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## Re-reading 373 years of History ... 1641-2014

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### The foundation of Our Lady Charity in Caen in 1641



Statue of Our Lady of Charity given to St. John Eudes by the Carmelite Sisters.

One day, in 1641, about St Julien in Caen, a woman shouted out to Father John Eudes and some of his friends who were walking and talking in the street: “Where are you going? No doubt you are going to church to “eat” images of the saints? (...) You should rather work to establish a house for these women, who are lots because they lack resources and direction.”

Madeleine Lamy knew the women she was talking about, since she has already helped some of them at the request of Father Eudes, who would often meet them during his missions in Caen and in the surrounding areas. (...) her cry for help led to the opening of a refuge for women in Caen on November 25th, 1641. Many friends supported Father Eudes in his project, but there were numerous difficulties and obstacles. (...) But we need to underline the constant support of Marie des Vallées, who was called “the saint of Coutances” and who believed in this project, and the de Camilly, de Bois David, de Bernières and de Langrie families who contributed to it with their friendship and financial help.. Over a period of more than 20 years, the sisters of the Visitation supported the initiation of the community with their presence. They were the people who trained the first Sister of Our Lady of Charity, in accordance with what John Eudes wanted for them... (...)

### The turmoil of history... and a new start

Little by little, Our Lady of Charity expands in France: 80 years after the very beginnings in Caen, there are 7 houses in France, the majority of which are in the western part of the country, but also in Paris and Tours. A sisterly bond unites the Sisters together but each house is legally independent from the others. During the Revolution of 1789, the tree is strongly shaken with the closing of houses and the dispersal of the Sisters. However, it weathers the storm and starts again at the beginning of the 19th century. It even starts to expand not without tensions, since the world has changed... but we are often tempted to keep or to look for what shaped us!

### One origin, two congregations

In 1814, Rose-Virginie Pelletier enters the house of Our Lady of Charity in Tours. (...) She is elected superior a few years later and founds a group of contemplative Sisters, in order to support the apostolate of the community through prayer. Then in 1829, under her leadership, the community agreed to open a new house of our Lady of Charity in Angers. She becomes superior of Angers in 1831. The development of this house quickly attracts vocations and requests for other foundations. In order to deal with it, she had the idea of pooling resources together under a new structure called a “generalate”.

With the granting of the Generalate, a new congregation emerges in 1835: Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd and it grows rapidly. Our Lady of Charity continues its former structure and develops too more slowly and in a smaller number of countries. The founding intuition of St John Eudes remains the same for both groups, as do the tests of reference and the traditions. The internationality and mobility that was encouraged right from the beginning of the Good Shepherd provides a breath of fresh air, while the reference to one “Mother House” shapes mentalities in a different way. The spring is the same, it became a river, but the river divides into two branches...



From that time on, and for more than a hundred years, history will be written in parallel... not without tensions and mutual misunderstanding ... there are obviously some meetings, official or interpersonal, sometimes missed opportunities or without further action... and sometimes deeper bonds too, like those two Sisters who were together at a training session in 1940 and who committed to pray that the union of the two congregations might one day come true! One of them, Sr Marie Pierre, is still here in Caen, she just celebrated her 99th birthday!

However, in general, contacts are actually limited until the Council of Vatican II (1962-1965). This council invites all religious congregations to renewal and to go back to their sources... then the two branches of the river rediscover all they have in common, projects are woven ... In France: common research on charism, spirituality: in France and Ireland: outreach to women in prostitution; in Ivory Coast the Good Shepherd supports the foundation of Our Lady of Charity in Yopougon...

## *Walking together... crying out together*



Over the long period of history, we experienced separately, each branch of the river has broken new ground around the world. Each branch has been enriched with the silt of irrigated land... haven't we all treasures and experiences to share? Haven't we also reconciliations to live?

In 2006, during a session in Angers, an imaginary dialogue between Mary Euphrasia and one of the Sisters in Tours, Mary Victoire, moved a lot the participants and led to many exchanges... And during several years since 2007, we have initiated a "journey of enrichment" and we have progressed together and rediscovers all we have in common: history, spirituality, charism, and mission... and that our differences, instead of dividing us, can help us grow. In France and in Belgium, we have "woven" many projects together: communities of Sisters from the two congregations, common apostolic projects, such as in Roubaix for women victims of violence or in Brussels in the heart of the prostitution district...

in Caen with young people ... in Rennes, where the Sisters are a friendly presence in a place where social diversity is being developed.

Knitting, weaving... until the question was clearly asked: what if we walked together completely? What if we took a common road? What if the world around us, that is so divided, was waiting for a sign of "reunification" from us? To take this path, we need to continue to listen to our common source and draw water from it together! We are gathered today in Caen, the place of the origins! Many friends and collaborators are with us, as are our brothers and sisters committed like us to serving the Church... Thank you to all of you, who are re-reading our history so far, thank you for celebrating with us this event of our reunification. From now on, Our Lady of Charity only will be Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, here and throughout the world! This is not a congregation with disappears but the members of the same family who are getting back together!

From now on, there will no longer be Our Lady of Charity alone, but Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd here and throughout the world! This is not a Congregation disappearing, but members of the same family coming together! A few days ago in Hungary, one of the Sisters was saying to us: "we are like two hands; hands are not here to look at each other; they are equal, they do not compare one with the other; they work together, they build, they give tenderness..."

Of course, it will take time for this to happen in the life of every one! Remember in *The Little Prince* by Saint-Exupéry, the story of the taming of the fox by the Little Prince: one needs to take time... we will need to continually remember that we draw water from the same source for the same mission (...).

### *Feeling together at home*

We give thanks to God together, we give thanks for the path we walked to get closer to one another, for our mutual enrichment... Recently, the coordinator of one of the European Provinces of the Good Shepherd was saying to me: "I have a feeling that we are coming back home!" Yes, Caen is our common house. The Sisters of Our Lady of Charity have been calling Caen "the old cradle" ... We all have our place here now.

We will symbolize it together through the sign of the heart: it is the first insignia worn by the Sisters of our Lady of Charity. The Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd kept it and added unity, because it represents for us the Heart of God, where we learn to love with a global perspective, attentive to the sufferings of the world, from God's perspective.



### *Taking the road together to Angers*

After this time of celebration in Caen, the Sisters will head to Angers, the place from where the mission reached the five continents (...) There are people everywhere that need help to get back on their feet, to restore their dignity and their uniqueness as human beings... Mary Euphrasia and John Eudes are the same kind of people as us, from the same large family, the one we form together today, with all our friends, collaborators... and so many more who are with us today, and with whom we share the same conviction:

*"A person is of more value than the whole world"*



*Sr Marie Françoise Le Brizaut (1940 - 2019)  
Superior Provincial of Our Lady Charity, France  
Cormelles le Royal/Caen - June 27th, 2014*