

THE SISTERS OF ST. MAGDALENE IN TRIPOLI (1846-1854)

Research summary Congregational Spirituality Centre, Angers, 2013

This research is linked with the foundation of the Contemplative Sisters in Angola in 2008. As that community was being established, some Sisters wished to know if it was the first contemplative foundation in Africa, and if not, that research be done to verify the circumstances of the first foundation.

Previously in April 2002, the International Commission of Contemplative Sisters in Saint-Louis (United States) had mentioned in a report, the presence of the Sisters of St. Magdalene (the Contemplatives) , in Tripoli (in modern day Libya) .

It was for this reason that the Contemplative Council asked the Congregational Spirituality Centre to research the matter. The research focus is to find out more about these Sisters of St. Magdalene, who joined the mission in Tripoli, and to establish whether or not they formed a community, which if this was the case, would make it the first Contemplative community of the Good Shepherd in Africa.

The research was undertaken by Sr. Maria de Los Angeles Morales in autumn 2012, with the help of the Congregational Spirituality Centre archivist, Sarah Elbisser. Thanks to archival documents referring to the Tripoli foundation, the missionary Sisters of St. Magdalene have emerged from anonymity.

The Tripoli foundation

The Mother House Council book gives the aim of the foundation in Tripoli:

“Since the work of liberating slaves has not been carried out in Cairo, our Worthy Mother has thought it necessary to take it elsewhere. She therefore thought of founding a monastery in Tripoli in Barbary.”

On 20th October 1846, Sr. Mary Alype Richard, a French Sister who had been in Algeria, and at this point changed her name to Sr. Mary Francis Xavier, and Sr. Mary of Jesus Dubois, the Superior of this new foundation formerly known as Sr. Mary Cyr, left the Motherhouse for Tripoli. They were accompanied by two Sisters of St. Magdalene.

The following year, on 2nd November 1847, two other Sisters left Angers for Tripoli, as mentioned by Sr. Mary Euphrasia Pelletier in her letter of October 1847 to Sr. Mary of Jesus Dubois and Sr. Mary Francis Xavier Richard¹: they are Sr. Mary Philomena Romano, the new Assistant from Piedmont (in Italy today), and Sr. Mary Dorothy Esseau, a French Sister who changed her name to Sr. Mary Euphrasia. So the community had six Sisters of whom two are Sisters of St. Magdalene.

¹ Volume VI, letter 1190, pp. 275-276.

Why were Sisters of St. Magdalene sent to this mission? It seems that in making this decision Sr. Mary Euphrasia Pelletier fulfilled the wish of some Sisters of St. Magdalene from Angers who hoped to be part of this new mission. This is the explanation given in the Mother House community letter from 2nd March 1848²:

“We have not yet told you about the little Community of our dear Sisters of St. Magdalene, whose work is now joined to that of redeeming the slaves. Already, last year, we had shared with you the news of their being engaged in working with our dear missionaries, but this year, their zeal for the salvation of souls had grown still more, through prayer, and they begged our Mother for permission for two of them to be among those of our sisters who were the first to go to Tripoli. During the Octave of the Feast of the Sacred Heart, our Mother felt urged to accede to their request, and welcomed it. On November 25th, the Community Sisters went in procession to the Monastery of the Sisters of St. Magdalene. Two of the latter, in a black Habit approved by our Mother, who stood between them both, renewed their vows, adding the Promise to work for redeeming of slaves, in so far as Holy Obedience would direct them. Thus began a new religious work, because those among the young Negresses and Arabs who desired to consecrate themselves to the Lord by vow, could enter into a class of which our dear Magdalens would be the foundation stones. For some time their constitution has been the object of deep reflection by our Mother. We have added some articles which will associate with this work. They are free to choose, some as solitary Magdalens praying for our monasteries, others could be attached to the mission for the slaves... Thus the ground where St. Euphrasia governed so many monasteries will be inhabited by a family which has grown and been formed under her maternal protection. In place of the Magdalen, the name Euphrasia is to be added to the other names given to our Magdalens... They will be called: Euphrasia of....”

A publication note referring to a letter from Sr. Mary Euphrasia Pelletier to Sr. Mary Francis Xavier Richard probably from July 1853³ names the Sisters in the community at this time:

- Sr. Mary Francis Xavier Richard, Superior
- Sr. Mary Philomena Romano, Assistant
- Sr. Mary Dorothy Esseau, known as Euphrasia.

And two French Sisters of St. Magdalene.

They are joined two months later by three other Sisters from Angers: Sr. Mary Mechtilde Flosse, the new Assistant, who changed her name to Mary Augustin, Sr. Mary Marcelle Richard and Sr. Mary Anastasia Seichel, a Maltese novice⁴.

Who are these Sisters of St. Magdalene?

² Mother House community letter from 2nd March 1848 quoted in the introduction to Sr. Mary Euphrasia Pelletier's letters from 1846, volume VI, p. 135

³ Volume VII, letter 1408, p. 246.

⁴ Publication note from Sr. Mary Euphrasia Pelletier's letter from 28th July [1853] to Sr. Mary Francis Xavier Richard, volume VII, letter 1409, pp. 248-249.

Sr. Mary Euphrasia never mentioned their names in her letters. She was clearly concerned about them, was worrying about their integration in the Tripoli community, and mentions them several times in her letters:

- *“May our two little Sisters of St. Magdalene also be blessed⁵. ”*
- *“Go out, my cherished St. Xavier, two or four times each week, you and our sisters, and also the little Sisters of St. Magdalene, to look after and to baptize hundreds of them [Arab children]... Don’t be in a hurry then, about placing the grilles⁶. Remain free then, you can do so much good!... Goodbye my dear daughters. You and my dear Sisters of St. Magdalene are the consolation of your devoted Mother in Our Lord⁷. ”*

In 1854, the house is closed as the situation is very difficult. The Catholic hierarchy not having been established as yet in Africa, the Sisters came directly under the Roman Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith. Releasing slaves is more difficult than expected, and even impossible. Sr. Mary Euphrasia Pelletier is deeply concerned for the community in the year before its departure and still hopes the mission will be continued: *“You are victims, my dearly loved Children, and also our two little Sisters of St. Magdalene. But I implore you, do not abandon this work!⁸”*

Following new research in the Mother House archives, the Sisters of St. Magdalene of Tripoli and their role in this mission have now become clearer. Their religious names are now no longer unknown: one was Euphrasia of St Genevieve and the other Euphrasia of Compassion⁹. According to the Mother House book of admissions for the Sisters of St. Magdalene, they are Sisters of St. Magdalene of St Genevieve Bouvet¹⁰, who made her profession on 15th August 1838, and Sisters of St. Magdalene of Compassion Terrien¹¹ who took the habit on 17th March 1838. It seems both came back to Angers when the Tripoli foundation ended.

The relevant parts of the new documents relating to the Sisters of St. Magdalene have been transcribed in the appendixes.

⁵ Letter to Sr. Mary Francis Xavier Richard, 8th July 1848, volume VI, letter 1229, p. 328.

⁶ Sr. Mary Euphrasia, on the advice of the French Consul in Tripoli, is asking the Sisters not to remain in the enclosure of the convent but to go out to meet the population and to be accepted by them.

⁷ Letter 1410 to Sr. Mary Francis Xavier Richard, 27th August 1853, volume VII, pp. 248-249.

⁸ Letter 1409 to Sr. Mary Francis Xavier Richard, 28th July [1853], volume VII, p. 246.

⁹ See in the appendix the letters from 8th March 1850 from Sr. Mary Philomena Romano to Sr. Mary Euphrasia Pelletier and from 16th September 1851 from the two Sisters of St. Sisters of St. Magdalene to the same.

¹⁰ Born Aldégonde Bouvet in Paris on 19th February 1812, she took the habit on 2nd July 1836 and died on 11th June 1895 in Angers. See her necrology in the appendix 2.

¹¹ Born Virginie Terrien in Saumur, she takes the habit at 20. According to the first volume of the Annals of the Sisters of St. Magdalene Community of Angers, she died on 23rd February 1868.

Appendix 1

Letters¹² related to the Sisters of St. Magdalene of Tripoli

1) Letters from apostolic Sisters

- Letters from Sr. Mary of Jesus Dubois to Sr. Mary Euphrasia Pelletier

- 26th December 1847:

[...] We have given out the assignments according to your wishes. Sister M. of St Philomena Assistant is the novice mistress, M. of St Alype is in charge of the class of sixty-five young Maltese. M. of St Euphrasia is in charge of the boarding house, Euphrasia of Compassion is giving lessons in writing and is very good at it [...] Our two Sisters of St. Magdalene will take possession of the house in the desert¹³, tomorrow the Feast of the Holy Innocents, to whom we commend the holy enterprise of the baptism of Arab children [...].

- 6th January 1848:

Our two dear Sisters of St. Magdalene are also very devoted, you have communicated your zeal for the salvation of souls to them; they will do a lot of good here. [...]

- 1st May 1848:

[...] Our two Sisters of St. Magdalene are settling in [...]

- 15th May 1848:

[...] Mary of St Alype [...] is taking care of the baptism of young Arab children with our Sisters of St. Magdalene . [...]

- 15th September 1848:

[...] Our very zealous Euphrasia of St Genevieve is already exhausted; she is now accepting that she has a very serious illness. [...]

- 10th [February] 1849:

[...] The two Sisters of St. Magdalene have had great temptations; now they are much better. Euphrasia of Compassion, who was the more upset of the two, has just assured us that she would rather die than leave Tripoli of her own will. [...]

Our two Sisters of St. Magdalene have had great difficulty in adjusting to the climate and to the country, and have overcome everything. They are never seen making an intentional mistake. It is a great consolation. They asked us to beg you to allow them to wear a black scapular with their black costume [...].

¹² The spelling has been modified and adapted to modern standards for reasons of reading and understanding.

¹³ Does this expression, frequently used for the house of the Sisters of St. Magdalene at this time, mean that the ones in Tripoli moved, a year after the beginning of their mission, into a house of their own? The question remains unanswered.

- *12th March 1849:*

[...] The Consul of France [...] gave us a piece of black cloth that will be used for the habits of our Sisters of St. Magdalene. [...]

- *9th April 1849:*

We are happy to follow the Rule as perfectly as possible; all our Sisters are very fervent, even our dear Sisters of St. Magdalene who have not made a single intentional mistake for a long time.

- Postscript to the Tripoli community letter from 19th June 1851:

My very dear Sister¹⁴ our two Sisters of St. Magdalene are paying their deep respect to you and asking you not to forget to mention them to Our Mother General and to their good Mothers of the council and chapter, and also to their dear Sisters, and would like to hear from you. Euphrasia of St Genevieve is still unwell and does not do anything; she begs her sisters to pray God to fulfill his holy Will in her. If possible she begs you not to forget them as well as all the Sisters of St. Magdalene, to whom she sends friendly greetings [...]

- Letters from Sr. Mary Philomena [Romano] to Sr. Mary Euphrasia Pelletier

- *8th March 1850:*

Following the signatures of Sr. Mary Philomena and Sr. Mary Euphrasia [Esseau], the letter bears two others:

Euphrasia of Compassion

Euphrasia of St Genevieve

Your two Sisters of St. Magdalene who will always be loyal and submitted to you.

- *Not dated:*

[...] Mother, our two Sisters of St. Magdalene are ill, especially Euphrasia of St Genevieve, it was difficult not to make her fast on Holy Friday. [...]

Letter from Sr. Mary Euphrasia [Esseau] to Sr. Mary Euphrasia Pelletier

- *13th September 1851:*

[...] Our two dear Sisters of St. Magdalene are more and more devoted to the mission, but Euphrasia of Compassion is the only one who can work in the class. She alone has recovered; she is telling us every day that she will go mad because the children are not afraid of her. [...]

¹⁴ The addressee of the letter is not named.

- Letter from Sr. [Mechtilde¹⁵ Flosse] to Sr. Mary Euphrasia Pelletier
- 31st July 1854:

[...] We are only three religious; the Sisters of St. Magdalene cannot stay in Tripoli after what has just been discovered¹⁶ about the other. Everyone is asking for her departure. [...]

2) Letters from the Sisters of St. Magdalene

- Letters from Srs. Euphrasia of St Genevieve and of Compassion to Sr. Mary Euphrasia Pelletier:

L.J.M.

From our monastery of Tripoli this 16th September 1851

My very Honored Mother General

I am taking advantage of the letter our good Mother Assistant is sending you, to put in this little note, to express our deepest gratitude for the few lines you included for us in your precious letter, which was a great joy to us as it proved that you did not forget your two little Sisters of St. Magdalene of Tripoli. We also wish to express our joy that Our Lord is still keeping you close to us in love and gratitude. We would love to be able to share our dear Sisters' joy and happiness of being near you. My cherished Mother, you do not mention your health. This allows us to hope it is good and that God will keep you with us for a long time, which will be a joy and happiness for us. We are however grieved not to hear from our good Mother Aimée of Jesus and from all our dear Sisters of St. Magdalene, this lack of news saddens us; nevertheless we are resigned to the will of God who allows this to be...

My very Honored Mother General we are still on the cross, our Good Mothers are all quite ill as well as myself; all three of us are stricken by the same illness, without any hope of recovering. My dear Mother it would be impossible to stay silent and not come and lay our great grief at your motherly heart. Seeing that our three names are mentioned in your very precious letter, but that you remain silent regarding our dear Mother makes us sad, it would be impossible to explain how much we cried over it, because in spite of her great resignation she has not been able to hide the suffering it caused. My dear Mother, this has made us all sad because the union and charity among us is such that we have only one heart. And how could we not, my very good Mother, have grieved when we saw the pain of our good Mother Assistant! She alone has been our consoling angel in these moments of trial, in these days of suffering and distress that we have had to face in Tripoli. She has known how to console us, and I dare say that without her we would have yielded many times to the temptations of despair that have arisen in our souls. But she has been a consoling angel to us by making us gather once again the courage that was about to leave us, and by the peaceful words she spoke to us. And even now my dear Mother despite her distress, she does not leave our bedsides, but forgets herself to provide the care required by our cruel illness, saying that it is what our Very Honored Mother General

¹⁵ The name is hardly legible.

¹⁶ The letter does not say what the problem is.

would do if we were fortunate enough to have her among us. Ah! My Very Worthy Mother, it would be impossible to describe her zeal, her devotion, and how much this good Mother is attached to you and to the congregation. She is a true saint and is following the spirit of God and yours in all things. Allow us in a few words to say she does all she can to make us forget the pain of exile. Forgive me, Very Honored Mother, for talking to you for so long, but I am only following the feelings you have always taught us to have for all our good Mothers, the one of gratitude, the duty of which we like to fulfill. I will also say my Dear Mother that God has given us a good Father whose untiring zeal consoles us and helps us with his advice to walk the path of religious perfection. I am finishing my Very Honored Mother by begging you to bless us and I kiss your blessed hand; and am in the profoundest of respects in the divine hearts of Jesus and Mary, My Very Honored Mother, your unworthy but obedient and devoted daughter,

Euphrasia of St Genevieve and of Compassion¹⁷

G.B.B.

My Very Honored Mother, we come kneeling to you to ask for a favor, that you allow us to raise our veils, as not being cloistered, we are obliged to speak even to men with our faces uncovered, and it pains us, but we are submitting to your will.

Please give, my Very Honored Mother, our deep respect to all our good Mothers in the Council and Chapter, to Mother Aimée of Jesus, Mother St Philippe and Mother St Vincent, and tell our dear Sisters of St. Magdalene that we always love them.

[Not dated]:

[...] ¹⁸ having only one wish which is to give our entire life to these poor souls; it is very easy to instruct them in this country as they have no religion. We would be very happy if we were called to go by obedience; we would fly there to console and lighten your heart, and we ourselves would die in peace, because we do not want to die without having accomplished this cherished work of yours which is also ours.

Forgive me for this long letter my dear Mother. I am finishing it by prostrating myself at your feet to kiss your blessed hand and to ask for your blessing for all your daughters of Tripoli, and I remain, very worthy and very honored Mother in the divine hearts of Jesus and Mary, with the deepest respect,

Your very humble and obedient
All devoted and unworthy daughter
Euphrasia of St Genevieve and Sister
Euphrasia of Compassion

¹⁷ It seems Euphrasia of St Genevieve also signed for Euphrasia of Compassion.

¹⁸ The beginning of the letter is missing.

Appendix 2
Necrology of Sr. Magdalen (or Euphrasia) of Saint Genevieve Bouvet¹⁹

MAGDALEN OF SAINT GENEVIEVE BOUVET one of the oldest branches of the foundation of our dear solitaires.

This good Magdalen who expired on June 11th was born on the 19th of February 1812 to the Bourbon Palace, her parents being servants to the Prince of Condé²⁰; her mother having died when was still young her father placed her as a boarder with the Religious of the Refuge at Versailles. On leaving there she lived but a short time in the world till she asked admission into the community of Magdalens then in its infancy. M^{elle} de la Salle her protectress recommended her to M^{me} la Comtesse d'Andigné who accepted with all her heart this new child and gave her on the day of reception her own baptismal name Genevieve.

Her profession took place in 1838 and since that time she aided by every means in her power her superiors, and edified, by a humble mortified life her sisters whom she loved; she often entertained them with accounts of the commencement of the Mother House, and in these histories the goodness of our Mother Foundress, M. de Neuville, and M^{me} d'Andigné, was ever brought to the fore.

Surrounded by the care of her mistress and often visited by the Rev. Chaplain, this good ancient Magdalen who was named ADEGONDE in baptism, died at the age of 83 years fifty-nine of which she spent with our Magdalens.

¹⁹ Published in the 9th Congregational Bulletin from June 1895, p. 45. Although her mission in Tripoli is not mentioned in this text, she is only Sister of Saint Magdalene whose name and date of profession match the Sr. Euphrasia of Saint Genevieve spoken of in the letters quoted in the previous pages.

²⁰ The house of Condé was related to the royal house of Bourbon whose members were Kings of France from 1589 to 1792 and then from 1815 to 1830.