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CHAPTER I

A CHILD OF THE REVOLUTION

In France, Bellegarde is the final stop of the high-speed train running from Paris to Geneva. It is a small city nestled in the Jura Mountains near the banks of the Rhône. It has become a busy crossroads for skiers en route to Evian, for tourists, business travelers, and even commuters to Geneva, which is just 25 minutes away.

If, however, instead of moving on, one takes the narrow road up the mountain, one passes through the tiny villages of Ballon, Lancrans, Confort, Chézery, and finally Lélex, which is almost at the same altitude as Gex, the most important town in the region and in the department of l'Ain. There are cars now, some new houses and, in Confort, a residence for the elderly, the *Maison Sœur Rosalie*, but in reality the area has changed little in size or appearance since the late XVIIIth century when Jeanne-Marie Rendu, known in religion as Sister Rosalie, was born there.

For many years, despite numerous treaties, the region had remained part of the Kingdom of Savoy. It would only be in 1760, during the reign of Louis XV, that it would definitively become a part of France. Known diversely as *Confort*, *Comfort*, and *Réconfort*, the village of Sister Rosalie's birth takes its name from the chapel of *Notre-Dame-de-Consolation* or *Réconfort* which the Cistercian monks had built there in the XIIth century and which had become a site of Marian pilgrimages. The chapel no longer stands but the name endures.

The Rendu family had been in the area that covered the former parish of Lancrans since the end of the XVth century. According to Sister Marie-Madeleine Manceau, a Daughter of Charity, who was the local superior of the *Maison Sœur Rosalie* in 1927 and who knew the family history well, "in the XVIIIth century there were twenty-four Rendu households, consisting of more than 130 persons: one sixth of the total population."⁵ Armand de Melun described the family as belonging to "this ancient bourgeoisie which by long years of useful work had attained a standard of living that was equidistant between

⁵ Letter of Sister Manceau, 24 August 1927, Archives des Filles de la Charité, Paris. Hereinafter cited as AFCP; Henri Desmet, C.M., *Sœur Rosalie, une Fille de la Charité, Cinquante ans d'apostolat au quartier Mouffetard* (Paris, 1950), 16.

luxury and want. Their social position, which was more honorable than glittering, attracted respect rather than envy."⁶

The prominence of the Rendu family beyond the confines of the Jura was further attested to by the Mayor of the XIIth arrondissement in Paris, Adrien Leroy de Saint-Arnaud, when, on 22 December 1856, he dedicated a bust of Sister Rosalie which was placed in the assembly room of the town hall. In his discourse he stated, "For many years, [the Rendu family] has given lawyers to Parlement and notaries to the provinces. The University and the magistrature are indebted to [the family] for high officials. Today [Rendu] descendants, by their meritorious service of Church and State, in administration and at the bar, still reflect its honorable origins."⁷

The initial diocesan investigation into Sister Rosalie's life opened in Paris in 1953. Its purpose was to look into the possible introduction of her cause for beatification by the Catholic Church. In her earlier written testimony, Sister Louise-Clémence-Claire Saillard, a Daughter of Charity who, in 1852, was in the initial stage of her formation in the house where Sister Rosalie was the local superior, recalled, "I know that she belonged to an honorable, very Christian family that was persecuted during the Revolution because of its attachment to the Church. Her parents had the privilege of hiding several priests during the Reign of Terror and of risking their lives to assist at the holy sacrifice of the Mass."⁸

But what do we know specifically about Sister Rosalie's immediate family and of her life in Confort which she left definitively before her sixteenth birthday? To what extent did the land and the people of this tiny village form her and prepare her for the life she was to live in an environment that was the antithesis of the one in which she had spent her childhood and adolescence?

If the Rendu family had its illustrious members, Sister Rosalie's parents were among the more modest ones. The birth certificates of her younger sisters, Jeanne-Antoinette and Jeanne-Françoise state explicitly that her father, Jean-Antoine, was a "tiller of the soil."⁹ Vincent de Paul had used a similar appellation to describe

⁶ Melun, *Vie de la sœur Rosalie*, 1.

⁷ Adrien Leroy de Saint-Arnaud, *Inauguration du buste de Sœur Rosalie* (Paris, 1856), 22.

⁸ Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, *Rendu, Positio; Sommaire*, 61.

⁹ Departmental Archives, l'Ain.

his own father.¹⁰ While clearly not rich, Jean-Antoine possessed land and after his marriage to Marie-Anne Laracine on 7 February 1785, in the church of Lancrans,¹¹ the young couple moved into one of the few houses in Confort. From later accounts, it appears that there were at least two servants in the household and that the family had the means to provide some assistance to persons who were poor living in the area.¹²



Parish church in present day Lancrans.
Courtesy of the author

There were four children, all girls, born of this marriage. According to the baptismal records of the parish of Lancrans they were: Jeanne-Marie, the future Sister Rosalie, on 9 September 1786; Marie-Claudine, on 8 September 1788; Jeanne-Antoinette, on 4 May 1793; and Jeanne-Françoise, on 19 March 1796.¹³

¹⁰ Pierre Coste, C.M., ed., *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondance, Entretiens, Documents*, 14 vols. (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre J. Gabalda, 1920-1925), 9:81. Hereinafter cited as *CED*. All citations will be from this edition.

¹¹ Archives, Parish of Lancrans.

¹² Melun, *Vie de la sœur Rosalie*, 4.

¹³ Archives, Parish of Lancrans.

Aside from the fact that he was a farmer who was able to provide adequately for his family, little is known of Jean-Antoine Rendu who died at the age of 33, on 12 May 1796 when his oldest child, Jeanne-Marie, was not yet 10 years old. The untimely death of her father was followed on 19 July of the same year by the death of her 4-month-old sister, Jeanne-Françoise.¹⁴ Thus, full responsibility for the household and for the education of her three daughters fell squarely on the shoulders of the young widow. Those familiar with Sister Rosalie's childhood are in agreement in stating that her mother was admirably suited to the task.¹⁵

Let us now turn our attention to those formative years and try to discern how they marked Jeanne-Marie, whom her family called "Marie." It is surely here, in the rugged terrain of the Jura Mountains, that the character of the future apostle of the Mouffetard section of Paris was formed. Born in Confort, Jeanne-Marie Rendu was baptized the same day in the parish church of Lancrans, there being no parish church in Confort at the time. The Baptismal record lists her godparents as Nicole Rendu and Jean-Joseph Rendu, her grandfather.¹⁶ Sister Rosalie would later state that he was her godfather by proxy, replacing his close friend, the superior general of the Sulpicians, Jacques-André Emery, S.S.¹⁷ Indeed, Father Emery would play a decisive role not only in the future consecrated life of his godchild but also of the Daughters of Charity during the dramatic and often traumatic years following the Revolution of 1789.

Jeanne Marie Rendu, fille d'Antoine Rendu et de
 le Plaisance, épouse de Marie, naquis et fut Baptisee
 le, mesd Septembre Mil sept cent quatre vingt
 six, par messieurs Jean Joseph Rendu, pere à figure
 Mairaine Nicole Rendu, et le terec enquis.
 Jean Joseph Rendu.

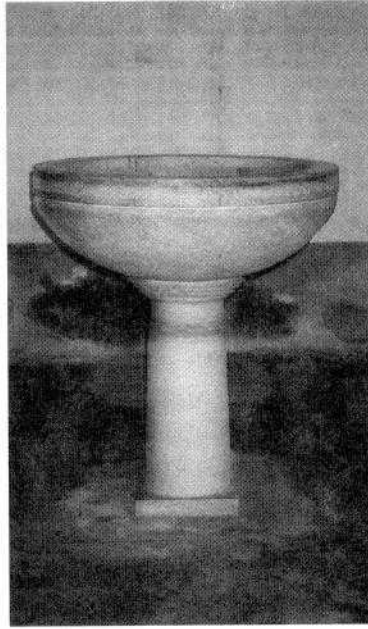
Baptismal record of Jeanne-Marie Rendu.
 Archives, Parish of Lancrans

¹⁴ Departmental Archives, l'Ain.

¹⁵ Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, *Rendu, Positio; Sommaire*, 85; Melun, *Vie de la sœur Rosalie*, 5.

¹⁶ Archives, Parish of Lancrans.

¹⁷ Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, *Rendu, Positio; Sommaire*, 82.



Parish baptismal font in Lancrans.
Courtesy of the author

But no one could have foreseen all of that in 1786. While the storm clouds of the Revolution were gathering quickly over the capital and most of the rest of France, the region of Gex remained relatively undisturbed. The Catholic faith continued to be solid in an area distinguished by the earlier presence of Saint François de Sales. Viscount de Melun described their faith as “straightforward” and “simple,”¹⁸ attributes that would characterize the future Sister Rosalie in all aspects of her life.

Thus, Jeanne-Marie spent her early years in a profoundly Christian atmosphere. However, this did not mean that she was an excessively pious child. According to Sister Marie-Louise Wicquart, a Daughter of Charity, who was the local superior in Confort in 1949, oral tradition in the village, passed on to her by one of Sister Rosalie’s distant relatives, had it that the little girl was “lively, even mischievous, but that she was very devout and had a very kind heart and already, as a child, was moved to assist those who were poor.”¹⁹ Armand de

¹⁸ Melun, *Vie de la sœur Rosalie*, 2.

¹⁹ Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, *Rendu, Positio; Sommaire*, 13.

Melun expands upon the portrait, describing his friend as a little girl who was “pretty... energetic... impulsive... and strong-willed.” He characterizes Sister Rosalie’s countenance as “lively... delicate... and mischievous.”²⁰

In this text Melun does not use any direct quotes, but when he goes on to explain how these characteristics manifested themselves he seems to be relating details that came from Sister Rosalie’s own reminiscences on her childhood as he inserts a “she said” without indicating who “she” is.²¹ He tells us that she “tried to get into all the mischief she could so that there would not be any left for her when she reached the age of reason.”²² He added that she “teased her sisters, liked to throw their dolls into the neighboring garden, was more interested in butterflies than in books, and that in games she was neither the last nor the least aggressive.”²³ Elsewhere, Melun describes the young Jeanne-Marie as having been “born with a lively and impetuous temperament.”²⁴

Sister Marie-Emile de Costalin, a Daughter of Charity, who was both a companion of eleven years at the house on rue de l’Épée-de-Bois and a close friend of Sister Rosalie, supports Melun’s account and adds reflections of her own.²⁵ She found those leadership qualities in the young girl that would later characterize the woman. In her testimony she tells us:

From the age of 7 or 8 she was already very mature and pious and had a good deal of influence over her playmates. She loved to play school and took her role of teacher very seriously. She had her pupils recite their catechism and their prayers. She also liked to play house and to be the mother of a very good little girl whom she would reward by taking her to the chapel dedicated to the Virgin Mary. If the chapel was closed when they got back from the fields, they would kneel near the wall.

²⁰ Melun, *Vie de la sœur Rosalie*, 3.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 225.

²⁵ Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, *Rendu, Positio; Sommaire*, 43.

Her little playmates feared nothing more than displeasing her and hid their naughtiness from her lest, "Jeanne-Marie... not want to play with them any more."²⁶

The years would temper Jeanne-Marie's impetuosity but that childhood exuberance which would later win her so many collaborators for the service of those who were poor was never dampened either by personal suffering or by external catastrophes. Sister Costalin, who knew her only as an adult, would attest to this. She stated that Sister Rosalie "was never impetuous although she was naturally exuberant."²⁷

It appears, however, that in the midst of those normal childhood games and nonsense, there grew in the heart of the child that deep love for those in need that would later draw her into the family of Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac and lead her to dedicate her life to the relief of human misery. Those who know anything of these early years are in agreement on that point. Once again it is Sister Costalin who tells us:

...in the humble and hospitable house of Confort those in need and travelers always found assistance. It was the rule of the house. This, however, was not enough for the heart of the little girl who always sought, as a grace, to give [those in need] what had been set aside for her. Sometimes she followed them secretly to give them the little treats that her delicate constitution required. Her little purse was never filled. When her grandfather gave her some small coins, she would watch the road leading into the village so as to share her treasure with the first needy person who came along.²⁸

Melun relates a similar tale, adding that the mischievous little girl's comportment was different with those in need. With them "she was always gentle and obliging."²⁹ And if there were no poor to assist, Jeanne-Marie shared herself and her meager possessions with those

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 43-44.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

²⁹ Melun, *Vie de la sœur Rosalie*, 3.

who worked for the family, compassionating with them and doing a portion of their household tasks.³⁰

Indeed, this “extreme sensitivity” to the needs of those living in poverty, and in all other things for that matter, is considered by those who study her life as “unquestionably Sister Rosalie’s dominant character trait.”³¹ It manifested itself early and would remain all her life, sometimes causing her difficulty and suffering as when she was a novice.³² This same trait, however, would also lead her to become “a resting place where the whole weary world could lay its burdens.”³³

But times were changing and simple acts of charity would soon involve danger and require personal courage. By 1793, the Revolution had moved well beyond the capital and the tiny village of Confort found itself on the route leading to safety in Switzerland for those, many of them priests, seeking to escape the Reign of Terror. It is important to understand that the danger was very real. The law punished by death anyone who supported the clergy in the exercise of their ministry or hid them from the authorities. The Catholic religion had been suppressed and anyone who aided its ministers was considered an enemy of the State and punished accordingly.

This, however, did not deter the Rendus from opening their home to several priests and to Monseigneur Joseph-Marie Paget, Bishop of Geneva-Annecy. There is an anecdote connected with the latter, which Melun claims Sister Rosalie herself related to him when speaking of the “sad incidents of her childhood,”³⁴ and which is repeated by Sister Wicquart.³⁵ Recounted in a variety of ways, it essentially seems to be that one day, when Jeanne-Marie was seven years old, a new gardener, called Pierre, appeared in the household. The little girl noticed that he was treated with a certain reverence. Her curiosity was aroused. She began spying on him and soon discovered him saying mass at night in a cellar. Raised to believe that any form of dissimulation was wrong, she confronted her mother saying, “Be careful, I will say that Pierre is not Pierre.”³⁶ Madame Rendu, who had felt that her oldest daughter was too young to share the burden

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, Rendu, Positio*, 189.

³² See Melun, *Vie de la sœur Rosalie*, 27.

³³ *Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, Rendu, Positio; Sommaire*, 82.

³⁴ Melun, *Vie de la sœur Rosalie*, 7.

³⁵ *Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, Rendu, Positio; Sommaire*, 14.

³⁶ Melun, *Vie de la sœur Rosalie*, 6.

of such dangerous secrets, had little choice but to tell her that their gardener was the Bishop of Geneva-Annecy, and that any indiscretion concerning his identity was deadly not only for Bishop Paget but for the family and for all the villagers.

Further credence is given to the tale by Canon Jean Mercier in his *Souvenirs historiques d'Annecy jusqu'à la Restauration* published in 1878, where he speaks of the bishop's flight into exile between September 1792 and April 1793 when he arrived at the house of the Congregation of the Mission in Turin, Italy. He states that:

During this six-month period, there is certainly the possibility of a stay by the poor exiled bishop in Confort which was very close to Geneva. The Gex region was part of the Diocese of Geneva-Annecy.... It would be very surprising if, during the first five years of his episcopacy, which began in May 1787, the bishop had not, on some occasion, discovered the hospitable home of the honorable Monsieur and Madame Rendu.³⁷

The Canon goes on to say that it was customary for mothers to present their children to the bishop for his blessing when he was passing through the village, so it is likely that the little Jeanne-Marie was among them.



Rendu home and birthplace of Jeanne-Marie (Sister Rosalie) in Confort.
Archives, Congregation of the Mission, Paris

³⁷ Jean Mercier, *Souvenirs historiques d'Annecy jusqu'à la Restauration* (Annecy, 1878), 293-94.

Mercier concludes his account of Bishop Paget's possible stay in the Rendu home by stating, "Be that as it may, it appears from all that, that Monseigneur the Bishop of Annecy's stay in Confort was not very long."³⁸ It need not have been to have left an indelible mark on the future Sister Rosalie. During the Revolution of 1830, the recollection of her mother's fearless hospitality may very well have been the impetus that led her to warn Monseigneur Hyacinthe-Louis de Quélen, Archbishop of Paris, of the danger he was in and to invite him to seek refuge in the house of the Daughters of Charity on rue de l'Épée-de-Bois.³⁹

The Reign of Terror touched Jeanne-Marie's life in a still more personal way. Her biographers are in agreement that she received her first holy communion in a cellar, perhaps where the *Maison Sœur Rosalie* of Confort now stands or in a nearby house. The pastor of Lancrans at the time was Monsieur Colliex. He had been condemned to death, like so many other priests, for his refusal to take the Civil Oath of the Clergy which recognized only the Republican government's authority in Church matters. He, too, had to go into hiding. However, according to a history of the period in the Gex region, he refused to abandon his parishioners. In August of 1794, he stayed in Lancrans with Sister Rosalie's uncle, so as to be able to continue his ministry in the parish.⁴⁰ It could well have been at that time, although no date is certain, that he prepared the young Jeanne-Marie for the sacrament that she was about to receive and gave her holy communion for the first time.

While few biographers or witnesses during the Cause of Beatification speak explicitly of Sister Rosalie's faith, it is evident that her love for those who were poor was rooted in faith and in the conviction that it was God whom she found in them. That faith was born in the rugged terrain of the Jura Mountains in a home where God was the center and where one had to be willing to risk all, even one's life, to remain faithful. That lesson came from the faith environment in which Sister Rosalie grew up, particularly from the influence and example of her mother, Marie-Anne Laracine Rendu.

Sister Rosalie's biographers, as well as those who testified during the Cause of Beatification concerning her childhood, are

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 294.

³⁹ Melun, *Vie de la sœur Rosalie*, 165.

⁴⁰ Edmond Chamouton, *Histoire de la persécution révolutionnaire dans le département du Jura* (Lons-le-Saunier, 1893), 250-52.

unanimous in acknowledging the primary role that Madame Rendu played in her daughter's human and spiritual formation. It is interesting to note that when speaking of the risks that Sister Rosalie's family took during the Revolution, by offering their home as a refuge for clergy fleeing into exile, Armand de Melun states, "Despite the law which punished by death those who would facilitate the practice of the condemned religion or who would hide priests who had refused the Civil Oath of the Clergy, she [Madame Rendu] opened her home to God and His ministers."⁴¹ Others use similar expressions. Yet, in 1793, Sister Rosalie's father, Jean-Antoine Rendu, was still living. He did not die until 1796. He certainly must have been aware and have approved of what was going on, although the driving force seems to have been his wife.

What do we know of Marie-Anne Laracine Rendu, who saw her daughter only once after she left Confort for the last time three months prior to her sixteenth birthday? The most complete description comes from the testimony of Mélanie Rendu, Sister Rosalie's cousin and close friend, who tells us:

Her worthy and venerated mother, widowed young, showed exemplary piety. She possessed and practiced all the virtues of the saints. In her parish, she was a model for widows and Christian mothers. Here she maintained the faith during the terrible period of the Terror of 1793. She instructed the uninitiated in the catechism and gave hospitality to priests who were emigrating.... By nature and the example of her ancestors she became the benefactress of all in need. She even brought Christian comfort to the bedside of the dying. In a word, her life was a tapestry of good works.⁴²

According to Mélanie, Madame Rendu was "the primary educator of her three daughters."⁴³ Much of that education came from the strength of her example. And it bore fruit in the heart of the young Jeanne-Marie, whom her cousin characterized as "gifted with great intelligence." She then added that, even at an early age, her cousin's

⁴¹ Melun, *Vie de la sœur Rosalie*, 5.

⁴² Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, *Rendu, Positio; Sommaire*, 85.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

“piety, modesty, and natural gentleness were her crowning glory and all her virtues made her stand out in her parish which she left at the age of fourteen.”⁴⁴

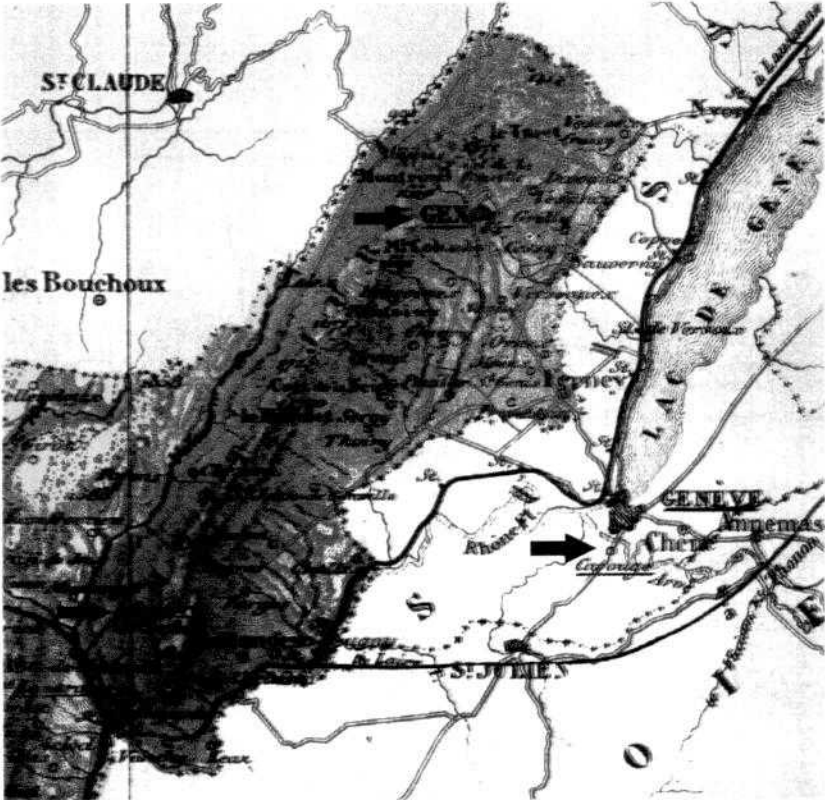
Mélanie’s assessment is valuable on two counts. It reinforces the clear influence of Madame Rendu on her daughter and it gives us an understanding of the education that Sister Rosalie received as a child. From her mother, the future Daughter of Charity acquired her solid, simple faith, her fearlessness, and her love and respect for persons who were poor. As Mélanie pointed out, Jeanne-Marie was “highly intelligent” but her education was essentially practical. She could read and write but spelling was largely beyond her and her correspondence reflects this. She spelled phonetically while expressing herself clearly, forcefully, and even with a certain grace. This combination of example and practical training developed her innate “*bon sens paysan*,” or common sense, as well as her good humor. These qualities had characterized Saint Vincent de Paul before her and, as in his case, would serve her well later on. Shortly after Sister Rosalie’s death, her cousin, Eugène Rendu, wrote of her:

Sister Rosalie’s principal character trait was her common sense, pushed to the point of genius. Those who did not have the honor of meeting her often could not appreciate her moral supremacy and, if I may say so, her ministry to souls, which the confidence that she evoked from all gave her. Persons came from far and wide seeking her advice.⁴⁵

It is this Jeanne-Marie Rendu who will leave her village for the first time, at the age of thirteen or fourteen, to begin a journey that would eventually lead her to Paris. In perhaps the most miserable slum of the French capital she would devote fifty years of her life in the struggle to bring relief to a whole gamut of human suffering. There, far from the rugged soil of the Jura Mountains, the lessons learned from the indomitable Marie-Anne Laracine Rendu would reach full fruition.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Eugène Rendu in *Le Messager de la Charité*, no. 102 (16 February 1856), 1.



Map of the Jura Mountains locating Gex, Carouge and Confort.
Archives, Congregation of the Mission, Paris