

What Can Committed Women Do?

Part – 1

Jean Evans

Mercy Center, Burlingame, California, USA

Abstract

Madame Barb Acarie and Mother Madeleine of Saint Joseph du Bois de Fontaines were instrumental in the renewal of Catholic life in seventeenth century France. Barb Acarie's spiritual search encouraged her to open her home to likeminded seekers. Teresa of Avila appeared and requested that Spanish Carmelite women be brought to France to introduce the Teresian reform. Salon Acarie created an environment in which the Spirit inspired generosity in response to the urgent needs of the church. Both Madame Barb Acarie and Mother Madeleine of Saint Joseph, were close associates of Pierre de Bérulle who was a pivotal figure in the development of the Carmel as well as the founder of the French Oratory.

Introduction

Surely the very same source of inspiration that led Francis of Assisi to rebuild a church in ruins in thirteenth century Italy was brooding over the church in France in the late sixteenth century. This was a church and a people decimated by religious wars and by the indifference and corruption of an unfit and unwilling clergy. Vincent de Paul,¹ a young priest angered by the church's unresponsiveness to its people spoke of

1 Vincent de Paul was born in Gascony, southwestern France in 1581. As a young man he was chaplain to Queen Marguerite de Valois, dispensing food and money to the poor. He also frequented the Cercle Acarie where he met Pierre de Bérulle who became his confessor. At a later stage, Vincent de Paul would apply to Rome for permission to found a new congregation for men, the Congregation of Mission. (Purcell 1963:65; 118)

a church under siege from within: “The Church has no worse enemies than her priests. Heresies have come from them... and it is through them that heresies have prevailed, that vice has reigned, and that ignorance has established its throne among the ‘poor’ people; and this has happened because of their undisciplined way of life.” (Thompson 1989:11) Ultimately, the re-building of the Catholic Church in France would not be realized by papal legislation or royal decree. It would not happen in Paris’ great cathedral or in one of France’s many monasteries. Rather, the re-birth of the church’s elder daughter *La Belle France*, would take place within a woman’s home, in her *salon*, her living room. There, in an upper room of sorts, the Spirit’s gift of mystical prayer would set the French church ablaze with women and men whose faith and compassion would renew the face of the earth.

This paper will focus on two Carmelite women in post-reformation France - Madame Barb Acarie in whose home mystics and seekers gathered and who was instrumental in bringing the Teresian Carmelite reform to France; and Mother Madeleine of Saint Joseph du Bois de Fontaines, the first French Carmelite prioress - mystic, leader, the face of Carmel to Parisian society, conservator of the Teresian tradition of the pre-eminence of Jesus Christ as way to God.

Conditions in the Catholic Church of Sixteenth Century France

While legislative reform of the church was promulgated during the Council of Trent, the Gallican Church had not even accepted the decrees of the Council of Trent until 1614,² nearly fifty years after the close of the Council. Principally, the reforms were meant to correct abuses in the praxis of Catholic clergy and hierarchy. Members of the secular clergy who served in poor rural dioceses far from Paris and the life of the Court received little or no education either in secular subjects or theology. Most priests did not know Latin and officiated at worship with practically no comprehension of the texts. In fact, many priests were illiterate.

Clerical abuses were related to the formation of seminarians and the life style of clergy, in particular. As Cognet writes, “The country clergy were sunk in penury, ignorance, concubinage and drunkenness.” (1959:56) Problems in the hierarchy stemmed primarily from the relationship of church and state and the system of governance that existed since medieval society. Members of the hierarchy of the church in France,

2 The decrees of the Council of Trent were accepted by the Assembly of the Clergy in 1614 under the leadership of Bishop Zamet. The delay in their promulgation in France caused grave concern to Pierre Bérulle. (Louise of Jesus, 1935:242).

like that in other European countries such as Spain and Italy, were drawn primarily from the ranks of aristocratic families. Though this system favored the French crown, it did little to guarantee the holiness of abbots, bishops or archbishops. The commendatory system in place since the Concordat of 1516, allowed the French crown the right to appoint archbishops, bishops, abbots and other religious officials. (Cognet 1949:7) The majority of bishops were courtiers, men of letters, soldiers or diplomats who would receive benefices for their "service" to the church: "It would be difficult to think of any period in the history of the church when the care of souls in the conventional sense of directing a parish was regarded as a prime qualification for Episcopal office. The more aristocratic the origins of bishops the less likely service of a parish would have appealed to them." (Bergin 1996:269)

Governing as absentees, members of the hierarchy managed to collect their revenues from their benefices on a regular basis. Bishops also gained revenue through pensions. Retiring bishops would retain a portion of diocesan revenues through their old age. This practice, one that originated among members of the Roman curia was a way of supporting a life style of affluence at the expense of the poor. (1996:141). Similarly, with regard to the appointment of abbots and abbesses in religious orders, the king, Henry IV exercised complete control. For example, the newly elected abbess of Maubuisson was removed from office by Henry IV and Angelique, the sister of his mistress Gabrielle, was installed in her place. Benefices were given to youngsters, as in the case of Henry de Guise, who was given six abbeys.³

While the Edict of Nantes stopped sectarian violence until the death of Henry IV, the aftermath of the many wars of religion and the burden of taxation, left the masses of French people desperately poor. Reform in the institutional church was imperative. Not only did seminary training need reforming, but also the life style of clergy and episcopacy required urgent attention. It was clear: ministering to the spiritual and temporal needs of the common people must become a priority in the church.

"A Mystical Invasion" to Renew the Church

The dire situation of the church in seventeenth-century France called forth a response from a number of Christians: Vincent de Paul, the chaplain of Queen Marguerite of Navarre was moved to work for the relief of the poor. Pierre de Bérulle began an order with the expressed purpose of renewing the life of secular clergy through seminary reform.

3 Even Sully, the Huguenot minister of finance, was the beneficiary of four abbeys and received 45,000 livres per year as a perquisite. (Purcell 1963:64)

Francis de Sales offered spirituality to lay people among whom he worked in the diocese of Annecy. Far from being a simple and direct response to need however, the initiatives of Vincent de Paul, Pierre de Bérulle, and Francis de Sales derived from motivations inspired by the Spirit, the fruits of each one's unique encounter with the mystery of God.

In the case of Vincent de Paul, the encounter is manifest in his insistence upon tenderheartedness in caring for those who are suffering because "those who care out of mercy are in God" and it is God for whom they care. "But do you know what it means to do something in charity? It is to do it in God, for God is love, that is doing it purely for God's sake." (Waaajman 2002:98). For Bérulle, the conviction that priests needed a more rigorous training stems from his view of the greatness of the priestly call to holiness. In the light of the abhorrent conditions of the priesthood in Bérulle's times, his call to priests in the Oratory to reclaim their inheritance is cogent. His insistence on their conversion comes from his own mystical insights into the greatness and majesty of God and of the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. He writes that God has called them "to recover once again our rights, to enjoy our legitimate succession, to have the Son of God as our portion" (Thompson 1989:185). In his ministry and preaching Francis de Sales' conceived an approach to spirituality that focuses on living a devout life of reliance upon the gentle goodness and compassion of God, a posture toward God which emerged from Francis de Sales' own anguished ordeal as a student. Convinced that he would go to hell and hopelessly desolate, de Sales languished in fear and interior darkness for six weeks. The ordeal ended one day when "divine providence mercifully delivered him" (1989:34). That experience shaped his preaching about Christ in whose "maternal breast, his divine heart foresaw, disposed, merited, and obtained all our benefits" (1989:39).

In examining the renewal of Catholic life in post-reformation France, it is easy to focus solely on the activities of men. However, the work of reform and renewal was not limited to priests, male religious or laymen. Delville states: "Too much can never be said about the astonishing role and the extraordinary influence of certain women in seventeenth century France." (1994:226) Women undertook extraordinary initiatives during this time. For example, Baroness Jeanne de Chantal became co-founder with François de Sales of the Visitation Order. For holy women and widows, it was the first religious order of its kind to move outside the cloister. Louis de Marillac, niece of prominent layman Michel de Marillac founded the Daughters of Charity with Vincent de Paul. Marguerite de Beuve brought the Ursuline Sisters to New Canada.

Madame Barb Acarie introduced the reformed Carmel of Teresa of Avila to French Catholic women. Madeleine du Bois de Fontaines became the first French prioress of the Carmelite Convent of the Incarnation in Paris. The Spirit drew upon the generosity of many people to recreate the church in France. It is no wonder, then, that this era in French ecclesiastical history has been called by Daniel-Rops, "the great century of souls." (Delville 1987:8)

In this essay I shall focus on the significance of two women whose mystical inspirations made a significant impact on the life of the church: Madame Barb Acarie, the foundress of Carmelite life in France and Mother Madeleine of Saint-Joseph du Bois de Fontaines, the first French prioress of the Paris Carmel of the Incarnation. Each contributed in her own way to the renewal of French Catholic life in the seventeenth century and both impacted the development of the French school of spirituality. As we shall see in the lives of both Barb Acarie and Madeleine du Bois de Fontaines, their contributions to the church bore lasting fruit in the propagation of the Carmelite order throughout France, none of which was accomplished without suffering. This paper will also address the person of Pierre de Bérulle, who was a central figure in the lives of both women. As Houssaye remarks, "What Madame Acarie had been for his [Bérulle's] youth, Mother Madeleine was in his years of maturity." (1874:214)

Madame Barb Acarie 1566-1618

According to Michel de Certeau a profoundly new consciousness emerges in the late sixteenth century. This awareness is expressed, not in scientific terms but in practical terms by Teresa of Avila who at the threshold of the *Interior Castle* presents her fundamental idea - the soul as a human dwelling place, God as the unique and sole resident, and the importance of being able to enter into oneself to discover God within (de Certeau 1987:197). Such an inward journey spawned revitalization in the lives of Christian people in France. Madame Barb Acarie and the conversations taking place within her Parisian home would become the centerpiece for the spiritual renewal of France. Her *salon* would become the venue for the emergence of that spiritual consciousness within the spiritual élites of French society, and Barb Acarie herself would become the foundress of the Teresian Carmelite reform in France.

Barb Avrillot was born in 1566. As a young woman she felt a deep attraction to prayer. Bremond recounts that her early attraction to religious life was not approved by her parents. She wanted to enter a convent and give her life to God, but her parents wanted her to marry.

In the end, she was betrothed against her will to Pierre Acarie. A devoted wife, she bore him six children and managed the affairs of the household. For some time after their marriage, Barb lost the spark of her early childhood relationship with God. Pierre took it upon himself to provide his wife with spiritual books in place of the romantic novels with which she entertained herself. Little did he realize that a collection of religious books would mark the beginning of a change in both of their lives. According to Bremond (1930:53), in 1588 when Barb experienced her first ecstasy she heard the words spoken to St. Augustine, "He is truly a miser for whom God is not enough."⁴ Morgain remarks that this phrase struck the heart of Barb Acarie like a thunder clap (1995:61). This moment of conversion marks the beginning of a phase in Barb Acarie's life that would be marked by both great suffering and joy.

With her consent to God's grace, she was transformed, going from ecstasy to ecstasy, from delight to delight. However, her husband and those around her grew more and more disturbed by the mystical phenomena (including the stigmata) that were becoming increasingly violent. Concerned family members called on physicians to "bleed" her in order to cure her mysterious ailments. Madame Acarie suffered intensely. Benedict of Canfield, a young English Capuchin friar, who was her spiritual director at the time, consulted with Dom Richard Beau cousin,⁵ about the distressful situation of Barb Acarie, her husband, children and household. It was decided that Madame Acarie should ask of God that the graces and delights at the depths of her soul should no longer be manifest externally. It was only in 1593 that Benedict of Canfield assured her and Pierre Acarie that the ecstasies were from God. However, from that time onward, much to the relief of her husband, Barb was able to return to ordinary life.

The crisis was hardly over, when in the following year 1594, Pierre Acarie disappeared from Paris, banished for years by Henry IV because of his involvement in the Catholic League. The League opposed Henry IV's protection of the Huguenots. They fought to defend France from Huguenot "heretics," and supported the papacy and Catholic succession to the French crown. Though he may have been considered politically insignificant, Pierre Acarie was exiled, a fact that put great stress upon Madame Barb Acarie. Acarie used his considerable fortune to support the League's activities, leaving Barb Acarie with little or nothing to manage the affairs of her household.

4 Bremond remarks that this same line, "trop estavare à qui Dieu ne suffit" was significant to St. Augustine. (1930:53).

5 Dom Beau cousin, a Carthusian monk would become Madame Acarie's spiritual director from 1594 to 1602.

Salon Acarie

However, Pierre Acarie's exile from Paris was not entirely unfortunate. According to Buckley Madame Acarie's "newly found independence allowed her to gather around herself the major figures of the dawning of French spirituality." (1989:30). She opened her home to religious seekers like herself, and although she felt spiritually lost, after some conversations with the Carthusian monk Dom Beaucousin, Barb Acarie began to have some peace. Dom Beaucousin introduced Madame Acarie to the works of the Rhineland mystics such as Tauler, Ruysbroek and Eckhart. Reading works by these writers and listening to the Carthusian's explanations of dark contemplation opened new vistas for Barb Acarie. The spiritual pathway marked out by Pseudo-Dionysus "that explored the nature of the soul's surrender to God as the person passed beyond sign and concept to be fully grasped by the mystery of love and so transformed" would be her guide and inspiration."⁶ (Sheldrake 1992:39)

The conversations in the Acarie *salon* covered a wide range of topics - from mysticism and monastic reform to the formation of secular clergy, from political intrigues to the contentious policy of religious freedom granted to Huguenots under the newly converted Henry of Navarre. (Delville 1994:28). Capuchins, Jesuits, Carthusians and secular clergy were among those who frequented Hôtel Acarie. Pierre Coton, Jesuit confessor to the king was joined by André Duval, professor at the Sorbonne and later one of the superiors of the Carmelite women. Among them were Pierre de Bérulle, who was later named Cardinal, as well as François de Sales, who became bishop of Geneva, and ultimately, a saint. Writing about this fascinating collection of religious seekers, Buckley says: (1989:31)

Here the Rhineland mystics would intersect with the growing spirit of Spanish Carmelite reform, a reform which the members of this circle would eventually introduce into France. Here the universal spirituality of Francis de Sales would confront in his occasional visits to France the lay spirituality of the chancellor Michel de Marillac and René Gaultier. Here finally the finest reaches of Catholic mysticism would engage in active social compassion which embodied itself in the foundations of charity now spreading throughout the nation... Madame Acarie nourished the life of conversation which expressed the religious hunger of the nations... with resources that lay within

6 This will become a significant factor when the Spanish Carmelites come to Paris to train candidates for Carmelite life: their training in prayer will reflect Madame Acarie's own personal bias.

the experiences and reflections of men and women so different.

Bringing the Carmelite Reform to France

It was perhaps in her own home that Barb Acarie first heard about the writings of the great reformer-mystic Teresa of Avila. She was eager to read the great Carmelite's works and obtained a copy in French from Fr. Jean de Bretigny in autumn of 1601. (Sheppard 1953: 89) After she read St. Teresa's works, perhaps in late 1601 and again eight or nine months later, Madame Acarie experienced visions of Teresa of Avila. In them she was told by Teresa that God wanted to her bring the Carmelite order to France. (1935:54) Senault writes that prior to 1588 an attempt was made to establish Spanish Carmelites in Toulouse, but was unsuccessful (1645:33). This was most likely due to disputes between Spanish and French clergy more than anything else. After her mystical encounters with the Mother of Carmelite reform, Barb Acarie became more determined than ever to bring Spanish Carmelites to France. By 1604, she had obtained Henry IV's permission to bring Teresa's Carmelites to Paris, and persuaded Catherine of Orléans, the princess of Longueville, to endow the monastery, thereby becoming its official foundress. (1645: 42)

During her husband's exile, Madame Acarie managed the household, reared her children, and carried the financial burdens created by her husband's bad judgment. In addition, she suffered physical ailments. As a result of having broken her leg three times, she moved about the construction site on crutches. Despite these financial and physical limitations, Madame Acarie enjoyed a freedom that was unusual for women of her times and culture. Literate and well-travelled, she had many contacts amongst the royalty and could rally people around her cause: to bring Spanish Carmelite women to Paris. She interacted with a number of people who worked with her in making the necessary arrangements for the arrival of the Spanish religious. She also needed to house and prepare candidates for religious life before the arrival of the foundresses.

When Pierre Acarie returned from his exile, he found his house turned upside down. Bremond says all was transformed, "the *salon* almost a convent parlour... he was perplexed, according to Père Duval, by the fact that a great number of people of every description, great and small, men, women and girls, religious and secular, came to his house to speak to his wife, and letters came to her from every quarter." Monsieur Acarie was heard to say to one of his priest friends, "It is uncommonly inconvenient to have such a saintly wife and one so skilled in giving

advice." (1930: 190). Nonetheless, Pierre did not stand in his wife's way. Prospective candidates lived for a time in the Acarie home. There they were trained in prayer and the rudiments of a religious life until such time as the Duchess de Longueville bought a house⁷ on the Place Sainte-Geneviève to accommodate the group of pious women more adequately.

Madame Acarie engaged Jean de Quintanadoine, her cousin Pierre de Bérulle, Jean de Bretigny and the Duchess de Longueville, to accompany to accompany six Spanish Carmelites. These were: Anne of Jesus, the "constant companion of Teresa of Jesus" who was nominated prioress; Anne of St. Bartholomew, Isabel of the Angels, Beatrice of the Conception, Isabel of St. Paul and Eleanor of St. Bernard. (1995:156) A young widow, Madame Louise Jourdain volunteered to be among the group to travel to Spain and accompany the Spanish Carmelites back to Paris. Although the Carmelite nuns were generally suspicious of the French, after praying together with Madame Jourdain and the other women before the journey to Paris, the nuns were pleasantly surprised at their piety and depth of prayer. The Carmelites and their entourage arrived in Paris on October 15, 1604, where a great welcome awaited them. It was the feast of St. Teresa of Avila, a most significant day on which to begin the foundation.

Typically, in that era the religious superiors of the Spanish nuns were Carmelite priests. Relations between Spain and France were not good during the reign of Henry IV of Navarre, who considered the Spanish Carmelite men "more Spanish than Christian." (Morgain 1995:29) So, as political considerations prevented either Spanish or Italian Carmelite priests from assuming a role of ecclesiastical superiors for the Carmelite women, the Holy See appointed three French clerics as superiors: Pierre de Bérulle, André Duval, and Jacques Gallament. The appointment of the French clergymen caused great consternation to the Carmelite men in Italy and Spain and indeed, to the women. (Dupuy 1964:12)

Once the Carmelites were in place it was their task to see to the spiritual formation of the first French candidates. There were numerous challenges of language and culture, for both the Spanish women and the French candidates. Only one young French woman, Marie de la Trinité Hannival spoke Spanish and none of the Spaniards spoke French, making communication difficult for all. By temperament, the Spaniards were more effusive and emotive than the French. They would dance in the chapel; the French women would sit quietly. There were issues related to cuisine as well. Perhaps more difficult to deal with

7 This house was subsequently closed in 1607. (1930: 191)

were differences in style of prayer. On this point, Bremond records the reactions of Anne of Jesus when she first met the French candidates: "I am careful that they meditate on and imitate Our Lord Jesus Christ, for he is often forgotten here. All devotion is concentrated upon the abstract idea of God: I do not know how it is done.... It is a strange affair. I can as little comprehend it as the language in which they seek to explain it; nay, I am unable even to read it." (1930: 229)

This difference in approach to prayer was a source of friction among the holy women: Teresian Carmelites were Christo-centric and kataphatic in their approach to prayer; whereas Madame Acarie, under the influence of the Rhineland mystics, would have encouraged her protégées to strive for imageless prayer, in what could be called an apophatic style. These two very distinct approaches to prayer and the spiritual life, not to mention the cultural and language differences provided continuous challenges for the new congregation as it developed. (Orcibal 1959:2).

Madame Acarie - Her Later Years

From 1604 on, Madame Acarie helped with the new Carmel foundation, and offered advice to the clerics who were the appointed ecclesiastical superiors of the Carmelite women. It was during this period that she experienced a great sadness. It was caused by a disagreement with her cousin Pierre de Bérulle over his insistence that the Carmelite women make a vow of servitude to the Virgin Mary. For Madame Acarie this practice was not consistent with the teachings of the Saint Teresa of Avila, and she could see that the insistence upon this vow of servitude would cause great suffering in the newly formed congregation. (1989:53)

After the death of her husband Pierre, Madame Acarie entered the Pointoise Carmel. Although she expected to remain a lay sister,⁸ Sister Marie of the Incarnation, as she was known, was admitted as a choir nun at the Pointoise Carmel where her daughter was prioress. There she lived, worked and prayed as Sister Marie of the Incarnation until her death in 1618. Three of her daughters became Carmelites and one of them, Marguerite of the Blessed Sacrament was noted for her mystical states.

On two accounts, Madame Barb Acarie was a significant figure in the life of the church in France and universally. First, she was undoubtedly

8 Until the latter half of the twentieth century, after Vatican II, many monastic orders of women had distinctions between the choir sisters and lay sisters. The former group were generally literate, able to read the Divine Office, and brought a dowry with them when they entered. The lay sisters were from a lower social class, entered without a dowry and had no formal education. Usually older women became lay sisters, and this would have been the case with Madame Acarie.

the instrument of God to introduce Teresian Carmelite life to the French people and to ensure that France's catalogue of saints would include many great Carmelite women such as: Thérèse of Lisieux, Elizabeth of the Trinity, the martyrs of Compeigne. She received many graces of conversion, of mystical prayer, of wisdom and self-effacing love. She faced numerous challenges as well - misunderstanding of her spiritual experiences, difficulties in her marriage, physical disability and struggles to fulfill the wishes of Teresa of Avila. Secondly, through circumstances that only Providence could arrange, the hospitality she offered in her home, *salon Acarie* would prove to be a magnet drawing spiritual seekers from France and beyond. Engaged in her own spiritual search she was willing to share it with others, an act which brought together prayerful people and reformers. Their spiritual conversations were a gift to the church. *Salon Acarie* was a vivid example of the power of collaboration within the church and a paradigm for church life and true renewal. Barb Acarie, Marie of the Incarnation, was declared blessed on June 5, 1791.