The Story of

ST. MARY EUPHRASIA PELLETIER

1796 – 1868

Foundress of
the Congregation of
Our Lady of Charity of
the Good Shepherd
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Her early years

The story of Rose Virginie Pelletier begins on the island of Noirmoutier off the northwest of France, where she was born on 31 July 1796. Her father was a local doctor and she was the eighth of nine children. Julian Pelletier and his wife, Anne, were both from Vendee, a land passionately loved by all who were born there. Being Vendean was synonymous with being Catholic and fiercely loyal to religion during the French Revolution when the Church was being suppressed and abolished.

At an early age, Rose Virginie learnt to pray for the Church, the Pope and all its missions. This she did without fail, every night, before going to bed. She also asked God’s pardon for her faults of the day.

Another very important thing she learnt was that all people were her brothers and sisters. Dr. Pelletier, her father, would visit the sick and bring home those who needed special care. When these people were brought in, her mother would tell the children that these were their brothers and sisters who needed to be cared for. Anne, her mother, managed, in spite of the meagre food supply, to make a good broth so that Dr. Pelletier could take this to the homebound. The little Rose Virginie witnessed all these and like Mary, kept them in her heart.

She passionately loved the sea and was happiest when playing on the shores. She was a born leader who was also mischievous, frequently playing pranks on the unsuspecting. She was responsible for bringing about the excavation of the Church of St. Philbert. She not only successfully persuaded her friends, but some men as well, to help her rediscover and restore the crypt of St. Philbert thereby restarting the devotion to this saint.

Noirmoutier in those days was a place where sailors, who were awaiting their turn at the port of Nantes, came to stay in the motels. As they sat talking around the coffee table, they would share about the captives they were transporting in the ships to be sold as slaves in Europe and America. Little Rose Virginie heard all that was shared. She was so disturbed by it that she harboured dreams of going out and saving these unfortunate people from such great injustice.

When Rose Virginie was twelve, the Ursuline Sisters came to the island and she attended a regular school for the first time. The sudden change from the old, easy, care-free life was trying and she missed the days of familiar roaming about the island of Noirmoutier. The Sisters found her open-minded, and generally well-behaved, but she was also unusually high-spirited, impulsive and not always easy to control.

At the tender age of nine, death struck her family for the first time. Her sister, Victoire-Emilie, who was almost fifteen, fell very ill and died. The family was devastated. In the autumn of the following year, while Rose Virginie was preparing for her First Holy Communion, her father died after a brief illness, at the age of fifty-four. The death was so sudden, so unexpected, that they could scarcely believe it was true.

Anne, worried about giving her children an education that would suit them for life, decided to leave Noirmoutier and return to the Soullans on the mainland. Rose Virginie was inconsolable at the thought of leaving this beautiful
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would pass on their way to the Cathedral. This house, run by the Sisters of Charity, was known as “The Refuge”. It held a particular fascination for Rose Virginie.

On one occasion, the boarders from the school were invited to serve at a special dinner for the girls at the Refuge. Rose Virginie had the opportunity to personally experience the work of the Refuge Sisters. She felt their attempts to provide healing experiences for wounded people impressed her. Rose Virginie decided that she wanted to join this Congregation when she finished school.

Social conditions in late 19th century France

The prevailing living conditions in France for the common people, especially the poor, in the years following the French Revolution were very bleak.

Sending children, especially girls, to live and work in other households was a common practice during this era. Young girls were employed as domestic servants in households throughout Europe. Paid at the end of their terms, these domestic servants were usually allowed to live in the household in quarters provided and were legally dependent on the head of the household they lived in.
The Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Refuge was founded by St. John Eudes in Caen in 1641. John Eudes was an outstanding priest and leader in the Christian renewal of 17th century France. He wanted everyone to experience the love of God. As a preacher, he was able to touch the hearts of many people and help women and girls who were exploited and in moral distress. From a few committed women in this service, the Order of Our Lady of Charity evolved. John Eudes continued preaching for as long as his health permitted. His last years were spent writing, and he died on 19 August 1680.

From 1814 to 1829, Mary Euphrasia lived in the convent in Tours. She governed, planned and successfully organised programmes for women, but more importantly, she immersed herself in these programmes. She heard the stories of the women, their pain, and their longings and allowed these pleas for justice to touch her own heart. Their stories, and their cries fanned the spark within her. In embarking on her unknown journey, Mary Euphrasia had the gift of attracting like-minded people, be they religious or lay. For Mary Euphrasia, the passion to see justice done began in the heart and led her, and people around her, to where they would not normally go.

In 1831, Mary Euphrasia’s first major innovation was the establishment of a contemplative group of Sisters within the Congregation. This was a response to the direct request of some of the girls who wanted to become Sisters but who did not possess the necessary requirements to qualify as postulants. Mary Euphrasia founded the Magdalens, known today as Contemplative Sisters of the Good Shepherd who lived a cloistered life and offered their prayer and work for the success of the work of the Refuge.

Women and children were left to fend for themselves as a result of the men having to leave home to join the army and navy, and many never returned. Hunger was prevalent; women were forced to leave the countryside to find work in the larger towns. There was overcrowding in the towns and diseases were widespread. Abortion, infanticide and abandonment were rife. Women and children were exploited and made submissive to men with little recognition of their value. There was limited access to education. Civil disorder was a common scene after the storming of the Bastille in 1789. In fact, all through Rose Virginie’s life, there were wars and uprisings with intermittent periods of peace.

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**Rose Virginie joins Congregation founded by St. John Eudes**

In October 1814, Rose Virginie responded to the call to join the Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Refuge, a Congregation that reached out to women and girls who were marginalised by society; many were victims of the events that were taking place in France at the time. Ten months later, Rose Virginie received the habit and her religious name of Sr. Mary Euphrasia. In Greek, Euphrasia means “Beautiful Speech”. On the morning of the Clothing, she solemnly promised to devote herself until her dying day to that same cause for which Christ died, and to spend herself and be spent in reclaiming souls for Him.
After two months with the new community at Angers, she returned to Tours where she found out that the Sisters were quite annoyed with her for being away for so long. Over the next two years, she was torn between requests from the community at Angers telling her that things were not going well and she was needed there, and the Sisters at Tours telling her that her place was with them.

In 1831, she was appointed superior at Angers and it was with much anguish and uncertainty that she tore herself away from Tours, which had been her home all of her religious life.

Mary Euphrasia set about developing the work at Angers and reconnecting with helpers and benefactors, many of whom had withdrawn over the previous two years due to the lack of encouragement and appreciation. Soon, vocations began to flow towards the Good Shepherd. Seventeen novices were received in October 1831. With the help of Count de Neuville, a new church was built and dedicated in 1834.

At one stage, Mary Euphrasia found herself badly in need of a professed Sister for an important office but none was available. She appealed to Tours for help and was unconditionally refused. She then turned to the Nantes Refuge but received the same reply. It made her wonder about having a common Founder, a common Rule, one and the same purpose, but living so hemmed in by one’s own interests that one could not stretch out a helping hand to a sister-house in need.

St. John Eudes had founded his houses as separate and autonomous entities. Why, she asked, were there so few houses of Refuge after a century and a half? It dawned...
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From the moment the Order was declared to be under a general government, demands for foundations began to pour in. At the same time, the number of vocations multiplied. Mary Euphrasia was now certain that it was the will of God that the Good Shepherd should expand and multiply its works of mercy. Over the next thirty-three years, she laboured tirelessly as she responded to one request after another to open houses in France, Europe, United States, Latin America, Asia, Oceania, and Africa. At the age of sixty-six, Mary Euphrasia expressed envy of her missionary daughters. If only she could be with them! “Ah,” she exclaimed, “if I were thirty, nothing could hold me back!”

Mary Euphrasia and her first lay collaborators

It was when Mary Euphrasia was in Tours that she first made the acquaintance of Countess d’Andigne, a wealthy landowner cum philanthropist from Paris who travelled regularly through Tours to oversee her properties in the area. It was she who brought her concern for the condition of women and children exploited in the factories, and news that the Bishop was looking for someone to begin a “Refuge” in Angers. Countess d’Andigne helped Mary Euphrasia and became her companion and financial sponsor in her extensive travels. Through her connections with...
influential persons, she unravelled difficulties and spread knowledge about the Good Shepherd Congregation.

By far the most important lay collaborator in the early days of the Good Shepherd mission was Count Augustin de Neuville. He later became a great friend and benefactor of the Good Shepherd Sisters, and to Mary Euphrasia, who sought and valued his advice on social and business matters.

Count de Neuville gradually absorbed the spirit of the Congregation from Mary Euphrasia and her burning desire to bring love and hope to those in need. He became its protector, in fact its co-founder.

In addition to his financial assistance, which was considerable, Count de Neuville offered strong moral support to the budding Congregation. On his suggestion that Mary Euphrasia needed “a central house to coordinate her various foundations,” he signed the request for the Generalate. He even went so far as to represent the Good Shepherd before the courts in 1842 in a case of false accusation. He wrote and spoke French, Greek, Latin, German, Italian and English fluently, and with his gift for languages, it was natural for him to help Mary Euphrasia with her correspondence.

He was generous but he wanted, above all, for the Religious of the Good Shepherd to be faithful to their mission. He understood the challenges of the Congregation and was not afraid to express his views on the qualities that a Good Shepherd Sister should have. He advised Mary Euphrasia to ensure each prospective candidate was aware of the life which they would have to live, with its fatigue, sacrifice and ceaseless labour.

“This good father, she recalls, often said to me that I must not leave out anything about what is painful in our vocation, in our obligations. If after that, he adds, one acknowledges to you that her goal is not to devote herself to so many work, because she likes better meditation and rest in God, say to her very quickly: “My daughter, blessed you are. Go, ask to be received at Carmel or the Visitation: it is not here that the Good God wants you.”

At the heart of the relationship between Mary Euphrasia and Count de Neuville was a spiritual connection. Both devoted their whole existence in the service of God, and for women and young people in suffering.

Mary Euphrasia and that inner spark

It is difficult to define what the ‘inner spark’ was in Mary Euphrasia that propelled her to draw in and attract people around her to join in the same journey, the same movement with her. The questions that we continue to ask ourselves today remain:

- What was the energy or power within that moved Mary Euphrasia?
- What was it that made her so passionate about this mission even in the face of objections?
- What had Mary Euphrasia experienced that inspired her to say, “One person is of more value than the whole world”? 
Towards the end of her life, Mary Euphrasia confided many things about her calling to the novices. She had her share of separation and grief, and would say: “Truly, I was unhappy, I often cried. Then I turned resolutely to God and I discovered that I was loved with an inconceivably personal love.” Herein lies the secret; she was loved … and this love had to be shared!

This intense love became the foundation of the experience of that “something,” that spiritual fire which was to form the basis of Mary Euphrasia’s approach to the women and children who were marginalised by society. That was the passion which she shared with the Sisters and her lay collaborators. That was the experience that brought forth the belief, “One person is of more value than the whole world.” She wanted to “do” many things, “show” in many ways this experience, but she realised her limitations. One thing, however, she could do – Love – and that she did with all her heart. “I was not possessed of great talents, but I loved, and I loved with all the strength of my soul.”

Her deep spiritual experience at the age of sixteen was a determining factor for her faith and trust in the heart of God on one hand, and her empathy for the suffering person on the other. People who have been maltreated, feel devalued and “lost”, must be told and must experience that they are of worth, and that a better future is in store for them.

“It is not enough that you love them, they must feel that they are loved.” “You have a heart created to love and to be grateful, therefore let the expression of your joy and gratitude for the great grace of your vocation ascend to God. Love your vocation. Desire to have a thousand lives to offer to the Lord and return him love for love … Great and noble thoughts are the fruits of gratitude. Gratitude is the memory of the heart.”

Mary Euphrasia was not afraid to show affection and had the gift to share this conviction, to communicate it, not only in words but also in action and attitude. Calling for and offering hot, plentiful nourishment, the warm cup of milk, the extra bundle of firewood on a cold day – all of them showed a delicate attention to the person.

Mary Euphrasia believed that the more the Sisters and lay collaborators contemplated the concern of the Good Shepherd for the lost and hurting, the greater would be their sense of justice, their ability to be creative and take risks, and their readiness to share of themselves; these would also become evident in their approach to the work.

Mary Euphrasia the creative nonconformist

An abundance of children born out of wedlock were left to fend for themselves, and when the government sent them to the Good Shepherd Sisters, there was no place to house them, as Mary Euphrasia did not want to mix them with the children already in the home. These children needed a different atmosphere and attention. As a God-send, St Nicholas
Zeal comes from the Greek word zelos, which means “to burn” or “hot enough to boil or bubbling over”. This zeal was bubbling over in Mary Euphrasia from her childhood to her death. She never tired of speaking about zeal to her Sisters and she spelt out more compellingly what this word meant by her life. In her Conferences, she said, “Do not be attached to one little corner of the earth, we must not fear to go and pitch our tents on the most distant shores.” For her, love and zeal were always united. She loved much and was ever ready to spring into action at the least sign of God’s will for souls.

When the Generalate was approved, she wrote to the Sisters, “Since Rome has spoken, I am transported with zeal in God and for Him.” At the time of the approbation, there were only four houses.

A few months later, Mary Euphrasia wrote to Sr. John of the Cross, “Truly my dear daughter, the designs of God are impenetrable, who can fathom them? We see this cloud, so small at first, cover the whole of France.” Cover the whole of France she did, by founding 32 more houses.
Mary Euphrasia and partnership in mission

Throughout Mary Euphrasia’s lifetime of work helping the poor and marginalised, she demonstrated qualities that made her stand out as a woman who was ahead of her time – qualities that are as relevant today as in her time. Among these are:

a. Her ability to trust, to be open to new ideas and to accept the contributions of others

Mary Euphrasia felt deeply the plight of children. How did Mary Euphrasia reach out to them … restore their dignity? She worked with other women who were eager to share in this mission, who had new ways and ideas of going about bringing mercy, compassion and justice.

b. Her “daring audacity”, teamwork and networking ability to respond to the signs of the times

Children were sent to prison and lived in the midst of adults, subject to the same regulations as them. Mary Euphrasia, with her Sisters and her close collaborators, were attentive to their times, to the movements of public opinion and to the development of legislation. On August 6, 1850, the French Parliament enacted a law concerning young detainees: those sixteen years or below had the right to receive instruction and education. Mary Euphrasia worked for the right of the child to receive instruction and education based on the legal and administrative framework, to set up the work. Almost every three weeks, large groups of young girls arrived at her doors, under detention as prisoners. Imagine the tremendous work the Sisters had to do! Despite the shortage of staff, Mary Euphrasia and the Sisters welcomed them with open arms.

c. Her projects for economic justice

From the earliest days, recognising the dignity of labour, the Sisters involved the women in livelihood projects. Mary Euphrasia used the Good Shepherd “network” to bring resources or work to the foundations. The houses exchanged addresses, recipes and participated in a distribution network from Angers. One cannot help but admire the ingenuity and courage of Mary Euphrasia and the first generation of Sisters.

d. Her creativity in fundraising

Mary Euphrasia was very inclusive by nature and constantly conscientising others to be part of the mission of justice.

Allowing herself to be touched by the socio-political realities of the time, she responded by founding many more houses for women and children in France and abroad where women were welcomed with love. The approach was focused on working to remove anything that hindered human growth – anything that prevented people from developing spiritually, physically, mentally, economically, creatively and so forth.

Mary Euphrasia’s burning desire, her zeal to let others far and wide experience kindness, access
food, shelter, and a loving place they could belong to and live with dignity, these are what we term today as basic human rights.

Mary Euphrasia wanted to expand, but had problems financing her many new ventures in favour of the poor. She had creative, sometimes persuasive ways of raising funds. She did not hesitate to ask the haves to help the have-nots, to ask on behalf of the poor; even the convents were not spared. For the foundation of the house in Algiers in 1843, Mary Euphrasia chose to appeal to her various convents. She acknowledged a donation from the convent in London and the already impoverished convent in Avignon.

Mary Euphrasia felt that it was her duty, and that of her Sisters’, to improve the living conditions of people who were suffering even if it meant utilising imaginative techniques to achieve their objectives.

e. Networking with Government / Corporate Social Responsibility projects

Taking care of the less fortunate, she knew, was also the responsibility of the Government. She would get from the Government whatever would facilitate her work. The following are two extracts from Letter 1426, pg 268, and Letters Vol. V1 1849 – 1855.

"Dear Sir
As our Congregation is very large and we have houses of our Institute in almost every part of France, of Europe and in every corner of the world, we are obliged to undertake journeys which can at times mount up to 150 - 200 seats per year … we request you to be so good as to grant us a discount … infinitely grateful to you sir if you would give us this proof of your kindness in favour of our work and apostolate all of which is in the interest of the poor."

In a letter to the Bishop of Bavaria, she wrote: “The French Government entrusts to our houses the poor young girls between fourteen years of age and sixteen who would have been condemned to prison because of stealing so as to protect them from shame and dishonour: for the latter, maintenance is always paid to us on their behalf.”

Her last days

Sorrow and joy alternated almost without interruption in Angers and the new houses. There were difficulties connected with each of the foundations, entailing a great deal of hard work. Throughout these hardships, Mary Euphrasia endured and embraced them, and said “Great crosses bring great graces.”

Ardent prayer sustained her. “Pray, be silent and hope” became her motto. She loved to repeat: “I belong to every country where there are souls to be saved.” Her work of saving them was going on apace, and souls were bought at a great price.

Mary Euphrasia’s last years were very lonely. Labour, enterprises, intense activities, physical and moral...
After her death, Mary Euphrasia founded, in her lifetime, 110 houses on every continent. Today, the Mission Partners of the Good Shepherd (Sisters and Lay) are present in more than 70 countries, embracing the world with their zeal for the salvation of all people. A year after the death of Mary Euphrasia, the Ceylon (Sri Lanka) mission was founded. From Ceylon, the Good Shepherd Sisters came to Singapore in 1939 and reached Malaysia in 1956.

It is not easy to sum up the life of Mary Euphrasia. Perhaps it is best understood in terms of her own wish for her Sisters: “You will effect no good, my dear Sisters … until you become animated with the thoughts, sentiments and affections of the Good Shepherd” and “Live His way of life.”

**Conclusion**

Today, we face many challenges including helping women and children, especially those who are trafficked, forced to migrate and oppressed by abject poverty. What do you think Mary Euphrasia has to say to us?

“I leave the Institute in your hands, you will sustain it.”

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**MINISTRIES AND SERVICES IN THE PROVINCE OF SINGAPORE-MALAYSIA**

**SINGAPORE**

*Marymount Centre*
- Ahuva Good Shepherd
- Good Shepherd Student Care
- Good Shepherd Centre
- Marymount Kindergarten
- Good Shepherd Convent Kindergarten

*Marymount Convent School*
- Good Shepherd Oasis

*Good Shepherd Restful Waters*

*Developing All Women in the New era (DAWN)*

**MALAYSIA**

*Pusat Kebajikan Good Shepherd*

*Women*
- Rose Virginie Good Shepherd Centre, Perak
- Seri Murni Crisis Centre, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah
- Mobile Women Empowerment Programme, Sabah
- Pusat Kebajikan Good Shepherd (Women Shelter), Selangor

*Children*
- Pusat Kebajikan Good Shepherd (Teenage Centre), Selangor
- Asrama Desa Pukak, Sabah
- Learning Resource Centre, Sabah
- Mobile Children Programme, Sabah

*Youth*
- YouthPREPCentre, Sabah

*Community*
- Seri Murni Crisis Centre, Sandakan
- Socio-Economic Development Programme, Sabah

*Good Shepherd Schools*
- Villamaria Good Shepherd Kindergarten and Nursery, Kuala Lumpur
- Mariaville Good Shepherd Kindergarten, Ipoh