

The Life Experience of St Joan Antide Thouret

“Vincent de Paul: Father, Model, Special Protector”¹

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St Joan Antide Thouret

Joan Antide Thouret was born in the little village of Sancey, in the diocese of Besançon, in Franche-Comté, on 27 November 1765, into a deeply Christian family. At a very early age *“she felt a strong attraction to the stricter religious life and at the same time to the service of the poor.”*² She was directed towards the Daughters of Charity, and to join them she *“was ready for everything, even to go to the end of the earth.”*³ During her time as a postulant in Langres, not far from her native village, she had her first “encounter” with St Vincent de Paul, the start of her daughter-like relationship with him, whom

she will always consider as her “father,” and her sure reference-point. She will defend her daughterhood relationship with the saint at special times in her personal story, and in the story of her congregation, all through the “seasons” of her life.

In **1825**, one year before her death, she still recalled that she had been part of the community founded by Vincent de Paul:

¹ JOAN ANTIDE to Pope Pius VII, LD 268.

² Sr ROSALIE THOURET, *Manuscript*, LD 484.

³ *Ibid.*, LD 487.

*"On 1 November 1778, aged 22, I entered the community of the Daughters of Charity in Paris."*⁴

In the prayer which she addressed to the saint when she was ill as a young novice, the names which she used many times during her life, were already in place: Vincent for her is **Father, Superior, model.**

*"Great saint, be a **Father** to me; I want to be one of your daughters, get me cured. You are my first **superior** and my **model**, I want to imitate your virtues."*⁵

The historical events precipitated by the French Revolution, which among other things suppressed religious communities, brought her far from the community; but Joan Antide remained faithful to a spirit which she had made her own, and to the advice which the Mother General at the time gave to the Daughters before the great dispersal:

*"Don't abandon the service of the poor, don't let yourselves be pushed down and don't lose courage; no matter what happens, let **nothing** divert you from loyalty to **Christ and the Church.**"*⁶

While waiting for *"the return to normality continue to attend to the **obligations of your own vocation.** You will be given the opportunity to make yourselves useful to the sick and the instruction of youth."*⁷

It was only when there came a period of calm that she accepted that there was no further need for her work and decided to follow the invitation of Père Receveur, the founder of a community, La Retraite Chrétienne, which had opted to go into exile rather than be dispersed.

*"He had written to me several times, urging me to join his Company where I would have continued my **first vocation**, taking care of the sick."*⁸

In frightful conditions during two years of wandering La Retraite Chrétienne got to Germany. The Founder frequently and at length asserted that Joan Antide was thwarted in the care of the sick; many died through lack of basic care. She decided to leave this community because:

⁴ JOAN ANTIDE, *Memorie di pure verità*, LD 462.

⁵ Sr ROSALIE THOURET, *Manuscript*, LD 490.

⁶ Mère DELEAU, in the official album of the fourth centenary.

⁷ Sr ROSALIE THOURET, *Manuscript*, LD 517.

⁸ JOAN ANTIDE, *Memorie di pure verità*, LD 464.

*“She cannot accept the stupidity of those persons who do not want to understand that **the service of God and his love are inseparable from those of the neighbor....**”*⁹

After a sixty-four day journey on her own she arrived in Einsiedeln in Switzerland, near the sanctuary of the Madonna of the Hermits. She had the idea of staying on there permanently, as a poor, unknown person, but she “wanted to know the will of God.” For this reason she consulted a hermit who told her:

*“My daughter, here’s God’s will: He wants you in France. The abandoned ignorant young people are waiting for you; go, therefore, **as a generous daughter of St Vincent de Paul and evangelize the poor.**”*¹⁰

I NEVER THOUGHT OF FOUNDING A CONGREGATION

The vicars general of her home diocese were also in exile in Switzerland, and she met them in Landeron in 1797. This meeting will pinpoint her mission:

*“Take some young women with you and **form them in the way you received formation.**”*¹¹

Joan Antide was surprised:

*“I never thought, nor developed the idea, of founding a congregation, nor did I ever invite anyone. The Good God and the ecclesiastical superiors ordered me to do so.”*¹²

On **11 April 1799**, when she was at last able to begin the work she had been asked to do, she said:

*“Whilst I was forming my daughters for the active life I formed them for the contemplative life to support and sanctify the active one. Right from the start I had laid down a little rule, **for every day, every week, every month, every year.**”*¹³

Obviously she had never forgotten the specific points made by St Vincent when he was presenting, and commenting on, the Rules for the first Daughters of Charity. In the novitiate in Paris she had certainly heard the Founder’s conferences being read out:

⁹ Sr ROSALIE THOURET, *Manuscript*, LD 531.

¹⁰ Sr ROSALIE THOURET, *Manuscript*, LD 540.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, LD 543.

¹² *Ibid.*, LD 602.

¹³ JOAN ANTIDE, *Memorie di pure verità*, LD 741.

*“Let’s see now, my dear daughters, how you should go through the twenty-four hours which make up the day, how the days make up the months, the months the years which will lead you on to eternity.”*¹⁴

The little rule to which Joan Antide refers is the one which was given to the first Sisters of Charity after the retreat which they had made in October **1800**. The retreat master said:

*“The superioress mentioned that she was going to give them the **Rule of St Vincent de Paul**, the main provisions of which she had written down from memory, as it was not possible to procure the book. The sisters then asked if it would be possible for them to listen to the reading while remaining on their knees.”*¹⁵

In the text of the Rule which Joan Antide submitted to the archbishop in **1802** for his approval she had no problem

*“with admitting that, with regard to the greater part of the regulations adopted by us in these constitutions, we saw them being lived out in various houses of the Daughters of Charity, where we made our novitiate for the religious life.”*¹⁶

WE LIVE ACCORDING TO HIS RULE

In **1805** the necessary approval of the Statutes by the Minister of Religious Affairs seemed blocked by objections made against the Foundress. Among these was the charge of usurping the name of the Sisters of Charity of Paris. Joan Antide defended herself:

*“We never intended to create a rivalry [...] with the Sisters of Charity nor did we ever appropriate their title from the moment when they were no longer called the Sisters of St Vincent de Paul, but Sisters of Charity [...]. We were given the title **Sisters of St Vincent** because we were living according to his Rule.”*¹⁷

In **1806** she again had need to clarify matters:

“It is believed that I arrogated to myself the title of Superior General of the Daughters of Charity of the Institute of St Vincent de Paul. Providence made use of me to form a society of

¹⁴ VINCENT DE PAUL, the first conference to the Daughters of Charity, 31 July 1634.

¹⁵ Diario-giornale di Bacoffe - ASCB.

¹⁶ The Rule of 1802, the opening chapter.

¹⁷ JOAN ANTIDE to M. Debry, Prefect of the department of Doubs, LD 103.

good young women **according to the Rule of St Vincent de Paul**. We never claimed that we were taking for ourselves the name of Daughters of Charity. We limited ourselves to taking the name of Daughters of St Vincent, or Sisters of St Vincent, in so far as **we were following his Rule and we took him as our protector and model**. All the Sisters of our society recognize as their superior the sister who received and formed them **according to the Rule of St Vincent**.¹⁸

The matter eventually arrived at a meeting, convoked in Paris in 1807 under the presidency of Napoleon's mother, of all superiors of institutes dedicated to works of charity. Joan Antide, on this occasion also, spelled out in writing the motives she had for taking this name. It was not inappropriate, because:

*"When we came together as a community we had several reasons for taking the name of **Daughters of St Vincent de Paul**. Our works were similar to those which this saint wanted to spread. His rule, which I knew sufficiently well to have written it out from memory, was the only one which seemed suitable."*¹⁹

*"It also seemed that the diocese of Besançon needed a **reminder of him**, because no other group except ours had been established there."*²⁰

She was not afraid to repeat in public the same reasons, though in order *"not to offend the Mother Superior in Paris she decided it was more than mere justice to renounce the name; this would not hinder her from cultivating devotion to St Vincent de Paul and retaining him as **our model and protector**."* And she will accept the new title which was suggested: Sisters of Charity of Besançon.²¹

Still in **1807** the text of the rule was printed, it was submitted to the archbishop for approval, and it contained a "Preliminary Discourse" in which she returned to the link with St Vincent:

*"You must respect these constitutions and Rules. We have not drawn them from our own ideas, but gathered them, for the most part, from what we saw in practice with the Daughters of Charity with whom we stayed for a long time. We believe that such practices were, for the most part, put in place by **St Vincent de Paul**. For this reason, rightly regard this great*

¹⁸ JOAN ANTIDE to M. Seguin, an official of the Besançon city council, LD 112.

¹⁹ JOAN ANTIDE, *Memoriale 1807*, LD 119.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Sr ROSALIE THOURET, *Manuscript*, LD 602-603.

*servant of God as your **Founder, special protector and Father.***²²

A certain number of years pass. Other experiences marked her life, among them the first foundation in Italy, in the Kingdom of Naples, in **1810**. It seemed to her that she had a duty to make contact with the Superior of the Congregation of the Mission, who lived in Naples. She introduced herself:

*“As an unworthy daughter of your own Founder, I have been in this holy vocation for thirty years. The Revolution dissolved St Vincent’s congregation. By God’s grace I have always remained faithful to **the practices and spirit of that Company.** I have copied out the Rule word for word, by the light of God alone. I had no access to any manuscript or printed version of this Rule. It, however, turned out to be in conformity with **the customs and primitive spirit laid down by St Vincent de Paul.** I have made him **Institutor, Founder, Father, Patron, Protector, Model,** of our community. Young people of this country may truly assimilate **the spirit of St Vincent de Paul.**”*²³

In **1818** “in order to guarantee existence and cohesion to the community which the good God had entrusted to her,” Joan Antide, when she requested from Pope Pius VII approval of the community and the Rule, stated clearly:

*“We were given the name of Sisters of Charity of Besançon. Nevertheless we are daughters of St Vincent de Paul, because we honor him as our **Founder, Father, Model and special Protector.**”*²⁴

The approval will be granted on 23 July **1819**. Some small modifications of the Rule were called for by reason of the expansion of the community beyond the diocese of Besançon. Among others was the alteration of the name to “The Daughters of Charity under the protection of St Vincent de Paul.” This was not a problem for the Foundress. She pointed out that the change was for one sole reason: to avoid confusion with the Sisters in Paris. It became a problem for the archbishop of Besançon, Mgr de Presigny: he was no longer considered to be “the Superior General of the Congregation,” because the community will be under the jurisdiction of local bishops. His reaction became clear in an interdict issued on 31 August

²² Preliminary Discourse in the Rule, LD 5.

²³ JOAN ANTIDE to Sig. Fulgoro, LD 237.

²⁴ JOAN ANTIDE, *Petition to the Holy Father*, LD 267.

1821 which “forbids the superiors of the houses of the Sisters of Charity of Besançon to receive Sister Joan Antide.”²⁵

The imposed division of her own community was a huge sorrow for the mother’s heart.

FIDELITY WHICH TRANSCENDS MEMORY FIDELITY TO THE CUSTOMS

Joan Antide had lived all of them, her life organized according to them for more than five years in the mother-house in Paris, and in the other houses in which she had lived. From the first moment in the morning, usually four o’clock, till nine at night the whole day was focussed on “the glory of the most holy name of the Lord.”²⁶

“The first thing you must do, when you’ve risen and have begun to dress, is to kneel down and adore God, to acknowledge that He is your Creator and Sovereign Lord. When you’ve finished dressing, and have made your bed, you’ll begin your mental prayer. Begin all prayers by placing yourselves in the presence of God. Go to Mass every day. The carrying out of your vocation consists in frequently recalling the presence of the Lord, and to facilitate this make use of the reminder which the striking of the clock gives. Before the meal recall the resolutions made during prayer. Maintain silence from the evening examination of conscience until after morning prayer, so that exterior recollection helps your union with God. Use well the time you have free from the service of the poor: never be idle. Set about learning to read to make yourselves suitable for being sent to a place where you will be able to teach.”²⁷

Joan Antide forgot nothing of all this. She also asked of her daughters, as the first act of the day, a prayer of adoration of God which at the same time expresses the will to consecrate oneself to His service. Next they will go to the place where the community comes together for prayer. Each prayer starts with the reminder to place oneself in the presence of God who wants to be adored in spirit and in truth.²⁸

“Vocal and mental prayer were practiced from the first days, as well as examinations of conscience, reading, rosary, ejaculatory prayer, silence, a monthly day of recollection, weekly

²⁵ Mgr DE PRESSIGNY, Archbishop of Besançon, LD 326.

²⁶ VINCENT DE PAUL, first conference to the Daughters of Charity.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ JOAN ANTIDE, *The 1820 Rule*, p. 50.

confession, Holy Communion, daily Mass, repetition of prayer, recalling the presence of God when the clock strikes, invitation to learn Christian teaching, being encouraged to read, to write, to keep accounts, and manual labor."²⁹

FIDELITY TO A SINGLE SPIRIT

It is easy enough to repeat acts which have been learned, especially when their sense and value are understood. In order for a spirit to be revived there is need of a fundamental harmony within the tension in order to achieve conformity to a model or to a mystery which is desired. Harmony of that sort is already a sign of the presence of a charism, a gift of the Spirit himself. There will, of course, be other elements of nature and grace to give effect to it, to develop it.

Joan Antide's fidelity to the spirit of St Vincent was grounded in a similar passion: love of God and love of the poor. She found in the Gospel the privileged spaces of Jesus' mission: the poor, children, the marginalized. She had assurance from the Gospel that "anything done to one of these little ones was done to Him." The mission entrusted to the community was felt by them to be a sharing in the mission of Christ the Saviour.

*"To be real Daughters of Charity, St Vincent says, means doing what the Son of God came on earth to do. Every time, for the last twenty years, that I read the text of chapter 58 of Isaiah I am deeply disturbed; the Spirit of the Lord is on me, the Spirit of the Lord has consecrated me. He sends me to announce a joyful message to the poor."*³⁰

Joan Antide, right from the first pages of the preliminary discourse to the Rules, in order to point out the motivations which should support us "in the exercise" of charity, recalls the same realities:

"To teach the poor to know, love, serve the Lord, is to do, in some way, what the Saviour of the World came on earth to do, to work for the establishment of the Kingdom of God, to cooperate in the saving of souls" and she also sends them back to the same quotation from Isaiah, quoted in chapter 4 of Luke.

In order to enter completely into this mission, which is proclamation through service, the Daughter of Charity, according to

²⁹ JOAN ANTIDE, *Memorie di pure verità*, LD 471.

³⁰ VINCENT DE PAUL, Conference in March 1659.

St Vincent's teaching, must be totally given to God: "**Given to God for the service of the poor,**" and for Joan Antide each Sister, therefore, called to "**live God's commandments and the main gospel counsels, to assist the poor in their temporal and spiritual needs must belong only to God, in order to fulfill perfectly his precepts.**"³¹

She also says that the Congregation was founded so that the Sisters "**would be able to go and face up to so many needs and problems and involve themselves only in serving and teaching the poor.**"³²

To go to the poor in the way that Jesus Christ did, to do what He did, but also to **go to the poor as if to Christ Himself**, believing Him to be present in them, are the rules which governed St Vincent's activity.

*"God has called you into the Company to honor Jesus Christ, source and model of all charity, **servng him corporally and spiritually in the person of the poor.***

In serving the poor you are serving Jesus Christ. A Sister will go ten times to serve a poor person; ten times she will find Jesus Christ. You serve Jesus Christ in the person of the poor, and that is as true as it is true that we are here."³³

Joan Antide, in presenting the Rule and the benefits which derive from following it, immediately points out that:

*"The poor, **these members of the suffering Jesus Christ,** will be helped and comforted in all their temporal and spiritual miseries."*³⁴

She gave a piece of advice to young Sisters preparing for vows:

"See Jesus Christ in the person of the poor. Always serve them as if you were serving Jesus Christ Himself."³⁵

*"It is necessary to serve the poor with respect, **seeing in their person the person of Jesus Christ** who, although sovereign and Lord of everything has wanted to accept as done to Himself all the good that will be done in his name to the least among men (Mt 25:40)."*³⁶

³¹ JOAN ANTIDE, *Preliminary Discourse*, LD 4-8.

³² JOAN ANTIDE, *Rule of 1820*, 55.

³³ VINCENT DE PAUL, Conference 24.

³⁴ JOAN ANTIDE, *Preliminary Discourse to the Rule*, LD 6.

³⁵ JOAN ANTIDE, *Instruction on the Vows*, LD 27.

³⁶ JOAN ANTIDE, *Rule of 1820*, 257.

The motivation behind the respect due to the poor is founded on these realities of faith, and gives rise to the attitudes which mark our being for them:

- **Cordiality**, shown in balanced good humour.
- **Compassion**, which listens kindly to their complaints (like a good mother, St Vincent adds), shares their worries and finds means of consoling them in their troubles.
- **Charity and patience**, which put up with their weaknesses, their reproaches and their insults: “Never use hard words to them: they already have enough of that to put up with” (St Vincent recalls).
- **Disinterestedness**, which does not accept anything from them under some pretext or other, and does not try to have oneself personally looked up to; never accept gifts from the poor, and take great care never to think that the poor have obligations towards you; on the contrary, you owe something to them, the saint warns.³⁷

If Christ is present in the poor, there are other immediate consequences:

*“Service of the poor must be preferred to everything else; we must not be slack when confronted with their needs.”*³⁸

Joan Antide, who never hesitated to **“run immediately”** as soon as she heard of the need for some service, even when to show herself in public could mean risking her life, reminded her daughters that **“at the first groan of the sick poor they must fly to their aid.”**³⁹ The service they must render to the poor takes precedence over all the rules. According to St Vincent:

*“Charity is a great lady. It is necessary to obey whatever she orders. This is called **leaving God for God.***

*You do not lose anything in leaving prayer and Mass for the service of the poor, since to serve them is going to God, that God whom you must see in poor persons.”*⁴⁰

Joan Antide’s Rule is not afraid to state that:

*“The Sisters of Charity will generously prefer **service of the poor** to private devotions, **even exercises prescribed by the***

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ VINCENT DE PAUL, Conference 21.

³⁹ JOAN ANTIDE, *Rule of 1820*, 189.

⁴⁰ VINCENT DE PAUL, Conference 1.

Rules when these **unavoidably** coincide with the **urgent service** of the poor.”⁴¹

“The spiritual exercises will be done in common. However, if some Sister has been unable to take part because at that time she was serving the poor she will make up for this in private, if possible.”⁴²

“The monthly retreat will be made privately, one after the other, because if all were to do it together **the poor would lose too much.**”⁴³

In this faith-inspired point of view they also sensed what Joan Antide had relinquished in her life, and what she demanded. It is necessary to leave family, a way of life and comforts:

“In order to consider ourselves not only as no longer having anything of our own, but as if **we no longer belong to ourselves.**”⁴⁴

“Nothing will have been done,” according to St Vincent, “if everything has been given up, but not ourselves.”⁴⁵

It is only someone who lives in this freedom who can love and serve unconditionally, without delay, with respect, with patience, and absolutely gratuitously.

“This renunciation of self is not necessary for persons **totally given to God and the service of the poor** who are bound by their state to make difficult sacrifices which cost so much to nature, without seeking themselves in a purely natural manner, without hope of enjoying human acknowledgement nor receive any recompense other than that which comes from God alone. Such perfection for the souls who **for enclosure have only obedience, for a cell a common room, the streets of the city, the wards of a hospital, for a grille the fear of God, for veil, holy modesty,** but nonetheless have to live in the midst of the world as if they were not there, preserve angelic purity, spread the good odor of Jesus Christ everywhere, and practice the sublime virtues of the cloister in the midst of dissipation and scandal.”⁴⁶

⁴¹ JOAN ANTIDE, *Rule of 1820*, 259.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 69.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁴⁴ JOAN ANTIDE, *Preliminary Discourse to the Rule*, LD 7.

⁴⁵ VINCENT DE PAUL, Conference 2.

⁴⁶ JOAN ANTIDE, *Rule of 1820*, 270.

In this text, as in others, Joan Antide hands on her personal experience, re-lives it. From way back at the time of discerning her vocation, through the contemplative life and life in the service of the poor, from the years passed during the Revolution, up to her journeying through the streets of Paris carrying hidden in a backpack the vestments needed for the secret celebration of Mass, or on the paths through the woodlands of Sancey, to her time in a hospital as a Daughter of Charity, she hears again the words St Vincent used to repeat to his Daughters: she had recorded it in her soul.

*“Your monastery is the house of the sick, your cell is your rented room, your chapel the parish church, your enclosure is obedience, the grille is the fear of God, the veil holy modesty.”*⁴⁷

This detachment allows the Sister of Charity to live her own consecrated identity in freedom, to feel herself ready **“to go across the sea, to go to the roof of the world.”**⁴⁸

*“I will go beyond the seas? Oh, I know, my Daughters, that you would be ready to do so. Even if you know that there is no possibility of coming back, you would not delay your departure by one minute.”*⁴⁹

It allows her be able to say:

*“I no longer belong to a place, to another person, but to every place to which God will be pleased to send me. I belong to God alone.”*⁵⁰

*“Without any reflection — be it near or far — we used to think: there where God is, is enough for us.”*⁵¹

*“We have heard the voice of our neighbour who is everywhere; we have heard the voice of the poor who are members of Jesus Christ and are our brothers; **in whatever country they are found they must be equally dear to us.**”*⁵²

Joan Antide did not, in the literal sense, “cross the seas,” but she did travel far afield, imagining the difficulties she would have encountered in “a foreign country, where an unknown language was spoken, where she had to welcome and form foreign young women.”⁵³

⁴⁷ VINCENT DE PAUL, Conference 111.

⁴⁸ JOAN ANTIDE, *Suprema testimonianza*, LD 632.

⁴⁹ VINCENT DE PAUL, Conference 48.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, Conference 1.

⁵¹ JOAN ANTIDE to Mgr Lecoq, LD 225.

⁵² *Ibid.*, *Circular 1812*, LD 73.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, *Circular 1811*, LD 60.

Far from her homeland, with gratitude in her heart for the approval she received from the Church for her community, but torn by the separation from her daughters, **she died in Naples on 24 August 1826**. After more than one hundred years the link was re-established.

In her the Church recognized Jesus Christ announcing the Good News to the poor, welcoming and serving the small and the humble, and beatified her on **23 May 1926** and canonised her on **14 January 1934**. The statue of this humble daughter of St Vincent is in place in St Peter's, among those of founders. Her sisters are spread **throughout the world in twenty-seven different countries**.

K E Y

to quoted texts relating to the Sisters of Charity

- **The Rule of 1820, (approved by Pope Pius VII)**
- **LD: Lettere e documenti, Santa Giovanna Antida Thouret, Fondatrice delle Suore della Carità, 1765-1826** (a collection of the correspondence, factual memoirs, the memoirs of St Joan Antide Thouret, the manuscript of Sr Rosalie Thouret, niece and secretary of St Joan Antide)
- **ASCB: Archivio delle Suore della Carità di Besançon** (Journal-diary of Bacoffe)

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