

THE BEAUTIFUL STORY  
OF  
SISTER MARGUERITE LECOMTE  
1737-1835

**THE SIMPLE STORY**  
of the **GRAIN of MUSTARD SEED**

or

**The First SISTER of Providence**

*Sister Marguerite Lecomte*

1737-1835

NIHIL OBSTAT

Saint Die, January 18, 1956

On the feast of the Chair of

St. Peter in Rome

G. KOPF

Doctor of Theology

Canon A. Wurth, vicar general, willingly grants: “The Imprimatur” to the biography submitted to him, desiring that these nicely-written pages of history do much good to all those who read them and thus spread the knowledge of the Congregation.

IMPRIMATUR

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A. WURTH

...,... General

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OR

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*“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard-seed that someone took and sowed in the field. It is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown, it is larger than all shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come make nests in its branches.”* (Matthew 13:31-33)

sowing the good seed...

The reader will find a simple yet radiant application of this parable in these modest pages.

First of all there was a “Sower,”

God in his great love wanted all creatures to help in the work of redemption. “God wanted to need people.” The One who created the world with a simple fiat offers us and even recommends to us that we collaborate in this continual creation.

As he did long ago, Jesus passed beside the lake, chose those open to his love to carry the flame to others and helped them walk in his light. Happy those whom the Lord finds available, ready to answer: *Ecce Venio!* It is in this army of generous souls that the Father of the family finds his pioneers, his “Sowers.”

Jean-Martin Moye was one of these. He was born in Cutting (Moselle), January 27, 1730. His father, James Moye, farmer and postmaster, and his mother, Anne-Catherine Demange, were justly considered perfect models of the Christian family life. Their charity and scrupulous honesty were proverbial. Providence gave them thirteen children, three became priests. Jean-Martin was the sixth child in the family.

Before Jean-Martin's birth, his mother had a dream that the child in her womb would be a saint. She immediately awoke her husband and together they offered a hymn of thanks to God. This dream became a reality. On November 21, 1954, his Holiness Pius XII solemnly proclaimed him Blessed Jean-Martin Moye.

### The Church of Cutting

The child was baptized the day after his birth and early showed dispositions toward prayer and holy things. He loved God's house, assisted at daily Mass, and something rare for a boy his age, often left his games to go kneel before the altar.

Intelligent and reflective, Jean-Martin drew attention for the exercise of an early apostolate. He gathered his little companions around a pear tree, improvised a pulpit from its branches, and preached. He was much appreciated by his young audience.

A respected contemporary testified to his remarkable piety, especially at the time of his first communion, when it is said, "his piety and modesty were comparable to an angel."

The parents prepared their son for a superior vocation, while respecting entirely the designs of God as well as the liberty of the child. At Jean-Martin's request, his brother, Jean-Jacques, who had left the seminary for health reasons, gave him his first lessons in Latin.

When Jean-Martin was seventeen, he entered the University of Pont-a-Mousson, directed by the Jesuits. After terminating his studies in the Humanities, he went to Strasbourg to study philosophy.

His vocation became stronger and stronger and he entered the major Seminary of Metz in October 1751, to study theology and prepare for the priesthood. The young Levite put his whole spirit of faith and love of God into this preparation.

As he left his paternal home, his pious mother said to him: "My little one, love God very much and think of others." This advice became the whole program of his life and Jean-Martin considered, from then on, that an apostle must give God to souls and not himself; God's perfect love, irreplaceable and infinitely precious is whom he must give to his sisters and brothers and not simply wish it for them. Jean-Martin thought this in the seminary and throughout his life.

Ordained a priest on March 9, 1754 by Monsignor de St. Simon, at that time Bishop of Metz, he was convinced that he was called "in order to love God and think of others." This made him prefer parish ministry to being a professor and he was named assistant at St. Victor Church in Metz.

His zeal for the glory of God and salvation of souls, restrained with difficulty as a student, was finally released. This large parish was a marvelous field open to his apostolate and he gave himself to them without reserve, more and more convinced that God could be loved only by total love.

The pastor of St. Victor, a man of knowledge and merit, put full confidence in his assistant. The young priest's seriousness made such a good impression that many souls came to him even though they knew he was a demanding confessor.

What was appreciated in him, even when he put nature to the test, was one felt he was not like those whom the Lord reproached as Pharisees. Jean-Martin moved people to penitence by example.

He lived poor, by love for the poverty of Christ. He would often say, "God gave me the grace to love the life of poverty."

His holy mother had instilled in him that "a good priest must live poor, die poor, and own no other property than a clay pot that he would break with a kick of his foot as he drew his last breath."

In 1758, Father Moye was sent to Saint Croix Parish in Metz. There he intensified his soul's ardent desire to work for the instruction of the poor children in the city, but especially those of the surrounding countryside.

The young apostle was not someone who would complain about evil without searching to do something about it. He was above all a person who got things done. In order to remedy the ignorance, so evil from all points of view, he understood that he had to begin with the children, especially with the little girls. The foundations begun by St. Peter Fourier and Alix LeClerc reached only the little girls who could go to school; that of St. Jean Baptiste de la Salle only little boys. The most neglected were the little girls in the hamlets, so he turned to help them.

He meditated on the project, consulted God in prayer, asked advice from his ecclesial superiors and waited patiently for the hour of Providence. This wait would last eight years! God's works takes part in eternity!...

Allow us to make a simple comparison. Should one be astonished before the anguish and resolutions of this soul of an apostle, to have heard an eminent eulogist of the new “Blessed” proclaim him “pioneer of Catholic Action,” and strongly emphasize his apostolic outlook, and initiatives? Who could deny these compliments and not recognize in Jean Martin Moye the true spirit of Catholic Action?

More still, in our times when the ideal of evangelical principles incites such generous outbursts in an idealistic youth, don't we find this same enthusiasm, born from the same needs, in the soul of the humble vicar of Metz?

It is so true that the history of peoples as that of souls is a perpetual starting over and that the aspirations and needs of humanity remain identical in all times.

It will also always be true that the conquest of souls or, more simply, charity towards our neighbor will be for an apostle's heart the best means of bearing witness to God the sincerity of his faith and love.

But the time has come to present the grain of wheat that the Sower will use according to the designs of Providence.

## II

*...Then there was the “grain of wheat” ...*

*Whose meeting was prepared by Providence.*

We read in the life of St. John Bosco that one evening in October 1864, returning by foot from Genes to Turin, his first vacation colony for ninety boys, he stopped in Mornese, a little village of Piemontais on the border of Ligurie. Welcomed by his friend, Dom Pestarino, pastor of the parish, Don Bosco, despite his fatigue, agreed to speak to the population of Mornese. His apostolic heart overflowed as he exhorted the crowd to live a perfect Christian life. In the audience was Marie Dominique Mazzarello, a young peasant girl thirsty for the absolute, and open to the gift of self and to all devotions.

Grace acted in this upright and generous soul and eight years later Marie Dominique Mazzarello was elected the first Superior General of the Daughters of Marie-Auxiliatrice by the twenty-seven first Salesian religious of St. John Bosco.

These meetings of souls are not rare in the history of the Church; Claire and Francis of Assisi, Therese and John of the Cross, Jeanne de Chantal and Francis de Sales are examples among many others.

The one that interests us here and which is no less interesting is the heroine MARGUERITE LECOMPTE.

She was born in Jeusse (Moselle) in 1737. When Father Moye was assistant in Metz, Marguerite lived in Metz with her family on the little street of the Cloutiers.

In this working class neighborhood where the labor and honesty of each one was its richness, Marguerite was expected to contribute to the livelihood of the family and so she worked in the mill and earned a meager salary.

Like most of the children of this time, she had been raised with no education and despite her great desire, she was unable to read.

A simple accident, arranged by Providence, was to give her the opportunity to remedy this situation.

Not long after her First Communion, while playing on the ice one winter day, she had a very serious fall and a fractured arm obliged her to have an extended stay in the hospital. There this docile and pious child very quickly won over the sympathy of the Sister nurses and when they learned of her great desire to read, they devoted themselves to help her realize that desire. In a short time, because she was blessed with a keen intelligence and excellent memory, as well as by sustained effort, Marguerite learned enough to be able to continue on her own and she did so successfully.

How happy she was when she found herself in possession of this “key to knowledge” which would allow her to learn so many things! But she was even happier when she was able to help others attain this same skill.

So she made a promise to God, in recognition of what she considered an exceptional and precious favor, to read only “good books.”

The rest of her life shows clearly that this skill was not just a result of luck, but was part of a providential plan. Marguerite would soon realize her desire to share this gift with others.

Her work place was rather far from her parent’s home; transportation was either inexistent or expensive, so the young girl carried her frugal lunch and ate with others, either in her own place or in neighboring fields when the weather was good. There they chatted pleasantly.

It goes without saying that Marguerite’s favorite pastime was reading when she could do this without neglecting her friends. Most of the time she used her leisure moments with her companions, preferring to deprive herself of what she really enjoyed, rather than grieve them. Her companions knew, however, what she called “her treasure” and, at times, they felt some legitimate envy, expressing timid

admiration. “It’s beautiful to know how to read,’ one of them said..”I’d like to know how to read,” hinted another. Tactfully, Marguerite didn’t say anything, but she took those who had thus spoken aside and promised to help them learn to read. She spent every spare moment doing this with untiring charity.

These details may seem childish, but they are very pertinent to our subject. This act of charity, accompanied by true self-sacrifice will be the mark by which the Blessed Jean Martin Moye will recognize his first daughter. God, who had prepared her as an instrument for His work, also reserved to Himself the placing of her in the hands of the “Sower,” his faithful servant.

First of all, let us look at Marguerite in her work place. Her virtues had merited the esteem of her employers who entrusted her with the direction of the room in which she worked. Her regularity, her constant attention to her work, was imitated by other workers and the group she directed was often held up as a model to those who were less conscientious.

Marguerite used her authority only for the greater good of her companions. An atmosphere of mutual confidence and affection was soon created between the supervisor and the workers. The latter easily had recourse to her advice, and during free moments they spoke freely of intimate and spiritual aspirations. And so, during one of these sharings, the conversation turned to the Feast of the Assumption and the reception of Sacraments. Let Marguerite tell us in her own words:

“As I was complaining about not being able to receive Communion, because I arrived at church for confession after the Pastor had already left and I didn’t dare disturb him, they said ‘Oh! We’re lucky. For some time now, we don’t have to look for a priest because he stays close to the confessional and even gives us time to prepare ourselves first. He’s a saint! He gives such good advice on how to make our work holy, that we want to be better. Come with us!’ I answered that I had no reason to change confessor and that after having been deprived of Communion on the first feast of Our Lady, I was hoping that it wouldn’t happen a second time.

But as the Our Lady’s Birthday was coming closer, Marguerite, fearing a new disappointment, let herself be persuaded and followed her companions to St. Victor.

“The confessor they told me about,” she continued, “was Father Moye. I found him standing near the confessional and I was able to make my confession. He asked me if I intended to return. I answered without saying yes or no. However I did agree with my companions that the practices that this holy priest recommended were stimulating. And I did return to him as a matter of fact.

This time, this pious director asked me about my practices of piety and about details of my work. I told him I was teaching reading to young female workers. ‘Ah!’ he said, ‘you are teaching reading, would you like to be a teacher?’

Such an unexpected question surprised the humble girl, “I responded that I would like that very much but that I have neither the knowledge nor anything else necessary to be a teacher, I am only a poor girl...”

These words, filled with true evangelical simplicity gladdened the apostolic heart of Jean Martin Moye. Those were the kinds of persons he was looking for, souls who depended on God rather than on self, souls detached from all, ready to give up all. He knew that God’s work would only be accomplished in the measure that God would be the sole master of the soul, that is, in the measure where the soul would be empty of self. He recognized this spiritual state, these indispensable qualities in his penitent:

The Grain of Wheat was found...

And when, at the beginning of 1762, Father Moye had obtained the consent of his superiors, he did not hesitate to call Marguerite Lacomte

### III

THE HARVEST IS GREAT...

The field to be harvested was vast...

The zeal of the apostle which we already recognized in Jean Martin had not wasted the grace of his priesthood. He had studied, observed the needs of the Lorraine population, and wanted to remedy their situation. In addition to what he had learned in the two parishes of Metz, he had been stationed in the neighboring countryside and remained saddened by the ignorance and the neglect of the rural masses. It was toward them that he would first go; it was for them that he searched generous souls.

He wouldn’t try to hide the difficulties which awaited them from those he would “send,” nor would he minimize them. Sincerity of love is proved by sacrifice, and it is when virtue costs that it is truly beautiful and meritorious to be virtuous.

Let us listen to the scene he presents of this new apostolate:

“We started the plan of an establishment for a hamlet where the animals sleep in the same place as the people, where the richest in the village are obliged to beg and where the elderly of sixty and eighty are ignorant of all religion and hardly know if there’s a God.

He adds: One can judge by what the one who will enter into the project can expect.”

Seen from a human viewpoint, the project would have nothing appealing to nature; it is not to nature that he appeals, but to the fine point of a totally supernatural generosity which relies on grace alone.

The supernatural, the grace!...That’s the secret of the fertile apostolate of Fr. Moyer during his entire life. He wanted to communicate this secret to his daughters and to all those who have gathered this fruit of the Redemption.

He also knows human weakness, especially feminine instability, which he vigorously denounces.

*“Nevertheless, I fear that some girls, to whom all projects please because they are new and extraordinary, present themselves in the first movement of human eagerness, excited by an imaginary zeal. May God ward off such subjects! May He send us those who have the necessary qualities to fill his merciful designs on this abandoned youth.”*

And he enumerates these qualities:

We need: girls who seek only the glory of God without other motives; zealous girls having at heart the salvation of the poor children; girls temperate and mortified; those who know how to adapt to the privations of the country; girls detached of all, ready to change residence, without looking for any other consolation but to do God’s will; girls of proven virtue; girls settled, mature, prudent...“I pray the Lord to send some of these!”

This prayer, coming from a heart entirely preoccupied with divine glory, was granted. A whole flowering of generous souls rose up to “serve”.

How did Father Moyer welcome them? How does he prepare them for their sublime but very difficult task?

Here again, we go back to the sources. Listen to the dialogue between the apostle with a heart of fire, in love with the strongest Gospel virtues, and the humble and frail young girl who has just accepted her first mission:

“Father Moyer had me come and said: *My daughter, I am going to take you to your post; I can give you a little something, but if you wish to abandon yourself to Providence, you will have more merit... I was in my first fervor, nothing cost me, I responded: Yes, Father, I abandon myself to Providence. The preparations were quickly made; the basket with a little something for the road and off we went!*”

And so, she entered fully in the spirit of the Gospel. “Carry neither gold, nor silver nor sack for the road, no two cloaks...Give freely what you have received freely.” (Mt: 10)

The reader could still ask a question: Hasn't this strong-souled apostle asked a superhuman response from these young souls, enthusiastic no doubt, but so frail?

The facts are there to answer us and they allow us to affirm that if the soul of an apostle is strongly fortified in the most solid Christian virtues, this strength would be tempered by goodness, daughter of his love.

In the preceding dialogue, we were able to admire with what reserve he proposes virtue:...

*"I can give you a little something, but if you wish to abandon yourself to Providence..."* -

The goodness of his heart appears here equal to the strength of his soul. He does not lay burdens on the shoulders of others; he proposes something to them and he waits, docile to the grace, the reactions, knowing well that God gives to each soul a measure of gifts on which it will be judged.

Fr. Moyer will witness this goodness of soul to his Daughters on many occasions; the history of the origins furnishes constant examples. It shows us Fr. Moyer supporting the Sisters in trials, making them see the good which comes from contradictions. He doesn't want them to be either disappointed or discouraged.

He always exhorts them paternally:

"I have seen some Sisters uneasy and troubled when one told them something disagreeable or when they were contradicted. They think of it uselessly, allowing themselves sentiments of sadness, discouragement, even murmuring and bitterness..., which comes only from pride.... Accustom yourselves to look upon events with the eyes of faith, then all will turn to the glory of God and to your advantage."

Without a doubt, one would seek in vain in these words a satisfaction for nature; it no longer has a place in the life of the apostle, and yet does not keep her from being and remaining human and condemning no one.

One of the first Daughters named by him, because of her age and experience, to prepare the opening of schools, or as Father Louyot says "to beat the dew in order to clear a path," was often exposed to the rebuffs and humiliations inherent in this work. Seeing her one day returning, a little sad, from a parish where he had sent her:

"Well, my daughter, he said to her, how were you received?" "Oh, my Father, replied the sister visibly moved, I have been insulted, scoffed at."

"Bless God, my daughter," replied the priest with serenity, "that we have been judged worthy to suffer for Him... Our work will prosper."

Contradictions! They are the lot of all disciples of Christ, “If they have persecuted me, they will persecute you also,” Jean Martin Moye knew this. He is not surprised, must less discouraged.

His work of the evangelization of the “masses” conceived in prayer, in a very pure vision of the glory of God, was to have the blessing of all divine works, to be marked with the seal of the cross.

When the opening of the first schools was known, people spoke about it differently and criticism spread rapidly:

Foolhardy to think that these girls, without fixed revenue, can subsist!

Illusion to believe that new subjects will come, with a single goal, to consecrate themselves to this work!

And how long will this experience last? Etc. etc.

To all these objections, the saintly priest opposed with only his faith and his confidence in God: “It is in pain, humiliation, that God’s work is done,” he wrote. “The more we are forsaken by others, the more we are helped by God.”

And when the trial was at its height with the interdiction of Bishop de Montmorency over the establishment of new schools, Father Moye wrote: “One cannot understand the pain that this decision causes me...Nevertheless, Grace leads me to sacrifice it for God. By multiplying the ‘acts of submission to the will of God, I find calm in the midst of the storm and I preserve peace of heart. He admitted that his great suffering was to see the plan that he thought came from God fail.

Painful trial, but how profound! The rocks along the way which at first seemed obstacles, were to become by God’s Providence, the materials with which he’d build the house.

One of his friends, Father Jobal, struck by the order of Bishop Montmorency that the schools in existence be maintained, had told him with assurance: “I admire Providence, these are the corner stones.”

These words were prophetic. At the end of the same year, the Bishop lifted the order and permitted the opening of a new school.

Though this event didn’t signal an end to the contradictions, which would be the mark of the life of the Servant of God, the example is enough to allow us to judge his authentic sanctity.

What we admire most, is that, knowing that the accusations brought against him had no other foundation than malice or error, he never tried to justify himself before the bishop and did nothing to make him change his decision. Even more, he applied himself to make his Daughters and his friends share his conviction: faith and submission to the will of God.

He is strong and he remains confident, because he knows that the work undertaken is not his; it rests entirely on Providence. He is sure of it; that is sufficient for him.

But one must move forward.

January 14, 1762

On a cold morning in January 1762, the fourteenth day of the month, two young priests entered the Church of Vigy and were welcomed by the Cure of the parish, Abbe Verniolle. A young girl, sedate but simple and modest, accompanied them.

Let us use Father Moye's own words

"Monsieur Jobal who had recently been ordained priest came with me to Vigy. He sang the Mass of the Holy Spirit and I gave the instruction on the necessity of procuring a Christian education for the young.

It is true that "eloquence is born of the desire to persuade," and the speaker was eloquent. Prayer was especially fervent. A great "adventure" was beginning.

Their thanksgiving ended, the two priests and the young girl took the road that led to Saint-Hubert, a hamlet situated four kilometers from Vigy. Fr. Moye knew this road for having traveled it during his missions, and it was a very good thing, since the snow, thick and clinging, in these Lorraine lands, hid it almost completely.

The two priests advanced painfully, thoughtful, recollected, penetrated with the importance of this first act of a project so long considered before God and which was finally to be realized.

Marguerite Lecomte – for it was she – followed a few steps behind, praying her rosary. Bright-eyed, sure of step, clothed in a heavy wool dress, wearing solid wooden shoes, she seemed indifferent to the cold. She walked strong with an unshakeable faith in Providence, learned from the school of Fr. Moye, when the soul was wide open to confidence.

The arrival of the three travelers created a sensation in the small sparsely inhabited locality, little accustomed to their tranquility being disturbed by visitors. The season of winter kept the inhabitants in their homes. Notified of the event, they soon assembled around the three, bearers without doubt of sensational news.

What was their surprise when Father Moye announced to them that the reason for this visit was the proposal of a school teacher for their children.

After the first moment of astonishment, for it was a real surprise for these brave peasants, it was necessary to look at the practical side, suggested spontaneously by good common sense: this school teacher would be without doubt, useful, but it would be necessary to lodge her, feed her...this newcomer, despite her sympathetic appearance, didn't look well-off...and all these families were poor...This was absolutely impossible.

A keen sighted observer could have noted at this hour, that these solid farmers were feeling a certain relief, agitated by the thought of this new idea coming to disturb their calm and tranquil life.

The conclusion was evident: the offer was met with defeat...But we already know that this defeat was not of a nature to upset the apostles who had come to work for God. Providence had not uttered the last word.

A brave peasant, mother of a large family, after having obtained the approving nod from her husband, timidly offered lodging to the young mistress. A respectful silence greeted the proposal. Heaven had resolved the question.

Sister Marguerite...we shall call her this from henceforth... received parting instructions from the two priests who, while blessing her, assured her of divine protection. They then returned to Metz, 14 kilometers from Saint Hubert.

For her part, the young mistress, after having answered some questions from the people who were self confident because of the morning scene, retired to the home of her charitable hostess and offered her services to her.

The day, fruitful in events, was coming to an end. The family came together around the table for the frugal evening meal. Sr. Marguerite used her poor provisions in order not to diminish the meager ration of the children, and the time for rest arrived finally...

It was eagerly awaited; the emotions of the day had worn her out, she longer for solitude.

How disappointed she was when the lady of the house indicated a corner of the common room which she was to share with the children and her and her husband. As a matter of fact, this room served as kitchen, dining room and bedroom for the whole family.

The heart of Sr. Marguerite tightened anew. In spite of the little she had at home, she did have a small room in Metz where she loved to retire and pray...However, the regret did not intimidate her. Listen as she gives us her impressions:

“I didn’t sleep, but I wasn’t discouraged; I did not want to look back; I rested on Providence and I encouraged myself with the thought that our good Father had told us many times: ‘Great things have small beginnings.’”

## V

### Heroic Beginnings

During this painful night, Sr. Marguerite formed her plans for the next day. The disappointment of the evening did not upset her. There had to be a little corner for her somewhere in the village. If she

could be alone, she would be satisfied. As soon as daylight came, she left in search of just such a favorable place, sure that Providence would lead her.

Although heavy snow covered and hid the houses, Sr. Marguerite noticed an abandoned stable at the entrance to the village and near the home of her hosts; she examined it and found it favorable for her needs. She easily obtained permission to make it her home and courageously she went to work.

The day was spent filling in the openings and clearing unwanted objects.

The inhabitants of Saint-Hubert were beginning to be interested in this new-comer who seemed to be moved with the purest of intentions and who did not hesitate to accept all the sacrifices to procure for them and their children the blessings of the knowledge of God. Her unselfishness especially struck them with admiration and, in her gracious goodness, they recognized the character of a true disciple of the one who said: "Love one another...Let the little ones come unto me."

In their own way and following their own means, they wanted to prove it. The richest among them offered a bundle of straw which would serve temporarily as a bed, another gave the board which separated the straw from the bare ground; another brought an old cover still capable of protecting from the severe cold; each one wanted to give a contribution, small as it was, to a work founded on charity.

"The second day," says Marguerite, "I was in my cubbyhole, happy and content. I was there really like a grain of mustard seed. The people sent me the three children of the house, but the space where I held them was so small that I was obliged to hold them on my lap.

With persevering patience, sustained by her love of God and of souls, Sister Marguerite continued her clearing out work and soon undertook, with the kind aid of the inhabitants, the construction of a livable house of wood and earth which would serve as dwelling and classroom for several years.

For this foundation, established under the sign of the cross and the most absolute destitution, was to live and bear fruit. The ardent missionary stayed more than a half century in this region where the hand of Providence had placed her... The grain of mustard seed, watered by divine grace, sprang up and blossomed.

These isolated and abandoned hamlets had attracted the attention of the apostolic zeal of Fr. Moyer. For them, he had conceived, before God, the project of these "open-air Sisters" who would go, under the protection of the Holy Infant Jesus, and bring to "little ones" the word of life.

"From the very beginning," he said, "I want to give to the sisters a simple, coarse, modest habit...Sr Marguerite Lecomte reminded me that I had bought soldiers overcoats to dress them with at first... I gave you a cross of wood for the same reason, as a sign of simplicity and poverty, and because a wooden cross has greater resemblance to the cross of Our Savior Jesus Christ."

As for the name, he cared little about it.

“I called you at first the poor Sisters, the Daughters of the Infant Jesus, since you are especially destined to teach children. But the public universally gave you and still call you the Sisters of Providence. And it’s the name that is most suitable for you, since it reminds you that you must abandon yourselves to this divine Providence. Rely only on Providence, without seeking human support.”

Monsignor Brault, bishop of Saint Die was right when, in his brilliant eulogy, he said:

“Father Moye was an initiator, an animator, much more so than a legislator... He gave to his work life and spirit. The spirit can act without the letter; the letter will never act without the spirit... This is the secret of the perpetual youth of a foundation.”

## VI

### Evangelical Virtues

Other schools were opened in the neighborhood of Vigy, among others at Befey, at Vry, at Lavieuville... The teachers of these schools were worthy imitators of Sr. Marguerite Lecomte and true Daughters of Blessed Moye by their abandonment to Providence and the practice of a heroic poverty.

“They left, four in number,” says a manuscript of that time, “to start a new school in Befey. They arrived there without bread, without provisions, without knowing how they would be lodged, nourished, etc...”

Everyone in Metz said that they would not stay there; that this enterprise was an imprudent... “But” said Monsieur Moye, “all my confidence was in God, and I had tried to inspire in them that same confidence in Providence; it would not fail them. It is true they had to suffer attacks, but permitted it to prove their faith; they triumphed over them.”

They taught school gratuitously and during time between classes, they worked in the fields to earn a living.

At Saint Hubert, a charitable person supplied Sr. Marguerite with one bread per week; the humble girl went herself to get it, so that the gift took the form of alms and she was able to mingle with the poor of the village.

Such opportunities delighted these generous souls who had been formed in the love of poverty and lived the doctrine of their Father:

“Love the poverty of the Savior”, he had often told them; “honor it by imitating it. You will content yourselves with the food of the poor... You will have only simple and poor furniture.”

Without doubt, these exterior practices do not constitute, theologically, the virtue of poverty, but they can at least be its manifestation, and here we can give the evidence.

We can, in fact, lack everything and practice real poverty without possessing the virtue. This is frequently the case of those who suffer material want that is imposed on them by life. Poverty has to be suffered. It is neither wanted nor loved and it engenders nothing but bitterness and envy.

True poverty is in the detachment of the heart which can embrace, if need be, destitution.

Real poverty, that which Fr. Moye wanted to instill in his Daughters, was the profound desire to imitate the poverty of Christ who “had no place to lay his head.”

“How quickly one will be poor, Lord, said a saint, who, loving you with all one’s heart, cannot stand being richer than you.”

The Founder made evangelical poverty one of the four pillars of his Institute. He repeated to his Daughters: “You will have only the necessities to live poor, and you will attach your heart to nothing...” He wrote from China: “Always value your poverty. Our Lord, during the three years that he preached, lived on alms, and the experience taught me the advantage of such a life... Love your poverty like a treasure.”

Two centuries have passed, new needs have arisen. Exteriorly, the work prospered. It has been necessary to build houses, schools; it has been necessary to arrange them modestly, but conveniently. Was the fundamental spirit weakened? Has the edifice, erected on the virtue so dear to the Founder, been shaken?

We don’t think so. The Sisters of Providence cling to poverty in its real sense: “Interior detachment and imitation of the Savior,” If their poverty is less apparent, it remains a fundamental virtue very dear, a pillar of the Institute. Poverty is strictly linked to charity. Sr. Marguerite loved the poor and although poor herself, she always found the means to help others.

When a child arrived at school sad, numb with cold, she did what she could to make him comfortable. It happened often that when she asked if all had had breakfast, she got several timid answers in the negative. She then distributed the potatoes that she prepared each day for herself and for those whom she knew to be insufficiently nourished.

Her charity overflowed also to the parents. She could be found at the bedside of the sick after classes, easing their pain and encouraging them. She visited the elderly, assisted the dying, preparing them for their last journey, especially when the priest was not available.

She was always ready “to serve,” and one still can find in the civil registers acts bearing the signature of Marguerite Lecomte, school teacher, serving as civil and religious authority.

The acts of baptism particularly testify to her attentive devotion of baptizing in case of necessity. This corresponds to the instructions of Fr. Moye. We know actually that the printing of a pamphlet on infant baptism – even those born pre-maturely – whose omission Fr. Moye attributed to a lack of care or

ignorance caused uproar in Metz and obliged him to leave the city. The opposition was merely new proof that all good works must be marked by the sign of contradiction; the entire life of Fr. Moye is testimony to that.

## VII

### Radiant Apostolate – Notre Dame de Rabas

Good to all, Sister Marguerite reserved a good part of her charity for the Sisters, that Fr. Moye had placed in the region at the request of the people. She visited them often, watched over their health, and encouraged them. Her memories remain attached especially to Befey, where undoubtedly, she taught for some time.

The hamlet of Befey, about equal to Saint-Hubert in size, is about eighteen hundred meters from there. It belongs to the parish of Vigy, whereas Saint-Hubert is connected to Altroff. This whole region, to the Northeast of Metz, is a wooded area with little farming. The footpath, a one-way road, which connected the two hamlets, crossed the entire length of the forest. Sr. Marguerite often traveled it.

In winter, the wolves lived quietly in these thick woods, prowling sometimes up to the homes whose inhabitants defended themselves the best they could. In summer, the shaded road was pleasant to travel.

A chapel, about half-way down the road from Saint-Hubert to Befey is dedicated to Notre-Dame de Rabas. It is the center of legends and memories kept alive by the people in the vicinity. As a matter of fact, they enjoy telling that the holy emperor Charlemagne loved to hunt in the woods when he stayed at Aix-la-Chappelle. The region was well stocked with game, which explains the attraction. In order to help his followers fulfill their religious duties, he had a chapel constructed in the center of the forest and had it dedicated to Notre Dame de Rabas. The wooden statue that can still be seen in the chapel is an authentic souvenir of this era. In the course of his outings, the emperor's troops stopped at this place and the chaplain celebrated Mass there. Around the chapel, the remains of the shelters set up for the hunt still exist.

The soil of that region being permeable, water was frequently lacking. Legend has it that on one day of extreme drought, the riders, assembled around their chief after a difficult and tiring chase, were complaining bitterly of thirst for themselves and for the horses. They searched in vain for the means to quench their thirst. Charlemagne invoked Our Lady; then he rebuked his men so strongly on the weakness of their faith, that even the horses, struck by the vehement tone of his voice, pranced energetically, and the hollow made by their hoofs was so deep that clear water sprang up abundant enough to appease the thirst of all and end all the quarrels. From that time, this marvelous water, always fresh

and clear, flows without ceasing even on the days of the greatest drought and bears the name of “Charlemagne’s fountain”.

The upkeep of this chapel, now restored, was assured by Sister Marguerite. She assembled the children there, and even the people who were often deprived of the presence of a priest.

There, in the calm of nature so favorable to prayer, the ardent apostle taught her pupils the method of prayer taught to her by Fr. Moye, that is to raise one’s thoughts to God by means of creatures. She would tell them how the spirit and the heart of a Christian can simply and naturally turn toward the creator, our Father, and speak to him. She gave them formulas, for example seeing a prairie, a forest, or a field one could say: “Blessed be God as often as there are flowers and leaves in this prairie...or as often as there are trees and branches in this forest... or of grains of wheat in this field...” Thus, the minor incidents of the day, the most ordinary actions were occasions for elevating the soul. How invigorating is this simple piety!

It is consoling to state, at this very time, these pious practices were transmitted from one generation to the next, and that there are people in Befey and Saint-Hubert who still use these with benefit for their Christian life.

Documents permit us to state that the Sisters placed by Fr. Moye in the neighborhood of Metz, supported themselves, rendered each other services, and replaced each other as the need arose. That is why Sr. Marguerite Lecomte’s name is found in the register of Saint-Hubert as well as in Befey and even in Vigy. She was at Befey at the time of the Revolution and stayed there during this troubled time, bringing together the children of the two hamlets, sustaining the faith of all. The documents also mention the construction of a school house in Befey where one can still find traces.

In the archives of the parish of Vigy a canonical visit is mentioned made by M. Baltus, archpriest of Vigy after the Concordat. In the report of this visit, one reads: They teach the principles of the Catholic religion at the school which is run by Sr. Marguerite LeComte.

In 1803, the mayor of Befey asked the M. le Dean of Vigy to come say Mass at the Chapel of Notre Dame of Rabas and to take care of the people there. He mentioned the great ignorance of the inhabitants, and their extreme need of religious help. M. le Dean answered this appeal in October 1803. In his account of the visit, he pointed out the generosity of the people, testimony to their faith. “Entire baskets are collected by the overseer of this chapel which has become known nationally. After the Revolution, Fr. About, pastor at Vigy left to instruct the youth of Befey.”

In 1807 M. the Archbishop of Vigy sent a petition to the Bishop of Metz asking to use the chapel for Mass and that it be considered an annex. “The bad road,” he said, “as well as the distance is such that Befey’s parishioners can only come rarely to Mass and they wallow in ignorance.”

All this shows how great was the misery, moral as well as material, of the French countryside at this time, especially in the region we're discussing. At the same time it shows the effort made by civil and religious authorities to remedy it.

The zeal of the Daughters of Jean-Martin Moyer found their nourishment and its place.

## VIII

### Apostolic Life of the "Sower"

What had become of the "project" of the young assistant of Metz at this troubled time in our national history?

On leaving Metz in 1764, Fr. Moyer was sent to Dieuze where he remained three years during which his zeal, far from diminishing, only grew. He preached missions in the neighboring parishes of Guebling and Gondrexange. There also he found the cross and accepted it generously, seeing in it a condition of the good he hoped to accomplish. His piety, his humble submission to the divine will, always helped him triumph. "When God has well proved us," he was to say later, "then he makes use of us." He was to experience this often.

In 1768 he was called to Saint-Die by Monsignor de Mareille, Bishop of Sion and Provost Marshal, to start a seminary. The death of the prelate the following year and also the lack of resources forced the abandonment of this project. Nevertheless, this short stay in Saint-Die always seemed to him providential. It was there, actually, that for the greater good of the work of the school, that Fr. Moyer met Canon Raulin, a venerable priest who was to be his faithful friend and zealous collaborator and later the restorer and defender of the Sisters of Providence.

At this same time, another friend, Fr. Lacombe, had opened a novitiate at Haut-Clocher in Lorraine. This novitiate was later transferred to Siersthal for the German Sisters; this is the origin of the Sisters of Saint Jean de Bassel.

Seeing his work in good hands, Fr. Moyer then considered realizing another project conceived and nourished for a long time in his soul: to contribute to the evangelization of China. In October 1769, he went to the Seminary of Foreign Missions in Paris to offer himself and prepare for this new apostolate. He had to wait for a place on the boat and it was only on December 30, 1771 that he was able to embark for the Far East. Arriving finally after a wonderful but perilous voyage, he was welcomed with fatherly kindness by his new bishop, Monseigneur Pottier, who entrusted him with the evangelization of Setchoan.

The ease with which the ardent missionary learned the Chinese language, the perfection of his accent, his rapid adaptation to the customs of the country, were to him a great help for his apostolate which grew in an extraordinary manner.

Fr. Moye saw himself entrusted by his bishop, with eastern Setchoan, and the still more pagan province of Kouy-tcheou. It was in traveling through this province that he was arrested, imprisoned, led to the Pretorium of the Mandarin where he generously professed his faith. It was in this same prison that he converted one of the guards who later himself became a priest, and preceded Jean-Martin to martyrdom. ?????

We cannot dwell here on the extraordinary fecundity of the apostolate of this missionary, which one could without exaggeration compare to the Apostle of the Indies. An evaluation of the ten years of mission reveals: the establishment of several Christian communities, the reform of social abuses and moral disorders, the composition of Prayer books in the Chinese language, the opening of a seminary to receive vocations to the native priesthood, the foundation of an Institute of Christian Virgin teachers like the Sisters of Lorraine, the angelic work of the infant baptisms, a prelude to the work of the Holy Childhood...

And if one seeks the secret of this astonishing fecundity, it will be found in his holiness. "He was," according to one of his biographers, "in China, as elsewhere, a man of sacrifice, of prayer and of humble obedience...He appears truly as one of the descendants of the great apostles of Christ. The cross he planted on Chinese soil is still standing despite the efforts to destroy it."

After ten years of intense labor, the apostle still attentive to "study Providence in order to follow without preceding it or allowing its moments to pass" understood that the hour had come to leave China. Docile to the voice of grace, approved by his Superiors, he returned to France.

"Providence who led me to China, calls me back to France," he wrote. All is said in these few words. His reasons, especially his health, had the complete approval of his bishop and his colleagues. The Sacred Congregation of the Propagation gave him favorable approval.

Arrived in Paris in 1784, Fr. Moye, after several days of rest, went back to work. He resumed the direction of the Sisters along with Monsignor Raulin and Fr. Lacombe who during his absence, had been the guardians and had continued the work of the schools. He preached missions at Lindres, Rambervillers, Essegney, Charmes; etc.he established novitiates at Essegney and at Cutting.

Soon came the troubled days of the Revolution; Fr. Moye made it his duty to instruct priests and the faithful on the civil Constitution of the clergy, wanting to preserve them from all error.

In May 1791, he went into exile believing this to be the way of Providence to save his Daughters and reestablish the humble society when the storm had passed.

He made his way to Trier, welcomed there the refugee Sisters, taught and encouraged them. He also worked with other refugee French priests giving them conferences on the priestly ministry, on Sacred Scripture especially on the Psalms.

After the battles of Valmy and Jemmapes, the soldiers retreated to Trier in great numbers. Typhus fever, a consequence of fatigue and misery, soon broke out among them. Fr. Moye worked unsparingly for the relief of these unfortunate victims. It was in this exercise of charity that he himself contracted this terrible disease which took his life in the morning hours of Saturday, May 4, 1793.

The news of his holy death, crowning an edifying life, roused in the town a cry of admiration as well as regret. His exiled Daughters were reunited around his death bed. They had piously collected the works of their Father to pass them on to the absent members: "Increase and multiply if such is the will of God!..." this was his final wish.

The Sisters of Providence would no longer hear the voice of the Founder on earth, but they were to retain his spirit and live according to his teachings.

## IX

### Final Days of "The Grain of Mustard seed"

We left Marguerite Lecomte at work in the midst of her dear children of the hamlets. The torments of the Revolution had not reached her; the years had passed in obscure self-sacrifice and in the exercise of charity.

Her hard life and all its privations had not impaired her health. Her dear hamlet of Saint-Hubert took care of her until 1815; she was then seventy-eight years old.

Nevertheless, despite her energy but feeling the fatigue, this courageous worker gave up. Services rendered for fifty-three years led the authorities to ask for a modest pension for her. The Prefecture of Metz honored this request and Soeur Marguerite was placed as a guest at the home of a good lady of the parish. She stayed there until October, 1826, and when Reverend Mother Therese Mourey, then Mistress of Novices and Assistant to the Reverend Mother Cecile Collard, came to invite her to end her days at the Convent of Portieux, which, following the Revolution, had become the center of the Congregation.

As a matter of fact, in 1803 Fr. Feys, who had known Fr. Moye in exile, had assisted at his death and had pledged undying reverence, had been named pastor of Portieux. He wanted to have Sisters of Providence for his school for girls. This little school was to be, according to Providence, the cradle of the Motherhouse. Around it, sprang up gradually the buildings destined for the Novitiate, to the Community, and a Chapel which remains the heart of the Congregation.

Sr. Marguerite willingly accepted this invitation. The joy and the emotion of the Community were great at Portieux on receiving this first Daughter of the Holy Founder.

In her new retirement, the pious religious did not cease to edify her companions by the liveliness of her faith, her tender piety, the uprightness and the sweetness of her charity. Her spirit was filled with holy maxims, words of Holy Scripture; she repeated them in such a way as to testify clearly that she was speaking from the abundance of her heart.

After God's word, Sr. Marguerite loved and enjoyed mostly the writings of Fr. Moye. One saw her fervor come to life, when during spiritual reading, she heard the advice or the letters of the Founder to the Sisters. It happened that she interrupted the reader and cried earnestly.

“Yes, my good Daughters, this is he, this is truly he! How many times he said that by word of mouth.”

One day, the Superior had read in the Novitiate what Fr. Moye said about the dispositions the Sisters were to have regarding teaching in the hamlets, Sr. Marguerite, carried away, sat up and said emotionally: “My dear children, love the hamlets, do not abandon our dear hamlets! Oh! if only I could still go teach the poor children of the hamlets!...”

Love of children, of the poor children of the hamlets remained an obsession of Sr. Marguerite Lecomte. After her title of religious, none was dearer than “teacher of the children of the hamlets,” Her name, which we see on the books kept at the Motherhouse, is followed by:...consecrated to the service of the Holy Infant Jesus for the instruction of the children of the hamlets and of the district of Vigy.

She had brought back from a pilgrimage to Saint-Hubert in the Ardennes a book treasured in the Archives of Portieux, entitled, Exercises of Devotion for the Christian Devoted to Saint-Hubert . On that book, Sr. Marguerite had written her name followed by these words: “Sister” of the Christian Schools of Befey, parish of Vigy. I lived there thirteen years,” and on the following page: “I, Sister Marguerite Lecomte, daughter consecrated to the Holy Infant Jesus for the instruction of the children of the district of Vigy, bought this book at the great Saint-Hubert of the Ardennes May 21, 1772.

She called the time in the dear hamlets, amidst all sorts of privations, her “years of happiness.” In order to abandon them forever, she had to have proof of her inability to continue. From her retirement in Metz, not only her heart and spirit but especially her prayer had returned to this beloved region, scene of her devotion. More than once, gathering her last strength, she returned there to renew in her dear children her pious exhortations to live a perfect Christian life.

In reference to this, the first years of her stay at Portieux were painful ones; she bore with difficulty the separation from her dear hamlet. Her great desire to see it again led her to believe she still had the strength to return again, and on foot, since the carriage made her ill. A Sister offered to accompany her because she doubted the “90 year old” had the strength to withstand the zeal of her desire.

The day of departure was fixed; hope seemed to reanimate the strength of this courageous religious. They left early in the morning, Sr. Marguerite, radiant with joy, but she had difficulty reaching Essegney, three kilometers from Portieux. Trying again to conceal her fatigue, she asked her companion to rest a few minutes and then wanted to continue the journey. After just a few steps, she had to admit defeat. Recognizing God's will in her helplessness, she submitted and said: "I see that it is now finished. I will never again see my dear children of the hamlets."

From that time on, Sr. Marguerite thought only of preparing for death; her prayer became continual. No longer able to read during the last years, because of her blindness, she always held her crucifix in her joined hands, and thus recalled one of the dearest devotions of the Blessed Founder.

Her patience in her weakness and during her illness was admirable. Faithful to the lessons and examples of Fr. Moye, she practiced penance and mortification to the end. Realizing, a few days before her death, that they had taken away her hair-shirt, she begged earnestly, saying that she had promised God to wear it to her last hour; it was necessary that her Confessor set her mind at rest in this regard.

The day she was to receive the Sacrament of the dying, when she saw the priest enter carrying the Holy Viaticum, her faith became stronger than the weakness of her body and she sat up in bed, showing the great love overflowing in her heart. It was the last testimony of her ardent desire to be definitively united to her God.

She died peacefully June 3, 1835, age ninety-eight.

She was buried in the part of the parochial cemetery, north of the church, reserved for the Religious of the Motherhouse. When the remains in the cemetery were transferred outside the village, the Sisters of Providence wanted to find the remains of the first Sister of the Congregation, but ran into many difficulties. It was only a hundred years later on January 12, 1935 that the site was located and bones were excavated could be safely assumed to be those of Sr. Marguerite. The presence of a medal of Saint-Hubert, testimony to her special devotion, supports this assumption.

The remains were then carefully and respectfully placed by the Sisters of Providence in a wooden box while awaiting re-burial.

With the permission of Monsignor Marottin then Bishop of Saint-Die, these venerable remains were put in a soldered lead casket and lain in a niche in the west wall of the chapel of the Motherhouse.

A marble plaque, in gold letters, bearing the name of Soeur Marguerite Lecomte, closes this cavity. It is followed by this inscription, after the dates of birth and death:

Called by the Venerable Moye  
to found with him  
the Congregation of Providence,

She was the first Religious  
at the school of Saint Hubert (Moselle)  
opened January 14, 1762.  
She dedicated herself there to the age of 78 years.  
She left us a beautiful example of virtue.  
In heaven, she prays for us.  
January 14, 1935

## X

### EPILOGUE

On May 12, 1955, a delegation from Portieux, there for the Triduum, celebrated in honor of the newly Beatified Jean Martin Moye at Cutting, where they venerated the memories of the childhood and youth of Fr. Moye. They then detoured to Metz to revisit the places sanctified by his apostolic endeavors and by the first Sisters sent by him to these Lorraine country places.

Vigy! Saint-Hubert! Befey! Wasn't in these places that the first heroic page of the history of the Sisters of Providence was written? Wasn't it indicated at the moment Holy Church proclaimed the authenticity of the virtues of the Founder and proposed him for veneration of his children, that we should return to the origin of the route traced by him and reflect on the distance traveled from there to establish a useful liaison between the past and the present in order to better prepare for the future?

When Sr. Marguerite Lecomte retired to Portieux and related to the young novices her humble beginnings in the apostolate, she was able to compare herself rightly to a "grain of mustard seed" which had become a large tree.

The Congregation of Providence, shattered by the tempest of the Revolution, had revived and "multiplied" according to the supreme vow of the Founder. They numbered now more than nine hundred Sisters and directed seven hundred schools and some hospitals.

Today, despite the storms and persecutions, the branches of that tree have again spread out. Some circumstances, recognized as providential, have brought about the external separation of some branches, without weakening the vitality of the tree.

The Daughters of Blessed Jean Martin Moye, spread in all parts of the world, even with a different name or costume, remain faithful to the spirit of the Founder who represents for them the unshakeable trunk.