

## “Going Beyond Borders”

*“Zeal, that precious part of our Eudist heritage, has been given a universal thrust by St. Mary Euphrasia; it must embrace the world. The international character of the congregation gives us an added incentive to **look beyond the needs of our geographical boundaries**, to those of the congregation, the Church and the world. Universal zeal calls us to be missionary.” (Constitutions 31)*

As you may remember this is the second year (24<sup>th</sup> April 2017 -24<sup>th</sup> of April 2018 ) of a 3 year project deepening our connection with St. Mary Euphrasia. We began last year with a reflection stimulating sharing on our personal stories and life commitments and linking them with the early years of Rose Virginie Pelletier’s life.

The focus for this year is “Going beyond borders”. This is a theme that is very pertinent in our day, as many countries develop a more inward type of nationalism, become more closed to welcoming strangers and more entrenched in a narrow sense of their identity.

Connecting with Sr. Mary Euphrasia, when she was newly elected in Our Lady of Charity in Tours in 1825, we notice that one of her first major decisions was to find ways to push out boundaries about what women and what type of life-style could be followed by those expressing a desire to live a contemplative life. This led her to the creative development of the Sisters of St. Magdalen, at the time, a congregation within a congregation.

The **geographical** move from the community in Tours to Angers in 1831 was a major change in Sr. Mary Euphrasia’s life. By this time, she had lived 21 years in Tours, 4 at school and 17 in the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity. This was much longer than she had been in Noirmoutier. She was well known in Tours and had a wide circle of friends among the clergy and civil officials. Crossing the borders from the department of Indre et Loire to the adjoining one of Maine et Loire meant leaving behind those she loved and where she was known, to begin afresh a new adventure into the unknown. Her doubts on the eve of her departure nearly prevented her from going, but, finally she travelled in faith knowing that it was God’s will for her.



*Remember some important geographical moves in your life: the ones you chose and the ones which were presented to you. Touch into the loss and gain in these changes. How have these changes stretched you, broadened your horizons and enriched your life?*

The early days in Angers were full of challenges, especially that of illness and premature deaths among some of the novices and young Sisters. The community of Our Lady of Charity in Nantes was willing to send some sisters to help Sr. Mary Euphrasia, but, because each convent was autonomous and under the direct authority of the local bishop, the bishop had the power to block this decision, which he did.



This led Sr. Mary Euphrasia to realize that the **organizational structure** was not serving the mission as it might, leading her to request the establishment of a Generalate, where there would be the possibility of easier movement between houses as needs required. This type of structure was something that was developing widely at the time and she became part of that forward movement.

The structure that Sr. Mary Euphrasia developed in 1835 had to be “restructured” just 20 years later. Due to rapid expansion, and at the request of the Pope, the Congregation was divided into Provinces in 1855. We are told that Sr. Mary Euphrasia found it hard to accept that change, yet collaborated with it for the good of the mission.

*What “restructuring” have you experienced in your Unit in your life-time? What have you learned from these experiences? What might be the structures that could help us go “beyond borders” at this time to give new life to the Unit, to community and to ministry?*

Mary Euphrasia had a strong sense of her own identity as a “vendéenne” (coming from Vendée), yet she evolved and expanded to the point of being able to say:

*“As for me, I no longer want to be called French!  
I am Italian, English, German, Spanish, American, African, Indian ...  
I belong to every country where there are souls to save.” (SME’s Conferences 6)*

As requests came to Angers for foundations in different countries and continents, Sr. Mary Euphrasia embarked on a policy of insisting on the **study of languages** needed for new missions. During their noviciate, the sisters were learning a foreign language. Count de Neuville taught Mary Euphrasia Italian in preparation for her visit to Rome. Sisters learned the language of their new mission on the long journeys by sea e.g. the first Sisters going to South America, to St. Felipe in Chile learned Spanish on the journey between 6<sup>th</sup> January and 25<sup>th</sup> May 1855.

*The borders which we experience because of language barriers are a perennial challenge for all of us. What are you doing to learn another language of the Congregation?  
Or if this is not possible imagine something you can do to help others who are trying to do this. What can we do as a community?*

*“For love, nothing is impossible.”*



When Sr. Mary Euphrasia bought the Abbey of St. Nicholas in 1854 which was outside the monastery grounds, she was filled with zeal to help young girls coming out of prison or about to go to prison. However, she was frustrated to think that every time a sister needed to go there to be with the girls, the written permission of



the bishop had to be given, to allow the sister leave the cloistered life of the monastery. This would add a **burdensome amount of bureaucracy to life**. And so Sr. Mary Euphrasia came up with the creative idea of building a tunnel under the two streets that join the Mother House to the Abbey, to allow easy access and avoid wasting time on paperwork! It was a complicated undertaking at that time. She benefited from her good relationships with the Prefect and the Mayor who agreed to close the “Royal road” for the 3 months of construction work. Today, we would probably start a campaign to change canon law.

*In what ways can we “go beneath” or “go around” awkward requirements / customs that are diverting our energy from the essentials of our mission?*

Sr. Mary Euphrasia sensed the need to go beyond the **boundaries of religion** when preparing Sisters to go to new missions. In the 1840’s , prior to the first foundation in Algiers, she invited a specialist on the Muslim religion to talk to the community so as to develop a greater understanding of the tenets and way of living this faith.

A current example of this approach comes from a wonderful story shared by Sr. Magdalena Franciscus, Provincial Europe BFMN, in a letter to the Province on 16<sup>th</sup> December 2016:

Hubert JANSSEN who is the coordinator for the Congregation in the Netherlands invited a Syrian Sister Sr. Lucie Kabaze who belongs to the Province Europe BFMN and works in the South of France, to visit Bloemendaal, where many Syrian refugees are housed in our premises. Most of them are Muslims and they prepared a meal for everyone, the Mayor and his staff, the people from l’Arche, the sisters and the neighbours. It was a good way to build relationships especially with Lucie as interpreter. This was also the week-end where the children gave a concert for the benefit of our mission in Burkino Faso. These links go beyond borders and are another way of living out and participating in our universal mission and of what it means to go beyond borders in this century.

**PRAYER:**

*May our hearts and minds come alive today  
To the invisible geography that invites us to new  
frontiers,  
To break the dead shells of yesterdays,  
To risk being disturbed and changed.  
May we have the courage to live the life that we  
would love,  
To postpone our dream no longer  
But to do at last what we came here for  
And waste our hearts on fear no more.*

John O’Donoghue: A Morning Offering (adapted)

