



## **“DO IT IN A GOOD WAY”: OUTSTANDING VIRTUES OF VENERATED MOTHER CLAUDINE ECHERNIER**

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### **Abstract**

*The Crossians believe in sculpting the outside, in the light of that which is within. They strive towards a healthy and harmonious society of the disadvantaged and the marginalized. In tune with God's self emptying love (Kenosis) which is co-extensive with life, they groom children to live in tune with existence, to build their homes on the bedrock of truth, to grow in universal consciousness, to witness things with an all comprehensive intelligence, to work with unbounded sensitivity, to act with a spirit of inquiry and to have a deeper perception of the unity of all knowledge, of life and love. Foundress Mother Claudine Echernier-an unlettered shepherdess who in her understanding and pure awareness established a direct contact with life. She listened to the Word of God with the greatest respect. She wanted to inculcate the same respect in every one. Like the Lord and for the love of the Lord, Mother practiced poverty, esteemed humility, realized the most essential obligations of religious life with untiring efforts and indomitable spirit.*

*This article contends that explicate Mother Claudine Echernier's charism from a sociological and public theology perspective reveals both the potential and the need for interdisciplinary research to explore the noble and eternal values, and mission of Mother Caludine Echernier.*

**Key words:** *Mother Claudine Echernier's Holiness, Virtues, Poverty, Prudence, Dedication, Education, Charism.*

### **Introduction**

“It is the good god who directs my path. It is for that I obey, but occasions for dissipation will not be wanting.”

~ **Mother Claudine Echernier**

“The fruit of silence is prayer; the fruit of prayer is faith; the fruit of faith is love; the fruit of love is service; the fruit of service is peace” (Colopy, 31). Service and love for the destitute were Mother Claudine Echernier's methods to bring the world one step closer to merciful love of Jesus. Mother Claudine was brought up in poverty, accustomed early in life to hardwork, tried by affliction and misfortune; she had acquired a maturity of judgement beyond her age and condition. Her spirituality and duty to God strengthened her relentless actions against hate and poverty. People of the world were happy with the good advice they had received from her. She helped the poor and orphans. This small woman aided all humans in need regardless of their backgrounds and beliefs. She walked with Jesus throughout her life rightly proved herself to be a God-called person. Her passion was to walk in the footprints of her Master, Jesus Christ – the Great Shepherd. She never forgot that Jesus is the ultimate example of the type of character God wants His people to be Mother Claudine Echernier. Mother can be aptly called as the “Mother of Virtues”. Her inspiration was the Holy Spirit Himself and it is this spirit which kept mother to live a life as exactly as the Holy Rules in everything and always. Her pondering thought was to do the will of the good God in everything. Like the Lord and for the love of the Lord, Mother practiced poverty, esteemed humility, realized the most essential obligations of religious life with untiring efforts and indomitable spirit. It is these virtues which Mother as imbibed from the Holy Spirit led to the gratification of the Holy Cross. This paper focuses on the virtues of our venerated Mother Claudine.

### **Sisters of the Cross of Chavanod**

The Congregation of the Sisters of the Cross was founded by Mother Claudine Echernier and Father Peter Mermier in 1838 at Chavanod in France, in the 19th century. The situation created by the French revolution (1789-1797) and the Industrialization of Europe (1750-1830) affected very much the socioeconomic and political conditions of France and especially the region of Savoy. As a result of the French Revolution, ignorance, misery and poverty prevailed. The deplorable situation of the young girls touched the heart of Mother Claudine Echernier. Strengthened by the love of Christ who gave his life for the salvation of all and inspired by the courage of Mother Mary at the foot of the Cross, Mother Claudine involved herself in eradicating ignorance and misery. With the support of Fr. Peter Mermier, Mother started this congregation, dedicated to serve the needy and to educate the youth to transform the society. The Congregation of the Sisters of the Cross of Chavanod is an Apostolic Religious Institute which is international and of Pontifical Right. The Institute is present in fifteen countries on four continents.



### **Founder of the Missionaries**

Fr. Peter Mermier, a zealous priest and Founder of the Missionaries of St. Francis de Sales, was deeply moved by the poverty and illiteracy that prevailed among the poor in the society and he sought for ways and means to remedy the situation. He envisaged the founding of a new type of religious Congregation which would enable poor young women to live a consecrated life in the midst of the world. He met Claudine Echernier during the Mission he preached at Chavanod in 1838. Animated by the fervour she communicated, some girls who approached her every Sunday yearned to dedicate themselves totally to God and to the service of His people.

The intuition of Fr. Mermier and his apostolic sense enlightened by the Holy Spirit and stimulated by the needs of the times, permitted this nucleus of young women, gathered around Claudine, to become the first community of the Sisters of the Cross. Thus was born, in extreme poverty and great simplicity, a Congregation of a new type for those times. It permitted in fact poor young women to live a consecrated life in the midst of the world, either continuing their work at home, or at their Master's or living together in community. They could thus help one another in their work, be witnesses of the Gospel in their milieu, and be educators of the poorest. By their services and life example, these Sisters "set the tone" in their parishes and helped others to come out of their condition of ignorance and poverty. At the time of the death of Mother Claudine Echernier in 1869, there were already 300 Sisters in the Congregation.

**Objectives of the Study:** The objective of the present paper is analyzing outstanding virtues of venerated Mother Claudine Echernier

### **Methods and Materials**

This paper is based on secondary data, primarily through literature, study of journals, articles, website and textual analysis. Overall this exploratory research tries to explore the virtues of Mother Claudine and life of Mother Claudine Echernier. Qualitative research approaches and procedures have been applied to explore pertinent information for this study

### **Mother Claudine Echernier (1801-1869)**

It was in the village called 'vers le Creux' in the parish of Feterne in Chablais, that Claudine Echernier was born on the 29th of may 1801. Her Fater, Francis Echernier, and her mother, Anne Dutruel, had nine children, four of whom died at a tender age. Poverty was their lot yet they were very rich in faith. They possessed only a small cottage, consisting of a single room without wooden flooring and a small portion of land whose produce together with the work of the father who was a day labourer, kept the wolf from the door. The parents taught the children to fear the good God; they advised them to be good; that was all they could do. Claudine evinces from her young age a most astonishing thirst for knowledge, and a great spiritual sensibility. At the age of 10, urged by necessity, her parents send her as a shepherdess to a rich proprietor of champagnes, Mr.Maillet. About the age of 15 she had the misfortune of losing her mother and had to replace her in tending to her brothers and sisters. Active and diligent, this girl of 15 had made up her mind to become a seamstress. A friend, Miss Poncet, an expert in the trade, taught her the art of cutting out and stitching. But soon, a new trial arose: her father, having yielded to the lure of smuggling, might serve a sentence of several years in prison. Claudine became at once the head of the little family and the support of the prisoner. Being endowed with a generous heart, she fulfilled these austere tasks with all the vigour of her 20 years. After his release, Francois Echernier remarried. Then Claudine who was 26, being freed from her obligations as housekeeper, entered the service of the Parish Priest of Feternes who had just been appointed to the parish of Chavanod. But her life was so well ordered that no one could point out the least thing that was disedifying; everything breathed piety, modesty, humility, charity and mortification; in a word, she was as exemplary in this parish as she had been at Feterne.

In the Parish House of Chavanod, she looks after the old mother of Father Delalex with much devotedness, and very soon she becomes conscious of this great evil- ignorance- and its harmful consequences. She , who never experienced the joy of crossing the threshold of a school, opens her kitchen to the little girls of Chavanod to teach them their A B C, give them some notions of needle work and at the same time, to speak of God. Fr.Martin who was Claudine's director advised her to apply henceforth to Fr.Mermier, superior of the Missionaries, for spiritual direction. From then on, Claudine was Fr.Mermier's most humble and most obedient spiritual daughter. She never undertook and thing without consulting him, she did nothing without his permission. She was strong and energetic because the Holy Spirit himself formed the spirit of this girl by his divine inspirations. Having found a loyal heart, he supplied all that lacked with regard to education, and rendered her, who was nothing in the eyes of the world, capable of great things.

Fr.Peter Mermier observing the simple and inspiring life of mother Claudine asks her to see the Bishop of Annecy, Mgr. Rey to speak to him of her life and disclose to him the desire which she was no longer alone to foster. She was listened to with attention and kindness. And on the feast of St.Jane de Chantal 21.8.1838, Father Mermier conveys to her the following



message: “Mgr Rey grants you full liberty to give yourself up to your undertaking, and does not prevent you from following the inspiration of grace, as long as they come from God, and a wise director recognizes them as such...” Father Mermier drew up and gave them a small manuscript rule of life which already contained, with less details, the spiritual exercises prescribe by our present Holy Rules. Mother Claudine continued her classes for the little girls. She had about thirty pupils. As the sisters had no beds, they slept on the straw mattresses spread out on the floor of the two rooms. They ate what the children gave them. Occasionally, when the parents baked bread, they loved to send them a loaf. They did needle-work, knitting, spinning to earn their living. They also went as workers to houses, which asked for their services, and worked in the fields or at spinning. In all her actions, in all her undertakings she had only the glory of God in view. She lived only for him. She sought him alone, all the rest was nothing for her. It was in her meditations and conversations with her God that she learnt so many things. She ascribed everything to God. When some admired the progress of her institute in front of her she said: ‘it is the good God who has done everything.’ on the 30<sup>th</sup> November 1862, Father Mermier who, since 1838, had been travelling the same road as the Sisters of the Cross, having finished his appointed task, ends his earthly course.

In that year 1869, she was keen to pay a visit to all the schools run by the sisters. Once more she started on her way, from the mountains of Savoy to the confines of Dau-phine and of Switzerland, to visit the 39 houses in which 300 sisters of the Cross were then working. Everywhere she derogated from her wonted austerity, showing great kindness towards all the Sisters and accepting the alleviations offered her. On her return she could say, “I saw all the Sisters. I am happy: everything is all right everywhere.” A last journey to La Salette fulfilled the wishes of Mother Claudine who, for a long time, had been desirous to make this pilgrimage of thanksgiving. Once she was back at Chavanod, sickness is not long in coming: on the 10<sup>th</sup> of August, at dawn, just as bell was ringing to wake up the community, Mother Claudine awoke to the brightness of God.

### **Virtues of Mother Claudine Echernier**

It will be difficult to enumerate all the kinds of mortifications saintly Mother encountered and the virtues she practiced to overcome them. The virtues of venerated Mother founder, Claudine Echernier are,

### **Love of Jesus Christ**

Mother Claudine Echernier who walked with Jesus throughout her life rightly proved herself to be a God-called person. Her passion was to walk in the footprints of her Master, Jesus Christ-the Great Shepherd. She never forgot that Jesus is the ultimate example of the type of character God wants His people to be Mother Claudine Echernier. Mother loved Lord with an ardent and generous spirit, which manifested itself in her words, and many times by the tears she shed before the Blessed Sacrament and before the Crucifix. In fact, we all have a fallen nature which is often lazy and which fights against the ways of God. To overcome this, we need to replace it with a Christ-like character that will walk with God, no matter what. The more Christ-like a person is, the more usable and available to God he will be, and the more fruitful and effective for God he will be. (John 15: 1- 17).

### **Faith**

Faith was her driving power, her consolation and her hope. She possessed admirably the marvelous art of seeing God in all things; in creatures, in events, in everything and everywhere. A Sister seeing her pulling out the weeds in the garden showed her surprise; our Mother replied: “I love this work very much, it reminds me about my poor heart, where there are always useless plants to uproot.” When she broke her leg she knitted, sitting on her bed. Someone told her that she should not tire herself thus; she replied that she was happy to mend the stockings of the ministers of Lord. They were all the stockings of the Missionaries which she mended during the time of her illness. Full of life and spirited. Man completely submits his whole being to God, including his intellect and his will. Mother completely submitted herself to God in an energetic way. She joyfully surrendered herself to the Lord. Faith is a gift from God! To receive a gift, we must be in communion with the Giver. Choose to trust Him and practice receiving His gifts with humble, open palms.

### **Love of Crosses**

From the childhood till the end, Mother had the passion and love for the cross. Because of her poverty, she was put into work in her childhood days. At the age of 15, she lost her mother. Her father was imprisoned because of smugglers. Mother faced the ordeals in a courageous manner, because of her love for the cross. She had an innate desire to gain souls for God. Because of debts, the family was in a situation to sell their property. Mother never felt for that, as she made it clear, that it was better to have nothing and to owe nothing. Everyone at home unanimously agreed with the Mother’s desire. Her love of Crosses reflected the following Biblical golden words. He said to them all, “If anyone wants to come with me, he must forget self, take up his cross every day, and follow me.” (LUKE 9:23).



### **Trust in Divine Providence**

Mother enjoyed a robust constitution. We can say that mother practiced this virtue to a supreme degree. Her rule of conduct was, “To do the will of God in everything”. When asked about the art of preserving her health. “Do like me”, she said, “I leave to God the responsibility of all my actions contenting myself in obeying Him, by following my Rule. In all that happens to me I see the disposition of Divine Providence; thus I am at rest always.”

### **Forgiveness**

“Forgiveness is the attribute of God, if we possess it, we bring heaven on earth.” The words “Forgive” which always resonated in her life and strengthened her to continue with her call. When one forgives, one first overcomes his own hurt feelings and does not allow resentment to take control anymore. This empowers us and strengthens us to forgive others. This powerful Virtue was widely promoted in our Institution.

### **Constant Mental Prayer**

Prayer is one of the most essential obligations of the religious life and she spent long hours before the ‘Blessed Sacrament’. In the words of Mother: “Mental prayer is the breath of life for our soul and holiness is impossible without it.” It doesn’t mean praying in the chapel all day, but simply loving God and others in every little act we perform. Mother’s entire life was a prayer, due to her constantly placing herself in the presence of the Lord, every moment of her life. Praise God. Make time for silence, for thanking Him, and for asking help to do His Will. Bring Christ into every little thing, offering up all your thoughts, words, actions, joys, and sorrows.

### **Obedience**

Fully trust in God’s plan for our lives, knowing that He is Truth itself. Mother was able to confidently give her fiat at the moment of the Annunciation, and also in every circumstance after that. We can believe and trust that God’s plan for us is good and loving. This is really hard, especially at times when life is uncertain, but you are not alone in the chaos. He is right there with you.

### **Divine Wisdom**

Wisdom is Knowledge of what is true and right, and having good judgment. Wisdom is a virtue we all desire. Divine Wisdom teaches us to seek that which is beyond the here and now. It is the desire to seek the divine. Mother was able to see the beauty of God’s will in every moment. She didn’t run to others first; she always conversed with the Lord first, so that she could embrace His Will. Ask the Holy Spirit for the wisdom to see things through the eyes of Christ and not your own. When asked about the art of preserving her health.

### **Humility**

Penetrating or entering deeply into subjects of thought or knowledge, Free from pride and arrogance; lowliness of mind. Mother perfectly conformed herself to God’s Will. She saw herself as God saw her: nothing more, nothing less. See yourself as God sees you! Pray the Litany of Humility, accept compliments gracefully and quietly, and don’t be embarrassed to have made mistakes in front of others. Mother never criticized other religious communities and she did not allow her daughters to do so.

### **Confidence**

Her love for Lord made her say that she could not understand, that she could not even believe that anyone could enjoy pleasure apart from the service of God; but she was equally not surprised to see that those who neglected their spiritual exercises were dejected, dreamy and lacked in devotion. Confidentially she confessed that without perseverance in spiritual exercises, she would never have been able to bear her habitual sufferings. Mother Claudine’s devotion to Mother Mary was remarkable ‘Do like me, never cease praying to the Holy Virgin’ but above all imitate her in her humility, her modesty, and her simplicity. Mother’s pilgrimage on foot in complete prayer and meditation to La Salette at her old age and declining health shows her thirst for visiting her patroness Mother Mary is remarkable.

### **The Charism of the Sisters of The Cross**

“Joyful participation in the merciful self-emptying love of Jesus dead and risen”.

“To reveal to all people the merciful love of the father and the liberating power of the paschal mystery”.

1. We follow Jesus who, though he was god, did not demand and cling to his rights as god but emptied himself (laid aside his mighty power and glory) became man, humble servant of god’s plan for the world and was obedient unto death on the cross for our salvation and was raised to the life of glory (cf. Phil 2:6-11).
2. Whatever be their state of life, the holy cross associates live this ‘call’ in their milieu as leaven, salt and light, transforming the society into a community of selfless love and brotherhood.



### Province of Trichy

In 1839, Mother Claudine Echernier founded the Congregation of the Sisters of the Cross of Chavanod in France with the help of Friar Peter Marie Mermier (who founded the Congregation of the Missionaries of St. Francis de Sales, known worldwide for its Salesian Convent Schools). The Sisters of the Cross spread to India in 1886 propagating their charitable educational goals for women in Amravati and then spreading to other parts of the country - Kolkata (Calcutta) and Vishakhapatnam amongst many places. Tiruchirappalli is one of the headquarters of Tamil Nadu. It is situated on the banks of the River Cauvery and is the fourth largest city in Tamil Nadu. The St. Joseph's School established for the education and instruction of Anglo-Indian girls was founded in 1896 by the European Sisters of the Presentation. At the end of the year, they left Tiruchirappalli and their place was taken up by lay teachers during the period extending from 1897-1901. Insignificant events lead to great surprises. In 1899, Fr. Bonaventure, Missionary of St. Francis de Sales, who was later to be Bishop of Nagpur was on his travels in South India met a Jesuit Priest at the railway station in Tiruchirappalli. While engaged in conversation the Jesuit Priest spoke of the urgent need to have Religious Sisters to run a school for Anglo-Indian girls. Fr. Bonaventure recommended the Sisters of the Cross who were doing remarkable work in the diocese of Nagpur. On 7th January 1901, a first batch of four sisters Sr. Eugene Porret, Sr. Rosalie Dusonchet, Sr. Emilie Josserand and Sr. Celine Dumoulin left for Trichy. The province of Trichy had its humble beginnings when the tiny seed brought from Amravati was planted in the soil of Cantonment on 10th January 1901. The history of Holy Cross College dates begins from 1901, when Mother Sophie set up a primary school with only a room or two and a handful of girls as her students. From its humble beginning, it has grown steadily, attained the status of a college in 1923, and became a second grade college in 1928 and post graduate college in 1964. In recognition of its service to the cause of women's education for over eight decades, the college was granted autonomous status from June 1987 by the Bharathidasan University.

### Conclusion

Mother Claudine applied herself constantly, to reproduce the life, the works and the virtues of our Lord Jesus Christ. Her only aim was always to secure the glory of God and the salvation of souls by her good example and edifying words. Mother was a fruitful fig tree whose seeds are sown in the form of Holy Cross Congregation all over the world and whose fruits are manifest in the different works of charity which they do for the greater good of humanity. Venerated Mother Claudine not only imbibed the virtues, but an embodiment of the same. Mother, not only felt for others, but felt with others, which is the highest form of humanity. Mother was not only a simple Daughter of the Cross, but the Superior General. It is enough to conclude that if the perfection of a religious consists in the exact observance of the Rules, and if according to the testimony of competent men, our Mother Claudine Echernier was perfect and holy. Mother strived to improve the lives of others, so that her own life was elevated into its highest dimensions. Truly enlightened people never seek to be like others. Rather, they seek to be superior to their former selves. Mother did not race against others, she raced against herself. Spiritual progress in the footsteps of Mother Claudine ensures wisdom, contentment, peace and joy, which ultimately paves way for the blooming of humanity. Mother was not only a simple Daughter of the Cross, but the Superior General. It is enough to conclude that if the perfection of a religious consists in the exact observance of the Rules, and if according to the testimony of competent men, Mother Claudine Echernier was perfect and holy. With joy and gratitude the humble and generous, Mother of France whom the Lord chose to be Foundress of Sisters of the Cross of Chavanod.

### Acknowledgement

I express my sincere thanks to Sisters of the Cross of Chavanod, Province of Tiruchirappalli and Dr. Sr. Christina Bridget, Principal, Holy Cross College (Autonomous), Tiruchirappalli for their kind help and giving opportunity to carry out research work and completing of this paper. I extend my sincere thanks to Sr. Saghayamary.A, Librarian, contributing the ideas and suggestions about in this paper.

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