



This year we celebrate 220 years since the birth of St. Mary Euphrasia in Noirmoutier. As the first reflection of a 3 year project, we offer some thoughts to stimulate your personal connection with her life and your conversations in your religious community, your family and in your social and work environment. Your reflection and sharing will no doubt challenge you to follow even more courageously in her footsteps today.

“Roses trémières” growing in front of the Birth House of St. Mary Euphrasia in Noirmoutier.

How did the world prepare to welcome the birth of Rose Virginie Pelletier?

The tiny island of Noirmoutier in France (28km X 10km), on the edge of the Continent of Europe was not where her parents Julien Pelletier and Anne Mourain planned to be for her birth. They had been displaced and brought as prisoners with several others from their home in Soullans on the mainland to the castle in the island in February 1794 having been suspected of being royalists. This was the era of the “reign of terror” which followed the French Revolution and was particularly violent in the area of Vendée where the castle was used as a “dumping ground” for people prior to being killed. More than 3000 people were massacred in Noirmoutier at that time.

We can imagine the suffering this couple experienced (Anne 33 and Julian 42). They had had 7 children prior to their arrest; one, Sophie, had died when she was one and they were still grieving the loss the previous year of Nathalie aged 10. The anguish for Anne’s mother left with 5 terrified children in Soullans and fearing the worst for her daughter and son-in-law must have been indescribable.

Following 3 months in prison, the Pelletiers were freed but not totally. They could not return home or have their family with them; they were assigned to a residence at 1 rue des Douanes in the town centre. This was due to the fact that Julian Pelletier was a doctor and could be useful to the Republicans. Also it emerged that Anne Pelletier had tipped off the Republicans about an ambush which she became aware of being planned against them and so saved the lives of nearly 300 soldiers. This shows great courage on the part of the mother of a young family.

Following the trauma of deaths, separation, displacement, and imprisonment the couple gave birth to their 8th child Rose Virginie on 31st July 1796, a day which became known at the time as “Freedom day” in France, a sign of new hope.

**Symbol of Vendée
(Noirmoutier is in Vendée department)**



For reflection, conversation and action

- a. *What was going on in your family and in the world immediately prior to your birth?*
- b. *What circumstances in Rose Virginie’s birth are being echoed in your country today?*
- c. *This year 2016 shows the highest number of displaced people ever registered in the world at 65.3 million. Like Anne Pelletier, how can you use your voice to diminish these numbers?*

An island childhood that was not “insular”

After Rose Virginie’s birth the family were able to be reunited in Noirmoutier and when she was 5 the youngest child Paul-Fidèle was born. They were especially close all their lives.

Rose Virginie became attuned to the sufferings of others when her parents brought home people in difficult situations to help them get on their feet.

At the age of 9 she felt bereft when her sister Victoire-Emilie died at the age of 15. This grief was further compounded a year later when her father Julian died at the age of 54. The family was devastated.

Rose Virginie grew up in the island with a great sense of freedom. This was linked to the fact that there was no formal schooling until she was 12. Her parents taught her to read and write. Not surprisingly, she had difficulty adjusting to the discipline of school. She showed great interest in studying the Gospels and got a prize for being able to recite the four accounts of the passion by heart.

There was a sense of safety on the island, which allowed a young girl go to the quays with her older brothers Arsène and Constant to talk to sailors and hear their stories concerning young girls in other countries being sold as slaves. This shocked Rose Virginie and she later said she could not countenance the continuation of such injustice.



To this day her name is still mentioned several times each day on the island, when visitors listen to the commentary in the crypt in the church of St. Philbert, the most visited place on the island. Rose Virginie discovered this by chance (serendipity!!) with one of her friends and was instrumental in restoring it and thus renewing devotion to St. Philbert on the island.

Crypt of St. Philbert

Philbert came to Noirmoutier with his monks in the 7th century to live “a quiet contemplative life”. However, when he saw the poverty of the people he set about developing dykes and salt beds to help them generate some income. The infrastructure which he established has continued to serve the island.

For reflection, conversation and action

- a. *What resonates with you in Rose Virginie’s childhood experience?*
- b. *How did your childhood environment influence the person you are today?*
- c. *In what ways is the “contemplative desire” leading you to “social engagement” and vice versa?*
- d. *What contribution can you/we make to ensuring that equal access to education is established for all, especially girls? (See sustainable development goals n°4,5 and 10 on home page of congregational website: www.buonpastoreint.org)*
- e. *What infrastructure/processes are you leaving for future generations?*

Turning points in Rose Virginie's early life

Rose Virginie was excited about her older sister Anne Josephine's wedding in Bouin in 1810. This excitement turned to sorrow when a guest Madame Chobelet suggested to her mother to send her daughter to her boarding school in Tours. Madame Pelletier agreed.

This separation involving a journey of 3 days and coming so quickly after the Pelletier's move from the island back to Soullans, was particularly heart-breaking for the young teenager.

The confinement of life in the boarding school together with the oft-times irrational personality of the directress made school very difficult. However, she developed friendships which were to last throughout her life. Angelique Dernée who became a Carmelite and Pauline de Lignac her teacher who became a co-foundress of the Ursuline Sisters of Dole were always there for her.

Given that Tours at that time was so far away from home, it was her friends who supported her when her brother Constance died when she was 16 years old. The most wrenching loss came when she was 17 years old and she heard of her mother's death. Referring to her pain later she said "I thought I was going to die..." Her mother was already buried by the time the news reached her. In 2013 on the 200th anniversary of this sad event, the Congregational Spirituality Centre and the parish of Noirmoutier together with members of her family had a special commemoration and placed a plaque in the cemetery in Noirmoutier, where Mrs. Pelletier had requested to be buried with her husband and daughter Victoire-Emilie. The grave has never been located.



Cedar of Lebanon.
Tree growing in the Bishop's garden,
planted 4 years before the arrival of
Rose- Virginie in Tours

The difficulties and misunderstandings which she experienced in school together with the loss of loved ones, did not close her in on herself or make her bitter. Rather these increased her sensitivity to the pain of others. She turned towards God and discovered that she was loved by God with an indescribable love.

The boarding school in Tours was quite close to the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity home for girls in difficulty. The students were given the privilege of doing voluntary work at certain times during the year. The life and work of the Sisters touched Rose Virginie very deeply. Based on her experience of being totally loved by God, she wanted to help women in need to have a sense of being loved and to help them get on their feet. Thus she decided to join the community in 1814, despite opposition from her brother-in-law and guardian. He would have preferred a congregation with a "higher status" e.g. Sisters of the Sacred Heart.

For reflection, conversation and action

- a. *What has been/continues to be a "defining experience" in your life?*
- b. *What events in your life have "broken your heart" and how have you grown through them?*
- c. *What motivated you in the life choices you have made and how did geographical proximity play a part in these?*
- d. *How have you dealt with opposition to your life choices and what gave you courage?*
- e. *What place are you giving to friendship in your life and how are you cultivating friendships?*
- f. *How do you reach out to people who are grieving especially those who have not been able to be present at the burial of loved ones e.g. those killed in war, drown at sea?*

Making Life Choices



The convent of St. Gatien where Rose Virginie entered in Tours is very close to the Institute of Christian Education; in fact she could see the school from one of the stairs. In many respects it seems that she adjusted fairly easily to the rhythm and regularity of monastic religious life.

Stairs in convent of St. Gatien

Members of the community of Our Lady of Charity had only reassembled in 1806, having spent several years dispersed due to the French revolution. Many were tired and traumatized by the effects of this experience. Rose Virginie and some others who entered at the time brought new life to the group.

Rose Virginie used her time in formation as a postulant and novice in studying Scripture and absorbing the teachings of the founder St. John Eudes and other Church fathers. The fruits of this study are seen in her letters and in the Conferences which she later gave to novices.



Stole representing St. John Eudes
Displayed in the Good Shepherd Museum of Angers

Rose Virginie had a great feel for the girls in residence at the refuge. She empathised with them and showed amazing creativity in dealing with challenging behaviour.

The space was fairly cramped for 20 girls and a small number of sisters. In a poem which she wrote shortly after her first profession, we get a sense of her frustration that the place is not bigger so as to be able to help more people.

This “wanting more” was shared by her friends in community Sr. Marie Stanislas Bedouet y Sr. Victoire Houette. They were dreaming together of what new things they could do to help more and more people.

Rose Virginie was fortunate to find a good spiritual guide in the confessor Fr. Alleron, who became and remained a life-long friend. He helped her particularly in a protracted time of “inner darkness”.

For reflection, conversation and action

- a. *What are the major influences which give meaning to and have shaped your life up to now?*
- b. *How do you communicate some of this meaning?*
- c. *What is the “more” to which you/ we are being called in this place at this time and how can we communicate and collaborate together to make this “more” happen?*