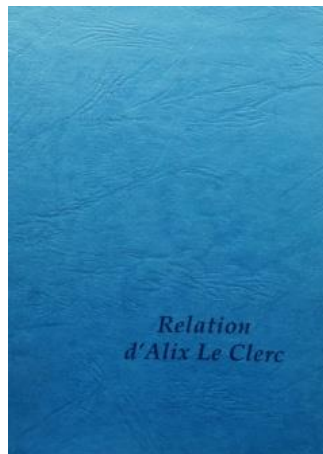


"RELATION" of Alix Le Clerc

(Traduction intégrale en anglais de la brochure originale en français ci-dessous)



The "Relation" is the only written work of Alix Le Clerc that we still possess. We know of only one extant text, a manuscript copy of twenty-two pages, which has been certified as conforming to the original. It is held in the Evreux municipal library.

Alix Le Clerc wrote her Relation at the request of her Jesuit spiritual director, Father Jean Guéret. The text is not dated but in all probability we can place it between 1618 and 1621, not long before Alix's death on 9th January 1622.

The "spiritual journal" is a form of writing frequent at the time. It entails describing a spiritual journey at the request of a third person. An experience of this kind is always lived out within a particular culture and so we must situate it in Alix's time if we are to approach the text with understanding.

Pierre Fourier and Alix Le Clerc lived at the turning-point of two centuries. In 1600, Pierre Fourier was thirty-five years old. Alix twenty-four. A few reference points are significant: 1564, birth of Galileo; 1565, beginning of the Spanish presence in the Philippines; 1567, foundation of the town of Rio by the Portuguese. In France, about 1570, Montaigne began the compilation of his Essays. In Europe, then, the universe was beginning to have wider dimensions, the vision of the world was changing, man was being looked at in a new light. The sixteenth century in Europe was shot through with the humanism of the Renaissance, shaken by the Protestant Reformation, which one might add was a cultural as much as a religious phenomenon. Such changes in mentality do not take place without an upheaval and so you have, in some ways, a society in crisis.

The period is still a religious one. No one questions, at least in the collective consciousness, the concept of a world where the visible and invisible exist side by side. God, angels, Our Lady, the saints, "evil spirits", are part and parcel of the same conceptual world and characteristic of the every-day life of the time.

The Duchy of Lorraine was then independent. It had remained prosperous under the firm hand of its Dukes and the country was not rent by the wars of religion, although in 1587 German mercenaries, the so-called "rough-necks", had partially laid it waste. Flourishing once again, this corridor of land had become aware of the cultural movements then shaking Europe.

In a society which is both in crisis and yet still religious, disquiet easily finds expression in the occult and in the religious occult. This explains the re-appearance in the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century of the phenomena of witchcraft and diabolical possession. Lorraine was especially affected by this collective psychosis which reflected the false beliefs and obsessive fears of the period.

The Council of Trent came to a close in 1563, two years before the birth of Pierre Fourier. Together with their contemporaries - François de Sales, Jeanne de Chantal, Pierre de Bérulle, Vincent de Paul - Pierre Fourier and Alix Le Clerc were witnesses of these difficult times, open to the new demands of a world in process of transformation. They may not be so well known but they have their place in this first period of the seventeenth century which has been called the "century of saints".

When Alix Le Clerc wrote her Relation she was superior of the house at Nancy, set up as a monastery in 1617. From 1597 onwards, from her first intuition as foundress, she had witnessed the growth of the "Congregation of the Blessed Virgin Mary". With Pierre Fourier she had been involved in the development of the first Constitutions, and together with him she had fought to preserve the true spirit of their origins. After the little school at Poussay she had experienced the difficulties of nearly all the foundations. She had spent time at Mattaincourt, Saint-Mihiel, Nancy, Pont-à-Mousson, Verdun, Châlons, Saint-Nicolas-de-Port... And all the while she was caught up in another adventure, a spiritual experience of great intensity: it is of this that she speaks in her Relation.

RELATION

To the glory of God and his Holy Mother,
and for the salvation of my soul, for love of Him.

Reverend Father¹ in God, in the presence of whose majesty I am but a tiny flea, and less than that; knowing myself to be unworthy of receiving any of his graces and worthy rather of much time in hell, on account of the many sins I committed when I lived in the world, and, during the sixteen or seventeen years since I first experienced the light of his grace, so many offences and so many failures to co-operate with that grace; for all this I consider myself deeply ungrateful to God, and to all those people who bear with me so patiently, to the point that if our just Lord wished to execute strict justice in my regard I would have no right of reply.

Often do I tremble and blush when I consider myself in this light before him; but then, turning my gaze to his infinite mercy and loving goodness, gained for me through the merits of my Lord Jesus Christ and the assistance of his blessed Mother, not only do I hope and trust in him but even feel great consolation, rejoicing that on the great day of judgment his mercy will be seen more fully in me than in all the rest of the world, and that it will also shine forth on all other sinners who have been converted.

1. So I shall begin, with shame, to tell of those things I believe I have received from our good Lord (to draw me away from sin and personal vanity) - everything I can remember out of the ordinary given for the good of my soul and of my vocation. Hence, this statement which I intend to make as succinctly and truthfully as possible (knowing that God, the searcher of hearts, cannot be deceived) may be corrected and put right if I have been mistaken in anything, or been too eased in conscience concerning certain doubts I sometimes have in these matters.
2. I was nineteen or twenty when I followed this vocation. During these twenty years I think I made only one good confession of the sins I knew I had committed in my youth, being drawn to do so by reading a book which happened to fall into my hands: when I was ill with a prolonged fever, a young man threw it on my bed as a joke. This book contained tragic stories of people who had been too ashamed to confess their sins. As soon as I recovered I went to confession, taking with me my closest friends whom I had impressed with the same fears of hell as I had conceived.
3. As I was then living in the town of Remiremont, my birthplace² where there was nothing but the darkness of ignorance and no clergy to lead us in the path of virtue, this confession was not enough to draw me away, in my total ignorance, from the sins and vanities in which I was indulging. The one good thing in me then was that I had a love of honour; I restrained my frivolity in company and hid my vain and youthful behaviour as best I could. I had some devotion to Our Lady and to St. Anne so that, in the eyes of the world, I was considered sensible and devout.

¹ This was her confessor, Father Jean Guéret (1559 - 1630).

² She was born there on 2nd February 1576 and baptised there the same day.

4. Once, after this confession, I dreamed that I was hearing Mass in the church of that town, dedicated to Our Lady, and that when I went up at the Offertory, I saw the Blessed Virgin at the corner of the altar, dressed in a habit just like ours. I stopped far away from her, not daring to approach because of my unworthiness; seeing this, she called to me, saying: "Come, my daughter, and I will welcome you because, when you were in sin, you did something pleasing to my Son in going to confession." Although at the time I thought it was only a dream, I resolved nevertheless to have a greater devotion to Our Lady and to go to confession more often.
5. From that time forward, in the midst of pleasure I carried a sad heart, and I felt a real desire to leave Remiremont where I was surrounded by so many vain and youthful companions. An occasion presented itself which Our Lord brought about by his divine Providence for the salvation of my father and mother and all their family since they died in a state of grace; such is my firm hope because of their happy death, and for this I thank God. My father was suffering from a long-drawn-out illness and to help his recovery he was advised to return to his native air. This he decided to do and went, with all his family, to live in the village¹ (dependent at that time on the parish church of Mattaincourt) where he had been born and where he had the means to live on and could stay as long as he wished,
6. I was delighted with this arrangement as it enabled me to withdraw from the world which wearied me without my knowing why. But once I was there, just as many companions surrounded me as at Remiremont, and there were even more vanities and worldly pleasures than before. It was by a special grace of God that I was not drawn to the vocation of marriage, but I had a strong aversion to being subject to a husband.
7. Two years went by in this way until our good Father came to be parish priest at Mattaincourt when his predecessor died. He began to preach on Sundays and feastdays but my ears were blocked by vanity and my heart was plunged in darkness and not yet ready to receive the light. Nevertheless, continuing in my devotion to Our Lady I resolved, on one of her feastdays, to go to confession and sent for our good Father to hear me, but he could not spare the time and so I lost my fervour which was not very great.
8. Then something happened which made me realise that there was a God of mercy who greatly cared for my soul. On three different Sundays, while I was at High Mass, I seemed to hear in the air the sound of a drum which ravished my senses; these in any case were very uncontrolled and under the influence of my vain and worldly desires. As I loved dancing, the sound captivated me and irresistibly compelled me to listen. On the third Sunday, I was so powerfully attracted to it that, quite out of myself, I seemed to see a devil playing the drum and a throng of young people gaily following. I carefully reflected on this and resolved then and there never again to belong to such a company, admitting to myself that I had been one of the most ardent in following the demon who only wanted to hurl me down into hell. I determined that henceforth I would make a complete change in all my ways and that I would do only what I knew to be most pleasing to God, even if I were to die in the attempt. It seemed to me as if my inner self had been removed and

¹ Hymont.

replaced by a totally different spirit.

9. I laid aside all my fine clothes and put a white veil on my head, like those the simple village girls wore when they went to Communion, and I made a vow of chastity without asking anyone's advice. All this caused consternation to my parents and neighbours and a good deal of gossip, since piety was something new to Mattaincourt. I went to see our good Father for the first time to tell him of my resolution and to do all that he said would be pleasing to God. He advised me to make a general confession, which was quickly done this time as I did not think I had many sins. But he put into my hands a book about examination of conscience where I found myself depicted with so many sins that I was overwhelmed with sadness and wept bitterly day and night. For six months I spent a little time every day making my confession to him, and daily more and more sins came to mind.
10. At this time I experienced great temptations to blasphemy and to disbelief in the mercy of God, and I came to ask myself why he, who is all-powerful and so hates sin, had allowed our first father, Adam, to fall, and why he had made all the human race subject to sin. These thoughts kept coming into my mind without my knowing that they were temptations, although I realized I ought not to dwell on them, since it was not God, whom I knew to be so good, who had made sin. I offered him my body to be ground to pieces if only he would restore my soul to its original purity.
11. One evening as I was reflecting in this way, a great fear suddenly came over me, and I seemed to be monstrously big and so heavy that I could not so much as move a finger, nor could I speak a word. I heard a voice within me say, "This represents the state of a sinner who cannot raise himself up without the grace of God". I saw a devil quite near me, and an angel dressed in white brandishing a sword against him and putting him to flight amid great commotion. Immediately I became so light that I was raised up, although I did not see anything to support me, and I was told as before, that this represented the state of grace. Then my body returned to the ground and, remaining motionless, began to be consumed by fire from head to foot, and to rise into the air like smoke. I again heard the voice telling me that this represented the state of perfection which consisted in subjecting the flesh to the spirit and the spirit to God, seeking him and loving him above all things and clinging to him alone.
12. After this I was free from the above temptations and felt a great desire to abnegate myself and suffer for the love of God for it seemed to me that sufferings drew one more surely to God. O how easy they seemed to me then! But practical experience certainly made me change my opinion, for I was still sunk in selfishness and was neither co-operating with the many great desires Our Lord was giving me nor really profiting from this time.
13. I had then a great longing for penances and I practised many, thinking I would continue them all my life, but after five or six years we came to Nancy and your Reverend Fathers to whom we went to confession moderated them and left us only with what we practise now.
14. I told our good Father of all that was happening within me and of the great desire I had to be a nun. He suggested that I should enter the convent of

St. Clare at Pont-à-Mousson. At first the idea attracted me, but it was short-lived. My parents, too, were against it because of the great austerity of the life, preferring to send me to an Order which was not enclosed, but their suggestion filled me with horror.

15. Whenever I prayed to God, there always came into my mind the need to found a new religious house wherein all possible good should be done, and the thought of this became so pressing that I went forthwith to suggest it to our good Father, begging him to let me arrange it all. But he would not consent, pointing out the difficulty of finding companions who possessed the qualities necessary to follow this new vocation, and producing many other reasons against it. But it seemed to me that everything was possible to God if he willed it, so much so that in less than six or eight weeks three girls came to me one after another to tell me of the desire they had suddenly felt of becoming nuns and of joining me, but they did not know how they would obtain their parents' consent. All this strengthened my first resolution. I took them immediately to our good Father; they each made a general confession to him and together we told him of the plan I had proposed and which they had willingly accepted. From thenceforth we wanted to live together and have all things in common, but we were not allowed to do so.
16. My parents, disturbed by the complaints and calumnies made against me because of these new devotional practices, sent me to a convent of the Hospitallers of St. Elizabeth¹ which follows the Rule of St. Francis. I told them plainly that this was not my vocation and that I had no intention of staying. All the same, curiosity to see what went on in a convent helped me to bear this trial. Bidding farewell to my companions, I assured them I should soon return. Once there, I found neither the discipline nor the good example I had hoped for: lay people were allowed to enter indiscriminately, bringing with them many sources of distraction. As a result, all the time I stayed there, I suffered much anxiety of mind and spent most nights in weeping and prayer. I wrote often to our good Father, begging him to obtain my speedy return, for I was in greater danger there than in the world, and he did this at once with the help of Madame d'Apremont and Madame de Fresnel, Ladies of the church of Poussay, whom I had seen before and who knew all our plans.

They begged my parents to let me go to them and their request was granted. So, my companions and I set off on the eve of the feast of Corpus Christi² and together, under the direction of our good Father, we began to pray much and to practise austerities and good works, in order to know and carry out the will of God.

17. Your Reverend Fathers at Pont-à-Mousson were informed of all that we were doing and gave their advice, at the urgent request of our good Father, who took the trouble to write to them about it. The Reverend Fathers Fourier, Nicaud and others were there then.

We came together after a specified time to vote and make known our desires and we were all in agreement to continue with our hoped-for plans. Whereupon our good Father drew up a Rule for us along these lines, and took

¹ Non-cloistered Sisters.

² In 1598.

it to Monseigneur de la Vallée, the Bishop of Toul, who, although he did not wish to give us letters patent, gave us permission to live according to it.

What I have said so far has been to show Your Reverence¹ that this vocation came from God.

18. Once, when I was in the church at Poussay praying to God for one of my relations who was in a state of sin, and feeling very much the dreadfulness of the offences which were being committed against God, weary of life and begging him with all the fervour I had to let me leave this world in which so many things displeasing to his Divine Majesty were done, I was suddenly taken out of myself. I seemed to see Our Lord with two of his Apostles, and they were seated high up in the middle of the church where the crucifix usually is. He was looking at me kindly and I seemed to have risen up to his feet with great fervour; but I had immediately fallen down again and I heard a voice say, "This is not the path you must take to heaven". Then I was shown a little lane like a plank, very narrow and carpeted with grass. It began in a chapel of the aforementioned church dedicated to Our Lady, on the altar near her statue, and the other end reached up to heaven. When I wanted to start going up by this path, I was told that it was not yet time.

Since then, I have always made a great point of entrusting all our undertakings to the care of the Virgin Mary, and I always have great confidence in her help and ask God for everything through his Son and through her.

19. One day in the same year, when I was in the abbey church in a chapel called the Sepulchre, praying for our vocation to be strengthened, I was rapt out of myself and thought I saw before me two of your Fathers. A voice within me said that I was to follow them. From that time I had a great desire to see some of them and to have contact with them, because our good Father and Madame d'Apremont were always speaking about them and praising your Society very highly. That same year two Fathers came to see Madame d'Apremont and this was the beginning of our acquaintance with them. At first, however, we had difficulty in following their advice on the moderation of the excessive penances and austerities we were practising.
20. We stayed at Poussay for only about a year because the Abbess and the older Ladies became displeased with us, saying that the younger ones were imitating us and spending too much time at their devotions. Madame d'Apremont put an end to their complaints by buying us a house at Mattaincourt which she had furnished and made ready for us. We went there to be near our good Father, as we had so much desired.
21. Once when I was thinking of the great repugnance I felt towards becoming the superior of the house and directing the sisters, a charge I was being asked to accept, whereas I would have preferred to obey in order to have more help and greater means of pleasing God, and in any case I judged myself incapable, I was taken out of myself as before and I heard that it was God's will that I should accept. I felt as though one end of a cross was being laid on

¹ Father Guéret. When she writes "Your Reverend Fathers" she is referring to the Jesuits.

my heart and I remained for many days with this vision, thinking it was there in reality.

22. After we had lived for some time at Mattaincourt, my father was prevailed upon by some persons of authority and so, in order to escape the mockery and calumny of the world against our new way of life, and following the advice of various members of the Church, he decided to take me away from our sisters and send me to Verdun, to the convent of St. Clare which was just being reformed. He warned me to prepare for this and told me he was coming to fetch me no later than the following day. The only thing I could do was to tell our good Father and ask his advice on what I should say to my parents. He told me I must obey them, the suggestion they were making was obviously for the salvation of my soul, that what we had begun showed little hope of success and was perhaps even a temptation, and that I was in conscience bound to obey them - all of which caused me much anguish. Seeing myself besieged on all sides, I turned to God and his holy Mother and fervently recommended the whole matter to the prayers of our sisters. And that night when I was praying that it might please God to move my heart to accomplish his holy will, if it was what everyone said it was, I was suddenly seized with fear and trembling, and being rapt out of myself it seemed to me that one of our sisters, or rather the Blessed Virgin in this guise, gave the child Jesus into my arms and told me to persevere in my vocation and have no fear, for he would be my hope. My soul was much consoled as I held the child.

Afterwards I began to fear that it was an illusion (our good Father having taught me from the beginning to distrust such things, telling me not to build my plans on them but rather always to seek true and solid virtue). I told Our Lord that if this vision came from him, then, since I had been told that he would be my hope, he should make my father change his mind; he had the absolute power to do so, and in this way I should be sure of his will. This actually happened, for my father left me in peace, and told me afterwards that when he was setting out to fetch me a great fear had come upon him that in constraining me to go he would be offending God. He left me completely free to carry out my resolve and wanted no more part in the matter.

23. Another time, the eve of the feast of the Purification of Our Lady, to which I have a special devotion as I had been told that it was the day of my birth and baptism, I was preparing to keep the feast as well as I could. Our Lady appeared to me, holding her little Son, and gave him to me saying that I should nourish him until he was fully grown. That I understood to mean that I should work for his glory. Then my soul was much humiliated and raised to great heights in the knowledge of God. I cannot say anything of it except that God is pure Spirit and that I had knowledge only of an infinitesimal part of his glory and perfection, and understood as well something of the Blessed Trinity, adoring the Three in One and above all their love and union. Their glory has always remained as it were imprinted in my mind, together with their purity, which urges me to desire that of my own soul and to feel great pity for the souls who rebel against the divine will; I would suffer and give my life over and over again for them to return to their first state!
24. I have also been transported to the little house of the Blessed Virgin and the child Jesus. I was much consoled to see them, their little furniture and their beds to one side, and Jesus' little chair.

25. I have always had a great desire to die, ever since I understood where true good is to be found and realized the dangers of this world. This desire has sometimes been excessive. Five years ago when I felt it more strongly than ever, I thought that I could no longer have any consolation in this world except in receiving the Blessed Sacrament of the altar, from which, through faith, I received the only good of my soul and felt a great desire to approach it often.

One morning, when I was dressing, still feeling this desire to die because I was wearied of serving my body in so many different ways, I was suddenly surprised and deprived of all movement and in my heart Our Lord seemed to be reproving me saying, "When I am with you, it must suffice; but there is still much selfseeking even in this". And since then this great desire has been moderated, and when it comes upon me it is immediately followed by a peaceful and tranquil resignation to the will of God, and Truth himself strips me of all self-love, as this truth he has revealed to me teaches me inwardly to love him for himself alone. Then I am content not only to remain here for as long as he wishes, but content, too, when it is his good pleasure to call me from this world, not to enjoy the glory of the blessed, if such be his will, so long as I can hear him praised and blessed by them.

26. It seems to me also that my soul is very far from presuming anything of itself, and that all my hope and confidence are founded on God's divine goodness and providence. This often leads me, I think, to undertake things beyond my capabilities and sometimes to refuse to be ruled by human considerations. And in this, too, obedience is of great service to me. I desire perfect obedience because I think Our Lord takes great pleasure in a soul that strives for this.

27. I will tell you, too, of the help I experienced from Our Lady in a great temptation which assailed my soul shortly afterwards. I was being greatly besieged by the imaginings and illusions¹ of burning desires of the flesh, when, one night, four devils appeared before me in human form who by their delusions deprived me of all physical strength and also of my voice so that I could not cry out. Our Lord permitted all this in order to teach me that it is he who overcomes our enemies when he knows our good will. These evil spirits of filthy and horrible aspect were prepared to carry out wicked actions in my person and as I could do nothing to defend myself except raise my thoughts to heaven, I begged Our Lord and his holy Mother to protect me from them, and I immediately felt their divine assistance. The demons, being unable to accomplish their designs, took hold of my feet and arms and dragged me from side to side. I was very glad that they should ill-treat my body, wreaking vengeance on it on my behalf. All this time, my soul was so confused, humiliated and fearful that I dared not lift my eyes to God.

And when I was completely exhausted and was about to fall into despair, I had recourse to the Blessed Virgin, mother of the afflicted, begging her that, since I had placed myself under her protection, she would obtain for me the merits of her Son to cleanse my soul and adorn it with his grace.

28. One evening, some time after I began to be afflicted by these temptations, when I was praying and making the examination of conscience with our sisters

¹ This word usually means deceptions of the devil.

(we were in the Cloître de Notre Dame at Nancy) I turned towards the windows over the entrance of our house and saw four tall men, dressed in black, carrying lighted torches, and coming up to the door in order to enter. I was thoroughly frightened to see men coming to see us so late at night. All our sisters who were there saw them too. But suddenly they disappeared and our house seemed to be on fire, ablaze with towering flames. We were stricken with terror, thinking the house was on fire, and intent on going into the street. Coming to myself somewhat, I realised it could be a delusion; we reassured each other and went on with our prayers. Immediately, these great flames began to die down, gathering up into an enormous ball of fire which went rolling through the cloister, and fell with a loud noise in the living quarters of the house.

29. I had abandoned all other spiritual exercises during the period of these temptations and said only the penitential psalms. I was often aware of foul smells round about me, like sulphur, I think, or other infernal concoctions; and even now I often detect these stenches when I have to overcome some temptation or affliction. To increase my difficulties, Our Lord allowed your Fathers to entertain some doubts about my spiritual state and to fear that there was something in my soul which I did not wish to disclose, or of which I was not aware. Nevertheless, I began to share their fears, wondering whether I was possessed, or something even worse beyond my understanding.
30. Then there came to me great suffering on account of a confessor, and this was one of the most trying snares the devil has ever set to afflict my soul. As we were in a town¹ where our house was at a great distance from that of your Fathers, our good Father thought it better that, in order to avoid being seen so often in the town, we should go to our spiritual director (one of your Fathers) only once a month and that for our ordinary confessions we should go to a good secular priest who lived nearer to us. He was reputed to be good, very capable, and to have great solicitude for the souls under his direction. Although he was pious, he did not possess enough discernment nor the other qualities necessary to help us. Under the pretext of wishing to help me in my temptations, he caused me much embarrassment and great anxieties.

After some time, the Reverend Father Baccarat, our extraordinary confessor, told me that this man was not at all suitable for us because he was too free and too familiar. So I left him immediately, which made him very angry and whenever he met me he showed his displeasure, sometimes even saying indiscreet and indecorous things to me. However hard I tried to shake him off, I could not avoid meeting him. Because of the dread I felt for him (or because God permitted it in order to try me further) it happened that in the violence of my temptations he often appeared in my imagination, and this caused me really great difficulties of conscience. Seeing myself in this danger, and being unable by means of letters I had written to our good Father to obtain his permission to leave the town where I was, I resolved to go and see him in person to tell him of the state I was in, overcome with apprehension and fearful of going out of my mind. I could not sleep, and dared not do so because of so many bad dreams; I had no appetite and was becoming extremely thin. I could not believe my confessors, some of your Fathers, when

¹ Nancy.

they told me I was not offending God; I pretended that my memory and my mind were in good order, and that I was continually and all the time resisting, whereas this was not so, and my understanding was clouded. This was the form my scruples took.

31. While I was with our good Father, at Mattaincourt¹, staying there nearly eight months and afflicted all the time, I sometimes said to myself: if Our Lord had allowed one to kill oneself, I would far more willingly do that than experience the state I am in; and I would willingly and in good heart have accepted any kind of death had God been pleased to allow me the choice.
32. This is how this temptation eventually came to an end. After I had endured it for more than two years, one day, the feast of the Nativity of Our Lady, I was at Vespers at Mattaincourt and during the singing of the Ave Maris Stella, I raised my soul to Our Lady and put my trust in her, humbly begging her to obtain for me from her Son the grace never to offend him in this temptation. At the verse, "Virgo singularis", desiring to praise God for her singular Virginity, I was rapt out of myself and saw near me a terrified devil who called to his aid three others some distance away and whom I could see also. But they were all put to flight and I found myself entirely free of the temptation. In gratitude for this grace which Our Lady obtained for me, I now repeat "Virgo singularis" after each decade of my Rosary.
33. During these ecstasies and trances of which I have spoken up to now, and others which I sometimes experience, my soul is filled with a light which makes me long and yearn for the divine perfections, either for a particular one or for those of the sacred humanity of Our Lord. Such ecstasies are not very frequent and I consider it a great grace and favour of God that as far as I know no-one has noticed them yet. They come upon me suddenly without my foreseeing them or having any presentiment of them; they do not last very long and while they last I do not know if my eyes are open but certainly I do not see or hear anything, nor do I know where I am. I remain kneeling or in the position I am in when they come. When I return to my senses I cannot prevent myself from sighing for quite a long time afterwards, even when I am working or eating or when I wake up at night. Our Sisters think that my sighs are due to some malady or an interior suffering: sometimes I give them trivial reasons for them. I think that it would cause them great scandal to see me, so full of miseries and imperfections, experiencing such things. Being such as I am, I cannot be astonished enough at them myself, if they come from God, unless it is that he, being infinitely good and merciful, wants to support my weakness and lack of fervour by his visits.
34. All the same, I very often feel no devotion but experience only aridity and darkness of understanding and am filled with nothing but confused thoughts. And sometimes when I reflect on it, I feel I would be glad to remain in this state all my life if I were strong enough to persevere in serving God well, and my soul is content with this insight, for it can the better know its abjection. At such times I have a great devotion to the "De Profundis", since I cry out from the depths of my emptiness and nothingness to the God of incomprehensible

¹ "Soeur Alix came to stay here two weeks ago; I am not sure but that God has allowed it so that she should remain here for some time." (Letter of Pierre Fourier to the nuns at Pont-à-Mousson, 5th March 1609.)

majesty and greatness.

35. I will say here that sometimes evil spirits appear to me in order to frighten me; but I do not fear them for they only have power because God wills it. At first they used to try to make me have false ecstasies and they would cause them to come upon me little by little so that I might feel them coming and consent to them through curiosity, but God always gave me the grace to recognize them for what they were as they left my soul in darkness. I would turn to Our Lord, begging him not to let me be deceived, and telling him that I judged myself more worthy of hell than of visions which were proper only to saints.
36. These evil spirits appeared before me several times, in the form of ugly and mis-shapen men, but they would flee as soon as I had the strength to make the sign of the Cross. At other times they appeared as moving hands trying to touch me; I would take hold of them and throw them to the ground, cursing those evil spirits in the name of God.
37. Another time I was in bed and not asleep, and the evil spirit appeared in the form of a large ball of fire advancing towards me to engulf me in its flames; at first it frightened me as it was so unexpected. It happened, too, when once more on my bed, that an illusion took me by surprise, and I saw a savage beast with huge ears and glittering eyes and vastly big legs which threw itself upon me in great fury; but when I made the sign of the Cross it disappeared at once. At the beginning of our vocation it also happened that an illusion took away all power of movement and I felt the evil spirit near me. Once it wanted to pierce my mouth with an iron hook, trying to make me swallow it; at other times it pulled at my hands with this hook, and I said inwardly that I would willingly endure this for the love of Our Lord.
38. One moonlit night during the first year that I lived at Nancy, I got up, wishing to go down a staircase near our room. I saw half-way down the staircase a black phantom in the shape of a man; at first I shuddered with fear, but immediately reassured myself with the sign of the Cross and resolved to go on, and as I put my hand on its head and invoked the name of Jesus Christ, it fled.
39. During the wars of Juliers¹, when I was superior at Verdun, large numbers of troops passed by who often put us in fear of a surprise attack on the town; I prayed earnestly to God that it might please him to preserve the town and appease his anger. I was shown many sufferings that the poor peasants would endure, but I was told that the town would be saved. Then, one morning when I was in bed in the infirmary and very sick, I seemed to see a member of the Town Council coming into the room in great terror, and abruptly pulling the curtain aside as he said: "The town has been captured and the enemy is within"; and while he was speaking I saw a huge ball of fire thrown onto me in bed. It was an illusion.
40. From our beginning Our Lord has granted me the grace not to fear the devil; it seems to me that the devil's power is so limited that he can easily be overcome in the name of Jesus Christ. I find nothing more difficult in this world, nor more dangerous than the temptations and rebellions of the flesh.

¹ German Principality, which from 1609 onwards was the theatre of a long war of succession.

41. I have suffered strong temptations against the faith, sometimes with regard to grace, free-will, the immortality of the soul, the Blessed Sacrament of the altar, the ceremonies of the Church and many other points that could be heretical although I did not realise it at the time. I have since learnt through sermons and by reading spiritual books how to resist them. I had a terrible temptation to believe that the sun was God, and this worried me for four or five months. I wept and prayed day and night, unable to resolve it or get rid of it. That was at the beginning when I was at Saint-Mihiel.
42. One day when I was praying to God with all the fervour I could that the good Duke Henry¹ should not marry Madame Catherine de Bourbon because she was a Huguenot, I was rapt out of myself and seemed to see a great cloud of serpents with outstretched wings flying through the countryside. There were several people about and the serpents were trying to come down on their heads to bite them. I understood then that they signified the host of heretics who were to enter Lorraine. While I was praying very hard that this misfortune should not befall us, I thought I saw a large precipice down which this woman was determined to throw others, but she had inadvertently fallen into it herself.
43. Another time my soul was flooded with a great interior light. I was at that moment meditating on some subject, I forget which, and this light overwhelmed me and I saw all my nothingness, surrounded as I judged myself to be, by so many faults and imperfections. I was taken up in spirit and seemed to see St. Anne near me, embracing me, and then suddenly disappearing.
44. When I am asleep, I often see before me events which are going to take place, things which concern me as well as those which affect our Congregation. This makes me very uneasy for I am afraid of being deceived, even though I do not credit them at all; but very often they are a sign that the events will possibly happen in the way I have seen them, and I commend them all to Our Lord for him to do just as he pleases. They usually do happen in the way I have seen them.
45. I forgot to say that as soon as I had made my first general confession, I thought I saw a procession of white-robed figures who seemed to belong to the Order of St. Francis. I followed them and they led me into a place where stood four columns hung all around with beautiful material; between two of these were sitting St. Clare and St. Elizabeth. I went up to them and asked which of them would receive me as her daughter, but neither of them would accept me. They showed me something in between the columns saying that my vocation was there. It was a child's cradle in which was planted a stalk of oats bearing more stalks and grain, propped up in some way on all sides. Close to the cradle was a huge iron hammer which knocked against the stalk each time the cradle rocked from side to side. It came into my mind that the vocation I should follow would suffer much persecution without being destroyed as this oaten straw was meant to signify, which, though so fragile in itself, could not be broken by the hammer; and that Our Lord would make it strong and stable.

¹ Henri II was Duke of Lorraine from 1608 to 1624. In 1599 he had married as his first wife Catherine, sister of Henry IV, the King of France.

46. When the convent of St. Clare at Verdun was at the beginning of its reform, your Fathers at Pont-à-Mousson advised our good Father to order us all to go there because the Reverend Father Fleurant and the nuns of that monastery desired it, and had sent their representative to Mattaincourt to request this of our good Father, who then suggested it to us, strongly urging us to trust in the advice your Fathers were giving him. This was one of the greatest contradictions my soul has ever suffered because we were told that it was the will of God and that our projects were a temptation. We spent six months praying without ceasing to Our Lord that he would conform our wills to this since we were told that it was his will, but we were unable to entertain even the thought of it. We told our good Father that we could not follow a vocation for which we had no inclination.
47. One evening, some time after this proposal, I thought I was in one of our houses where there was a cloister and a great number of your Brothers were walking as if in procession; our sisters were sitting in a corner near the entrance of the cloister and I had a rake, the sort used for picking up hay in the fields, and I was going round gathering up all the bits of straw scattered in the cloister so that they should not be wasted. None of the Fathers took any notice of me but seemed to scorn my efforts, except for one of them who appeared very venerable and had authority over the others; he looked at me kindly and made me a sign to persevere in my task. When I returned to my senses, I realised that it was the holy Father Ignatius who had been encouraging me in the education of little girls, for these are considered of no more value than wisps of straw. But I also distinctly heard a voice say to me, "I desire that henceforth these little souls who are like illegitimate children abandoned by their mothers should find one in you".
48. In the year 1603 His Eminence the Cardinal of Lorraine wanted us to go to Nancy. Your Fathers who were in the same town decided, in agreement with our good Father, that we should go to live there. We felt a great repugnance to this plan (we were then at Saint-Mihiel), as that town seemed very little suited to us because of the Court and because of the great number of people whom we should not be able to avoid seeing as we were not enclosed. While I was asleep, I was told that it was right to go there, that we should endure many sufferings and calumnies, but that we would do and also receive much good for the glory of God.
49. After we had been in Nancy for some time, I turned my attention to the problem of obtaining a house of our own where we could settle properly. We did not possess a penny, and houses and land were excessively dear, as you know. One evening, when I was asleep, I saw Our Lady standing on an old wall complaining to me that she had been abandoned in this place. I woke up at this point and was wondering where a house could be found when a voice told me that it was already built. The next day the Primate came to tell us that the Cloître de Notre Dame in the old part of Nancy was for sale because the Cardinal was expelling the religious who had refused the reforms he wishes to impose on them. After many vexations and contradictions we bought the Cloître for six thousand francs which we managed to pay off by God's Providence.
50. In the same way our house at Saint Nicolas was shown to me in a dream. I was told that I must gather flowers from our garden at Nancy and transplant

them to Saint Nicolas. Some time afterwards, having given them much advice and good counsel, we sent some of our Sisters to the house of your Fathers which they sold us for seven thousand francs.

51. I would have much to say if I were to enumerate all the favours we have received from Divine Providence, but it is not necessary for my purpose here. I only beg Your Reverence to pray, as I often pray Our Lord, that I may be pleasing to him; and that knowing his ways and profound judgments he will spare me nothing in the way of difficulties and afflictions; even though I tremble as I say this, for my untamed nature fears them dreadfully, but I hope, if it pleases him to send me opportunities, that he will give me the grace to bear them with patience, provided that I can obtain from him the grace of one last favour, that I may praise him for ever; this is my sole ambition.
52. I remember that three years before I came to live at Verdun, I saw the town in a dream, looking exactly as I found it when I arrived, and I also saw something of what I would have to endure there, which would last for a long time. I was taken to a high place near Saint Vanne; and there I was shown a large town of France situated on a plain at a great distance from Verdun where we were still to go: it was Châlons. When I went there a few years afterwards, I recognized it as the same town. I was astonished to think I had seen it from Verdun and could not understand how we could have seen so far.
53. I spent six months at Verdun in great peace of mind, the Reverend Father Lebrun having resolved several difficulties which had been troubling me during the previous years. Suddenly I was again tormented by my great temptations which began more violently than ever: temptations to sensuality and despair; they always come together to torment me more. My soul was so overwhelmed that I began to feel I was going to lose my mind, so much so that in these straits I became ill for quite a long time. The evil spirit really began his attacks when I was taking our Sisters to Châlons, for it seemed, as I went out of the gates of Verdun, that a host of devils were throwing themselves on my soul; and all along the road, experiencing their furious attack, I sang hymns and holy songs so as to resist and overcome them.
54. They got back at me with terrible violence. The first night on our return from this journey - since our accommodation was in a hostelry, where there was only one bed¹ and I had made my companion take it and slept on the floor because of a vow I had made not to sleep with another person - just as I was thinking to go to sleep, there they were, devils in the guise of men, who by their spells deprived me of movement and the power to get up; they even took away my speech, and began to do wicked things, trying to touch me. I experienced a diabolical fire in my flesh like an inferno. Only my spirit was free and that was hard put to it to resist the temptation; I bound it fast to Jesus and his holy Mother, telling them that as my spirit was all that was left to me they should strengthen it and take my part so that I did not offend them. I was tormented like this the whole night long without the demons being able to touch me. The mistress of the lodging became gravely ill; the house was disturbed, a candle was brought into the room and that rid me of the illusion.

¹ In a room used as a cowshed. She had seen the cows and calves being taken away when she arrived.

55. Evil spirits like this appeared to me many times and cast a sort of spell on my feet, and I seemed to feel a kind of shivering until the fire in my rebelling flesh was so fierce that I could not prevent my body from jerking. And it is over this that I mainly have scruples. Sometimes when I wanted to throw myself out of bed, the figure of a man would appear and hold me down.
56. These temptations lasted for two whole years at Verdun and in the midst of them I had still other afflictions which pained me greatly; these were certain disagreements which seemed to be causing disturbance in our Congregation. We had obtained letters from the Bishop of Toul giving us permission to set up a new foundation, but placing us under the Rule of St. Benedict¹, which I thought was not suited to our vocation. I prayed very hard about it to Our Lord; I received the reply inwardly that the matter would not be settled thus, but in another way which would be according to my desire. I related this to the Reverend Father Lebrun. And by the grace of God it happened as I had been told.
57. I have forgotten to mention here that in the seventh or eighth year of our vocation I felt much impatience and lacked confidence that I would ever see our projects succeed as I had always hoped up to then; but there occurred many little upsets and disagreements, provoked as much by the devil as by our own lack of experience. I doubted whether I ought to persevere in my hope to finish my days in this vocation. And as our good Father Confessor knew all about it I told him once in great agitation that I wanted to ask God and Our Lady to make me know their will in this matter, since he would not make a decision. One day when I was more than usually agitated, a white phantom appeared before me; I made the sign of the Cross and it disappeared immediately and I was told inwardly that it was the wicked spirit who, under fine pretexts, was tempting me to distrust and impatience. At the same instant I felt my soul strengthened with new hope and encouraged to finish my days here.
58. When I was recalled from Verdun to return to Nancy I had great difficulty in bringing myself to obey because of a situation there which made me very afraid of temptation. Realizing that I had to go, I told Our Lord that he would have to protect me since I was going for love of him, with no intention of staying unless he granted me this grace. I spent two and a half years there² quite at peace on that score. But a week after our arrival at this monastery³ my temptations began again and lasted ten whole months with very little respite, as I told you, and I shudder to think of them even now.
59. On one occasion, being thus tempted until two or three o'clock in the morning, and having prayed very hard to Our Lady for a little respite I fell asleep. On awakening at the sound of the bell at four o'clock and opening my eyes, I saw Our Lady standing in the middle of the room; I could see quite clearly and I cried out to her, my dearest Mother and Mistress! I was very sorry afterwards, because she disappeared immediately, and in my soul I felt a new confidence in her, and I am sure that it is she who has obtained for me the peace I have felt since the feast of her Nativity. For I was in my room that day feeling very

¹ Pierre Fourier and Alix themselves always held to the Rule of St. Augustine.

² In the Cloître de Notre Dame.

³ The new monastery built in 1616 - 1617.

sad and afraid to make my profession: it seemed to me that if I renewed the vow of chastity which I had already made and that it would be a solemn vow, the sin would be even greater, and seeing myself in such a state of wretchedness, I dared not hope for sufficient grace from God not to offend him.

60. In the midst of this affliction I was suddenly taken out of myself and reproached for the little confidence I had and given assurance of God's grace. I found I was weeping gently, an unusual thing for me in any circumstance, unless it is like the present one which I presume to come from God to strengthen my weakness, and make me experience the marks of his great mercy. For these ecstasies, which usually dull all my senses, always leave my mind and will afire with the love of God and with a great desire that he may always do his holy will in me. I usually experience them in the midst of my greatest temptations, not at the actual moment my flesh rebels but after my soul has been much humiliated; and most often when I am meditating on the infinite merits of the holy life and Passion of my Saviour which I should so much like to keep continually before my mind.
61. The last time I was even more afflicted by these temptations was one evening when going into my room, in complete peace of mind, untroubled and unworried, I seemed to see a black phantom in a corner where I used to take the discipline. I was not sure whether to take it or not; but I decided to take it to get the better of my imagination. Suddenly I experienced such strong temptations that I no longer knew where I was; they went on all night.
62. I forgot to say why I took a vow to sleep alone as I said above. Then I was still living in my father's house, at the beginning of my vocation, and was lying in bed one night, fully dressed, with another girl; all of a sudden, as I was talking to her about matters to do with salvation, I was overcome so strongly by a diabolical stench, that I was forced to leave the bed; and yet the girl smelt nothing. And as long as the dress I had been wearing lasted, it retained some of the stench. It immediately came to my mind that Our Lord wanted me to go to bed alone. At once I made a vow to do so. I often experience this stench when some affliction is to come upon me; and so it sometimes precedes my great temptation.
63. I am wondering whether I should give two or three examples of acts of confidence I have performed, although I can attribute nothing in them to me except evil. I am somewhat mortified by having difficulty in telling of them, but I do so in order that your Reverence may be the judge of everything, and advise me of those matters which I must rectify to be more pleasing to God. In the first or second year of our vocation, when I was at Mattaincourt, one of our Sisters had a bad stomach illness caused by the austerities we were practising. Whenever she took any food she brought it up again with such violent pains that it was pitiful to see her. I felt moved to command her in the name of obedience not to do it any more not that it was my intention to force her to keep the food down but hoping that God would cure her by this virtue. And that was what happened: at that very hour she was completely cured of this infirmity.
64. Another time when I was at Verdun, we had laid in quite a good supply of corn for the year but weevils got into it in such great numbers that human

resources could avail nothing. I was suddenly inspired with devotion to the names of Jesus and Mary and also to that of their servant Ignatius in whose influence I put my trust. I told the servant to spread the corn out in layers and write these three names in it. This treatment caused all the insects to disappear so completely that we did not see another weevil throughout the whole year.

65. On one occasion at Nancy, before we were professed religious¹, I said, "If we are given any alms this week they must go to buy candles to light the chapel while we say the Divine Office". The Procuratrix raised objections to this because we were short of many things in the kitchen. I told her, "If Our Lord sends both, you will see how wrong you were." The same day we were sent a good sum of money as well as candles which lasted all the year. And this came from someone from whom we would never have expected it.
66. One Easter Sunday in broad daylight I was with a very devout person. We were conversing with some fervour and true sentiment about the Resurrection of Our Lord, when we both saw a lighted torch move round the room. We made the sign of the Cross, and if we had wished to credit the feelings this sight left us with, we would have said it was a sign of Our Lord's presence.
67. When I was in Paris with the Ursulines of the Faubourg Saint Jacques, in choir one day with the nuns, I felt a very strong desire to know what I could do most pleasing to Our Lord and I prayed to him about this. Rapt out of myself, I was told that I should examine all my actions both inwardly and outwardly to see if they were always done purely for the love of God.
68. Another time when I was at Nancy walking by myself and contemplating the absolute purity of union with Our Lord in the future life, I sighed deeply, longing for death. I was stopped short and told, "If I am with you here, is not that sufficient for you? Beware of self-love."
69. Two or three months before I took the habit here, I was begging Our Lord to efface my sins by his merits. I felt a great sorrow that I had not preserved purity of soul since my childhood. Being then taken out of myself, I seemed to be speaking with Our Lord at first about the sanctification of Saint John the Baptist and when I said to him, "Lord, you have given much greater graces to another of your creatures," he said, "Are you speaking of my beloved Mother? I tell you that it is in her too that I take my delight."
70. Some months ago when I was hearing Holy Mass in the choir with all the nuns, I earnestly prayed Our Lord to impress on my heart a continual remembrance of his passion and of the example of his holy life. He answered me, "Keep one eye always fixed on me and the other on your faults in order to correct them and you will attain to your desire."

I conclude, throwing myself at the feet of this same Saviour, imploring his mercy which I beg you also to obtain for me through his merits.

¹ Before the house acquired the status of a monastery in 1617.

In the original, the Reverend Father Jean Guéret, Rector of the Jesuit Noviciate, has written: Mère Alix Le Clerc of Remiremont, the first Religious of the Congregation of Our Lady, wrote the above in her own hand.

The Relation of Alix Le Clerc is given here in its entirety. It was necessary to modernise the spelling and punctuation, and simplify some turns of phrase so as to facilitate the reading of this seventeenth century text.

The work was done by Sr. Marie-Madeleine Cord'homme who died in 1987.

This edition of the Relation of Alix Le Clerc is intended for the sisters of the Congregation of Our Lady. It is taken for granted that they are familiar with the lives of Alix and Pierre Fourier and the history of the origins of the Congregation. The aim of this edition is a simple one: to help people realise that Alix lived in a period very different from our own and thus forestall misinterpretation. Many approaches are possible to a text of this kind. We have not wanted to give more importance to one than to another, but even at first contact the Relation, brief though it is, is recognisable as a great spiritual writing.

Sr. Paule Sagot (Paris, December 1990).

"In her "Clarification" of the Relation, Mère Angélique Milly paints us a portrait of Alix in her prime... "She was tall, upright, and well-proportioned, with an excellent figure and excellent bearing, her hair was quite fair, her complexion pale and delicate, her eyes blue, her nose rather long, and she had beautiful not overfull lips. She had a good mind and good judgement, was reserved and wise in speech, gentle and invariably even-tempered..."

From the very beginning of her Relation, when she makes clear her intention, Alix is at one with the opinion of her contemporaries, unknowingly revealing her personality: "I shall begin... to tell... everything I can remember out of the ordinary... as succinctly and truthfully as possible". The adverbs are indicative of her temperament, her desire to be honest with herself and with God. She will try to forget nothing, but limit herself to what is essential, without exaggerating the facts and without seeking a literary form of expression.

It is, then, an account which relies on memory, passing continually from the present to the past, and this is what gives it its actuality; it is the account of a life experience by someone living in a particular period: we shall not be able to judge of it by today's criteria. Lastly, it is an account intended for a definite person, her confessor: that gives Alix's words a very special depth of meaning, sometimes of the order of a confession. But, in this handing over of herself to another person, the simplicity of its inner rhythm is such that we shall often forget the presence of Jean Guéret. Alix Le Clerc is speaking first of all in the presence of God.

The general impression is one of spontaneity. Alix repeats herself sometimes, or comes back on something: "I forgot to say..." And yet, is there, all the same, a concern for composition?

When Alix consults her memory, she seems to do so in two different ways. In the first part of her account, dealing with the period before 1599, the events are in chronological order. After that they are grouped analogically: temptations, interior illuminations, dreams... They relate to each other through the meaning she gives them. In this case an internal coherence comes from her memories, and this inner dynamism gives strength and continuity to the whole. What we have is the itinerary of her desire.

"I WAS NINETEEN OR TWENTY WHEN I FOLLOWED THIS VOCATION"

Of the years before 1597, Alix narrates only what she thinks will be useful in throwing light on the rest of her account. She does not mention her family. It seems likely, contrary to what is said in other accounts of the time, that her parents left her a considerable amount of freedom. At nineteen she was not yet married, and her personal tastes were taken into account: "I had a strong aversion to being subject to a husband".

What education had she had? Doubtless, to learn "good manners" and the rudiments of education, she had attended the celebrated Abbey of the Canonesses for which Remiremont, a lively flourishing town, was renowned. There Alix found many "vain and youthful companions". Alix uses the word "vanity" seven times when speaking of this period of her life. Today it no longer has the meaning

it had then, metaphysical rather than moral, more akin to that of Ecclesiastes. It is often used in the plural - vanities, vain things - and signifies outward show, things of little worth, attractive and deceptive, ephemeral and delusive. The mystics see in it the emptiness of being. Pascal will use the word frequently when writing of the wretchedness of man.

"In the midst of these vanities I carried a heavy heart". With such classic conciseness does Alix evoke the period of "social life" at Remiremont. The only pointers she gives to "another life" at that time are, at certain moments, the fear of hell, maintained by the sermons of the day, and some devotion to Our Lady.

1597: the happenings on three Sundays

Alix goes to Mass in the church at Mattaincourt. A picture in sound, the noise of a drum, perhaps a mere distraction, impinges on her and obsesses her. She is caught up in something she loves, captivated in her vitality, in her body: the expression "with elation" at that time meant a physical vivacity. "As I loved dancing, the sound captivated me". On the third Sunday, the picture became a visual one: a devil - for the first time she gives him a name - is leading the band of dancers. She doesn't chase the picture away but faces it squarely. She considers it - that is to say assesses it - and decides to change her life. She passes from the imaginary to freedom, from illusion to reality.

She "seems to see" the demon and she acknowledges God. In this same intuition, the invisible world is revealed to her. Action follows immediately. "I laid aside all my fine clothes... and made a vow of chastity without asking anyone's advice". A total break, a passage from "appearances" to "a life of truth", the offering of her whole self: such meaningful acts, the taking of a vow, the change of clothes, are to be found in most accounts of conversion. The "without asking anyone's advice" is rarer; it is indicative of character.

1597... 1599

Alix Le Clerc is entering into a new world. She is leaving the world of vanities for the inner space of her desire, passing from religion to faith. From this time her life is indwelt by a Presence.

The word "desire" appears in the text and, with it, a whole emotional gamut: bitterness, anxiety, temptations. Pierre Fourier, whom she has gone to see for the first time, gives her a book to read, an "examination of conscience" (there are a great many of them after the Council of Trent). She undergoes the painful experience of scruples. Her style is less spontaneous. New words such as "to endure", "to be mortified", habitually found in the spiritual works she is beginning to read, are added to her own personal experience. Her psychology becomes deeper, more mature and more complicated. She moves now into the spirituality of her time. "I had a great longing for penances". This may be a feeling of guilt, a new and disquieting experience of her own body, the desire to imitate the saints, to share in the Passion of Christ whose Person she now discovers in her regular reading of the Gospel. All the religious monographs of the period mention bodily penances, and the inevitable excesses in this field.

At the same time, Alix undergoes an experience of inner illumination. Before her conversion, she does not seem to have had a very extensive knowledge of religion. Now she enters at once, from the depths of her heart, into the reality of Mystery. Dreams, words spoken interiorly, visions of the imagination and of the intellect, all these help her to make the difficult journey. It is at this moment that there occurs one of the most beautiful passages in the Relation. "Our Lady appeared to me, holding her little Son..." The mother of Jesus becomes for her a constant presence, light and comfort. Already, at Mattaincourt, Alix has interiorised the whole mystery of Salvation, the mystery of the communion of the Trinity and of the incarnation of the Son.

Finally it is during this period that Alix's conversion receives the seal of authenticity: the work to be accomplished and the mission received. Her desire to "please God" leads to the decision to "found a new house". What she is experiencing of the "out of the ordinary" is here authenticated and Pierre Fourier, for all his prudence, will recognise it as true.

In 1599 Alix is twenty-three years old. She has lived through the bitter discovery of the dark depths of her soul and the wonder of her first visits from God. She does not withdraw into her inner world. Her trust is already unwavering - "it seemed to me that everything was possible to God if he so willed" - and it increases her activity tenfold. The language she uses, at times charged with emotion, at others full of joy, with active verbs following one upon the other, are a reflection of this intensity of life.

Symbolic visions

During these decisive years, Alix has two symbolic visions of particular significance: that of a path, suggestive of a journey, and another of a struggle. This latter, described in paragraph 11, is closely linked to the incident of her conversion. Alix has just made a vow of chastity. In paragraph 10, she speaks for the first time of her body, offering it to God "to be ground to pieces". Immediately afterwards, she has the vision of the Angel fighting with the devil, something our present-day mentality is inclined to reject. St. George striking down the dragon, Michael vanquishing Lucifer were everyday images of the time, inspired by the Apocalypse.

But this outward setting is not what is essential. Here, experience takes the place of imagery... It is Alix's body itself which becomes the symbol, a language which cannot be expressed in words. In her body, weighed down one moment, light the next, she lives in all its intensity the struggle between flesh and spirit. Then she rediscovers the universal symbol of fire, fire which terrifies or burns up, gives light and purifies. Fire will play a great part in Alix's account. She speaks, it is true, of the "diabolical fires of the flesh" but also of her "will set on fire for love of God". She will have to pass through the fire, live through and "endure" this time of change. Finally, she understands what is happening: "I was told that this represented the state of perfection which consists in seeking God and loving him above all things". The expression "state of perfection", found so often in spiritual treatises of the time, is used here, for the only time, in the whole of the Relation. It disappears in face of the boundless impulse of her desire for God.

Through this symbolic vision, Alix lives out in her own person three essential constants of the human condition: time must be "endured", sexuality assumed, conflict undergone.

In the "time" of the Relation, from 1598 onward, we can distinguish certain "key-moments".

- 1599, Mattaincourt. Her father wants to take her by force to the Poor Clares. The conflict is with her father, and we can recognise the element of paternal authority which was uncontested at the time.
- 1600, Mattaincourt. Their work is threatened. Père Fleurant, a Recollect Father, wants to unite the new-born Congregation with the reformed Daughters of Saint Clare.
- 1605, Nancy. Great difficulties and "misunderstandings" in the Congregation. Alix is tempted to despair.
- 1609, Nancy. The temptation takes concrete form, in the episode of the "indiscreet" confessor.
- 1613, Verdun, Châlons. Alix is in the grip of her interior phantasms.

These situations of conflict are the result of tension, a break with the past opening out into a new future.

ONLY MY SPIRIT WAS FREE

In her most difficult moments, according to Angélique Milly, Alix Le Clerc would ask to have the Gospel of the Passion and the Book of Job read to her. The Relation is an account of trials in the biblical sense of the word.

The theme of the "spiritual combat" occurs regularly in the history of spirituality. Beginning with Scripture, and more especially St. Paul, it is taken up by the Desert Fathers, explained in more detail by Cassian, the Fathers of the Church and writers in the Middle Ages. It is central, too, to Book I of the Imitation of Christ. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries abound in books which are full of warlike terms describing the battle with the three enemies: Satan, the world and the flesh. This tradition is summed up in the famous meditation on the "two standards" in Ignatius of Loyola's Spiritual Exercises.

Formulated in different ways in different cultures, the reality of the spiritual adventure remains unambiguous, dramatic sometimes, and lived out in the depths of human consciousness when it accepts the challenge to live in truth before God. The more total the gift, the harder the struggle will be. Alix enters the lists, radically and with her eyes open: may Our Lord, she says in paragraph 51, "spare me nothing in the way of difficulties and afflictions, even though I tremble as I say this, for my untamed nature fears them dreadfully". She will undertake the battle in a cultural context very different from our own.

The Council of Trent has re-emphasised the value of sacramental practice

and given back to the sacrament of penance its full importance. In a Church with strong emphasis on the hierarchical aspect, the increased importance of the role of confessor and spiritual director can prove restricting; his authority comes into play more especially in the case of women. The anti-feminism still prevalent in the Church finds expression in the area of confession, since the female body is considered an occasion of sin. This explains the counsels of prudence given to confessors and the feelings of guilt experienced by women. The unease of a whole society becomes fixated on this point: in trials for witchcraft, more women than men are condemned. There is a multiplication of books on demonology between 1590 and 1630. Alix Le Clerc lived at the height of this troubled period. Elisabeth de Ranfaing, who had to undergo long sessions of exorcism at Nancy, was well known to her, a native of Remiremont like herself.

The Adversary

"Our Lord has granted me the grace not to fear the devil... I find nothing more difficult in this world nor more dangerous than the temptations and the rebellions of the flesh".

We are not too astonished at the frequent mention of demons - she never uses the name Satan - in the account of her struggle. Alix follows the "model" of her times, described in so many biographies of the period, in which the Adversary, the Evil One, the Seducer, plays a large part; it comes from the depths of a subconscious filled with the images found in iconography. We do not yet know what pictures she may have had before her eyes. Lorraine was open to the influence of Flemish and Rhenish art, and one thinks of Hieronymus Bosch and Grunewald, the famous "Temptations of St. Anthony", and a whole range of pictures which could serve as models - scenes of martyrdom, descriptions of hell, dances macabres - which were intensified by the eloquence of preachers and served to create a whole world of the imagination.

Alix's emotionalism, her poor health and excessive penances will, at times, constitute fertile soil for the attack of "evil spirits". At the same time she experiences the desires and drives of a normal woman for whom the vow of chastity represents a real renunciation.

Alix's encounters with the Adversary occur in different ways. When they are bodily attacks, she does not fear him; when they are associated with desires of the flesh, she is deeply distressed in mind; when they are insidious, trying to trap her through real life and events and people, then she has to recognise that it is he and thwart him.

When Alix speaks of the attacks of the "evil spirits", she does so with a certain detachment, without relating them to her inner turmoil. She is capable of describing them with precision, in their ugliness and their strangeness: like four black men, like hands, like a savage beast, with glittering eyes and vastly big legs, all accompanied by noises, and being dragged from side to side, and having her body attacked by iron hooks, and the air about her filled with the smell of sulphur. The "as if" signifies the "illusion" of a diabolical manifestation through sexual symbols. Alix faces it boldly and chases it away with a gesture or a word, the sign of the Cross or invocation of the name of Jesus.

She expresses herself differently when the attack becomes more subtle and affects even her mind. The words she uses are strong, sometimes weighed down by distress: "when I was completely exhausted and was about to fall into despair". Two series are, in this respect, significant. Alix has instinctively grouped together paragraphs 27 to 32 (Nancy between 1606 and 1610) and paragraphs 52 to 57 (Verdun at the time of the Châlons foundation in 1613.) Each series culminates in an event to which we can give a date: the episode of the "indiscreet" confessor at Nancy and the night in the hostelry on the road from Châlons. The form of the trials is different: in one, the temptation is a solid fact; in the other, Alix fights with her own imaginings. And yet there are analogies between the two accounts.

First, there is a difficult psychological context which makes Alix more vulnerable. There are warning signs beforehand: unpleasant smells, dreams, "illusions" such as the ball of fire rolling through the house, temptations. There are difficulties coming from the many new foundations in the form of financial worries, or from their surroundings as at Nancy when the Jesuits "entertained some doubts" about her spiritual state. At Verdun there are "misunderstandings" within the Congregation and these are serious since some of the sisters, one of them an early companion, seem to be moving away from the spirit of their origins. The journey to Châlons takes place in disastrous conditions, during the "terrible winter" of 1613.

What strikes one next is her solitude. At Nancy, at the time of the affair with the confessor ("one of the most trying snares the devil has ever set to afflict my soul") Alix is unable to tell anyone what she is feeling. "He often appeared in my imagination". Then her body speaks for her and she becomes ill, recognising clearly the psychosomatic nature of her illness. "I could not sleep and dared not do so because of so many bad dreams". There follows a period of depression and of temptations to suicide which will last for eight months.

"I was again tormented by my great temptations, temptations to sensuality and despair; they always come together to torment me the more". In these few words, Alix compresses a long period of suffering. In contrast with this, one remembers what she was at Remiremont before 1597: both sensitive and sensible and with little tendency to scruples. She loved her self-image and her body. It was when she realised the pleasure she took in dancing that her conversion took place. She decided then "to make a complete change in all her ways". This was a radical conversion which would affect her attitude to her body. She feels called to make a vow to sleep alone. In spite of varying opinions in the course of history, the Church has often had difficulty in admitting that the body can be pleasurable. Alix does not escape this pessimistic idea: "I was wearied of serving my body..."; "I was very glad that they (the evil spirits) should ill-treat my body, wreaking vengeance on it on my behalf". Like other spiritual people of her time, Alix enters a tradition of strict asceticism: to subdue the body and make it suffer so as to overcome "the diabolical flames of the flesh". The devil is present in the struggle. The body once brought under control, but at the same time violated, will both overcome the "illusions" and provoke them. Alix will experience all this.

"Sensuality and despair always go together..." Here she conveys, with her usual succinctness, the paradox of the human condition. She experiences at one and the same time the strength and the finiteness of her desire, the struggle

between the instinct to live and the instinct to die. No doubt her fear of sinning is present in this desire for death. But, at other times, her longing to die (twice she will hear Christ "reprimanding" her for this desire) will be the expression of a love which can no longer bear to live without seeing the face of God. In this she is at one with mystical experience.

Handing over to God

"A candle was brought into the room and that rid me of the illusion". The dim light in the Châlons hostelry is symbolic. Although physically worn out, Alix still has sound spiritual health. All the accounts of temptations end with an experience of light. They are presented in the same way: between the dream and the awakening there is firstly the flood of images, then the distress of mind, the reaction of her whole person and the recourse to God. "Only my spirit was free". Confessors are not always helpful; more often than not she has to clear her path through the darkness alone.

She is aware that the Adversary is coming (unpleasant smells), and confronts him, but not in a state of tension. The temptation is "turned back on itself" and made use of for the spiritual tasks of battle, humility, and the handing over to God and to his Mother. The battle brings with it a temporary loss of balance, the obsessive fear that she may give in; but she pulls herself up and comes to a halt in time. There is always a return to what characterises her most, her simplicity, her self-emptying, which are transparent in the robust and genuine style.

Alix makes a distinction between the visions which seduce and those which transform. We know that she profited from the teaching of Pierre Fourier and the Jesuits. With a sure spiritual instinct, she recognises Satan the seducer, "God's ape" as Bérulle calls him, because he mimics the Incarnation: God takes upon himself the human condition, Satan wants to seduce it in order to possess it for himself. Teresa of Avila exposes his tactics: "It is in the imagination that the devil plays his tricks and lays his traps." By analysing them, Alix foils these false "attractions" of the seducer which draw her to "consent to them through curiosity". From this point of view, a comparison of paragraphs 35 and 60 of the Relation is extremely instructive.

As she goes over her past life, Alix is always true to her resolution: to speak "succinctly" of anything that seems to her a "little out of the ordinary". So it is that, by saying things "as truthfully as possible", she calls up for us today essential polarities of human existence: woman and man, truth and falsehood, death and life. Thoroughly human, sensitive and straightforward, she lives out her difficult journey in the presence of God. For this reason she seems close to us and outside the cultural symbols of a particular period.

"I CALL OUT TO GOD"

At first sight, in the Relation, the hours of darkness seem more numerous than the hours of light. When the evil spirits and the temptations of the flesh are evoked, we are struck by the strength of expression and the violence of the sensory images. In the case of visitations from God, the style is gentle, moderate

and peaceful. This is doubtless because the good spirit and the bad spirit, as St. Ignatius explains, do not affect the psyche in the same way. The evil spirit assaults the more peripheral and more vulnerable areas of the emotions and the imagination. God works in the deep, still centre of the soul, in a way that is less easily perceived by the senses but remains constant. We speak of the "assaults" of the devil but the "touch" of the Spirit: it is easier to speak of the former, because they can be described, than of the latter which cannot be expressed in words and are creative and transforming.

Furthermore, Alix wants to be truthful and to hide nothing, especially those things which humiliate her. One must bear in mind the role of the director of conscience at that time and the importance given to confession: to hide one's sins "through shame" leads to damnation. She is writing at the express wish of Père Guéret who recognised an exceptional personality and doubtless needed her account to understand it better. It is noteworthy that Alix always preserves a happy medium in her wish to "tell everything" and that she never dwells on her experiences. There is a kind of detachment in the way she explores her dark areas as there is in the evocation of the hours of light, and this makes her very present to us; there is a transparency in the darkest hours and clarity of expression which outshines the style of her time. "I had a great interior light which overwhelmed me and I saw all my nothingness". In one sentence, she sums up all her spiritual life. Like the light of the candle at the Châlons hostelry, her humility, her truth, runs through everything. Her nights are never totally obscure, nor are her visitations of grace a blinding flash.

Nights of purification

"I very often feel no devotion but experience only aridity and darkness of understanding... I cry out from the depths of my emptiness and nothingness to the God of incomprehensible majesty and greatness." Alix had not read John of the Cross but, in this paragraph 34, she seems close to the experience of the "Dark Night".

Suffering in prayer conceals here an intense thirst for the living God. Can one not connect this experience of purification with the temptations against the faith described in paragraph 41? They are concerned with the Eucharist, the ceremonies of the Church, grace and freewill. In this attraction to the ideas of the Reformation, Alix is disturbed in the certainties of her faith. She returns in some way to the times before the Christian Revelation. "I had a terrible temptation to believe that the sun was God, and this worried me for four or five months". We have spoken of her passage through fire. The sun, the ball of fire, are doubtless associated with symbolic pictures; they are often found in the writings of the mystics.

Night calls forth day. The lighted torch that Alix saw "one Easter Sunday in broad daylight" is the sign for her of a living presence; "...we would have said it was a sign of Our Lord's presence." Here, the fire is a symbol of the Resurrection. Did not the disciples on the road to Emmaus ask each other: "Were not our hearts burning within us..."?

Spiritual senses

"My ears were blocked by vanity and my heart was plunged in darkness", wrote Alix, speaking of the years before her conversion. When she recognises God in her life, her vision widens, and her spiritual senses begin to grow and with these new senses she grasps invisible realities. Her experience of God unifies her faculties and increases her powers of perception and communication. This "spiritual sense" is allied to her physical body and keeps the same language of sight, hearing, touch and taste, but it allows her to see beyond the immediate reality; it develops her intuition and her creativity, unravels the meaning of signs, forewarns her of what is to come. One could perhaps recall here the prophetic dreams which Alix interprets with her usual reserve, relating them to her personal history and the history of her work. Such dreams, be it said, are frequent in the monographs of the period. But above all, and at even greater depth, her memory is transformed, and so too her will "afire with the love of God and with a great desire that he may always do his holy will in her".

Her spiritual senses grow in the measure of her desire for God. Alix's personality develops. The impression of emptiness which she had experienced formerly in "vanities" becomes the desire to "make herself nothing" in order to seek God. This harsh recognition of her poverty is always lived out in a love and trust which lead her "often to undertake things beyond her capabilities". The self-image to which she clung, ("I loved honour") finds a new centre in God and gives her the capacity to be creative and to face the unknown. Her deep loyalty leads to self-knowledge and a true humility - or simplicity as she also calls it. According to her contemporaries, this was her favourite virtue because it was through simplicity, she said, that "our intentions go straight to God".

Visitations from God

Sincere, sober of expression, with no self-satisfaction or soul-searching, that is how we see Alix when she speaks of her "visitations from God". She is never more attached to the experience than to God himself. There is a ring of truth which cannot be denied. Paragraph 60 is remarkable in this respect: "I was suddenly taken out of myself..."

She is gripped by the presence of her Lord who upbraids her for her lack of confidence. "I found I was weeping gently, an unusual thing for me". She makes it clear that, though these graces may come to her during a period of temptation, it is not "in" the temptation but "afterwards", when "her soul is much humiliated". In the light of a pure, untrammelled gaze, she "sees" God in paths which are sometimes disconcerting.

Alix does not analyse the causes of such visits, but she tells us of their effects, the "signs of God's great mercy": sweetness and fire and interior freedom. To make use of St. Teresa of Avila's comparison in the Fifth Mansion of the Interior Castle, "the chrysalis has produced the butterfly"... One can, indeed, compare what Alix says in this passage with those chapters in which St. Teresa speaks of the prayer of union. The language is obviously different, as are their personalities, but they both, each in her own way, try to describe their experience

of God.

In writing of these visitations from God, Alix sometimes says "That consoled me greatly". The word "joy" is not to be found in the Relation. She uses the word "consolation" which, in her time, did not have the purely emotional meaning it has today. It implied an interior movement which suddenly took hold of the whole person bringing peace to the depths of the soul, and quiet to a heart indwelt by a Presence.

At the beginning of her vocation, Alix experienced a time of light which would be a great support to her during many dark hours: "Our Lady appeared to me holding her little Son..." Alix has just made a vow of chastity: one could perhaps interpret as a projection of her unconscious, her desire for motherhood, that image of Mary giving her her child (in the first vision in a dream, at Remiremont, Mary was not holding her son). But the vision fades before the imperative "that I should work for his glory". Taking the place of the image vision comes an intellectual one, an intense light in the understanding. From the humanity of Christ, of which Mary is the sign, Alix passes into the mystery of life in the Trinity. At Manresa, in 1522, at the time of his Illumination at the River Cardoner Ignatius of Loyola had had that all-embracing intuition of the meaning of the mysteries of faith. These lines of the Relation have the stamp of the great mystical texts. They bear the marks of authenticity: the impossibility of conveying such an experience and the feeling of its finality. Alix comes out of it transformed, marked for ever by her "great pity for souls": "I would suffer and give my life over and over again..."

Paragraph 23 may well affect us in a special way. We are aware of Alix's closeness to us in the joy of a woman receiving a child into her arms, and from the arms of Mary, quite simply, as when two mothers meet each other. Then there is the joy, which surpasses all understanding, of the revelation of the living God. And, finally, there is Alix's joy as she accepts the charism of foundress together with the strength to undergo suffering and to hand over her whole life.

Interior words and dreams

"The life and passion of my Saviour which I should so much like to keep continually before my mind". Alix often mentions the conversion of her memory. We can detect the Ignatian influence here, but also a personal note: to convert her memory means for Alix to convert her imagination whose "illusions" she mistrusts. Above all, it means expressing an ever-growing love. Angélique Milly writes that "she had great devotion to the humanity of Christ". The stress laid on meeting Christ in the mystery of his childhood and of his passion is another characteristic of the spirituality of her time.

"I seemed to be speaking with Our Lord". Alix has read and re-read the Imitation of Christ. In the "Interior conversations of Jesus with the faithful soul", she discovers her own experience, her familiar conversations with her Lord, and the "words" which teach her in the depths of her heart. She writes of them always with great discretion: "an inner voice told me..." "I was told..." These words confirm her in her trust and set her free to act.

The work to be done is always present in Alix's inner experience: it is the criterion of her authenticity and indicative of spiritual health. It is through her personal history that God's work is born and continues to grow. The dreams, of which there are so many in the Relation, are waymarks both on Alix's inner path and on the early road of the Congregation. The dream pictures show her tenderness (a cradle, wisps of straw to be raked together) and her realism (houses to find or to build)... She works out their meanings and they are like a light which sustains her in her undertakings and difficulties.

Alix has had the very human experience of failure and overcome the temptation to discouragement. Her inner freedom is apparent in the way she tackles the obstacles coming from her family, the people about her, numerous ecclesiastics and even the Congregation itself. She describes them, in discreet language or in strong, but without bitterness. She listens to advice, "calls out to Our Lord" asking him to change what they say is His will in her regard, and then she acts. One does not have the feeling that she is really being "directed" by her confessors. She is guided by obedience and this is stronger than any "misunderstandings and arguments". In everything, her aim is to enter into God's desire.

From 1597 onwards, Alix finds in Pierre Fourier a spiritual director who is both firm and sure. Throughout those six months of daily confession (such a thing was not unthinkable at the time) Pierre Fourier's experience of God must have encountered that of Alix which was just beginning. They were both filled with the same great desire "to please God". Alix has an intuition of the "new house". Pierre Fourier conceives the apostolic project. He is everywhere present in the Relation, but after his own fashion. Aware of the unusual aspect of this "new vocation", he remains prudent, sometimes taking an active part, sometimes remaining silent. These silences are periods of waiting. He believes in the power of the Spirit; and when he sees clearly, he goes ahead, taking full account of the sisters' opinions, and boldly supporting the work as it begins.

Alix will remain obedient to Pierre Fourier but without ever abdicating her own responsibility; and she will continue to have confidence in him especially at the moment of her great trial in 1609 when, "overcome with apprehension", she leaves for Mattaincourt.

"AND YOU WILL ATTAIN TO YOUR DESIRE"

The Relation ends with these words which Alix hears with her inner ear. They conjure up a future and the end of a road.

The account began with the event of 1597. Very much later, five years before the time when she writes her Relation, Alix had lived through an experience which she describes from paragraph 25 onwards. As she thinks back on her progress in the light of her whole life, she places this visitation from God in the context of her initial conversion. "When I am with you, that must suffice", her Lord says to her. And so her great longings are modified, she finally accepts her own body and no longer wishes to die. There is a wholeness in her soul coming from "a peaceful and tranquil resignation to the will of God", and she has

an inward understanding that "God is to be loved for himself alone".

This, in brief, is the story of Alix's journey and of her desire.

The last sentence of paragraph 25 takes its place in the long tradition of Christian mysticism: "I am content, when it is his good pleasure to call me from this world, not to enjoy the glory of the blessed if such be his will, so long as I can hear him praised and blessed by them." This is not just a figure of speech. Such words can only be said from the core of a being which takes the new commandment to its logical conclusion: "The greatest love a person can have for his friends is to give his life for them." (John 15, 13)

In her Relation, Alix Le Clerc limits herself to "what is necessary for her purpose". We do not find here, at least not explicitly, the warp and woof of her daily life. But the Evreux manuscript does contain, in addition, a few spiritual texts "taken from a small exercise book written in her own hand". They are probably notes from her reading, joined to personal commentaries, in which one recognises Alix's discreet and sober style. The titles are these: "Concerning interior peace. Look for the centre of the soul, which is God, in his honour and glory. Prepare a dwelling for God in our soul. The virtue of humility." Alix's contemporaries have added to these a short title: "Our Mother's sentiments concerning the Congregation".

These pages reveal a very simple spirituality which authenticates the high points of her mystical experience. We shall be faithful to what Alix shows us of herself in the account of her hours of darkness and of light if we end with a sentence from her "little notebook" which takes its inspiration from Scripture: "If there is anything good in this world, then it is the man of peace who possesses it, for the Kingdom of God is joy and peace in the Holy Spirit".

SOME NOTES CONCERNING THE RELATION

The Evreux manuscript

This is a thick quarto notebook of 126 pages and is kept in the Evreux municipal library, shelf mark 9. It consists of documents collected after Alix's death, with a view to writing her biography. Mère Angélique Milly is the author of part of the collection and she seems to have taken scrupulous care over the transcription of the original texts. The certificate of authenticity is dated 2nd February 1658.

The Evreux manuscript is, then, the only authentic collection we know of to date. It contains the "Relation" written by Alix Le Clerc, the Clarification of the Relation by Angélique Milly, some spiritual writings of Alix Le Clerc "taken from a small exercise book written in her own hand", and a few Memoirs of "our Mother's chief undertakings".

It was published at Nancy, in 1666, with the title "The Life of the Venerable Alix Le Clerc, foundress and first Mother and Religious of the Order of the Congregation of Our Lady", but the original text was modified by the editor. This 1666 Life was re-issued by A. Gandelet, with other modifications (Brussels, 1882). Several extracts were taken from it and produced, for the use of the sisters of the Congregation, in three duplicated pamphlets (Paris, 1957). The "Spiritual Writings of Alix Le Clerc" were published separately in 1968.

The existence of the Evreux manuscript came to light by chance in about 1942. How did this manuscript make its way to the Evreux library? Probably during the French Revolution. Soeur Hélène Derréal (in "Blessed Alix Le Clerc and her writings", Nancy, 1947) gives the following explanation: in 1639, the nuns from Nancy went to found a monastery at Vernon, in Normandy. It is quite possible that Mère Angélique Milly, who was then superior at Nancy, gave them this copy in memory of Mère Alix Le Clerc.

MÈRE ANGÉLIQUE MILLY

Martine Milly was born in 1598 and was first a pupil and then a novice at the Verdun house opened in 1608. She accompanied Alix Le Clerc on the journey to found Châlons in 1613, and in 1615 went with her to Paris to the Ursulines in the Faubourg Saint Jacques. She succeeded her as superior at Nancy on 19th December 1621, and kept this charge until her death in 1660. At the request of the Bishop of Laon, Mère Angélique Milly sent sisters from Nancy to found convents in France: at Saint-Amand, Vernon and Montfort-l'Amaury in 1639, and at Chateaudun in 1643.

Spiritual journals

The spiritual journal is not a literary genre. "Mysticism is not a speciality of writers. But it makes writers of those who are driven by it to tell of their experiences" (J. Beaudé, "La mystique", Paris, 1990). What it entails is the "telling of" a spiritual adventure. The writing is spontaneous, guided only by a desire for truth in this exploration of the past. An example is St. Augustine in

Book X of the "Confessions".

Mention may be made of some "Relations" in the sixteenth and the first part of the seventeenth centuries: Ignatius Loyola's, Teresa of Avila's Life by herself, two "Relations" of Marie de l'Incarnation, an Ursuline of Tours, and the Memoirs of J. J. Olier. Lesser known perhaps are the "Relations" of Claudine Moine (known as the "mystical seamstress") and of Catherine de St. Augustin of the Hotel-Dieu in Quebec...

What books did Alix Le Clerc read?

On the subject of her temptations against the faith, Alix writes in paragraph 41: "I have since learnt, through sermons and by reading spiritual books, how to resist them". We know what books Pierre Fourier recommended to the religious of the Congregation: ... "some specific short treatise, and Scriptures and especially the Psalms, or from that golden book, the Imitation of Christ, or from the learned writings of the great St. Augustine or from other Fathers of the Church." The outlines for "retreats" drawn up by Pierre Fourier are those of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, adapted to the spirit of the Congregation. The "Journalier" which may have been written by Pierre Fourier and in any case takes its inspiration from him, insists on spiritual reading. The religious of Our Lady must do this "every day without fail... with great joy and gladness of heart, and with an inner longing to learn the will of God". (1649 edition)

The Imitation of Christ has been universally read in the West for centuries (the first manuscript dates from 1414), and it nourished Alix Le Clerc's meditation. You find echoes of it in the Evreux manuscript of the "Spiritual Writings". The prayer "Octroie-moi, Seigneur" is clearly inspired by Chapter 13 of the Fourth Book.

Did Alix read the works of Teresa of Avila? It is not impossible since the first French translation appeared in 1601. She would have known it from her stay with the Ursulines in Paris, in 1617. We know that she took the name of "Teresa of Jesus", in 1617, as her name in religion.

Paragraph 5 "My father went, with all his family, to live in the village where he had been born".

What do we know of Alix's parents?

Very little about the family on her mother's side. Women's names were not always mentioned on official documents. On her father's side we have considerable data, patiently pieced together by Pierre de Gonneville. At the present stage of research, we know that Demenge Le Clerc le Viel, of Hymont, had six children: Jean, Didier, François, Demenge the younger, Catherine and Nicolas. Jean had two daughters, Alix and Philippe, and one son, Jacques.

Jean Le Clerc was a merchant. At Remiremont he was, in turn, magistrate, then alderman in 1587 (i.e. town tax-collector and president of the court) and finally Mayor in 1591. (The Mayor was chosen by the Abbess of the Chapter of Canonesses.) He came to live at Hymont in 1595 and died there about 1602.

Alix's mother died at Mattaincourt in 1609.

Paragraph 15 "...three girls came to me, one after another..."

They were: Gante (or Ganthe) André (1578? - 1648), Isabel de Louvroir (1581 - 1628), her sister Jeanne de Louvroir (1579? - 1635), all three from Mattaincourt. Shortly afterwards they were joined by Claude Chauvenel (1579 - 1633) from Mirecourt.

Paragraph 16 "My companions and I went there." (to Poussay)

It is here that the first Retreat takes place, called the Retreat of the "ballots". In the "Summary of the aims of the Daughters of the Congregation of the Blessed Virgin Mary," (1610) we find the words: "They withdrew to the village of Poussay... And there, on the feast of Corpus Christi and during the octave... they discussed first of all whether they should marry or not marry; then, if they were not to marry, whether they should live at home or in some secluded place; whether they should live alone or in community, and, if they became nuns, should this be in an existing Order or in a new one. And after all these points had been considered, and a day given to each one... and they had been gone over again, and weighed up and recommended to God... they expressed their unanimous agreement on pieces of paper on which every evening, each one wrote her decision in secret, without knowing what the others wrote and without having conferred together... As a result, the provisional Rule was drawn up in writing."

Paragraph 17 "Your Reverend Fathers at Pont-à-Mousson were informed of all that we were doing and gave their advice."

Because of their number and their renown in Lorraine at that time, the Jesuits were closely involved, often very effectively, in the history of the origins of the Congregation of Our Lady. In paragraph 46, Alix mentions one occasion on which they were the cause of difficulty, when they agreed with the opinions of Fr Fleurant, the Recollect from Verdun. Pierre Fourier's attitude can sometimes seem disconcerting, as in paragraph 22 which has a similar context, right at the beginning of the Congregation. Here, moreover, he has no wish to oppose the Jesuits. But his prudence allowed of a happy conclusion to the affair: he asked the sisters to send him, after mature reflection, their written opinions, and these he sent to Fr Fleurant without comment. (cf. Sr. H. Derréal, "A missionary of the Counter Reformation", p. 171) One can compare with this episode Alix's account of her dream in paragraph 47: her "holy Father Ignatius" himself fortifies her confidence by encouraging her to educate girls.

The Fr Fourier, mentioned in paragraph 17, was the Jesuit Jean Fourier (1559 - 1632), Pierre Fourier's cousin. He was Rector of the University of Pont-à-Mousson when Pierre Fourier studied Theology there. He was later at Avignon and then at Chambery where he became the friend and counsellor of François de Sales, "strongly urging" the latter to publish the "Introduction to the Devout Life" (1608).

CONCERNING THE IDEA OF "THE MENTAL IMAGERY" AT THAT TIME

"It is at the beginning of Modern Times... that hell, its inhabitants and its "henchmen", most strongly capture the imagination of men of the West" (J. Delumeau, *Fear in the West*, 1978). New perspectives, still to be explored, open up at the time; the laws of nature are beginning to be recognised, but they are not yet subject to control. The feeling of insecurity finds expression in a fear of the devil who finds favourable ground in this setting of a whole universe of "sorcery". The "imaginary" is marked, besides, by the excesses of certain forms of preaching, by the element of fantasy in the popular theatre (devilish machinations are still much appreciated) and by paintings such as the tormented engravings of Jacques Callot in Lorraine. To ward off fear, you have to find "Scapegoats". What you know, you can master... Satan will be fought through his agents such as wizards and sorcerers who are often accused of having made a pact with the devil. In the first place, the courts pursue those who have taken part in "witches' sabbaths" but, within a group which is already vulnerable, an unusual and apparently inexplicable fact is sufficient to arouse suspicion and bring about the condemnation of the innocent.

Between 1576 and 1591 there is, in Lorraine, a great wave of trials for sorcery. Nicolas Remy, the county magistrate in Nancy, himself alone, sent 900 sorcerers and sorceresses to the stake; and he continued to do so, as Public Prosecutor, from 1591 to 1620. Out of ten lawsuits, nine were concerned with women (cf. R. Taveneaux, *Histoire de Nancy*, 1978). The period sees a multiplication of books on "demonology". The medical manuals attribute a demoniacal origin to all the illnesses they cannot explain. In 1599 Bérulle publishes his treatise on "energumeni", that is to say the "possessed". Whereas sorcerers are considered to be the guilty ones, the possessed are victims to be delivered by numerous exorcisms.

Elisabeth de Ranfaing (1592 - 1649), during the time of her visits to Nancy from 1619 onwards, often came to see Alix Le Clerc at the monastery near the Porte St. George, presumably to be comforted by her. She was called the "energumen" of Nancy and for six years she had to undergo sessions of exorcism, to which the public flocked in great numbers from France, Germany and England. The Jesuit Jean Guéret was one of the exorcists. Pierre Fourier, against his will, assisted at one of these sessions. His biographer, Bedel, relates the incident. When she was, at last, free of her ordeal, Elisabeth de Ranfaing founded the "House of Refuge".

Vanities

A whole cultural aspect of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is conjured up by this word. "The change in direction of a culture shows itself in a literature of illusion" (M. de Certeau, 1966). *Astrée*, that "precieux" novel, written between 1607 and 1627, is a good example. That sensitivity towards everything which is an empty and transient facade assumes, too, the language of painting. The pictorial genre known as "vanity" was very much in vogue in seventeenth century Europe. It takes the form of still lifes", a kind of code symbolising the words of Ecclesiastes: "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity". A wilting flower, the

smoke from a guttering candle, objects such as hour glasses, mirrors, jewels, masks, books, trophies... all these things bring to mind the transience of pleasure, power and learning. The symbol of the "skull" is to be seen on most of the canvases. It brings man back, beyond appearances, to reality. This meditation on human destiny is not fundamentally pessimistic. The skull at the foot of the crucifix recalls the victory over death of Christ, the new Adam. It is a sign of redemption and of hope in the resurrection. In this form of art, the spirituality and culture of a whole period come together.

CLARIFICATION OF SOME EXPRESSIONS

In the Bible, "flesh" describes the whole of man in his frailty as a human creature. In St. Paul (Romans 7 - 8) this vulnerability is represented as sinful weakness. From this comes the opposition between the spiritual and the carnal man, and the necessity of inner conflict between flesh and spirit, the flesh in this case being whatever in man opposes grace. Pauline thinking is taken up by St. Augustine and is often found in spiritual writers. In a narrower sense, fairly widespread in the seventeenth century, the flesh is taken to mean "sensual pleasure". This can lead to a disparagement of the body and an excessive insistence, sometimes, on external mortification. In this matter, François de Sales restores a sense of balance, as he so often does. "To cure our vices, it is obviously necessary to mortify the flesh, but what is of primary importance is to purify our affections and refresh our hearts". (Introduction to the Devout Life, part 3, chapter 23).

Originating in Scripture, the history of spirituality has been characterised, since Origen, by the doctrine of the "spiritual senses". St. Augustine (Confessions X; Sermons 159) and authors in the Middle Ages (notably St. Bonaventure) have spoken of this conversion of "feelings" in their experience of God. Later, we have Ignatius of Loyola saying: "The soul is not satisfied and nourished by knowledge but by a feeling and taste for interior things." (Spiritual Exercises 2).

The expressions "good spirit and bad spirit" are those of Ignatius of Loyola. "There are three kinds of thoughts which come to a man: one takes its rise from a man's own impulses, the two others come from without, that is to say at the suggestion of the good or bad spirit." (Spiritual Exercises 32. It is to be noted that "thoughts" do not mean abstract ideas.) This use of the word spirit is traditional in spiritual literature: "It evokes both the complicity of man with the attraction of good or evil which he experiences within himself, and at the same time his non-identification with powers from which he can free himself". (J. Cl. Guy, commentary on the Spiritual Exercises). The good spirit gives strength, courage and joy; the bad spirit brings division and anxiety, sadness and turmoil. In this distinction, there is neither dualism between a spirit of Good and a spirit of Evil, nor is there an illusion to dark powers. It refers here to the different forces present in the "spiritual combat".

Teresa of Avila distinguishes imaginary "visions" from intellectual ones. Using the terminology of the time, she calls imaginary those which are made up of images. But she specifies, (here we are indebted to J. Delumeau in "Le Catholicisme entre Luther et Voltaire", Paris, 1985) that they are presented to the

eyes of the soul and not of the body. So too, when he was hearing Mass one day, St. Ignatius saw "with his inner eye", at the moment of the elevation, white rays coming down from heaven. However, for the mystics of the time, of greater import than the visions "of the imagination" even when they are presented to the eyes of the soul, are the "intellectual" visions, not seen with eyes, which endure far longer and, in a mysterious way, show forth the divine presence. The soul feels Jesus close to her, "seeing him neither with the eyes of the body nor the eyes of the soul" (Interior Castle, Sixth Mansion), yet divining God's nearness, comforting and transforming her. This certitude of the presence of the Other, away and beyond any image, constitutes the essential of mystical experience. Writing at the beginning of the seventeenth century, St. François de Sales will say, "What need is there to represent by an external or internal image, the one whose presence one delights in?" (Treatise on the Love of God, VI, 9)

Alix Le Clerc's Relation: various dates

1576 *2nd February: birth of Alix at Remiremont.*

1595 *Departure for Hymont with her family.*

1597 *Alix decides to change her way of life and meets Pierre Fourier, (he suggests St. Clare at Pont-à-Mousson). Idea of the "new religious house". Alix is joined by three companions.*

June: Pierre Fourier comes as Parish Priest to Mattaincourt.

Christmas: they commit themselves publicly in the church at Mattaincourt.

1598 *Alix's parents send her to Ormes, to the Hospitaller Sisters of St. Elizabeth, under the Rule of St. Francis.*

Night of 19th/20th January: Pierre Fourier is confirmed in the project of a new congregation for the education of girls.

May: Alix and her companions arrive at Poussay. Retreat of the "ballots". July, opening of the first school.

September at Liverdun, Pierre Fourier gives the Provisional Rule to Monseigneur de la Vallée and receives verbal approval.

1599 *July: they leave Poussay for Mattaincourt. Alix's father wants to take her to St. Clare at Verdun. The Recollect Fr Fleurant wishes Alix and her companions to enter the reformed Poor Clares at Verdun.*

1601 *They return to Poussay.*

1602 *Foundation of St-Mihiel.*

1603	<i>Foundation of Nancy (Ville Neuve).</i>	8th December: Letter of Approbation for the Congregation from the Cardinal of Lorraine (son of the reigning Charles III), Papal Legate.
1604	<i>Foundation of Pont-à-Mousson.</i>	
1605	<i>Alix returns to Nancy.</i>	
1606	<i>Purchase of the Cloître de Notre-Dame in the Old Town.</i>	Pierre Fourier goes to see Monseigneur de Maillane, the new Bishop of Toul.
1609	<i>Mid-February: Alix leaves to seek out Pierre Fourier at Mattaincourt.</i>	Pierre Fourier works with Alix in drawing up the Constitutions.
1610	<i>Alix at Pont-à-Mousson.</i>	
1611		A. de Lenoncourt, Primate of Lorraine, approves the "Summary of Aims".
1612	<i>Alix at Verdun.</i>	
1613	<i>December: foundation of Châlons. Difficult return journey.</i>	October: the Bishop of Toul establishes the Congregation under the Rule of St. Benedict. The sisters meet at Nancy with Pierre Fourier.
1615	<i>In Paris at the Faubourg St Jacques. Suggestion to unite the Congregation with the Ursulines. Alix meets Pierre de Bérulle. May: return to Verdun and departure for Nancy.</i>	1st February: first Bull of Approbation signed by Pope Paul V (but only for Nancy and with no mention of the education of day pupils).
1616	<i>Monastery built at Nancy in the New Town.</i>	Lengthy stay of Pierre Fourier at Nancy to draw up the Constitutions. Second Bull of Paul V signed on 6th October. (Permission to teach day pupils is granted as a special favour. Only Nancy is mentioned in the Bull.)

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- 1617 *Canonical erection of the Nancy monastery.*
21st November: first official Clothing and beginning of enclosure. 9th March: approbation of the Constitutions by the Bishop of Toul.
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- 1618 *2nd December: first professions in the monastery at Nancy.*
9th December: canonical election of Alix as Superior of Nancy.
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- 1620 *Alix at St-Nicolas-de-Port.*
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- 1621 *19th December: Angélique Milly is elected Superior of Nancy.*
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- 1622 *9th January at 9 o'clock in the morning, death of Alix Le Clerc at Nancy.*
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There were then 13 houses of the Congregation:

Mattaincourt (1599), Saint-Mihiel (1602), Nancy (1603), Pont-à-Mousson (1604), Saint-Nicolas-de-Port (1605), Verdun (1608), Châlons (1613), Bar-le-Duc (1618), Mirecourt (1619), Epinal (1620), La Mothe, Dieuze and Soissons (1621).

At the time of Pierre Fourier's death (1640) there were 49 houses.

The preparation of these texts has been greatly helped by the suggestions and advice of sisters of the Congregation and of experts, and to them I express my gratitude.

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