

## *From the Archives*

### **Devotedness unto Death**

Recently, whilst in Bangkok for the meeting in relation to the Congregational Website discussion on the Motto '**Devotedness unto Death**' occurred. Questions arose as to its origin, how it developed and its relevance and place for today. The following is a summary of what I have so far discovered. No doubt there are other examples hidden away in a variety of Archival Documents.

To begin with it is clear that the writings of St Emilie convey the sentiments of '**Devotedness**' which occasionally she expressed in her letters.

*I have not only the conviction of the truth of my own vocation, but also the admirable cooperation of my Sisters. They have been and will always be **Daughters of Devotedness** and of sacrifice. ( to Sr. Pauline Gineste 1840)*



And

*God wishes to distinguish our Institute by establishing it on the basis of a great generosity towards him, and by molding our souls to a sublime **devotedness**, which will consist not only in serving Him in the exercise of charity but also in working even under persecution. (to Sr. Elizabeth de Chamoin 1842)*

It is generally understood that this motto phrased as '**Devotedness unto Death**' did not come directly from St Emilie but developed over time. Following the death of Mother Emilie the word '**devotedness**' is occasionally included in the letters of the early Superior Generals especially in relation to a death of a Sister who portrayed **devotedness** in her way of life. In June 1898 Mother Celina Joseph Le Bouffo refers to Mother Melanie Souquie as having served the Congregation '*with so much wisdom and **devotedness.***'

Later she writes:

*Our missions of Syria and Palestine are flourishing and are doing a great deal of good. They are expanding every day thanks to the **devotedness** of our dear Sisters.  
(17 December 1900)*

*Never draw back from a difficulty, from an occasion of struggle, of **devotedness.***

*(May 1903)*

On the occasion of the final Approbation of the Constitutions in 1903 Mother Celina urges the Sisters to live a life of simplicity *with an interior spirit and **devotedness** towards our neighbor.*

In notes from the 1913 General Chapter, we find a footnote.

*The Motto that has been at a certain epoch attributed to our Foundress and is mentioned for the first time in an official letter.*

This letter is from Mgr. Joseph Antoine, Bishop of Marseilles who attended the General Chapter and commented on the strong religious spirit he witnessed going on to refer to the *'beautiful motto, **Devotedness till Death**'*.

The next significant reference is located in the **Directory** published in 1921 and used up to 1965. It states:

*Let the Sisters fear neither fatigue nor disappointment. The grandeur of their apostolate will admit neither of any narrowness of heart, faint heartedness, nor of that eager seeking after spiritual consolation, instead of gladly welcoming daily trials and humiliations. Oh, may the sisters aspire to those pure and holy joys which result from true **devotedness** in the Good Master's service.*

Publications in preparation for the Beatification in 1929 indicate the Motto as being very relevant. It can be found on the front page of the Biography, *'The Life of Emilie De Vialar'* published in 1929. It seems that at this time various artistic designs were created. Some using the word **Devotedness** and others **Devotedness unto Death**.

Later, August 1947, and in preparation for the Canonization, Mother Theresita Moret proposes:

*That each house procures a picture of the Apparition of the Angel revealing to St Joseph the Mystery of the Incarnation. This picture will be placed in the Community Room, as also the motto of the Congregation artistically written or printed.*

In 1955 *'The Seal of the Cross'* by M. G Carroll further elaborates on this Motto.

*In every place where they labor, they are at the service of the sick, the poor and the children, from morning till night their days alive with the same zeal which made their Foundress choose as her motto: Entire dedication unto death 'Se Dévouer et Mourir!' These words, which the Congregation has adopted as its motto and is the expression of its missionary ideal are a perfect summary of the entire life of Saint Emilie De Vialar and of all the teaching which she left as precious legacy to her Daughters. (p 179)*

At the Centenary of the death of Mother Emilie a document *'To Our Holy Mother - A Filial Homage of her Daughters'* comprises a series of meditations. One focuses on the way St Emilie followed in the footsteps of St Paul and concludes with:



Devotedness Unto Death

This motto rightly sums up the dispositions of a strong heart, Wholly dedicated to Christ, Dead and buried in His mystery While awaiting to partake of His Resurrection, of His Eternal Being!

In other publications at this time this Motto is often found at the beginning or end of a page, with no explanation, giving the reader a reminder that it gathers together the essence of what St Emilie lived and wished to be integral to the life of the Congregation. One can also presume that the essence of the motto was continually handed on by means of an oral tradition. This would have been especially so during the years of 1860 to 1900 when the writings of Mother Emilie were being collected.

A paper '**Spirituality of the Institute**' written after Vatican 2 and used in preparing the 1982 Constitutions presents **Devotedness** in the context of the contemplation of the Mystery of the Incarnation. The entire paper subtitled '*The Sources which permit us to know the Spirituality*' outlines the community memory unlocking past treasures and calling all to breath together in seeking faithfulness to the spirit of the Congregation. The Theology of the Incarnation, particularly as revealed to St Joseph, is seen as the central inspiration from which other aspects of her spirituality flow.



*In St Emilies contemplation of the Incarnation stirs up the gift of her life to God and humanity... they are inseparable.... Her **devotedness** is complete and does not make exception of anyone. The gift of her life will go right to the end of love. (page 1/2)*

The writer of this document points out that this is in line with the phrase '**Devotedness unto Death**', and gives a caution as to the need for it to be viewed in a particular way. This is further developed when mention is made of the 'Works of the Congregation in light of the Incarnation', and speaks of service especially to the poor.

*In a spirit of compassion, that is to say, they must listen to their complaints in with patience, support them in their infirmities with great kindness and to assist them with **devotedness**. (First Constitutions Chapter 8:2)*

In a further section headed 'The Mission or the Works of Charity' we find:

*The apostolate requires a 'recollected and a **devoted**' life.... Both recollection and **devotedness** unite one to God in the Holy Spirit which is the spirit of Jesus.*

This gives rise to the call :

*...to meditate each day on the immense charity with which the heart of Jesus Christ is filled. (S.D.R 11)*

In more recent times we have the biography by Sr Agnes Cavasino '**Emilie De Vialar, Foundress**' which provides a hint as to the gradual development of the understanding and purpose of the Motto. Referring to publications and magazines distributed throughout the Congregation in earlier times she writes.

*These records provided the opportunity of going back in history and travelling the world giving a seal of authenticity to such achievements. They gave faces to women of quiet courage who in difficult circumstances had known how to act with heroism. Some went to the heights of **devotedness** by paying with their lives. Was not their motto right from the beginning: **To Devote oneself and to die**. The motto was born from a practical experience: refuse nothing, take nothing back, daily living a life of simplicity. (p 237)*

Today in the '**Book of References**' these themes flow from the selected Scripture which in turn inspires No 7 of the present Constitutions.



The Scripture being:

*Jesus had always loved those who were his in the world, but now he showed how perfect his love was. (Jn 13.1)*

And

*Unless a wheat grain falls on the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain, but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest. (Jn 12:24).*

Article No 7 gives direction and guidance for today:

*The motto of the Institute: **Devotedness unto death** expresses in its simplicity the gift of self which after the example of Christ our Savior has no limits to its love.*

The final document of the 2019 General Chapter calls for an expression of **devotedness** by means of the image of missionary Pilgrims who:

*.. are called to be deeply rooted in the love of the One who has called us to love to receive love, to be full of tenderness, compassion and joy, to be courageous, daring always aware that He who has called us is with us. (p 8 )*

It is evident that the word and practice of **devotedness** is deeply embedded in the life of the Congregation from its earliest days. It can be seen as the sap giving life, unity, encouraging faithfulness and being an integrative element in the spirituality and life of the Congregation. Over time it has thrown fresh life in creative and critical ways on the living out of the Mystery of the Incarnation in the spirit of Devotedness by encapsulating the beliefs and vision of St Emilie De Vialar.

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