

Claude Demoustier RSCJ Reflections

How do any of us know another person?

We come to know them in the give and take of daily life, the choices they make, the values that guide them, the way they spend their time, the passions that preoccupy them. We know them in the way they live, and we know them, too, in the way they die. Such was surely true of Claude Demoustier who leaned into her dying and left us the most remarkable example of faith, of hope, and of unfailing gratitude.

The best thing I can say about Marie-Therese Claude Demoustier is that she was a Religious of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. She loved the Society. We all do, of course, at least most of the time! But Claude demonstrated her love of her vocation by the way she prayed, the friendships she forged with Sophie and Philippine, the choices she made to live the vows, the care she took to become a true educator, the way she returned again and again to the Constitutions and chapter documents, and her consistent habit of self-reflection. Even in the last few days before she died she told me she was working on being less judgmental.

Claude's formation was during the turbulent time of the 60's and early 70's. You may remember that period before our new Constitutions were finalized when each RSCJ wrote her own vow formula, some of them of dubious theological merit. I found a copy of what Claude wrote and then proclaimed in the church of St. Thibault, Joigny in 1972. Here is what she said:

Seized by the Mystery of God's fullness
and of my emptiness before him,
and in response to his eternal covenant with me,
in joy and gratitude for his call
and for my family and friends who have brought me to this day,
I promise Jesus Christ to live forever
a life that will witness to this Mystery
by means of chastity, evangelical poverty and obedience
in the Society of the Sacred Heart
which carries out its mission of education in the Church.

These words give a little glimpse of her heart and her desires, above all to be captivated by the Mystery who is God. And all her life-long she continued to grow in her understanding of what she had vowed and what it required of her.

Of poverty, she once wrote: “If I hold on to an idea, a feeling, an expectation, I am not poor. The poor person holds on to nothing as her own. She is constantly ready for the surprises the Lord sends us through others.” Furthermore she had precious few possessions. Debby Watson and I disposed of her few boxes at Mason Road in less than an hour.

About chastity she prayed: “I want to let God captivate my heart totally, to enthrall me, as John Donne would say...to let God possess me.” Truly, God was her heart’s desire. “I am drawn to become little in the immensity of God’s heart. I must be single-hearted in my response.” She also delighted in God’s love for her as revealed in nature, in events, and especially in those who surrounded her. “It is as if God is saying to me: Please stop and see that I love you.”

And about obedience, I can testify personally to her faithfulness. In 2000 when I passed along Clare Pratt’s request that Claude come to Rome to work in the secretariat, I suggested she take ample time to think and pray about it, but Claude didn’t need time. “The day I made my vows,” she said, “I promised I would never say ‘no’.”

Claude had a deep and abiding love of Saint Madeleine Sophie. Once a community conversation revolved around the question: When am I most aware of Sophie’s presence in my life? She responded: “In probation in Joigny I asked Sophie to let me know the one thing I needed most in my life in order to be a true RSCJ. The answer came soon: GENTLENESS.” Then Claude added: “I am most aware of Sophie’s presence when I am with the students in a demanding situation and I feel like committing mass murder... that’s when I feel Sophie’s call to gentleness.”

Claude truly loved her work with young people; she saw herself in collaboration with God. Just after coming to Villa Duchesne in 1977 she went on retreat with the seniors and she felt God was very present during those days. She wrote: “I had moments of real frustration when I saw the students struggling to understand. I wanted them to understand and to accept so badly. I wanted to snap my fingers and make it happen. And then I remembered that God would do it in God’s way, and that God is counting on my witness, on my fidelity, love and kindness to help God along. So I resigned myself joyfully and peacefully to praying for them, begging God to do what God needed to do in them in God’s good time.”

How like Saint Madeleine Sophie Claude was, drawing the students to be their own best selves for God by her love and by her prayer.

By recalling all these wonderful things about Claude I do not mean to overlook the times of struggle and darkness in her life, the times of loneliness, the occasional misunderstandings, the sense of uselessness and even failure that sometimes overcame her, the pain of leaving familiar places, especially her beloved Grand Coteau – which she left not once but three times. But this was her conviction: “Pain and suffering are Jesus’ gifts to help me be more like him.”

Claude’s deepest desire, as expressed in her vow formula, was to live a life that witnessed to the Mystery of God’s fullness as a true Religious of the Sacred Heart. What a precious witness she was.

Kathleen Hughes, RSCJ
Oakwood
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