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A Brief History of Mother Mathilde Raclot

9 February 1814 – 20 January 1911

Mother St Mathilde was born Marie-Justine Raclot in the village of Surianville in Northern France, a town on the high plateau of the Vosges. Her parents owned a farm and were socially comfortable and strong in their religious convictions. Francis Raclot, Justine's father, was highly esteemed in the district as an upright man, calm and with good judgement. He dearly loved his lively little daughter and she learned much from his patient disposition and his kindness to the poor, especially to those stranded without shelter in the severe cold of winter. Justine's mother was not outwardly affectionate and on the arrival of a little brother seemed to invest her attention in him rather than in her daughter. Justine loved her maternal grandmother and when scolded by her mother found consolation in her loving care.

Justine was a healthy child, who loved the beauty and calm of the family garden and the surrounding countryside and filled her days with innocent little games. Much of her time was spent alone, something that in later years gave her a keen appreciation of solitude. One of her childhood joys was to dress up her dolls as little nuns and even then she envisaged them going on missionary journeys. Her mother did not discover this pursuit until later and there is reason to believe she was not pleased as she did not envisage life as a nun for her only daughter.

Even in childhood Justine was a prayerful little girl whose faith matured gradually. At age 6 she was sent to a nearby school in Lanvielle with a cousin and enjoyed the experience. Later at age 12 in 1826, her father recognising her need for a secondary school education, made the sacrifice of sending her to a boarding school in Langres run by the Dames of Saint Maur, the name by which the IJ Sisters were then known in France.

Although the boarding school of that period was rather spartan, Justine grew to love the regularity of life there, enjoyed studying and the prayerful atmosphere which brought her closer to a personal sense of God alive in her life. The seeds of her vocation were surely sown there but she was only sixteen when, well armed for the struggles of life, she completed her studies and returned home. Her return home though happy in some ways was over-shadowed by her fear of revealing her longing to become a sister in the convent where she had studied. She did foresee opposition, especially from her mother. This dilemma is recorded by her biographer who knew her personally:

"Indeed if she had clear-cut ideas on the subject of her vocation, she was at a loss to know how to carry out her plans. Her childish roguishness had been replaced by a real shyness; she did not dare to share her



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intimate thoughts even with her father. As for her mother, the antipathy which she had felt for her daughter even from her earliest years had but increased, because Madame Raclot was aware of her daughter's fervent desire and that was another disappointment for her. She showed her feeling by coldness and a lack of indulgence which became more apparent every day."

During the two years Justine spent at home she cultivated a great interest in reading books which deepened her faith life and presented her with role models whose lives attracted her. Eventually a cousin, named Victor, helped her by revealing her vocation to her father. His response was that of a man of deep faith, although his future loss pained him greatly: "Since this is what you desire, follow the path to which God has called you. I have neither the right nor the power to prevent you from doing so, despite pain and separation."

On 15th October 1832 Justine entered the Noviciate at Langres accompanied by her father. Sadly her mother was not around to say goodbye. Leaving her loving father and brother especially, was a heroic sacrifice. She threw herself with great generosity into the strict religious formation offered her in Langres and some months later in Paris. She was professed in March 1835 and given the name of Mathilde. Throughout her period of training her outstanding qualities of courage, integrity and sincerity of purpose were seen and acknowledged by all who lived with her.

Sr St Mathilde was then sent to southern France to educate young children in a number of schools run by the IJ Sisters or Dames of St Maur as they were known then. The temperament of people in southern France differs greatly from that of those in northern France. The natural exuberance of childhood was more evident in the southern schools in which she taught but given "the profound respect with which she inspired her students and her calm and disciplined character", she won them. Her seventeen years as a teacher showed her to be highly intuitive in how best to form young persons and treat them with fairness.

The call to move to the East, to Penang in Malaya, came suddenly from headquarters in Paris in September 1853 giving Sr St Mathilde only three days to prepare herself to leave Southampton on 18 September. This second voyage to the East planned by Mother de Faudoas, Mother General, saw four sisters led by Sr St Mathilde set off through the Mediterranean, to the Red Sea and to the Indian Ocean. Less strong personalities would have been daunted by such a journey which required them to change boat three times and cross by land from Cairo to Suez. Their arrival in Penang in October 1853 was truly welcomed.

Their story is the story of a band of unusual women, well ahead of their time, in particular that of the three brave sisters who left Penang with Mother St Mathilde, Sisters Appolinaire, St Gregory and St Gaeta Gervais for Singapore in 1854. Inspired by their deep Catholic faith and by the founder Blessed Nichols Barre, they



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rose above the social norms of their times, believing in the transforming power of education for young women at a time when few believed in the worth of educating women, especially the poor. They turned their beliefs into concrete action choosing to go where few had gone, to offer help where little help had been given.

On arrival in Singapore after a rough sea journey from Penang on 5 February 1854. Mother Mathilde set about getting the two houses given the sisters by Father Beurel and by Monsieur Cassette ready for the sisters and for the students. At first student numbers were few as the response to education for girls needed to be encouraged. This foundation called for "tremendous resolve, faith and energy" as many difficulties had to be resolved. Stories abound of acts of extraordinary and providential generosity by people in Singapore who responded to acute shortages of food and other basic requirements to upkeep the orphans who poured into the care of the Convent. From the early days of the sisters arrival, children were left in their care. Singapore society at this period of its history did not have the social infrastructure to support the poor or those requiring medical aid.

During those early years, the Convent reached out to all who sought refuge within her walls. All were treated with great kindness, often by Mother St Mathilde herself, who welcomed those most in need and trusted in divine providence to provide what was required for their upkeep and care. She was held in high esteem by all who knew of her generosity of spirit to those in greatest need.

The faith which she and her sister companions demonstrated, their courage and capacity to withstand hardship and adversity continue to inspire us today.

At a time when Mother St Mathilde had laid the strong foundation for a flourishing school for girls in CHIJ Victoria Street as well as an orphanage which offered young girls hope for their future, one would justifiably have expected her to enjoy some respite from the heavy demands of her leadership. Yet once again, she defied expectations and set out on a great mission to Japan. Her foundations in Tokyo and Yokohama are today testimonies to her indefatigable zeal.

At her graveside in Yokohama, a Protestant Minister in the crowd called out:

"Go, good and faithful servant. You have deserved well of the Lord."

By Sr Deirdre O'Loan

Sources:

Life of Reverend Mother St Mathilde (Foundress of the Missions of St Maur in Malaya and Japan) by Sr St Francis de Sales

Convent Chronicles : Lily Kong, Low Soon Ai, Jacqueline Yip

Infant Jesus Sisters, Singapore (founded in France, 1662, established in Singapore 1854)



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