his part, sent her some works of Saint-Jure^y and of Rodriguez. She thanked him for them in July 1868⁸⁹ when she had just received them.

3) Relationship with the priests and brothers at Saint-Louis

The daily contacts with the priests and brothers at Saint-Louis were necessarily frequent: they all met at church, they shared the same concerns and faced the same problems and they helped one another. Sr M. de la Croix appreciated these contacts in the immense solitude she experienced, alone among her girls.

- *Father Vigouroux*

Fr Vigouroux obviously played a major role. Sr M. de la Croix had complete trust in him. Since Fr Forestier's departure, he had become her spiritual director and she appreciated him. She wrote in 1865:

*Who would not gain something from him? He is, as you well know, the most generous man, renouncing himself in all things.*⁹⁰

She was also deeply saddened by his being named parish priest in Nouméa at the end of 1869. "*The whole of Saint-Louis is in tears*", she lamented, and a little further on added: "*I have lost my spiritual father.*"⁹¹ A few months later she said in desolation: "*Our girls are no longer directed.*"⁹²

For his part, Fr Vigouroux did not hide his esteem for the sister. In November 1864, he had already recognized her "*limitless devotion to the mission and its works*",⁹³ and in

^y Jesuit and spiritual writer of the 17th century.

February 1865 he exclaimed, “*I am in admiration at how she can enter into her girls’ hearts.*”⁹⁴ Several years later, he noted how devoted the girls were to her.⁹⁵ Fortunately for Saint-Louis, Fr Vigouroux returned there in March 1871.

- ***The brothers at Saint-Louis***

Sr M. de la Croix maintained a very fraternal relationship with Brothers Alexandre and Elie. She often spoke to Fr Poupinel about the former, “*the pious, devoted, good little brother*”,⁹⁶ who was for her “*a sister of charity*”.⁹⁷ The latter, Brother Elie, having arrived in Saint-Louis in February 1870, suffered from neuralgia. That made him compassionate: one day when Sr M. de la Croix was very ill and had to stay in bed, he came to see her and said: “*My sister, offer your suffering for the Pope.*”⁹⁸ Another time it was she who rejoiced at his happiness at having just received a letter.⁹⁹ This friendship led Fr Poupinel to thank her for the good she did for both of them.¹⁰⁰

4) Priests passing through

- ***Father Camû***

The presbytery at Saint-Louis had the opportunity to offer hospitality to sick priests coming from other islands of the Pacific. It was thus that Fr Armand Camû arrived in March 1867. He was so ill that he died a month and a half later. That time sufficed for him to appreciate Sr M. de la Croix’s constant devotion and care for him. She in turn, writing to Fr Poupinel in August 1867, expressed her admiration and esteem for the deceased. She also wrote with a truly understandable pride:

Our girls were happy to serve him. I found ten of them carrying out the smallest errand for him, and he himself noticed this pleasure lighting up their faces. The poor

patient's linen would have aroused real disgust in more than one normal laundress, but our little laundry maids, seeing only the good fortune of serving a priest, argued among themselves as to who would wash even his handkerchiefs and underclothes.

She concluded the paragraph in this way:

*I speak of our children; I saw nothing, not even that it was night! And here they are passing one after another through my thoughts and in my heart so that I can write about them and present them to you. Oh, you are a priest, bless them and give them to Mary.*¹⁰¹

This was truly a mother speaking!

- ***Fathers Grézel and Pionnier***

Another priest, Fr Isidore Grézel, who had spent twenty-six years on Wallis and Futuna, and whose health was very run down, arrived at Saint-Louis in May 1869. He stayed there for several months and Sr M. de la Croix welcomed him with joy, because, as she said, she felt “*a special veneration for those who have suffered some illness in the service of the Divine Master*”.¹⁰²

In March 1870, a young missionary disembarked in Nouméa. As he was named at first for La Conception, Fr Jean-Nestor Pionnier had the opportunity to meet Sr M. de la Croix for whom he soon felt great admiration. At the beginning of the 20th century, soon after her death, he dedicated a biography to her.¹⁰³

- ***Bishop Bataillon***

Another visitor, completely unexpected, passed through New Caledonia in October 1871. Bishop Bataillon, Vicar Apostolic of Central Oceania, having arrived on a warship,

went to Saint-Louis for a few days. Before leaving again, he went to greet the sister, pleased to see her again. “*I, who have known him for such a long time*”, she exclaimed,¹⁰⁴ because he had been in Europe in spring 1858 when she was in Lyon preparing for her departure.

Two years later, the first Marist Brothers arrived. Before opening a school in Nouméa, two of them, Brothers Henricus and Felix, came to visit Saint-Louis, a visit which made Sr M. de la Croix sigh, “*Oh, when will many come for Saint-Louis!*”¹⁰⁵ For well formed personnel were needed to take care of the boys’ and girls’ schools.

5) Visitors

Sr M. de la Croix had very few opportunities to be away from Saint-Louis: she went to Port-de-France in August 1865 with Sr M. de Bon Secours and Caroline who were going to see the doctor.¹⁰⁶ In September 1867, when Port-de-France had become Nouméa, she paid a courtesy visit to the new superior of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Cluny,¹⁰⁷ and in March 1870, she consulted the doctor about her eyes.¹⁰⁸

On the other hand, she welcomed visitors. At the end of 1864, Madame Truscott, whose husband a captain on whose ship many missionaries had travelled, spent a few days at Saint-Louis. The sisters did their best to be pleasant to her but this lady did not know French! Consequently there was much embarrassment for both sides.¹⁰⁹

On several occasions, Sr M. de la Croix mentioned a Madame Joubert who lived in Sydney and had received the sisters at her home. When she came to see her sons, who were settled in Païta where they had opened the first sugar refinery, it was natural that she pay a visit to Saint-Louis. She even stayed for three days in July 1869.¹¹⁰

In February 1865, Dorothée, an ex-pupil from Ile des Pins, came to spend a month at Saint-Louis.¹¹¹ Caroline, Dorothée and Hortense's cousin, arrived some time later. Her health already left so much to be desired but her illness became worse so she remained there until her death in April 1869.¹¹² During this whole period, her family came to see her, and Sr M. de la Croix offered hospitality to Ti-Jerome, the Regent of Ile des Pins, Ti-Hippolyte, Caroline's father and still others, including Dorothée, who again remained for a fortnight in February 1869.¹¹³ Hortense, married to her cousin, the High Chief Samuel Vendegou, also arrived in July of that year but as she was sick, she stayed in bed the whole time.¹¹⁴

Among those who went to Saint-Louis, there were also people from Nouméa, who, not fearing the governor's hostility, came to visit the priests and the sisters. Sr M. de la Croix several times referred to Monsieur Champesteves, procurator, and to his "*charming family*".¹¹⁵ Some of the naval officers, alone or with their wives, also liked to come and spend the day at the mission.¹¹⁶

Among them, the chaplains were the most regular visitors. Sr M. de la Croix spoke with gratitude of Fr Farron, "*a charming priest whom we all like*", who had given her "*all of Bossuet's writings*".¹¹⁷ She also dwelt at length on the visit, in 1873, of Fr Cleret, the chaplain of the *Orne*. This "*zealous priest*", this "*friend of the missions*", to whom another chaplain had passed on information, asked the sister if he could attend her class. This is how she described the incident. Note that at that time she had ninety students.

My girls wanted to have the French translation of the beautiful prose "Veni Sancte Spiritu" and in order to abridge it I said: I'll dictate it to you. We were at the third verse when Father came in. He quickly took their exercise books to see how these little bush girls could write French. He almost declared it was a miracle and

*brought the books himself to show me that some of them didn't have one error! He questioned them as if he were in France, and his kindly manner brought forth some good answers I can assure you [...]. He said something about arithmetic. He did not grow tired, but the bell rang for a change of duties. He went outside into the yard so that he could have a better view of the changeover: those who were sewing coming into the classroom, gardeners taking their knives, the ironers lighting their irons, the cooks rolling up their sleeves, the scholars taking up their needles.*¹¹⁸

A few lines further on, she remarked: “*I believe this priest did that out of zeal, and that is why I gave in to his desires.*”

6) Visits from Gouverneur de la Richerie

That year, 1873, there were many visits. On four occasions, Governor de la Richerie, his wife and all their entourage came to spend Sunday at Saint-Louis. These visits were hardly to Sr M. de la Croix's taste. Concerning the first visit, at the beginning of March, she remarked not without vexation:

*They brought a magnificent lunch, and then bread, wine, beer, coffee, fruit for dessert and even table linen. I was humiliated.*¹¹⁹

On the occasion of the second visit, at the end of April, the governor was showing around Rear Admiral Baron de Roussin, who was passing through New Caledonia. The day finished in the church with Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. The children sang so well - “*a clear accent, sweet voices, piety, perfect harmony*”¹¹⁹ - that there was great astonishment among the officers. After the ceremony, the

sister earned the Rear Admiral's compliments and an emotional handshake from the governor. "*Poor people, as if it were me*", she concluded that day.¹¹⁹

In November and December, it was almost the same scenario. The first time, the governor brought a Monsieur Reboul, "*inspector general*", who observed everything "*with interest*".¹²⁰ The second time, the visitor was a Monsieur Jore, marine superintendent and inspector general. Marvelling at the beauty of the songs in the church, he leant towards his neighbour to ask him who the religious were who sang so well.¹²¹

V. OUR LADY OF THE MISSIONS

In the midst of all the tasks and preoccupations that filled her days, Sr M. de la Croix also had to reflect and make decisions concerning her status in the church: she wanted to be a religious, but was she truly one?

We have seen how, in 1858, in Lyon, she had spent a few weeks at the novitiate of the Sisters of Jesus and Mary. We also remember the ceremony of 6 July, during which, clothed in the same habit as her two companions, she received the name Sr M. de la Croix and became a novice in the Third Order of Mary for the Missions of Oceania, the secular branch, something that can never be overstressed. Despite the vow of obedience to the vicar apostolic pronounced during the following days, despite profession in the TOMMO and the veil added to the habit in Sydney in November 1858, she had many reasons to ask this question. In a letter addressed to Fr Yardin in October 1858,¹²² the visitor of the missions had regretted that, for New Caledonia, they had not turned to an organized religious congregation, as he had requested.

In Lyon, Frs Favre and Yardin were aware of the situation in which these women found themselves - including Sr M. de la Croix - whom they had been responsible for sending to Oceania. It was uncomfortable to say the least. Naturally therefore, when the opportunity that they were seeking presented itself, at the end of 1861, the decision was taken to open in Lyon a house of formation. The direction of this undertaking was confided to Mother Marie du Cœur de Jésus, a religious who had left her congregation in order to be a missionary.

1) **Sister Marie de la Croix's hesitations**

This news must initially have caused Sr M. de la Croix to rejoice but information about the foundation was so scarce that on two occasions, in December 1862 and July 1863, she gave in to an outburst of temper:

To know that the Society can at will put us in a position without our even knowing what it is, this gives rise to feelings in me that you should understand,

she stated in July 1863.¹²³

In April of the following year, seeing that in Lyon they believed that she wished to withdraw - she had not responded to the letter Mother M. du Cœur de Jésus had addressed to the sisters in Oceania in November 1861¹²⁴ - she strongly affirmed her desire for religious life. She had not changed her mind: every day of her life she placed her free will in the hands of Jesus, through Mary. Admittedly, she felt very strongly her unworthiness: the thought of her own wretchedness created deep anguish in her. The beautiful title of religious made her discover the abyss that separated her from such a pure vocation, but she abandoned herself into God's hands because the repeated miracles of his mercy

towards her were for her a guarantee that he gives himself to those who seek him.¹²⁵

In July of that year, the sisters received an extract of the Constitutions drawn up for the newborn congregation which from then on was called Our Lady of the Missions. A letter from the superior accompanied the extract. She asked the sisters to put into practice in their communities all that was prescribed, as far as possible. She specified that this would be “*a preparation which will make the accomplishment of all your desires and ours easier to attain*”,¹²⁶ namely to be recognized as a member of the congregation. Sr M. de la Croix did not respond to that letter either.

A letter she addressed to Fr Yardin in September 1865 reveals, succinctly, one of the reasons for this silence: between her and the superior there was a lack of the “*filial confidence*” necessary for this kind of relationship.¹²⁷ In May 1866, still to Fr Yardin, she added that her most ardent desire was to die in Caledonia, and she feared that in entering the congregation she would have to leave the country. She reiterated that the superior inspired in her much respect, but she would need a great openness in order to write to her...¹²⁸

It was just this openness that did develop. On 29 June Sr M. de la Croix responded to a personal letter of M. M. du Cœur de Jésus, received during the final days of May.¹²⁹ Having firmly decided to accomplish God’s will, crucifying as that might be, she wrote to her:

I was told [...], and I felt it myself, that God did not want any reservations and I am too used to finding in the Divine Master a jealous God to resist him.

A little further up, she had already affirmed:

Here I am, Reverend Mother, truly dependant on you. You may fix the time and place of the novitiate you want

*me to make. I abandon myself to God through your hands.*¹³⁰

She continued:

*I don't know whether you will find in this letter the tone of filial respect and docile confidence that I would like to show you. As for me I am delighted with the sentiments I find in your letter, and this seems to promise a real relationship of mother and daughter.*¹³¹

2) Religious Profession (19 March 1868)

Henceforth the road was clear. Accepted on 16 October 1866 by the General Council of the Congregation gathered in Lyon,¹³² Sr M. de la Croix began her novitiate at Saint-Louis on 1 March 1867.¹³³ In April, she confided to Fr Poupinel her joy at being a novice, and added: “*I don't see how this makes any difference to my everyday life, but my goal will be reached more surely.*”¹³⁴ Fr Vigouroux, who was responsible for directing her during her novitiate, affirmed without hesitation:

*She could not add to her life any greater regularity and fervour, nor more devotion in her works; you yourself know that would be difficult for her.*¹³⁵

Having completed the year of novitiate, Sr M. de la Croix made profession on 19 March 1868. Here she was, a real religious! “*Very moved by this day*”, she wrote to Fr Favre in order to thank him.

*It is within the heart of Saint Joseph that I have just made my profession [...]. You know all my feelings with regard to the Mission, the Congregation and the Society which was my first mother: I renew them to you as I beg your blessing.*¹³⁶

Since she was the only one of the sisters in New Caledonia to be received into the congregation, she pronounced her vows very discreetly and kept her tertiary habit. On 19 March a year later, again without any ceremony, Sr M. de la Croix renewed her vows, regretting that they were only annual vows, because she had wholeheartedly given herself to the congregation of Our Lady of the Missions.¹³⁷

3) Disillusionment

However, scarcely two months later, she heard from the lips of Fr Grézel who arrived from Australia, news that was all the more astonishing because nothing or no one had prepared her for it: she was not aware of anything. For a few years a disagreement that became increasingly serious, put opposition between M. M. du Cœur de Jésus and the Society of Mary superiors, and Fr Poupinel had not informed her about it. This was something she did not understand or accept:

*Ah! Fr Poupinel, this is the first time that you have hurt me, or rather caused me pain, but how piercing it is! [...] I see how it is, Father, you lacked confidence in me. Probably I didn't deserve it; and yet I feel that I am worthy of it, I who gave myself to this congregation after such keenly felt repugnances and with such complete devotedness, believing it would tighten my bonds with the Society of Mary, for you must remember the affection I have shown for Very Reverend Father General of the Society of Mary, my first Mother. [...] How upset I am! Why was I made to take these vows? I don't want to be separated from the Society of Mary any more than I want to renounce the sole aim of my life, the missions. I don't want to be separated from them not even by a hair's breadth.*¹³⁸

This rebuke simply expressed her understandable disappointment, even more so, her disillusionment. In June 1869, she very clearly declared just where she stood in the face of this disagreement:

*My resolution is taken, quite irrevocably, I believe, at the feet of Our Lord. Even if it were not a duty of love which binds me to the Society of Mary, a duty of gratitude would do so, and certainly one that I feel most strongly.*¹³⁹

She also affirmed that she had not understood certain practices of the congregation, certain points of the Constitutions that she judged impractical in the mission field; but since Fr Favre approved of it, she had sacrificed herself and set herself to love her new family wholeheartedly.

A little further on, still in the same letter, she added:

All this will not be done without a great deal of interior suffering. All my fears, dulled at the time I took my vows, have reawakened: unworthy of being a religious, happy to be one, and now doesn't the Lord vomit me out of his mouth?

She was to bear this suffering for many long months. In September she wrote a letter to Fr Favre asking him for clarification as to what she should do.¹⁴⁰ This first letter did not reach its destination so there was no response, and Sr M. de la Croix, not wanting to withdraw of her own accord, renewed her vows on 19 March 1870. She repeated her request on 29 May 1870.¹⁴⁰ This time also, no reply arrived; one had however been given but:

*So that I would be without any human help at all, the good Lord permitted the boat which carried Very Reverend Father's letter to be wrecked, as you know,*¹⁴¹

she wrote to Fr Yardin in September.

4) Sister Marie de la Croix returns to being a simple tertiary

Not wanting to act “*on my first impressions but only under the direction of the Very Reverend Father General*”,¹⁴² she insisted to Fr Poupinel, who had returned to France, that she would not write to Fr Favre a third time for fear of wearying him. She was in the hands of the Society of Mary; it was the Society of Mary that made her to enter this congregation, it was up to the Society of Mary to tell her what she ought to do because she was concerned about the future of the works begun in New Caledonia. Who would continue them? Her health was not good: she was not the only one to think that she would no longer be there.

In mid-September, Sr M. de la Croix received, not from Fr Favre but from Fr Yardin, the letter that put an end to her uncertainties and anxiety. It was the only one out of all those she received at that time, that she kept until the end of her life.^z

The priest explained that if he had delayed so long in writing to her, it was that he wanted her “*to have the time to debate this with God alone*”. The direction the superior of Our Lady of the Missions was giving her institute made it impossible for the islands of Oceania. He therefore advised her, “*to live and die as a tertiary unless you receive better advice*”, because “*God does not look at the habit, nor the name but the works*”, and he concluded: “*My heart is full to the brim as I speak to you in this way for I think of the future. May God’s will be done!*”¹⁴³

To this letter, Sr M. de la Croix responded:

Will God who has supported me up to this day allow me to fall? No. And the reason for my hope, for myself also,

^z The text of this letter can be found in Appendix 8.

*is my hope itself. I know that I am cowardly, I shudder at the thought of such and such inevitable crosses. When I said, on looking at Our Lord, I am willing, complete serenity returns; I am not weary. I truly desire that future which God has in store for me.*¹⁴⁴

Henceforth, all was clear: when 19 March 1871 arrived, Sr M. de la Croix did not renew her vows and went back to being what she had been, a little sister of the Third Order of Mary, hoping that “*the merits of so many holy priests who share with the T[hird] O[rder] of Mary*” will save her.¹⁴⁵ On 1 April, she hung around her neck “*the medal, so beautiful and modest*”, of her true family, the Third Order of Mary,¹⁴⁶ which she had just received.^{aa}

VI. HEALTH PROBLEMS

Throughout this chapter there have been allusions to Sr M. de la Croix’s health. Let us now say what we know about this.

Already in Lyon, before her departure, it was known that her health was not good. Doctors had even been asked to write a certificate because, with “*delicate health, a chronic cough, is nervous*”^{bb} *but this has no organic cause*”,¹⁴⁷ it was questionable whether she would be able to survive in a hot climate.

In Ile des Pins, she was subject to “*major blackouts*”,¹⁴⁸ to migraines that “*pounded her head like a red hot iron*”,¹⁴⁹ and even to coughing up blood,¹⁵⁰ so much so that Fr Poupinel

^{aa} The medal she wore since 1858 - that of the TOM - had vanished in the fire of July 1867.

^{bb} In the 19th century, this word had a much less negative meaning than it does nowadays.

wondered how much longer she would live.¹⁵¹ Sr M. de la Croix herself was convinced that she would die young.¹⁵²

At Saint-Louis, her health did not improve. The headaches weighed her down,¹⁵³ she often had fever¹⁵⁴ and had to stay in bed,¹⁵⁵ knocked out by violent and painful attacks.¹⁵⁶ In spite of that, she accomplished “*an amount of work that certainly two sisters in good health would not manage*”.¹⁵⁷

For several months at the beginning of 1870, she suffered from eye trouble that made her practically blind. In March she was sent to Nouméa to see a doctor and there she fell sick and was again “*totally bedridden, ... blind and as icy cold as a cadaver*”, but still maintaining “*the deepest inner serenity*”.¹⁵⁸ As the doctor diagnosed severe anaemia, she accepted to be treated in earnest.

*Out of obedience and love for this dear mission to which I desire to give my life, as also my death, my eyes as well as everything else, I am taking greater care of my miserable body than I have ever done,*¹⁵⁸

she acknowledged at the time. Her sight returned somewhat, “*just enough to carry out the bulk of the work*”.¹⁵⁸ In October, she could finally write:

*So as not to forget that I have been blind, there are moments when, without any pain, my sight is completely gone and then comes back again.*¹⁵⁹

Her health was so poor throughout 1872 and 1873 that everyone was anxious. In March 1872, she had rattling in the throat and received absolution without being able to make her confession. She did not hide her desire to die.¹⁶⁰ In January 1873, she was swollen, especially her head and heart, and she received the Viaticum, for the third time in less than a year.¹⁶¹ It was received again in August of that year and Fr Rougeyron

could write: “*Our Lady of Lourdes brought her back from the tomb*”¹⁶² because the children at Saint-Louis, girls as well as boys, had promised to erect a little sanctuary to Our Lady of Lourdes if they obtained her cure.¹⁶³ During the following months the promise was kept. Thanks to Fr Vigouroux’s ingenuity, a Lourdes grotto soon stood on the edge of the Thy, in the immediate proximity of the village. Nowadays, we can still go and pray there.

ENDNOTES - CHAPTER IV

- ¹ cf. Report Rougeyron-Favre, 16.12.1868, APF, t. 41, pp. 466-467
- ² Croix-Berset, 27.09.1864 - ASMSM 224.6
- ³ cf. Rougeyron-superior of the community in Paris, 03.01.1864 - AAN 5.4
- ⁴ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 31.08.1867 - APM VM 227
- ⁵ Vigouroux-Rougeyron, 15.09.1864 - AAN 56.1
- ⁶ cf. Croix-Yardin, 16.08/26.09.1864 - ASMSM 221.3
- ⁷ Croix-Berset, 17.09.1864 - ASMSM 224.6
- ⁸ Croix-Charlot, 29.08.1865 - ASMSM 226.5
- ⁹ Vigouroux-Forestier, 04.11.1864 - APM ONC 208 (OPS II, 351)
- ¹⁰ Poupinel-Yardin, 20.11.1864 - APM OP 418
- ¹¹ Croix-Poupinel, 05.07.1866; (OPS III, 427 - unpublished passage)
- ¹² Croix-Poupinel, 08.10.1871 - ASMSM 221.2 (OPS III, 592, §1)
- ¹³ This document is conserved in AAN 158.1
- ¹⁴ Rougeyron-Forestier, 02.01.1865 - APM ONC 418
- ¹⁵ Rougeyron-Goujon, 06.01.1866 - AAN 8.5
- ¹⁶ cf. Mathieu-Croix, 20.04.1865 - AAN 158.1
- ¹⁷ Forestier-Rougeyron, 25.02.1865 - AAN 5.6, Vol. I
- ¹⁸ Underlined in the text
- ¹⁹ This project is dated 16.05.1867; one example is conserved in AAN 127.6
- ²⁰ Croix-Fabre, 25.09.1866 - ASMSM 221.4
- ²¹ Croix-M. du Cœur de Jésus, 29.06.1866 (OPS III, 426)
- ²² Vigouroux-Forestier, 03.12.1864 - APM ONC 208
- ²³ Vigouroux-Yardin, 09.04.1870 - APM ONC 208
- ²⁴ Rougeyron-Forestier, 03.07.1866 - APM ONC 418
- ²⁵ Vigouroux-Forestier, 03.12.1864 - APM ONC 208
- ²⁶ Report Rougeyron to the work of the Holy Childhood, 22.10.1868 - Archives Paris and AAN 27.1 (copy) - p. 4, typed text
- ²⁷ cf. Vigouroux-Poupinel, 15.12.1870 - APM ONC 208
- ²⁸ Villard-Poupinel, 02.02.1872 - APM ONC 208
- ²⁹ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 22.09.1867 - APM VM 227
- ³⁰ Original conserved in AAN 113.2; undated but corresponds with this period: no teaching is foreseen and the two companions of Sr M. de la Croix are mentioned.

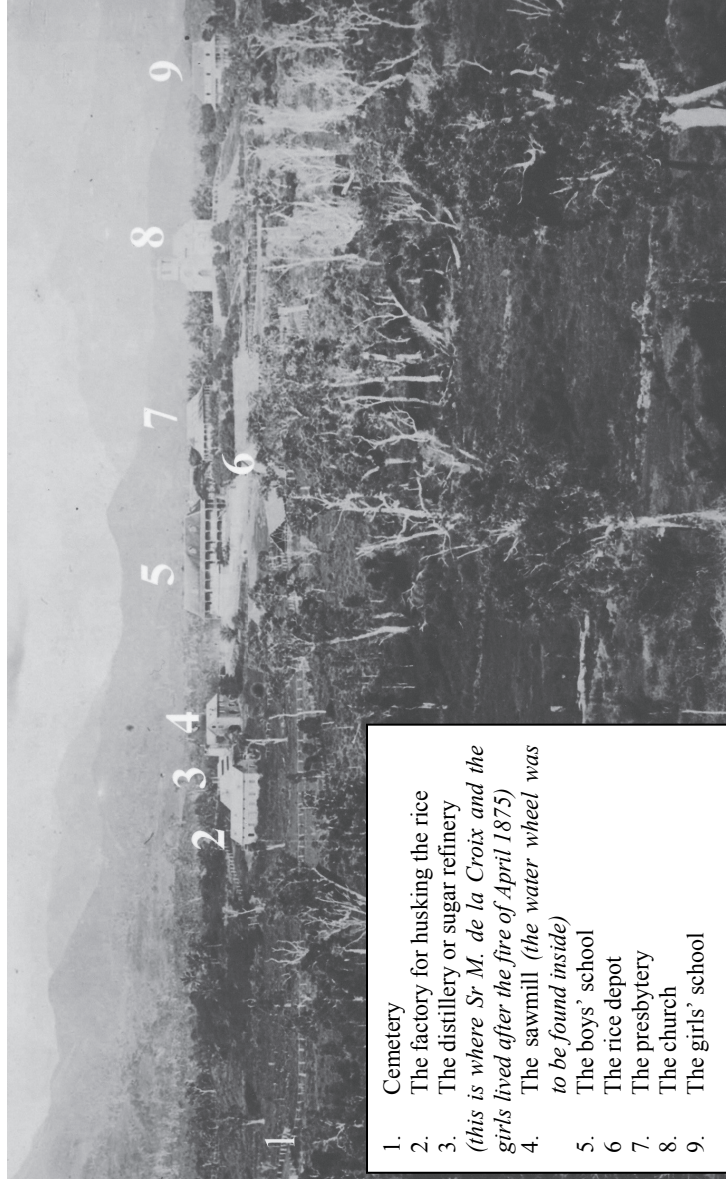
- ³¹ Report Rougeyron to the work of the Holy Childhood, 22.10.1868
- Archives Paris and AAN 27.1 (copy) - p. 4 typed text
- ³² cf. Croix-Poupinel, 06.02.1872 - ASMSM 221.2
- ³³ Croix-Poupinel, 22.09.1867 - APM VM 227
- ³⁴ Croix-Poupinel, 22.07.1869 - APM VM 227
- ³⁵ Villard-Poupinel, 10.06.1870 - APM ONC 208
- ³⁶ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 06.02.1872 - ASMSM 221.2
- ³⁷ This rule, also conserved in AAN 113.2, is undated, but it seems evident from its form and content that it replaces the preceding one that had become obsolete.
- ³⁸ Villard-Poupinel, 02.02.1872 - APM ONC 208
- ³⁹ Croix-Poupinel, 11.07.1872 - ASMSM 221.2 (OPS III, 600 - unpublished passage)
- ⁴⁰ *ibid.*
- ⁴¹ *ibid.*
- ⁴² Croix-Poupinel, 14.06.1872 - ASMSM 221.2
- ⁴³ Croix-Poupinel, 11.07.1872 - ASMSM 221.2
- ⁴⁴ Croix-Charlot, 29.08.1865 - ASMSM 226.5 (copy)
- ⁴⁵ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 08.01.1872 - ASMSM 221.2
- ⁴⁶ Croix-Poupinel, 12/16.08.1871 - ASMSM 221.2
- ⁴⁷ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 14.06.1872 - ASMSM 221.2
- ⁴⁸ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 29.11.1871 - ASMSM 221.2
- ⁴⁹ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 25.03.1873 - ASMSM 221.3
- ⁵⁰ Croix-Poupinel, 18.06.1873 - ASMSM 221.2 (OPS III, 621 - unpublished passage)
- ⁵¹ Croix-Poupinel, 29.11.1871 - ASMSM 221.1
- ⁵² Report Rougeyron to the work of the Holy Childhood, *op. cit.*, see note 26, p. 5 typed text
- ⁵³ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 04.09.1869, - APM VM 227
- ⁵⁴ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 06.02.1870 - ASMSM 221.2
- ⁵⁵ Croix-Poupinel, 18.08.1870 - ASMSM 221.2 (OPS III, 572 - unpublished passage)
- ⁵⁶ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 20.09.1870 - ASMSM 221.2
- ⁵⁷ Croix-Poupinel, 14.10.1870 - ASMSM 221.2 (OPS III, 576 - unpublished passage)
- ⁵⁸ Croix-Poupinel 02.04.1871 - ASMSM 221.2 (OPS III, 583 - unpublished passage)

- ⁵⁹ Croix-Poupinel, 12.08.1871 - ASMSM 221.2
- ⁶⁰ Croix-Poupinel, 11.07.1872 - ASMSM 221.2 (OPS III, 600 - unpublished passage)
- ⁶¹ Croix-Poupinel, 08.05.1869 - ASMSM 221.2 (OPS III, 521 - unpublished passage)
- ⁶² Croix-Poupinel, 01.09.1868 - ASMSM 221.2
- ⁶³ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 06.02.1870 - ASMSM 221.2
- ⁶⁴ Croix-Yardin, 16.09.1870 - ASMSM 221.3 (OPS III, 621 - unpublished passage)
- ⁶⁵ Croix-Poupinel, 18.06.1873 - ASMSM 221.2
- ⁶⁶ cf. Croix-Fabre, 21.07.1865 - ASMSM 221.4
- ⁶⁷ cf. Croix-Charlot, 29.08.1865 - ASMSM 226.5 (copy)
- ⁶⁸ Croix-Gilibert, 06.12.1868 - APM Dossier Gilibert
- ⁶⁹ Croix-Rougeyron, 27.04.1865 - AAN 116.9
- ⁷⁰ Croix-Poupinel, 19.07.1868 - APM VM 227
- ⁷¹ Croix-Yardin, 08.09.1869, 02.07.1870 - ASMSM 221.3
- ⁷² Croix-Poupinel, 04.09.1869 - APM VM 227
- ⁷³ Croix-Yardin, 08.09.1869 - ASMSM 221.3
- ⁷⁴ Croix-Poupinel, 29.11/5.12.1871 - ASMSM 221.2
- ⁷⁵ cf. Croix-Charlot, 01.08.1867 - APM VM 227 (handwritten copy)
- ⁷⁶ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 03.08.1867 - APM VM 227
- ⁷⁷ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 22.09.1867 - APM VM 227
- ⁷⁸ Croix-Forestier, 05.11.1866 - ASMSM 221.51
- ⁷⁹ Croix-Charlot, 20.08.1865 - ASMSM 226.5 (copy)
- ⁸⁰ Croix-Poupinel, 29.02/26.03.1872 - ASMSM 221.2
- ⁸¹ Croix-Charlot, 01.08.1867 - APM VM 227 (handwritten copy) (OPS III, 465)
- ⁸² Croix-Poupinel, 23.10.1867 - APM VM 227
- ⁸³ Croix-Poupinel, 22.09/01.10.1867 - APM VM 227 (OPS III, 478 - unpublished passage)
- ⁸⁴ Croix-Goujon, 13.10.1867 - AAN 116.9
- ⁸⁵ Cf. Poupinel-Forestier, 22.11.1867 - APM OP 418
- ⁸⁶ Croix-Poupinel, 16.03.1869 - APM VM 227
- ⁸⁷ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 11/12.07.1872 - ASMSM 221.2
- ⁸⁸ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 17.05.1873 - ASMSM 221.2
- ⁸⁹ cf. Croix-Yardin, 30.07.1868 - ASMSM 221.3

- ⁹⁰ Croix-Yardin, 30.09.1865 - ASMSM 221.3 (OPS II, 392 - unpublished passage)
- ⁹¹ Croix-Poupinel, 14.11.1869 - APM VM 227 (OPS III, 543 - unpublished passage)
- ⁹² Croix-Poupinel, 06.02.1870 - APM VM 227 (OPS III, 553 - unpublished passage)
- ⁹³ Vigouroux-Forestier, 04.11.1864 - APM ONC 208 (OPS II, 351 - unpublished passage)
- ⁹⁴ Vigouroux-Forestier, 01.02.1865 - APM ONC 208
- ⁹⁵ cf. Vigouroux-Yardin, 18.09.1870 - APM ONC 208
- ⁹⁶ Croix-Poupinel, 12.08.1871 - ASMSM 221.2
- ⁹⁷ Croix-Poupinel, 17.05 et 11.09.1873 - ASMSM 221.2
- ⁹⁸ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 12.08.1871 - ASMSM 221.2
- ⁹⁹ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 29.11.1871 - ASMSM 221.2
- ¹⁰⁰ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 14.06.1872 - ASMSM 221.2
- ¹⁰¹ Croix-Poupinel, 31.08.1867 - APM VM 227
- ¹⁰² Croix-Poupinel, 08.05.1869 - ASMSM 221.3 (OPS III, 521 - unpublished passage)
- ¹⁰³ See bibliography
- ¹⁰⁴ Croix-Poupinel, 08.10.1871 - ASMSM 221.2
- ¹⁰⁵ Croix-Poupinel, 07.10.1873 - ASMSM 221.2
- ¹⁰⁶ cf. Croix-Forestier, 30.08.1865 - ASMSM 221.51
- ¹⁰⁷ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 31.08/10.09.1867 - APM VM 227
- ¹⁰⁸ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 07.04.1870 - APM VM 227
- ¹⁰⁹ cf. Vigouroux-Forestier, 03.12.1864 - APM ONC 208
- ¹¹⁰ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 22.07.1869 - APM VM 227
- ¹¹¹ cf. Croix-Forestier, 01.03.1865 - ASMSM 221.51
- ¹¹² cf. Croix-Poupinel, 08.05.1869 - APM VM 227
- ¹¹³ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 13.02.1869 - APM VM 227
- ¹¹⁴ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 22.07.1869 - APM VM 227
- ¹¹⁵ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 02.07.1870 - ASMSM 221.2
- ¹¹⁶ cf. Croix-Forestier, 29.11.1865 - ASMSM 221.51; also Vigouroux-Yardin, 12.02.1869 - AAN 56.1 (photocopy original)
- ¹¹⁷ Croix-Poupinel, 29.11/08.12.1871 - ASMSM 221.2
- ¹¹⁸ Croix-Poupinel, 18.06.1873 - ASMSM 221.2 (OPS III, 621)
- ¹¹⁹ Croix-Poupinel, 17.05.1873 - ASMSM 221.2 (OPS III, 620 unpublished passage)

- ¹²⁰ Croix-Poupinel, 01.12.1873 - ASMSM 221.1
- ¹²¹ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 27/31.12.1873 - ASMSM 221.2
- ¹²² cf. Poupinel-Yardin, 26.10.1858 (OPS I, 100)
- ¹²³ Croix-Poupinel, 08.07.1863 (OPS II, 314); see also Croix-Yardin, 20.12.1862 (OPS II, 302)
- ¹²⁴ M. du Cœur de Jésus-Mont Carmel and Pitié, 11.11.1861 (OPS II, 258)
- ¹²⁵ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 06.04.1864 (OPS II, 331)
- ¹²⁶ M. du Cœur de Jésus-Sisters of Oceania, [end of 1863 or beginning of 1864] (OPS II, 410)
- ¹²⁷ cf. Croix-Yardin, 30.09.1865 (OPS II, 392)
- ¹²⁸ cf. Croix-Yardin, 09.05.1866 (OPS III, 421)
- ¹²⁹ According to letter, Croix-M. du Cœur de Jésus, 27.08.1866, Sr M. de la Croix had written to her in December 1865, but this letter either did not arrive at its destination or has not been conserved.
- ¹³⁰ Croix-M. du Cœur de Jésus, 29.06.1866 (OPS III, 426, §5)
- ¹³¹ *ibid.*, beginning of §6
- ¹³² Minutes General Council-ARNDM, p. 109 (copy)
- ¹³³ cf. M. du Cœur de Jésus-Croix, 28.10.1867 - ARNDM Letter Press Book I, p. 77
- ¹³⁴ Croix-Poupinel, 03.04.1867 (OPS III, 451)
- ¹³⁵ Vigouroux-Yardin, 07.05.1866, - APM ONC 208, (OPS III, 420 - unpublished passage)
- ¹³⁶ Croix-Favre, 19.03.1868, (OPS III, 493)
- ¹³⁷ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 16.03.1869 (OPS III, 517, §5)
- ¹³⁸ Croix-Poupinel, 08.05.1869 (OPS III, 521, §§1, 3)
- ¹³⁹ Croix-Poupinel, 07.06.1869 (OPS III, 524)
- ¹⁴⁰ cf. Croix-Favre, 29.05.1870 (OPS III, 565)
- ¹⁴¹ Croix-Yardin, 16.09.1870 (OPS III, 574)
- ¹⁴² *ibid.*
- ¹⁴³ Yardin-Croix, 13.06.1870 (OPS III, 567); also Appendix 8
- ¹⁴⁴ Croix-Yardin, 16.09.1870 (OPS III, 574 - unpublished passage)
- ¹⁴⁵ Croix-M. du Cœur de Jésus, 01.04.1871 (OPS III, 582, §3)
- ¹⁴⁶ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 02.04.1871 (OPS III, 583)
- ¹⁴⁷ Yardin-Poupinel, 17.08.1858 (OPS I, 88)
- ¹⁴⁸ Croix-Yardin, 23.10.1860 - ASMSM 221.3

- ¹⁴⁹ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 05.07.1863 - APM VM 227
- ¹⁵⁰ cf. Croix-Berset, 20.04.1861 - ASMSM 224.6, also Croix-Poupinel, 05.07.1863 - APM VM 227
- ¹⁵¹ cf. Poupinel-Yardin, 06/07.05.1861 - APM OP 418
- ¹⁵² cf. Croix-Poupinel, 25.09.1860 - APM VM 227
- ¹⁵³ cf. Croix-Forestier, 30.08.1865 - ASMSM 221.51, Croix-Poupinel, 16.03.1869 - APM VM 227; also 27.12.1873 - ASMSM 221.2
- ¹⁵⁴ cf. Croix-Berset, 03.06.1870 - ARNDM Box File XIV
- ¹⁵⁵ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 12.08.1871 - ASMSM 221.2, also Rougeyron-Poupinel, 02.11.1872 - APM ONC 418
- ¹⁵⁶ cf. Croix-Forestier, 05.11.1866 - ASMSM 221.51, also Croix-Poupinel, 14.07.1873 - ASMSM 221.2
- ¹⁵⁷ Vigouroux-Poupinel, 04.02.1867 - APM VM 227
- ¹⁵⁸ Croix-Poupinel, 07.04.1870 - ASMSM 221.2
- ¹⁵⁹ Croix-Poupinel, 14.10.1870 - ASMSM 221.2 (OPS III, 576 unpublished passage)
- ¹⁶⁰ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 29.2/26.3.1872 - ASMSM 221.2
- ¹⁶¹ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 02.02.1873 - ASMSM 221.2
- ¹⁶² Rougeyron-Poupinel, 09.09.1873 - APM ONC 418
- ¹⁶³ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 11.09.1873 - ASMSM 221.2



1. Cemetery
2. The factory for husking the rice
3. The distillery or sugar refinery
(this is where Sr. M. de la Croix and the girls lived after the fire of April 1875)
4. The sawmill *(the water wheel was to be found inside)*
5. The boys' school
6. The rice depot
7. The presbytery
8. The church
9. The girls' school

The mission of Saint-Louis in 1875



Sister Marie de la Croix with some pupils - among them the first four PFM (with capes) - in the late 1870s at St Louis



At Saint-Louis about 1885 - Sister Marie de la Croix with a group of Melanesian sisters

(They are all Petites Filles de Marie except Sr M. Scholastique (ex PFM) who was TORM from June 1885, beside Sr M. de la Croix. The first PFM on the right is Agrippina who would become Sr M. St Jean, TORM, in August 1892 and the companion of Sr M. de la Croix in Belep).

CHAPTER V

SAINT-LOUIS 1874 - 1892

I. PETITES FILLES DE MARIE [Little Daughters of Mary] or THE BIRTH OF A CONGREGATION

1) The beginnings

- *Sister Marie de la Présentation's attempts*

Among the sisters' projects, there was a very real concern to awaken the desire of the young women living with them to share their way of life. Sr M. de la Croix and Sr M. de la Présentation spoke about this between themselves. In July 1866, when she had been at Saint-Louis for two years, Sr M. de la Croix in fact wrote to Fr Poupinel:

You know how happy I am about the project for the Island sisters, but the realisation is not without difficulties: who will train them? I am suffering too much today to give you my opinion on this subject, besides it is no use. I know it differs from that of Sister Marie [de la Présentation] on some important points.¹

The latter had gone ahead because, in the same letter of July 1866, Sr M. de la Croix spoke of Dorothee, “*the good, sturdy postulant*” of the sister on Ile des Pins, who was again mentioned in 1867 and in 1869.² It seems that she was wearing a habit and had made vows.

At the same period another attempt was made on Ile Ouen.^a A small convent, called “*Providence Notre-Dame de*

^a This little island, which is still inhabited today, lies to the south of Nouméa, in the direction of Ile des Pins.

la Paix” [Providence - Our Lady of Peace], had been opened there in the course of 1867, under the direction of Marie Salomé, from this island who was also formed by Sr M. de la Présentation. This attempt lasted a few months.³

Fr Rougeyron, who had not been informed about these projects, very soon expressed his reticence about them.⁴ As premature as they may have been, these attempts did at least have the merit of having taken place and having shown that young Melanesian women were also asking about becoming sisters.

- ***Sister Marie de la Croix’s hopes***

During this same period Sr M. de la Croix was concerned with two young women in whom she thought she detected signs that God was calling them. These young women were Caroline and Louise.

- ***Caroline***

Two girls accompanied Sr Marie de la Croix when she left Ile des Pins in August 1864: one of the two was Caroline Vendegou, Hortense’s cousin, already mentioned. Having returned to her island in October, Caroline came back to Saint-Louis for treatment the following year. She had problems with her eyes and was suffering from tuberculosis. The illness grew relentlessly worse. At her own request Caroline stayed at Saint-Louis with Sr M. de la Croix, until her death in April 1869. She was then about 19 years old.

As long as she had the strength to do so, Caroline helped Sr M. de la Croix in many ways, particularly by giving catechism classes to the girls at the school and the women of Saint-Louis, who spoke the same language as she. On several occasions Sister expressed her admiration for Caroline. She wrote in 1865, “*She loves God very much.*” A little further on,

she added: “*Along with admirable sincerity, she has a real horror of sin.*”⁵

As Caroline’s condition was deteriorating, Sr M. de la Croix noted “*the beautiful spirit of resignation*”⁶ she manifested. She was “*a sincere virtuous person*”⁷ whose inner light increased as her sight faded.⁸ Writing to Fr Poupinel in 1867, Caroline stated clearly:

*My desire is to serve God wholeheartedly, to devote myself completely to his service lacking in virtue though I be.*⁹

In March and again in July 1868, she repeated this desire “*to be united to God*”.¹⁰

However her strength was diminishing: “*No more voice, no more strength, she only takes a few steps [...] and no longer does anything in the house.*”¹¹ At the beginning of 1869, despite Sr M. de la Croix’s love, attentiveness and care, the doctor of the *Coëtlogon* declared that she only had a few days to live,¹¹ and Sr M. de la Croix added: “*My poor Caroline is devout, calm and resigned, she is serenely awaiting death.*”¹¹ In the presence of her uncle Jérôme, chief of Ile des Pins, Caroline expressed her desire to die at Saint-Louis. The response was clear:

*Oh well, stay, my daughter. We share the same faith, I give you my consent. I have given you to the Sister so that you may serve God better than we do. Do that and pray for us.*¹¹

Sr M. de la Croix was very close to Caroline, she loved her dearly and considered her like her daughter: “*My heart feels all the anguish of a mother. Who has ever loved my daughter like that!*”¹²

Caroline died peacefully “*on 26 April between two and three in the afternoon*”.¹³

- ***Louise***

Louise was from Nouméa. We know nothing about her family. Orphaned at a very early age, she was Sr M. de la Croix's student at Saint-Louis, where she was baptised in the early 60s. Sr M. de la Croix's letters reveal a young girl who was very open with her, as also in her relationship with God. At fifteen she taught catechism to a class of small children.¹⁴ In 1872, growing increasingly devout,¹⁵ she began the association of 'Communion of Reparation'.¹⁶ She was also very close to Mary.¹⁷

Sr M. de la Croix sang the praises of this very intelligent young woman: "*These are the treasures of the country... how many French women would be able to keep up with her*", she wrote in 1873.¹⁸ Already, in 1872, after Fr Rougeyron's feast on 29 June, she had repeated to Fr Poupinel the remark made to her by a journalist who had come for the occasion. He could not believe that Louise had written, completely on her own, the congratulatory message that she addressed to the priest that day!¹⁹ Spelling mistakes were rare in her letters.²⁰

Louise could also be remembered for the precious help she gave Sr M. de la Croix: "*my life's companion*",²¹ "*my Louise*".²² She was "*extremely thoughtful in her attitudes and in her words*".²³ However her health did not permit her to respond to the expectations of the sister who suffered greatly because of this: "*I was going to lose the oldest of the pupils of this house*,"²⁴ she acknowledged with regret in 1874. Louise died on 18 September that year, leaving a great void in the house and without being able to achieve her desire to give herself to God on this earth. But the ground had been prepared; scarcely a year after her death, three of her companions gave themselves to the Lord.

2) First consecration (12 September 1875)

- *Arrival of Bishop Vitte (January 1874)*

After Bishop Douarre's death in 1853, Fr Rougeyron as provicar apostolic, was entrusted with responsibility for the vicariate. This rather awkward situation lasted until 1873: on 4 April of that year, Rome named Bishop Ferdinand Vitte as Bishop of Anastasiopolis and vicar apostolic of New Caledonia.

Bishop Vitte was, of course, a Marist. Born in Cormoz, l'Ain, he had made profession in the Society of Mary in 1846. During the 60s, he successively assumed the responsibilities of provincial of Lyon and of Paris. In 1870, he accompanied Bishop Elloy, vicar apostolic of the Navigators (Samoa), to Rome as the bishop's theologian during the Vatican Council. He was ordained bishop in Verdélais, near Bordeaux, in May 1873, and embarked at Marseille in October of the same year.

Coming from Sydney on the *Egmont*, the new bishop disembarked at Nouméa on 28 January 1874. Arriving with him was Fr Hilarion-Alphonse Fraysse^b and three Assumption Sisters. The ship entered the harbour at 9 o'clock in the morning, and berthed at the beginning of the afternoon when the travellers were able to disembark.

As he was officially recognised as head of the Catholic Mission, Bishop Vitte was accorded military honours: five rounds of canon were fired from the roadside and five more from the port. The bells of Sainte Clotilde's parish church also joined in. The people of Nouméa raced to the place, and soon a long procession was heading towards the church where the

^b After the resignation of Bishop Vitte in 1880, it was Fr Fraysse who succeeded him as head of the vicariate.

travellers thanked God for their voyage and safe arrival in Nouméa.²⁵

- ***The Assumption Sisters***

Before leaving France, Bishop Vitte was concerned about the needs of his vicariate. He had been informed of Sr M. de la Croix's poor state of health and the difficulties that her premature death would pose for the school at Saint-Louis. As he was a close friend of Mother Marie de Jésus, foundress of the Congregation of the Assumption,^c it was to her naturally that he turned. The response was somewhat hesitant: New Caledonia was so far away and the congregation was so young! But the response was positive. As noted above, together with the new bishop, three sisters embarked at Marseille: Sister Marie de l'Incarnation, a choir sister, was the superior; Sisters Rosalie and Apollonie were both lay sisters.

The very day they arrived in Nouméa, they were taken to Saint-Louis and immediately they were disillusioned.²⁶ The sisters' place was pitiful. Since the fire of 1867, it had consisted of leaf houses with walls made of the bark of niaouli trees. When it was announced in 1873 that the sisters would soon arrive, some work was done so that each one would have her own room, but their accommodation was hardly decent.²⁷ At the end of 1873, Sr M. de la Croix remarked in a letter to Fr Poupinel: "*The sisters' house is more habitable than the Bishop's poor rooms*",²⁸ but the impression created in the mind of the superior was disastrous. She also didn't know how to treat the girls.²⁹

^c This congregation was founded in 1839 with the help of Bishop d'Alzon, who was himself the founder of the Assumptionists.

The attempt was quickly cut short. Minutes of the deliberations of the bishop's council of 2 March 1874, explained it in this way:

After waiting and trying for six weeks, the three Assumption Sisters who came to take responsibility [for the school] are, and realise that they are, unsuitable for this role.³⁰

The Bishop still had hopes for this congregation in his vicariate in the future. In fact, Sister Rosalie, who “*is dying from respiratory problems*”,³¹ did die on 19 August 1874 at the Sisters of St Joseph de Cluny³² in Nouméa. Sr M. de l'Incarnation, the superior, left New Caledonia in September 1874.³³ The third one, Sister Apollonie, who was appointed to La Conception where the people liked her, received serious leg injuries during a cyclone which struck the south of the main island in February 1876. An emergency amputation could not save her and she died a few days later in Nouméa.³⁴ No more Assumption Sisters were to come to New Calédonia.

- ***Steps taken by the first young women (April 1874)***

Due to this failure, the matter of replacing Sr M. de la Croix as head of the school remained in suspense. But another project immediately took flesh, one moreover that she had been thinking about for a long time, that being helped by the daughters of the country.

In April 1874, Fr Vigouroux spoke of this to Fr Poupinel. Referring to the withdrawal of the Assumption Sisters, he wrote:

Under these circumstances, Sister de la Croix has received beautiful testimonials of love and gratitude on the part of the poor children. A few among them have asked Bishop Vitte to devote themselves to the education

*of indigenous girls under the direction of Sr de la Croix.*³⁵

A few lines further on the priest named these young women: Scholastique, Louise, Marie from Nékéty,^d Pauline from Wagap. “*Young women 20 years of age*”, specified the priest who wondered whether they would persevere in their resolve. In fact, there would be no question of Pauline. As for Louise, we have already seen that she died in September that year.

Scholastique, from Païta,^e was Louise’s first cousin.³⁶ It is impossible to determine the exact year she came to Saint-Louis, but she had certainly been baptised there: she was named Scholastique in memory of Mother Scholastique, her godmother, the English Benedictine whom Sr M. de la Croix had come to know in Sydney in 1858 and with whom she had corresponded for a long time. Scholastique who was barely 17-18, had authority in the house and was much appreciated by Sister whom she assisted and replaced when health problems forced her to stay in her room. “*Everyone obeyed her respectfully*”, noted Sr M. de la Croix in 1871.³⁷ Scholastique also showed herself to be a “*faithful carer of the sick whom I was not able to push away from my bedside when she saw me suffering*”,³⁸ because she is “*devoted as none other*”.³⁹

Very little is known about Marie from Nékéty. Like Scholastique, she had been baptised at Saint-Louis since Caroline was her godmother.⁴⁰ Seemingly of quite fragile health,⁴¹ Marie died at Saint-Louis on 22 September 1880.⁴²

Very soon afterwards a third young woman joined Scholastique and Marie: her name was Isabelle and she came

^d Nékéty - now called Nakéty - is close to Canala, on the East Coast.

^e Païta is a few kilometres north of Nouméa.

from Ouvéa. It was Fr Jean-Simon Bernard, for several years priest in charge of this island, who brought her to the sister in October 1870; she was, it seems, the daughter of the High Chief.⁴³

The Bishop was all in favour of what they were doing. Sr M. de la Croix wrote to Fr Poupinel at the end of April 1874: he “*promised them that he would employ them in the Mission and gave them real hope of one day becoming Tertiaries of Mary*”.⁴⁴ By that their ties with the Marist family were affirmed right from the beginning. Sr M. de la Croix had never thought otherwise: what she desired for herself, she wanted just as strongly for her young women.

- ***Their status within the Society of Mary***

At the Bishop’s suggestion,⁴⁵ Sr M. de la Croix immediately wrote to France asking that, if *Manuals des Petites Filles de Marie*^f existed, they be sent to her. The sister, whose joy was immense, declared in this letter: “*You see we have some plans*”, and a little further on she added, “*If before I die, I am able to call my children my daughters and my Sisters, Oh what a reward that will be!*”⁴⁶ She also asked Bishop Vitte to order some Office books of the Immaculate Conception in Latin and in French.⁴⁷ The Manuals arrived in June 1875⁴⁸ as well as the Third Order medals and cords requested earlier on by Fr Fraysse.⁴⁹

Without waiting for the manuals to arrive, the Bishop had given them “*a little book of practices of the Third Order*”.⁵⁰ It would be interesting to know what these practices

^f The Petites Filles de Marie, in Lyon, were a branch of the Third Order of Mary which was intended for young women; those who were unmarried at 25 moved into the Association of Christian Virgins.

were! Perhaps a letter of Sr M. de la Croix gives some kind of answer. In effect, she wrote at the beginning of September 1875: “*Our three girls have withdrawn from the world, they live a community life*”,⁵¹ because if we want them to become part of this association begun for lay people, it is obvious that “*their life will be much more perfect than that of their Little Sisters*” in France; they will be

*members of our beloved Society of Mary, but also, and this is the other aspect of their vocation, members of the Mission to which they will consecrate their lives.*⁵²

Bishop Vitte approved of and encouraged the project but he wanted to act prudently. At the beginning of September 1875, when the date of the ceremony was approaching, he gave a clear explanation of the situation:

*I am giving the blue habit to three young Melanesian women who are destined to assist Sr M. de la Croix. For the past year, they have been asking me to allow them to consecrate themselves to the Mission, as tertiary novices. Insofar as they will not take any vows, there is no danger.*⁵³

But he foresaw them making a promise without any delay, and then a vow.

- ***The ceremony of 12 September 1875***

The first consecration of these three young women was fixed for 12 September 1875, feast of the Holy Name of Mary and Marist patronal feast; that was to give joy to Scholastique who loved the Society of Mary with all her heart.⁵⁴

In order to give them authority in the house and “*make them respected by those who were their companions and are going to be their pupils*”,⁵⁵ it was foreseen that they would put on a habit that day: a long blue dress with sleeves buttoned at

the wrist, a cape that would also be blue, a white collar, a blue cord and the Third Order medal. This was how the habit that Fr Fraysse described as “*semi-religious-caledonian*”, looked.⁵⁶

On 3 September a novena was begun in preparation, during which Sr M. de la Croix asked the Lord for the gift of perseverance for her little indigenous sisters.⁵⁷ On 12 September, a Sunday that year, during the 7 am Mass celebrated by the vicar apostolic, Scholastique, Marie and Isabelle, clothed in their habit, pronounced their consecration in a church full to overflowing. This is how Sr M. de la Croix described the event:

*The ceremony was as beautiful as it could have been, so moving that streams of tears flowed from the eyes of all the missionaries who were present; priests and brothers. The whole parish was there, touched to the depths of their being. Our young women, despite the emotions they felt, were calm and resolved, dignified and simple.*⁵⁸

The ceremony followed was that for the reception of the Petites Filles de Marie in France, with, however, some modifications for “*the Bishop, who for the present time kept the name ‘Petites Filles de Marie’, wanted only the Third Order*”.⁵⁸ In the same letter, Sr M. de la Croix continued: “*The Bishop preached a magnificent sermon, expressing his heartfelt joy, and he truly showed it.*” He was profoundly happy about this step forward towards the implanting of Christianity in New Caledonia.

During the following days, the three new Petites Filles de Marie wrote to Fr Poupinel, whom Sr M. de la Croix had spoken so much about to them,^g to express the joy they felt in

^g Scholastique knew him because she had been at Saint-Louis for quite a number of years.

having given themselves to God and their “*happiness of belonging to the Society of Mary*”.⁵⁹

3) The beginnings

The day after this moving ceremony, life went back to normal at the school.

- *Sister Marie de la Croix’s Auxiliaries*

Since they wanted to help Sr M. de la Croix in her work of education, all three who “*for such a long time already worked as assistant teachers without having the title*”,⁶⁰ became her “*official auxiliaries*”. A few months later, having no doubts that they were “*the foundation stones of this completely indigenous structure*”, she noted:⁶¹

*Our three Petites Filles de Marie are admirable in their good will. Isabelle is in such peace that she communicates it to others; Scholastique does not know what it is to spare herself. Night and day she is at my bedside; she manages and directs the house. Marie, who has much to fight against with her free and wild nature, makes acts of virtue which must delight the Heart of Jesus.*⁶²

She was amazed at the steadfastness manifested by these three young women.

On the other hand, her own health left much to be desired. Assisted by Isabelle and Marie, Scholastique fulfilled the role anticipated for her to perfection. She went to great trouble to ensure that the house was well run.⁶³ During a visit in France by the Bishop it was “*our young women in blue*” who wrote to him every month, giving an account of how things were going at the house.⁶⁴ In November of that year Sr

M. de la Croix again spoke of her hope: “*Scholastique will be the pillar of this undertaking.*”⁶⁵

- ***New vocations***

In September 1876, all three young women renewed their consecration “*at the feet of the Blessed Virgin*”⁶⁶ and, at the beginning of December, Fr Fraysse preached a little retreat for them to correspond with “*their heartfelt desire*”.⁶⁶

At that time, they were no longer three but four as a young woman called Maria Tiand'o^h originally from Lifou,ⁱ and who had been at Saint-Louis for several years, had come to join them. Sr M. de la Croix introduced her in these words:

*She is very young with a very gentle character. She doesn't speak much, she is cheerful but doesn't make any noise. She is far from brilliant in class, but when she speaks of God, she is delightful.*⁶⁷

She received the novice's medal in September 1876 and put on the blue habit a year later.⁶⁸

Over the following years, other young women came to Saint-Louis with the intention of doing the same as these first Filles de Marie; of course not all of them persevered. In August 1877, Sr M. de la Croix spoke of the daughter of a High Chief who was “*idolized in her home area*”.⁶⁹ Was it Suzanne, “*the great chieftainess of Maré*”, who would put on the blue habit in May 1881?⁷⁰

^h Tiand'o is not Maria's surname, but her indigenous name. She had been baptised and made her first communion at St Louis in 1873. She became Sr M. du Rosaire in the TORM.

ⁱ Lifou which is between Ouvéa and Maré is the largest of the Iles Loyauté.

At that date, Bishop Vitte had to resign from his position because of his poor health and he was replaced by Bishop Fraysse. The latter decided, and this was the first time, to summon all the sisters of his vicariate to a general retreat which took place at Saint-Louis from 1 to 8 May. The Petites Filles de Marie were certainly there, and on 8 May, the closing day of the retreat, a ceremony took place in the Church in front of the altar of the Blessed Virgin. Sr M. de la Croix gave a detailed account of this to Fr Poupinel.

From the hands of the Bishop, surrounded by all his priests, two postulants dressed in white received the novice's medal. They were Agrippina,^j who came from Saint-Louis, and Valentine,^k from Ile des Pins. Then came Suzanne's^l turn: clothed in the blue habit and holding a lighted candle in her hand, she pronounced her consecration as a Petite Fille de Marie "*in a gentle, confident, charming voice*". Scholastique and Isabelle in their turn came forward: after having renewed their consecration, they received a rosary to wear at their side as part of their habit.^m

Sr M. de la Croix concluded her report of the event in this way:

*The crowd, silent and recollected, could not contain their emotion after they came out of the church and we learnt that everyone had stood on the benches so as to see the happy Filles de Marie better.*⁷¹

^j Agrippina became Sr M. St Jean in the TORM and was Sr M. de la Croix's companion in Belep.

^k Valentine was Caroline's sister: having become Sr M. de l'Assomption in the TORM, she died prematurely in 1899.

^l Suzanne became Sr M. St François in the TORM and died in 1943.

^m At that time Marie Nakéty had already died. We do not know why Maria Lifou did not take part in the ceremony.

That day a rule that Bishop Fraysse had written for them also went into effect.⁷²

- ***Formation given by Sister Marie de la Croix***

Information about the formation these young women received is scarce. On the day after the memorable event just described, Bishop Fraysse spoke of the severity of the mistress. This formation “*is a bit rough on them at times*”, he said and he put it down to the sister’s illness, “*which upsets her nerves*”, but he added,

*the qualities of the Mistress are so great that the hearts of the novices are drawn all the same, so that there are happy results.*⁷³

Sr M. de la Croix acknowledged this severity when she wrote to one of them:

*I was a hard mistress, but I still believe I am a loving mother. O Colette, does anyone love you more than I do?*⁷⁴

Her concern to pass on to the novices a taste for prayer can be felt throughout the letters she wrote to the Filles de Marie, “*who are endeavouring to come closer to God*”.⁷⁵ She gave them conferences to explain the rule and spoke to them about the spiritual life.⁷⁶ Because of her experience and what had been confided to her, she knew the importance of humility, fraternal charity and self-renunciation that community life implies.

On the human level, she taught them to teach, and being herself a musician, she gave them a sound musical formation, even teaching some of them to play the harmonium. This was useful for church liturgies and was a good way of relieving the boredom in the isolation of certain missions.⁷⁷

Bishop Fraysse was so conscious of the importance of the work undertaken by Sr M. de la Croix that in 1881 he was not afraid to write:

*The Petites Filles de Marie are a source of bright hope. [...] At all costs this undertaking must be continued, the advantages to be gained are indisputable.*⁷⁸

II. THE SCHOOL CONTINUES

1) Construction of a house (1874 - 1875)

- *Decision*

Right from his first visit to Saint-Louis, Bishop Vitte could only remark on the dilapidated state of the girls' school. Here is how he described it at the beginning of February:

*Some girders of rough wood placed one on top of the other and joined together with mud; a few planks making partitions here and there, and the thatch roof: that is our splendid boarding school. [...] Poor Sr M. de la Croix has been sleeping in this hovel for eight to ten years with her 80 to 100 girls. It would be impossible to tell you what she suffers and has suffered there.*⁷⁹

A few days later, in a letter to Fr Poupinel, the Bishop spoke of how unhealthy the house was:

*Our poor children sleep in water insofar as they cannot get up in the morning without getting their feet wet, and each night I tremble at the thought that their house might collapse under the gusts [of wind].*⁸⁰

It was therefore urgent that a house be built, and the decision was taken on 20 February during a meeting of the Bishop's council: the girls could not be left to live in a 'shack' like that

any longer; the need “*to build a house was urgent*”⁸¹ if they wanted to continue this work and develop it.

- ***Laying the foundation stone (29 April 1874)***

Very soon work began. On 29 April, when the vicar apostolic was getting ready to set out on his first pastoral visit,⁸² he blessed the foundation stone of the house. The site chosen was “*just below the church*”; this would be a “*large convenient*” building that could accommodate a hundred girls and six sisters.⁸³

Besides, some of the youth of the mission, some freed convicts, “*drunkards who were occasionally insolent and inclined to violence*” provided the labour and worked under the supervision of Fr Vigouroux, the construction foreman.⁸³

The work did not proceed as quickly as desired and the expense was considerable. Fortunately, in 1875, “*thanks to the income from the cattle which will rise to 30,000 francsⁿ this year, our accounts will be all right,*” stated Fr Vigouroux in April 1875.⁸⁴ For his part, Fr Fraysse, spoke of a “*very big expense*”, more than 5,000 francs for the construction of this house, but this expense “*was truly necessary*”, he concluded because “*the establishments of St Louis are the pride and pearl of the Mission*”.⁸⁵ Bishop Vitte also calculated the cost of the house which would be “*beautiful and spacious*”,⁸⁶ at between “*60 and 80 thousand francs*”.⁸⁷

- ***Another fire (12 April 1875)***

On 12 April 1875, while the house was slowly taking shape, a new fire completely destroyed the shacks where the sister and her girls were still living. This time it was not a case of imprudence, as it was in 1867, but the criminal act of a

ⁿ Refers to gold francs.

freed prisoner who had previously been convicted of similar offences, something that no one at Saint-Louis knew. The fire was so fierce that in no time not the slightest trace of the dwellings remained.⁸⁸

At first the girls and the sisters^o spent their nights in the attic of the priests' house snuggled up on the floor. They were "*squeezed together like sardines in oil*". Ten days later they were relocated to the sugar refinery,^p "*arranged somehow or other*"; there they were also crammed in: there were 92 girls! Planks and straw mattresses had been laid on the boiler, but it was cold there.⁸⁹ The priests very soon obtained blankets and the children were able to sleep.⁹⁰ This new trial immediately had repercussions on Sr M. de la Croix's health: swollen all over, she had fever, a heavy head and blurred vision. "*Three radishes that I have eaten are having a fight in my stomach,*" she confided to Fr Poupinel.⁹¹ The distress was so great that Sr M. de la Croix, who could obviously not teach class, thought of sending the children back to their families, but "*no one, neither the priests nor the girls, wants that*".⁹² However, some of them went to sleep in the village.⁹³

Measles were on the rampage in Nouméa at that time, then dysentery and other illnesses soon made their appearance. As many as forty seven girls were sick at the same time! The factory started to look like a hospital. "*Thanks to God and Mary*",⁹⁴ no death came to darken this already dark scene!

^o Sr Apollonie, an Assumption sister was still at St Louis with Sr M. de la Croix.

^p At the end of the 60s, some colonial settlers coming from Réunion Island tried to cultivate sugar cane in the Païta area. The priests, who took part in this project, had built this factory at St Louis which was used at harvesting time, so not in April.

- ***Blessing of the house (12 September 1875)***

It was during this surely very painful time, that Scholastique, Isabelle and Marie completed their preparation for the great event of their consecration as Petites Filles de Marie.

It was on the actual day of the consecration, after the 9 o'clock Mass, that the new house was blessed. Bishop Vitte, who could not wait to see the community suitably installed,⁹⁵ wanted to make a big thing of this ceremony. He invited the governor and all the “*eminent persons of Nouméa*”,⁹⁶ namely the captains of the ships in the port.⁹⁷ No document provides details about this feast, but they say that the house was far from being completed. Two storeys were more or less closed in and the walls were in the process of being rough-cast. Despite marvellous dedication, Fr Vigouroux was not able to make it habitable: there was no furniture.⁹⁸

In February 1876, when the community had finally moved into the house,⁹ there was a fierce cyclone which, as has been seen, caused the death of Sister Apollonie. The gusts of wind pushed the rain back with such force that it passed under the tiles and the house was inundated: “*For twenty four hours everything was floating in water from the attic down to the basement.*”⁹⁹ But finally life returned to normal in the house which “*is very beautiful and would stand out in a large parish in France*”,¹⁰⁰ the Bishop stated with very legitimate pride.

⁹ No document specifies the exact date (between September and February) that the sisters moved into the house.

2) Life at the school

- *Formation of the pupils*

Sr M. de la Croix, on several occasions, asked for educational materials from France. In January 1877, she wanted someone to get her some “*good, devotional, simple school music but especially with good moral standards*”. The girls knew her whole repertoire and loved singing while doing round dances.¹⁰¹ Two months later, she asked for Fr Domainger’s book, *Le Chemin du Bonheur*, for all the Mission schools. She thought that with a few minor changes “*this book could become a very useful manual for our dear people*”.¹⁰² In 1878 she said she would like to receive E. Tonneau’s books on mathematical methods, as to date she only had the first five of the ten books in the series.¹⁰³

Content with her students’ behaviour, the sister noted in a letter:

*Their behaviour is as good as could be asked of them and God looks after our children down to the most minor details. For myself, I never speak to them of surveillance but of God’s presence.*¹⁰⁴

- *Usefulness of this work*

As in the preceding years, some naval officers visited the Saint-Louis Mission. In January 1877, the commander of the *Navarin* and its chaplain arrived when the children were in class. They were dumbfounded, especially the commander, M. Brosset, who, thirty years earlier, had been godfather of the first three Christians baptised at Balade: he realised how far they had come.¹⁰⁵ In October 1880, Fr Xavier Montrouzier accompanied a ship’s captain. Questioned by the latter, the girls shone but, the priest asked, what use would this knowledge be? Would it not be better to teach them to raise poultry, pigs, cows and goats, and to teach them to keep a

house clean ... rather than make them into conceited half-educated, not very docile people?¹⁰⁶

Fr Fraysse obviously did not share this opinion. In 1875, he was already affirming the importance of education if any lasting results were to be obtained.¹⁰⁷ In 1876 he insisted on the importance of the education given in a boarding school for the better formation of generations.¹⁰⁸ And when in 1879 Sr M. de la Croix again received the last sacraments, he was seriously concerned, “*What a vacuum this sister will leave if she is no longer with us!*”¹⁰⁹ because he did not see any of the sisters who could replace her as director of the school.

3) The work develops

- *New tertiaries arrive from France in July 1877*

Whilst Fr Fraysse was worrying about the future of the girls’ school at Saint-Louis, nevertheless some ‘tertiaries’, as they were called, arrived from France. Sr M. de la Croix’s repeated requests since withdrawing from the congregation of Our Lady of the Missions had been taken up by Bishop Vitte after the unsuccessful attempt of the Assumption sisters. In 1875 he declared, “*Like Sister de la Croix, I am in favour of pure and simple Tertiaries*”, on condition, of course, that they be formed before leaving France.¹¹⁰ He harked back to this responsibility in his following letters. On 3 September, he expressed the desire, that some good tertiaries be gathered together in France to help Sr M. de la Croix in her work of formation.¹¹¹

Sr M. de la Croix’s joy was immense when she learnt, at the beginning of 1876, that a project was underway in Lyon.¹¹² A year later, the plan was moving forward because of the Bishop going to France. The sister was concerned about furnishing the rooms that those arriving would occupy. To that end she spoke seriously to her hens because “*it is these*

charitable creatures who are going to supply me with the necessary money".¹¹³ She made a novena to St Joseph in March 1877 to ask that the sisters do much good for the children whom they would be caring for.¹¹⁴ She had great trust in Fr Colin, who had died in November 1875; she prayed very fervently to him that the Third Order would end up by being regularized and that a formation house would be opened.¹¹⁴

On 5 July 1877, the *Bossuet* berthed at Nouméa. It brought some Trappists who were coming to try and establish a foundation at Wagap, on the east coast of the mainland. Also on board were some Marist brothers coming to join the first brothers who arrived in 1873; they had opened a community school in Nouméa^r and taken charge of the boys' school at Saint-Louis.

Finally there were two sisters, two tertiaries: Sister Marie du Sacré-Cœur^s and Sister Marie du Calvaire. Both had left the congregation of Our Lady of the Missions in order to achieve their desire to be Marist and missionary. The first one took the habit as a member of the Third Order of Mary for the Missions of Oceania (TOMMO) on 15 July at Saint-Louis, and was immediately appreciated because "*she teaches very well, methodically, with gentleness and assurance*".¹¹⁵ As for the second one, her stay at Saint-Louis was brief. Having returned to Nouméa, she found employment as a domestic servant in a family, and soon afterwards married a man she had known during the voyage on the *Bossuet*. Sr M. de la Croix did not hide her disappointment, even her bitterness.¹¹⁶

^r The present Frédéric Surleau school near the cathedral, which was taken away from them in 1904 due to the law of separation of Church and State.

^s This sister occupied several posts in New Caledonia, then was sent to the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu) in 1898, where she remained until her death in 1920.

- ***Other tertiaries arrive in February 1878***

On 14 February of the following year, two other tertiaries arrived on the *Cunga*, which also brought Bishop Vitte to Nouméa. The first one, Sister Marie Saint-Charles, had just left her congregation, the Sisters of the Cross of Jesus, in Ain. Struck by a serious illness, she had been cured by Our Lady of Lourdes and was fulfilling her vow by dedicating herself to the missions. She stayed at St Louis for a few months and in June, went to Bondé, in the north of the mainland where she had been assigned.

The second one, Sister Marie Joseph, was a niece of Bishop Philippe Viard.[†] Originally from Lyon, she belonged to the Association of Christian Virgins in the Third Order of Mary for many years. Appointed to St Louis, she attended to the laundry and showed herself to be fully devoted to caring for Sr M. de la Croix.¹¹⁷

The sisters' community had expanded! Fortunately there was room for everyone in the large house. In November 1879, Sr M. de Bon Secours who left Pouebo for good because of her health would also be welcomed there.

- ***The Petites Filles de Marie set out for other missions***

We have just seen how in June 1878, Sr M. St Charles had been sent to Bondé. An excellent teacher, she immediately opened a school there. In December of the same year sisters arrived at Nathalo, on Lifou. This was an event because two Petites Filles de Marie, Scholastique and Isabelle, accompanied Sr M. du Sacré-Cœur and they, too, opened a school.

In 1881, following the big retreat which brought all the sisters together at Saint-Louis, other departures took place:

[†] A Marist who was bishop of Wellington in New Zealand from 1860 to 1872, year of his death.

Suzanne and Valentine - who was a novice - were named for Ile des Pins; Maria Tiand'o replaced Scholastique in Lifou. Bishop Fraysse also made major changes among the tertiaries. Sr M. de la Présentation was assigned to Pouebo where there had been no sisters since 1879. Sr M. St Charles replaced her at Ile des Pins. She herself was replaced at Bondé by Sr M. du Sacré-Cœur. Finally, Sr M. Joseph left Saint-Louis to go to Lifou.

Thus Sr M. de la Croix remained at Saint-Louis with Scholastique whose health was not very good. Sr M. de Bon Secours who, although retired, would still continue for a few more years going to other convents for longer or shorter periods of time.

III. THE FINAL YEARS AT SAINT-LOUIS (1882 - 1892)

1) The TOMMO becomes the TORM

- *The profession of 7 June 1885*

It does not seem that the decisions taken in France in 1880 regarding the regularization of the Third Order of Mary for the Missions of Oceania (TOMMO), and the visit of Bishop Lamaze, vicar apostolic of Central Oceania in November 1880,^u brought about changes in the situation of the tertiaries in New Caledonia. There had certainly been the retreat of May 1881. On this occasion, the three sisters who had arrived in 1877 and 1878 were officially received into the TOMMO and pronounced the vow of obedience.¹¹⁸ But there was no question of religious profession, neither for the sisters who arrived a long time ago nor for those who had recently

^u Bishop Lamaze was at that time returning from France where he was ordained Bishop following Bishop Elloy's death.

arrived.^v Sr M. de la Croix, in a letter of 11 May, cited above, spoke to Fr Poupinel of “*the renewal of our vows*” which on 8 May preceded the ceremony in honour of the Petites Filles de Marie, but what were the vows in question?

Three years later, in August 1884, Bishop Fraysse wrote a letter to Fr Henri Couloigner^w in which he spoke at length about the sisters. He asked, “*Do they have vows? Will they ever have any? When and how would they be able to make them?*”¹¹⁹ In February 1885, the first two sisters formed at Saint-Brieuc for New Caledonia arrived at Saint-Louis: they were novices. Before they were sent to their respective missions, the Bishop admitted them to first profession in the Third Order Regular of Mary (TORM). The ceremony took place on 7 June 1885 at the end of the retreat: Sister Marie Sainte-Anne and Sister Marie Marguerite committed themselves for three years.¹²⁰ Along with them, Scholastique, one of the first three Petites Filles de Marie, became Sister Marie Scholastique, a religious also in the TORM. But what about the other sisters? What about Sr M. de la Croix?

- *Did Sister Marie de la Croix make profession in the TORM?*

During the following years, Sr M. de la Croix made some modifications to her habit, no doubt to bring it into line with that worn by the sisters who came from France. In particular, she replaced the medal of the Third Order on her chest by a crucifix, a change that she had long desired.¹²¹ No document refers to this: only a photo confirms the fact.^x

^v During this time, back in his vicariate, Bishop Lamaze had admitted the sisters on Wallis and Tonga to religious profession.

^w This priest had taken on the role of Procurator for the Missions in Lyon following Fr Germain’s death in 1880.

^x This photo is referred to at the beginning of Chapter 8.

From this period on there was no further mention of the Third Order of Mary for the Missions of Oceania: it had definitely become the TORM in New Caledonia. Would Sr M. de la Croix have taken religious vows at this point?

2) **Saint-Louis takes on importance**

During these years, due partly to the retreats which now brought the sisters together there every two years, according to Bishop Fraysse's decision, due also to the increasing number of sisters and the development of the novitiate of the Petites Filles de Marie, more and more Saint-Louis became the central house, the point of first arrival and the place of hospitality for all the sisters, TORM as well as PFM. Sr M. de la Croix's workload increased proportionately.

- *Hospitality for sick and aged sisters*

And so Sr M. de la Paix, whose health was really failing, arrived in January 1883 and remained at Saint-Louis until the retreat of June 1885.^y Then it was Sr M. de Bon Secours' turn: from December 1883 until her death in November 1895, she was fully part of the community. That provided the time and opportunity to develop a deeper relationship with Sr M. de la Croix than previously. Between 1892 and 1895 Sr M. de la Croix would write some very affectionate letters to her from Belep.

At the beginning of 1886, under the superiors' orders, Sr M. de la Présentation arrived at St Louis from Pouebo. The persistent throat problems she had suffered from for years seemed to have become cancerous. Sr M. de la Croix and

^y She then left for Ile des Pins where she stayed until her death on 12 July 1896.

Hortense Vendegou, who had been at Saint-Louis since her husband's death, devotedly cared for her until her death on 24 August 1886.

Sr M. Joseph Peysson, who was also sick, left Belep in June 1890 and spent the last years of her life at St Louis. She died on 13 March 1892, not without having bequeathed three thousand francs to the Petites Filles de Marie, for the work she most loved.

- ***Hospitality for the TORM sisters coming from France***

Mention was made above of Sr M. Ste Anne and Sr M. Marguerite, from the Saint-Brieuc novitiate. They had arrived in New Caledonia in February 1885 and, while awaiting the June retreat, it was naturally Saint-Louis that offered them hospitality. This permitted Sr M. de la Croix to get to know them and form a deep, solid friendship with them.

The following years other TORM Sisters came to New Caledonia: Sr M. Marthe and Sr M. Célestin arrived in June 1887. The former was named for Saint-Louis where she stayed a long time, assisting Sr M. de la Croix who very much needed that, and as we read in a letter to Bishop Fraysse, adapting to "*the sister's rather domineering personality*".¹²² At the end of 1889, Sr M. Jean-Baptiste and Sr M. Angélique; then in December 1891, Sr M. Gabriel and Sr M. Chanel spent a few days at Saint-Louis before going to reinforce or open new communities. Thus Sr M. Jean-Baptiste joined the Filles de Marie at Ouvéa and Sr M. Gabriel along with Honorine, opened a school at Thio in 1892.^z Sr M. Chanel remained at Saint-Louis; Sr M. de la Croix described her as "*a charming*

^z A school was also opened in Tyé in 1890 and put in the care of Sr M. Célestin and Sophie, and another in Nakéty in 1892 was confided to two PFM.

young sister”.¹²³ It was she who would go to Lifou when, on Sr M. de la Croix’s departure Sr M. Anne inherited her heavy responsibility at Saint-Louis.

- ***Hospitality for the sisters passing through***

On several occasions, new sisters on the way to their mission in Fiji had stopped over in Nouméa. Sr M. St Clair spent some days at St Louis in 1884. Bishop Fraysse spoke of it in a letter: he found her to be well formed. He wrote: “*Sr M. de la Croix had her take a class and was enchanted with her way of handling it.*”¹²⁴ They would have liked to keep her!

In September 1888, four other TORM sisters made a rapid stopover - one night - at Saint-Louis. They were two French women: Sr M. Bernard and Sr M. Thérèse, and two Australians, recruited in Sydney: Sr M. St John Baptist and Sr M. St Francis of Sales, because Fiji needed English-speaking teachers. Marie Blanchot,^{aa} a Nouméan and a friend of Sr M. de la Croix, who helped her in many ways, accompanied them.

Finally in February 1892, the community even offered hospitality to three Marist Sisters, also on their way to Fiji. In the account of their voyage, they spoke of Sr M. de la Croix and Sr M. de Bon Secours whom they had seen at St Louis.¹²⁵

It is also to be noted that on two occasions during this period, in 1885 and 1889, Sr M. de la Croix had the joy of again seeing Fr Claude Joly, whom she had known at Villa Maria in 1858 when he was the assistant to Fr Rocher at the Procure in Sydney.

^{aa} The Blanchot family were benefactors of the Mission. For example it was they who gave the Little Sisters of the Poor the land where their house was built, in a suburb of Nouméa which as a matter of fact is called Faubourg Blanchot [Blanchot Suburb].

- *Novitiate of the Petites Filles de Marie*

Among the tasks that kept Sr M. de la Croix busy, there was one, as has been seen, to which she gave priority; the formation of the young Melanesian women who, all through those years, continued to come with the desire to consecrate themselves to God.

Bishop Fraysse himself who thought highly of this work said so clearly on several occasions. In 1884, he wrote:

*I believe that the system of placing our schools under the direction of a capable European sister, aided by two young Caledonians, is by far a much more practical arrangement for multiple reasons.*¹²⁶

He wanted it to develop,¹²⁷ it meant so much to him that he did not get someone to replace him when the ceremony of taking the habit was held;¹²⁸ he wanted to be there.

A retreat was given at the novitiate each year, on the occasion for one or other of the young women to take a step forward. In October 1882, Agrippina received the blue habit. A year later, it was Valentine, Thérèse and Flore's turn... In January 1887, four of them (one from Lifou and three from Ile des Pins) received the novice's medal and another one, Madeleine, from Lifou, pronounced her consecration. Often Sr M. de la Croix noted these ceremonies in her personal notebook which shows the importance she gave them!

After ten years as Filles de Marie, those who requested it and were accepted by the Bishop, made their vows in the FORM, as did Sr M. Scholastique in 1885. That is how Agrippina became Sr M. St Jean l'Evangeliste in August 1892, on the eve of her departure for Belep with Sr M. de la Croix.

3) The death of Father Poupinel (July 1884)

Since the end of the 1870s, Sr M. de la Croix had considerably slowed down her correspondence with the priests in Lyon. Almost monthly letters to Fr Poupinel until 1877, went down to three in 1878, then one letter in 1879, 1880 and 1881, then nothing more. Why this silence? Her last letter, that of 11 May 1881, begins astonishingly with: “*So an order is needed to write to Fr Poupinel!*” In fact, she wrote only because Bishop Fraysse had commanded her to do so but she quickly added: “*I am writing to you, then, Father, through a very pleasant obedience.*” She finished this letter with these words: “*In spite of appearances, I remain your most respectful and grateful daughter in J. M. J.*”

Why this silence? It would seem, at least that is what Fr Poupinel suggested in a letter in 1880, that she had been hurt by a “*severe admonition*” that Fr Vigouroux gave her in 1878. Not wanting to complain, she would then have stopped writing to Fr Poupinel.¹²⁹ It was true that on several occasions during that period she made some unkind remarks about different people which may have been due to her very faltering health. This was something that Fr Vigouroux could not allow to pass.¹³⁰ She herself realised it because already in 1877, she wrote:

*I am in terrible suffering. I am not complaining about my suffering but I am complaining because I offend God and because of that, oh yes! I would like to die.*¹³¹

And a year later: “*I suffer and I am ill-tempered.*”¹³²

So ended the main source of information about Sr M. de la Croix. Besides, Fr Poupinel died shortly afterwards, on 10 July 1884 at Saint-Genis-Laval, just out of Lyon. He was assistant to the Superior General, who was still Fr Favre.

For all that, Sr M. de la Croix did not stop writing. Henceforth, it was especially to those who had been her novices that she would send affectionate letters full of concern.^{bb} The sending out of the sisters which began in 1878 continued: in December 1883, Suzanne and Thérèse were sent to Maré, the most southern of the Iles Loyauté; in October 1886, Sr M. Scholastique accompanied by two Petites Filles de Marie^{cc} arrived in Ouvéa. From then on, there was a community of sisters on each of the three Iles Loyauté.

Sr M. Marguerite soon came to Maré to consolidate the work undertaken. She arrived in July 1885 and was welcomed by the sisters with cries of joy. A few more years would pass before Sr M. Jean-Baptiste would come to join Agrippina on Ouvéa in January 1890.

Life in the missions was difficult at that time, especially on the islands because of the still greater isolation there than on the mainland. Sr M. de la Croix knew that - had she not previously lived in Ile des Pins? In her letters she tried to guide and encourage these young women whose good will was as great as their desire to do good, but whose inexperience was obvious.

4) Voyages to Lifou and Pouebo

Thanks to this correspondence, some details are known about the two trips which Sr M. de la Croix made at that time.

^{bb} A batch of letters to Fr François Beaulieu, missionary on Maré has also been preserved.

^{cc} It is not known which ones.

- *To Lifou (October-November 1883)*

In 1883, the construction of a very large, beautiful Church that can still be admired today, was completed at Nathalo. Bishop Fraysse wanted to make the feast for its blessing a big event. The mission boat, the *Guillaume Douarre*, bought many people who had embarked at Saint-Louis on 23 October. Among the passengers, gathered around the bishop and several priests were Sr M. de la Croix, two Petites Filles de Marie,^{dd} and some thirty girls from the school.¹³³

However at Nathalo, everyone - Catholics and Protestants - was busy with the preparations.¹³⁴ A triumphal arch was erected in front of the main door of the Church. The festivities lasted several days. On the morning of 31 October the blessing of the Church took place. In the afternoon a bell and a statue of the Blessed Virgin were also blessed and Fr Montrouzier baptised the elderly Kapoua who had got him to come to Nathalo in 1858, but had remained a pagan until that day.

The Governor,^{cc} his wife and entourage, arrived the following day, the Feast of All Saints. Having disembarked from the boat which had brought them to Chépénéhé, they finished their journey on horseback. At Nathalo, the bells rang out at full volume to welcome them. A pontifical Mass with deacon and assistant deacon followed in an absolutely packed Church.

Even though no document mentions it, Sr M. de la Croix was surely overjoyed to see again her former students from Lifou, no doubt married and mothers of families. Among

^{dd} They were Colette and Valentine.

^{cc} At that time it was Pallu de la Barrière, the ship's captain, who was governor from July 1882 to September 1884.

them was a certain Angela, who had left Saint-Louis in 1871 and with whom she had remained in touch by letters for quite a long time.

On the other hand, writing to Agrippina on 4 December, she spoke to her of a stopover at Touaourou,^{ff} on her return journey:

*Oh, if you could have seen these women's display of affection when I arrived at Touaourou!! How they talked and wept. 'Ah', said Agnes, 'I knew you were on board and I was watching the boat straining to move forward. For my part, I started praying that there would be no wind and you would be obliged to come down. I succeeded.'*¹³⁵

- ***To the Iles Loyauté and Pouebo (20 August -5 October 1890)***

Seven years later, on 20 August 1890, Sr M. de la Croix again embarked on the *Guillaume Douarre*. There was a different reason for the journey this time; it was a matter of transporting to Pouebo the necessary materials for urgently needed repairs to the mission buildings.¹³⁶

It seems that the sister boarded only at the last minute. In fact, writing on 17 August to Apollonie, a *Petite Fille de Marie* stationed at Lifou,¹³⁷ she did not mention this journey. All the same she was there. The Bishop had asked her “*to accompany the school girls who were returning from St Louis to their respective missions*”.¹³⁸ Several *Petites Filles de Marie* were also with her, including Flore named for Maré.

The boat's itinerary was fixed before its departure: it went first to Lifou, sailed back down to Maré, put in at Ouvéa,

^{ff} Touaourou is at the south of the mainland on the east coast.

then sailed up to Pouebo.¹³⁹ The documents don't give the exact dates of these different stopovers but what is sure, is that wherever it passed, a community of sisters was there to welcome the travellers with joy.

At Lifou, Sr M. de la Croix noted the wonderful development of the school directed by Sr M. Ste Anne. At Maré, Sr M. Marguerite was happy to welcome Flore. In Ouvéa, the sisters passing through lavished encouragement on Sr M. Jean-Baptiste who had taken up her position at the beginning of the year.

The *Guillaume Douarre* was anchored off Pouebo in mid-September. Sr M. de la Croix was deeply moved in visiting these historical places and meeting the first Christian community of the island! From Pouebo, she had the time to write to Madeleine^{gg} who had been at Belep since June. She told her she regretted not being able to reach her: the bishop had made Pouebo the last place on the itinerary for the voyage. There was no question of going to visit the sisters at Bondé, nor even going to Balade,¹⁴⁰ where the first missionaries had disembarked in December 1843, even though it was very near to Pouebo.

Since the boat had supplies to unload at Wagap,¹⁴¹ it stopped there on its way back.^{hh} This gave the sisters the opportunity to meet up with Sr M. Célestin and Sophie who had been stationed at Tyé, right beside Wagap, since July.

^{gg} This PFM, who was originally from Lifou, received the blue habit in July 1888.

^{hh} The Trappists made their foundation at Wagap. When they returned to France, they left everything to the mission. It was then decided to use these buildings to open the St Leonard refuge for freed convicts who wanted to finish their life in prayer and penance.

On 5 October the voyage ended.¹⁴² Sr M. de la Croix brought back with her fifteen girls for the school and “*the regret of not having gone to Belep*”.¹⁴³ Could she then imagine that in two years time she would be there and would spend the last years of her life there?

5) Sister Marie de la Croix leaves Saint-Louis

The time for departure was sounding for Sr M. de la Croix! We remember that she had arrived in Saint-Louis in August 1864. It was, twenty eight years later, in August 1892, at the time of the sisters’ retreat and changes of communities, that the vicar apostolic announced her departure. Is there an explanation for that decision?

- *Health reasons?*

The health problems she had experienced during the preceding years have already been mentioned. After 1874 the situation remained unchanged, in other words, worrying: crises occurred one after the other, sometimes very frequently. Bishop Vitte did not, however, seem unduly concerned. He stated in 1874:

*[Sr M. de la Croix] takes to her bed every month for two or three days at about the same time, which makes me think this illness will disappear with age.*¹⁴⁴

For her part, Sr M. de la Croix was less optimistic. In 1876, she wrote to the procurator in Lyon: “*My health is still very bad; I could die any minute.*”¹⁴⁵ Fr Fraysse himself, regretted that she was so “*often affected by her emotional sufferings*” which did not make the life of the sisters any easier.¹⁴⁶ He thought that there were appalling disorders in her whole system¹⁴⁷ and he also expected her to die soon.¹⁴⁸ She often received the sacrament of the sick.

Finally, it was Bishop Vitte who was right. With the passing of years, these very troublesome and painful crises disappeared. Fr Fraysse agreed it was so when he wrote to Fr Poupinel in 1881:

*Her health is improving and if the anaemia can be controlled and the crises pass with age, we can count on her help for a long time,*¹⁴⁹

because she was badly needed at Saint-Louis where she still did “*better than anyone else*”.¹⁵⁰

References to Sr M. de la Croix’s health then become less frequent and are no longer alarming. In 1882, Fr Vigouroux spoke of neuralgia,¹⁵¹ in 1889, bilateral pneumonia worried those around her.¹⁵² She herself, in her letters to the Filles de Marie, mentioned some neuralgia¹⁵³ and headaches,¹⁵⁴ but all finally seemed harmless and could not explain her departure from Saint-Louis.

- ***Trouble at the school?***

Fr Pionnier, in the biography he dedicated to Sr M. de la Croix, spoke of difficulties that the sister would have had with the senior students of the school and we have no reason to doubt him. This is what he wrote on the subject; he was describing her departure for Belep, at 4 am on 6 October 1892:

But the school itself, the children whom the sister had cared for with such tenderness and devotion, in vain did she look for them in the semi-darkness, not one was there. Why weren’t they there? It was not a mystery for the one towards whom this abstention was aimed. It is not yet the moment to identify the origin and causes of the harmful influence that withered the hearts of all the senior students. To the immense sacrifice that the

*separation imposed on her, must be added the bitterness caused by the darkest ingratitude. [...]*¹⁵⁵

The priest's extreme discretion as to why these older ones had this attitude is understandable.

In rereading the letters that Sr M. de la Croix wrote during this period - the end of the 80s - to the Filles de Marie, one cannot but notice that she said little about this matter. It was only in correspondence with Colette, herself a native of Saint-Louis, that some minor clues can be picked up. In December 1886 she regretted having "*few teachers, very few girls of good will*", which meant that she had to look after all the classes, "*with 80 girls and all the rest as you know*".¹⁵⁶ Several months later she asked Colette to tell "*those who are going to come with the sister how ill-tempered I am in order to make them reflect*".¹⁵⁷ Finally, in September 1888, she confided to her: "*God will no doubt replace me soon for the good of all.*"¹⁵⁸ Tenuous as those clues are, they are all that will be known about the matter.

- ***Who is going to replace her?***

It is natural to ask this question, because, for years, it was her qualities as a formator and educator that had justified her being kept at Saint-Louis.

Now, among the sisters of the Third Order Regular of Mary who had come to New Caledonia, there was just such a person who stood out for the work she had achieved. Sr M. Ste Anne, who was in charge of the school at Nathalo in Lifou, was a good educator as well as a good organiser. She was also appreciated by the Filles de Marie stationed on Lifou. Young - she had just turned thirty in 1892 - and very healthy; it was understandable that Bishop Fraysse would have thought of putting her in charge of the house at Saint-Louis.

Sr M. de la Croix who knew and esteemed her could leave in peace. She was named for Belep where she was to live and take care of the leprosy patients who were going to be gathered there. She left happily because a position of dedication was proposed for her. At that time, when no cure was known for this illness, to go and live with the patients was surely a way of exposing oneself to becoming a leprosy patient too. She knew that very well but did not seem to worry about it.

ENDNOTES - CHAPTER V

- ¹ Croix-Poupinel, 05.07.1866 - ASMSM 221.2 (OPS III, 427)
- ² cf. Vigouroux-Poupinel, 04.02.1867; Croix-Poupinel, 13.02.1869 - APM VM 227
- ³ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 16.01.1869 - APM VM 227
- ⁴ cf. Rougeyron-Goujon, 10.09.1867 - AAN 8.5
- ⁵ Croix-Poupinel, 30.11.1865 - APM VM 227
- ⁶ Croix-Goujon, 18.06.1866 - AAN 8.5
- ⁷ Croix-Poupinel, 05.07.1866 - ASMSM 221.2
- ⁸ cf. Croix-Forestier, 02.10.1866 - ASMSM 221
- ⁹ Caroline-Poupinel, 02.12.1867 - APM VM 227
- ¹⁰ cf. Caroline-Poupinel, 21.03.1868, 19.07.1868 - APM VM 227
- ¹¹ Croix-Poupinel, 16.01.1869 - APM VM 227 (OPS III, 512 - unpublished passage)
- ¹² Croix-Poupinel, 13.02.1869 - APM VM 227
- ¹³ Croix-Poupinel, 08.05.1869 - APM VM 227 (OPS III, 521)
- ¹⁴ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 31.08.1867 - APM VM 227
- ¹⁵ cf. Croix-Angéla, 16.03.1872 - ASMSM 226.45
- ¹⁶ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 14.06.1872 - ASMSM 221.2
- ¹⁷ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 18.06.1873 - ASMSM 221.2
- ¹⁸ Croix-Poupinel, 14.07.1873 - ASMSM 221.2
- ¹⁹ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 11.07.1872 - ASMSM 221.1
- ²⁰ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 01.12.1873 - ASMSM 221.2
- ²¹ Croix-Germain, 03.11.1874 - ASMSM 221.52 (OPS IV, 643 - unpublished passage)
- ²² *ibid.*
- ²³ Croix-Poupinel, 11.07.1872 - ASMSM 221.2 (OPS IV, 600 - unpublished passage)
- ²⁴ Croix-Germain, 03.11.1874 - ASMSM 221.52 (OPS IV, 643 - unpublished passage)
- ²⁵ cf. *Le Moniteur de la N. Calédonie*, official publication, 749, p. 28; 750, p. 37
- ²⁶ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 28.03.1874 - ASMSM 221.2
- ²⁷ cf. Rougeyron-Vitte, 22.11.1873 - AAN 13.3
- ²⁸ Croix-Poupinel, 27.12.1873 - ASMSM 221.2
- ²⁹ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 28.03.1874 - ASMSM 221.2

- ³⁰ Register of Episcopal Council decisions, p. 8 - AAN 12.1
 See also Fraysse-Poupinel, 27.03.1874 - APM ONC 418;
 Vigouroux-Poupinel, 27.04.1874 - APM ONC 208
- ³¹ Fraysse-Poupinel, 27.03.1874 - APM ONC 418
- ³² cf. Vitte-Sup. gen. of the Assumption, 19.08.1874 - Archives,
 Sisters of the Assumption
- ³³ cf. Croix-Germain, 03.11.1874 - ASMSM 221.52
- ³⁴ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 24.03.1876 - ASMSM 221.2
- ³⁵ Vigouroux-Poupinel, 27.04.1874 - APM ONC 208 (OPS IV, 636);
 see also Croix-Poupinel, same date - ASMSM 221.2
- ³⁶ cf. Croix-Germain, 03.11.1874 - ASMSM 221.52
- ³⁷ Croix-Poupinel, 29.11.1871 - ASMSM 221.2
- ³⁸ Croix-Poupinel, 08.10.1871 - ASMSM 221.2
- ³⁹ Croix-Angela, 16.03. 1872 - ASMSM 226.45
- ⁴⁰ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 25.09.1875 - ASMSM 221.2
- ⁴¹ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 26.08.1878 - ASMSM 221.2
- ⁴² cf. Croix-Poupinel, 11.05.1881 - ASMSM 221.2
- ⁴³ cf. Mgr Trochu : *Vie de Mère Marie Thérèse*, p. 189;
 cf. bibliography; see also Vigouroux-Poupinel, 04.01.1882 -
 APM ONC 208
- ⁴⁴ Croix-Poupinel, 27.04.1874 - ASMSM 221.2
- ⁴⁵ cf. Croix-Germain, 03.11.1874 - ASMSM 221.52
- ⁴⁶ Croix-Poupinel, 28.03.1874 - ASMSM 221.2 (OPS IV, 635)
- ⁴⁷ cf. Vitte-Poupinel, 23.04.1874 - APM ONC 418
- ⁴⁸ cf. Croix-Germain, 16.06.1875 - ASMSM 21.52
- ⁴⁹ cf. Croix-Germain, 03.11.1874 - ASMSM 221.52
- ⁵⁰ *ibid.*
- ⁵¹ Croix-Germain, 02.09.1875 - ASMSM 221.52 (OPS IV, 657)
- ⁵² *ibid.*
- ⁵³ Vitte-Germain, 03.09.1875 - APM ONC 418 (OPS IV, 658)
- ⁵⁴ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 02.09.1875 - ASMSM 221.2
- ⁵⁵ Croix-Germain, 02.09.1875 - ASMSM 221.52 (OPS IV, 657)
- ⁵⁶ Fraysse-Poupinel, 27.08.1875 - APM ONC 418
- ⁵⁷ cf. Croix-Germain, 02.09.1875 - ASMSM 221.52
- ⁵⁸ Croix-Poupinel, 05.10.1875 - ASMSM 221.2
- ⁵⁹ Marie-Poupinel, 02.10.1875 - OPS IV, 663; letters of Isabelle and
 Scholastique - OPS IV, 660, 662

- ⁶⁰ Fraysse-Poupinel, 27.08.1875 - APM ONC 418
- ⁶¹ Croix-Germain, 02.09.1875 - ASMSM 221.52 (OPS IV, 657)
- ⁶² Croix-Poupinel, 29.06.1876 - ASMSM 221.2 (OPS IV, 667)
- ⁶³ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 12.07.1876 - ASMSM 221.2
- ⁶⁴ Croix-Poupinel, 04.08.1876 - ASMSM 221.2
- ⁶⁵ Croix-Poupinel, 28.11.1876 - ASMSM 221.2
- ⁶⁶ *ibid.*
- ⁶⁷ Croix-Poupinel, 29.06.1876 - ASMSM 221.2 (OPS IV, 667)
- ⁶⁸ cf. Croix-Germain, 31.08.1877 - ASMSM 221.52
- ⁶⁹ Croix-Poupinel, 30.08.1877 - ASMSM 221.2 (OPS IV, 694 - unpublished passage)
- ⁷⁰ Croix-Poupinel, 11.05.1881 - ASMSM 221.2 (OPS IV, 781 - unpublished passage)
- ⁷¹ *ibid.*
- ⁷² cf. Fraysse-Poupinel, 17.09.1881 - APM ONC 418
- ⁷³ Fraysse-Poupinel, 13.05.1881 - APM ONC 418 (OPS IV, 782)
- ⁷⁴ Croix-Colette, 22.11.1883 - ASMSM 223.332. See also Croix-Colette, 09.06.1889
- ⁷⁵ Croix-Colette, 21.04.1888 - ASMSM 223.332. See also Croix-Agrippina, 24.04.1889 - ASMSM 223.3
- ⁷⁶ cf. Croix-Agrippina, 04.12.1883 - ASMSM 223.3
- ⁷⁷ cf. Croix-Agrippina, 24.04.1889 - ASMSM 223.3
- ⁷⁸ Fraysse-Poupinel, 13.05.1881 - APM ONC 418 (OPS IV, 782)
- ⁷⁹ Vitte-Directeur de la Ste Enfance, 02.02.1874 - Arch. de la Ste Enf., Paris, Océanie C. 699
- ⁸⁰ Vitte-Poupinel, 15.02.1874 - APM ONC 418 (OPS IV, 632 - unpublished passage)
- ⁸¹ Minutes of Episcopal Council meeting, 20.02.1874 - AAN 12.1, p. 5, 6
- ⁸² cf. Gaide-Poupinel, 18.06.1874 - APM ONC 208
- ⁸³ Vigouroux-Poupinel, 18.06.1874 - APM ONC 208
- ⁸⁴ Vigouroux-Poupinel, 03.04.1875 - APM ONC 208
- ⁸⁵ Fraysse-Poupinel, 27.08.1875 - APM ONC 418
- ⁸⁶ Vitte-Germain, 10.07.1875 - APM ONC 418
- ⁸⁷ Vitte-Germain, 03.09.1875 - APM ONC 418
- ⁸⁸ Croix-Poupinel, 23.04.1875 - ASMSM 221.1
- ⁸⁹ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 23.04.1875 - ASMSM 221.2

- ⁹⁰ cf. Croix-Germain, 26.04.1875 - ASMSM 221.52
- ⁹¹ Croix-Poupinel, 23.04.1875 - ASMSM 221.2 (OPS IV, 652)
- ⁹² Croix-Poupinel, 21.05.1875 - ASMSM 221.2
- ⁹³ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 02.09.1875 - ASMSM 221.2
- ⁹⁴ Croix-Germain, 16.06.1875 - ASMSM 221.52
- ⁹⁵ cf. Vitte-Poupinel, 06.08.1875 - APM ONC 418
- ⁹⁶ cf. Vitte-Germain, 03.09.1875 - APM ONC 418
- ⁹⁷ cf. Alexandre-Poupinel, 30.09.1875 - APM ONC 208
- ⁹⁸ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 02 / 07.09.1875 - ASMSM 221.2
- ⁹⁹ Croix-Poupinel, 26.02.1876 - ASMSM 221.2 (OPS IV, 665 - unpublished passage)
- ¹⁰⁰ Vitte-Favre, 29.09.1875 - APM ONC 418
- ¹⁰¹ Croix-Poupinel, 29.06.1876 - ASMSM 221.2
- ¹⁰² Croix-Poupinel, 19.01.1877 - ASMSM 221.2
- ¹⁰³ Croix-Poupinel, 18.03.1877 - ASMSM 221.2
- ¹⁰⁴ Croix-Germain - 10.05.1878 - ASMSM 221.52
- ¹⁰⁵ Croix-Poupinel, 19.01.1877 - ASMSM 221.2
- ¹⁰⁶ Montrouzier-his family, 29.10.1880 - AAN 9.4
- ¹⁰⁷ Fraysse-Poupinel, 27.08.1875 - APM ONC 418
- ¹⁰⁸ Fraysse-Poupinel, 06.10.1876 - APM ONC 418
- ¹⁰⁹ Fraysse-Germain, 01.05.1879 - APM ONC 418
- ¹¹⁰ Vitte-Germain, 03.04.1875 - APM ONC 418 (OPS IV, 650)
- ¹¹¹ Vitte-Germain, 03.09.1875 - APM ONC 418
- ¹¹² Fraysse-Germain, 28.01.1876 - APM ONC 418
- ¹¹³ Croix-Poupinel, 19.01.1877 - ASMSM 221.2
- ¹¹⁴ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 18.03.1877 - ASMSM 221.2
- ¹¹⁵ Croix-Germain, 04.08.1877 - ASMSM 221.52
- ¹¹⁶ *ibid.*
- ¹¹⁷ Fraysse-Poupinel, 08.01.1880 - APM ONC 418
- ¹¹⁸ cf. S. M. Joseph-Poupinel, 10.07.1881 - ASMSM 320
- ¹¹⁹ Fraysse-Couloigner, 06.08.1884 - APM ONC 418 (OPS IV, 843, §5)
- ¹²⁰ cf. *Revue du Culte de Marie*, t. 2, p. 269 - 272
- ¹²¹ cf. Vitte-Germain, 01.01.1878 - APM ONC 418; Croix-Germain, 10.05.1878 - ASMSM 221.52
- ¹²² Fraysse-Méchin, 03.06.1889 - APM ONC 418
- ¹²³ Croix-Colette, 22.05.1892 - ASMSM 223.332
- ¹²⁴ Fraysse-Couloigner, 06.08.1884 - APM ONC 418 (OPS IV, 843)

- ¹²⁵ cf. Account of the voyage of Srs Mélanie, Marthe and Sébastien, 1892 - ASM
- ¹²⁶ Fraysse-Couloigner, 06.08.1884 - APM ONC 418 (OPS IV, 843); see also Fraysse-Poupinel, 29.04 / 17.08.1881 - APM ONC 418
- ¹²⁷ cf. Fraysse-Poupinel, 17.09.1881 - APM ONC 418
- ¹²⁸ cf. Fraysse-Couloigner, 22.10.1883 - APM ONC 418
- ¹²⁹ cf. Poupinel-Fraysse, 12.02.1880 - AAN 105.3
- ¹³⁰ cf. Vigouroux-Poupinel, 17.12.1878 - APM ONC 208
- ¹³¹ Croix-Poupinel, 14.12.1877 - ASMSM 221.2
- ¹³² Croix-Poupinel, 20.12.1878 - ASMSM 221.2
- ¹³³ cf. Fraysse-Couloigner, 22.10.1883 - APM ONC 418
- ¹³⁴ The following details are from the book *Lifou Pacifique-sud* (see bibliography)
- ¹³⁵ Croix-Agrippina, 04.12.1883 - ASMSM 223.3
- ¹³⁶ cf. Minutes of Episcopal Council meeting, 06 / 20.08.1890, p. 82, 84 - AAN 14.4
- ¹³⁷ cf. Croix-Apollonie, 17.08.1890 - ASMSM 223.3
- ¹³⁸ BERV, 23.08.1890 - AAN 90.1
- ¹³⁹ cf. BERV, 06.08.1890 - AAN 90.1, p. 82
- ¹⁴⁰ cf. Croix-Madeleine, 10.09.1890 - ASMSM 223.3
- ¹⁴¹ cf. Minutes of Episcopal Council, 06 / 20.08.1890 - AAN 14.4
- ¹⁴² cf. Croix - Spiritual Notes, II, p. 5, typed text - ASMSM 210
- ¹⁴³ Croix-M. du Rosaire, 31.10.1890 - ASMSM 233.3
- ¹⁴⁴ Vitte-Favre, 03.10.1874 - APM ONC 408
- ¹⁴⁵ Croix-Germain, 03.08.1876 - ASMSM 221.52 (OPS IV, 669); see also Croix-Poupinel, 29.10.1876
- ¹⁴⁶ Fraysse-Germain, 27.08.1878 - APM ONC 408
- ¹⁴⁷ cf. Fraysse-Germain, 04.04.1879 - APM ONC 408
- ¹⁴⁸ cf. Fraysse-Germain, 12.06.1879 - APM ONC 408
- ¹⁴⁹ Fraysse-Poupinel, 28.11.1879 - APM ONC 408
- ¹⁵⁰ Fraysse-Poupinel, 04.03.1881 - APM ONC 408
- ¹⁵¹ cf. Vigouroux-Poupinel, 4.01.1882 - APM ONC 208
- ¹⁵² cf. Fraysse-Hervier, 18.01.1889 - APM ONC 408
- ¹⁵³ cf. Croix-Agrippina, 22.10.1888 - ASMSM 223.3
- ¹⁵⁴ cf. Croix-Colette, 31.01.1887; Croix-Agrippina, 14.12.1889 - ASMSM 223.3; see also Croix-Beaulieu, 15.05.1882 - ASMSM 221.4

¹⁵⁵ Pionnier, *op. cit.*, p. 338 - AAN 113.6

¹⁵⁶ Croix-Colette, 04.12.1886 - ASMSM 223.3

¹⁵⁷ Croix-Colette, 23.07.1887 - ASMSM 223.3

¹⁵⁸ Croix-Colette, 19.08.1888 - ASMSM 223.3

CHAPTER VI

WITH THE LEPROSY PATIENTS IN BELEP (1892 - 1898)

1) Arrival of the missionaries in Belep (1856)

Belep is situated directly north of the mainland, but still within the lagoon. It is composed of two islands, Art and Pott, surrounded by many small islets.^a Those two islands were inhabited when in 1856, on 10 January to be exact, Frs Xavier Montrouzier and Pierre Lambert, accompanied by Br Gabriel, disembarked in the bay of Wala, on the western side of Art. The landform of this island is quite irregular so the population is scattered, generally along the sea shore. There are three villages on Pott.

The missionaries did not arrive alone. Unhappy with his people, the High Chief had left Belep some time before and gone to La Conception where he met some Christians and asked to be baptised. With the new name of Amabili and aware that the Belema^b wanted him to return, he consented to go back to his own place, provided his people also accepted the Christian faith.¹

The years passed. Fr Montrouzier, then Fr Lambert, were replaced by other missionaries and left Belep. In 1885, when the Governor^c of the colony planned to settle some former

^a Yandé, a third smaller island to the South East of Art was also inhabited as it still is today.

^b This is how the inhabitants of Art and Pott are called in the Belep language.

^c At that time, Monsieur Le Boucher, the first civilian governor who remained in New Caledonia from July 1884 to May 1886.

white convicts who were liberated^d on Art, Fr François Gautret, who had been on Belep since 1883, worried about what would become of the youth. He asked Bishop Fraysse to open a boarding school, especially for the boys, whom he thought were in greater danger than the girls, because of the promiscuity.² His confrere, Fr Jérôme Guitta, who had arrived at Belep at the same period, asked for a brother and a sister.³

And so, on 6 June 1886, thirty years after the priests' arrival, Sr Marie Joseph Peysson, accompanied by two Petites Filles de Marie,^e disembarked at Wala, where she very soon opened a school. It was a simple mud and straw dwelling, which housed the sisters and their pupils, not far from the church and the presbytery. There was no further question of brothers.

Sick and aged (she was 62), Sr Marie Joseph left Belep in June 1890 at the time of Bishop Fraysse's⁴ pastoral visit. Sr M. du Rosaire^f and Madeleine, a Petite Fille de Marie, replaced her in the month of July. Two years later, when the administration decided to open a leprosarium on Art, they left, as did all the rest of the population, and returned to Saint-Louis.^g

2) A leprosarium at Belep

In the mid 1870s people began to speak of leprosy in New Caledonia. In order to inform the Superior General of the

^d Namely, those who had been condemned to penal servitude and had completed their sentences, but were not permitted to go back to France: the colony had to be populated.

^e One of the two was Thérèse, from Ile des Pins. It is difficult to know who the other Fille de Marie was, perhaps Honorine from Pouebo.

^f Maria Tiand'o, originally from Lifou, received the blue habit on 12.09.1877 and made profession in the TORM on 5 May 1889.

^g Undoubtedly in July 1892, like the Belepians.

Society of Mary about the discussions taking place, Bishop Fraysse wrote to him in August 1892: “*In 1877, there were only about ten leprosy patients in the colony*”, but, unfortunately, no one at that time understood what a scourge leprosy was. People did not take any precautions and the disease invaded “*the population with frightening rapidity*”, and “*today we have to acknowledge that there are from two to three thousand people affected*”.⁵

- ***Decision to open a leprosarium in Belep***

In January 1889, the local Government took the decision, - even if “*alas! it was 8 years too late*”⁵ - to open a leprosarium in Belep.⁶ It was not possible to bring all the patients together at the Ile aux Chèvres^h where those from Nouméa and its surroundings had already been banished.⁷ That island was too small and too close to the coast.

Another three years passed. The plan of 1889 again surfaced in March 1892. Bishop Fraysse was informed of it by Mr Gallet, director of indigenous affairs,ⁱ who told him that a few months later the vicariate would have to cede the Mission buildings at Art, for a compensation set at about 12,000 francs.⁸

This decision, formalised by an order issued at Nouméa on 1 October 1892⁹ and confirmed by a decree signed in Paris

^h At first they thought of Tiga, off the coast of Lifou, but the chief of Leussi (Lifou) was opposed to it. Ile aux Chèvres is in Dumbéa bay, off the Ducos peninsula, thus very close to Nouméa. Another leprosarium had been opened in the Houaïlou region, on the East coast (BONC p. 43-44).

ⁱ Monsieur G. Gallet held this post until August 1893; he then became head of the Immigration service, and, in December, temporary Director of Internal Affairs. The sisters in Belep held him in high esteem.

by the President of the Republic^j on 22 September 1893, a year later. It was published in the *Journal officiel de Nouvelle Calédonie* on 13 January 1894.¹⁰ The order issued on 1 October 1892 made provision for a medical director, male nurses and caretakers, as well as a chaplain and nursing sisters. No doctor,^k male nurse or caretaker would ever go to Belep to look after the patients. On the other hand, a chaplain and nursing sisters would go: the whole weight of care-giving would be borne by the sisters while the chaplain would assume the function of director as well as his pastoral duties.

- ***Sister Marie de la Croix is assigned to Belep***

From the beginning of 1892, the bishop was faced with the question of whom among the priests and sisters would accompany the poor exiles who were going to feel the extent of this confinement, cruel for many families. Should not religion take its rightful place in Belep?¹¹ He called for volunteers and on 21 August 1892, in the letter to the superior general already quoted, he could announce:

I have received numerous requests, both from the priests and from the sisters when they first heard of the work to be established. I had only to choose and I have chosen the two most likeable faces in the vicariate: (with the unanimous advice of the Council) Very Rev. Fr Villard [...] and the Very Rev. Sister Marie de la Croix, a

^j It was Sadi Carnot at that time.

^k Only once, in February 1895, the doctor from Pam came to Belep: he arrived on the 13th and left on the 15th. Another doctor came in October 1897, but for scientific research: he did a skin biopsy on each of the patients but did not give them any treatment.

missionary here since 1856,¹ a religious of outstanding courage, whose qualities are appreciated by everyone.

In truth, Bishop Fraysse had already made his choice because the names of the priest and the sister were mentioned in the minutes of his Council's meeting of 8 June 1892. He knew his missionaries well and he knew that "*this new undertaking called for first rate people*".¹²

A few lines further on, in the same letter to the superior general, he added that Sr M. de la Croix would have as companion a local sister who played the harmonium and would be able to accompany the singing in liturgical services. This was Agrippina who, as mentioned above, exchanged the blue habit of the Petites Filles de Marie on 14 August for that of the Third Order Regular of Mary. She would be known as Sister Marie St Jean l'Evangéliste. These two became the "nursing sisters".

3) The opening of the leprosarium

As the inhabitants of Belep had left at the end of July to go to Balade, few people remained. A few leprosy patients were there, awaiting the arrival of others. Fr Eugène Barriol, who had been at Belep since 1890, also remained there with a handful of able-bodied men: he had embarked on the construction of a new church and a new presbytery at the beginning of the year.

- *Arrival of the sisters*

During this time the sisters at Saint-Louis were busy making preparations for the departure, set for 6 October. The

¹ A slight error of 2 years: the sister arrived in New Caledonia in December 1858, as noted in Chapter III.

evening before, the people there had said their good-byes to those who were leaving. All gathered at the home of the chief Joseph Wamytan. They thanked Sr M. de la Croix for all she had done for them over the past twenty-eight years. Of course, the family of Agrippina (Sr M. St Jean) was there. Following the customary speeches, Marie Den,^m a former pupil of Sr M. de la Croix, presented her with an offering on behalf of everyone: the people wanted to help cover the expenses involved in setting up Belep.¹³ We can imagine what an emotional moment this was! Would the two sisters ever return to Saint-Louis? Going and living among the leprosy patients, was it not already a form of burial?

Very early the next morning - and in the rain,¹⁴ - they left for Nouméa accompanied by Sr Marie Sainte Anne. They made a quick visit to the vicar apostolic who handed them the official letter appointing them to the Belep establishment.¹⁵ At 7 o'clock in the morning, they went on board the *Otway* which sailed up the West Coast of the main island and made its way towards Belep.¹⁶

At midday on Monday 10 October, after a problem-free journey, the sisters arrived at Wala. The boat dropped anchor a few metres off shore, which facilitated the disembarkation of the passengers and their luggage.

- ***Temporary accommodation in the old school***

Several rivers flowed into the bay, marking the boundaries of the villages, abandoned two months earlier, and their houses where the patients would take up residence when they arrived. Two paths led up from the shore: one, on the

^m Marie Den was the sister of Eugénie PFM, who had become Sr M. Joseph in the TORM. Sr M. de la Croix spoke often of her in her letters; they wrote quite often to each other.

right, went straight up to the church,ⁿ the other, slightly to the left of the first, led to the old presbytery where the sisters were to live. This house, with walls of clay mixed with straw, like all the houses of the area, was covered with thatch. For the moment it was inhabitable; some essential work would be done on it over the following weeks.^o

While waiting, the sisters settled into the house, situated further to the left on the mission land, which Fr Barriol had constructed in 1890 to accommodate the sisters and their students.¹⁷ This building was obviously larger than the presbytery and even had a second storey. On the ground floor were a large room, which would be the classroom, and three other smaller rooms. Upstairs was the dormitory. Sr M. de la Croix and Sr M. St Jean chose one of the small rooms at the end of the house for themselves; they would remain there for three months, until January 1893.

For the time being, they were busy preparing to welcome the patients and, in particular, the little girls who would live in this house, and be especially entrusted to their care. The large room on the ground floor quite naturally became the work room; one of the small rooms would serve as the room for doing dressings; and in another one, which was furnished with shelves, the sisters arranged the medicines. Meals would be taken on one of the two large verandahs surrounding the house; in case of bad weather, they would all eat in the large room.¹⁸

ⁿ This church, along with all the buildings mentioned below, has disappeared. In their place the dispensary and the school were constructed.

^o The plan of the establishment, as it was drawn up by Fr Villard in 1893, for Bishop Fraysse will be found at the end of this book, in Appendix 10.

- *Arrival of the first patients*

In the afternoon of Thursday 13 October, - that is, three days after the sisters - the *Ne Oblie* arrived. This ship left Nouméa on 4 October and took on board the leprosy patients from Saint-Louis, La Conception and Ile aux Chèvres. Then, sailing south, it called at Ile des Pins and Maré where other patients were waiting. It then sailed up the East Coast where three stops were scheduled: at Canala, where patients from the region (Kouaoua, Nakéty, Thio...) had already been gathered for some time in a small, make-shift leprosarium, at Houailou and at Pouebo where Fr Villard came on board. The patients' chaplain arrived at Belep with them. In a letter written to his bishop on the evening of 13 October, he spoke of his joy at having been chosen for this "*sublime vocation*", and he exclaimed: "*Thanks be to God! Thanks to you Mary! Thanks to Your Excellency!*"¹⁹

Needless to say, the sisters were there on the shore when the boat arrived: 235 patients, men, women and children, came down from the boat.^p Many of them were seriously affected; in January 1894, fifteen months later, sixty of them²⁰ were already dead.^q There were four white people among the arrivals: two freed convicts, Gallyer and Rougiès, who came from Ile aux Chèvres, Courtot, who was a shop-keeper at Houailou, and Cottin, a mechanic and petty officer in the navy, who boarded at Pouebo.

^p Among them were some wives who were not patients: they accompanied their husbands and became leprosy patients (cf. Letter Sr M. de la Croix-Apollonie, 05.07.1893 - ASMSM 223.3).

^q One patient died during the voyage: another woman from Canala, "*completely rotting*", was the first to die at Belep, on 26 October 1892, and the first to be buried in the new cemetery. She was baptised before her death.

- ***The sisters help the people to settle in***

Directed by Fr Villard and the sisters who lavished words of encouragement and comfort on them,²¹ the people settled into the various areas of Wala, according to their tribes of origin. Other patients, just as pitiful, would follow as the months went by: from Pouebo, Bondé and Ponérihouen. Between February and April 1895, a small sailing boat, the *Florence*, would bring 105 patients in three trips.²²

Over the following days, the sisters helped them to settle in, doing their best to get them all they needed: blankets, plates, spoons, knives, pots...²³ Afterwards they even attended to their clothing. They made jackets, pants, skirts as without delay they put their sewing skills at the service of everyone.²⁴ Sr M. de la Croix could write to Sr M. Anne in January 1893: “*Our people were all beautiful for Christmas!*”²⁵ They had collected the dirty and torn clothes in the houses, and had washed, repaired or replaced them with new ones.

4) The sisters’ tasks

- ***Looking after the girls in the infirmary***

On the evening of this sad 13 October, the sisters brought five young girls who had come from Ile aux Chèvres to the ‘infirmary’, as the former girls’ school would henceforth be known. It was there that the life of these children would gradually be organised, for worse rather than better in the early days.

Let us meet them. Suzanne^r and Clémentine^s were Melanésians originally from La Conception. Juliette, who was

^r Suzanne’s mother was from Belep. Sr M. de la Croix spoke of her as an intelligent girl, full of life.

white^t, Marie Pétazig^u and Marie Noblot,^v of mixed race, had, all been with the Sisters of Saint-Joseph of Cluny^w in Nouméa. At Ile aux Chèvres they had experienced almost total abandonment: apart from an elderly patient from Canala who used to prepare their meals,^x they were left to their own resources. When they arrived in Bélep, already greatly disfigured by the leprosy,

*one had no hands, the other no feet, the arms of another were rotting, the other one had only one eye, the last one had a tomato on the cheek,*²⁶

it was necessary to start by giving them a good wash because, as Sr M. St Jean wrote,

*they were all too dirty to touch. We washed them, made or fixed up their clothes and washed the sheets which were contaminated.*²⁶

^s Clémentine, who was very helpful, had a beautiful death in December 1896; as someone was offering her something to drink, she replied: “*Oh! don’t disturb me, let me think of the good Lord*” (Sr M. de la Croix-Sr M. Anne, 20.12.1896).

^t Juliette’s father, deceased at this time, was a freed convict who had been the executioner at the penitentiary; her mother used to write to her and send her little delicacies.

^u Marie Pétazig was the oldest of the five, and the most difficult at first.

^v Marie Noblot was wealthy; a lawyer in Nouméa managed her fortune and gave her a small income; she also received some parcels. Her father was European, an ex-military man, it seems, and her mother was from Canala.

^w There was an exchange of letters between them and Mother Théodonie during the first year; the sister even made small gifts for them.

^x For this service, he was remunerated by Marie Noblot’s lawyer.

The two sisters had no one to help them at that time. On 21 October, the *Guillaume Douarre* brought two Petites Filles de Marie who had leprosy: Philomène, originally from Touaourou, and Marie, from Bondé.²⁷ Both of them were going to help the sisters in their numerous tasks, as far as their health would allow.

It did not take long for the number of girls in the infirmary to increase. In April 1893, they were ten,²⁸ in December 1895, they were twenty five “*of all colours, ages and places of origin*”.²⁹

- ***Surrounding them with love***

The early months were difficult; it was only after a year that Sr M. de la Croix shared this with Sr M. Anne. She wrote to her:

*For many months these children did nothing but swear at us using the vilest expressions, the lewdest words. One of them called me a “thief” and that was the nicest word. The other said to me: “If only they had put this old witch in the village with the people instead of annoying us with her?” And so on and so forth. Sister St Jean had her large share. We never acted as if we heard them, even when the insults were said at point blank range. We prayed and the Blessed Virgin did the rest. Now, if we had to leave these children, our hearts would be broken.*³⁰

Because, as Sr M. de la Croix asked earlier on in the same letter, how could they thank God for such a change in their behaviour? These children no longer avoided them, on the contrary, they liked to be with the sisters: “*When Sr St Jean and I talk about them, we shed tears of gratitude,*” wrote Sr M. de la Croix.³⁰ In 1894, Fr Villard also noticed the good spirit in the house: “*These children are contented and happy*

with the sisters who know how to guide them, according to the stage of their illness."³¹

It doesn't take too much intelligence to understand how the sisters obtained this result: they surrounded the children with care and affection,³² they endeavoured to keep them occupied and make their lives pleasant.³³ From the first days, they were concerned with giving them the best food they could;³⁴ they lived with them the whole day;³⁵ they took them to visit the sick in the village,³⁶ they suggested outings for those who could walk,³⁷ and fishing expeditions for all of them;³⁸ they gave them classes³⁹ and taught them plain chant,⁴⁰ they asked them for whatever help they could give,⁴¹ showing them that they were needed. They suffered to see them suffer.⁴² They spoke to them of God's love and their entire lives were a witness to it. Together, they prayed for the other sick people.⁴³ And so these little girls found or re-found the way to God⁴⁴ and, when the time came, died in peace.⁴⁵ Sr M. de la Croix recognised that herself in 1894: she said, "*a good spirit that makes life enjoyable reigns in the house*".⁴⁶ In 1895, she wrote to her old friend, Fr Forestier: "*They are now my daughters ... they are the most beautiful*".⁴⁷ At that same period, when it was proposed that the sisters go to Saint-Louis for the retreat, both of them refused: "*What will our girls do, alone and sick*"⁴⁸; during this absence? they protested.

- ***Caring for the sick in the village***

As much as they were attached to their girls, they were not by any means their only preoccupation. The patients in the village needed them: they knew that and went to visit them as often as they could, which was practically every morning.⁴⁹

With Philomène and Marie, the two Petites Filles de Marie, and soon with the young girls from the infirmary also, the sisters would go off to do their rounds, from house to house, with their baskets of dressings under their arms.⁵⁰ They

stopped at each family, spending as much time there as necessary to care and console and to render a hundred and one services.

Sr M. de la Croix did not seem to regret not having a doctor to care for the patients. In February 1893, she wrote to Sr M. Anne:

*We have the good fortune of not having any doctors to carry out experiments and acquire a bit of knowledge to the detriment of the unfortunate patients.*⁵¹

Sr M. de la Croix, who saw these men, women and children at close quarters and observed the evolution of this terrible disease, had become convinced that: “*any cure is impossible*”.⁵² She maintained that all the sisters could do was to dress the wounds,⁵³ try to ease the people’s suffering,⁵⁴ talk with them,⁵⁵ encourage them to lead as normal a life as possible⁵⁶ and be with them to the very end.⁵⁷ An oasis of peace for them before they died, all things considered.

Their medications? Sulphur, calcium for use in baths or lotions, phenol, coal tar soap from Norway... The patients preferred bathing in the sea and the river to all of these remedies which brought them some relief but not a cure. They accepted more readily to take cold liver oil.⁵⁸

- ***Helped by Nérée***

Very soon the sisters were given the services of Nérée, a male nurse-aide, appointed by the administration and because of that received a small wage.

Nérée was originally from Ile des Pins. He had come to Saint-Louis to serve the Mission and had received the Third Order medal in March 1890.⁵⁹ This was the period when Bishop Fraysse, desirous of following the plans of the Holy See which was urging missionaries to form a local clergy, was

thinking of setting up a seminary.⁶⁰ Were there not already some Wallisian priests? So a ‘school for the clergy’ opened its doors at Saint-Louis during the following months and received several young men, tertiary-catechists, to whom Fr Chanrion, the future successor of Bishop Fraysse, taught Latin. Nérée was one of these first ‘Latin scholars’. But it was discovered that he had leprosy and must also take the road to Belep in October 1892.

- ***Sister Marie de la Croix, the soup maker***

Among the patients in the village, some were able to go fishing or grow some food,⁶¹ but others who were terribly deformed were incapable of even going to fetch water or prepare a meal for themselves. The sisters took care of them⁶² and Sr M. de la Croix’s soups were particularly appreciated. She told Sr M. de Bon Secours about this:

*I am ‘the soup sister’, a jack-of-all-trades. What would you say if you saw us moving through the village with an enormous pot of soup and all the sick with their nose to the door, holding out their bowls.*⁶³

A few months later she gave the same sister her soup recipe:

*How much effort is needed to have some vegetables for all the soups that I make; I strip all the trees: the cabbage tree knows me well, the kumara^y leaves, the leaves of the capsicum plant tremble at my approach.*⁶⁴

They also took meat, bread, tea and “other little delicacies” to “the sicker or more fragile” patients.⁶⁵

Those who were able-bodied did not hesitate to go up to the infirmary when they needed something. Since the sisters were in charge of it, the sick came to ask them for dressings,

^y The name given to sweet potatoes in several Pacific Island languages.

lotions and ointments,⁶⁶ the sisters also gave linen, salt, writing paper, envelopes... to those who needed them;⁶⁴ they were always available to receive and serve them.⁶⁷

5) Missionaries among the leprosy patients

If the sisters were anxious to provide these poor people with the care their condition required, if they endeavoured to relieve their physical and mental sufferings, and make their exile on Belep as painless as possible, there was yet no doubt that they had the even deeper desire to help them die well. “*We have not come here simply to close their eyes*”, wrote Sr M. de la Croix in October 1894.⁶⁸ A few months later, she very clearly affirmed that: “*We are completely taken up with our dear patients*”, but, “*the care of their souls is our greatest concern.*”⁶⁹ The letter she addressed to Fr Forestier in December 1895 summarises their situation well:

*Our task alongside these dear people is to care for them, but much more to prepare them for death, to console them, to satisfy their last desires because we are quite literally at their service.*⁷⁰

- *Among the Catholics*

In so far as the Catholics were concerned, their task was relatively easy. Sr M. de la Croix recognised that, on the whole, they were “*resigned and happy*” ... even if there were a few “*recalcitrants*”.⁷¹ She noted that many times she accompanied the priest when he brought communion to the sick.⁷² Each feast was the occasion for grand ceremonies at the Church where all those who were able, sang, accompanied by Sr M. St Jean on the harmonium.⁷³ For their first Christmas in Belep, Sr M. de la Croix, as “*a true mother of a family,*” was anxious to know if “*all her children had everything they needed for body and soul*”.⁷⁴ With the girls from the

infirmary, the sisters decorated the church.⁷⁵ Sr M. de la Croix was pleased to tell Sr M. Anne that there were numerous communions at Easter 1896.⁷⁶ Admittedly, the hymns were not beautiful because the patients' voices became more and more nasal as their illness progressed, but that didn't matter! In July 1896, Hélène and Louise, two women from Saint-Louis, who had become widows, "*moved to our place and lived in our infirmary, where they have peace,*" Sr M. de la Croix wrote to a *Petite Fille de Marie*, from St Louis.⁷⁷ In November of the same year, she told Sr M. Colette:^z

*We have lost our dear Gustave, a former seaman of the 'Guillaume Douarre'. His life was edifying, and likewise his death.*⁷⁸

As already mentioned, there were four Europeans among the patients. Several times, with great discretion for his name was never mentioned, Sr M. de la Croix spoke about one of them "*who had forgotten God for 34 years*"⁷⁹ and who, very gradually, returned to prayer because "*he wanted to change his ways*".⁸⁰ This grace compensated her for many hardships and she thanked the Lord for it.

- ***Among the Protestants***

Sr M. de la Croix also worried a great deal about the Protestants from Maré who began arriving at Belep from October 1892. Fr Villard noted in a letter written to Bishop Fraysse:

When the women or young girls from Maré have come to ask for some help at the infirmary, we have treated them as our own children, inviting them to share our girls'

^z Colette, originally from Koé, Dumbéa, was received as a PFM in June 1885, and made profession in the TORM ten years later; she then became Sr M. Colette.

*simple meal. Therefore we were not surprised to learn, by means of a letter written by Eugénie, a Petite Fille de Marie from the mission of Maré, to Sr M. St Jean: [...] “You are fortunate to be able to do some good for the heretics, because they wrote here saying that the women have a good relationship with you, go and visit you and eat with you.”*⁸¹

Nevertheless, contact with these ‘heretics’ was not always so easy. In 1893, Sr M. St Jean expressed their desolation at seeing them die “*like dogs*”, for they did not want the sisters at their bedside.⁸² A year later the same regret was expressed in writing by Sr M. de la Croix:

*Yesterday a woman from Maré died like a little dog. When we were passing by, a gang of people were guarding her door so that we could not say anything to her about the good Lord.*⁸³

They did, however, have the joy of announcing to those to whom they wrote that, among the Protestants, “*a young man from Maré wanted to become a Catholic*”, but he was abandoned by his people.⁸⁴ Then followed a recommendation to pray a great deal for him. He had been won over by the witness given by the sisters, “*charitable towards everyone*” without making any distinction between people.⁸⁵

- ***Among those not yet evangelised***

There were still many who were not yet evangelised in New Caledonia at that time; so the successive arrivals of patients included them too. They were the focus of the very special care and attention of Sr M. de la Croix and her companions. Sr M. de la Croix was very quick to note in her journal her desire to instruct them so that they could be baptised.⁸⁶ did Catholic theology at that time not maintain that without baptism there was no salvation? Therefore the sisters’

efforts were directed towards this objective: that no patient die without being baptised. In their letters, they both asked for prayers for this intention - they had to be snatched from the devil - and they announced their success. Often the patients waited for the last moment. *“It is so as to not tarnish their souls!”* thought Sr M. de la Croix.⁸⁷ They had, in the person of the Emperor Constantine, an illustrious predecessor!^{aa}

Rare were those who escaped their watchful concern.⁸⁸ Sr M. de la Croix wrote in April 1895 of her pain at the death of *“an unfortunate sorcerer who didn’t want to be baptised”*,⁸⁹ only to add immediately: *“Three others were indeed baptised and are now in heaven.”* In January 1894 Fr Villard wrote to his Bishop:

*An elderly man had been baptised. Before dying, he said to those who were looking after him: Thank the sisters sincerely for what they have done for me. Tell everyone that I am very happy to die baptised.*⁹⁰

In the same letter, the priest also wrote about:

An old woman baptised the day before at the point of death. The sisters said to her: ‘Hullo, Marie!’ She responded: ‘Yes, yes. Marie, who is half dead, but very happy!’

In the letter to Fr Forestier already frequently quoted, Sr M. de la Croix asserted without hesitation:

*The good Lord has granted many people who would never have become Christians in their tribal areas, the grace of baptism. When dying, they acknowledged that.*⁹¹

^{aa} Converted in 312 after his victory over Maxence in sight of the walls of Rome, the emperor Constantine accorded religious freedom the following year but was baptised himself only on his deathbed in 337.

- ***Victorine and the friends from Canala***

Among all these sick people, there was a group of women who held their attention - and ours - in a special way! Very soon Sr M. de la Croix called them “*our friends from Canala*”, and during the first few months she often spoke of them in her journal. In October 1892, she noted the warm welcome she received from “*a woman from Canala*”, called Victorine, who had been sick for four years. Then she recorded that this woman, without any religion, used to speak about religion to the other patients. On 22 November, she went to the priest’s house to ask for the medal^{bb} and sent an elderly man from Canala to do the same. For Christmas, the first at Belep, Victorine was there, at the Church, with a group of women, despite the threatening storm. After midnight Mass the sisters put everybody up in a shed - there was no question of letting them go back home in the rain - and brought them tea and biscuits.

In January 1893, Sr M. de la Croix commended Victorine to Sr M. Anne; she wrote:

*she is an apostle. Several women owe it to her that they were baptised before dying. If I had the time I would edify you with stories of our old friend; in the meantime, pray for her.*⁹²

In March of that year, seven women among the “*friends of Canala*” came to ask the sister to instruct them! Sr M. de la Croix promised them that Sr M. St Jean “*who is longing to do so*” would go to their place on Sundays to show them pictures “*as Peter Claver used to do.*”⁹³

In April 1894, it was to Sr M. de Bon Secours to whom Sr M. de la Croix wrote:

^{bb} At that time, a medal, worn on the chest, was given to all those who expressed their desire to be baptised.

*We spent time with our friends not yet baptised from Canala, to whom we take soup and meat especially. Not one of these women is capable of cooking up a pot of something for herself: they are blind, covered with wounds or without fingers; when they scratch themselves it is with a poor stump that makes one shudder. I sit there to have a little chat with them; they are my friends. One of them showed me a new wound of which I will spare you the details.*⁹⁴

Ten months later, in January 1895, again to Sr M. de Bon Secours, Sr M. de la Croix wrote:

*From the time of their arrival, we have gained the friendship of the women from Canala and the surrounding villages; we called these women 'our friends' and we loved them as such. By means of large pictures [...] we were able to give them religious instruction and, admittedly it was a joy for us. Oh! what delightful times I have spent in their midst! [...] Our friends from Canala numbered ten. They have all died and all were baptised, some of them in admirable dispositions.*⁹⁵

There was the pain at the death of her friends but the joy of knowing them to be in heaven. These sentiments filled her heart, but which was uppermost?

6) Community life

- *The sisters move into the former presbytery*

In January 1893, on the 11th to be exact,⁹⁶ the sisters left the infirmary and their girls to go and live in the former presbytery situated a little further to the right. It had been repaired through the efforts of Fr Barriol and his team of workmen. During the preceding weeks the house had been re-roofed with new straw, the floors redone, the verandah

repaired and the walls white-washed.⁹⁷ Right beside the house, to the left, a small kitchen, two metres by two metres, had been added. It was furnished, at Sr M. de la Croix's request, with a stove constructed by Gallyer, one of the two freed convicts, a brick-layer by trade.⁹⁸ Fr Villard absolutely insisted that the sisters have a separate kitchen from that of the children who "*want to see, touch and almost taste everything.*"⁹⁹ He was far from satisfied with the sisters' dwelling which he judged as clean and simple, but stifling.¹⁰⁰ In fact, the verandah did not go round the whole house, which had no windows at the back, so there was inadequate ventilation. He said that when the weather was very hot it was an oven; it would have been better to have it knocked down and construct a new and larger one.¹⁰¹

In the state it was in, the house was in no way palatial. It had only just been made liveable. When a cyclone threatened in March 1893, and the gusts of wind became stronger, the sisters hastened to strengthen the doors with crates and stones.¹⁰² In 1896, the priest^{cc} vowed to replace it with a new house, with a tiled roof and a verandah.¹⁰³ In May 1897, they stopped blocking the holes in the roof for fear they would see the house collapse.¹⁰⁴ At the end of that same year, the worm-eaten wooden beams were confided to God and the house was re-roofed!¹⁰⁵ It consisted of three rooms: in the middle a rather narrow parlour, furnished with four chairs, an armchair, a white wooden table, a harmonium and a small dresser painted grey, on which were three statues, one of the Blessed Virgin and two smaller ones of the Sacred Heart and St Joseph. To the right was Sr M. St Jean's bedroom and to the left, Sr M. de la Croix's. In each room there was a bed, a table, a chair and some shelves for books. In addition, there was a white wooden cupboard brought from Saint-Louis in Sr M. de la

^{cc} Fr Dominique Moris replaced Fr Villard, who died in May 1895.

Croix's room. On the wall was a cross with a piece of palm. In front of the house was an enclosure where the sisters planted whatever was sent to them from Saint-Louis.¹⁰⁶

- ***They gather together in the evening***

Given the number of their duties, the sisters did not spend much time in their house, apart from the night. They had a very full schedule which Sr M. de la Croix outlined to Sr M. de Bon Secours in October 1893 in response to her questions:

Our day, mine, begins about 4 am with meditation and then Mass at 5.15 am. I attend almost two Masses^{dd} when I pray for those I love, mentioning them by name. Breakfast for the children who get up under the watchful eye of a Fille de Marie; while Sr St Jean pays a visit to the hen house, supervises the children's dressings and I attend to the kitchens...^{ee} Visits to the villages according to the weather and the heat. Then there is class for the girls of our house and a short class for the little boys of the village who come to our place. Philomène or I attend to that. Sr St Jean takes care of the church, the music, the harmonium. Sr St Jean or I share all the sewing or work in the fields, everywhere. At 10.30 am all the four of us have spiritual reading. Study for our girls. At 11 am, examen of conscience. Sr St Jean serves the children's meal and I the priests. 11.30 am, lunch. Recreation for everyone. I take mine to the feet of Jesus so that others may come in their turn. At 2.30 pm Marie Petazig reads from a life of the saints. Singing classes and other amusing

^{dd} There were two priests at Bélep at that time: Fr Barriol left in April, but Fr Rougeyron arrived in August 1893.

^{ee} In the plural, as there was the children's kitchen, that for the priests and sisters, and the pots of food for the people in the village.

*[readings]... then another visit to the patients if necessary, and all sorts of work, as in the morning, broken by a visit to the Blessed Sacrament and evening prayer. Once more, attending to the children whose meals are served by Sr St Jean or me, even though the Filles de Marie preside at the tables and eat with our little patients. For our meals, we have had to obey and eat them apart in the small white house where I am writing to you. After everyone has gone to bed, we both withdraw and sew because we have more sewing than you can imagine. That is when one of us reads something to relax the other, and all the books I have left behind pass before my eyes. After the evening prayers each one goes to her room.*¹⁰⁷

In May 1896, Sr M. de la Croix gave a few supplementary details to Apollonie: “*disturbed all the time during the day*”, they only had this time in the evening to get together after those in the infirmary had gone to bed; until 9 pm “*one of us does some serious reading and we discuss it, that’s all*”.¹⁰⁸

7) **Prayer life**

- ***Retreats***

At Belep, as everywhere else, the annual retreats were the opportunity to re-immense oneself in prayer. The first took place in September 1893¹⁰⁹ and Fr Villard preached it (two meditations in the morning and one in the afternoon); Sr M. de la Croix gave the conferences for the sisters. A year later, in September 1894, Sr M. de la Croix, who had just been sick, was dragging herself during the retreat.¹¹⁰ The following retreat was scheduled only for January 1896. It was preached by Fr Guitta. She did not seem to have appreciated it much because the priest read from a notebook dating from the time

of his novitiate!¹¹¹ However it was a retreat “*without noise, turmoil or disturbance*”, “*truly hidden in our solitude in Belep*”.¹¹² This time the conferences were given by Sr M. de la Croix. Those who listened to them appreciated them because the subjects covered were very practical ones. This is what Sr M. St Jean said about them:

*Sr M. de la Croix was afraid of boring us and sometimes asked us if she kept repeating too much. We would say ‘No’, quite the opposite. For who would be weary of listening to a talk about religious life, other than people of the world for whom it is something unfamiliar? We were at ease, it was our mother who was speaking to us, instructing us, reminding us of what she had told us so often in novitiate!*¹¹²

Finally another retreat took place in March 1897. Being in March it was “*under the protection of our father St Joseph*”.¹¹³ It began on a Monday after the washing was done and went on without interrupting their work, and while one of the children in the infirmary was in her last agony and died.^{ff}

- ***The importance of prayer***

On Sundays, no doubt in the afternoon, they got together with Philomène and Marie; Sr M. de la Croix would do a reading with explanations and give some guidance. She also arranged the monthly retreat. In a letter to a Petite Fille de Marie she added:

*What sustains us, my daughter, is the meditation we are able to make in the morning without being disturbed and having the leisure to take a long time for it. As for me, I can easily have 2 or 2½ hours of prayer in the morning. After that we are busy with work.*¹¹⁴

^{ff} A reference to Joséphine Bouroua who died on 10 March 1897.

- ***Church ceremonies***

The church that Fr Barriol began to construct in 1892 would remain unfinished for a long time. It was in the shabby, dilapidated old church that the sisters went to pray and participate in the parish liturgies. Sr M. de la Croix often expressed her desolation at this “*dirty and damp church, where the rats and lizards indulge in all kinds of impudence*”,¹¹⁵ and where it rained just like outside.¹¹⁶ If there was a sudden shower and someone forgot to put things away, one had to run and save them, even in the middle of the night.¹¹⁶

The ceremonies usually attracted many people, Christians as well as those not yet evangelized. For Christmas 1892, the church was well decorated and the altar gleamed with lights. “*How well we prayed there!*” exclaimed Sr M. St Jean.¹¹⁷ However, as the months passed and illness gained ground, “*our feasts became silent, the voices died out*”.¹¹⁸ Sr M. de la Croix, who so loved the beautiful ceremonies at Saint-Louis, suffered at being deprived of them. After Fr Villard’s death, the priests who replaced him were aged and infirm. In 1897, Holy Week unfolded sadly:

*Since Wednesday, no Mass, no office, no sermon, in a word, nothing. A short Stations of the Cross on Good Friday and that’s all,*¹¹⁹

Sr M. de la Croix recorded. And at the end of the year for Christmas,

*Fr Moris announced that, since he could not give communion at the midnight Mass, there would be no Mass, as last year.*¹²⁰

That adds up to a lot of privations!

8) Father Villard

Fr Villard's death has been noted a little above. His 'departure' caused deep grief to the sisters. He was very good to them, as towards everyone. He was well placed to know with what devotion, zeal and piety¹²¹ they devoted themselves to their patients, and he was able to say so. In January 1894, he wrote in a letter to Bishop Fraysse: "*The sisters win the hearts of these poor unfortunate people very quickly by their attentiveness and their devotion.*"¹²² He also knew how to acknowledge it through gestures: whenever he could, on a feast day or any other occasion, he would celebrate Mass for someone who had died, for a sister or someone else. Sr M. de la Croix often referred to this in her letters, happy to tell her correspondents about it.

Fr Villard died on 31 May 1895 - last day of the month of Mary, Sr M. de la Croix noted - after three months' illness. He was 74 years old. As he himself had expressly requested, he was buried in the midst of 'his' children, in the cemetery reserved for the patients. And there that he still rests today.

Two months later, still sorrow-stricken, Sr M. de la Croix wrote: "*The grief in our heart is truly deep and our people will not quickly stop missing him.*"¹²³ In 1896, on the anniversary of his death, she again spoke of "*the Reverend and unforgettable Fr Villard*"¹²⁴ whom she still missed.

It was also in 1895 that Fr Rougeyron left Belep. He had arrived there in August 1893, since he had asked to finish his days on earth with the leprosy patients. However his health prevented him from exercising any ministry and he was becoming increasingly paralysed so he had to leave again in July 1895^{gg} by the boat that was bringing the replacement for

^{gg} He retired to Balade where he died in 1902.

Fr Villard, Fr Dominique Moris, who was named for this position because he could speak the language of most of the patients. In December, Fr Jérôme Guitta, already elderly, came to join Fr Moris in order to keep him company.

9) Closing of the leprosarium

In Belep the years passed, with their share of joys and sufferings.

There was very great isolation in the island. Every month the *Otway* called in to the bay of Wala to bring mail and fresh supplies. However, the fear of catching the disease and the stench were such that, very often, the crew did not come ashore, and left as soon as possible.

- *The sisters many and varied occupations*

Consequently the sisters were able to attend to their tasks calmly. Monday, as everywhere else, was laundry day: “*We do the laundry for 16, not counting the church washing,*” wrote Sr M. de la Croix in January 1893. She had just received “*12 packets of soap powder which does wonders*”, but had no pot in which to boil the linen. She was going to ask the administration for one.¹²⁵ They had one or two cows and a few goats which permitted them, from time to time, to make cheeses that “*the priest really appreciates*”.¹²⁵ For the feast of the Annunciation that year, Sr M. de la Croix had two roosters she had reared, killed, and Fr Villard noted in his diary, “*This is the first time since our arrival that we have eaten poultry.*”¹²⁶ As there were no green vegetables on the island, they tried to establish a vegetable garden, but the result depended on the vagaries of the weather: if the gusts of wind were too strong - and Belep was a very windy place! - or it rained heavily, the seedlings were carried away.¹²⁷

- ***Sister Marie de la Croix gradually grows old***

Sr M. de la Croix's health was certainly much better than in the 1870s so she rarely had to interrupt her activities. On several occasions she mentioned headaches and facial pain¹²⁸ from which she had suffered for years. In July 1894, she recovered from a minor attack and was awaiting the next.¹²⁹ The following year, an "*abscess that had come to a head*" on her hip, was a cause of great fatigue.¹³⁰ In 1897, rheumatism of the right hand wanted to make her give up work!¹³¹ The following days this rheumatism '*went down*' into her leg. This is how she described it to Sr M. Anne:

*I felt such a strong pain in my right foot on the Saturday, eve of the Holy Name of Mary, that I cried out in pain. You know how hypersensitive I am.*¹³²

No comments!

A few months earlier, when she had just celebrated her birthday, she had written again to Sr M. Anne: "*Is it surprising that I am carrying the weight of my 65 years?*"¹³³

- ***The sisters' happiness in the midst of 'their children'***

The preceding pages make it clear that the sisters assumed their multiple tasks each day with great courage. We can go further and affirm that they were happy for they said so many times in their letters: "*We are completely taken up with our dear leprosy patients,*" Sr M. de la Croix wrote;¹³⁴ and also, they are "*our children, a portion of our inheritance*".¹³⁵ She even declared unambiguously: "*My patients are my joy.*"¹³⁶ To a Petite Fille de Marie she went so far as to write:

*Dead to the world, happy to no longer count for anything... we know only the leprosy patients and the leprosarium. These are our children. We have 274 of them and we would like even more.*¹³⁷

Of course, the girls of the infirmary held a special place in her heart. She was an educator in every fibre of her being; her work at Ile des Pins and at Saint-Louis bore witness to that. So there is no reason for surprise on reading what she wrote to Sr M. Anne in 1893:

*Even if I am a nursing sister at present, I have remained and will always remain a missionary sister. If I had not been surrounded by children here, I don't know what would have happened for that is our primary calling.*¹³⁸

In their distress, these children needed joy and fun. Sr M. de la Croix did her best to meet their need. In 1894 she wrote: “*I sing and act young to entertain those in the house,*”¹³⁹ and in 1895: “*I play the young person to relieve the boredom of my girls.*”¹⁴⁰ In September of that year, after having spoken of Sr M. St Jean’s difficulties at playing the harmonium with “*her poor hands that have become stiff through work,*” she added:

*Still, we sing with our girls who have no hands or feet and almost all of whom have no lungs [to sing]... Nothing new in this. We are always happy here.*¹⁴¹

- ***Opening of a leprosarium at Aoué***

This pitiful happiness was not going to last. At the end of 1896, Sr M. de la Croix informed Sr M. Colette of a plan that was in the process of being implemented:

*A leprosarium for convicts and freed men is being set up in the Aoué Bay, 6 to 8 km away from us. In December forty sick men are to arrive.*¹⁴²

This plan distressed Sr M. de la Croix who did not hide her anxiety in a letter to Sr M. Anne: “*My God, save our poor people. For four years now, we have been praying God to keep this scourge far away from us...*”¹⁴³

The patients arrived during 1897 and Sr M. de la Croix noted in September that:

*the supervisor and his wife, well-meaning people, welcome our priests and do what they can so that the reasonably able-bodied convicts stay at home.*¹⁴⁴

- ***Closure of the Wala leprosarium (May 1898)***

While somewhat reassured by this, she experienced another much more serious trial. The sisters learnt in October 1897 “*that the Balade people were going to return to Belep and that the patients were going to leave!*”¹⁴⁵ She announced this to Sr M. Colette in January:

*You know that Belep is going to be evacuated very soon and our poor patients will return to their homes! It is a great misfortune, my daughter.*¹⁴⁶

and the same day she wrote to Sr M. Anne:

*Let us not speak about Belep, it is too sad. We are all like a bird on a branch. Oh! how we need God's help...!*¹⁴⁷

The Belepians returned home even before the patients had left: on Easter Sunday 1898 - 10 April - more than 100 of them received communion, “*but the children taken out of the Balade schools are wandering around like their parents*”.¹⁴⁸ As long as the leprosy patients were there, they could not actually return to their homes since they were occupied!

The departure of these unfortunate patients took place in May; Sr M. de la Croix was dismayed:

*Nero's edict is being carried out. Last Thursday, 5 May, the steamboat 'Loyalty' came to take 80 of our poor patients*¹⁴⁹

and the following Thursday, 12 May, the same boat took the others:

*It was an indescribable spectacle; you would have to have seen it. These poor people were crying and holding out to us their hands which we grasped without thinking of the danger; we were grasping their stumps, hands without fingers. Oh! those unfortunate people whom we loved so much and were so happy to console. God willed it so, may it be!*¹⁴⁹

Again they were going to be scattered in small make-shift leprosaria and more or less left to their own resources.

Among those leaving was Nérée, the nurse and also Juliette, the only survivor of the five little girls who had come from Ile aux Chèvres in October 1892. Sr M. de la Croix would learn of her death at the end of 1900.¹⁵⁰

- ***The sisters' sorrow***

Sr M. de la Croix did not hide her sorrow and that of her companion, especially concerning the infirmiry girls:

*Sr St Jean's heart and mine are overwhelmed with sadness when we think that our children will no longer go to school and will become savages again, living far from the Mission. We who have taken so much care of these little girls, our children.*¹⁵¹

Her heart was so heavy that all she could say to Sr M. Anne was:

*"Pray for our leprosy patients and pray for us."*¹⁵²

ENDNOTES - CHAPTER VI

- ¹ cf. *Journal du P. Lambert* - AAN 30.1
- ² cf. Gautret-Fraysse, 23.03.1885 - AAN 30.1
- ³ cf. Guitta-Fraysse, 22.03.1885 - AAN 30.1
- ⁴ cf. BERV, suppl. 19.07.1890 - AAN 90.1
- ⁵ Fraysse-Martin, 21.08.1892 - APM ONC 418.1
- ⁶ cf. BERV, suppl. n° 29, 27.07.1889 - AAN 90.1
- ⁷ cf. Minutes of Episcopal Council meeting, St-Louis, 29.01.1890, p. 54 - AAN 14.4
- ⁸ cf. Minutes of Episcopal Council meeting, Nouméa, 23.03.1892; also 08.06.1892 - AAN 14.4, p. 138; also p. 144
- ⁹ cf. BONC 1892, p. 325, AAN
- ¹⁰ BONC, 1893, p. 465ff.; see also *Echo de la France Catholique*, 20.01.1894
- ¹¹ cf. BERV, suppl. 11.06.1892 - AAN 90.1
- ¹² Fraysse-Provicaire des N. Hébrides, 19.07.1892 - AAN 111.1
- ¹³ cf. Pionnier, op. cit., p. 337 - AAN 113.6
- ¹⁴ cf. Croix-Anne, 08.10.1892 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹⁵ cf. *Journal de S. M. de la Croix*, 1892-1893 - ASMSM 210.6
This official document cannot be traced.
- ¹⁶ cf. *Journal de S. M. de la Croix*, 1892-1893 - ASMSM 210.6
- ¹⁷ cf. Le Vasseur-Fraysse, 13.08.1890 - AAN 30.2
- ¹⁸ cf. Croix-Bon Secours, 29.10.1893 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹⁹ Villard-Fraysse, 13.10.1892 - AAN 30.2
- ²⁰ cf. Villard-Fraysse, 05.01.1894 - AAN 30.3
- ²¹ cf. *S. M. de la Croix à la léproserie de Bélep*, notes of S. M. St Jean, p. 9 - ASMSM 210.3 (copy)
- ²² cf. Villard-Gaide, 05.04.1895 - AAN 30.3
- ²³ cf. Villard-Fraysse, 20.10.1892 - AAN 30.2
- ²⁴ cf. Villard-Fraysse, 05.01.1894 - AAN 30.2
- ²⁵ Croix-Anne, 04.01.1893 - ASMSM 223.2
- ²⁶ M. St Jean-Apollonie, 23.10.1892 - ASMSM 223.33
- ²⁷ cf. *Journal de S. M. de la Croix*, 1892-1893 - ASMSM 210.6
- ²⁸ cf. Croix-Apollonie, 08.04.1893 - ASMSM 223.33
- ²⁹ Croix-Forestier, 27.12.1895 - ASMSM 221.51
- ³⁰ Croix-Anne, 28.10.1893 - ASMSM 223.2

- ³¹ Villard-Fraysse, 08.01.1894 - AAN 30.3
³² cf. Croix-Colette, 29.08.1893 - ASMSM 223.3
³³ cf. Croix-Apollonie, 05.07.1893; also Croix-Colette, 03.01.1894 - ASMSM 223.3
³⁴ cf. Croix-Fraysse, 15.10.1892 - AAN 116.9
³⁵ cf. Croix-Bon Secours, 01.11.1892 - ASMSM 223.2; also Croix-Colette, 01.03.1894 - ASMSM 223.3
³⁶ cf. *Journal de S. M. de la Croix*, 03.02.1893 - ASMSM 210.6; also Croix-Bon Secours, 23.05.1894 - ASMSM 223.3
³⁷ cf. Croix-Anne, 06.03.1893 - ASMSM 223.2
³⁸ cf. Croix-Madeleine, 24.07.1895; also Croix-Apollonie, 07.04.1896 - ASMSM 223.3
³⁹ cf. *Journal de S. M. de la Croix*, 09.12.1892 - ASMSM 210.6; also Croix-Anne, 04.01.1893 - ASMSM 223.2; also Croix-Apollonie, 08.04.1893 - ASMSM 223.3
⁴⁰ cf. Croix-Apollonie, 05.07.1893; also Croix-Colette, 29.08.1893; also 03.01.1894 - ASMSM 223.2
⁴¹ cf. Croix-Anne, 04.01.1893; also Croix-Bon Secours, 08.04.1894 - ASMSM 223.2
⁴² cf. Croix-Anne, 30.10.1896; also 14.06.1897 - ASMSM 223.2
⁴³ cf. Villard-Fraysse, 05.01.1894 - AAN 30.3
⁴⁴ cf. *Journal de S. M. de la Croix*, 21.11.1892, 02.02.1893; also 20.03.1893 - ASMSM 210.6; also Croix-Fraysse, 25.07.1893 - APM 116.9
⁴⁵ cf. Croix-Anne, 14.06.1897 - ASMSM 223.2
⁴⁶ cf. Croix-Bon Secours, 23.05.1894 - ASMSM 223.2
⁴⁷ Croix-Forestier, 27.12.1895 - ASMSM 221.51
⁴⁸ cf. Croix-Bon Secours, 03.10.1895; also Croix-Anne, 06.10.1895 - ASMSM 223.2
⁴⁹ cf. Croix-Bon Secours, 01.11.1892 ASMSM 223.2
⁵⁰ cf. M. St Jean-Apollonie, 08.06.1893 - ASMSM 233.2
⁵¹ Croix-Anne, 05.02.1893 - ASMSM 223.2; see also Villard-Fraysse, 01.05.1893 - AAN 30.2; also Croix-Anne, 06.11.1892 - ASMSM 223.2
⁵² Croix-Anne, 06.11.1892 - ASMSM 223.2
⁵³ cf. Croix-Bon Secours, 09.03.1894 - ASMSM 223.2
⁵⁴ cf. Croix-Apollonie 07.09.1893 - ASMSM 223.3; also M. St Jean-

- Frayse, 30.12.1892 - AAN 118.1; also M. St Jean-Apollonie, 08.06.1893 - ASMSM 233.2
- ⁵⁵ cf. Croix-Bon Secours, 08.04.1894 - ASMSM 223.2
- ⁵⁶ cf. Croix-Apollonie, 08.04.1893 - ASMSM 223.3
- ⁵⁷ cf. Croix-Anne, 04.01.1893 - ASMSM 223.2
- ⁵⁸ cf. *Rapport sur la léproserie de Bélep*, Croix-Frayse, 01.01.1894 - AAN 116.9
- ⁵⁹ cf. BERV, suppl. 12.04.1890 - AAN 90.1
- ⁶⁰ cf. Fraysse-Martin, 01.08.1890 - APM ONC 418
- ⁶¹ cf. Croix-Forestier, 27.12.1895 - ASMSM 221.51
- ⁶² cf. Villard-Frayse, 06.11.1893 - AAN 30.2
- ⁶³ Croix-Bon Secours, 06.11.1893 - ASMSM 223.2
- ⁶⁴ Croix-Bon Secours, 05.05.1895 - ASMSM 223.2
- ⁶⁵ Villard-Frayse, 20.10.1893 - AAN 30.2
- ⁶⁶ cf. Villard-Frayse, 08.01.1894 - AAN 30.3
- ⁶⁷ cf. M. St. Jean-Apollonie, 08.06.1893 - ASMSM 233
- ⁶⁸ Croix-Bon Secours, 30.10.1894 - ASMSM 223.2
- ⁶⁹ Croix-Anne, 07.04.1895 - ASMSM 223.2
- ⁷⁰ Croix-Forestier, 27.12.1895 - ASMSM 221.51
- ⁷¹ Croix-Apollonie, 08.11.1893 - ASMSM 223.3; see also M. St Jean-Frayse, 07.11.1893 - ASMSM 233.3
- ⁷² cf. Croix-Anne, 06.11.1892; also 05.02.1893 - ASMSM 223.2
- ⁷³ cf. Villard-Frayse, 28.12.1892 - AAN 30.2
- ⁷⁴ Croix-Anne, 04.01.1893 - ASMSM 223.2
- ⁷⁵ cf. Villard-Frayse, 28.12.1892 - AAN 30.2
- ⁷⁶ cf. Croix-Anne, 05.04.1896 - ASMSM 223.2
- ⁷⁷ cf. Croix-Eugénie, 26.07.1896 - ASMSM 223.3
- ⁷⁸ Croix-Colette, 26.11.1896 - ASMSM 223.3
- ⁷⁹ Croix-Anne, 26.07.1893 - ASMSM 223.2
- ⁸⁰ Croix-Bon Secours, 29.08.1893 - ASMSM 223.2
- ⁸¹ Villard-Frayse, 20.10.1893 - AAN 30.2
- ⁸² M. St Jean-Apollonie, 08.06.1893 - ASMSM 233.3
- ⁸³ Croix-Bon Secours, 05.05.1894 - ASMSM 223.2
- ⁸⁴ Croix-Abbé Donat, 24.07.1894 - ASMSM 226.45
- ⁸⁵ cf. *S. M. de la Croix à la léproserie de Bélep* - op. cit., p.13 - ASMSM 210.3 (copy)
- ⁸⁶ cf. *Journal de S. M. de la Croix*, 25.10.1892 - ASMSM 210.6

- ⁸⁷ cf. Croix-Bon Secours, 25.11.1894 - ASMSM 223.2
⁸⁸ Croix-Anne, 03.04.1894 - ASMSM 223.2
⁸⁹ Croix-Bon Secours, 28.04.1895 - ASMSM 223.2
⁹⁰ Villard-Fraysse, 05.01.1894 - AAN 30.3
⁹¹ Croix-Forestier, 27.12.1895 - ASMSM 221.51
⁹² Croix-Anne, 04.01.1893 - ASMSM 223.2
⁹³ Croix-Anne, 06.03.1893 - ASMSM 223.2
⁹⁴ Croix-Bon Secours, 08.04.1894 - ASMSM 223.2
⁹⁵ Croix-Bon Secours, 02.01.1895 - ASMSM 223.2
⁹⁶ cf. *Journal de S. M. de la Croix*, 11.01.1893 - ASMSM 210.6
⁹⁷ cf. Barriol-Fraysse, 18.11.1892 - AAN 30.2
⁹⁸ cf. *Journal de S. M. de la Croix*, 14.12.1892 - ASMSM 210.6
⁹⁹ Villard-Fraysse, 16.11.1892 - AAN 30.2
¹⁰⁰ cf. Villard-Fraysse, 15.01.1893 - AAN 30.2
¹⁰¹ cf. Villard-Fraysse, 28.12.1892 - AAN 30.2
¹⁰² cf. *Journal de S. M. de la Croix*, 05.03.1893 - ASMSM 210.6
¹⁰³ cf. Moris-Fraysse, 10.12.1896 - AAN 30.4
¹⁰⁴ cf. Croix-Anne, 09.05.1897 - ASMSM 223.2
¹⁰⁵ cf. Croix-Anne, 01.11.1897 - ASMSM 223.2
¹⁰⁶ cf. Croix-Bon Secours, 29.10.1893 - ASMSM 223.2
¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*
¹⁰⁸ Croix-Apollonie, 31.05.1896 - ASMSM 223.3
¹⁰⁹ cf. *Journal du P. Villard*, 18.09.1893, p. 73 - AAN 32.1
¹¹⁰ cf. Villard-Gaide, 01.09.1894 - AAN 30.3
¹¹¹ cf. Croix-Anne, 05.02.1896 - ASMSM 223.2
¹¹² M. St Jean-Apollonie, 05.02.1896 - ASMSM 233.2
¹¹³ Croix-Anne, 21.03.1897 - ASMSM 223.2
¹¹⁴ Croix-Apollonie, 31.05.1896 - ASMSM 223.3
¹¹⁵ Croix-Anne, 07.05.1893 - ASMSM 223.2
¹¹⁶ cf. Croix-Anne, 21.03.1897; also Croix-Bon Secours, 05.05.1894 - ASMSM 223.2
¹¹⁷ M. St Jean-Fraysse, 30.12.1892 - AAN 118.1
¹¹⁸ M. St Jean-Apollonie, 08.01.1895 - ASMSM 233.2
¹¹⁹ Croix-Anne, 18.04.1897 - ASMSM 223.2
¹²⁰ Croix-Anne, 19.12.1897 - ASMSM 223.2
¹²¹ cf. Villard-Fraysse, 07.11.1893 - AAN 30.2
¹²² cf. Villard-Fraysse, 05.01.1894 - AAN 30.3

- ¹²³ Croix-Madeleine, 24.07.1895 - ASMSM 223.3
¹²⁴ Croix-Apollonie, 31.05.1896 - ASMSM 223.3
¹²⁵ Croix-Anne, 04.01.1893 - ASMSM 223.2
¹²⁶ *Journal du P. Villard*, 25.03.1893, p. 48 - AAN 32.1
¹²⁷ cf. Croix-Bon Secours, 05.05.1894, ASMSM 223.2
¹²⁸ cf. Croix-Anne, 07.09.1893, 05.12.1893; also 01.11.1897 -
ASMSM 223.2
¹²⁹ cf. Croix-Anne, 26.07.1894 - ASMSM 223.2
¹³⁰ cf. Croix-Anne, 28.04.1895 - ASMSM 223.2
¹³¹ cf. Croix-Anne, 05.09.1897 - ASMSM 223.2
¹³² Croix-Anne, 19.09.1897 - ASMSM 223.2
¹³³ Croix-Anne, 21.03.1897 - ASMSM 223.2
¹³⁴ Croix-Anne, 07.04.1895 - ASMSM 223.2
¹³⁵ Croix-Anne, 01.01.1895 - ASMSM 223.2
¹³⁶ Croix-Anne, 14.06.1897 - ASMSM 223.2
¹³⁷ Croix-Apollonie, 05.09.1895 - ASMSM 223.3
¹³⁸ Croix-Anne, 28.10.1893 - ASMSM 223.2
¹³⁹ Croix-Apollonie, 06.05.1894 - ASMSM 223.3
¹⁴⁰ Croix-Apollonie, 08.01.1895 - ASMSM 223.3
¹⁴¹ Croix-Apollonie, 05.09.1895 - ASMSM 223.3
¹⁴² Croix-Colette, 26.11.1896 - ASMSM 223.3
¹⁴³ Croix-Anne, 04.10.1896 - ASMSM 223.2
¹⁴⁴ Croix-Anne, 19.09.1897 - ASMSM 223.2
¹⁴⁵ Croix-Anne, 01.11.1897 - ASMSM 223.2
¹⁴⁶ Croix-Colette, 23.01.1898 - ASMSM 223.3
¹⁴⁷ Croix-Anne, 23.01.1898 - ASMSM 223.2
¹⁴⁸ cf. Croix-Anne, 15.04.1898 - ASMSM 223.2
¹⁴⁹ Croix-Eugénie, 15.05.1898 - ASMSM 223.3
¹⁵⁰ cf. *Spiritual Notes* N° 3, Croix, 1894-1903, December 1900, p. 17
- ASMSM 210.7 (copy)
¹⁵¹ Croix-Apollonie, 16.05.1898 - ASMSM 223.3
¹⁵² Croix-Anne, 16.05.1898 - ASMSM 223.2



**At Belep between August 1898 and 1908 - Sister Marie de la Croix and Sister Marie St Jean
with a group of pupils**

CHAPTER VII

AT BELEP WITH THE BELEMA^a - THE LAST YEARS (1898 - 1908)

Once the leprosy patients had left, the sisters, even though their hearts were torn,¹ turned their attention towards the people coming back from their forced exile. From July onwards they welcomed several young women who asked to come and stay with them,² but they did not know what the vicar apostolic's intentions were for themselves. Would they remain at Belep? Straightaway Sr M. de la Croix expressed her availability, her willingness to obey the superiors' orders.³

1) The sisters remain at Belep

- *Bishop Fraysse's decision*

At the beginning of September, Sr M. de la Croix had not changed her mind: she was ready to obey. She told Bishop Fraysse that in writing, but her "*desire would be to remain at Belep where there are such fine young people*".⁴ This desire came true at the end of that month:

We were waiting with some trepidation for the Bishop's response to know if we would be staying at Belep, and His Lordship told us in a very fatherly letter that he is leaving both of us there. You can imagine that we thanked the good Lord,

she confided to Eugénie.⁵

However the return of the Belema posed some problems,

^a The name for the people of Belep.

notably concerning the people from Pott. It was impossible for the former inhabitants of that island to return to their homes as their island had been leased for 18 years by the administration to a Dane, a Mr Lind,^b who was operating mines there, getting some freed men to do the work.⁶ The displaced people were few in number, but a place for them had to be provided at Art. No doubt that explains, at least partly, the remark Sr M. de la Croix made to Sr M. Colette in November:

*We have taken up the work of Belep again, so tried, so fragmented, and I would say, so difficult. Our remedy is prayer, unite your prayers with ours.*⁶

- ***Isolation and destitution***

Sr M. de la Croix knew that in asking to stay at Belep, they would continue to be very isolated. She did not seem to fear that, quite the contrary: she told Eugénie that the solitude of Belep delighted them. It did not prevent them from “obeying any word that came from a Superior”, if they were told to leave. But how were they “to live with human beings now”, when for five and a half years they had lived “only with the dead?”⁷ Three years later, in 1901, she noted in all simplicity that they lived “in an absolute isolation”,⁸ as they had foreseen.

This isolation was coupled with extreme deprivation that can only be guessed for the sisters practically never mentioned it as they were so used to it! There was only one exception: to ask for stamps since there was no Post Office at Belep. At different times,⁹ Sr M. de la Croix wrote to Sr M. Anne, the most faithful of her correspondents, to ask her for some or thank her for them. In August 1901, she wrote to her

^b Sr M. de la Croix often mentioned this Mr Lind in her journal. He maintained a good relationship with the mission.

when she had just received three francs worth: “*Now I am richly supplied for a long time. Once again, a thousand thanks.*”¹⁰

- ***Accommodation***

Their accommodation likewise left much to be desired. In June 1899, the minutes of the Bishop’s council who met in Nouméa, noted that the house would “*need urgent repairs.*”¹¹ No doubt the two sisters were still living in the former presbytery into which they had moved in January 1893, as mentioned above.^c

Over the years this dwelling became increasingly unsafe. In February 1906, Sr M. de la Croix wrote, with a touch of humour, “*the house is crumbling like old bread.*”¹² Two months later, when a cyclone had devastated the island, she expressed her amazement that the house was still standing. “*For me it is a miracle,*” she said, and a little further on she added, “*the walls are leaning and we cannot fail to be gently crushed*”¹³ - something that did not seem to preoccupy her unduly!

In February 1907, there was another cyclone. As soon as he could, the chief of the tribe, who was worried about the fate of the sisters, ran to see if the house was still standing... Fortunately, “*the good Lord has listened to our prayers*”, Sr M. de la Croix calmly wrote.¹⁴ A year later, this time after torrential rain, she marvelled: “*It is a daily miracle that we are not crushed by our shack,*”¹⁵ a miracle that in the following months she had no hesitation in attributing to Saint Joseph.¹⁶

^c According to some documents, it seems that the sisters looked after the two houses during this period.

- *The deaths of Philomène and Father Vigouroux*

As the two Petites Filles de Marie had not arrived at Belep with the convoys of the leprosy patients, they were not on the official lists. Consequently, they did not leave again in May 1898. Philomène,^d “*who is dying*”, was very happy about that. Sr M. de la Croix said she called out, “*Oh! let me die.*”¹⁷ Two months earlier, following a severe attack, she had in fact been given the Sacrament of the Sick. Sr M. de la Croix did not think she could last much longer.¹⁸ From September Philomène “*patient and resigned*”,¹⁹ no longer left her bed, her health diminished but she did not suffer much.²⁰ By the beginning of December, someone had to stay with her every night.²¹ On the day before Christmas Eve, she died in admirable dispositions, asking for her final goodbyes to be passed on to her family whom she had not forgotten at that last moment.²² At last she was, “*delivered from this world’s pains*”,²³ that had been particularly burdensome for her during the final years of her life. She was buried in the leprosy patients’ cemetery, beside Fr Villard where she rests.

In September of that year, Sr M. de la Croix learned with deep sorrow of “*the death of the most revered and beloved of the priests*”.²⁴ Fr Vigouroux, aged 82, died at Saint-Louis on 30 August. On that occasion she wrote to Eugénie:

*I am coming to you with a broken heart [...] the extent of the loss we have suffered just becomes more evident... God, the Divine Consoler, will close the wound that he has inflicted.*²⁵

^d Originally from Touaourou, Philomène Mangou received the blue habit of the PFM in 1888. Appointed to Ile des Pins, she remained there until, being diagnosed as having leprosy, she was sent to Belep in October 1892.

Her feelings are understandable: during so many years at Saint-Louis he had been for her a father, and a guide, most attentive and generous! She knew she could count on him.

- ***Bishop Fraysse's visit (June 1899)***

In June 1899, on his pastoral visit, Bishop Fraysse, accompanied by several priests made a quick stop-over at Belep. Having arrived at 8.30 pm on 22 June, the travellers set out again at 10.30 am the next day. It could not have been more rapid!^e But for the two sisters, it was nevertheless a great joy, for both of them esteemed and venerated this “father”, whose goodness and kindness they appreciated and whom they had not seen since their departure from Saint-Louis. Besides, among the travellers was ... Sr M. Scholastique,^f at that time stationed at Pouebo! She had been invited by the Bishop, “*who wanted to give her a little enjoyment*”,²⁶ to join the group.

The poverty at Belep was so great that it was not possible to find a bed for everyone: the priests had to be satisfied with mats and some pillows. On the occasion of this visit Bishop noted the dilapidated state of the sisters' house and realised how much they were in need of help.²⁷

Of course, one finds a summing up of this visit in Sr M. de la Croix's letter written some days later:

^e Already several years earlier, Bishop Fraysse had given up the Mission boat, the *Guillaume Douarre*, which was too expensive to maintain. He often borrowed the “*coastal boats*” for his tours. *L'Echo de la France Catholique* of 22.04.1899 informs us that he went as far as Houailou on the *St Antoine*. To continue his journey he used the boats available to him.

^f Scholastique, one of the three first PFM, who made profession as Sr M. Scholastique in the TORM in 1885, as noted above.

*Oh! May the good Lord be blessed a thousand times over for this hour of holy joy. A little ray of sunshine in seven years of life, of which God alone knows the details! The Bishop was kind as in earlier times... good like the most tender of mothers.*²⁶

2) Visit to Saint-Louis (August - September 1899)

- *Meetings*

While the Bishop was there, the question was raised as to whether one of the sisters from Belep could not come to Saint-Louis for the general retreat planned for August of that year. Naturally, Sr M. de la Croix left the place for the younger person, but Sr M. Saint-Jean's response to this proposal was clear: either both go or no-one goes. Sr M. de la Croix also refused to go on her own. A few days later, in a letter to Sr M. Anne, she made the matter very clear: "*If I had a companion, I would fly there.*"²⁸ Bishop Fraysse's decision arrived, filling them with joy: both were expected at Saint-Louis!

They set out at the beginning of August and were away for two months.²⁹ Details about their stay at Saint-Louis are scarce since Sr M. de la Croix did not write as she had the joy of once again seeing and living with her usual correspondents. They could talk and catch up with one another, exchange memories and do all that in person.³⁰ It was a happy time, all the more so since everybody did their utmost to give them pleasure and make their stay enjoyable.³¹ Another source of joy was getting to know the sisters who had arrived from France since October 1892 and the new Petites Filles de Marie, since it was a general retreat.

- **Retreat**

This began the evening of 15 August and was jointly preached by the Bishop and his brother, Fr Célestin Fraysse.^g The retreat concluded on 23 August with a ceremony during which three Petites Filles de Marie, former novices of Sr M. de la Croix, made profession in the Third Order Regular of Mary^h and three TORM Sisters pronounced their perpetual vows.ⁱ Two days later, two novices^j received the blue habit of the Petites Filles de Marie.³²

A few weeks later, when the sisters had returned to their mission, Sr M. de la Croix described in her notebook her feelings of having once again seen “*so many people and so many things that will always be precious*”. But she continued, “*how many empty spaces also,*” recalling the memory of Fr Vigouroux, but also no doubt that of Sr M. de Bon Secours who had died at the end of 1895, and Sr M. de la Paix, who had died at Ile des Pins in July 1896. As for the retreat, it was understandable that, after the lack of such spiritual nourishment during the previous years, she appreciated “*the piety, zeal and goodness in every way of the two preachers*”.³³

Bishop Fraysse, writing to a priest in France, also made mention of this memorable time:

We have just had the Sisters' retreat: 44 Sisters, Europeans, indigenous or Petites Filles de Marie, running 18 schools.

^g Having arrived in New Caledonia in 1879, Fr Célestin, after a period of time at Saint-Louis, was appointed to Lifou where he worked from 1883 to 1898. He then returned to St Louis where he remained until his death in 1906.

^h Sophie (from Lifou), who became Sr M. Agnès, Geneviève (from Ile des Pins), who became Sr M. Geneviève, and Calixta (from Maré), who became Sr Marguerite du Sacré-Cœur.

ⁱ Sr M. Véronique, Sr M. Odile and Sr M. Hélène.

^j Hélène, from Belep and Anastasie, from Ile des Pins.

*A beautiful reunion and an excellent spirit. There was complete union and a cordial relationship between Sister de la Croix (of the old regime) and the T.O.R. Sisters.*³⁴

- ***A treasured memory***

Sr M. de la Croix and Sr M. St Jean would long remember this visit. Sr M. de la Croix referred to it in her letters almost to the end of her life. She told Sr M. Etienne how happy she was to have seen her: *“I would not forget either your face or the grace-filled days we spent together.”*³⁵ The following year she again recalled to her *“the memory of those days of fervour”*,³⁶ that she held so vividly in her heart. In June 1902, writing to Sr M. Colette she referred to this retreat that had brought them together *“almost three years ago”*³⁷ and in August 1907, she wrote to Sr M. Anne:

*If I am not mistaken, 9 years have gone by since I made, along with you, my last retreat and embraced you all for the last time... Let us not speak of what takes place in my heart when I remember this...*³⁸

That final journey concluded on Sunday 1 October.

3) Life at Belep

- ***Difficulties***

*“After a voyage of five days and not having been too seasick [...] quietly, without disturbing anyone,”*³⁹ the two sisters disembarked at Wala while everyone was in Church, and went up to their place. They were greatly surprised to see that everything in the house had been gone over and that many things had disappeared.⁴⁰ Benediction over, the girls rushed in and joyfully held out their hands to the sisters. Once again they were astonished because the girls were *“all burnt, all disfigured!”*³⁹

To understand what had happened we need to know that Fr Moris had left Belep at his own request a year before, and had been replaced by Fr François Gautret.^k This priest had a terrible fear of leprosy, and straightaway reproached the sisters for not having sufficiently disinfected the houses, for not taking adequate precautions with the patients still on the island^l and so risking the contamination of all those who came in contact with them.⁴¹ He had set up a small leprosarium at Inar, on the road leading to the Sainte-Croix peninsula, where he was trying to gather all the patients.^m

In August, during the two sisters' absence, he wrote to the Bishop suggesting that they be transferred because, he complained, the school had not been "*purified*" and the sisters had allowed a girl who had leprosy to be among their pupils, so he asked for a new sister and a new Fille de Marie to be sent to him.⁴²

Bishop Fraysse had not listened to this request since the sisters returned to their post. But during their absence, the priest went to take back from their place everything he thought might be useful for himself: reading charts, newspapers, a pictorial New Testament, Sr St Jean's harmonium... Sr M. de la Croix acknowledged that "*he has the right, but to rummage through the belongings of poor women who have nothing under lock and key!*"⁴³ when they had suggested to him several times to come and see what they had! Fr Guitta, having made the fears of his superior his own, had undertaken to paint the children with phenol acid

^k This priest, a missionary since 1874, had already worked at Belep from 1881 to 1887.

^l When the Belema returned from Balade in 1898, there were a few leprosy patients among them.

^m There is still a small cemetery at Inar.

wherever they had spots, causing painful burns that distressed the sisters.

Over the following days, the priest gave back to the sisters most of what he had taken, and life returned to normal after a fashion. There were very few letters throughout the year 1900, and they said nothing. Sr M. de la Croix confided to Sr M. Anne in March 1901 that she had asked Fr Gautret to give the sisters' annual retreat but he refused: you have made one at Saint-Louis, take care of it yourselves,⁴⁴ he replied and indeed the sisters made their retreat at the beginning of July with Sr M. de la Croix giving two conferences each day.⁴⁵

In 1903, Fr Gautret, who had not put his feet in the school since the sisters' return from Saint-Louis,⁴⁶ wrote a report, in which he repeated all his grievances against the sisters, always in regard to the leprosy patients.⁴⁷ He again asked that the sisters leave.⁴⁸ Astonished and probably a little anxious, in September Bishop Fraysse sent Fr Alexandre Danielⁿ to assess the situation on the spot.⁴⁹ In November, Fr Gautret left Belep to go to Balade.

- ***Father Dagod is appointed to Belep***

The boat that took Fr Gautret away brought his replacement. As Fr Joseph Dagod had lived in Belep for a few months in 1889-1890, he knew the people and the area.^o Relationships with the sisters immediately returned to normal. A few months later, when there was question of their retreat,

ⁿ This priest who had arrived in New Caledonia in 1874, was ministering at Bourail when the vicar apostolic asked him to visit Belep.

^o Fr Dagod, having arrived in the Mission in 1879, had worked at different stations on the mainland and in the New Hebrides; he remained a little more than four years at Belep at this period and returned there in 1913.

the priest told the Bishop that the sisters should not go to the one at Saint-Louis in April 1904 because their absence would be too detrimental for the mission!⁵⁰ And it would be the same for the retreat in May 1906.⁵¹

In March 1904, a cyclone beat down on the island. Torrential rain and a powerful wind destroyed everything in their path. Trees were blown down, the gardens and plantations flooded. A real disaster! There was so much water in the old church that “*people did not know where to genuflect*”.⁵² The sanctuary and the sacristy were so badly damaged that the priest decided to complete the church that had been under construction for such a long time. He was concerned also about the bad condition of the sisters’ house. He did a few repairs on it and made some improvements by way of adding two windows and a door.⁵³

- ***Father Puech replaces Father Guitta***

At the end of 1904, Fr Guitta who was sick and elderly, died. While waiting for his successor to be appointed, priests came on two occasions to spend some time at Belep. Fr Michel de Thuret spent the month of March 1905 and Fr François Chaboissier also remained there for about a month between December and January 1906.^p The latter, after having given First Communion to a dozen little girls whom Sr M. de la Croix had prepared, gave the sisters a few meditations to help them make something of a retreat.⁵⁴

Fr Jean-Baptiste Puech arrived mid February. Belep was the first missionary destination for this young priest who was to spend a very long time there, until 1946. He would have the time to get to know and appreciate Sr M. de la Croix. It was he who would be with her during her last hours.

^p These two priests were then stationed at Koné.

4) Change of leadership in the vicariate

- *Death of Bishop Fraysse*

In 1905, another death, that of Bishop Fraysse, affected the whole Mission. His 25 years as Bishop had been celebrated in Nouméa on 25 July. He died quite suddenly, scarcely two months later, aged only 63, but his health had not been good for several years.

This was again a great suffering for Sr M. de la Croix. She lost “*a beloved Father*”, in whom she had complete confidence.⁵⁵ She retained “*the constant memory of his acts of kindness*”, even though her sorrow was “*deep and heart-rending*”.⁵⁶ It was impossible for her to forget him.⁵⁷

- *Bishop Chanrion succeeds Bishop Fraysse*

It was Fr Claude Chanrion, originally from the region of Lyon, who was chosen by Rome to succeed Bishop Fraysse. Having arrived in New Caledonia in 1889, Fr Chanrion spent a few years at Saint-Louis, in charge of the seminary that had just been opened. He left for Maré in 1895, and in 1904, having become provicar, he moved to Nouméa.

The news of his nomination to head the vicariate arrived in that town in January 1906 and reached Belep the following month. Sr M. de la Croix would hardly have the opportunity to get to know the new vicar apostolic. However, she wrote to him on several occasions: to assure him of her obedience and her prayers,⁵⁸ to tell him about Belep, about the school and improvements that needed to be made,⁵⁹ or quite simply to wish him a happy new year.⁶⁰

- *Bishop Chanrion goes to Belep*

The new Bishop, who still knew very little about the various stations of his vicariate, would have the opportunity to

go to Belep in January 1907. Actually the work on the church had been completed since the previous October, and as would be expected, Fr Dagod had asked Bishop Chanrion to come and bless it. On 13 January, the first Mass having been celebrated the evening before, Sr M. de la Croix wrote to Sr M. Anne:

*We prayed much for you in the new Church, for you, for all the sisters at St Louis, for your works and your children.*⁶¹

This reflection shows the privileged place Saint-Louis held in her thoughts. Who would be surprised at that?

On this occasion Bishop Chanrion remained at Belep for eight days which gave him the time to visit the school, and the sisters time to appreciate his kindness.

5) The school at Belep

- *Reopening*

In 1898 the school was allowed to open again and would, as at Saint-Louis, be Sr M. de la Croix's focus of concern. She wrote at the beginning of October that year: "*For six weeks now our school is back in full swing.*"⁶² Six weeks indicates that the school had been open again since mid August. At that time, as noted above, the sisters still did not know if they would be staying on at Belep, but it was a matter of urgency. Since their return, the girls had been left to their own devices, and they were the first to ask to come back with the sisters.⁶³ Their enforced stay at Balade had had rather a detrimental effect on them.⁶⁴ A year later, Sr M. de la Croix was more than ever convinced that their role was "*to raise the ruins of these unfortunate people by means of schools*".⁶⁵

Having again become "*teachers as before*",⁶⁶ the sisters courageously set about their task. Certainly, they encountered

some “*painful difficulties*”⁶⁷ but the girls came - 30 or so at first, then 50, 55..., then all the girls of the island from 5 to 15 years of age - and they showed much good will. Almost all of them were boarders and most remained with the sisters until their marriage.⁶⁸ In March 1899 Sr M. de la Croix noted with a certain satisfaction that on the whole the school was going well. She certainly did not aspire to turn their students into mini-academics, but if they remained good Christians, the sisters would have achieved their aim.⁶⁹

- ***A priority: Christian formation***

Because their first concern was to give the girls a sound Christian formation, to have them love the good Lord,⁶⁹ religious instruction was first priority in the school. Sr M. de la Croix tried to obtain some bibles⁷⁰ and books on Church history⁷¹ that the children liked very much,⁷² as also catechism books for sure.⁷³

She had much joy each year preparing the children for their First Communion,⁷⁴ even if they were not always well-behaved!⁷⁵ In 1903, the feast of Blessed Father Chanel was celebrated with special solemnity: the small statue that the sisters kept in their house was carried into the classroom decorated with flowers while hymns were sung. Thanks to Sr M. Anne’s generosity, the children received that day “*all sorts of pictures, pretty little things*”,⁷⁶ as rewards for their good marks.

- ***Teaching***

Other things were obviously taught at the school at Belep. Sr M. de la Croix is again the one who gives us some information. In May 1906, she summed up their school activities in this way:

*The subjects are the same for the two classes but at very different levels: religious instruction, reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, plain-chant, French, especially French. Our pupils speak it fluently.*⁷⁷

As Sr M. St Jean's health needed to be conserved, Sr M. de la Croix took responsibility for those who knew the least. She made no complaint about this, was she not "*almost good for nothing?*"⁷⁸ ... But, as everyone knows, these are the most difficult pupils!

The sisters tried hard to obtain resources in order to be able to give the children the essential exercise books and school textbooks. In August 1900, they were raising a pig and they made it "*eat triple rations so that its fat would procure some books for our girls.*"⁷⁹ The pupils did have some grammar books as "*old as the hills*" and "*incomplete*",⁸⁰ but also *La Géographie de Nouvelle Calédonie*⁸¹ by M. Gauharou.⁹ In June 1903, Sr M. de la Croix asked for six geographical atlases for the whole school "*those that cost only 80 cents*"⁸². There were no history books; no doubt Sr M. de la Croix did not see the need of speaking about "*our ancestors, the Gallic people*", to the children! But the students learnt the verbs, did short dictations and, in 1900 started doing subtractions.⁸³

To help them with preparing their classes the sisters subscribed to the *Journal de l'éducation* but in August 1903 Sr M. de la Croix hesitated about renewing the subscription as they did not have the money to pay for it. Besides, it was hardly any use to them because "*the articles included are not as interesting as before*"⁸⁴.

⁹ M. Gauharou lived many years in New Caledonia where he held various administrative posts. In 1882 he published *La Géographie de Nouvelle Calédonie pour les enfants des écoles*.

If the financial resources needed to give the teachers and students all the required educational materials were lacking, the physical set-up also left much to be desired. Like the sisters' house, the school was run down.⁸⁵ And the children had to be fed; it was up to the sisters to manage as best they could! The mission had some land at Sainte-Croix, north of Wala, or at Rama, five to six kilometres to the south. The girls used to go there to make plantations or to collect coconuts for feeding the animals. Sr M. de la Croix made a passing remark, probably with a touch of astonishment, that not a single man ever went to help them.⁸⁶ But it was not a complaint. For the children, those days were also times of relaxation... they were at the seaside so they fished and had a good time.⁸⁷

- *And the boys?*

From 1898, Sr M. de la Croix would have really liked to take care of the little boys also, but she came up against the refusal of Fr Gautret. He said that Fr Guitta gave them catechism classes three times a week and that was quite sufficient: it was pointless to teach them French.⁸⁸ They had to wait for the priest's departure in November 1903 for things to change. Cyriaque, a teacher trained at Saint-Louis, arrived with Fr Dagod. He was entrusted with the boys and he took them three times a week. Unfortunately, he fell ill in 1905, and left Belep. Even though Fr Dagod was alone since Fr Guitta's death, he tried to replace Cyriaque, but the classes were suspended in August. The oldest boys stayed home, much to their parents' regret. Courageous as always,⁸⁹ Sr M. de la Croix reclaimed the smallest boys. In November, she wrote to Eugénie that, despite her age, her stick^f and her stiff

^f She did not use this stick only for walking; she also used it to discipline boys who were a little too unruly. The catechist Grégory Thalé, father of Sr M. Thérèse Thalé, had stinging memories of it!

hand, she had thirty-eight seven-year-old girls and boys in her class, the boys coming by day. She added, “*I so love what we are doing for God because He alone will repay us, so much the better.*”⁹⁰

The situation remained the same in 1906, but the children were “*unruly and light-headed*”.⁹¹ Sr M. de la Croix was 75 years old! A year later, about fifty “*brats*”, girls and boys, “*all children of good will, but as carefree as butterflies and as noisy as thunder*” still filled her classroom. “*That demands a lot of effort*”,⁹² she acknowledged. As she was quite seriously ill at the end of the year, the small boys were withdrawn from her class for a short while.⁹³ In February 1908, she got a few of them back, the slower learners!⁹⁴

At the end of June, it was so obvious that Sr M. de la Croix was at the end of her tether - she could only get to the school leaning on a child’s shoulder.⁹⁵ In church the priest asked the parents to keep their children at home. At that time Sr M. de la Croix had only six weeks to live.

6) Sister Marie de la Croix’s companions

After Philomène’s death in December 1898, only one Petite Fille de Marie remained at Belep: Marie, who had also come when the leprosarium was opened. Three other sisters had arrived at the end of 1899, after the visit to Saint-Louis: Thérèse, who it seems came with Sisters Flore and Virginie who arrived at the end of October. Sr M. de la Croix often spoke of them in her letters.

- *Marie and Thérèse*

Neither Marie nor Thérèse had leprosy. Therefore both of them lived with the sisters at the school; they helped them as much as they could.

Marie was a good young person, wrote Sr M. de la Croix, she did all she could to be of service and was very regular in her prayer life. However she grew so stout over the years that she became “*almost disabled*”.⁹⁶ In 1907, her infirmities prevented her from taking the children to work in the plantations.⁹⁷ Sr M. de la Croix noted, humorously, “*Marie Bondé rolls rather than walks!*”⁹⁸ This was not to prevent her from living a long time yet, since she died in Belep in 1927.

The situation was very different with Thérèse.^s Today, we would say no doubt that this sister was emotionally disturbed. Sr M. de la Croix put up with her outbursts of temper and her shouting, and never asked for her to be changed. She knew why she was put with her and she knew that she was “*the torment of all the sisters who have had her as helper*”.⁹⁹ She regretted not being able to carry “*this inexpressible cross*” better.¹⁰⁰ In September 1905, she admitted: “*I know a community where peace is bought at a high price, but there is peace.*”¹⁰¹ After Sr M. de la Croix’s death in 1908, the community went to Saint-Louis to take part in the retreat. When the sisters returned to Belep, Thérèse was no longer there. It was not Sr M. de la Croix who asked for that.

- ***Flore and Virginie***

It was Flore and Virginie’s state of health that explains why they were sent to Belep: they were suspected of having leprosy. For this reason, Sr M. de la Croix settled them in a small stone house constructed in 1893 for Mr Courtot, a European leprosy patient. After this gentleman’s death, the house remained unoccupied until the two sick sisters, soon joined by some girls from the school, moved in there.

^s Thérèse, originally from Ile des Pins, had been a PFM since 21 October 1883.

Sr M. de la Croix always spoke with great affection about Flore^t whose courage and piety she admired. Without hiding her pain, she described the relentless progress of the illness: feet covered with sores, a leg as black as coal ready to explode, skin that falls off when she undresses, her difficulty in walking...¹⁰² In 1903, after a short period in the throes of death, the Blessed Virgin called Flore, on the first day of her month. Before dying Flore had promised that “*in heaven she would pray for everyone*”.¹⁰³

As for Virginie,^u it was very soon recognized that her illness was not leprosy. It was a cancer, an ulceration that little by little ate away at her face. In place of her nose, there was soon only a hole. The disease reached her eyes. Her right eye was like a button shining at the bottom of a cavity, her eyelids were ulcerated, her forehead attacked. Her mouth gradually closed up; there came a time when Virginie could no longer receive Communion.¹⁰⁴ All these sufferings explain in large part and put into perspective this unfortunate person’s sometimes troublesome behaviour: “*She did not endure this martyrdom on her own,*” remarked Sr M. de la Croix¹⁰⁵ who recognised that she was good hearted,¹⁰⁶ and said how much she herself suffered at seeing what Virginie had to endure.¹⁰⁷ This situation would last a long time since Virginie died only in 1911, that is, three years after Sr M. de la Croix.

- ***Sister Marie Saint-Jean***

Among Sr M. de la Croix’s companions, Sr M. St Jean was the only one who formed community with her in the complete sense and, as mentioned above, she had done that since 1892 - the opening of the leprosarium. From that time until Sr M. de la Croix’s death, her dedication would never

^t Flore, originally from Thio, had also been a PFM since 21.10.1883.

^u Virginie, originally from Bondé, had been a PFM since 19.03.1890.

fail. She was her faithful and appreciated companion. It was she who generally took the children to Sainte-Croix or to Rama; she worked with them and spared no effort, so that Sr M. de la Croix said of her: “*Our dear Sister bears all the burdens of the work.*”¹⁰⁸ She also gave classes and succeeded well since, in 1905, Bishop Fraysse asked her to take over the administration of the school in place of Sr M. de la Croix whose infirmities were increasing as she aged.¹⁰⁹

Sr M. de la Croix was the one who usually kept in touch with Sr M. Anne through almost monthly letters. These included frequent references to Sr M. St Jean: to ask for shoes or a veil that the sister needed,¹¹⁰ or to express concern about her health. In February 1902, she had such severe intestinal pain that she fainted,¹¹¹ but two months later she had regained her strength, thanks to bottles of grenache^v sent by Fr Célestin.¹¹²

Sr M. St Jean quite often added a word or two at the end of the letters, but being too busy she sometimes did not have time. In 1904, Sr M. de la Croix ended her letter: “*I send you love from both of us because Sr St Jean is taken up in every direction and will not write anything in the space I was leaving for her.*”¹¹³

Sr M. de la Croix did not hide her esteem for her companion: “*What can I say about Sr St Jean? That she will be a little, great saint: seriousness, simplicity and a delightful piety.*”¹¹⁴ In 1906, when Sr M. St Jean had again been very run down and they wanted her to go and spend some time at Saint-Louis, Sr M. de la Croix wrote:

^v Grenache was a wine made from black grapes from Languedoc-Roussillon.

*You do not know her qualities. She assures me that she does not want to go away and that, like myself, she loves our hidden life,*¹¹⁵

and the matter was left there. How could Sr M. St Jean contemplate for an instant leaving on her own, the sister whom she could see getting weaker and needing her more and more?

Sr M. St Jean, for her part, expressed her admiration and affection. In May 1899, she wrote to Sr M. Anne:

*If I don't write to you, it is because when Sr M. de la Croix writes, she does so for both of us, and we have but one heart in loving our true friends.*¹¹⁶

She assured Bishop Fraysse, in 1902 that she was happy with Sr M. de la Croix.¹¹⁷ In 1905 she spoke to Sr M. Anne of her desire to fulfil right to the end, her debt of gratitude to “*such a worthy Sister who has been more than a mother to me*”.¹¹⁸

7) The period of infirmities

- *Climate*

Ever since she had been at Belep, Sr M. de la Croix punctuated her correspondence with comments about the weather on the island. It was as if, in ageing, she had become more sensitive to bad weather. In October 1893, for instance, she noted:

*It is blowing strong enough to dehorn the cattle, you would think it was a cyclone; but it is always windy at Belep and I have not experienced a month without thunder. I am deafened by the noise of the wind and the waves which roar and resound like canon blasts.*¹¹⁹

She also made reference to the rain that damaged the gardens,¹²⁰ and the dry times that burnt up everything,¹²¹

making the cook's work extremely difficult: "No water, no vegetables," she explained to Eugénie.¹²²

The heat and the cyclones were often commented on.¹²³ In April 1908, for example, she began a letter to Sr M. Anne,

*I am not writing to tell you about the rain and the good weather, even though these things tire me all the same [...] It's terrible weather, real cyclone weather.*¹²⁴

- ***Health problems***

Following the patients' departure, Sr M. de la Croix continued to have headaches¹²⁵ and neuralgia.¹²⁶ Like everyone else, she was also subject to colds and bouts of flu¹²⁷ and was sometimes confined to bed.¹²⁸ Stomach pains caused her a great deal of suffering on several occasions.¹²⁹

Increasingly as the years passed, she had to face up to the infirmities of old age and declining strength. In May 1903, she had such a severe stroke that, at her request, the priest gave her the Last Sacraments and she renewed her vows.¹³⁰ Two years later, there was another warning: her right arm was paralysed and she could not hold a pen because the pain in her right thumb was too bad. Several letters written at this period were written with difficulty, in pencil.¹³¹ Soon her legs were also affected: she had to remain standing during Mass and could walk only with a stick.¹³²

In June 1905, the illness reached her lungs.¹³³ In 1907, she suffered such severe chest pain that some days she could not speak, but she still gave classes for her fifty little ones.¹³⁴ She was gravely ill on 22 June, and asked the priest for the Sacrament of the Sick. Some days later, when once again she had got on top of the illness, she wrote:

*I was dying. I placed my soul in my Saviour's hands, in his hands pierced for my salvation, and I threw myself headlong into his mercy.*¹³⁵

At the beginning of 1908, those around her noticed an improvement. She herself said: “*I am better, almost cured, because of your prayers, but I am old, frighteningly old.*”¹³⁶ It was her companion's health that worried her:

Sr M. St Jean is not looking more off colour, [...] her cough is no worse, ah! get people to pray, you who obtain miracles,

she asked, instead of prolonging “*a life that is useless, like mine*”¹³⁷.

- ***Refusal to leave Belep***

Needless to say, at Nouméa and Saint-Louis they were aware of the increasing precariousness of Sr M. de la Croix's health. Several times she received letters from Sr M. Anne raising the possibility of her leaving Belep but Sr M. de la Croix always refused. If the superiors ordered her to leave, she would obey, but was there not enough land at Belep?¹³⁸ She was still not a burden; it would be hard for her not to die on the go.¹³⁹

When the Bishop, in 1906, put the question to her through the intermediary of Fr Puech, stressing the new sisters' desire to meet her, she replied

*dryly and rudely: Oh! how this question irritates me! If the superiors want me, let them give me an indication!*¹⁴⁰

If she was so insistent on staying at Belep, it was due to the isolation and because she could still work there.¹⁴¹ And besides, she was happy at Belep; she stated it quite simply: “*The happiness of serving God is already a heaven... will I have the other one?*”¹⁴²

8) Sister Marie de la Croix's jubilee

- *The date of the celebration is advanced*

If there was a date that Sr M. de la Croix never forgot, it was certainly that of her arrival in New Caledonia: 2 December 1858. From the 1990s onwards, she often referred to it, most often in her personal notes. For example, in December 1890, when she was still at Saint-Louis, she wrote:

*Tomorrow I will complete 32 years of mission. Can I think of it without shuddering!! My soul is as if dried up, repentance and aridity are struggling with each other.*¹⁴³

In December 1897, from Belep:

*I shall begin my fortieth year of mission on the 2nd. Forgive me, Lord, for so many faults and thank you a thousand times over for so many blessings.*¹⁴⁴

Less often and with more restraint, she mentioned it in her letters. In November 1903 she exclaimed, “*Oh! don't you know that on 2 December I will begin my 47th year of mission?*”¹⁴⁵ Out of fear of festivities that she dreaded, she did not say anything more about it, and she expressly acknowledged that in January 1908 when she wrote to Sr M. Anne: “*I no longer speak of my age, nor of the anniversary of my arrival in Caledonia for fear of some fuss.*”¹⁴⁶

But others had thought of it! During 1907 it had been decided to advance the date of the celebration because, with good reason, her state of health made people fear that she might no longer be there in December 1908.¹⁴⁷ The festivities were therefore set for Wednesday 13 May.

Early warning signs and last minute preparations

Congratulatory letters and gifts anticipated that date. The Carmelites of Nevers^w had already written to her in 1907,¹⁴⁸ to offer their best wishes and to express their admiration; they also sent gifts which arrived in January: a crucifix for herself, some fabrics and school supplies which, given the school's destitution, greatly pleased her.¹⁴⁹

Sr M. Anne, for her part, showed her affection for Sr M. de la Croix by sending her a box.^x Sr M. St Jean acknowledged receipt of this in February, assuring her that all had been received and warmly welcomed, except the compliments!¹⁵⁰ For the box was accompanied by letters from the little girls at Saint-Louis, expressing their gratitude and that of the whole village. Sr M. de la Croix thanked them, nevertheless, by means of a small note addressed to all these children in February.¹⁵¹

At the beginning of March, Fr Pionnier, whose admiration for Sr M. de la Croix was known, “*took it upon himself*” to send her a card with these words “... *to the Venerable Jubilarian.*”¹⁵² Then, from Sainte-Foy-lès-Lyon,^y letters arrived from the superior, Mother Marie Louis-Chanel, and her assistant, Sr M. Joseph Haquin. Their prayers, they told her, were joined with their best wishes and congratulations addressed to her for her life of dedication.¹⁵³

Little by little as the date of the celebration approached, Sr M. de la Croix's displeasure increased and became evident. She tried by every means to evade it. She threatened and upset

^w The chaplain of the Carmel of Nevers was the brother of Fr Puech. For the letter of the prioress, see Appendix 11.

^x No document specifies what was in this box.

^y Place where the Congregation's novitiate was established in France.

everyone, so much so that all in the house were afraid.¹⁵⁴ The girls who had written

*lovely little letters in which they expressed in their own way their very justifiable feelings towards their benefactress,*¹⁵⁵

were distressed: on the day of the celebration they would not be able to say anything while the boys and the village people would be able to speak; but not them, what shame! Fortunately, Sr M. St Jean was there on the evening of the 12th, to the great joy of the girls, she wrote a congratulatory message taking a phrase from each of these letters.

- ***The celebration of 13 May***

The great day finally arrived. Early in the morning the bell called everyone to the church which was decorated as on major feast days. At 8 o'clock there was a sung Mass of thanksgiving, celebrated by Fr Ameline.^z Then everyone went to the sisters' place. The senior boy of the school read the congratulatory message they had prepared and a girl, shaking with nerves, followed on.^{aa} The village mothers then went up; as they too wanted to thank Sr M. de la Croix who took care of their children. Everything went well!

A little later, the "Teama"^{bb} arrived followed by his people: he also came to congratulate and thank Sr M. de la Croix. After making a speech he presented some gifts; local

^z In January Fr Ameline replaced Fr Dagod who did not feel capable of organising this celebration and had asked to be changed.

^{aa} For the texts of these congratulatory messages see Appendices 12 and 13.

^{bb} In several languages of New Caledonia, especially in the north, "Teama" means chief.

curios, wooden carvings and valuable shells. Nowadays we would say: he performed the customary ritual.

In the afternoon the month of Mary was celebrated, followed by a particularly solemn Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. At the end, the *Magnificat* was sung wholeheartedly and with full volume. After evening prayer, everyone went home happy: it had been a wonderful day. “*It was like a Sunday!*”¹⁵⁶ the children exclaimed.

The next day, Fr Ameline wrote to Bishop Chanrion. He summed up the day in a few lines, then added:

*The Sister who earlier on had threatened to take her stick to anyone who dared to go and congratulate her, had, on the contrary, been truly gracious in accepting very well and showing her gratitude for all that had been done for her, congratulatory messages and other things.*¹⁵⁷

The same day, Sr M. de la Croix also wrote to the vicar apostolic saying that she did not fear getting a bad report because she had made incredible efforts to be pleasant throughout the whole of that celebration for which she had been the excuse, much against her will! She continued her letter, protesting her inability to do good:

*My greatest task during these fifty years has been to try the patience of others without any positive effect on myself [...] I deserve only to be forgotten.*¹⁵⁸

9) The supreme hour approaches

- *Preparation for death*

For some years allusions to her age were frequent in her letters; in February 1897, when the heat was too much for her, she told Sr M. Anne:

*I am getting old - that's no surprise! My energy is declining, I am becoming even more cowardly and I suffer so much from it as to want to hide myself; my decrepitude is very difficult [to live with], believe me.*¹⁵⁹

In 1906, she again wrote to her: “*I am slow-witted, old, cowardly and a featherbrain to the last degree!*”¹⁶⁰ Two years earlier she had declared, “*I am the same old lady who is awaiting death and the terrible judgement!!! Thank you for your prayers.*”¹⁶¹

For she often thought about her death. At the beginning of 1896, when she had just learnt of Sr M. de Bon Secours’ death, she made a resolution to prepare for death every day but, she noted in February, “*without being any readier to appear before God*”, while “*however, I often have a sense of death following hot on my heels*”.¹⁶² Similarly, in 1904, after the death of Fr Guitta, she wrote: “*It is my turn now. This thought of eternity is healthy and does me good.*”¹⁶³ When she spoke of death, she often seemed to fear it, because she thought good deaths “*were rare after a bad life*”,¹⁶⁴ implying: bad... like hers! Yet the fear of “*falling into hell*”,¹⁶⁵ of undertaking this “*formidable journey*”,¹⁶⁶ seem to have disappeared during the last months of her life. Did she not write in January 1908: “*I am awaiting this departure the way people wait for a stroll in the countryside as soon as the good weather comes?*”¹⁶⁷

It was not going to be long in coming.

- ***Sufferings of her final days***

The improvement observed at the beginning of the year did not last long. The “fanfare” of her jubilee in May was hardly over before health problems again took the upper hand. At the beginning of June, Sr M. de la Croix suffered what was no doubt another stroke; she “*can get to her classroom only*

by leaning on a child's shoulder".¹⁶⁸ She wrote to Sr M. Anne on the 22nd of the same month - and it was her last letter - of how weak she felt, adding, "*I am clearly on the way out, let us leave the good Lord do as he wants.*"¹⁶⁹

At the end of the month, at Fr Ameline's request, the parents kept their children home; for Sr M. de la Croix, that was definitively the end of her teaching.

The month of July was lived in suffering.¹⁷⁰ From the first days, acute pains prevented her from going to the church. In the middle of the month Sr M. St Jean gave a few details to Sr M. Anne: Sr M. de la Croix had terrible pain in her chest, ribs, left hip and bones that were displaced. Since she could no longer go to the church, the priest brought her Communion in their little parlour.¹⁷¹

At the end of this letter are a few lines - the last ones - from Sr M. de la Croix's hand:

Sr Ste Anne, it is me. I can't do any more! Make no mistake, this will be the last time that I trouble you. Happy feastday. May St Anne bless you. My goodbyes to the sisters and to Marie in the village. I can't do any more. Farewell.

Sr +

Evidently Sr M. de la Croix remained completely lucid: she even thought of Sr M. Anne's feastday!

Sr M. St Jean took advantage of a small boat passing through at the end of July to write again, saying, "*Our Mother remains bedridden, suffering in a pitiable way*",¹⁷² and that, in spite of prayers and novenas!

- ***Meeting the Lord***

Sr M. St Jean noticed a slight improvement at the beginning of August: the pain in her ribs seemed to have

eased. Fr Puech came to visit her and encouraged her to ask for her recovery, saying: *“Think about these fine young people, they still need you.”*¹⁷³

On 8 August Sr M. de la Croix was able to get up and go as far as the parlour beside her room. Sr M. St Jean read to her, stopping from time to time to listen to her reflections.¹⁷⁴

The following day she was dead.

The administrative circular announcing her death stated: *“In the morning her strength rapidly diminished, she asked for and received Extreme-Unction.”*¹⁷⁵ Fr Puech, who administered the sacraments to her in the morning, was present during her final moments. At about 3.30 in the afternoon,

*while the priests were praying and people present were sobbing, she calmly surrendered, without any effort, her soul to God.*¹⁷⁶

She was fully conscious right to the end.

As soon as they heard the news of her death, the people of the island hastened to come and pray beside the body. It was as though *“she was asleep on her bed, so peaceful was her countenance,”* according to Sr M. St Jean.¹⁷⁶ The women, the children and the sisters took turns to spend the night beside her, reciting prayers, until the transfer of the body.¹⁷⁷

The following day, 10 August, the priests celebrated their Masses for her. The second Mass was sung and the people received Communion.

The burial took place at 4 o'clock in the afternoon. Around the tomb, in the middle of the mission cemetery, everyone was weeping and Sr M. St Jean expressed her feelings at seeing her let down into the grave, but she added: *“All the same, what a beautiful death!”*¹⁷⁶

Many Masses were requested by the people during the following days. A month later, Fr Ameline wrote to Bishop Chanrion:

*People continue to have Masses said for Sr M. de la Croix. Again this morning there was a sung Mass for her. It is very edifying.*¹⁷⁸

In September, so a month later, Sr M. St Jean wrote a few pages in which she recorded the testimonies of affection and esteem given by the inhabitants of Belep. All spoke of their grief. The school children acknowledged that she was strict but, said a little girl: “*She punished me severely and often because I truly deserved it. [...] I could see that she loved me a lot.*” A boy, who had had the strap, had understood that “*she loved us more than our parents*”. She did not want those children to become bad boys! A young girl maintained that she would pray every day for Sr M. de la Croix, remembering her kind deeds. In floods of tears, the catechist Stanislas made a beautiful declaration:

*My friends, we cry and miss this good Sr M. de la Croix. Yes, she has been our mother, she has done good for everyone in our country; she was truly devoted to our children. It is indeed right that we should miss her: let us weep for her together and also pray for her. Let us also rejoice because the good Lord has called her in order to give her a great reward. We shall always be her children, she will not abandon us; from heaven above she will watch over us.*¹⁷⁹

Even in our days, the memory of Sr M. de la Croix remains very much alive and venerated, whether in Ile des Pins, Saint-Louis or Belep. The young people have learned from the elderly all that Sr M. de la Croix had done for them.

ENDNOTES - CHAPTER VII

- ¹ cf. Croix-Anne, 10.07.1898 - ASMSM 223.2
- ² cf. Croix-Anne, 16.05 and 10.07.1898 - ASMSM 223.2
- ³ cf. Croix-Anne, 16.05.1898 - ASMSM 223.2; also Croix-Eugénie, 10.05.1898 - ASMSM 223.3
- ⁴ Croix-Fraysse, 04.09.1898 - AAN 116.9
- ⁵ Croix-Eugénie, 02.10.1898 - ASMSM 223.3
- ⁶ Croix-Colette, 06.11.1898 - ASMSM 223.3
- ⁷ Croix-Eugénie, 15.05.1898 - ASMSM 223.3
- ⁸ Croix-Etienne, 01.12.1901 - ASMSM 223.2
- ⁹ cf. Croix-Anne, 06.12.1900, 27.03 and 18.08.1901, 05.01.1903, 9.09 and 08.10.1904, 07.04.1906, 07.07.1907 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹⁰ Croix-Anne, 18.08.1901 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹¹ cf. Minutes of Episcopal Council meeting, 19.07.1899 - AAN 14.5, p. 73
- ¹² Croix-Anne, 04.02.1906 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹³ Croix-Anne, 07.04.1906 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹⁴ Croix-Anne, 10.02.1907 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹⁵ Croix-Anne, letter finished 13.03.1908, ASMSM 223.2
- ¹⁶ cf. Croix-Anne, 08.04 and 17.06.1908 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹⁷ cf. Croix-Anne, 18.05.1898 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹⁸ cf. Croix-Eugénie, beginning of May 1898 - ASMSM 223.3
- ¹⁹ Croix-Fraysse, 04.09.1898 - AAN 116.9
- ²⁰ cf. Croix-Anne, 30.10.1898 - ASMSM 223.2
- ²¹ cf. Croix-Colette, 11.12.1898 - ASMSM 223.3
- ²² cf. Croix-Anne, 18/23.12.1898
- ²³ Croix-Madeleine, 16.03.1899 - ASMSM 223.3
- ²⁴ Croix-Apollonie, 26.10.1898 - ASMSM 223.3
- ²⁵ Croix-Eugénie, 02.10.1898 - ASMSM 223.3
- ²⁶ Croix-Anne, 07.07.1899 - ASMSM 223.2
- ²⁷ cf. Minutes of Episcopal Council meeting, 19.07.1899 - AAN 14.5, p. 73
- ²⁸ Croix-Anne, 07.07.1899 - ASMSM 223.2
- ²⁹ cf. Spiritual Notes n° 3, Croix, 1894-1907, August 1899 - p. 14 - copy ASMSM 210.7

- ³⁰ Between 01.07.1899 and 15.07.1900, no letter of Sr M. de la Croix to Sr M. Anne has been conserved.
- ³¹ cf. M. St Jean-Fraysse, 12.10.1899 - AAN 118.1; see also Croix-Fraysse, 13.10.1899 - AAN 116.9
- ³² cf. Etienne-Denyse, 23.08.1899 - ASMSM NC 510
- ³³ cf. Spiritual Notes n° 3, Croix, 1894-1903, p. 14 - copy ASMSM 210.7
- ³⁴ Fraysse-(Hervier?), 26.08.1899 - APM ONC 418.2
- ³⁵ Croix-Etienne, 22.10.1899 - ASMSM 223.2
- ³⁶ Croix-Etienne, 28.08.1900 - ASMSM 223.2
- ³⁷ Croix-Colette, June/July 1902 - ASMSM 223.3
- ³⁸ Croix-Anne, 13.08.1907 - ASMSM 223.2
- ³⁹ M. St Jean-Fraysse, 12.10.1899 - AAN 118.1
- ⁴⁰ cf. Croix-Fraysse, 13.10.1899 - AAN 116.9
- ⁴¹ cf. Gautret-Fraysse, 26.11.1899 - AAN 30.4
- ⁴² cf. Gautret-Fraysse, 15.08.1899 - AAN 30.4
- ⁴³ Croix-Fraysse, 13.10.1899 - AAN 116.9
- ⁴⁴ cf. Croix-Anne, 27.03.1901 - AAN 223.2
- ⁴⁵ cf. Loose sheets, p. 4 copy, end Spiritual Notes n° 3, Croix, 1894-1903, ASMSM 210.7
- ⁴⁶ cf. M. St Jean-Fraysse, 29.07.1902 - AAN 118.1
- ⁴⁷ cf. Report of Fr Gautret on the sisters of Bélep, April 1903 - AAN 30.4
- ⁴⁸ cf. Gautret-Fraysse, 21.04. also 14.05.1903 - AAN 30.4
- ⁴⁹ cf. Croix-Fraysse, 26.09.1903 - AAN 116.9
- ⁵⁰ cf. Dagod-Fraysse, 21.01.1904 - AAN 30.4
- ⁵¹ cf. Croix-Chanrion, 13.05.1906 - AAN 116.9
- ⁵² Croix-Anne, 14.03.1904 - ASMSM 223.2
- ⁵³ cf. Dagod-Chanrion, 12.03.1907 - AAN 30.5
- ⁵⁴ cf. Chaboissier-Chanrion, begun 26.12.1905 - AAN 30.5
- ⁵⁵ Croix-Anne, 05.10.1905 - ASMSM 223.2
- ⁵⁶ Croix-Anne, 09.12.1905 - ASMSM 223.2
- ⁵⁷ cf. Croix-Anne, 04.02.1906 - ASMSM 223.6
- ⁵⁸ cf. Croix-Chanrion, 12.02.1906 - AAN 116.9
- ⁵⁹ cf. Croix-Chanrion, 13.05.1906 - AAN 116.9
- ⁶⁰ cf. Croix-Chanrion, 12.12.1907 - AAN 116.9
- ⁶¹ Croix-Anne, 13.01.1907 - ASMSM 223.2

- ⁶² Croix-Eugénie, 02.10.1898 - ASMSM 223.3
⁶³ cf. Croix-Anne, 16.05.1898 - ASMSM 223.2
⁶⁴ cf. Croix-Anne, 10.07.1898 - ASMSM 223.2
⁶⁵ Croix-Denyse, 21.07.1899 - ASMSM 223.2
⁶⁶ Croix-Eugénie, 02.10.1898 - ASMSM 223.3
⁶⁷ Croix-Colette, 06.11.1898 - ASMSM 223.3
⁶⁸ cf. Dagod-Chanrion, 14.07.1905 - AAN 30.5
⁶⁹ cf. Croix-Madeleine, 16.03.1899 - ASMSM 223.3
⁷⁰ cf. Croix-Anne, 25.07.1900; also 02.11.1902 - ASMSM 223.2
⁷¹ cf. Croix-Anne, 11.04, 26.05; also 07.07.1907 - ASMSM 223.2
⁷² cf. M. St Jean-Anne, 13.07.1907 - ASMSM 233.2
⁷³ cf. Croix-Anne, 10.06.1903 - ASMSM 223.2
⁷⁴ cf. Croix-Anne, 13.02 et 12.07.1904 - ASMSM 223.2
⁷⁵ cf. Croix-Anne, 08.09.1907 - ASMSM 223.2
⁷⁶ cf. Croix-Anne, 06.05.1903 - ASMSM 223.2
⁷⁷ Croix-Chanrion, 13.05.1906 - AAN 116.9
⁷⁸ Croix-Eugénie, 14.03.1900 - ASMSM 223.3
⁷⁹ Croix-Anne, 18.08.1900 - ASMSM 223.2
⁸⁰ Croix-Anne, 25.07.1900 - ASMSM 223.2
⁸¹ cf. Croix-Anne, 05.06.1902 - ASMSM 223.2
⁸² Croix-Anne, 10.06.1903 - ASMSM 223.2
⁸³ cf. Croix-Eugénie, 14.03.1900 - ASMSM 223.3
⁸⁴ Croix-Anne, 05.08.1903 - ASMSM 223.2
⁸⁵ cf. Croix-Anne, 02.04.1902 - ASMSM 223.2
⁸⁶ cf. Croix-Eugénie, 29.01.1901 - ASMSM 223.3
⁸⁷ cf. Croix-Eugénie, 31.05.1900 - ASMSM 223.2
⁸⁸ cf. Croix-Fraysse, 13.10. 1899 - AAN 116.9
⁸⁹ cf. M. St Jean-Anne, 05.10.1905 - ASMSM 233.2
⁹⁰ Croix-M. Joseph (Eugénie), 11.11.1905 - ASMSM 223.3
⁹¹ cf. Croix-Anne, 11.07.1906 - ASMSM 223.2
⁹² Croix-Anne, May 1907 - ASMSM 223.2
⁹³ cf. Puech-Chanrion, 13.11.1907 - AAN 30.5
⁹⁴ cf. Croix-Anne, 25.01/10.02.1908 - ASMSM 223.2
⁹⁵ cf. Administrative circular n° 101, 20.08.1908 - AAN 90.1
⁹⁶ Croix-Anne, 11.07.1906 - ASMSM 223.2
⁹⁷ cf. Croix-Anne, 11.05.1907 - ASMSM 223.2
⁹⁸ Croix-Anne, 11.10.1907 - ASMSM 223.2

- ⁹⁹ Croix-Anne, 18.08.1901 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹⁰⁰ Croix-Anne, January 1902 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹⁰¹ Croix-Anne, 12.09.1905 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹⁰² cf. Croix-Anne, 01.12.1901, Jan/Feb 1902, 02.04.1902 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹⁰³ Croix-Anne, 06.05.1903 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹⁰⁴ cf. Croix-Anne, 01.12.1901, 02.04.1902, 12.11.1904, 26.05.1907 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹⁰⁵ Croix-Anne, 28.11.1900 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹⁰⁶ cf. Croix-Anne, 29.07.1906 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹⁰⁷ cf. Croix-Anne, 12.11.1904 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹⁰⁸ Croix-Anne, 11.07.1906 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹⁰⁹ cf. Croix-M. Joseph (Eugénie), 11.11.1905 - ASMSM 223.3
- ¹¹⁰ cf. Croix-Anne, 13.09.1901, ASMSM 223.2
- ¹¹¹ cf. Croix-Anne, 05.02.1902 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹¹² cf. Croix-Anne, 02.04.1902 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹¹³ Croix-Anne, 13.02.1904 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹¹⁴ Croix-Anne, 01.12.1901 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹¹⁵ Croix-Anne, 03.03.1906 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹¹⁶ M. St Jean-Anne, 03.05.1899 - ASMSM 233.2
- ¹¹⁷ cf. M. St Jean-Fraysse, 29.07.1902 - AAN 118.1
- ¹¹⁸ M. St Jean-Anne, 13.06.1905 - ASMSM 233.2
- ¹¹⁹ Croix-Anne, 01.10.1893 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹²⁰ cf. Croix-Madeleine, 08.04.1894 - ASMSM 223.3
- ¹²¹ cf. Croix-M. Etienne, 11.12.1902 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹²² Croix-Eugénie, 07.01.1896 - ASMSM 223.3
- ¹²³ Croix-Anne, 12.06.1905 - ASMSM 223.2; also M. St Jean-Anne, 13.06.1905 ASMSM 233.2; see also Croix-Anne, 05.10.1905 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹²⁴ Croix-Anne, 08.04.1908 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹²⁵ cf. Croix-Anne, 13.02.1904, 08.12.1904, 08.04.1908 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹²⁶ cf. Croix-Anne, 07.01.1904 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹²⁷ cf. Croix-Anne, 09.09.1904, 07.06.1906, 08.09.1907, etc... ASMSM 223.2
- ¹²⁸ cf. Croix-Anne, 13.08.1905, 26.11.1907 - ASMSM 223.2; also Dagod-Chanrion, 13.11.1905 - AAN 30.5

- ¹²⁹ cf. Croix-Anne, 23.05.1901; also 08.04.1908 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹³⁰ cf. M. St Jean-Anne, 13.05.1903 - ASMSM 233.2; see also Croix-Anne, 25.05 and 10.06.1903 - ASMSM 223.2; also Croix-Fraysse, 26.09.1903 - AAN 116.9
- ¹³¹ Thus Croix-Anne, 14.03, 13.04, 13.05 and 12.06.1905 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹³² cf. Croix-Anne, 12.06.1905, ASMSM 223.2; also M. St Jean-Anne, 05.10.1905, ASMSM 233.2
- ¹³³ Croix-Anne, 12.06.1905; also 13.07.1905 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹³⁴ cf. Croix-Anne, 11.05.1907; see also 26.05 and 7.07.1907
- ¹³⁵ Croix-Anne, 07.07.1907 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹³⁶ Croix-Anne, 10.01.1908 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹³⁷ *ibid.*
- ¹³⁸ cf. Croix-Anne, 13.02.1904 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹³⁹ cf. Croix-Anne, 07.11.1905 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹⁴⁰ Croix-Anne, 03.03.1906 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹⁴¹ cf. Croix-Anne, 10.02.1907 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹⁴² Croix-Anne, 13.05.1906 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹⁴³ Spiritual Notes n° 2, Croix, 1887-1893, p. 7 - copy ASMSM 210.7
- ¹⁴⁴ Spiritual Notes n° 3, Croix, 1894-1903, p. 9 - copy ASMSM 210.7
- ¹⁴⁵ Croix-Anne, 24.11.1903 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹⁴⁶ Croix-Anne, 25.01.1908 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹⁴⁷ cf. Dagod-Chanrion, 14.08.1907 - AAN 30.5; also Croix-Anne, 11 and 26.11.1907 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹⁴⁸ cf. M. Thérèse de St Augustin-Croix, 11.08.1907 - ASMSM 210.8
- ¹⁴⁹ cf. Croix-Anne, 25.01.1908 - ASMSM 223.2; also M. St Jean-Anne, 13.09.1908 - ASMSM 233.2
- ¹⁵⁰ cf. M. St Jean-Anne, 12.02.1908 - ASMSM 233.2
- ¹⁵¹ cf. Croix-Petites Filles de St Louis, February 1908 - ASMSM 210.8
- ¹⁵² Croix-Anne, 13.03.1908 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹⁵³ cf. M. Louis Chanel and M. Joseph Haquin-Croix, 13.03.1908 - ASMSM 233.22

- ¹⁵⁴ cf. M. St Jean-Anne, 14.05.1908 - ASMSM 233.2; also Ameline-Chanrion, 14.05.1908 - AAN 30.6
- ¹⁵⁵ M. St Jean-Anne, 14.05.1908 - ASMSM 233.2
- ¹⁵⁶ cf. M. St Jean-Anne, 14.05.1908 - ASMSM 233.2
- ¹⁵⁷ Ameline-Chanrion, 14.05.1908 - AAN 30.6
- ¹⁵⁸ Croix-Chanrion, 14.05.1908 - AAN 116.9
- ¹⁵⁹ Croix-Anne, 21.03.1897 - ASMSM 223.2; see also 18.12.1898, 10.10.1902, 08.10.1904; Croix-Fraysse, 04.09.1898, 12.12.1901, 18.07.1902, 26.09.1903 - AAN 116.9
- ¹⁶⁰ Croix-Anne, 07.06.1906 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹⁶¹ Croix-Anne, 12.11.1904 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹⁶² Croix-Anne, 05.02.1896 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹⁶³ Croix-Anne, 08.12.1904 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹⁶⁴ Croix-Anne, 05.10.1905 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹⁶⁵ Croix-Anne, 23.05.1901 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹⁶⁶ Croix-Denyse, 12.08.1902 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹⁶⁷ Croix-Anne, 10.01.1908 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹⁶⁸ cf. Administrative circular n° 101, 20.08.1908 - AAN 90.1
- ¹⁶⁹ Croix-Anne, 22.06.1908 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹⁷⁰ cf. Administrative circular n° 99, 20.07.1908 - AAN 90.1
- ¹⁷¹ cf. M. St Jean-Anne, 13.07.1908 - ASMSM 233.2
- ¹⁷² M. St Jean-Anne, 27.07.1908 - ASMSM 233.2
- ¹⁷³ cf. S. M. St Jean, *Quelques notes sur notre Mère, S. M. de la Croix*, September 1908 - ASMSM 210.3 Ph.
- ¹⁷⁴ M. St Jean-Anne, 12.08.1908 - ASMSM 233.2
- ¹⁷⁵ Administrative circular n° 101, 20.08.1908 - AAN 90.1
- ¹⁷⁶ M. St Jean-Anne, 12.08.1908 - ASMSM 233.2
- ¹⁷⁷ cf. S. M. St Jean, *Quelques notes sur notre Mère, S. M. de la Croix*, September 1908 - ASMSM 210.3 Ph.
- ¹⁷⁸ Ameline-Chanrion, 15.09.1908 - AAN 30.6
- ¹⁷⁹ cf. S. M. St Jean, *Quelques notes sur notre Mère, S. M. de la Croix*, September 1908 - ASMSM 210.3 Ph.

FROM VENDÉE TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

CHAPTER VIII

AN OUTLINE OF SISTER MARIE DE LA CROIX'S PERSONALITY

In this final chapter we are now going to attempt, briefly though it be, to describe the person Sr M. de la Croix was. Throughout the preceding pages each reader has already been able to note many traits and form some idea of the richness of her personality. However, there seems to be some value in bringing together remarks made in passing and to complete them - without pretending to cover everything - so that this description may be as accurate as possible.

I. PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

Obviously we can only speak of Sr M. de la Croix's physical appearance by referring to the photos of her that have been preserved. They are very few, and mostly group photos where she is surrounded by Petites Filles de Marie or children. Very fortunately there are two that can be classified as portraits which show her closer up.

The first photo can be dated as being from the late 1880s from details of the habit the sister is wearing: the *camail*^a clearly has a wide blue border which appeared at this period and would exist only for a short time. Only the upper part of the body is visible. The sister seems to be seated. She was then about 55 years old. Taken front on, her face framed by a piped wimple is astonishingly young for someone who, as we have seen, had suffered serious health problems during the preceding years. Her expression is calm, direct and peaceful,

^a This word was used for a cape covering the chest.

and her chin determined. Her head is leaning slightly to the right. On her chest, a crucifix has replaced the Third Order of Mary medal with which she had to be contented for so many years: no doubt, Sr M. de la Croix is now a member of the Third Order Regular of Mary.

In the second photo, which very likely dates back to 1899, that is to the trip to Saint-Louis for the sisters' annual retreat, Sr M. de la Croix is standing, slightly in profile. Again in this photo only the top of her body is visible and her head is slightly inclined to the right. But it is striking how much she has aged. She was then 67 years old - which was really old at that period - and had spent gruelling years with the leprosy patients at Belep. She also appears to have put on a lot of weight which several references in her letters moreover confirm. Thus in 1897 she wrote: "*I am old, heavy, a real burden in all respects.*"¹ Her expression in this photo is serious, almost severe; it is astonishing that it does not reflect the joy of this stay at Saint Louis which gave her the possibility of seeing again all those she had left in 1892 and getting to know the new Petites Filles de Marie and the sisters who had arrived from France. It was, however, a great joy, that she spoke about several times in her letters after her return to Belep, as also in her personal notes: "*What an emotional time it was at St Louis*", she wrote,

*... who can understand all that went on within me at seeing there again so many people and so many things that will always be precious...*²

A final interesting detail completes this outline: Sr M. de la Croix was short. This information is given by Fr Jean Pionnier in the book dedicated to her to which reference has already been made. The priest described this sister whom he had known personally, as "*slightly shorter than average but well built*".³

II. SOME TRAITS OF HER CHARACTER

Continuing on from what he had already said, Fr Pionnier went on to speak of Sr M. de la Croix's personality. In particular he wrote:

Her pleasantly cheerful expression usually lit up in a smile that was irresistibly charming. All her inner energy was reflected in her eyes: the fire which sparked this sometimes crushed rudeness, stupidity and deceitfulness at their root. Only those who had experienced how penetrating her gaze was, even to feeling an inner discomfort, could affirm this. But in the presence of human suffering, physical and moral, how full of compassion^b and tearfulness she could be. She knew how to speak the truth with courage to all, indirectly, which for adults is the most useful form of respect, and for their good, but without any bitterness; the venom of bearing a grudge never entered this soul; it knew no pretence and flattery, though human weakness could be excused.

Many documents allow us to complete this portrait:

1) Strength of character

Others, before Fr Pionnier, had been struck by what the priest called "*her inner energy*." When Frs Favre and Yardin made acquaintance with the young woman in Lyon in 1858, when she was still called Pélagie, both spoke of her "*energetic character*",⁴ her willpower and "*courage which far surpasses the average*".⁵ Fr Poupinel made the same observation a few months later in Sydney: she has "*a strong will*", he asserted,

^b This word is found in the *Larousse du XX^e siècle*, 1929. There it is more precise: better said as "compassion".

and a little further on in the same letter, he said he was convinced that if she was guided well, she “*will make prodigious sacrifices*”,⁶ which would be proved true.

In order to stand firm in the face of the difficulties she was to come up against during the fifty years of her missionary life, Sr M. de la Croix truly needed an exceptionally strong character. Let us recall some of these difficulties: her humiliating departure from La Conception in 1859, the obstacles the colonial administration placed to the running of the schools between 1864 and 1870, her entry into the congregation of Our Lady of the Missions in 1868 and her withdrawal in 1871, the two fires (1867 and 1875) in the house at Saint-Louis, the painful episode with the Assumption Sisters in 1874, her departure from Saint-Louis in 1892, the difficulties of the work with the leprosy patients between 1892 and 1898.

When she left for Belep, she was convinced that she would become a leprosy patient herself, but nowhere did she express any apprehension whatsoever. In 1894, she wrote in all simplicity to Sr M. Anne: “*Philomène [a Petite Fille de Marie] is at the stage where the patient suffers most. Pray for us when we will reach that stage.*”⁷

After the fire in 1875, Fr Fraysse made this comment: “*She is someone who has been well baptised; and she is not one to give up in the face of difficulties.*”⁸

2) Harshness and frankness

Strong and demanding of herself, Sr M. de la Croix was the same with other people: her frankness (this “*truth that she knew how to speak ... to all*”, according to Fr Pionnier) bordered sometimes on harshness and took people by surprise. This is how Fr Vigouroux wrote of it in 1869:

*Sr de la Croix will do much good wherever she is but in order to avoid these strong, sharp words, which tell things just as they are, [Fr Rougeyron] prefers to do without her help in important situations.*⁹

When new sisters arrived from France in 1877 and 1878, their stay at Saint-Louis did not go smoothly. Sr M. de la Croix who, at first had sung the praises of Sr M. du Sacré-Cœur for her qualities as a teacher,¹⁰ soon found her “*good for nothing!*”¹¹ She did not get on at all with Sr M. St Charles who stayed at Saint-Louis for a few months before leaving for her post at Bondé. “*I am unhappy since the arrival of this reformer*”, she wrote, without going into any more details.¹²

In order to be well thought of by the sister, was it necessary to accept without question everything that was done at the school and which came solely under her authority? Even Scholastique - whom Sr M. de la Croix undoubtedly loved a great deal - would experience moments of disgrace and suffered many humiliations. “*Punished every day*”, and treated “*in front of all the girls as a hypocrite, a proud person who was going to report everything to Fr Fraysse*”, she needed much patience and humility to put up with these reproaches!¹³

It seems that no one was spared; Fr Fraysse noted in 1878:

*Sr de la Croix's bite is sharp and unfortunately in her present sickly state, she bites too often and little escapes her teeth.*¹⁴

“*The sickly state*” she is in. This is undoubtedly the key to understanding these regrettable lapses. Is 1878 not the period - between 1875 and 1880 - when Sr Marie de la Croix experienced acute health problems? She herself realised the situation and suffered because of it. She wrote to Fr Poupinel at that time:

*Pray for this miserable woman hated by everyone here, criticised by everyone and only used for want of someone better.*¹⁵

As her health improved over the following years, things would go better.

3) Her excesses

She knew herself well: “*By nature, I am too uncompromising,*” she wrote to Fr Yardin in 1859.¹⁶ Indeed, in her writings we find many pithy expressions which astonish or sometimes cause a smile. She called herself “*a chétive pécore*”;^{c 17} she considered her unworthiness - to enter the Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions - could give rise only to “*justifiable disgust*”, her own wretchedness plunged her into deep anguish, an abyss separated her from such a pure vocation!¹⁸ She expressed her gratitude towards the Society of Mary which had “*pulled me out of the mire*”.¹⁹ In 1894, she again affirmed that she was “*wretchedness itself and its miserable daughter*”.²⁰ A few months later, when she was recalling her arrival in the mission thirty-six years earlier, she confided to Sr M. de Bon Secours: “*How many years and how little fruit! There I am, old, without being able to offer anything to the good Lord.*”²¹

4) Forgetfulness of self

Another trait which characterised Sr M. de la Croix - less obvious no doubt by its very nature - was her desire to be forgotten²² and her forgetfulness of self.²³ That might seem

^c A reference to the young frog in the fable of the Frog and the Ox (cf. *Le Nouveau Petit Robert*, 2000).

paradoxical, since the richness of this personality caused her to stand out among the other sisters.²⁴ The documents say very little about this, it is almost necessary to read between the lines: Sr M. de la Croix worried very little about herself.

At Saint-Louis, she had no hesitation in adopting the same life style as her girls.^d Certainly, she did not go to the plantations: she knew nothing about agriculture and especially about Melanesian methods of cultivating taros, yams and manioc. Moreover she had enough other occupations to fill her days. But she was not put off by any task: cooking, care of the hens and pigs, and the weekly washing - at Belep as well as at St Louis - played a large part in her life side by side with classes, sewing and visits to the sick. She even tried gardening at Belep, with Sr M. St Jean, in order to improve the menu with some green vegetables and she made cheese with the goats' milk.²⁵

During the meals, she was in the midst of her little ones and had the same menu, so much so that her health suffered. In addition to the numerous crises, almost weekly, that marked her life during the 1870s was "*a very high temperature due to anæmia*".²⁶ Fr Fraysse was concerned and put her on a diet that she followed "*in the name of obedience*". She acknowledged that it did her good: "*Almost full strength wine, red meat, etc. etc.*," she wrote at that time.²⁶

It can be noted in passing that, having become very sensitive to the cold, she needed to cover herself up well during the cool season. During the day she wore a heavy coat and she needed "*several heavy woollen blankets*" at night because her body was worn out, full of infirmities.²⁷

^d It should be noted that, very often, in her letters, Sr M. de la Croix did not say "my" girls but "our" girls.

At least since the 1867 fire, she spent her nights in great discomfort. She explained it in a letter to Fr Charlot:

*They put on four posts a framework of boards or rope made from the coconut tree, a mat, a sheet, a pillow of dried banana leaves, and there we have our beds on which we sleep in the delights of Bethlehem.*²⁸

5) Humility

In the letters she wrote to Frs Poupinel and Yardin during the first years, Sr M. de la Croix showed herself to be very free. She did not hesitate to describe herself as a great idiot²⁹ and stupid,³⁰ she insisted that she was not worth much,³¹ that she was proud and unmortified.³² Was this just a manner of speaking? Did she really believe what she was saying?...

Why should we doubt her words? There is factual evidence of her real desire to cultivate the virtue of humility. After some difficulties that resulted in her being sent, at the end of 1859, into exile at Ile des Pins, she wrote to Fr Rougeyron. The letter concluded in this way: *"I am very well at Ile des Pins; I have found in our priests justice, honesty and trust, which are rare,"*³³ and in a letter in which she related to Fr Poupinel what had happened, she stated: *"It seems that displeased him."*³³ Anyone would have been, to say the least! Several months later, regretting that phrase which could be said to be tactless, Sr M. de la Croix sent apologies to Fr Rougeyron: *"It's late, but it is at least sincere,"* she admitted in another letter to Fr Poupinel.³⁴

The years passed and her writings continued to include expressions indicating how little self-esteem she had. In 1867, when she had received a letter from Fr Poupinel reproaching her, she noted simply: *"You cannot remake people, Sr d. l. Croix is proof of that."*³⁵ At the beginning of September 1875,

a few days before the ceremony of consecration of the first Petites Filles de Marie, she wrote:

There is some little result of my sixteen and a half years of mission, but it isn't from me, and I am glad to acknowledge it, it is from God and Him alone;

she is only “*a last resort, for want of something better.*”³⁶

In 1880, very conscious of her limitations, she requested prayers, not for the recovery of her health, but that she correct her ways.³⁷ In 1890, on the occasion of a retreat, she wrote to Sr M. Anne, who was then stationed at Lifou: “*I have often asked forgiveness for having given you such bad example so many times.*”³⁸

From 1892 onwards, Sr M. de la Croix continued to write from Belep. Given the risky situation she was in among the leprosy patients, we might have thought that, strengthened by a certain self-esteem, the references to her imagined mediocrity would disappear. Nothing of the sort: her life was worthless.³⁹ she offered this wretched life to God, so that he could purify it;⁴⁰ she clung to the merits of her girls who did more good than she;⁴¹ she had not done anything of value.⁴²

In September 1898, after the patients had departed, when it seemed that Bishop Fraysse hesitated to leave the sisters at Belep, she insinuated:

*It would be a major illusion to count on me to do something better than I do at Belep, given my age, my health and especially my defects.*⁴³

In 1907, she declared to a Petite Fille de Marie:

*What shall I tell you about Belep? Just what could be said of every place; each one tries to fulfil her obligations and the most slovenly one is me.*⁴⁴

And in May 1908, at the time of her jubilee, she admitted to Bishop Chanrion: *My greatest task during these fifty years has been to try the patience of others without benefiting myself.*⁴⁵

A generous soul is never satisfied with the work accomplished.

6) Sense of humour

Reading Sr M. de la Croix's correspondence enables us to observe some other things. Thus we are struck by her sense of humour and by the picturesque expressions - we have already come across a few of them - that abound in her writings.

How did she speak about herself? In 1861, she presented herself as "*Madame the Marchioness of the Ile des Pins.*"⁴⁶ She concluded a very long letter to Fr Poupinel in 1873, saying: "*Bless your daughter who is respectful as well as being a chatterbox.*"⁴⁷ In 1894, she was "*a large barrel, good for nothing*"⁴⁸ and, in 1896, she presented herself as "*the cook of burnt sauces.*"⁴⁹ In 1898, her desire to remain at Belep was so great that she wrote to the vicar apostolic: "*I have heard that your Lordship said ruins should not be moved!*"⁵⁰ Obviously she didn't take herself seriously: humour, humility ...

How did she speak of the events that punctuated her life? In 1862, when some men at Ile des Pins were getting ready to leave for the mainland, she commented:

*The concert produced by the noble beasts with which they are filling their canoes makes it clear enough that it is not nightingales they are going to sell.*⁵¹

A shipwreck deprived Fr Charlot, her friend from Bordeaux, of the photo she had sent him: "*No doubt the fish have devoured me,*"⁵² she concluded, surely with a smile. In 1901,

she again used the image of fish, but this time she was the victim: when Sr M. Anne had sent her photos of the sisters most recently arrived from France, she expressed how sad she was: "*How I regret not receiving the photos that you said were coming with the other things, and that the fish are gazing at instead of me!*"⁵³

Sometimes she also joked about people with whom she lived or corresponded. While Brother Alexandre at Saint-Louis was going to a lot of trouble to keep the boys' school going, Sr M. de la Croix declared: "*He is preventing St Louis from dying and for that cause he is killing himself.*"⁵⁴ She mischievously noted when alluding to Fr Yardin: "*To Fr Yardin of happy memory although she often found gaps in his memory...*"⁵⁵ and in 1873, it was Brother Mallet - who was then the procurator in Nouméa - who bore the brunt of her humour; she was in fact waiting for mail: "*It is no doubt due to the forgetfulness of the Saint forgetful Mallet that I haven't got it.*" she declared.⁵⁶

In 1883, a crate sent to the Petites Filles de Marie at Lifou missed the boat so she wrote:

The crate which I announced containing all that you asked me for has been forgotten by I don't know which blockhead who merits at least having his stupidity emphasised.^{e 57}

In 1896, alluding to Fr Guitta, then 73 years old and who was the companion of Fr Moris at Belep she said: "*We have a relic in our very elderly Fr Guitta.*"⁵⁸ A year later it was about Fr Moris that she joked to Sr M. Anne:

^e Literally: at least three circumflexes (to prolong the word *bêta* in French).

*The good, good, good Fr Moris is like all men: he gives wrong information that is not true or he makes a mountain out of a mole-hill.*⁵⁹

In 1903, some parcels sent from St Louis arrived at Belep, but were not given to her. With a seeming touch of irritation, she noted in a letter:

*Everything arrived in April addressed to: Belep Mission, except the bills which were addressed to "Sisters".*⁶⁰

But was it still humour?

7) She came to serve the indigenous people

If she had come to New Caledonia, if she had left her country and cut all ties with her family, it was because she was carried along by a great project, that of participating in the evangelisation of a people who had for some years been coming into the Christian faith. She expressed it on many occasions and in terms that left no doubt about her intentions. In 1866, when she was hesitating to enter the Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions, she affirmed strongly in a letter to the superior general: "*the missions were the constant object of my desires for eight years before I came here.*" A few lines further on she spoke with no less conviction of this "*precious desire*" within her,

*to live and die among these people to whom I had given myself believing that Our Lord wanted me to be their servant forever.*⁶¹

At Ile des Pins she lived surrounded by the girls day and night because that was how she could best take care of them, teach them catechism, songs and prayers and recount sacred history to them.⁶² She gave her life to them for their salvation.⁶³ She joyfully welcomed into her hostel two little

orphans from Lifou who were still not yet baptised but whom Fr Fabre, her travelling companion, asked her to make into Christians capable of serving on their island - a task that Pélagie and Julie were to carry out very well later on. She seized every opportunity to reiterate that she was "*the servant of these poor people*".⁶⁴

At Saint-Louis, where she was dealing with children coming from every corner of the main island and the other islands, she knew that she could be counted on to make of them "*an army of catechists and little apostles*",⁶⁵ who, once they returned to their places, would prepare the way for the missionaries. In 1874 her joy was immense when several young girls among her students told the vicar apostolic that they too desired to consecrate themselves to the mission and to the education of girls. We have seen how carefully she fulfilled this task and passed on the flame. When the Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions separated from the Society of Mary, Sr M. de la Croix found herself faced with an agonising choice to make: to keep on being a Religious and leave New Caledonia or to become again a simple tertiary of the Society of Mary and remain in the mission. Her decision made, she explained it in this way:

*If for the good of these poor people, we must leave them, I would be glad to do so. But the only thing I earnestly desire down here is the happiness of dying with the last of these coloured people with whom I have lived and whom I have served for some twelve years,*⁶⁶

and she remained. She belonged to her girls.⁶⁷

On her way to Belep in 1892 she wrote to Sr M. Anne of her awareness of being "*made for the indigenous people*". She again spoke of her "*joy in serving them to the end*".⁶⁸

- ***But was she interested in the Melanesians' customs?***

One can ask whether this unreserved attachment she felt for the Melanesians, prompted her to try and learn about their way of life and their customs. In the second half of the 19th century, sciences such as ethnography or anthropology did not yet exist or had scarcely come into existence - thus Fr Lambert's book *Mœurs et superstitions des Neo-Caledoniens*, which was an attempt in this direction, came out in 1900. Only a negative reply can be given to this. Only once during her time at Ile des Pins, did she make a reference to a Kanak custom. Hortense's father, Kaoua Vendegou, who died in 1855, was going to have a Christian burial in 1862. Sr M. de la Croix spoke briefly about it to Fr Poupinel: she told him his body had remained "*exposed in the trees as is the custom of the country*",⁶⁹ and she continued without any trace of astonishment:

If the birds of prey had not made a mouthful of him, it was because, thanks to his title as High Chief, the body of poor Philippe [his baptismal name] had been enclosed in a coffin,

and she moved onto something else without making any comments. References of this kind are extremely rare in her writings. Did she think that would be of any interest? In any case she had not come for that.

8) Her openness to the world

Sr M. de la Croix's desire to give herself totally to the Melanesians and to serve them did not prevent her from being interested in what was happening elsewhere in the world. From 1865 onwards, namely from the time she began to live at St Louis, numerous traces of this are found in her correspondence.

- *Newspapers from France*

She appreciated in particular, being able to read the newspapers coming from France, such as the conservative and ultramontanist journal *L'Univers*, that the priests lent her. She enjoyed reading this so much that she would have liked to subscribe to it... if she had had the required "50 francs for a year!"⁷⁰ *Le Monde* was also passed onto her, but, being very busy, she kept it so long that people no longer wanted to lend it to her!⁷¹ Fortunately, her friend, Fr Charlot, wrote her lengthy letters every month or almost monthly, in which "all the current issues are outlined".⁷²

In this way she was able to react to events that were shaking France, such as the 1870 war. Filled with anguish, she wrote at that time:

*Oh! poor France! If for love of God I had forgotten it, now that it is groaning in distress, what feelings of affection are stirred up in the depths of my heart.*⁷³

In May 1871 - the English telegraph was in action - she was worried: "What has become of Paris at this moment when I am writing? Has God burned down this new Sodom?"⁷⁴ alluding to the revolt of the "Communards", and the civil war which steeped the capital in blood for a few weeks.^f

The Church and the Pope were subject to the repercussions of these tragic events. The Franco-Prussian war had interrupted the work of Vatican Council I and led to the capture of Rome and the end of the Papal States: the Italians

^f At the 1871 elections, two thirds of the members of the National Assembly were royalist. This result, reflecting the real situation of the country, was not that of Paris, which had a strong republican and anticlerical tradition. Whence arose a revolt and the proclamation in Paris of the Commune which would last two months and leave lasting traces in people's minds.

were establishing their unity and wanted Rome as their capital. Sr M. de la Croix, in her fidelity to the Pope, had a lot of difficulty in accepting that he had lost his temporal authority.⁷⁵

Thanks to Fr Poupinel, she received magazines from France. In 1869, when she had just received a bound edition of a year's copies of *Messenger du Cœur de Jésus*,⁷⁶ she wrote to him saying how much she, and also her girls, liked this publication.⁷⁷ Fr Poupinel also sent her *L'Echo de Fourvière*; which she let people on all sides borrow, to the extent that often she was the only one not to read it; it was on the move so much! Even the convicts of the neighbouring camp^g asked for it and that "*did them a great deal of good.*"⁷⁸

- ***The Caledonian Press***

From 1859, *Le Moniteur de la Nouvelle Calédonie*, a weekly magazine, was published at Port-de-France. Of course, Sr M. de la Croix read it; and was then able to give Fr Forestier, who had left for France, news of the country. She wrote in 1865:

*Le Moniteur de Port-de-France, of 20 August, gives an account of the celebrations of St Napoléon, horse races inaugurated on this occasion [...] with the money on each one [...] "real social progress" for everyone's pleasure.*⁷⁹

The cutting side of her character is once again in evidence!

In the immense isolation of Belep, Sr M. de la Croix always gave great importance to the newspapers that reached her. At that time the most important of these was *L'Echo de la*

^g This camp was situated at Thabor at the site of Marie-Reine College.

France Catholique. Published by the Vicariate since 1885 - the printing press had been set up at Saint-Louis - this weekly paper gave news, Catholic news in particular, of Caledonia and the world. Sister also very frequently spoke about the *Bulletin*^h which was reserved for 'the ecclesiastical personnel of the Vicariate'. The priests at Belep sometimes passed it onto her and she appreciated being kept up to date about the Bishop's movements and actions, changes of priests, etc... She then shared her disappointment with Sr M. Anne when an issue didn't reach her, which, it seems, occurred quite frequently at the beginning of the century.⁸⁰ Sr M. Anne then started to send the paper directly to her. Sr M. de la Croix thanked her for this on many occasions; for example in 1903 she wrote to her: "*Thank you for the Bulletins that you slipped in with your letter. I only get to read those you send me.*"⁸¹

She spoke only once of *La France Australe*ⁱ an issue of which, "*had been passed on to our priests,*"⁸² but we do not know if she herself had been able to read it. As for magazines, she spoke once of the *Pèlerin*⁸³ that came from France, and Fr Gautret affirmed that she "*devoured*"⁸⁴ it.

Despite her age, Sr M. de la Croix continued to be interested in everything. In 1894, she learnt of the assassination in Lyon of President Sadi Carnot and expressed her horror.⁸⁵ In 1899, she referred to a disagreement that caused conflict between Bishop Fraysse and Governor Feillet.⁸⁶

^h *Le Bulletin*, which was first called *Bulletin hebdomadaire*, appeared as a supplement to *L'Echo de la France Catholique*. In 1888, it became the *Bulletin ecclésiastique et religieux du Vicariat*, then from January 1902, the *Communication administrative*. In her letters, Sr M. de la Croix would continue to speak of the *Bulletin*.

ⁱ *La France Australe*, a daily newspaper, began to appear in August 1889.

One issue caused her particular concern: the rise of anticlericalism. She wrote in 1901:

*I am worried about the fate of the congregations in France, especially the Society [of Mary].*⁸⁷

In 1906, she was outraged:

*it is today that unspeakable laws^j have to be strictly enforced, O France, above all, O Church.*⁸⁸

She feared, not without reason, the consequences of this anticlericalism for the New Caledonia Vicariate.⁸⁹ In 1904, when she had just heard of the Sisters of St Joseph of Cluny's expulsion from the hospital in Nouméa, she expressed her sorrow:

*I have spent hours and hours in deep adoration, simply repeating these words: 'Your will be done, Lord, your will be done'. Poor France and poor Vicariate! Let us suffer, pray and suffer again, and may God be blessed in all things.*⁹⁰

A few months later, it was Bishop Fraysse's turn to be expelled from the building that served as the Bishop's residence in Nouméa.^k Sr M. de la Croix was indignant: "*How can we tell you what Sr St Jean and I are feeling about all these troubles and vexations?*"⁹¹

In 1907, just after the visit of Bishop Chanrion who had come to bless the new church, and at a time when for the well-

^j Reference to laws which led to the separation of Church and State in France, causing the removal of subsidies, the confiscation of religious buildings and forbidding members of religious congregations to teach.

^k It was following this expulsion that the Catholics in Nouméa mobilised themselves to build the present Bishop's residence in the suburb of Blanchot.

being of Belep, she thought he should have “*been able to stay a month,*” she went on to say:

*Other much more serious concerns are calling him back to Nouméa where persecution is brewing, according to news that has reached us these days. No more chaplain at the hospital!*⁹²

III. HER RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

It remains for us to speak of Sr M. de la Croix's spiritual life, about her relationship with God. There would be many things to say about this, so much that an in-depth study would be needed, which is not within the scope of this book. No doubt one day someone will undertake to do this, someone who will take care to situate her thinking within the framework of 19th century spirituality. Quite obviously, Sr M. de la Croix was dependant on that: in her writings are found expressions of her devotion to the Eucharist, to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and to Mary. For now, we shall confine ourselves to presenting a few characteristics that show how she saw herself before God. Three themes have been singled out: the importance of the cross in her life - her abandonment to God's will - her union with God, and, in concluding we will attempt to show her stance before Mary.

1) “**You don't have to be called Croix [Cross] in order to carry the cross**”

This is how Sr M. de la Croix expressed herself in a letter to Sr M. Anne in 1893 and she added: “*You have to suffer in order to do good.*”⁹³ This theme of the Cross keeps coming back in her letters because it was she who chose the name that she had borne since 6 July 1858.⁹⁴ The cross was attached to her footsteps,⁹⁵ it was her lot and she loved it.⁹⁶

During her childhood she had experienced much sadness and suffering: “*I have cried so much in my life*”, she confided to a friend in 1861, “*that my eyes now fill with tears for nothing*”.⁹⁷ However, she desired nothing else than to be a “*true daughter of the Cross and of love*”.⁹⁸

In 1872, when her poor health often kept her in bed, she hoped that Our Lord would not allow her to “*drag*” this cross, that she would be able to “*carry*” it right to the end.⁹⁹ She did all in her power to achieve that.¹⁰⁰ In 1877, when Scholastique was ill, Sr M. de la Croix expressed her pain and anxiety: “*There are times when I wonder whether God will again inflict this sacrifice on me. Fiat!*”¹⁰¹

On 14 September 1887, feast of the Holy Cross, when the Sisters were making their annual retreat, Sr M. de la Croix noted in her spiritual notebook:

*O Cross, my name and my salvation! I salute you and venerate you!! Be my strength and my hope. Rekindle my faith, Cross of Jesus, be my life.*¹⁰²

In 1894, Sr M. de la Croix was generous in her advice to Apollonie, a Fille de Marie who was going through a difficult period:

*The memory of the sufferings of our God must never leave us. Let us meet at the foot of the Cross. There we learn to suffer and to love.*¹⁰³

In April 1898, when the Belep leprosarium was about to close, she expressed her own sorrow to Sr M. Anne: “*There are crosses everywhere, even at Easter-time,*” she sighed.¹⁰⁴

She wrote again to the same sister on the eve of Palm Sunday, April 1906:

We are going to spend these days of prayer united in spirit, and we shall bring together our regrets, hopes and

*acceptance at the foot of the Cross which always unites us.*¹⁰⁵

2) “Abandonment to God’s will, in life and in death”

Sr M. de la Croix affirmed this resolution to abandon herself to God’s will,¹⁰⁶ all throughout her life and in all circumstances.

From 1859, in Ile des Pins, she expressed her happiness at being at God’s service. Admittedly she was still suffering from the hurt she had experienced at the beginning of the year, but “*had Jesus found justice on earth?*” As for herself, she had “*the deep joy*” of doing God’s will and that “*soothes the bitterness*”.¹⁰⁷

When Fr Poupinel made a trip to Europe in 1862, Sr M. de la Croix exclaimed:

*God knows what the Sisters are losing in him! No one is indispensable, it seems clear, God alone suffices. In Caledonia these words are understood.*¹⁰⁸

No recriminations: she accepted it.

In 1866, when there is question of Sr M. de la Croix entering the Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions, she prayed unceasingly: her sole desire was to “*accomplish God’s will however crucifying it may seem to me*”.¹⁰⁹ In 1869, however, she no longer had peace of heart because she did not understand the superior general’s attitude toward the Society of Mary and found herself “*alone and without a guide in the hands of the Divine Master*”, she whose only fear was “*not to do God’s will!*”¹¹⁰

In 1879, when her health was so bad that “*several times she was taken to the gates of eternity*”, she blessed “*God’s*

will which is always to be adored”, but admitted that she needed courage to do so.¹¹¹

From Belep she used to write to her former novices. In 1896 she recommended to Madeleine who had changed community and was missing the sister she had left, that she “*offer up*” this feeling of affection; “*along with everything else to God’s will*”.¹¹² In 1907, Sr M. Joseph (Eugénie) was undergoing many trials at Lifou; she encouraged her to place herself “*always in God’s hands*” and to “*accept the Master’s will with all the love*” she was capable of.¹¹³

When, in 1905, Sr M. de la Croix herself had just learnt of Bishop Fraysse’s death and was “*heartbroken*” by the news, she could only say: “*Nevertheless, the good Lord is there, and in our pain we do not stop adoring his holy will.*”¹¹⁴

3) “An immense fount of mercy in which I love to lose myself”

It was in these terms that Sr M. de la Croix, already in 1860, spoke of her life of union with God: if she loved to lose herself in the Divine Mercy, in spite of her faults and negative attitudes, it was because she needed to hope that one day she would be “*completely given to the Heart of Jesus and be a true daughter of Mary*”.¹¹⁵ In December 1864 - when Sr M. de la Croix had been at Saint-Louis for three months - Fr Vigouroux had immediately understood that he was dealing with “*a privileged soul, [...] admirable in her union with God*”.¹¹⁶

As soon as she could, Sr M. de la Croix started Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament at the school. In a letter to Fr Poupinel, she mentioned it in passing, giving only a few details: this devotion had been begun in secret in 1870 but the Bishop really wanted it set up in an official manner¹¹⁷... In

1902, which was a long time after, there was another reference to the “*hours of adoration*” that she made with Sr M. St Jean, praying “*for all of you at Saint-Louis*”.¹¹⁸ A day of adoration existed in the community in 1904, and it seems that it was on Fridays.¹¹⁹

Something that Sr M. de la Croix also appreciated was to be alone with God, “*the joy of finding him alone*”.¹²⁰ Sick, scarcely able to sleep, she would “*spend pleasant nights with Our Lord*” and she spoke in all simplicity of “*happiness from the reflections he suggests to me*”.¹²⁰ In 1894 she spoke to Madeleine of this joy of being “*alone with him and always blessed*”.¹²¹ The same year she confided to Sr M. de Bon Secours her suffering at being deprived of the liturgies, so very beautiful at Saint-Louis, but went on to say: “*When one is with God alone, there are so many things to say to him, and that is some consolation.*”¹²²

She did not hesitate to speak of her love for God. In 1876 she wrote in this vein to Fr Poupinel:

*If others love the Lord more than I do, if others serve him better than I do and there are such people, I know and I confess it to my shame, but no one feels more than I do the joy of belonging to him.*¹²³

In November 1894 she exhorted Apollonie in this way:

*Do you not hear Our Lord saying to you that he has chosen you, that he has loved you... Therefore, do only that, love him, this God of goodness. Love him for yourself, for those who do not love him enough, for those who don't love him at all, there are people like that...*¹²⁴

Five years later she advised Madeleine to love the good Lord wholeheartedly and to make him loved, even if it is not easy.¹²⁵

Sr M. de la Croix appreciated the peace of Belep after the hustle and bustle at Saint-Louis. She recognised this in 1893:

*We have the time to pray, we who complained so much to be lacking it formerly and we place ourselves body and soul at the foot of the Tabernacle.*¹²⁶

She repeated the same idea to Eugénie several years later: “*We are able to pray a lot.*”¹²⁷

This prayer was constant: in 1901, she acknowledged quite simply to Sr M. Anne: “*We can help you only by prayer, but yes, I can assure you that it is constant.*”¹²⁸ Two years later she again affirmed this: her prayer was constant.¹²⁹

4) “**Mary, our all, after Jesus**”

Concluding a letter to Fr Yardin in September 1861, Sr M. de la Croix, who was then at Ile des Pins, asked prayers so that

the name of the Lord and of our dearly loved Mother may be known, praised, blessed and thanked forever by all peoples,

and especially by “*our children, yours, those who belong to Mary, our queen, our all, after Jesus*”.¹³⁰

These words help us discover not only the depth of her love for Mary, but also how she lived her relationship with Christ’s mother, Mary: she is “*our all*”, but “*after Jesus*”, who remained at the centre of her faith.

With Mary she stood at the foot of the Cross.¹³¹ Recalling the difficulties and suffering she had gone through, this “*ever present Garden of Gethsemane*” within her, she immediately added: “*Mary was not on Thabor, but on Calvary.*”¹³² Some years later, she said it again to Apollonie: it is at the foot of the cross that we encounter the heart of our mother.¹³³

The heart of Mary is the heavenly path to go to Jesus¹³⁴ because Mary “*can move the heart of her Son*”.¹³⁵ Through her many graces are obtained;¹³⁶ she had protected the travellers during their voyage in 1858,¹³⁷ she had obtained the healing of a child at Saint-Louis in 1877,¹³⁸ the young leprosy patients who arrived at Belep in 1892 had been transformed “*thanks to Mary and also to you all who prayed*”.¹³⁹ ...

It was “*Mary who reigned and governed*”¹⁴⁰ at the sisters’ school at Saint-Louis; it was through her intercession that the girls had become what they were. Is not Mary “*the Queen, Mother and Mistress of this Providence?*”¹⁴¹

In 1896 she affirmed in a letter to Sr M. Colette:

*You do well to consider the Blessed Virgin as the Superior of your house. We have always considered her that way. You must recall this yourselves.*¹⁴²

It was not something else she said to Eugénie when she wrote to her in 1900: “*Our school is doing well in acquiring knowledge. The Blessed Virgin is its Superior.*”¹⁴³

In May 1876 a fourth young woman, Maria Tiand’o, came to join the first three Petites Filles de Marie, and that occurred “*during the month of Mary at the time when the Bishop proposed the organisation of the little congregation*”. Sr M. de la Croix rejoiced, seeing immediately in that, a sign that the “*Queen of heaven blesses this work*”.¹⁴⁴

At Belep Mary’s month was celebrated each year with great fervour. In 1893, Sr M. de la Croix expressed a certain concern:

Oh! How we would like to know if the Blessed Virgin will grant us what we ask of her with such fervour

and she added: “*it is for the well-being of our undertaking!*”¹⁴⁵

In 1895, when Fr Villard was dying, she confided to Sr M. Anne: “*The Blessed Virgin will take him at the end of her month. He loved her so much, she would want to reward him.*”¹⁴⁶ In fact the priest died on 31 May. At the beginning of May 1899, she wrote at the end of a letter to Sr M. Anne: “*United always in Mary and at her feet during this blessed month.*”¹⁴⁷

A final quotation, because we need to conclude this anthology. In May 1907, Sr M. de la Croix advised Sr M. Joseph (Eugénie):

*Oh! my daughter, let us pray well, and unceasingly because we live in troubled times. Let us ask our Mother to watch more and more over this land that is dedicated to her.*¹⁴⁸

Has not each of us made this our prayer on one occasion or another?

ENDNOTES - CHAPTER VIII

- ¹ Croix-Etienne, 01.10.1897; see also Croix-Bon Secours, 08.04.1894 and 30.04.1894, also Croix-Anne, 10.05.1899 - ASMSM 223.2
- ² cf. Croix-Etienne, 22.10.1899 and 28.10.1900 - ASMSM 223.2.
- ³ Pionnier, *op. cit.*, pp. 388-389
- ⁴ Favre-Poupinel, 16.07.1859 - APM VM 211 (OPS I, 87)
- ⁵ Yardin-Poupinel, 17.08.1858 - APM VM 211 (OPS I, 88)
- ⁶ Poupinel-Favre, 17.11.1858 - APM OP 410; (OPS I, 110)
- ⁷ Croix-Anne, 06.05.1894 - ASMSM 221.2; see also Croix-Anne, 04.11.1894 - ASMSM 221.2
- ⁸ Fraysse-Germain, 26.04.1875 - APM ONC 418
- ⁹ Vigouroux-Yardin, 12.02.1869 - AAN 56.1
- ¹⁰ cf. Croix-Germain, 04.06.1877 - ASMSM 221.52; see also Croix-Gilibert, 01.09.1877 - APM ONC 208
- ¹¹ Fraysse-Germain, 27.08.1878 - APM ONC 418; see also Croix Germain, 26.08.1878, ASMSM 221.52
- ¹² Croix-Poupinel, 11.04.1878 - ASMSM 221.2
- ¹³ Vigouroux-Poupinel, 17.12.1878 - APM ONC 208
- ¹⁴ Fraysse-Poupinel, 05.06.1878 - APM ONC 418
- ¹⁵ Croix-Poupinel, 26.08.1878 - ASMSM 221.2
- ¹⁶ Croix-Yardin, 26.10.1859 - ASMSM 221.3
- ¹⁷ *ibid.*
- ¹⁸ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 06.04.1864 - APM VM 227 (OPS II, 331)
- ¹⁹ Croix-Poupinel, 07.06.1869 - APM VM 227 (OPS III, 524)
- ²⁰ Croix-Anne, 03.04.1894 - ASMSM 223.2
- ²¹ Croix-Bon Secours, 02.12.1894 - ASMSM 223.2
- ²² cf. Croix-Yardin, 19.08.1862 - ASMSM 221.3
- ²³ cf. Croix-Yardin, 20.02.1859 - ASMSM 221.3; see also Yardin-Poupinel, 17.08.1858 - APM VM 211; also Poupinel-Yardin, 16.12.1864 - APM OP 418
- ²⁴ cf. Poupinel-Yardin, 30.05.1860 and 05.10.1860 - APM OP 418
- ²⁵ cf. Croix-Anne, 04.01, 05.02 and 06.03.1893 - ASMSM 223.2
- ²⁶ Croix-Poupinel, 29.06.1876 - ASMSM 221.2 (OPS IV, 667 - unpublished passage)

- ²⁷ Poupinel-M. du Cœur de Jésus, 07.10.1869 - ARNDM Box File XIV; APM OP 418 (handwritten copy) (OPS III, 540); see also Croix-Poupinel, 20.05.1872 - ASMSM 221.2
- ²⁸ Croix-Charlot, 01.08.1867 - APM VM 227 (handwritten copy) (OPS III, 465)
- ²⁹ cf. Croix-Yardin, 04.09.1859 - ASMSM 221.3
- ³⁰ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 21.04.1861 - APM VM 227
- ³¹ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 30.10.1859 - APM VM 227
- ³² cf. Croix-Yardin, 09.08.1861 - ASMSM 221.3; also Croix-Poupinel, 01.08.1861 - APM VM 227
- ³³ Croix-Poupinel, 17.12.1859 - APM VM 227 (OPS I, 171 - unpublished passage); Sr M. de la Croix's letter to Fr Rougeyron does not seem to have been conserved
- ³⁴ Croix-Poupinel, 15.05.1860 - APM VM 227
- ³⁵ Croix-Poupinel, 03.04.1867 - ASMSM 221.2 (OPS III, 451 - unpublished passage)
- ³⁶ Croix-Poupinel, 02.09.1875 - ASMSM 221.2 (OPS IV, 659)
- ³⁷ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 13.04.1880 - ASMSM 221.2
- ³⁸ Croix-Anne, 12.11.1890 - ASMSM 223.2
- ³⁹ cf. Croix-Bon Secours, 26.11.1893 - ASMSM 223.2
- ⁴⁰ cf. Croix-Bon Secours, 20.07.1894 - ASMSM 223.2
- ⁴¹ cf. Croix-Bon Secours, 01.08.1895 - ASMSM 223.2
- ⁴² cf. Croix-Forestier, 27.12.1895 - ASMSM 221.51
- ⁴³ Croix-Fraysse, 04.09.1898 - AAN 116.9
- ⁴⁴ Croix-Eugénie, 14.07.1907 - ASMSM 223.3
- ⁴⁵ Croix-Chanrion, 14.05.1908 - AAN 116.9
- ⁴⁶ Croix-Poupinel, 21.04.1861 - APM VM 227
- ⁴⁷ Croix-Poupinel, 18.06.1873 - ASMSM 221.2 (OPS III, 621 - unpublished passage)
- ⁴⁸ Croix-Bon Secours, 30.10.1894 - ASMSM 223.2
- ⁴⁹ Croix-Apollonie, 08.07.1896 - ASMSM 223.3
- ⁵⁰ Croix-Fraysse, 04.09.1898 - AAN 116.9.
- ⁵¹ Croix-Poupinel, 19.08.1862 - APM VM 227
- ⁵² Croix-Poupinel, 05.07.1863 - APM VM 227 (OPS II, 314)
- ⁵³ Croix-Anne, 23.05.1901 - ASMSM 223.2
- ⁵⁴ Croix-Poupinel, 20.09.1870 - ASMSM 221.2
- ⁵⁵ Croix-Poupinel, 29.04.1870 - ASMSM 221.2.

- ⁵⁶ Croix-Poupinel, 01.12.1873 - ASMSM 221.2 (OPS III, 628 - unpublished passage)
- ⁵⁷ Croix-Agrippina, 04.07.1883 - ASMSM 223.2
- ⁵⁸ Croix-Anne, 01.01.1896 - ASMSM 223.2
- ⁵⁹ Croix-Anne, 21.03.1897 - ASMSM 223.2
- ⁶⁰ Croix-Anne, 05.05.1903 - ASMSM 223.2
- ⁶¹ Croix-M. du Cœur de Jésus, 29.06.1866 - ASMSM 223.1 (handwritten copy) (OPS III, 426)
- ⁶² Croix-Berset, 20.04.1861 - ASMSM 224.6
- ⁶³ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 06.03.1860 - APM VM 227
- ⁶⁴ Croix-Poupinel, 05.07.1863 - APM VM 227 (OPS II, 314)
- ⁶⁵ Croix-Fabre, 29.09.1870 - ASMSM 221.4
- ⁶⁶ Croix-Favre, 29.05.1870 - ASMSM 221.1 (OPS III, 565)
- ⁶⁷ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 18.08.1870 - ASMSM 221.2
- ⁶⁸ Croix-Anne, 08.10.1892 - ASMSM 223.2
- ⁶⁹ Croix-Poupinel, 19.08.1862 - APM VM 227
- ⁷⁰ Croix-Poupinel, 29.02.1872 - ASMSM 221.2
- ⁷¹ Croix-Charlot, 29.08.1865 - ASMSM 226.5 (copy, unidentified handwriting)
- ⁷² Croix-Poupinel, 16.09.1870 - ASMSM 221.2 (OPS III, 574 - unpublished passage)
- ⁷³ Croix-Poupinel, 14.10.1870 - ASMSM 221.2 (OPS III, 576 - unpublished passage)
- ⁷⁴ Croix-Poupinel, 26.05.1871 - ASMSM 221.2 (OPS III, 586 - unpublished passage)
- ⁷⁵ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 12.08, 08.10.1871 and 29.02.1872 - ASMSM 221.1
- ⁷⁶ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 14.11.1869 - APM VM 227
- ⁷⁷ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 06.02.1870 - ASMSM 221.2
- ⁷⁸ Croix-Poupinel, 15.05.1873 - ASMSM 221.2 (OPS III, 620 - unpublished passage)
- ⁷⁹ Croix-Forestier, 30.08.1865 - ASMSM 221.51
- ⁸⁰ cf. Croix-Anne, 10.10.1902 - ASMSM 223.2
- ⁸¹ Croix-Anne, 13.10.1903 - ASMSM 223.2
- ⁸² Croix-Anne, 10.02.1907 - ASMSM 223.2
- ⁸³ Croix-Anne, 01.12.1901 - ASMSM 223.2
- ⁸⁴ Gautret-Fraysse, 29.09.1901 - AAN 30.4

- ⁸⁵ Croix-Bon Secours, 02.07.1894 - ASMSM 223.2
- ⁸⁶ Croix-Anne, 10.05.1899 - ASMSM 223.2
- ⁸⁷ Croix-Anne, 12.07.1901 - ASMSM 223.2
- ⁸⁸ Croix-Anne, 12.07.1906 - ASMSM 223.2
- ⁸⁹ Cf. Croix-Anne, 05.02.1902 - ASMSM 223.2
- ⁹⁰ Croix-Anne, 09.04.1904 - ASMSM 223.2
- ⁹¹ Croix-Anne, 09.09.1904 - ASMSM 223.2
- ⁹² Croix-Anne, 10.02.1907 - ASMSM 223.2
- ⁹³ Croix-Anne, 07.06.1893 - ASMSM 223.2
- ⁹⁴ cf. Yardin-Poupinel, 17.08.1858 - APM VM 211
- ⁹⁵ cf. Croix-Yardin, 08.11.1858 - ASMSM 221.3
- ⁹⁶ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 07.11.1860 - APM VM 227
- ⁹⁷ Croix-Berset, 01.07.1861 - ASMSM 224.6 (OPS II, 237 - unpublished passage)
- ⁹⁸ Croix-Yardin, 09.08.1861 - ASMSM 221.3
- ⁹⁹ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 29.02.1872 - ASMSM 221.2
- ¹⁰⁰ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 27.02.1875 - ASMSM 221
- ¹⁰¹ Croix-Poupinel, 24.10.1877 - ASMSM 221.2
- ¹⁰² Spiritual Notes n° 2, Croix, (1887-1893), p. 2 - typed text
- ¹⁰³ Croix-Apollonie, 04.03.1894 - ASMSM 223.3
- ¹⁰⁴ Croix-Anne, 15.04.1898 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹⁰⁵ Croix-Anne, 07.04.1906 - ASMSM 223.2
- ¹⁰⁶ Croix-Poupinel, 28.11.1876 - ASMSM 221.2
- ¹⁰⁷ Croix-Poupinel, 17.12.1859 - ASMSM 221.2 (OPS I, 171 - unpublished passage)
- ¹⁰⁸ Croix-Yardin, 13.07.1862 - ASMSM 221.3 (OPS II, 281 unpublished passage)
- ¹⁰⁹ Croix-M. du Cœur de Jésus, 29.06.1866 - ASMSM 223.1 (handwritten copy) (OPS III, 426)
- ¹¹⁰ Croix-Poupinel, 19.11.1869 - APM VM 227 (OPS III, 545 - unpublished passage)
- ¹¹¹ Croix-Gilibert, 19.10.1879 - APM Dossier Gilibert
- ¹¹² Croix-Madeleine, 28.05.1896 - ASMSM 223.3
- ¹¹³ Croix-M. Joseph, 14.07.1907 - ASMSM 223.3
- ¹¹⁴ Croix-M. Joseph, 11.11.1905 - ASMSM 223.3
- ¹¹⁵ Croix-Poupinel, 18.04.1860 - APM VM 227
- ¹¹⁶ Vigouroux-Yardin, 03.12.1864 - APM ONC 208

- ¹¹⁷ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 22.02.1875 - ASMSM 221.2
¹¹⁸ Croix-Anne, 02.04.1902 - ASMSM 223.2
¹¹⁹ Croix-Anne, 12.11.1904 and 11.07.1906 - ASMSM 223.2
¹²⁰ Croix-Poupinel, 12.07.1876 - ASMSM 221.2
¹²¹ Croix-Madeleine, 22.07.1894 - ASMSM 223.3
¹²² Croix-Bon Secours, 05.05.1894 - ASMSM 223.2
¹²³ Croix-Poupinel, 04.08.1876 - ASMSM 221.2 (OPS IV, 669 - unpublished passage)
¹²⁴ Croix-Apollonie, 06.11.1894 - ASMSM 223.3
¹²⁵ cf. Croix-Madeleine, 16.03.1899 - ASMSM 223.3
¹²⁶ Croix-Apollonie, 05.07.1893 - ASMSM 223.3
¹²⁷ Croix-Eugénie, 26.07.1896 - ASMSM 223.3
¹²⁸ Croix-Anne, 23.05.1901 - ASMSM 223.2
¹²⁹ Croix-Anne, 05.01.1903 - ASMSM 223.2
¹³⁰ Croix-Yardin, 02.09.1861 - ASMSM 221.3
¹³¹ cf. Croix-Yardin, 09.08.1861 - ASMSM 221.3
¹³² Croix-Poupinel, 11.11.1861 - APM VM 227 (OPS II, 257)
¹³³ cf. Croix-Apollonie, 15.05.1898 - ASMSM 223.3
¹³⁴ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 18.04.1860 - APM VM 227
¹³⁵ Croix-Poupinel, 01.08.1861 - APM VM 227
¹³⁶ cf. Croix-Poupinel, 11.11.1861 - APM VM 227
¹³⁷ cf. Croix-Yardin, 08.11.1858 - ASMSM 221.3
¹³⁸ cf. Croix-Germain, 24.10.1877 - ASMSM 221.5
¹³⁹ Croix-Colette, 29.08.1893 - ASMSM 233.3
¹⁴⁰ Croix-Poupinel, 29.02.1872 - ASMSM 221.2
¹⁴¹ Croix-Poupinel, 18.06.1873 - ASMSM 221.2 (OPS III, 621 - unpublished passage)
¹⁴² Croix-Colette, 08.08.1896 - ASMSM 233.3
¹⁴³ Croix-Eugénie, 31.05.1900 - ASMSM 233.3
¹⁴⁴ Croix-Poupinel, 29.06.1876 - ASMSM 221.2 (OPS IV, 667)
¹⁴⁵ Croix-Bon Secours, 29.05.1893 - ASMSM 223.2
¹⁴⁶ Croix-Anne, 29.05.1895 - ASMSM 223.2
¹⁴⁷ Croix-Anne, 10.05.1899 - ASMSM 223.2
¹⁴⁸ Croix-M. Joseph (Eugénie), 12.05.1907 - ASMSM 233.3

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

Having come to the end of this work, I would like to make two remarks:

This biography, like all biographies, gives one picture - my own - of Sister Marie de la Croix, and only that. Someone else would have seen her in another way. By making the best use I could of the documents at my disposal, I have endeavoured to convey what I discovered, what I felt. Someone else would certainly have felt and expressed things differently. Could it not be foreseen that someone would take up this material again in a few years' time and write Sister Marie de la Croix's biography from her/his own perspective? It seems to me that would be worthwhile and enlightening.

The task of writing this book has led me to reflect on the conditions in which our early sisters - those at the end of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century - lived their missionary "adventure". They left their country and their family without hope of returning. Once they had arrived in Oceania, they gave themselves as best they could, carried along by their love of God and others. They accepted living in very difficult conditions, experiencing material poverty: in regard to accommodation, clothing and food, and spiritual poverty in the isolation and distance.

At present there are many books appearing that study the colonial adventure of the 19th century and rightly condemn the flagrant abuses of that period. Where that is not appropriate is when, in condemning the abuses, they also condemn the work of the missionaries! How can missionaries and officials of the colonial administration be put on the same footing? The latter

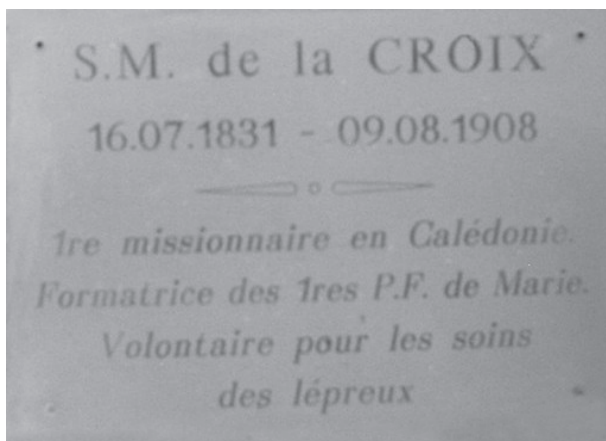
BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

usually spent a few years in the country, and then returned home. They were not concerned about the well-being of the people: their concern was to get the most out of the country, to exploit its natural resources, to organise everything in such a way as to derive maximum profit...

These pages, through the intermediary of Sister Marie de la Croix, pay glowing homage to our early sisters.



The tomb of Sister Marie de la Croix at Belep



Translation of the headstone:

Sr M. de la Croix

16.07.1831 – 09.08.1908

First missionary in Caledonia

Novice mistress of the first Petites Filles de Marie

Volunteer for the care of leprosy patients

APPENDICES

Appendix 1

BIRTH CERTIFICATE of Sister Marie de la Croix (Pélagie Phelippon)

Photocopy in ASMSM.

Municipal Archives of La Roche-sur-Yon

No 119 Birth of Phelinda Pélagie Augusta Phelippon

In the year eighteen hundred and thirty-one, on the seventeenth of July, at ten o'clock in the morning, appeared before us Basile Moreau, deputy mayor of the town of Bourbon-Vendee, administrative centre of the department of Vendee, delegated by the mayor to perform the functions of registry officer, M. Auguste Joseph Phelippon, proprietor, aged thirty, residing in this town. The aforesaid presented before us a female infant born at midday the previous day, declaring this child to be his and that of Mme Marie Antoinette Pélagie Gouyneau, his lawful wife. He declared that this child is being given the Christian names of Phelinda Pélagie Augusta, this declaration and presentation being made in the presence of M. Pierre Augustin Goupilleau, proprietor, aged forty, uncle of the child, and Hyppolite Roulin, aged forty-one, also proprietor and uncle of the child, both residing separately in this town. After this deed had been read to them, the father and the witnesses signed it, along with us.

[the signatures follow]

BAPTISM CERTIFICATE of Sister Marie de la Croix

Photocopy in ASMSM.

Archives of Luçon Diocese

No 100 Baptism of Félinna-Pélagie-Augusta Phelippon

On the eighteenth of July, eighteen hundred and thirty-one, Félinna-Pélagie-Augusta, born on the sixteenth of the same month, of the lawful marriage of Mr Pierre - Auguste - Joseph Phelippon, and Mme Pélagie Gouyneau was baptized.

The godfather was Mr Augustin Goupillaud, represented by Mr Hippolyte Roulin, father, and the godmother, Mme Victoire Legay, grandmother of the child and widow of the late Mr Phelippon. They have signed this declaration with us.

[the signatures follow]

Appendix 2

Original document in ASMSM 253; copy in *Our Pioneer Sisters - from legislative texts and documents of an official character 1855 - 1932*, (Volume V), doc. 36, p. 128. Translation by Charles Girard in *Lay Marists - Anthology of Historical Sources*, Rome 1993, doc. 287.

MEETING ON 6 JULY 1858

After the holy Mass and benediction of the Most Holy Sacrament, the Rev. Fr Director addressed us in a touching exhortation which we regret we cannot reproduce in its entirety.

“Sisters, our meeting is not an ordinary meeting; it should produce lively impressions in us and leave a salutary memory with us.

You have before your eyes, in a new kind of dress one of your sisters who, for many years, has edified us by her assiduity, her good spirit, her piety and her simplicity; and next to her are two others whom we are seeing for the first time and to whom we are also happy to give the name of sisters, although they have not yet entered our little family. Well! these three sisters are about to leave us to go to the other end of the world, in order to consecrate themselves in the service of the missions. Isn't this for us a just cause for affliction and tears? Yes, Sisters, we are allowed to cry, in the moment of this distressful separation, as we understand that we will probably no longer see these dear sisters during this present life. But our sadness should be a very holy one, accompanied by resignation to the will of God. Yet more, our sorrow should be mixed with joy, for if we love our sisters, we should share the feelings which urge them on. Now our

sisters, rising above the weaknesses of nature, are happy to leave everything, to confront every fatigue, every danger, every pain, every work, every privation entailed in the apostolate. So, let us rejoice with them, and let us bless the Lord who can inspire so much courage in the souls whom he calls. We should also rejoice, Sisters, in the thought of the corporal and spiritual good which our sisters will bring to the ‘uncivilised’ in whose midst they are being sent. We will have a share in this good, for in a family everything is in common, as in a body all members draw profit from mutual works.

But you understand that if our sisters, who are leaving, consent to share with us the merits of their heroic sacrifices and of their generous devotion, it is quite just that, on our part, we should give them at least our fervent prayers to support them in the works of the apostolate and to call down upon their heads the graces which they need so as to answer their sublime and yet so difficult vocation. And our sisters have a right to these prayers, and they claim them, not only during their long and dangerous crossing, but all during their lives among the unbelievers. This is the easy means which God has placed in our hands to associate ourselves in their apostolate. Finally, Sisters, another resolution which the spectacle we have before our eyes ought to inspire in us is that which the apostle recommended to the early faithful as he said to them, ‘*You must acquire a fresh, spiritual way of thinking.*’ When we see our sisters, who are so generous for the Lord, to whom they are sacrificing their country, their families, their friends, their habits, their health and their lives, could we refuse the Lord the small things he asks of us? Could we fear a small inconvenience in order to accomplish the easy obligations which we have willingly taken upon ourselves in entering the Third Order? No, Sisters, it will not be that way, and if we had some occasions of negligence or cowardice for which to blame ourselves in the past, from this day onward the memory

of this ceremony and our sisters' example will inspire in us a fervour that will grow more perfect from day to day."

Then Reverend Father turned to the departing sisters to address them in these words

"And you, my dear sisters, what more fitting words could I address to you at this time than those of the apostle to the Corinthians: '*Consider your vocation.*' I do not wish to speak of your apostolic vocation, others will speak to you about that with more authority; but about your vocation in the Third Order of Mary. May you be able to appreciate your happiness in being received into the blessed family of this tender Mother. What a consolation for you and what a pledge of success for the holy and difficult ministry which you are going to carry out! You are leaving, Sisters, but, I can tell you, you are not leaving alone. The hearts of all your brothers and sisters in Mary will follow you, their good wishes will accompany you everywhere; and while you fight the battles of the Lord, we shall raise our suppliant hands to him.

May this thought, my dear Sisters, support you in your fatigue and console you in your afflictions! But your greatest happiness is becoming the privileged children of Mary, and, for this reason, having a very special right to her powerful protection. Make use of this right at all times, Sisters, in your weariness, in your failures, in your weakness, in your falling, and - I would say - *especially* in your falling; if you should have the misfortune to fall, throw yourselves into the arms of your Father with a completely filial confidence. May his love be ever in your hearts, and may his sweet name be ever on your lips. Never forget that recommendation of the Rule, '*habitual recourse to her all-powerful intercession.*' It concerns you and you need it even more than those of your sisters who are remaining here."

“And now, Sisters, come forward; come and promise Mary to be faithful and devoted to her honour and to her love, so that she may obtain for you the graces which you need to be good tertiaries.”

Miss Vianey received the name of Sister Marie de Bon Secours

Miss Phélippon, that of Sister Marie de la Croix

Miss Jacquier who had received the name of Marie Rose de Lima, exchanged it, in keeping with the advice of the Very Reverend Father Superior, for the name of Sister Marie de la Paix.

The meeting was concluded with the singing of the *Magnificat* and Rev. Father Director's blessing.

Appendix 3

Official Bulletin of New Caledonia - 1865 - p. 7, 8 and 9

N° 7. - **DECISION** of the Governor authorising Mme Pélagie Philippon, known as Sister Marie de la Croix, to open a private school at Saint-Louis, for young indigenous girls of the area (day school).

Port-de-France, 12 January 1865.

WE, THE GOVERNOR OF NEW-CALEDONIA AND DEPENDENCIES,

Given our decree of 15 October 1863 regulating public education;

Given Article 29 of the ministerial directive of 26 July 1860 concerning the Government of New Caledonia and Dependencies;

Taking into account the report of the colonial secretary,

HAVE DECIDED AND DO DECIDE:

Art. 1. Mme Philippon (Pélagie), known as Sr Marie de la Croix, is authorized to open a private day school for the young indigenous girls of the area, of which school she is appointed teacher.

Art. 2. The colonial Secretary is given responsibility for implementing the present decision, which will be communicated and recorded wherever necessary.

Signed: Guillain.

By the Governor:
The Colonial Secretary,

Signed: A. Mathieu.

APPENDIX

SAINT-LOUIS SCHOOL

Conducted by Mme Pélagie Phélippon

INTERNAL REGULATIONS
AND SCHEDULE OF CLASSES

Morning Classes

1st Division

Monday and Friday

Moral and religious instruction	08.00
Legal system of weights and measures	08.30
Reading	09.00
Writing	09.30
Classes finish	10.00

Tuesday

Basic French	08.00
Reading	09.00
Writing	09.30
Classes finish	10.00

Wednesday

Arithmetic, practical skills	08.00
Basic education in industry and hygiene	08.30
Reading	09.00
Writing	09.30
Classes finish	10.00

APPENDICES

Thursday

Basic French	08.00
Principles of singing	08.30
Reading	09.00
Writing	09.00
Classes finish	10.00

Saturday – Holiday

2nd Division

Every day, except Saturday

Moral and religious instruction	08.00
Principles of reading	08.30
Memory exercises, mathematics, etc	09.00
French language, common words, conversation	09.30
Classes finish	10.00

Afternoon classes

From 3 - 5 p.m. - Catechism and manual work

Appendix 4

Document conserved in AAN 113.2 - Sr M. de la Croix's writing.

Saint-Louis, [1870]

RULE OF OUR LITTLE PROVIDENCE

	Rise at dawn
	Breakfast and reading class from after Mass until 08.00
08.00 – 11.00	Work in the garden, laundry, ironing, cooking, sewing, workroom activities
08.00 – 11.00	Writing class and various lessons, and sewing for the very little ones
11.00	Religious instruction. Singing class on Thursdays and Saturdays
Midday	Lunch, recreation
13.45	Writing and French class. Wednesday: arithmetic
15.00	Workroom activities and gardening Time for Rosary and a short visit to the Blessed Sacrament depends on the time of return from the plantations as does the evening meal. In winter, study for a quarter of an hour after the evening meal for the intermediate level students, then they go to bed.
21.00	Spiritual reading for the older students Bed-time in all seasons

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Monday morning

Checking the girls' dirty linen, then sending the soiled linen to those assigned to do the washing

Saturday

Free time after lunch

Sunday

Catechism for all groups from after the High Mass until 11.00

11.30

Lunch, Rosary or Stations of the Cross – Litanies of the Sacred Heart of Jesus – an outing

Office of the Hours and free time

In the evening, naming of students who have to take on various responsibilities for the week

Details of the duties confided to our girls.

Three girls for the general supervision of each dormitory. They are changed only in case of bad behaviour.

A supervisor for the children who do not go to Mass because they are very little or frail. She also will get them up each morning and watch over their prayers and personal hygiene.

The catechumens who do not attend Mass do the housework with the class teachers during Mass.

Two supervisors for the midday recreation.

Two cooks for the Providence - one supervisor.

Two cooks for the Mission.

Two class teachers.

A laundry supervisor.

A mistress in charge of mending.

A mistress for the ironing.

Three teachers for reading and catechism.

Five children responsible for the altars and the care for the church for the week.

Prayers and devotional practices in use in our Little Providence

Upon waking: BENEDICAMUS DOMINO

Response: DEO GRATIAS

Offering of the day to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Apostolate of Prayer: “Sacred Heart of Jesus, I offer you” etc.

Angelus – Morning prayer – Holy Mass

Before each class: Come Holy Spirit, Hail Mary, invocations to the Sacred Heart, Mary Immaculate and St Joseph

At the end of class: “We fly to your protection...”

When the clock strikes the hour, the class monitor recalls God’s presence saying:

“Let us remember that we are in God’s holy presence”

Blessed be Jesus Christ

Hail Mary, etc. – My Jesus mercy, a short prayer in line with the special devotion of the month or season.

Daily Adoration and Stations of the Cross by our girls who have chosen a particular day.

Adoration on Saturday for the small children and those who do not have a particular day; two girls, taking turns on

Adoration on Saturdays, guide them.

Devotions of the month

January	Month of the Holy Childhood. Daily litanies until the feast of the Purification
March	Month of St Joseph. Reading and litanies each day
May	Month of Mary as above
June	Month of the Blessed Sacrament and the Sacred Heart as above

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July	Month of the Precious Blood and of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart Offerings of the Precious Blood every hour Litany of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart every Thursday
August	Month of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, invocations to St Louis
September	Month of the Seven Sorrows, invocations to St Michael
October	Month of the Holy Angels, reading and litanies
November	Month of the souls in Purgatory
December	Month of the Immaculate Conception
Lent	A 'clock of the passion' with offerings made each hour [<i>in honour of the passion of Christ</i>].

Appendix 5

Document conserved in ASMSM 221.2 - copy made by Sr M. de la Croix and sent to Fr Poupinel.

Greetings from Louise to Father Rougeyron for his feastday, 29 June 1872

J. M. J.

To the Very Rev. Fr Rougeyron.

Very Rev. Father,

Your children have never had the joy of wishing you happy feast day, and how often we have desired to show you our gratitude! However, a sentiment that we are all aware of has caused you to be always absent on the feast of St Peter. That is why, Very Rev. Father, your little family hastens today to express its gratitude, love and devotion to you.

We know that you are our father and we your children. Since we have grown up in your house and have been delivered by you from so many dangers, you are doubly our father. With God's grace, we hope that your sufferings will not be in vain, and we shall always try to prove that to you by our good behaviour.

Deign, very Rev. Father, to bless our promise. We ask this of you as leader of the church in Caledonia and representative of the beloved Head of the Church, whom a Christian cannot forget on St Peter's feast day.

Louise

St Louis 28 June 1872.

Appendix 6

Document conserved in ASMSM 221.2 - copy made by Sr M. de la Croix and sent to Fr Poupinel, 18 June 1873.

J. M. J.

Consecration to St Joseph

I consecrate my whole being to you, my good father, and I choose you as my father and my protector. Good St Joseph, I beg you to watch over me as your beloved child. O St Joseph, my good father, make me love you wholeheartedly as Jesus, my God, loved you. Make me obedient as Jesus obeyed you. Look after me as you looked after the child Jesus. Saint Joseph, my father, you are aware that I do not know how to love you ... O my father, grant me the grace to love you more and more, so that I can one day see God face to face.

Amen.

Agnès (from Touaourou)

St Louis 30 March 1873.

Appendix 7

Document conserved in ASMSM 221.2 - copy made by Sister M. de la Croix and sent to Fr Poupinel, 18 June 1873.

To the Most Holy Virgin Mary

O Mary! I dedicate my work to you, bless it. I give you my whole being. Since I no longer have a mother here on earth, I have chosen you to be my Mother and Mistress. Mary, I ask pardon of you for all the faults I have committed during your month. O Mary, every day during your month I have asked you for the grace to love the good Lord. Please keep me within your heart until the hour of my death. Mary, deign to accept me. I also confide to your care our Holy Father, the Pope because it would seem that his enemies are going to crush him; deliver him from all evil people. O through your Immaculate Conception, intercede for our Holy Father, the Pope!

I thank you for all the graces you have obtained for me, especially that of being a child of God. Mary, since you are the sacred vessel of the Holy Spirit, grant my soul greater strength and love for him. I give you my heart, it is yours.

Jesus and Mary, I place myself in your hands, in life as in death.

Maria (a girl aged about 12 from Lifou, baptised this year. She has also made her First Communion - not being very intelligent, it was her heart alone that spoke).

Appendix 8

Document conserved in ASMSM 231.5; extracts published in *Our Pioneer Sisters - from correspondence 1836 - 1885*, (Volume III), Letter 567, p. 177.

Letter from Father François Yardin to Sister Marie de la Croix

Mission Procure, Lyon, 13 June 1870

My dear Sister,

I received your note of 9 April, as also the letter you sent to Rev. Fr Poupinel. He has gone to visit our missions in Ireland and it is unlikely that he will be able to write to you by this mail.

I was deeply upset to learn that you were in danger of losing your sight. What can I say? Nothing except, may God's will be done! This God of ours is always loving, even when he sends severe trials. He seems to take pleasure in making the name you have chosen a reality in you: however, keep up your courage and trust *in cruce salus in cruce vita, in cruce protection ab hostibus*. Read the text in Chap 12, verse 2 of the 2nd book of *The Imitation of Christ*.

You are hurt at not having received a reply from Very Reverend Father and I regarding your request to us. You now have Very Reverend Father's answer through Father Poupinel. Already you can guess what my response is. But why did I, for my part, keep this voluntary silence, even though it hurt me to do so? It was to give you perfect freedom of choice to either stay where you are or enter the Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions. I wanted you to have the time to discuss this with God alone.

Today I feel more daring about it because of your infirmity. The superior of the Sisters would receive you, I believe, because she has a good heart; but you would become a stranger to the Society of Mary, which has nothing whatsoever to do with the new Congregation, and who has cut communications. The directions given by Reverend Mother make the Institute impossible for the missions except perhaps in New Zealand. She has her own ideas which are beautiful in theory, but impossible in practice. She comes with her mind made up and will listen to no advice. I have gone through a great deal of trouble and I'm afraid all that will be useless for the missions which I had in mind only. The Lord be blessed! Things being what they are, you would do well to live and die as a Tertiary unless you receive better advice. God does not look at the habit, nor the name, but the works, and the works you are now doing would be endangered if you changed. My heart is full to the brim as I speak to you in this way for I think of the future! May God's will be done!

The superior of the sisters in Nouméa exaggerated when she spoke of Father Rougeyron asking for 20 Sisters. He was only making Rev. Father General aware of his need for sisters, and he simply asked if he could have some Sisters of St Joseph if the Mission Sisters, who do not seem to be moving, are not available. It is possible that, in a conversation with the superior, he told her he needed at least 20 sisters in the vicariate; but that was far from being a request. Besides, Fr Rougeyron knows how to count, and he would not disregard the fact that given the resources at his disposal, 20 sisters, with their travel, setting up costs etc. would more rapidly deplete his allocation.

I have sent you some reading textbooks with the pictures. As for hymn books, you have to await a new edition; the first three are out of stock. Furthermore, I am sending you some prayer books for your most pious girls: namely the Ursulines'

former manual, some other little books and then what else I wouldn't know. However my purse needs to have a bit more in it to be able to send you other things: would I have the heart to send things to a poor blind person like you, for a fee?

The Reverend Mother is in Rome to get a Province and a novitiate of her order established in New Zealand. Is she not proceeding rather quickly?

You have Monsieur de la Richerie as Governor. He has formally declared that he did not want to oppose the priests, and asked them not to judge him before seeing him at work. He is even asking for a letter from the Rev. Father General, and that is going to be sent to him: let us hope and pray! He will arrive at your place with this letter.

Mlle Caroline cannot move around much, but she keeps going. She thanks you cordially for remembering her and asks you to accept her kind regards. Mlle Berset is in Rome with the Rev. Mother, which presumably means she is fine. Your dear old friend from Bordeaux is slowly going down: he never writes to Mlle Caroline without speaking of you.

Good-bye, dear blind one, I leave you in the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary.

Your very devoted
Fr Yardin

P.S. When I was about to close my letter I received the enclosed. You can die in peace, little sister, once you have been able to press the signature of Pius IX to your lips!

It was the 14th of last month that Bishop Elloy was able to have an audience with the Holy Father and present Marguerite's letter to him... "What joy for the good Sister Marie de la Croix and the dear little children who are so

devoted to the Pope,” added His Lordship. So I am not wasting any time in sending you this letter that has become so precious. I handed over the 100 f. to the Pope, expressing my regret that I did not have more to offer him. “It is not the amount that touches me,” replied Pius IX, “it is the affection and devotion of these dear children of Oceania.”

Appendix 9

Original of this document is in APM. Photocopy conserved in AAN 87.4

Letter from Caroline (Saint-Louis) to Father Poupinel (Villa Maria)

Saint-Louis, 4 December 1865

Very Reverend Father,

Sr M. de la Croix told me that Ma^a Hortense and Catherine are writing to you. I do not want to be the last to do so even though I am not at Kwnyé. I came to Saint Louis towards the end of August to accompany Sr M. de Bon Secours. I then saw that Sr de la Croix had many students who understand my language and did not know their catechism. Alas! poor little ones, recently baptized without much instruction, and other catechumens. I asked the Sister and Rev. Fr Vigouroux to allow me to stay here for a while so as to help her a little and show her my gratitude for the care she gave me during my childhood, and they have permitted me to stay. My family was also very pleased, and so here I am a catechist, not only for the girls, but also for all the women who speak or understand the Kwnyé language. Each day Sister gathers the women from each of the villages

^a In the language of Ile des Pins, “Ma” used before a woman’s first name and “T” before a man’s name indicates their importance.

surrounding the mission to teach them catechism and sewing. I help her in all of that, because there is a lot of work to do at St Louis.

You will be pleased to learn, Reverend Father, that the largest and most diligent village is that of the Nenghara whom the Governor put at St Louis last year, for reasons you know!... All the men wear the medal and the women now go only to Port de France blushing and in secret.

I am very happy with the position Providence has placed me in here. You see God showers me with many graces. I say this to you as a good father, so that you can help me thank the Lord.

They say you are in Sydney. I am very pleased that you arrived, but I would be more pleased if you came to visit your poor Caledonians, suffering so much on account of the pagans and bad Christians! While waiting dear Father, come and visit us through your kind prayers; people will never forget you.

My writing is very bad, but I have been so sick for a year now that I could not use my limbs and finally, I lost the sight in my left eye. Since I have been at St Louis the good Lord has given me back some of my health. Is it not just that I use it to serve him?

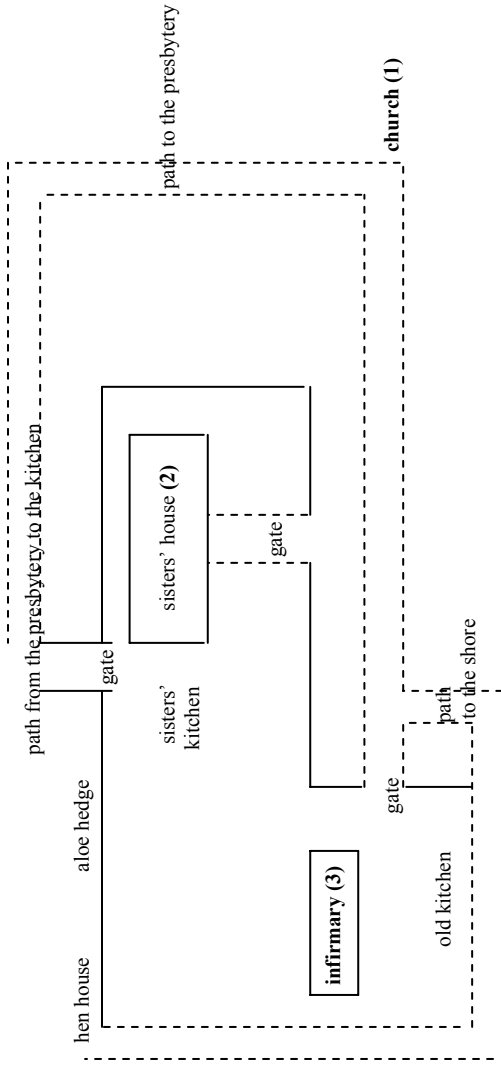
Please accept, Reverend Father, the respectful best wishes of your daughter in Jesus and Mary.

Caroline

Appendix 10

Document conserved in AAN 30.2

Fr VILLARD'S SKETCH at the bottom of p. 2 of a letter addressed to Bishop Fraysse 06.07.1893



- (1) **The old church**, very run down - begun by Fr Barriol in 1892, and finished by Fr Dagod only in 1905.
- (2) **The sisters' house** was the former presbytery.
- (3) **The infirmary** was the former sisters' school. It was obviously larger than the presbytery (sisters' house).

Appendix 11

Document conserved in ASMSM 210.8

Letter from the Prioress of the Carmel of Nevers to Sister Marie de la Croix

Carmel of Nevers, 11 August 1907

May Jesus be all our love!

Very dear Sister,

Since it is understood that the Carmel of Nevers and the beloved Bélep Mission are but one family, you will kindly allow me to offer you the best wishes of your Carmelite sisters who join with your dear protégés on the other side of the world, in asking the good Lord to pour out his choicest and most abundant blessings on the valiant religious who has generously farewelled all that was dear to her, in order to make God's name known and win souls for him. Not knowing the date on which all the grateful inhabitants of Bélep would honour their beloved Jubilarian, we have chosen, dear Sister, to offer as our bouquet for your jubilee, Holy Communion on 8 December for your intentions, and since there is no feast without a follow up, we shall pray on the 9th for your beloved companion. Our hearts would find it too long to wait for her jubilee. Now that we know you and your mission, tell your dear children that we love them as you do. If the good Lord has not asked us to cross the ocean in order to gain souls for Him, we are happy to offer from within our cloister our

prayers and little sacrifices to make fruitful the efforts of those who are on the front line, and since we have known it, the dear Bélep Mission has the best part of our offerings.

There is no distance, in the Heart of Jesus so, dear Sister, that is where we shall meet, along with your dear sister, and in this divine Heart, I remain your humble and unworthy little sister and servant.

Sr M. Thérèse de St Augustin

Appendix 12

Document conserved in ASMSM 210.8 - 13 May 1908

Simple, charming speech of the oldest boy at Sister Marie de la Croix's school, on the occasion of her Golden Jubilee reproduced with all its Caledonian flavour.

Esteemed Mother,

I alone, am going to speak to you; but all my friends think the same as I do.

We think that you have been a true Mother for the young indigenous people for a long time, maybe one thousand years, and we are not mistaken. When we are naughty, you do not abandon us. And if we are naughty once more, or twice, or three times or many, many times, you never abandon us. Mothers do likewise.

And then, when you are ill, you never remain in your leaf house. You come out to give us classes. Now you can no longer walk unaided, so you have had a walking stick made and you come to school every day, morning and evening. You are very tired when you arrive, but you remain right to the end.

We would like to thank the Most Blessed Virgin for having sent you to the young indigenous people and we want to ask her to prepare a beautiful reward for you. However, we shall not be all alone in praying for this. We shall be very numerous, perhaps a hundred thousand. There will be all the Missionaries because you have always helped them a great

deal. There will also be many indigenous people who are now in heaven. They are there because you taught them how to be good when they were little; they would not be there if you had not come to Caledonia. We also want to make another prayer but we do not know if you will be pleased. We would like to ask the Blessed Virgin to keep you in our midst for a long time still. We have good reason. If you were not here, who would teach us catechism, French, reading, writing, mathematics, history, geography and a million other things? And who would make uniforms for us? And who would prepare remedies when we are sick? Yes, we shall make this prayer.

Now, here is a crucifix. We want to give it to you. There is Jesus when he died for us. He will bless you because you help Him to make us good. However, when you in your turn look at Jesus, you will pray to Him for your little children.

Appendix 13

Document conserved in ASMSM 210.8 - 13 May 1908

Speech on behalf of the little girls at Bélep to the esteemed jubilarian

Beloved and esteemed mother,

Here we are gathered to honour you. Whole-heartedly we come to express our congratulations to you on the occasion of your golden jubilee.

We thank the good Lord for the graces He has bestowed on you, for the good He has enabled you to do throughout this long life that you have spent so faithfully in his service, glorifying him and making him known to so many poor indigenous people of New Caledonia.

What heroic deeds have you not done, sacrifices, renunciations, dedication of every kind, in order to gain souls for Jesus Christ? Many people were still pagan when you arrived in Caledonia. You knew how to direct their hearts towards the right path. The good Lord has blessed your efforts because the number of your students throughout all of Caledonia is more than we can count and these children remember your kind deeds with gratitude.

Sister, 50 years of good works is something wonderful! In return, what a beautiful reward awaits you in heaven!

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What shall we, poor little girls of Bélep, surrounded by your most motherly care, do to show you our gratitude? We shall pray and ask God to keep you close to us for a very long time still, so that you can continue working for our salvation. Through our mischief and our ingratitude, we have caused you pain many times, good Mother. Today, we beg you to forget all that and forgive us. Henceforth we want to become true and worthy daughters of a mother like you. This is the wish of your Bélep children. May the Blessed Virgin bless and protect all of us, the Mother and the daughters.

13 May 1908

Appendix 14

(Document conserved in AAN 90.1)

Secretariat - Apostolic Vicariate of New Caledonia

ADMINISTRATIVE COMMUNICATION

of 20 August 1908

No. 101

The advanced age of the esteemed Sr M. de la Croix led us to fear that her illness announced in No. 99 of this communication might end in death. What we anticipated has happened: after fifty years of valuable service in our indigenous schools, she gave up her soul to God on Sunday 9 August.

Although she had been struck down by illness from the beginning of June until the end of the month, she went to her beloved school, leaning on a child's shoulder. In order to make her take a little more rest, the priest had to tell the Christians in church not to send to school the little children of whom Sister de la Croix used to take special care. - The whole of July and the first days of August were for her a time of great suffering which she piously endured. In the morning of 9 August her strength was rapidly diminishing and she asked for and received Extreme Unction. Right to the end she was

fully conscious and about three-thirty in the afternoon she breathed her last.

From that time until her funeral held at four in the afternoon of the following day (the Mass was celebrated in the morning), people prayed unceasingly around the body of the deceased. How many Communion have been offered for her since that time, how many Masses requested by the neophytes for the repose of her soul! It is truly encouraging to know that our spiritual children will think of us after our death, and their prayers are far preferable to the splendour and pomp of other funerals.

Let us end by expressing the wish that a circular be written about this valiant missionary religious: it could only be rich in instruction and edification!

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