



Rosalie Rendu: The Person Behind the Actions

from Chapters 1-2 of [Sister Rosalie Rendu: A Daughter of Charity On Fire with Love for the Poor](#) by Louise Sullivan, D.C.

Brief Bio

- Blessed Rosalie Rendu was born in the Jura Mountains, near the Swiss border in the current department of Ain, in 1786. At 15 she joined the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, attracted by their charity and spirit of service.
- For 54 years, from her novitiate until her death, she dedicated herself to serving the poor in the Mouffetard, the most deprived district of Paris. A soul of continual prayer, she reportedly said: "Never have I prayed so well as in the street."
- The numerous texts that have appeared since her death portray her heroic deeds on the barricades during the revolutions of 1830 and 1848, or her risking her own life at the bedside of the sick during the cholera epidemics of 1832, 1849, and 1854. They also recount in detail the great works that she founded for those who were poor, or that a street in Paris was named after her.



[Images from St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive](#)

Rediscovering the Secret of Sister Rosalie

- As with St. Vincent and St. Louise, or in studying the life of any saint, there is the danger of losing the person behind the actions, of being so dazzled by the magnitude of their achievements that the spiritual and human motor that drove them disappears. Such has often been the case with Sister Rosalie.
- Sister Rosalie, the woman, is far more and far less than the sum of her actions. If she has something to say to the men and women of today, it is precisely because of **the person she became by the grace of God and by her response to that grace.**



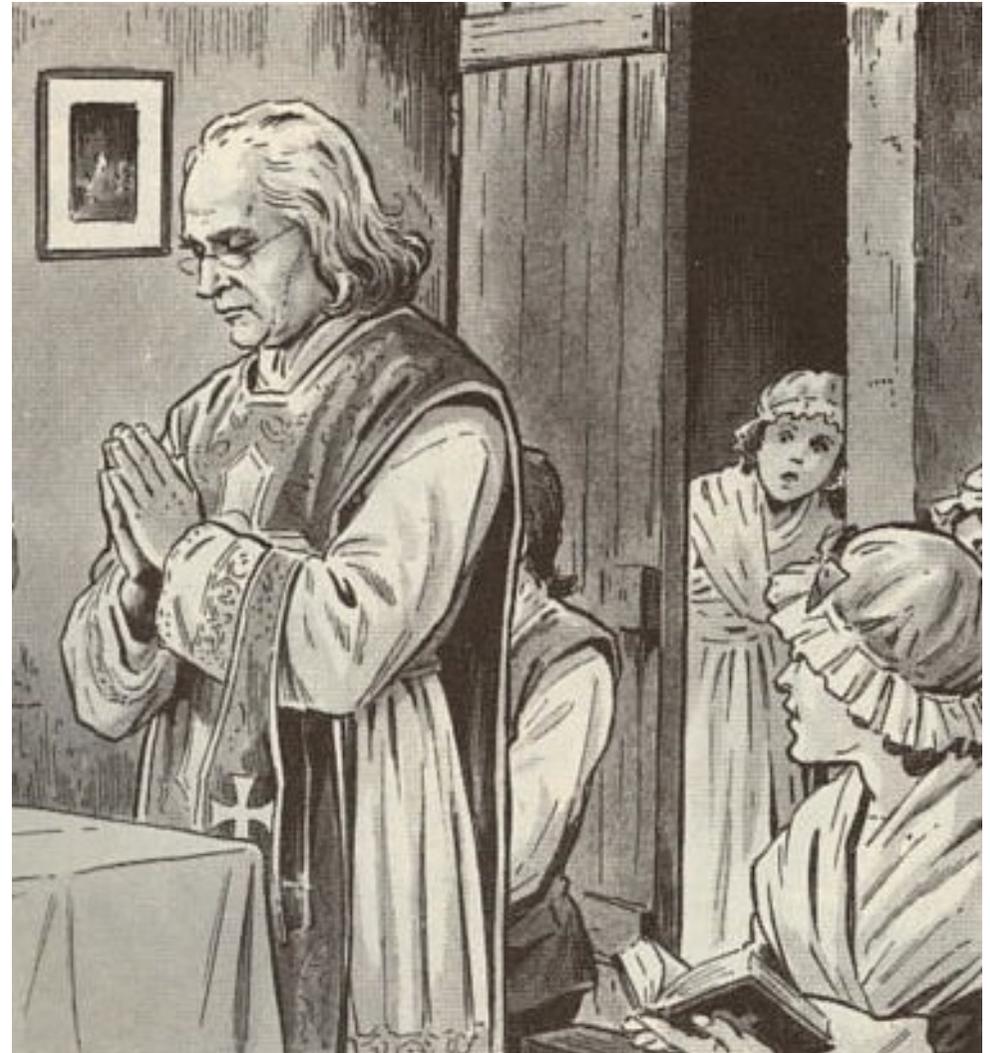
The Person Behind the Actions

- Who was this simple country girl who became a symbol of Our Lord's loving mercy toward those who are poor? What would move her to dedicate her life in service of others, in contradiction to the values of our world?



A Child of the Revolution

- Rendu was three years old when the French Revolution broke out. The Rendu family home became a refuge for these priests. In fact, the [Bishop of Annecy](#) found asylum there under the assumed name of Pierre. Jeanne-Marie was fascinated by this hired hand who was treated better than the others. One night she discovered that he was celebrating a [Mass](#).
- This exceptional environment of wartime and persecution forged her character.



A Spiritual Portrait

- A confidant of Sister Rosalie's wrote that her initial thoughts of dedicating her life to the service of God and those in need dated from her first communion which took place in a cellar in Confort. Armand de Melun writes,

"There were before the altar a priest [Father Colliex], who was preparing himself for martyrdom, and a virgin who promised God whom she was receiving for the first time, to love him all her life in the person of the lowly and the poor."



A Human Portrait

Indeed, Jeanne-Marie spent her early years in a profoundly Christian atmosphere. However, this did not mean that she was an excessively pious child. Armand de Melun expands upon the portrait, describing his friend as a little girl who was "pretty... energetic... impulsive... and strong-willed... mischievous... born with a lively and impetuous temperament." 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." 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."



A Human Portrait

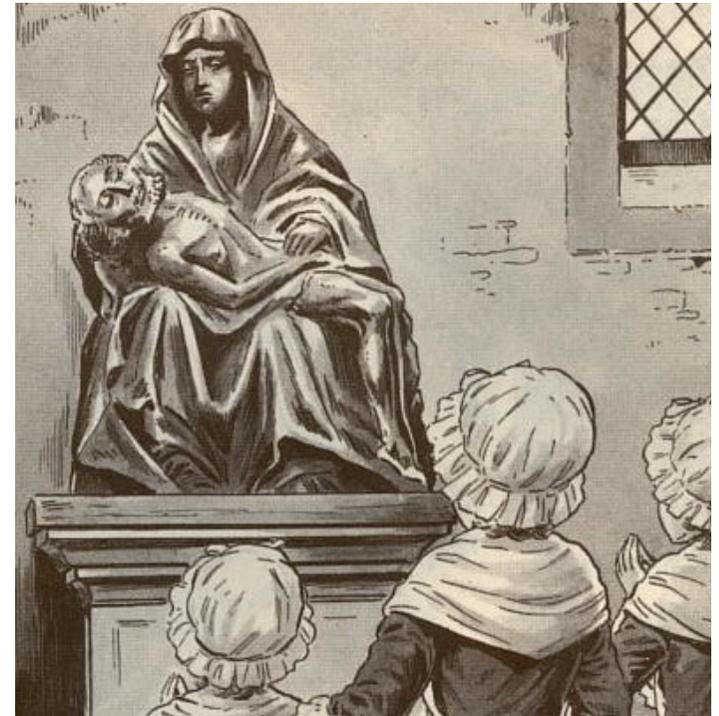
A close friend of Sister Rosalie testifies:

“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... 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.”



Rosalie's Dominant Character Trait: Moved To Serve the Poor

- Oral tradition in the village, passed on by one of Sister Rosalie's relatives, had it that the little girl was "lively, even mischievous, but that she was very devout, had a very kind heart and already, as a child, was moved to assist those who were poor."
- In fact, Rosalie's "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."
- Her sensitivity manifested itself early and would remain all her life, sometimes causing her suffering. Yet this trait would eventually lead her to become "a resting place where the whole weary world could lay its burdens."



Loving, Exuberant, Strong

- So it appears, 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.
- The years would temper Jeanne-Marie's impetuosity but that same childhood exuberance, never dampened by personal suffering or by external catastrophes, would later win her many collaborators for the service of those who were poor.



Her Mother's Influence

- Another major part of the faith environment in which Sister Rosalie grew up was the influence and example of her mother, Marie-Anne Laracine Rendu.
- What do we know of Marie-Anne Laracine Rendu, who saw her daughter only once after she left home for the last time three months prior to her sixteenth birthday?



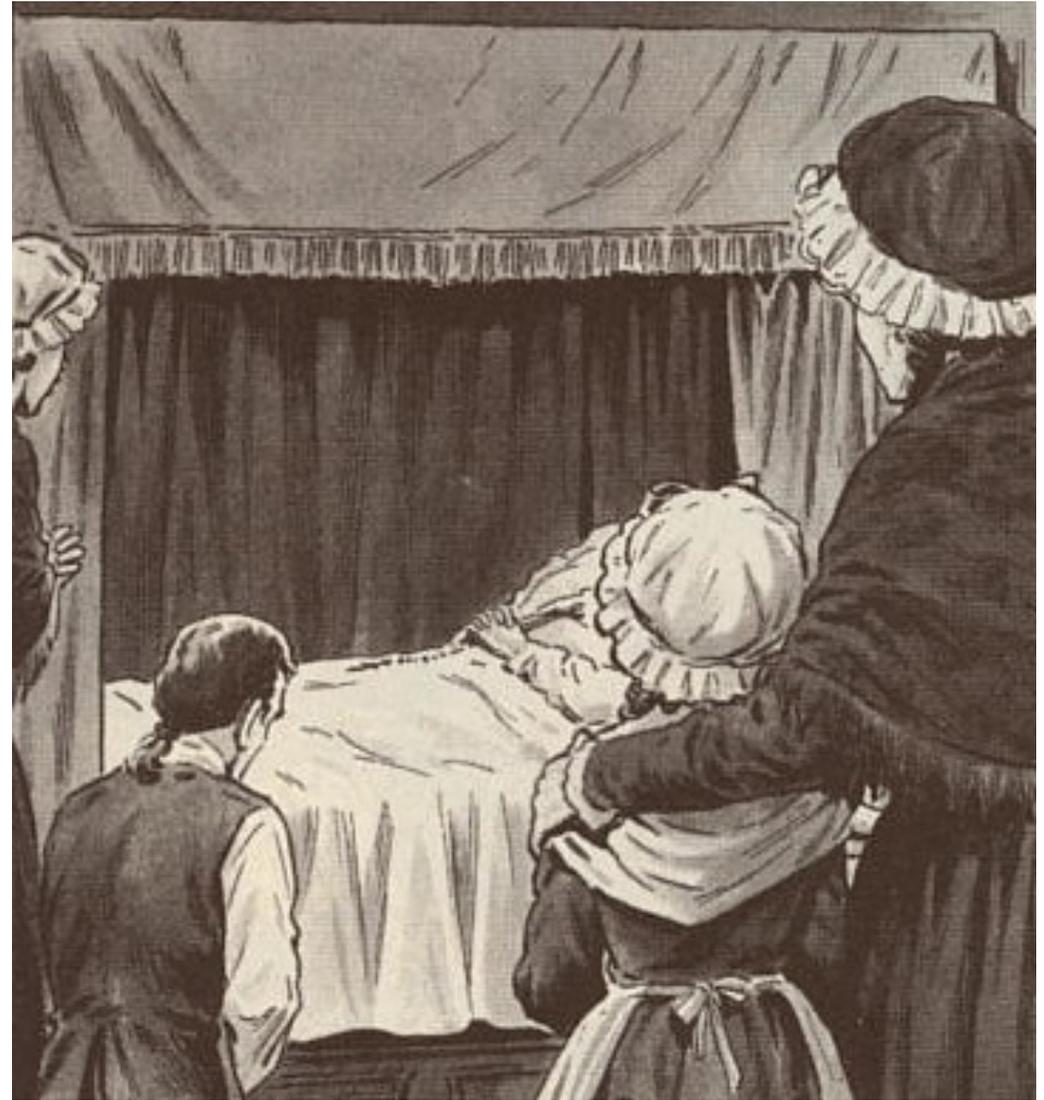
Her Mother's Influence (continued)

The most complete description comes from a cousin, Mélanie Rendu: 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. She maintained the faith during the terrible period of the Terror of 1793. 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."



Her Mother's Influence (continued)

- She instructed the uninitiated in the catechism.
- 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.



Her Mother's Influence (continued)

- 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.
- According to Mélanie, Madame Rendu was "the primary educator of her three daughters." Much of that education came from the strength of her example. (It was not until later that religious women, who had been dispersed during the Reign of Terror, were once again coming together and turning their attention to the education of young girls.)



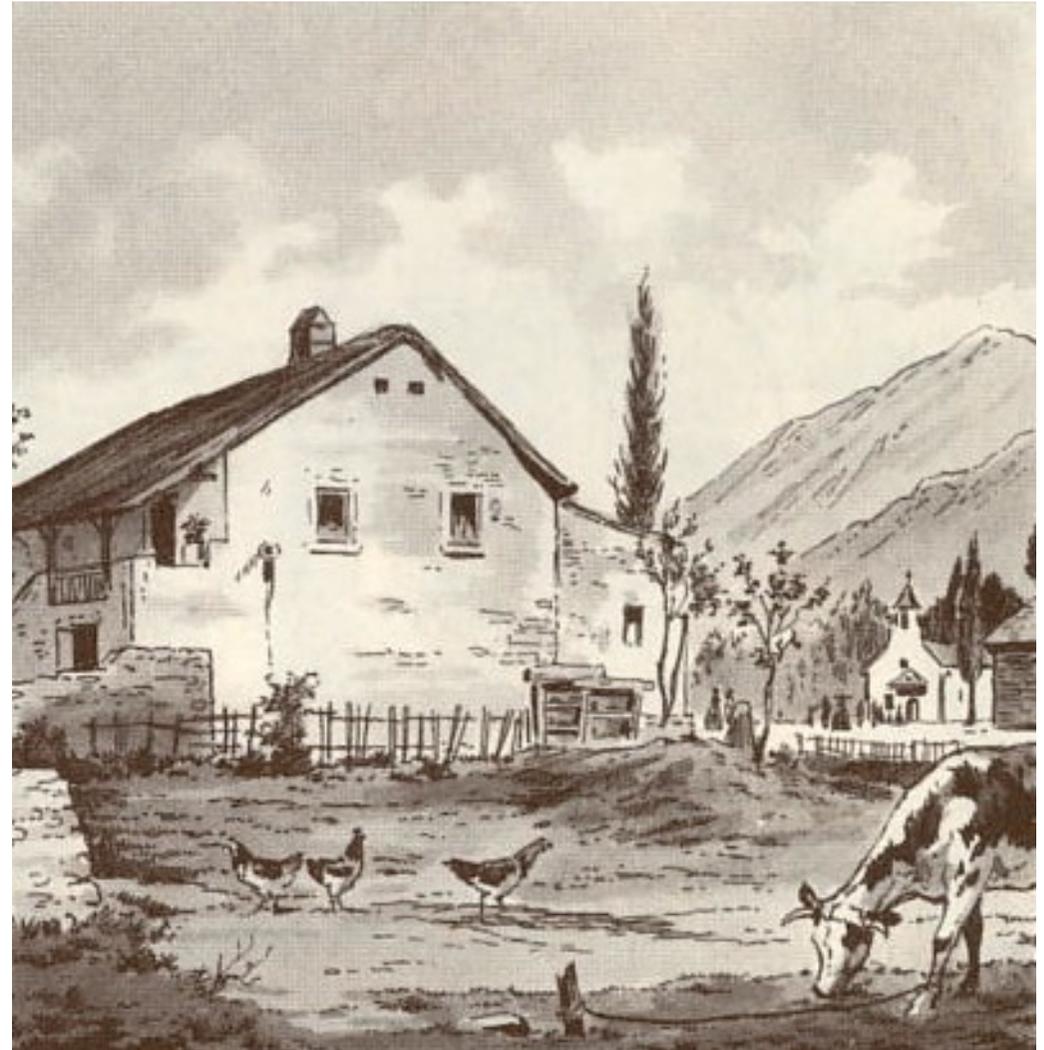
Her Mother's Influence (continued)

- What precisely did she learn from her mother that helped to make her the woman that she became? In many respects, the young girl was a reflection of the older woman.
- Mother and daughter shared themselves and whatever they had with others. At her mother's side, the child and the adolescent also developed a capacity to love family and friends. She imbibed her mother's quiet courage in the face of danger and her willingness to take risks.



Faith Born in the Mountains

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.





Clockwise from left: [Stream in the Jura Mountains \(the Torrent\) oil painting by Gustave Courbet](#), [View of Gex Area](#), [Jura in Autumn](#)

Common Sense Served Her Well

- 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 of common sense and good humor 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, Eugene 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."

“People smart”

- Later in life, Rosalie seemed able to deal with everyone (whether rich or poor) equally; she became well-known and won over many hearts, even those who were apathetic or anticlerical.

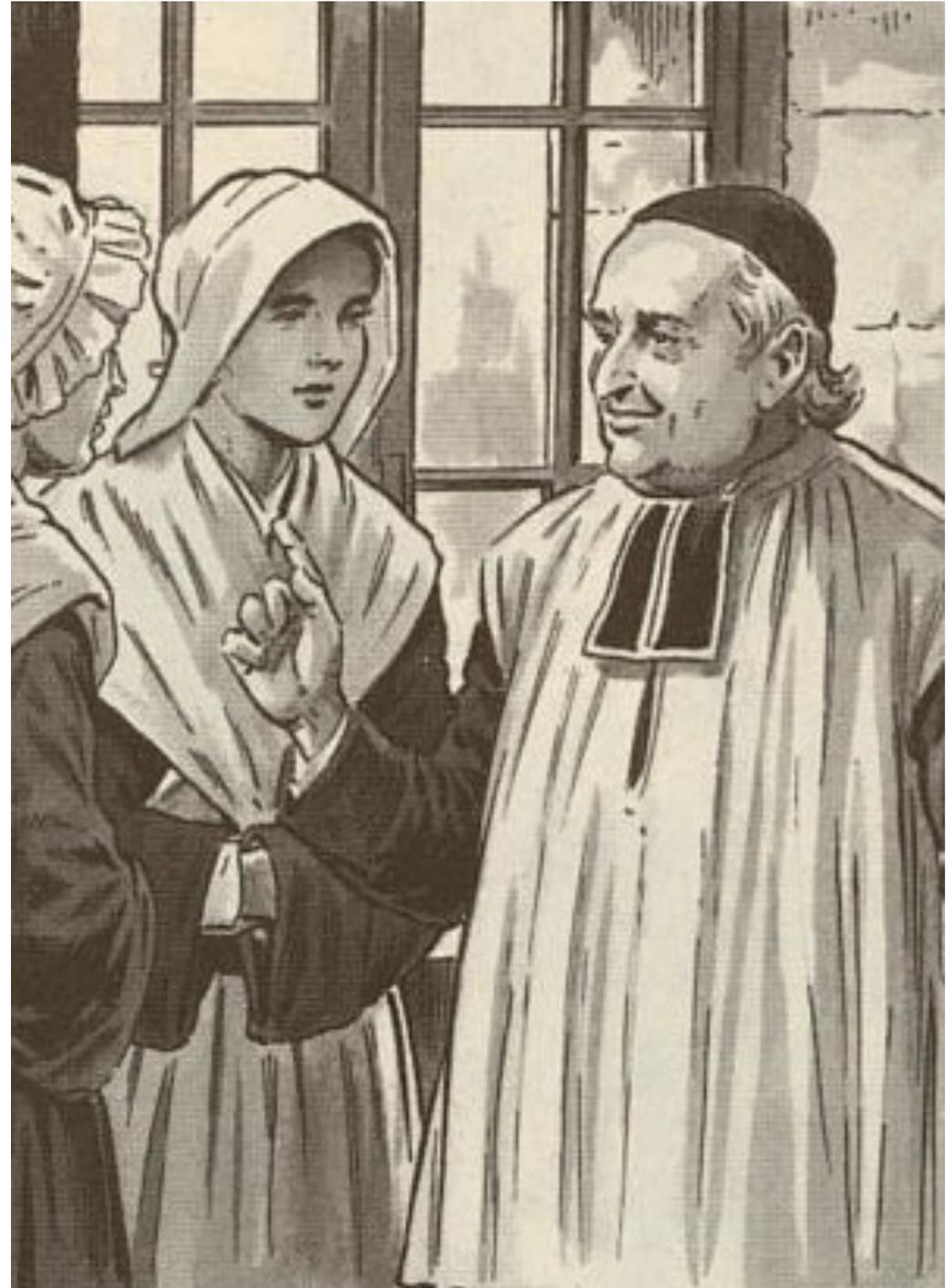


Schooling, First Contact with Daughters of Charity

- Some time around 1800/1801 Jeanne-Marie left home for a boarding school in Gex where she spent a year, possibly two. There is agreement that Jeanne-Marie was a serious student who would have taken readily to the semi-cloistered life of the Ursulines. Yet, despite her fondness and admiration for her teachers, she felt called to serve God and persons who were poor.
- Either before beginning her studies or during them, she met the Daughters of Charity of the Hospital of Gex, which had been founded by Saint Vincent de Paul himself shortly before his death in 1660. She was drawn to their service of those who are poor.

Schooling/Other Influences

- it would also appear that during this period Jeanne-Marie was in close contact with the pastor of Gex, Monsieur Pierre-Marin Routh de Varicourt, who gave her spiritual direction and assisted her in discerning the will of God in her life. Because Jeanne-Marie was so young, the pastor encouraged Madame Rendu to send her to Carouge where "several pious and zealous clergymen" had established a boarding school for young girls run by "women of great merit. Madame Rendu acquiesced and Jeanne-Marie continued her education there, as well as her spiritual journey, prior to entering the Daughters of Charity.

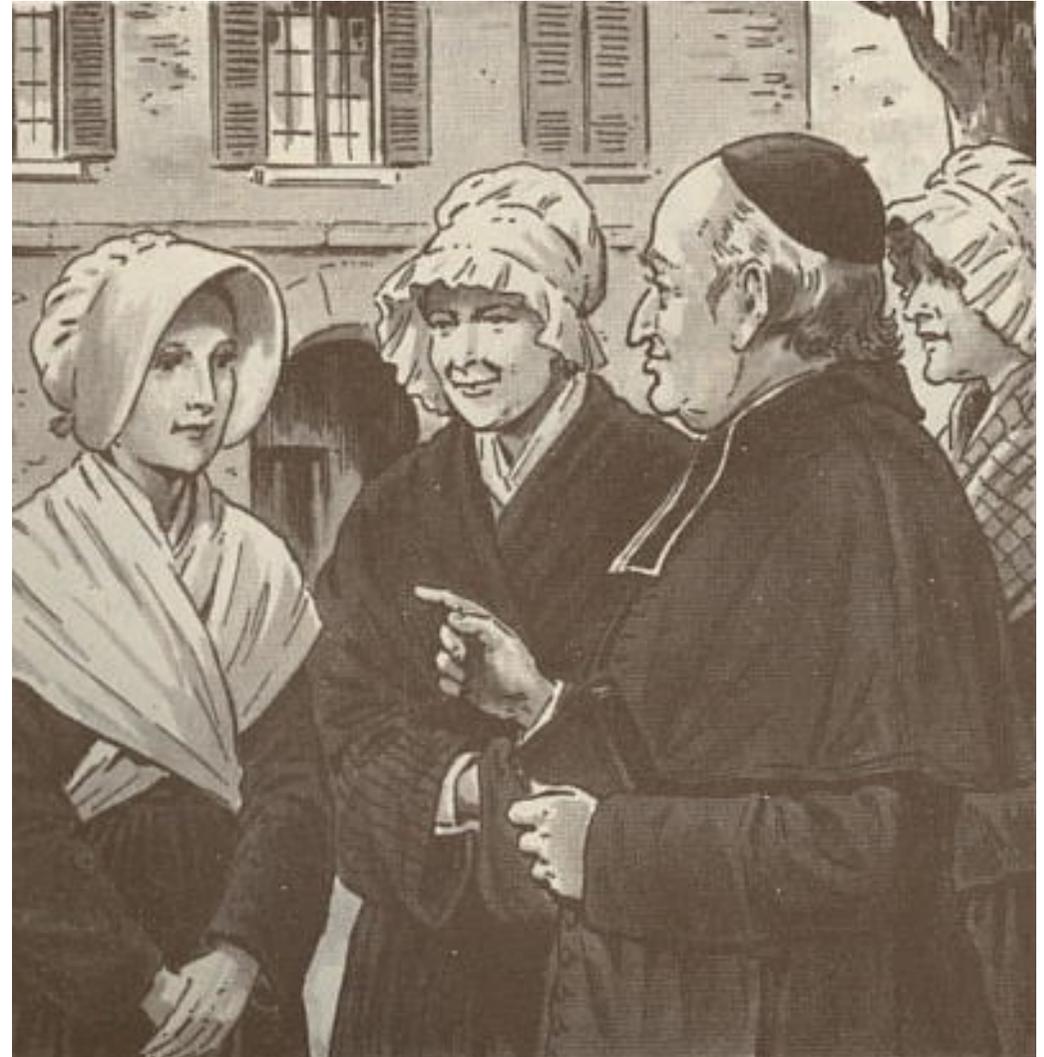


Schooling/Other Influences (continued)

- It would appear that the education Jeanne-Marie received at Gex and later at Carouge, near Geneva, was largely domestic. The young women were being prepared to be wives and mothers. However, the human and Christian formation was solid and in this climate Jeanne-Marie's religious vocation took root.
- After six months at Carouge, the future Sister Rosalie returned to Gex and began a six-month postulancy. This is a period during which the candidate shares the life and apostolic work of the sisters of the congregation that she hopes to enter. Considered a time of discernment, both she and they try to determine if the vocation is real, if the candidate is suitable for the life to which she feels that she has been called, and if the congregation can provide an environment in which this particular young woman can grow in her love and service of God and neighbor. While Monsieur de Varicourt continued to guide her, Sister Suzanne, as the local superior, assumed direct responsibility for Jeanne-Marie's initial formation.

An Adolescent in Search of Her Vocation

- Her stay in Gex and Carouge, her contact with the Ursulines and with the Daughters of Charity, her experience of both the contemplative life and the direct service of persons who were poor, and the spiritual guidance of Father de Varicourt, all combined to define and solidify Jeanne-Marie's calling. Thus it was that when she learned that her friend Armande Jacquinot, a young woman from Lancrans, was leaving to enter the Daughters of Charity in Paris, her own desire to give her life to God became clear.

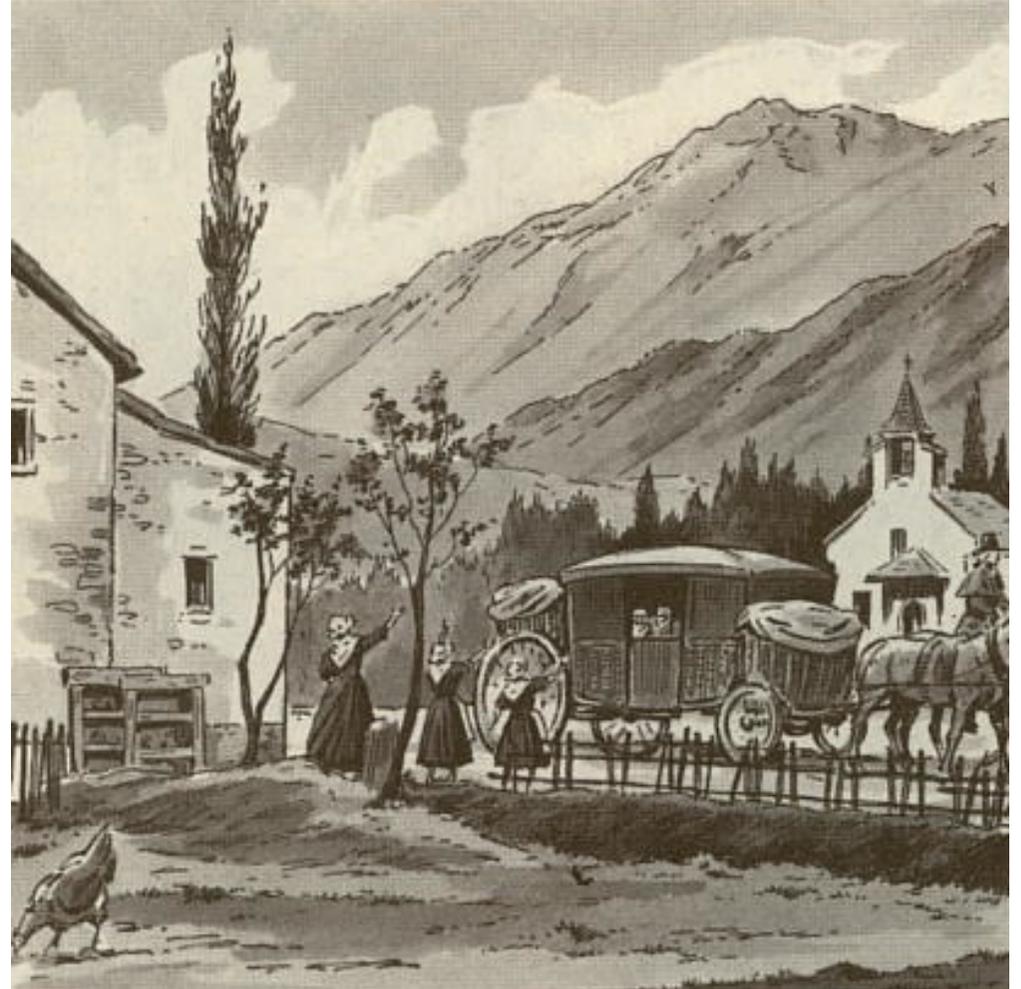


Decision to Leave Her Home and Family

- Although she was not yet sixteen years old, Jeanne-Marie wanted to leave immediately for Paris with Mademoiselle Jacquinot. The latter tried to discourage her because she was so young. She knew that her mother, too, would oppose the decision, and her consent was an absolute requirement. Jeanne went to her mother, told her of her vocation, which she had nurtured for a long while and which God was approving by providing her with an opportunity to follow it, and, on her knees, begged for her consent.
- She was not to obtain it immediately. Prompted by "prudence and motherly love," Madame Rendu argued against a vocation that she felt was not "solid" or "sufficiently thought out." In the end she would yield to her daughter's entreaties, but not without the conviction that "the trip, time, and distractions would dissipate the illusions of this first impulse and soon bring her daughter back to her." She even asked Father Emery, Superior General of the Sulpicians who was Rosalie's godfather and a close friend of her grandfather, to try and convince her daughter of the "foolishness" of the step that she was taking.

Pain of Leaving Home

- When they finally set out, these three young women from the Jura, to begin their lives as Daughters of Charity. Melun describes the tearful departure that, in later life, Sister Rosalie must still have remembered vividly. He says that the young girl, who bid farewell to her mother that day, did so with a desire to fulfill the will of God in her regard, but also with "a bleeding wound in her heart." Indeed, for mother and daughter, there was probably the vague realization that this was a final separation. They would see one another only once again and the pain would remain.



Love and Sorrow

- Although Sister Rosalie lived only about thirteen years in her mother's home, it seems important to reiterate here that Madame Rendu was the strongest influence in her life during these formative years.
- Melun says that his friend: "...always felt keen sorrow for the loss of or separation from a person who was dear to her... Her limitless charity could not replace any of her affections. It only increased her capacity to love and, therefore, to suffer in those whom she loved."



The Pain of Separation Never Leaves

- Only six letters of Sister Rosalie to her mother have been preserved, although there were undoubtedly others. They all reflect her great love for her mother and the pain of their separation. In 1853 she wrote: "I share in your suffering. I am immeasurably afflicted not to be able to go to you and to tell you this in person. Yes, my dear and tender Mother, believe that I am making a great sacrifice and that it costs me dearly. I continue to hope that you will remain with us and that I will be able to give both of us this just and desired consolation."



Her Roots Always With Her on the Journey

Jeanne-Marie Rendu left 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. As she left the Jura for the last time, Jeanne-Marie Rendu had within her those qualities that would one day make her the "Apostle of the Mouffetard area".



Reflection

- Reflect on your own vocation- what can you learn from this spiritual and human portrait of Blessed Rosalie?
- What do the following words or phrases mean to you?
 - ▶ personal sacrifice
 - ▶ surrender
 - ▶ the humility to be a servant for a lifetime
- How does Rosalie's story inspire vocations? How can she help men and women everywhere grow in their love for the poor? In their respect for the dignity of the Catholic religious life?

Summary

- A child of the Revolution
- Rooted in solid simple faith
- Playful/childlike exuberance
- Common sense, born in the rugged terrain of the Jura Mountains
- An adolescent in search of her vocation
- In response to God's grace
- "Extreme sensitivity" to the needs of those living in poverty





"From the age of reason, Jeanne had thought of consecrating herself to God. None of the joys of the world attracted her. She wanted no part of its celebrations or glitter. At the same time, she felt drawn by its groans and misery." -Armand de Melun

Source: Chapters 1-2 of [Sister Rosalie Rendu: A Daughter of Charity On Fire with Love for the Poor by Louise Sullivan, D.C.](#)

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