

CONGREGATION OF OUR LADY

The Spirituality of

Peter Fourier

and

Alix Le Clerc

Paule Sagot

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INTRODUCTION

All through the history of the Church, the saints have been our travelling companions. Benedict, Francis, Dominic, Teresa of Avila, Francis de Sales, Thérèse of Lisieux, Charles de Foucauld ... each in his or her own day heard the call of the Spirit. Their response was whole-hearted, leading to action, to something that lasted. Down through the ages, they remind us that the Gospel is always new. By their very lives they lead us to the Word of God, and demonstrate what love of God and neighbour can be when lived out with total dedication.

Every spiritual leader belongs to a certain time in history. He has his own culture, his own psychology and language. To become familiar with him (or her), we need to stretch our minds so as to enter a world that differs from ours, but above all we need to open our hearts.

Peter Fourier and Alix Le Clerc lived at a turning point in European history. During the 16th century there was an extraordinary cultural renewal. The invention of printing in the previous century led to wide diffusion of classical works and the Bible, which had until then been the preserve of clerics. The influence of the "humanists" transformed people's mentality. Distant exploration led to the invention of new instruments of scientific research. Galileo was an exact contemporary of Peter Fourier. The universe was expanding, our perception of the world was changing, and man himself was seen in a new light. It was a time of great contrasts because, in the midst of this Renaissance, the old scourges of the Middle Ages - war, plague and famine - still survived, especially in country districts.

The Church was passing through one of the major crises of her history. She had been shaken to the core by the Protestant Reformation. The Council of Trent ended in 1563, two years before Peter Fourier was born, and it summoned the Church to undertake external reform and a renewal of missionary zeal. But saints as well as councils are means of renewal. To begin with, in the 16th century, there were the great Spanish mystics: Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross and Ignatius Loyola. Then, further north, Francis de Sales, Bérulle, Vincent de Paul. Peter Fourier and Alix Le Clerc, their contemporaries, witnessed these troubled times and were open to the challenges of a changing world. They are less well known, chiefly for historical reasons: the Duchy of Lorraine was then independent, not part of the Kingdom of France. But they certainly have their place in this first part of the 17th century which has been called "the age of saints."

Peter Fourier was born in 1565 at Mirecourt in Lorraine. His father was a cloth merchant, his forbears country people, and he himself was both a realist and open to new ideas. He studied at the Jesuit college, then at the University of Pont-à-Mousson, and joined the Canons Regular at Chaumousey in 1585. Having been ordained at Trier in 1589, he became parish priest at Mattaincourt in 1597 and in that same year he and Alix Le Clerc founded the Congregation of Our Lady, to run free schools for girls. In 1622, at the request of the Bishop of Toul, he undertook the reform of the Canons of his own Order. His reputation for holiness and as a reliable counsellor spread throughout Lorraine and he had considerable influence with the ducal family. When war broke out with France, he staunchly defended Lorraine's independence. Pursued by Richelieu's minions, he had to flee to Franche Comté where he died at Gray in 1640.

Within this bare biographical outline, there existed an intensely active life. Read Peter Fourier's day-to-day correspondence, 1598 - 1640, and you discover him as pastor and apostle of charity, unrivalled educator, founder and reformer of two Congregations, and over and above all that, as company manager, lawyer, negotiator, diplomatist and subtle politician. His was an amazingly crowded life. As the mainspring of all this activity, he had his own way of going to God, his own brand of what is called "spirituality."

How do we come to know his spirituality? He wrote no theological treatise for wide circulation. But he did compose Constitutions and short reflections on religious life. At the time of his canonisation in 1897, all his writings were collected in three large volumes known as "Opuscles," which included talks, sermon and meditation notes and various "considerations." Further, Peter Fourier was a prolific letter-writer and some 2000 letters have come down to us in which his personality - his holiness and his ordinary humanity - are spontaneously revealed.

In these letters we meet the everyday Fourier. He used to say *that the house should be seen to glow with poverty, but that the library, sacristy and infirmary could not be too handsomely equipped.* His writings, as well as the testimony of contemporaries, reveal his vast culture, his open-mindedness, his quick, unfailing compassion. Those long years of study at Pont-à-Mousson fashioned within him a humanist and an apostle, helped by his open, realistic, very sociable temperament. The major events in a time of upheaval, the daily happenings of village or community life, always found him keenly aware and concerned by whatever was going on. You can see him as easily guiding the hand of a child at his first letters, as publicly rebuking, before the whole ducal court, a youthful Cardinal of Lorraine careless of applying the decrees of the Council of Trent.

It is always a concrete situation that gives rise to his wise advice on life and often, unconsciously, he lets you glimpse the profound experience of one of God's familiar friends.

Go straight ahead, steadily, gently, affably.

Serve God with merry and joyful heart.

How good it is to trust God.

Peter Fourier never founded any "school of spirituality." But he has a certain tone peculiar to himself, a way of living out his relationship with God and with others, which gives coherence to his spirituality. He can be a good travelling companion on the path of daily life.

Fundamental longing for God

When talking one day with the Sisters at Epinal, Peter Fourier was asked by one of them: "How do you know whether you really love God?" His answer: *We know we love God by our desire to love him.*

A young man was seeking admission to the Canons of Our Saviour. Fourier asked:

Did he long from the depth of his being to follow the way of humility and of the Cross of Jesus Christ?

He hoped he would continue steadfast, eager and alive to others, ever ready to run ahead, and afire with zeal to win souls for God.

And he added that if, through human frailty and infirmity, such burning desire were still beyond him, did he at least long to possess it?

Op. CNS, I, 118

"Desire," said St Augustine, "is in the depths of our hearts. Show me a lover and he will understand what I am saying. Show me someone who longs for something, someone hungry, someone wandering in this wilderness, thirsting and longing for the fountains of his eternal home, show me such a one and he will know what I mean."

(Homily on St John's Gospel 26,4)

Some sisters of the Congregation of Our Lady were preparing to make a retreat. Peter Fourier invites them first of all to make room for this longing for God *by chasing from their hearts all the din and racket that lodges there, and by duly preparing themselves in body as in mind.* Fully aware of our psychic unity, he knows the limits of human nature, expects one to be clear-sighted about self, and analyses emotional and relationship problems. Each piece of advice carries a shrewd comment revealing his spiritual realism.

No headache or bodily infirmity which might hinder her severely, ... no extraordinary afflictions habitually befalling her, except through her own fault, ... no responsibilities or matters of such importance that no one else can deal with them ... Let her mind be at rest, as far as possible ... and let her not harbour any envy, scorn or aversion for another, without at least being distressed by such feelings and trying to overcome them ...

Op. CND, 2

As regards the purpose of this retreat time, Fourier goes straight to the point:

To awaken or increase a tremendous longing, a hunger and thirst, a steady, constant, insatiable craving to please God in all things, great and small, and to plant this firmly in the depth of one's heart.

Op. CND, 10

This sentence deserves attention: it sums up the whole approach of a life indwelt by the longing for God. In Fourier's time, the word "heart" stood for courage, will-power, the inner core of a person which was the source of free actions.

Hence conversion of heart meant a transforming of one's fundamental desire. Peter Fourier expressed this in his own robust and colourful style. His basic thought relies on verbs, and is then sharpened and broadened by his use of adjectives: powerful, sturdy, constant, insatiable ...

His words speak of intense life, but also of that patience which knows how to wait and gives one a realistic approach to daily living in this world. Desire for God springs up, takes root and, day by day, fuels the will to live. Desire trusts in God, as in a rock, and bears fruit in the theological virtue of hope.

The whole of existence "in all things great and small" is quickened by this desire in which God is both source and goal. Human desire converges with God's desire which precedes and attracts it, forming a personal relationship, a relationship of love. *God thirsts for our thirst* wrote Peter Fourier, echoing the words of Psalm 118: "Your law is my delight." He often speaks of spiritual delight: the longing to please God, he says, makes the soul happy. In his day, delight (*allégresse*) had overtones of vivacity, even physical sprightliness. Peter Fourier is partial to verbs of action: the young Canon is called to *run ahead, eager and alive to others*. The opposite of this lively course is routine, heavy-going habit. Lethargy takes over and one sinks by the wayside. In his vivid style, Peter Fourier then speaks of venial sin:

It makes the soul sluggish and slack, weighs it down, slows its steps so that even walking is almost impossible, as if the feet were bewitched.

... the soul succumbs, is chilled, loses all its vigour, loses its way little by little through negligence, like those great buildings that fall into ruin because of leaking gutters which gradually cause walls to decay.

Op. CND, 71

The young Canon Regular is to be "sensitive to others". This term had a wider meaning in those days: it concerned the role of affectivity in the spiritual life. Peter Fourier recommended meditation on Chapter 7 of the Book of Wisdom, which he calls Sapience, closer to its original meaning. "Sapio, sapere" was to savour, to have a taste for, an understanding that was enjoyed and felt. Reason and feeling were both enlisted in the quest for God. This "mighty great appetite" and "burning desire" called for reflection and discernment.

When we attune ourselves to the desire for God, our sensibility is transformed, our interior vision focuses on the unseen. We seem to have new senses linked to our bodily ones whose language they use: seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting, touching. All spiritual writers from Origen and Augustine to Ignatius of Loyola and Francis de Sales spoke of "spiritual senses" in the experience of the things of God.

The liturgy of Pentecost prays for this transformation in the *Veni Sancte Spiritus*, and in his Preface to the Constitutions of the Congregation of Our Lady, using the rhythmic style of the psalmist, Peter Fourier voices the heartfelt joy of the soul that finds its wholeness in the desire for God.

*Listen, daughter of Our Lady,
listen to the voice of your God
his only Son,
who speaks to you as a friend ...
Listen, blest daughter of the Virgin Mary,
you who long with all your heart
to serve and glorify,
to bless and honour for ever
your Creator and Lord,
after the example of your most worthy Mother,
you who seek to root all the joys,
desires and delights of your soul
in God your Saviour ...*

Peter Fourier, familiar friend of God

Peter Fourier wrote no spiritual diary and did not describe his personal experience of intimacy with God. But from time to time an exclamation slipped out:

*Is there any greater happiness than to have Jesus Christ dwelling in one's heart?
See how tender the Lord is, how marvellous and lavish, truly and intimately present
within us.*

This presence of God in the soul, sometimes keenly and joyfully relished, often hidden in silence and darkness, is a fundamental experience for those who seek God. The deeper the soul's longing, the more inaccessible does God seem to be. At the same time, intuition tells you that if God is God, he must be near. His presence fills the universe, yet he dwells too in the depths of the human heart. One of Peter Fourier's meditations highlights this mystery of the living God in his otherness and his nearness:

Consider how God's essence is measureless, boundless in extent.

*... infinite light, infinite wisdom, infinite beauty, infinite gentleness, infinite joy,
infinite riches, infinite glory and majesty, infinite purity, infinite love, infinite holiness
... all this is in God as in a boundless sea of goodness, from which all things derive
whatever is good in themselves.*

*O Lord my God, O supremely simple Being, in you all things are to be found in
eminent perfection. Great you are yet measureless, of goodness unalloyed, infinite
beyond telling, of beauty not fashioned, timelessly eternal, immense beyond bounds.
You are everywhere present without dimension or extension, perfect in your oneness.
Strip my heart, O Lord, of the vanity of self-love and self-esteem.*

*O my soul, would you seek anything outside this divine essence? What do you long
for? What do you desire? What are you seeking? Enter into the heart of your God ...*

Op. CND, 135

Notice the momentum in this passage, flowing from reflection on God to experience of God, possibly hinting at a path of conversion. God, "an infinite sea." Our understanding drowns in this limitless ocean. And then comes the intimate personal touch of the last sentences.

Peter Fourier on Prayer

Although Peter Fourier wrote no systematic treatise on prayer, it is not difficult to gather together his comments on this subject as his writings are full of them.

ADVICE ON PRIVATE PRAYER

In his meditation plans, he adopts the Ignatian framework of preludes, points and colloquy. But, within this framework, the tone is unmistakably his own, and his advice reflects the soundness of his doctrine and his awareness of human nature.

Personal prayer is a talking with God, and an open-ended dialogue. The soul speaks to God as friend to friend. It is a true conversation, both in word and in silence, listening and watching, a matter of presence rather than speech. You come to prayer with fervour and trust, freely and just as you are, poor yet rich with a great desire:

They will try to become familiar with it (mental prayer) and hold it dear, with neither anxiety nor apathy.

In their colloquies with Our Lord, let them treat with him according to the diverse impulses of their heart.

Let this converse be humbly familiar.

If you really love speaking to God, that is a sign that you love him ...

She will not pay overmuch attention to her unspoken words, her actions or behaviour, lest these things prevent her from simply contemplating God, riveting her attention on him who is present to her. Nor should she compose fine speeches in her mind, rather letting her words rise from the deeps of her will, stirred by the Holy Spirit, and not from reason, however enlightened.

Let her humbly have the hardihood to ask great things of God.

His converse knows no bitterness, his company no tedium. Why are we so perverse that we do not even want to try to pray?

This will give me signal confidence, spurring me on to find him.

Extracts from the Journalier and the Recueil de S. Dié.

Peter Fourier summarises what mental prayer means to him: *To kindle in oneself the fire of love for God and the salvation of others ... to seek God, only God ... his honour and glory, his love and intimacy, and not oneself.*

FROM DAY TO DAY

Pray at all times ... trying to grow, day by day, in intimacy with God.

Peter Fourier is speaking here of that form of prayer known as "ejaculatory prayer". It consists of a very short, frequently repeated prayer, matching the rhythm of one's breathing. Such prayer has influenced all the Christian East. "Let the memory of Jesus be one with your breathing," wrote St John Climacus (580-649). Our own times have rediscovered this prayer, called "prayer of the heart" or Jesus Prayer.

"Lord Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

It is an invocation which keeps one anchored to essentials in spite of the many distractions and demands of daily life.

Francis de Sales, like Peter Fourier, insisted on this method of prayer: "The pilgrim who takes a little wine to cheer his heart and refresh his tongue, may halt a short while for the purpose, but does not break his journey. He is but gathering strength to complete it with greater speed and ease, only pausing the better to advance."

Everyday life is our meeting-place with God

The lover approaches God trustfully, speaks to him familiarly, without qualm or fear. So I shall speak to God heart to heart, not dressing up my words or composing artful and affected speech: but openly and frankly I will pour out my heart in his presence, in private prayer or otherwise, begging, lamenting, thanking, praising, offering myself, just as it pleases the Holy Spirit to inspire me.

The terms so often used by Peter Fourier - conversation, familiarity - are expressions of nearness. At that time "to converse" meant "to live with," and was not confined to the, often brief, time given to personal prayer. When he speaks of the indwelling of the Trinity, he uses biblical terms, closer to everyday life than dogmatic formulae: *God is Father, Mother, Spirit, Pastor ...* He knows the ways of simple hearts referred to in the psalms. He lives by faith which transforms his approach to reality.

This great confidence we will have in his Goodness will lead us to handle all our affairs with peace of mind and unruffled tranquillity. Nor is it reasonable that whoever relies totally on God should act otherwise.

... because of this I shall be of good cheer, assured, courageous, whether it means undertaking something for the glory of God or whether it means suffering and endurance.

Go to God in whatever you do or undertake ...

See God in creatures and in one's occupations.

He is ceaselessly at work in them, perfecting them, preserving them, supporting them, enkindling them, enlarging them, transforming them. "My Father goes on working and so do I." (John 5,17)

Recueil de S. Dié

They (the Sisters of Our Lady) are urged and called by God to co-operate with him in the salvation of little children ...

Constitutions CND, VII, 3

Look, go, co-operate ... Peter Fourier leads us on from a meditation on God's immensity to faith in a God close by, an interior awareness which is neither isolating nor escapist, but a source of action. To rely on God through all the ups and downs of daily life is to come close to his mystery of love. Peter Fourier lived out this "familiarity" in simple prayers of petition. His letters are full of them: prayers for his country, its ruler, the poor, the great, the sick, for all who suffer and for current affairs. One of his finest prayers, inspired by the Bible, comes spontaneously in a letter to a community besieged by creditors:

O good Lord! O wise and rich and powerful Lord! When we do not know what we ought to do, nor where to turn for help, we have but one recourse, both admirable and powerful, and that is to turn our eyes, our hands, our hearts, our desires, our hopes and intentions, everything which is ours or depends upon us, to your Divine Majesty, and this we do now in all humility. Have pity, Lord, upon your humble servants.

12th June 1630

If mystical experience means living each moment in mysterious closeness to the living God, then Peter Fourier is certainly a mystic: in him, God's otherness and his nearness are found in a spirituality rooted in faith in the Incarnation of the Son. God is close to Fourier through Christ, seen in the faces of men and women, and especially in the poor. His biographer, Bedel, relates an anecdote in which we see Peter Fourier bearing witness to the Gospel in the midst of his people:

"One day on the feast of St Epvre, patron saint of the place (Mattaincourt), knowing that his parishioners were about to do themselves well ... he asked them to wait a little after Mass and said he would take them to a place where they could find Jesus Christ. After Mass he led them off to a part of the cemetery where he had purposely assembled all the poor, and said to them: 'There you are, there's the Jesus Christ I promised you. Take him off to your feasting and treat him as he deserves. Whatever you do to the least of these ... you do it unto me.' Whereupon the parishioners vied with one another as to who would do best."

Possessed by Jesus Christ

Like St Paul, to whom he constantly refers, Peter Fourier is above all an apostle, an apostle of Jesus Christ.

Wholly given to his pastoral ministry and the relentless demands made on him from all sides, his message and his life are inseparable. The message is simply that of the Gospel. We know his preferences from the passages he quotes most often and which became his very life, moulding his way of being, his face and heart and hands ...

All things to all men

Peter Fourier chose the parish of Mattaincourt because, according to his cousin, Father Jean Fourier, he expected to find there "plenty of hardships and little earthly reward." As soon as he arrived, in 1597, he began moving around the parish. He held that a parish priest should "live with" his flock, sharing in their joys and sorrows. He wrote in 1619: *I feel myself obliged to obey them and that, as curé, I owe them my journeys, my vigils, my presence, even my very life, should I need to risk it for their sake.* And, in 1637: *For forty years now and more, I have wept when I saw you weeping, and shared in your every distress, ailment and infirmity.*

This echoes St Paul's: "Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep." (Rom 12,15)

When he undertook the reform of the Canons Regular of Our Saviour, from 1622 onwards, he simply gave them the great passage from Matthew 25 as their charter of life.

Sharing in the ministry of Christ our Saviour will mean for them to be ready to receive charge of souls and carry it out ... to devote themselves to educating and instructing clerics ... to be missionaries (in village missions) ... to teach children and poor young people their letters free of charge ... to relieve those in distress, visit the sick in hospital, lovingly console those in prison. In a word, engage in all like duties of Christian charity whatever they may be.

Op. CNS I, 85

This last sentence widens the perspective, suggests initiatives and opens new horizons. Peter Fourier launches his reformed Canons into an apostolic life corresponding to the needs of his day. In one letter commending two of his Canons, he unwittingly paints his own portrait:

... These ministers of Jesus Christ (the Canons Regular of Our Saviour) do not spare themselves and never delay a single instant when called. They believe that, as regards their duty to their parishioners, not one of them - man or woman - is too small and insignificant, but should be treated as master or mistress for whom they would spring from table while at a meal, or rise from sleep and bed at midnight's hour.

... It is normal for them to treat the poorest as they would the wealthiest ... They never ask and never take anything from the poor as the due of a parish priest assisting at their betrothal or their wedding, baptising their children, administering Extreme Unction, granting them Christian burial, assisting at funerals and singing at these as much and as loud as for the very richest ... If a poor parishioner is ill and cannot provide for himself, and has no one else to help him, of their charity they will give him alms when he or his children come begging. Sometimes they even forestall him, sending to his house whatever he was too ashamed to dare ask for.

... And when pastors combine these two things, almsgiving and the Word of God, and add good example withal, they become invincibly strong and draw everyone "with reins of kindness, with leading-strings of love." (Hos11, 4)

1st July 1639

Almsgiving and the word of God go hand in hand. Peter Fourier insists on almsgiving because it is directed straight to Jesus Christ reflected in the poor, but he also advocates organised action, witness his various innovations at Mattaincourt: justice of the peace, credit co-operative ... He makes those who are comfortably off aware of the demands of social justice, and never wearies of openly fighting abuses practised by the powerful, far beyond the boundaries of his own parish. For him, social reform and pastoral renewal are inseparable.

Announcing the Word

Announcing the Word of God is at the centre of this renewal. Peter Fourier is a pastor, deeply distressed by the religious ignorance of his flock. He reminds the Canons of Our Saviour that "their mission is to announce the Word of God," quoting the prophet Amos: "See what days are coming ... days when I will bring famine on the country ... a famine of hearing the word of Yahweh" (Amos 8,11), and Isaiah: "Whom shall I send? Who will be our messenger?" (Is 6,8)

His studies at Pont-à-Mousson were an admirable preparation for this task. He would read the Bible in Latin and urged curés to read it unflaggingly, guided by the commentaries of the Fathers of the Church. He advised them to take notes while reading Scripture and to use it *like spiritual bread, baked in the oven of meditation and nourishing the soul for eternal life.*

Plentiful quotations from Scripture crop up in his letters, especially from the Wisdom books in the Old Testament, and from St Paul in the New Testament. This reflects the taste of his day, as does his, mostly moralising, way of presenting the texts, using examples which he interprets and paraphrases.

After the Council of Trent, the Word would be transmitted through the preacher's homily. This was the first concern of the curé of Mattaincourt. In a renewed church he restored the importance of the Sunday Mass and saw to the beauty of the liturgy and ceremonies. He embarked on a new style of preaching, paying special attention to the religious instruction of children, which he enlivened by dividing them into matching groups, *so that all these little people, when grown up, would faithfully serve God their Creator, according to each one's capacity and vocation.*

For his beloved parishioners, most of whom were poor or illiterate, Peter Fourier prepared his Sunday sermons with great care. They are remarkable for their simplicity, a characteristic not often found in those days; collections of his notes have come down to us with lists of biblical texts arranged by theme and intended to illustrate his preaching. The ease with which he quotes from both Old and New Testaments in his sermons, shows how familiar he was with Scripture. Peter Fourier, a pastor totally dedicated to serving his flock, was truly a dwelling-place for the Word of God.

Op. CNS, 261 et seq.

How does Peter Fourier see Christ?

Peter Fourier preaches Christ as Saviour. His whole life was given to proclaiming God as rich in mercy. For him, the title of Saviour always went with the name of Jesus: a vivid awareness of the meaning of the Good News of Salvation lies at the very heart of his personal experience of God. Echoing St Paul: "God loved us with so much love that he was generous with his mercy ... he brought us to life with Christ" (Eph 2,4), Peter Fourier keeps coming back to the mission of Christ which is one with his very person: *the most profound humility and most merciful greatness of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ*, and agrees with St Augustine: "To know the greatness of God, first know his humility."

In that essentially christocentric theology, Peter Fourier is undoubtedly a man of his age. Each of the spiritual writers of the time had his particular emphasis. Fourier's, according to Bedel his biographer, was "tender love" *for the human Jesus of Nazareth, only son of the Father, son of the Virgin Mary*. Jesus close to us, sharing our anxieties, our celebrations, our hardships and sufferings, assuming our human condition unreservedly. And Bedel adds: "He had an especial devotion to the mysteries of the Nativity and the Passion of the Lord" - those two moments in life when the Son of God was totally surrendered and dependent on man.

Mary is the woman who allowed God to become man. Focused as it was on the person of Christ, Peter Fourier's devotion (in the full 17th century sense) to Mary is deeply theological. As Mother of Jesus, she is grafted on to his mission as Saviour of the world. As *Mother of sweetness and mercy* she takes her place in the history of Salvation. Peter Fourier uses admirable terms to express this presence, revealing intense personal experience. He treats the Gospel story of Cana as fundamental to the spirituality of the Congregation of Our Lady. At the beginning of the Preface to the Constitutions he repeats Mary's words:

Do wholeheartedly whatever my Son, your Lord, Creator, Saviour and Redeemer, your God and your Spouse tells you to do.

Christ is first of all "her Son." Then, in the other titles given to this Son, Peter Fourier sums up the whole mystery of the Incarnation in a single sentence.

One cannot really communicate a personal experience of God, but it does show through in one's way of being. In Fourier's case, his tender love for Christ become man was translated into love for "the neighbour who cost him so dearly." His familiarity with the historical Jesus of the Gospels transformed his already acute sensibility to make of it a kind of spiritual sense, an extraordinary attentiveness to all that is human. His "humanity," remarked on by his contemporaries as a characteristic of his personality, was his particular way of responding to God's mercy, part of his own inner experience. And it was his way of reflecting God's mercy to others. Peter Fourier's loving attitude echoes St Paul speaking of God's "kind purposes."

Let us offer gifts to the poor who suffer, the gifts of seeing them with humanity, looking upon them with kindness and mercy.

Op. CNS, II, 480

That attitude appears throughout his correspondence and in the course of his daily life. And when he came to write the Constitutions for his two Congregations, one finds the same outlook expressed more elaborately. The Congregation of Our Lady has inherited this attitude.

Peter Fourier is a sound spiritual counsellor. His humanist culture was combined with a sociable temperament, open to all that concerns human beings. He had a keen and perceptive mind and possessed a spiritual realism in which discernment was coupled with the power of observation. From his writings one could compose a small treatise on spiritual sagacity, not to mention all the words of wisdom that he drops in his many letters.

Spiritual combat

The theme of "spiritual combat" occurs widely in writings on spirituality. This expression derives from military language - the "two standards" of St Ignatius - but is also based on Scripture, St Paul in particular: "Put on the armour of God." (Eph 6,11) Nowadays we speak more readily of self-control, interior freedom and cleansing of the heart.

We do not know whether Peter Fourier had ever read "The Spiritual War" by Scupoli, an Italian religious (1530-1610), but it was enormously popular. Published in 1589, it ran to no fewer than 50 editions. Francis de Sales kept it to hand "in his wee pocket," he said, adding that a spiritual counsellor was not always available, but this little book would do instead.

One of Peter Fourier's meditations in the Opuscles is headed "To overcome my passions." "Passion" in his time had a wider meaning; it stood for whatever was impulsive and uncontrolled in one's affective life.

Just as in the upper reaches of the soul it is self-will, self-esteem and self-opinion that are the source of all evils, so in the lower reaches the harm is done by want of mortification of our passions. They plunge and prance about with abandon, like wild horses. They stir up our souls, now with cravings, hopes and tears, now with excitement, rashness and anger, now again with impatience, dejection and gloom. Or else they fill us with joy at some good thing we have, or with hope for one we do not have. Then all at once they bring anguish at trouble we have, and dread of trouble we do not have. In this fashion, those who fail to master their passions are like a storm-tossed sea which is never calm.

Consider the tranquillity and peace of those who have tamed their passions. They possess paradise ahead of time, neither fear nor hope for anything in this world, and enjoy perpetual security and sweet peace of soul, and often of body too.

Op. CND, 54

In this passage, Peter Fourier analyses the turbulence of our inner world in his own vivid, picturesque fashion. Joy and sorrow succeed each other without apparent cause, often in connection with our relations with other people. Imagination adds to the turmoil and floods our consciousness. In another passage, he sums up the essence of the spiritual combat in a couple of verbs:

They will try not to be moved or shaken by any mortal thing that might allure or frighten them.

Const. 1640, II, 6

Being a shrewd psychologist, he knows that, deep in our psyche, those passions spring from two apparently contradictory sources: attraction and fear. In this, he is already remarkably modern, just as he is when he points out the close link between physical and spiritual phenomena. Being in control of passions brings peace of mind, "and often of body too."

In his analysis of the spiritual combat, Peter Fourier harks back to a long tradition, especially to a much-quoted master, John Cassian (360-435). Cassian used the classification of passions as set out by Evagrius, an Egyptian monk of the fourth century who distinguishes eight "spirits of evil": greed, lust, avarice, anger, melancholy, vainglory, pride and acedia. Acedia meant a distaste for spiritual things, a kind of sluggishness which, with melancholy, was the ancient equivalent of sloth. These spirits of evil were the offspring of two "master-passions," greed and pride, which take possession of the self, harden the heart and make it oblivious to any but self.

Out of this traditional list of passions, Peter Fourier dwells on pride (*la superbe*) and negligence, which is his word for sloth. He adds ingratitude, which is typical of his open and generous nature. He treats of these vices in his own vivid way, with many a common-sense remark ...

Pride, a puffing up of self-esteem and private judgment.

Thinking that we alone are cleverer than our superiors and a whole community, is what makes us rely unduly on our own opinions and hold out against others ...

This innermost garment of the soul - here he quotes Plato - must be stripped away if we are to be truly poor. Being poor in goods and arrogant in mind does not, properly speaking, amount to evangelical poverty.

... Humility comes more easily if we remember how often we have been mistaken in our judgments ...

Negligence is a sign of failing virtue which will not go far. It takes over as a result of disordered affection or attachment to someone, to certain matters or certain work, or else because of a violent dislike for someone, or excessive concern for our own convenience and self-esteem, that weighs us to the ground and deprives us of generosity and courage.

Extracts from Op. CND

As for ingratitude, Peter Fourier sees it as revealing a person shut in on himself who refuses to owe anything to anyone, relies on no one and rejects every gift offered by another. *O what vile spawn is ingratitude!* he exclaims. His letters are full of expressions of gratitude for services rendered, gifts received, prayers said for his intentions. And he is always thanking God for his blessings.

Pride, negligence, ingratitude ... grown old and stubborn ... These spiritual sicknesses are the targets of his asceticism, for he sees that they stand for spiritual paralysis:

... little by little they sap the spirit, stifle progress and infect the soul so powerfully that, feeling overwhelmed by them, it becomes so fearful of the effort needed to escape them that it prefers to wallow in its own imperfections.

Op. CND, 141

In fact they smother those essential elements in a person, desire, relationship to others and to God. Pride puffs up desire excessively, negligence drains it, ingratitude turns it in on itself. The proud look down crushingly on others, the negligent ignore them, the ungrateful turn away.

And then we are no longer able to surrender totally to God, but go to him cautiously, so far and no further, by this way only and no other, or not by that one, as if fearing that God would give us too much and lead us too far. It is as if we were tying his hands.

Op. CND, 141

How do we "conquer our passions"? In modern terms, Peter Fourier's advice can be summed up thus: revive your generosity, re-intensify your desire; be alive to yourself and to others; re-discover the value of the present moment and the fleeting nature of passing things. Far from being an end in itself, self-discipline is what gives us wholeness and makes us capable of loving. It is the door to interior freedom, avoiding both rigidity and over-elation. Peter Fourier is very suspicious of over-zealousness (empressement) which is his word for agitation.

The clean of heart are able to seek God in all things ... to seek him steadfastly and bravely, simply, openly and without ceremony, in a spirit of humble adaptability, light-hearted and alert (heading straight for the pure authentic fountain) in true and unfeigned liberty.

How sweet is the Lord to the soul that seeks him.

Recueil de S. Dié

A heart that is humble, fervent, open, will be free for prayer in any form, with cries, requests, intercession, praise and thanksgiving, "fruit of joy and gratitude," as Evagrius called it. Peter Fourier reminds us that self-surrender to God, far from being passive, is a supremely active spiritual attitude which involves bravely risking oneself by total reliance on his mercy.

In all her actions, the sister of Our Lady makes straight for God, performing them with her whole heart, right willingly and joyfully.

Primitif Esprit, 82

She aims at what is most perfect, but gently, without violence or constraint and without fuss.

Id. 102

Desire, pray, reflect, set to work, then examine yourself often and you will be perfect.

Op. CNS II, 147

This last sentence sums up the whole of the spiritual combat, sustained by the longing for God.

Solid and perfect virtues

This expression is often used by Francis de Sales and Peter Fourier. Sometimes the word "perfection" has implied a moral process, a goal to be reached, an ideal to be set up. In reality, these words "you will be perfect" follow the biblical interpretation of the Gospel precept: "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matt 5, 48) That is to say, a process of becoming never achieved, of longing never satisfied. These virtues are "perfect" because rooted in God's love received and poured out on others. They are solid because not deceptive. They are everyday virtues, simple common-or-garden virtues.

Peter Fourier had a good understanding of time. *Everything has its moments and seasons, which we must not let slip.* Humility and patience are at once serene acceptance of the present, and trust for the future. They are the waiting virtues, a way of living out the theological virtue of hope, day by day. With them, we become Gospel apprentices in the school of the Son of God in his humanity (Matt 11, 24).

The most important, most learned, most profitable and most necessary lesson that he (Jesus Christ) ever taught in his University to his first students, the blessed Apostles, and to us, was this one: "Learn of me for I am meek and humble of heart."

Primitif Esprit, 29

Following Christ together in the Congregation of Our Lady

For religious of the Congregation, "life in community and mission spring from a single source." This sentence of the 1984 Constitutions echoes across four centuries the spirit of the 1640 Constitutions, called the "Great Constitutions" to distinguish them from the earlier ones dating from 1617. Peter Fourier worked on them, at Gray, right up to the time of his death in 1640.

Two chapters of these Constitutions, chapters VI and VII of the second part, form the central theme and are their very heart. There you will find the charism of the Congregation described and its way of following Jesus Christ and living the Gospel. Chapter VI calls the Synoptic Gospels to mind, especially Mark 3, 13, "He appointed twelve to be with him," and Chapter VII, "of mutual charity," is inspired by John 17: community life has its roots in the life of the Trinity. In these two chapters are found the same attitudes of mind and heart necessary both for a life of following Jesus Christ and as the source of peace in the community. *They are in very truth sisters one to another, disciples of Our Lord, members of one body.*

Const. 1640, II, 7

Following him wherever he goes

Chapter VI is a meditation on Christ Jesus living his human life to the full. Peter Fourier meditated long on this chapter, reaching an ever deeper understanding. The manuscript of the Constitutions, preserved in the Archives of the Congregation, is ample proof of this. He returns again and again to this text, deleting, adding, clarifying. The form of apostolic life Peter Fourier desires for the Congregation does indeed have its roots in the reality of the Incarnation.

Their unique concern is to follow Our Lord wheresoever he goes ... knowing that all his actions, all his words during his earthly life are given to them as a rule ... they shall study carefully all that they have learned of him. They shall examine his teachings and those things which he esteemed, recommended, advised, espoused and practised, such as poverty, labour, hunger, thirst, zeal for souls and the unquenchable desire to do the will of God in all things ...

Const. 1640, II, 6

Imitating Jesus *during his earthly life* means "living with" the men and women of his own time and his own country, above all during the years of his public life, when with his apostles he travelled the roads of Palestine. It is noteworthy, too, that Peter Fourier likens the mission of the sisters of Our Lady to that of the apostles. *You who lead the life of apostles ...*; and to the sisters of Vitry he writes: *You are like twelve apostles.*

Following him wherever he goes means accompanying him on the roads, open to unpredictable meetings and unexpected events.

Jesus entered into human time, he knew how tedious it could be, knew the daily anxieties, the joys and sorrows of every human life, and experienced the weariness of the apostolate, "poverty, hunger, thirst and the zeal for souls," and his "unquenchable desire to do the will of God in all things." Jesus is expressing here his desire both as a human being and as the One Sent by the Father. With Christ, the prayer of the apostle enters into the will of the Father: that the Kingdom of God may come and that men and women may have life to the full. "The glory of God is a human being fully alive, and the fulness of life is to see one's God." (St Irenaeus)

It is of the nature of a charism to transmit through time a certain spirit, a way of living the Gospel, a way of looking at the world and other people. Rediscovering the spirit of one's founder does not mean repeating or even imagining what he would do today. It means absorbing his outlook in order to do something new as he did.

Peter Fourier's way of looking at things is always up-to-date. He is a clear-sighted observer of his own time, of its social injustices and the abuses in the Church. He looks with compassion on children, women, the poor and the marginalised. His initiatives, his work for a fair distribution of goods and respect for the rights of the individual, so often mentioned in his correspondence, all stem from this. As does his passion for education. One's attitude to children must be such as to help their development: affection, respect, understanding, realism, breadth of mind, all in a climate of gospel joy, simplicity and charity.

The religious of Our Lady are cognisant of their heritage. They expressed this in their 1984 Constitutions. "Freedom according to the Spirit ... makes us attentive to life and to all that brings life to birth, helps it to grow and sets it free. It makes us ready to speak out against anything which destroys life. Here, in today's world, we recognise our mission as educators and our resolve to announce the Good News to the poor. It is to this that we have been called throughout the whole of our history."

Const. 1984, p. 5

Following him together

"One heart and one soul in God." So begins the Rule of St Augustine. The Constitutions of the Congregation of Our Lady are imbued with this spirit, especially in the practice of the evangelical counsels.

"As long as I do not covet it," says St Augustine, "everything that belongs to my brother and sister belongs to me." Poverty lived in fraternal charity creates a place of freedom. "Let all things be in common" is linked to "let distribution be made according to the needs of each." (Rule of St Augustine, 1) Goods are shared with attention to

individuals and respect for their diversity, each one discerning her own needs and the needs of the community, and this presupposes a simple lifestyle. They shall take care, says Peter Fourier, to avoid anything which could detract from "the poverty and simplicity" of the Congregation.

Seen in the perspective of "one body," the relationship between authority and obedience is considered a service to the community, a service of unity which manifests and builds up the Body of Christ.

At the beginning of Chapter 2, Part II, Peter Fourier quotes the epistle to the Philippians and makes union with Christ in his obedience the foundation of religious obedience seen in the light of faith. Referring to the close connection in the same letter between Christ's obedience and Paul's exhortation to unity, he links obedience to community life. It is *daughter to humility, foster-mother of charity, mother of harmony and sisterly love ...* We could read here, in conjunction with the core chapter of Part II on "mutual charity," the chapters of the 4th and 6th parts which treat of the assemblies of religious, of the superior and of the union of the Monasteries ... (extracts, p. 39ff and p. 49ff). Shrewd psychologist that he is, Peter Fourier gives practical examples: patience when opinions differ, refusal to pass judgment on others, respect for the gift of the Spirit in each sister, mutual forgiveness before going to prayer ...

Peter Fourier's Augustinian inspiration is revealed in the "tone" of his writing. In his style full of imagery, rhythmic, even lyrical on occasion, he recalls themes dear to St Augustine: longing for God, listening to the Word, humility, joy of heart springing from the mercy of God, interior freedom as it is expressed throughout the Rule and especially in the last lines:

*" ... breathing forth in your conversation the sweet odour of Jesus Christ,
not indeed as slaves under the yoke of the law,
but with the freedom with which Christ has made us free."*

Rule, VIII

An Augustinian apostolic spirituality

Peter Fourier wanted the Augustinian rule for his two Congregations both because, as he said, "it is based on the form of life led by the Apostles," and because it has at its centre the heart of the Gospel message, the new commandment, love of God and one's neighbour.

Centred on love

The love of God is the first commandment in the order of precept, but the love of one's neighbour is the first to be put into practice ... Because you cannot yet see God, it is by loving your neighbour that you will be counted worthy to see him: by loving your neighbour your eye is purified to see God. For John it is patently obvious: If you do not love your brother or sister whom you can see, how will you be able to love God whom you cannot see? We are told to love God. If you say to me: Show me whom I must love, what other answer can I give than John's own: No one has seen God. And yet do not think that you are entirely deprived of the vision of God. God, says John, is Love and whoever lives in love lives in God.

Love your neighbour, then, and ask yourself what is the source of this love. There, in so far as it is possible, you will see God. So, start loving your neighbour. Share your bread with the hungry, and welcome into your house the poor homeless man; if you see someone naked, clothe him, and don't despise those who are of your own flesh and blood.

If you do this, what benefit will you have? Well, your light will break through like the dawn and that light is your God.

St Augustine: Commentary on the Gospel of John

The source of love of God and neighbour is the Son of God made man and given up to death for the life of the world. He who through *love humbled himself so utterly ... wants us to love the neighbour who cost him so dear*. Commenting on the Rule of St Augustine, Peter Fourier dwells on the symbols of gold and olivewood, paraphrasing a passage from the First Book of Kings (1Kgs 6,31). The olive is the symbol of loving kindness which foresees another's need and anticipates it. Gold is the symbol of love. Peter Fourier compares it to the sun: it is both light and heat, glowing and fiery; it dilates the heart and makes it wider than the heavens. But Peter Fourier makes haste to remind us that it takes practical form on this earth and finds expression "in a good-natured cheerful face" ...

Peter Fourier's motto, *to harm no one and to be of service to all*, inspired by St Augustine and St Ambrose, is indicative of his spirituality, simple, exacting and realistic. It doubtless holds a mirror to his own daily life. Grounded as it is in sound theology of the Incarnation, it is lived out in the humble service of a deep and effective love.

What sort of charity is it if it is unable to put up with some inconvenience?

(10th March 1623)

We can often learn a good deal from what other people do and say.

(11th February 1636)

Be quick to excuse, forgive, forget; interpret everything in the best possible way; live in peace and understanding, and God will help us.

(20th December 1624)

"The person who has received God's command to love his neighbour as he would love himself must, first of all, know how to love himself." Here Peter Fourier quotes St Bernard, insisting on a well-ordered love of self. In this little daily programme he summarises three kinds of love: listening to the voice of God, practising charity and humility, and being strong and patient in one's own regard. Here in a few words we have his whole approach to the surrender of self and the power of grace: to be captivated by the Word, give others the space to live their lives, and be kind to oneself.

Life in the Spirit

Reference to the Spirit is a constant with Peter Fourier. Like St Augustine, he comes back again and again to Romans 5,5 "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."

His insistence on this presence of the Spirit in the life of the Christian doubtless reflects his own deep experience. In the passage in Galatians on freedom in the spirit, we can trace his own character as it must have been in later life. "The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." (Gal 5,22)

Of the all too few extracts from sermons that have come down to us, the most detailed is the one for Whit Sunday. There are spontaneous invocations to the Holy Spirit throughout his correspondence. The Spirit teaches our inner self how to be pleasing to God and how to savour his Word. Doing God's will is linked to interior obedience to the Spirit who is not a spirit of constraint but of "joy." The Spirit is the source of apostolic action, he inspires words that will touch hearts, creates new ideas, sets us free from fear. It is he who creates community, "bringing members together by his divine action." He makes us "his temple and his home," and his grace reaches to the very ends of the world. An echo of St Augustine in his commentary on John's first letter:

Question your own heart. If you find in it love for your brother and sister, go in peace. This love could not be there without the presence, too, of the Holy Spirit ...

I don't know who limits Love to the size of Africa. Let your love flow out over the whole world if you really desire to love Christ, because Christ's members are spread over the whole world.

A spirituality open to everyone

Although found in writings meant especially for religious, Peter Fourier's spirituality is valid for all Christians whatever their age or station in life.

What should one teach children? he wrote on 12th November 1627 to P. Manceau, a Canon Regular of Our Saviour ... *Teach them that the rich (with difficulty perhaps), the poor, manual workers, professional people, all of them in their own walk of life, can become saints, if they keep to the rules in the vocations to which God has called them.*

In this he is very much of his time. At this turning point in the 17th century, spiritual life was undergoing renewal. Francis de Sales' "Introduction to the Devout Life," first published in 1609, had been reprinted more than 40 times in the saint's lifetime, a sure sign that it was answering a need. Devotion, or the "perfection of charity" as Francis de Sales defined it, is available to everyone, and everyone can meditate, lay people as well as monks, bearing in mind their different conditions of life. "It is wrong," he writes, "a heresy even, to banish the devout life from soldiers' barracks, artisans' shops, the courts of princes or the homes of married people."

Francis de Sales and Peter Fourier never met, but both of them had a very clear insight into the needs of their times. They were both part of the same movement of spiritual renewal, imbued with the convictions that everyone is called to sanctity.

Peter Fourier's pastoral work is shot through with it. The titles of the little treatises written for parish priests are revealing: advice "on teaching people of every social class in a way they can understand"; "giving short instructions to children and simple folk" or "to children who have not yet quite reached the age of reason, and yet have some fledgling idea of the difference between good and evil" ...

To everyone Peter Fourier commends a *tender, virile piety, solid and discriminating*. This explains the soundness and practicality of his advice to married people and those in high positions.

To husbands and wives he measures out advice suitable to their state. He reminds them to administer their temporal affairs wisely, of the importance of a healthy diet, of helping their neighbour, of concern for justice, and he tells them that their home is like "a Church in miniature," a house of prayer, where they live in the joy and harmony of "one heart and one mind."

He reminds those in high places that *other people's prayers are of little use if they don't get down to work themselves* ... He insists on the duty of social justice and comes down very heavily on abuses, publicly denouncing them.

Necessary occupations do not prevent one from loving God, writes Peter Fourier. This is why they called him the Francis de Sales of Lorraine, just as he was a Vincent de Paul by his acute sense of practical charity and his respect for the poor.

In a spiritual tradition

Peter Fourier is so imbued with Scripture and the Fathers of the Church that it is sometimes difficult to make a distinction between quotations coming from his wide culture and his own remarks, since the two are expressive of a similar thought. In his correspondence alone, more than 1200 quotations from the Bible and the Fathers have been found in 1700 letters.

The authors whose reading he recommends reflect his own theology, based as it is on the very best sources. What would you find in the "library" of Canons Regular? An immediate answer comes from Peter Fourier's pen: treatises of the Fathers of the Church, then Cassian, Theodoret, Sophronius, John Climacus, Gregory the Great, the Venerable Bede, Ludolf of Saxony, Denis the Carthusian, Thomas à Kempis, Luis of Granada ...

Spirituality is a path along which one does not walk alone. Peter Fourier was close friends with some authors and by calling them to mind you meet Fourier himself.

He read John **Cassian** a great deal. Founder of the Abbey of St Victor in Marseilles, he wrote for monks, but the subtlety of his analyses and his insistence on meditating on Scripture make of his work an education in the liberation of the heart for love. In the same perspective, Peter Fourier read John Climacus and his well-known "Ladder of Paradise," and also the Palestinian monks of the 6th century, notably "The Spiritual Meadow" of John Moschus, quoted by Sophronius.

His closest friends were **the Fathers of the Church** whom he read constantly. "This reading was his usual occupation in his moments of leisure," wrote Bedel, adding "but he concentrated on five of them in particular as being more suitable to his purpose: St Augustine, St John Chrysostom, St Basil, St Gregory of Nazianzus and St Bernard."

Augustine was his "chosen among thousands." Peter Fourier asked for "his works to be placed directly next to the Bible on the shelves in his library." This lifelong attraction first found expression when he chose to become a Canon Regular of St Augustine.

Basil of Caesarea and John Chrysostom were theologians and pastors who remained very close to their flock. Peter Fourier loved them as ministers of charity who never ceased reminding people of the rights of the poor, and rich people's duties of justice, and had organised in various parts of the diocese reception centres for the needy and the sick and for foreigners ... He seemed to have a marked preference for "his Nazianzus," the mystical theologian of the Incarnation of the Word.

Doubtless this same inspiration drew him to **Bernard of Clairvaux** with his christocentric theology; it is through personal, affective union with the humanity of Jesus, son of Mary, that men and women can know God, since it is through Christ that God comes to them.

All spiritual authorities commend the reading of the **Imitation of Christ**, from which Peter Fourier quotes many passages. This book, attributed to Thomas à Kempis, bears witness to the great movement of spiritual renaissance, known as the "devotio moderna," which brings the Middle Ages to a close. The "Imitation" read over many centuries has nourished lay people's interior life from the dawn of modern times. It has been a call to sanctity for generations of Christians.

Peter Fourier belongs to no school of spirituality but he has made peculiarly his own a whole spiritual tradition from the Desert Fathers to Francis de Sales. Like the Fathers of the Church he juxtaposes God's part and ours, human effort and the free gift of grace, pastoral apostolate and praise, asceticism and mysticism. Long years at Pont-à-Mousson, in the framework of the "spiritual exercises," had been his formation in the free and generous attitude of Ignatius of Loyola. He believed in men and women, formed in the image of God, and in their capacity to be transformed by the Gospel. This made him a spiritual optimist and therefore a man of his time.

*"May both good and ill fortune
be for you paths straight to God."*

Entretiens de S. Mihiel

At the origin of the Congregation of Our Lady there is the meeting between Alix Le Clerc and Peter Fourier. In Alix, there was intuition and an interior enthusiasm; in Peter Fourier a conviction enlightened by the Holy Spirit. From the moment he arrived in Mattaincourt, free education for girls had been his constant preoccupation. That same year 1597, Alix Le Clerc, touched by the grace of conversion, came to find him. At Christmas, the Congregation of Our Lady was born.

Apart from her work, how can we come to know Alix Le Clerc more deeply? Peter Fourier has left us an enormous number of letters and many other writings, whereas from Alix we have a single manuscript of 50 sheets, her "Relation," written about 1618 at the request of her spiritual director, and a few notes in a "little exercise book in her own handwriting." It is her whole self we find in these pages. To see even a little of the unique path she took to meet her God, perhaps we can just let her speak for herself.

"I was nineteen or twenty when I followed this vocation"

The year was 1595. Alix had just arrived at Hymont, a village near Mattaincourt. Born at Remiremont on 2nd February 1576, she had apparently spent a happy childhood there. In the eyes of the world she was highly respected. She was popular at parties and enjoyed them. She valued her reputation because *she had a love of honour*. And yet she was possessed by a desire, to which she was as yet unable to put a name. *In the midst of pleasure she carried a sad heart* and it was without regret that she left Remiremont.

I was delighted to withdraw from the world which wearied me without my knowing why. But once I was there (at Hymont), 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.

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 feast-days, 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 feastsdays 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.

Relation, 6, 7

Then came the events of 1597. *Something had happened which made me realise that there was a God of mercy who greatly cared for my soul.* On three successive Sundays, during Mass, she seemed to hear the sound of a drum, and then came the devil leading a troupe of dancers. She had a dread of hell and suddenly it took shape before her; it was the revelation of an invisible world and was immediately followed by action.

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 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 replaced by a totally different spirit.

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.

Relation, 8-9

"New ventures demand bold steps," said J.-J. Surin, a spiritual writer of the 17th century. This is the first step in conversion; the second is "to love God for himself alone." This is the long path along which we can follow Alix in her Relation.

She went to find Peter Fourier and he advised her to make a general confession. *This was quickly done as I did not think I had many sins.* Her parish priest, however, gave her a book about examination of conscience ... This began a period of suffering for Alix, a time of scruples and temptations, but also of spiritual transformation. Her soul opened to the mystery of the living God. God spoke to her in her inmost being, in symbolic visions and with vivid insights. It was during this time that her conversion experience received the stamp of authenticity, the call to mission, and Peter Fourier was not mistaken.

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 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.

Relation, 15

From that intuitive moment, Alix as foundress would see the "new religious house" develop. She would live through all its stages, beginning with the first school at Poussay, and would spend time at Saint-Mihiel, Nancy, Pont-à-Mousson, Verdun and Saint-Nicolas-de-Port, experiencing every kind of difficulty. Obstacles came from her family, from men of the Church, and from Rome itself which was reluctant to recognise a new type of apostolic religious life for women. Alix Le Clerc put fidelity to this vocation at the very heart of her spiritual journey and described it matter-of-factly in her Relation.

May God be your one and only love

She began by describing the path her desire took. At first, she said, she had a longing for purity, penance, suffering. She would have to go beyond her own desires in order to reach the One Desire and give herself entirely to him.

I always had a great desire to die, ever since I understood where true good is to be found and realised 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 self-seeking 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.

Relation, 25

At the end of the only letter in her own handwriting that has come down to us, Alix wrote on 4th June 1620 (she was to die on 9th January 1622): *I beg you to pray to God for us, I beg him to be your one and only love.* In these words she summed up the fervour of her desire.

The more absolute the desire, the more total the gift, the harder the struggle. Alix fought the battle against the background of her own time. Everyone believed, at any rate in their collective consciousness, in a world where the visible and invisible coexisted. God, angels, Our Lady, the saints, "evil spirits," were all part of the same mindset with regard to the universe. Alix used the language of contemporary writers of autobiography. The Devil had a large part to play, coming from the depths of an unconscious full of images, reflections of the iconography of the period. Assaults of the "evil spirits," temptations, all took human forms. The body joined in the struggle and it was a battle fought alone.

Her psyche might be distraught, but Alix kept her spiritual sanity. Only my spirit was free, she wrote in the midst of her distress, and elsewhere, *My soul was flooded with a great interior light ... and this light overwhelmed me and I saw all my nothingness.* (Relation, 43) What could have been a source of discouragement became for her a light to live by. When her trials were at their worst, she never lost hope.

Consolation and desolation succeeded one another. She experienced simultaneously her own poverty and the sweetness of visits from her God. With remarkable lucidity she became able to distinguish the visions of the Evil One, which aroused her fear and curiosity, from those which came from God and gave her new life and advanced her spiritual progress

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.

Relation, 60

"The holy life and Passion of my Saviour" ... According to Mère Angélique Milly, she had "a great devotion to the humanity of Christ." Both the Relation and her little notebook bear constant witness to her familiar conversations with Christ. *It seemed to me that I was talking with Our Lord.* She felt herself *transported to the little house of the Blessed Virgin.* She had recourse to Jesus both in her interior difficulties and those arising from outside events, and also in her greatest temptations. *Our Lord has granted me the grace not to fear the devil.* She lived with her Lord and longed for the final meeting with him. But once when she was speaking of her desire *to be united with Jesus Christ in the world to come*, she was stopped short and heard the words: *"If I am with you, is not that sufficient?"*

Here, on this earth ... That brings us back to day-to-day life and to the jottings in her little notebook. In it you will find this prayer, largely inspired by the "Imitation of Jesus Christ":

Grant me this, O Lord: make your home in me and let me live in you, so that, joined each to each we may live in this close union together now and always. Yes, you are my beloved chosen from among thousands, in whom my soul has been pleased to dwell and take her rest my whole life long.

Her contemporaries had noted down these words of hers:

Seeing Our Lord Jesus Christ and his Holy Mother in conversation (that is to say in their daily life) drinking, eating and doing other ordinary things, you realised that they were human beings like other people. He was called a carpenter ... and he was the son of a carpenter and of Mary ...

Our Lord was ready to give his life and his precious blood for souls, and one soul before God is worth more than the whole world ...

They will unite themselves as far as they are able to the actions of Our Lord and his Holy Mother, and become accustomed from the first moment of their vocation to giving their full attention to their work, walking always in the presence of God and seeking him in simplicity of heart.

Spiritual Writings, pp. 15-16

Walking in his presence in truth and simplicity

The sisters who knew Alix best began, in the tradition of the hagiography of the time, by enumerating the "virtues of our Mother," her humility, her patience, her love of her neighbour. This was how they saw her, simply putting the Gospel into practice.

In her notebook, Alix insisted on humility, *the Son of God's own virtue*. It is impossible to live with God without this humility of heart which implies self-knowledge and gratitude for the gifts of God, and goes hand in hand with charity. Her notes contain shrewd analyses which are signs of a long experience of community life.

Those who are truly humble are always at peace with God, with other people and with themselves. What is more praiseworthy is that they are sometimes at peace with those with whom they disagree.

There are certain people who complain that in community exercises they cannot enjoy the peace and quiet they promised themselves before they entered; if they really sought to know the cause of this, their only complaint would be about themselves since such anxiety usually comes from pride and a lack of humility.

Spiritual Writings, p. 14

Did the Sisters who came into contact with Alix every day realise that her humble serenity had deep roots in the experience acquired with such suffering in the depths of her being?

I very often feel no devotion but experience only aridity and darkness of understanding and am filled with nothing but confused thoughts ... At such times I have great devotion to the "De Profundis," since I cry out from the depths of my emptiness and nothingness to the God of incomprehensible majesty and greatness.

Relation, 34

Her contemporaries used to say that she preferred to speak of simplicity rather than humility. She would say that

simplicity was one of the principal dispositions God asked of a soul in order to communicate fully with her ... She applied to this virtue the words of Our Lord ... "Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

She wanted her sisters to live

in this spirit of simplicity, sincere in their words and actions, their attention directed to God. She had a natural aversion for pretence, artifice and dissimulation.

Life 1666, p. 282

This seems to have been a characteristic of her spiritual temperament. The pages in her notebook reveal a very simple spirituality which authenticates the high moments of her mystical experience.

Let us prepare a dwelling for God in our soul ... Once we have sought and found Our Lord who is our true peace and resting place, we must endeavour to delight in his blessed presence and apply ourselves to preparing a suitable abode for his majesty. Our poverty should not upset us because he himself will supply everything we need to complete our work. All he asks of us is fidelity and a little hard work to make good use of the gifts he will put in our hands.

My God and my Lord, send me the light of your holy and blessed Spirit so that I may find the way that leads to peace.

If any good is to be found in this world it is possessed by the peace lover since the Kingdom of Heaven is joy and peace in the Holy Spirit.

Let us make haste, then, to build him a temple in our hearts so that he may dwell there in peace, and that we too may live in him in this world and in his eternal kingdom forever.

Spiritual Writings, 5 - 10

She saw God in her neighbours.

Because she saw God in her neighbours, she had such tenderness and affection in seeking ways of helping them, and assisting them in any way she could, that when she saw them in trouble or affliction she entered into their sorrows with so much feeling that they became her own. She helped them spiritually and materially in any way that her charity suggested.

When she was living at Nancy in the Convent of Notre Dame, she often went with a worthy lady to visit poor sick people who had been neglected or abandoned, and were living on the outskirts of the town in wretched underground hovels, where the stench was such that people were appalled at the mere thought of going in. She would take them whatever she could, make their bed, dress their wounds, clean up the filth, all with great joy, and sit down near them with words of consolation and encouragement.

When she was in the monastery, on good days she loved sending someone to visit the prisoners, with gifts of bread and wine and meat and preserves if she knew some of them to be ill. She said that she loved to honour in them the humiliations that Our Lord had borne for our sins ...

... when Sisters of the Congregation came on a visit to the houses where she was living, she would receive them with joy and a wonderfully warm welcome.

When her companions were discouraged by the difficulties and opposition they encountered from all sides, from people trying to destroy what they were trying to build up, and when they were so exhausted that they had almost given up hope, Mother Alix always stood firm, strong in the firm faith she felt in the depths of her soul that God wanted this vocation for them, confident that he would give them the grace to overcome their difficulties. She kept their courage up, assuring them that this was God's work.

Life 1666, p. 296 et seq .

... I should work for his glory

On 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. This 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.

Relation, 23

Alix Le Clerc had just made a vow of chastity. She had given up for her God her desire for motherhood. This vision, which seems to have taken place at the beginning of her vocation, is a real revelation of her personality and brings her very close to us.

We see first of all the joy of a woman receiving the child from the arms of Mary, quite simply, like two mothers happening to meet. Then that picture fades in the bright light of an interior vision. Mary's words touch Alix in the depths of her being: she is given the Child to nourish until he is fully grown. The tradition of the Congregation of Our Lady has always been to see in this gesture the sign of its own vocation: to help the child to grow.

But there is more to it than that. The call was to Alix herself to nourish his growth and work for his glory. That date of 2nd February was not long after the Christmas liturgy celebrating the coming of the Word into the hearts of those who awaited him. The humanity of Christ, the nurturing of the infant given by his mother, drew Alix into the mystery of the love of the Trinity. Her union with Christ and her apostolate were no longer separate. Filled with "compassion" for souls, she welcomed the love of God for the entire human race, called to become the Body of Christ. In this she received the confirmation of her vocation to the apostolic life.

Summary

Peter Fourier (beatified in 1730, canonised in 1897) and Alix Le Clerc (beatified in 1947) ... two characters often in contrast, but both spiritually outstanding, possessed by God and open to the world of their own time.

Their experience of God was rooted in one and the same intuition in spite of the different roads they took. This intuition was a vivid awareness of the truth of the Incarnation. Closeness to Jesus Christ had taught them how God sees men and women. Mary, the Mother of God, was always present to them. She gave Alix her Child. At Cana, she prepared for the Word to be accepted and his Glory revealed.

Both Founders had chosen for the Congregation of Our Lady the Augustinian way of life, with its emphasis on liberty in charity and on those interior dispositions of desire and humility which enlarge the heart and manifest themselves by creating "space for God" (Augustine's own words) thus becoming a way of opening out to others.

Since the end of the sixteenth century, "new houses where all possible good may be done" have multiplied, one house founding another. The Congregation of Our Lady, born at Christmas 1597, which has known many vicissitudes, has spread today to four continents, and remains deeply marked by the spirituality of its founders.

To harm no one and to be of service to all.

Peter FOURIER

Let God be your one and only love.

Alix LE CLERC

Selected Texts

Witnesses to the words and deeds of Our Lord

This text is taken from Peter Fourier's "Entretiens" with the nuns of Saint-Mihiel. In an informal tone, he gives them a lesson from the Gospel, urging them to take Jesus Christ as their teacher and follow him as did the Apostles.

Our Lord is seen today choosing for his Apostles poor fishermen, simple people, unlettered, rustic and strangers to learning. He did not intend to spend many years in preaching; he was to return to heaven after his resurrection. He needed to gather together a group of disciples and instruct them in his teaching so that, after his ascension, they could preach it to both Jews and Gentiles, and later to all the inhabitants of the earth. He had to find architects, workmen and masons to build this most holy temple, this Church for all nations.

He needed to create a new firmament to sing the glory of God. Finally, he needed Doctors and Founders for the Church, to teach the world with all its peoples and princes, its kings, philosophers, its educated and uneducated, who would establish the Church throughout the whole world, set like precious stones as the foundations of the new Jerusalem.

Now where does our Saviour turn to find such people? Does he go to Athens, fount of philosophy; to Rome, mother of eloquence; to Jerusalem, even, city of true wisdom? No, he does not go to these great and renowned academies to find doctors, philosophers, orators, Ciceros, Demostheneses, Aristotles, Platos. He goes to the Sea of Galilee and enlists fishermen, poor fellows without possessions. O bounty of God! O Power! O Providence! O Wisdom!

What do I see here? Could there be some point of resemblance?

In our own time Our Lord has been fain to enlist, as witnesses of his words and deeds to the world of little girls, young women who would be their sure guides, teach them and found a Congregation. Did he go to the courts of princes and choose young women renowned for their elegant speaking? No. On the banks of the river Madon, in a village of the Moselle region, he chose young women who were in their own eyes weak and simple, thinking themselves to be nothing more than masks of piety, just shadows of devotion, to adopt your own view of yourselves. To serve as an example to you, and be a consolation to you, Our Lord called ordinary, uncouth individuals and made of them fishers of men. Through familiarity and constant companionship with him, through his teaching and the working of the Holy Spirit from on high, he made them truly wise; poor though they were, he enriched them with heavenly gifts; though common men, he endowed them with a divine nobility and made them princes over all the earth.

These four fishermen were like rough, unhewn stones that the divine mason, Our Lord himself, took between his hands, polishing them and squaring them so as to put them in the most prominent position in the whole building. Well then, consider whether you are not willing to let this same stonemason polish you and make you perfect and shining to all eternity.

What God asks of the Sisters of the Congregation of Our Lady

This outline for a meditation is full of meaning. The prelude is Augustinian in tone, the theological basis is sound, the advice on human relationship realistic, and the whole based on those passages of the Gospel which Peter Fourier particularly favoured.

Prelude

Imagine that Our Lord looks upon our right dispositions, our frank and open good will, and reads in our hearts the joy we experience and the pleasure we have when we hear the beautiful word "love," which stands at the beginning of our Rule, being used and expounded. He sees the desire we have, if we but venture to ask him, to hear from his lips still further effects of this most holy love. Imagine that he then stops us and says that he wants to tell us something and write with his finger in our innermost heart a message which has important consequences for ourselves and for others.

We must immediately be quite still, with the utmost attention we can command, and in deep humility affirm interiorly that we mean to listen to all the Lord wishes to say to us; we must pray to him devoutly to give us the grace never to erase nor to act against what he has engraved in the depths of our soul.

Meditation

Consider how the Sisters of the Congregation of Our Lady, knowing that the love of God stands at the beginning of their Rule, aim in all their works towards these three ends: his honour and glory, their own salvation and perfection and the service of their neighbour. For, aware that all that is done in charity to one's neighbour is accepted by God as done to himself, who desires us to love those he has created, made in his own image and for whom he has died, they set themselves to help their neighbour by every possible means.

They will work for the good of the souls of young girls;
never speaking or thinking ill of them;
sympathising with them and consoling them;
reverencing them as temples of God;
regarding their affairs and their needs as their own;
suffering inconvenience in order to suit their convenience;
praying day and night for their needs.

And since one cannot love one's neighbour except in the measure in which one is humble, patient and courteous (St Paul says that charity is patient and kind, not proud or envious, and never harms another), they pay great attention to these virtues.

Their especial concern is the education of young people ... and, in a word, they search out every means possible and appropriate to their Institute, to be of help to their neighbour.

The human touch

Whether it was a case of some hidden distress,
or of an unjust situation calling for denunciation,
Peter Fourier saw it with unfailing compassion,
resulting in action both clear-headed and effective.

God is urging me to help my people. He would indeed be displeased with me were I to abandon his poor members dying of hunger at Mattaincourt.

31st May 1631

If you only knew what it was like to be a parish priest and to see two or three hundred people in one's parish who have no bread, no butter, no possibility of work, no credit, no furniture to sell, no friends or relations, and no neighbours either willing or able to help, and some of them sick and in poor health, I am sure you would write to me and say: make sure, Father, that you never abandon these two villages.

23rd May 1631

How I pity my parishioners and those whom I love, and those who love me. How I pity all widows and more especially those with children to feed in these troublous times. I pity those who weep and those who are distressed, and those who have goods distrained by the bailiffs and I pity those who face poverty and total ruin because of other people's debts. All such wretchedness can be found in the case of this poor woman, who is utterly desolate and uncertain whom to turn to in this world. She has plucked up courage and is appealing to you on my advice, to see if by any means she may, at your instance, find some kind of alleviation of her distress. Some years ago her late husband, with two of his brothers, contracted a debt of twelve hundred francs to Monsieur de Casenove. [*Monsieur Roder, Seigneur de Casenove, father of Soeur Angélique, a nun at Mirecourt.*] This year, one of the two brothers failing to pay the twenty-eight francs interest he owed, the said gentleman is threatening her with a summons for the sum owed by her brother-in-law ... To avoid ruin for herself and the endless worry she is enduring from this harassment she, and I myself for the love of God and the pity I feel for her, would like to appeal to Monsieur de Casenove to let the matter rest ... And if her influence, together with mine, should not be sufficient to obtain this favour, it occurred to me that, with your permission, I might enlist the help of Soeur Angélique. It is not a major matter and the creditor will not lose by it. Surely he would not refuse his daughter this request ... We are simply asking that the bailiffs should stop badgering us and asking for money in the affair. In this way the tears, pleadings and sufferings of the poor widow would be ended and no longer pierce the heavens at this holy time of Easter.

I call upon the good Soeur Angélique, who does not know what it is to go hungry and to suffer affliction in this world, to take pity on those who have had their fill of suffering, for the love of God and the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of mercy, and to say a word on our behalf to her worthy father. Our Lord will surely reward both father and daughter.

To the Sisters at Mirecourt, 21st April 1631

He said one day that if he had been able, he would have liked to be the Treasurer General (which, at the time, meant Chancellor of the Exchequer) so that he would have had the responsibility of relieving orphans and widows. He would have liked to put poor relief on a properly organised basis and preclude the necessity for begging in the streets. He thought this should not be impossible for Catholics, since one never saw beggars among the Jews and seldom among Protestants. Finally, he would have liked to keep an eye on the royal expenditure, since public finances are usually badly managed: and as a rule it is the subjects who become poor and deprived, their bank balances shrinking as those of the Sovereign increase. And when courtiers (those leeches of the Court) gain the Prince's ear while soliciting some grant or other, the said monarch is unwilling to suffer loss, so it is the people who groan beneath the cruel yoke of tyranny. He knew that the resources of princes are drawn not from the mines of Peru but from the veins of their subjects.

From J. Bedel, *Vie du très Révérend Père Pierre Fourier*, 1656, p. 31

To help them live and live good lives

His daily familiarity with the Gospel had taught Peter Fourier how God looks upon his children. His chief aim was an increase of life; and, especially in education, he urged upon his hearers an approach to children which would help them to develop fully.

May many little, and not-so-little, girls who were formerly forced to beg for their bread, find in these schools a means of learning, without difficulty, free of charge, exempt from dangerous influences and in the shortest possible time, how to earn their own living and even to contribute to the support of their parents. And then, one day, when they have grown older and become mistresses of households or mothers of families, they will be able to teach the same things to their little ones.

Primitif Esprit, p. 8

They shall be taught to live, and to live good lives ...

Constitutions, Introduction to III

One should not think of people as they ought to be, but as they are and as they are capable of becoming.

26th September 1620

Make as much of the poorest child as you do of those held in great esteem.

22nd August 1605

Care must be taken that the poorer children and those of modest station are given their lessons at a time which best suits them.

Constitutions III, 15

They shall not despise nor show irritation with those who have difficulty in learning.

Constitutions III, 16

They shall be taught gently, little by little, in tune with the occasion and their own capacity, to hold themselves in a right disposition towards God.

Constitutions III, 9

Speaking of pupils from Protestant families: If there are any such in the school, do not allow the others to be unkind to them or speak to them contemptuously, or tease them, and do not speak directly against their religion. And when it comes to rewards, do not give them holy pictures (which might offend them) but a bit of gold paper perhaps or a nice pen.

26th February 1624

No vanity shall be permitted there, no haughtiness, no affectation or showing off.

Constitutions III, 10

The pupils shall take care not to despise or offend anyone of their school-fellows, however small or poor she may be. They are to live together in great harmony and friendship.

Constitutions III, 17.22

The school should be full of happiness and merriment.

12th June 1611

The Science of the saints

Whatever their age or circumstances, people can become saints in the vocation to which God has called them.

*A catechism lesson for children
who have not yet perfectly
attained the age of reason.*

A good plan would be for the parish priest or the curate to choose one day a week, an ordinary working day, not a holiday, on which the bell would be rung at midday for all the children, boys and girls, of seven years or less, to assemble in the church. He himself would be there and would take up his stand by the door which would be wide open. When all the children had sat down in an orderly fashion, first of all everyone would make the sign of the cross, and then he would say out loud, distinctly and intelligibly, the Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary and other of the usual prayers of the Church, in Latin or in French or in the local dialect.

Next he should choose one of the more advanced of the children whom he would ask to stand up and repeat what had just been said. If possible, he should ask one or two more to do the same, so as to inspire in the others a desire to learn. A good, devoted pastor will take care not to frighten his beloved little ones by over-severity or threatening words, or anything which might make this little session a burden to them or keep them away. With kindness and a serious yet affectionate demeanour, he will aim at gently, gradually and simply imprinting on these childish souls the first elements of Christian doctrine, while bearing in mind their mental capacity and their intellectual range at that age. After that he will give them his blessing and send them happily on their way.

During the time of this catechism lesson, no adult or person over eight or nine years of age should be permitted to enter the church, so that the instruction may be completely adapted to the younger ones and the curé himself may speak with absolute freedom and in a manner calculated to appeal to little children. Otherwise there might be a danger of his being interrupted or hindered by disruptive and mocking behaviour on the part of older children, and he might be forced to adopt a tone more suitable to their age and beyond the range of understanding of the little ones. Every Sunday, after the sermon, the priest should announce which day of the week parents are to arrange for their children to attend this catechism lesson.

Op. CNS, p. 221

*Recommendations to a Lady of Quality
about to visit her country estate.*

- Pay all your bills before you leave.
- Don't let the village people run into vast expense in order to welcome "Madame."
- Speak to them kindly, politely and with respect.
- Don't buy things on credit.
- Pay your people's wages promptly.
- When budgeting for your stay, set aside a sum sufficient for the relief of the poor, and an "emergency" fund in case of famine or pestilence.
- Arrive for Mass immediately the bell rings, so as not to keep the curé and his parishioners waiting.

Adapted from Op. CND, p. 539

Advice to a diplomat about to undertake a mission

The Marquis de Ville, a friend of Peter Fourier, had asked him to "draw up a little guide to conduct when serving as an envoy on a diplomatic mission." (J. Bedel)

Before his departure

The devout, loyal and prudent nobleman, sent by his Sovereign to other rulers on an important mission of state, wishes to carry out his task successfully for the honour and glory of God and the peace and satisfaction of his superior, on whom he depends. He therefore prepares himself with great care, well in advance, as regards all his future words and actions.

When he returns to his house after his audience with the Prince, he draws up a memorandum of all he has to do, in short paragraphs and in a disguised style, just in case the paper should go astray. These paragraphs contain the main points of his mission and he studies them with care. If he comes across anything he does not quite understand, or if some doubt or problem occurs to him, he seeks a fresh interview with the Prince the following day and respectfully and prudently asks for clarification. When an enterprise of great moment is at stake, the more often it is talked over and clarified the more easily it can be brought to a satisfactory conclusion.

Since God turns his fatherly and merciful eyes upon those who stand humbly before him, and since he cannot refuse any prayers which are made to him in such wise, the envoy should at every moment remember his own weakness, his incompetence and lack of address (or so it seems to him) for a task of such importance, involving negotiations with persons of such high rank in society.

Nevertheless, he must not lose courage nor allow himself to be too anxious as he acknowledges the weakness common to all mankind. He will remember that God expects of us a great and perfect hope together with a firm trust in his goodness, mercy and providence. Those who take their stand, in a rational manner, on these convictions are never disappointed, so long as they make their own contribution by doing all they can to achieve the success of the mission entrusted to them.

At the scene of the negotiations

During the whole of the time spent at the rendez-vous, when business permits, he will devoutly hear Mass daily, recite the Little Office of Our Lady and say the Rosary and other prayers. He will give unstintingly of his time, being afraid neither of long journeys nor of severe cold or heat; he will employ all his patience when forced to wait entire days and half-days and long days one after the other, so as to seize the right moment to approach this or that person. After meticulously carrying out the task entrusted to him by his Sovereign and having obeyed his orders without adding, omitting or changing anything, he will in all courtesy, modesty and prudence, make use of suggestions made to him by this same Prince before his departure, which he will have had the foresight to bring with him.

In all such cases, and in others similar to it, he will not trust his own judgment and good sense. He will carefully avoid any undue haste, and not yield ill-advisedly or too easily to people trying to hurry him on. He should keep before his eyes the excellent motto adopted by the wisest of the Greek philosophers: Make haste slowly.

On returning to his own country

As he approaches the town where he lives and enters it, he says a brief prayer. On dismounting from his horse, he will go to the church to give thanks to God, and then seek an audience with his good Prince, to whom he gives a faithful and accurate account of all that he has achieved and how it was received. He tells him which of the persons with whom he has had to treat have proved cooperative, so that friendly relations may be kept up with them, and which were apparently hostile, not in order to irritate his master, for that would be totally pointless, but to enable him to put into practice the wise counsel of the great sage, Socrates, who said that the duty of a good ruler is to strive to turn his enemies into friends, which is the most peaceful way to proceed...

In all this you can see how religion and good sense work so admirably together that they produce splendid fruits which prove sweet to those willing to gather them.

A loyal ambassador is the health of the State.

Jean BEDEL, *Vie du Très Révérend Père Pierre Fourier*, 1636, p. 364

*From his letters:
various counsels for the
spiritual and secular life.*

My heart is at peace, O God,
it is ready to do your will in all things.

23rd July 1623

The hands of God ... all powerful, infinitely wise.

26th February 1624

Just let God do something on his own, he is much wiser than you.

20th December 1624

Go ahead straightforwardly and in good faith.

5th March 1626

Don't rush at things and don't leave anything undone.

19th October 1637

In the affairs of God we are not always obliged to yield to the hurry of others.

12th April 1622

In all this, we must go forward with a little patience and a great deal of gentleness, humility, prudence and judgment, and with a clear understanding of our purpose.

9th September 1630

Very important and successful enterprises are often based on quite insignificant-looking beginnings.

13th June 1630

You must not take fright or lose courage when faced with difficulties. You will find them everywhere.

1st December 1634

Don't worry or fret trying to do more than you are able. To those who can wait all things come in due time.

2nd March 1624

Prudence is a queen among virtues and her hand is to be seen in all things.

1st August 1637

This is my great principle: in order to make a profit one has sometimes to take a risk. People who are too cautious, who examine every project minutely and never run the risk of losing anything or leaving anything behind, goods or rights or peace or security, these people sometimes, perhaps often, miss opportunities of doing great services to God and their neighbour and of enriching themselves.

10th March 1623

... wondrously devoted to the Holy Spirit

This is Peter Fourier's recommendation during the course of an informal talk to the Sisters of Epinal.

In their Congregation they will try always to maintain a very great devotion to the Holy Spirit, their Director and Sanctifier.

Constitutions VII, 3

They will try to the best of their ability to ensure that their little pupils are faithfully instructed by the means set forth below, and by any further means which it may please the Holy Spirit of God graciously to suggest to their community in the future.

Introduction to Constitutions, III

I think that if you three take the time to put your heads together, and invoke the Holy Spirit who will come and remain with you, then provided you listen to his voice, the four of you together will accomplish marvels.

28th October 1640

Discretion in all this is essential, but above all be governed by the inspirations of the Holy Spirit which are many times surer than human wisdom and which we must humbly count on in all our affairs both small and great.

11th June 1633

Jesus Christ did not leave them books, but promised them the grace of the Holy Spirit, telling them that this Spirit of God would teach them all things.

Op. CNS, I, 19

Today we are celebrating the feast of the descent of the Holy Spirit on Mount Sion and upon the sacred college of Apostles, to inscribe in their hearts the law of the Gospel, the law of love; and we are celebrating, too, the fact that this very day the Holy Spirit will do the same for us, in proportion to our capacity, as he did for the souls of these holy Apostles.

We are celebrating our determination never again to take any step but under the guidance of, and in accordance with, the inspirations of the Holy Spirit. We shall endeavour to do nothing, however insignificant, without first invoking him. He in his turn promises never to leave us unaided when we call upon him.

Homily for the Feast of Pentecost

Queen Charity

Our Lord wills that the Sisters, who together make profession of loving, serving and following him, should imitate him principally in this, that just as he and his Father are one, so they, though many in persons, should also be one heart and soul in God.

... They shall hold themselves in close and perpetual union through the sacred bonds of charity, loving one another with a love that is spiritual, joyful, true and perfect. It shall consist not merely of words, but also be from the heart and that heart pure and clean.

Constitutions II, 7

They will always prefer this fruitful harmony to any material goods which they might possess in this world.

Constitutions VI, 3

They shall pray that they themselves, together with all those not of their number who shall ever be called to their aid, preserve always a mutual understanding and perfect unity. They shall pray, too, that holy Christian humility, Queen Charity, quiet modest patience, the Spirit of God and zeal for souls, reign mightily among them in all this holy work.

Constitutions, Final prayer

Six pieces of good advice

This forms part of Peter Fourier's
last Charge to the Canons of Our Saviour
from the "Annales" of Gilles Drouin

The first, to live together in great charity and to keep in close union in spite of all the efforts of the world and the devil.

The second, to remain humble in heart, mind and deed, and always to be intent on this virtue.

The third, to ensure that all relations between us remain totally frank and friendly, avoiding all intrigue, disingenuousness and laying of traps for one another, since they are hateful monsters, plagues infecting human relationships and baneful to every virtue.

The fourth, to lay aside our personal interests in favour of those of the community, and never to seek our own advancement at the expense of the public or of any individual.

The fifth, always to seek advice before acting.

The sixth, to have recourse to prayer in the smallest of our enterprises.

Prayer to Divine Providence

This prayer of Peter Fourier forms part of the tradition of the Congregation of Our Lady. For centuries the Sisters used it as part of their Night Prayer.

O Divine Providence,
I abandon myself entirely to thee,
and I cast myself upon thee
desiring never to leave the shelter of thine arms.
Thou art my Father and Creator,
Thou knowest the nothingness out of which thou didst draw me,
the clay out of which thou didst fashion me,
the goal towards which I must strive
and the path which must lead me thither.
Dispose of me and all that is mine
according to thy good pleasure.
Henceforward, I desire to know one thing only,
thy Providence;
to recognise it, to adore it,
to submit myself to it with reverence and resignation,
to cooperate with it as far as my weakness will permit,
and to await all things from its divine bounty.
Can I abandon myself into better hands
than those of the most loving of Fathers?

"Listen, daughter of Our Lady ..."

When Peter Fourier, in the Constitutions, speaks of Mary, he discloses a profound spiritual experience. He lingers meditatively over the mystery. In the style of his time, his thought takes its course, measured and majestic, often lyrical, and theologically based on scriptural passages. Mary, Mother of Jesus, is the one who prepares the way to accepting the Word and herself announces it.

LISTEN, Daughter of Our Lady, to the teaching of your holy, wise and loving Mother, teaching which is gracious, efficacious and divine. From a mother's heart come these loving words: Do wholeheartedly whatever my Son, your Lord, Creator, Saviour and Redeemer tells you to do, for he is your God and your Bridegroom.

Open your heart to the Mother of gentleness, mercy and love, the Mother of grace and salvation, of good counsel and wisdom. Listen to her and have faith in her words.

Listen to the voice of your God, her only Son, who speaks intimately to you for love of her. Listen then to him, with love, with consuming eagerness to hear and learn and obey. Listen with your heart to his wise words, as he speaks to you and indicates his holy will.

Listen to the gracious, powerful and efficacious word of your God, who in his mercy seeing from heaven and from all eternity the wide and deep humility of heart which he looked for and hoped for, asked for and foresaw in you, has already deigned and deigns still to call you by your name, to inspire you and to draw you ever closer to himself, saying to you in your spirit: Mary, Anne, Catherine, Margaret, Barbara, or whatever your name is, come and see.

Listen, therefore, to what your Lord says to you. Follow him and his holy Mother very closely. And see in what Congregation, in what place. God's providence and majesty, in his all-embracing love, have been pleased to set you in this world.

It is a sanctuary of prayer, in which a spiritual, heavenly life is led, a life full of virtues, ever tending towards perfection, a life of apostolic sisters, whose concern is not only their own holiness in every possible way, but who try together to put their love, their enthusiasm and their never-ending labour at the service of others: helping souls through wholesome, faithful, steadfast, wise and free education in their schools for girls, both poor and rich.

This is a schooling, an apprenticeship, an ever enduring training towards a kind of holiness befitting women. It is a perpetually flowing spring of true holiness, which spreads through town and villages, and even through whole provinces, to very Heaven itself, in full measure.

In spite of its great holiness, however, it is like a kind of desert, where no one may claim, hope for, ask for, wish or seek for rest or an easy life, or joy or happiness in any other thing but God and in those things which lead to him.

O wise, courageous and valiant daughter, listen, and mark well the thorns you will find in this holy place, and realise that they do no harm: on the contrary they are of profit and delight, and become sweet and desirable; and among them blazes the fire of God's love, which enlightens and enkindles with a sacred flame the hearts, tongues, ears, eyes, carriage, words, actions, thoughts, desires, wishes and longings of all your companions.

For it is he, it is your Lord, your God who has placed you here. It is the King of heaven and earth who has done this marvellous thing for you. It is really he, who is God, and he is yours. It is he, who to reward your total self-offering to him, a gift which excludes nothing and holds nothing back, gives himself entirely to you.

*To him, and to his blessed Mother, be all
honour, glory, service and praise for ever and ever.*

Constitutions CND, extracts from the Preface.

Of the duty of the Sisters of the Congregation towards the Blessed Virgin Mary

The Sisters will always have a great desire to love Our Lord and to please him in everything as far as in them lies. They could not show and express this desire more adequately than in loving what he loved, and in loving the more dearly her whom he loves above all his creatures, his most pure and holy Mother, the blessed Virgin Mary. They shall strive unceasingly, both individually and as a Community, to cherish honour and serve her, by revering her, thanking her, and that by every means they will find most suitable.

They have already chosen her for their Mother, Mistress and Patron, not only because of the conviction they have always held that she herself conceived, brought forth, cared and provided for their Congregation, and that she will continue ever to uphold and powerfully defend it and succour it in all its needs, but also because they have unanimously resolved, from their very beginnings in the spiritual life, to choose in all circumstances, as far as lay in their power, whatever course of action they knew to be the most perfect, most worthy and most pleasing to God.

In virtue of this choice and because all Christians are bound to honour the Mother of God their Redeemer ... they shall love her dearly, tenderly and respectfully, as children love their mother, a Mother all-gentle and merciful, herself most lovable and loving her daughters in a manner beyond compare. They shall honour her as their Mistress, as Queen of virgins, Queen of angels, Queen of all the saints and Queen of heaven. They shall study and revere all her words and actions as a pattern and as a rule of holiness and as a perfect and divine example expressly given them from heaven, for them to ponder over at all times, to admire and to imitate.

They shall ever keep deeply imprinted in their hearts this most precious and divine counsel which fell from her blessed lips, and repeat it often: *Quodcumque dixerit vobis facite*, do whatever my Son, your God, tells you to do.

They shall also try to gently instil devotion to the Mother of God into the hearts of the children in their schools, taking into account the age and capacity of each.

To help these children to persevere in their love and veneration for the blessed Virgin Mary, and so as to deepen their devotion to her and keep them faithful to their duty, the Sisters shall try to explain to them and to imprint deeply in their hearts the four words quoted above: *Quodcumque dixerit vobis facite*. These words will lead them little by little, and as it were by the hand and by the gracious and loving voice of the Mother of God, to carry out willingly whatever Our Lord asks of them at any particular moment. And the Sisters themselves, while teaching this doctrine to others, shall keep ever in mind that their Congregation is by way of being founded on these divine words. For they are all called together under the name and protection of the Mother of God precisely for the purpose of devoting themselves entirely to the task she lays before them, explaining it to them, requesting and desiring it of them. It is summarised in these few words, which they shall keep deeply engraved on their hearts, to be pondered over day and night throughout their lives. And they shall be assured that in obeying them faithfully they are keeping to the spirit of their holy Institute.

Constitutions, II, 6

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