

Anne-Marie Javouhey and the Holy Will of God:  
A Spirituality for our Time ... Part 1  
by Regina Brunelle, SJC

“What makes Cluny Sisters different from other nuns?” a Cluny Associate once asked. “Our spirituality,” came the prompt reply. “And what is that?” persisted the Associate. This article is an attempt to answer that question.

A spirituality is a particular way of living gospel values. Blessed Anne-Marie Javouhey, the founder of the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny saw the whole of the gospel through the prism of the motto she gave her sisters: The Holy Will of God

### A Contemplative in Action

If ever there lived a contemplative in action it was certainly Mother Javouhey. Her whole life swung back and forth with the regularity of a pendulum between listening to God and

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Anne Marie Javouhey

carrying out what she discovered to be God's will for her. God's will was her food, as it was the food of Jesus. “The Holy Will of God” was her call to action. “The Holy Will of God? Ah! That is everything!” She once wrote to the sisters.

However, her experience was that “God gives us enlightenment in little doses. Doing the Holy Will of God might be ‘everything’, but it is not necessarily easy!” Life taught Blessed Anne-Marie that it Anne Marie Javouhey requires living in a perpetually listening mode. It demands patience and tenacity in the face of difficulties. It sometimes rests on the willingness to take risks when others might be counselling a prudence that has nothing to do with the virtue but a lot to do with timidity. In the early days, sometimes the risks Anne-Marie took led to failure. Sometimes she failed because she didn't take a necessary risk! Was that God's Will, too? Even in this, the young seeker discovered, there are valuable lessons of humility and trust to be learned, and God certainly wants us humans to learn those! The important thing is neither the success nor the failure but the motivation that leads to action.



*Whatever you did for  
least of these, you did  
for me.*

Jesus

### Anne-Marie's Philosophy and Spirituality

From Senegal, where in 1822 she had gone to see for herself in order to stabilize the presence of Cluny sisters there, she wrote, “I'm waiting to begin until I get some enlightenment from God

about how to proceed in order to succeed in this effort...I need to know, as much as it depends on me, whether God wants to use me directly or indirectly. I am in God's hands, ready to do God's will as soon as it is revealed to me!" This, in a nutshell, contains the whole of Blessed Anne-Marie's philosophy and spirituality. Her spiritual life grew out of her ever-deepening awareness of God's providential Presence guiding her every step. The essential, as she counseled her Sisters, was to keep in step with this Providence, never running ahead nor lagging behind.

## The Historical Perspective

Because her God was the God of history, she saw

everything from a historical perspective. Her sense of history enabled her to stand in the present while rooted in the past, a stance that made it possible for her to envision what, to many, was a seemingly impossible future. Long before the Second Vatican Council she wrote to her daughters, "We must be of our time in order to win it for Jesus-Christ."

And what did her time look like?

Hers was an era of chaos, of the Reign of Terror leading to the breakdown of society as it had been experienced for generations. All of the stabilizing factors people had known in both Church and state were in shambles. The monarchy was overturned. War widows and orphans were abandoned to their own devices. The Church had been tripped of influence. Priests were forced to take an oath of fidelity to the government. Those who refused fled or went underground. At first, young Anne-Marie felt a priest was a priest and what was the difference so long as she had Eucharist. Eventually, an underground priest whom she was leading to a dying woman helped

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her realize her parents were right and she was wrong. She ceased attending Masses celebrated by jurist priests. Instead, she gathered the community to pray the prayers of the Mass together and taught both children and adults the fundamentals of the faith. Such was the France in which Anne-Marie Javouhey grew to adulthood. She spent her life creatively responding to the painful and disconcerting consequences of the events of her time. Living these events taught her many things: the importance of thinking things through with the help of many voices; the fact that she was, indeed, her brother's and sister's keeper, with a responsibility towards others; the

inherent dignity of every human being.

In the service of others, she discovered her call to serve the Other. Her spirituality flows from the

UNLESS GOD BUILDS  
THE HOUSE  
THEY  
LABOR  
IN  
VAIN.  
PSALM 127



baptismal call to share in the mission of Christ ... the call to proclaim the Good News not by words but by deeds, deeds that spoke to her contemporaries because they addressed contemporary needs. "We must be of our time in order to win it for Jesus Christ!"

## The World in Which We Live

When we look at the world today, what do we see? A world in the chaos of transition much like the world in which Anne-Marie Javouhey lived. In the face of so many urgent needs, we often feel overwhelmed and think we can do nothing to remedy these situations. Mother Javouhey's wry comment to her Sisters is applicable here. "To hear us talk, one would think we cannot [do God's will] when the fact is that we don't want to."

Though social action is undoubtedly much more complicated now than in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, what we face today is not fundamentally different for us from what it was for Anne-Marie. In the signs of her time, she discovered God's will for her. Whatever the need, she set out to meet it. She educated the young. She cared for the sick and the insane. She housed orphans and the elderly. She orchestrated a vast project in French Guiana to prepare slaves for freedom. She envisioned and facilitated the nucleus of an African clergy. Immediate needs opened her mind to undreamed of possibilities. She did all this because she recognized that this was what God wanted her to do.

*We must be of our time  
in order to win it for  
Christ!*

*Anne-Marie Javouhey*

## Learning from Anne Marie

By searching out the Holy Will of God, Anne-Marie sought to bring meaning to her lived experience. Using the gospels as her measuring stick, she examined the evolving values of her day without rejecting the profoundly human values she had imbibed from her culture as a child. The values that measured up to the gospel, old or new, she integrated into her missionary life and work.

GOD  
STANDS  
AT THE  
RIGHT  
HAND  
OF THE  
NEEDY.

PSALM 145



St. Irenaeus taught that the Will of God is the human person fully alive. The witness of her life amply demonstrates that Anne-Marie believed this truth with every fibre of her being. She worked to foster the authentic freedom of the children of God because for her, the protection of the human person was an essential part of living the gospel.

To live the spirituality of the will of God, then, is to hear God speak to us in the events happening all around us. It is to take seriously our Christian responsibility to do the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. It is to respond to the urgent needs of the hungry, the naked, the exploited, the tortured and the abused in specific and concrete ways according to our means. It is to discover new possibilities where others see only problems. It is to shake off our lethargy and be willing to put

our time, talent and treasure on the line, one situation at a time, one day at a time, to address the tragic events we witness daily in our towns and cities and in the news media. Long before the urgings of Vatican II, Anne-Marie discerned in the signs of her time how she was being called to share in the mission of Christ. No task was too small or too difficult once she was convinced it was God's Will for her. Acting out of this conviction is the vocation of all Christians. There is no other. In this era of transition when old ways are disintegrating and confusion seems to reign everywhere, 'signs' bespeaking God's will surround us, too. Through these events, the Holy Spirit speaks to us with the same urgency as She spoke to Blessed Anne-Marie.

*(This is the first of a series of articles exploring Cluny spirituality for today's world. Please send us your comments at: [clunyusa@hotmail.com](mailto:clunyusa@hotmail.com).)*