

Marie Eugénie and the Kingdom: Social consequences of the Gospel

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Marie Eugénie's thinking about the Kingdom springs in part from her experience of Jesus, the way of understanding the Christian faith she had recently discovered, from her process of searching and the maturing of her own vocation. It is also the result of the analysis, the reinterpretation, which she makes of the world around her. This is what she calls *the social consequences of the Gospel*.

Her time was a period of drastic political changes, social inequalities and exploitation, and of movements against oppression. It was also an age of discoveries, a propitious time for the rise of new ideas and forms of relationship. Many factors came together to make possible the confrontation between a rigid, exhausted system and the new phenomena that were struggling into life.

The disillusionments and hopes of the 19th century, the defeats and the achievements, and the struggles and plans that left a particular stamp on Marie Eugénie's context, marked the world, and we can still see the consequences in our own world. In both cases and periods, Marie Eugénie's and our own, we human beings are faced with the choice between remaining in the established order and going out in search of changes that will secure better living conditions for all.

Marie Eugénie looked at her world and had the courage to explore the new phenomena. In her experience of life, which God burst into, radically transforming her ideas and her heart, the Kingdom acquired such an importance that she felt she had received the will to overcome everything and work for it.¹ She could not accept a world in which so many people lived under oppression because of the injustice of a few. She imagined a different, "truly Christian" society and found in Jesus Christ and his Kingdom the motivation and the transforming power society needed.

Marie Eugénie sensed that the Kingdom announced by Jesus showed the unconditional and merciful love of God, who acts in history to heal, forgive, welcome and share. God's Presence and action free all men and women so that the Father's plan can be fulfilled in each and in all.

Her conviction was that *what was required was not to proclaim a doctrine but to carry it out*. She was convinced that only through the Gospel was it possible to transform human beings and society, and decided to stake her life on this. This is revealed in her letter to Père Lacordaire, in which she talks about the motivation behind her work: "...I do not think I need to explain where I fixed my gaze to obtain the final result, but it is totally on Jesus Christ and the extension of his Kingdom."²

The Kingdom became her passion. She was confident that when the Kingdom was actively accepted by a human being it became a powerful stream of life, able to inspire hope and strength, inspiration to imagine and seek other possible worlds. Her decision to work for the Kingdom was

¹ Letter to Fr D'Alzon 1843.

² Letter No 1501 to Fr Lacordaire 1841.

rooted in the certainty that “the regeneration of humanity, its social law, must come from the words of Jesus Christ...”³

The Kingdom is a connecting thread in the history of the people of Israel, who longed for the coming of a king who would establish justice among his people. According to Israelite ideas from the earliest times, the king’s justice meant defending and protecting those who were unable to defend themselves, the incapacitated, the weak and the poor, the widows and the orphans. That is why when Jesus announced that the Kingdom of God had come, the people understood that there would be a change, that finally the situation yearned for by so many would become a reality, a different world, with more justice, friendship and solidarity.

From this point of view the Kingdom represents a radical transformation of values: it completely overturns the established order and proposes a different way of looking at the world, interpreting it and acting in it. Over against a system based on competitiveness, on the struggle of the stronger against the weaker, on the domination of those who hold economic and political power, Jesus proclaims that God is the Father of all without distinction and that therefore we are all sisters and brothers. His proclamation is an invitation to act accordingly.

The Kingdom is therefore life as God dreams of it and wishes to build it; it is God’s plan for humanity. If God reigned in each of us, if we let God be God, if we acted like God – so Marie Eugénie thought – no-one would have to suffer through oppression, rejection, violence..., we would have a truly Christian society.⁴ It would change the Church, the world and our lives.

From the perspective of this logic of the Kingdom, which is always relevant, it is unacceptable that an economic and financial system, in its greed for limitless material profit, should be altering the ecological balance. The human cost is so great that such basic aspects of life are affected as health, employment, food, human stability and the harmony of the species. All this does not just exacerbate inequalities, but creates new forms of poverty linked to the deterioration of habitats (desertification, contamination of land), increasingly frequent and more violent natural disasters, etc.

In the face of all these situations the Kingdom that is Good News has a vocation to condemn everything that prevents men and women from enjoying decent, stable living conditions and equality of opportunities that allows them to fulfil their human potential and contribute their talents to the building of society. In our time the task of transforming society is indissolubly linked to the fight to break all these tendencies that are exhausting nature and human beings.

The Gospel tells us that the Kingdom “has come near,” that “it is within us,” but also “in us.” To build it we need to learn to discern its signs in our world. The parables suggest that the Kingdom is as small as a mustard seed,⁵ and at the same time as valuable as treasure,⁶ that we have to look for it because it isn’t always obvious and works slowly and silently, like yeast in dough.⁷ The Kingdom of God grows despite difficulties and even failure. The Kingdom is always near and is here, but will not be fully established until we men and women learn to live like children of the same Father and

³ Ibid..

⁴ Letter to Fr D’Alzon 1842 or March 12 1844?

⁵ Mt 13,31-32; Mk 4,30-32; Lk 13,18-19.

⁶ Mt 13,44-52.

⁷ Mt 13,33; Lk 13,21.

brothers and sisters of others, until we are able to care for the earth on which we live, until at last 'all may be one.'⁸

Today it seems that we have no solution to the ecological crisis. But from the smallest groups taking action to care for the environment to large organizations working for sustainable development on a world scale, signs of the Kingdom are already visible.

During the first years of the foundation Marie Eugénie understood the implantation of the Kingdom as a fact visible in time and history: she dreamed of the social Kingdom. But gradually she began to see that this Kingdom was growing in herself, enabling Jesus Christ to become "*the only Lord, the only teacher, the only one who has dominion over all things.*"⁹ She then began to talk about the 'Kingdom in souls', realizing that the transformation that comes with the Kingdom is not just a transformation of social structures, but also a deep change within a person. Even so, Marie Eugénie asked God to "*preserve in her that spirit of love for his Kingdom here below*".¹⁰

In her last years she wrote to the Sisters:

We must not tire of praying for the coming of the Kingdom of God, even in a time like ours, when the insolence of rejection seems to tell him... You do not exist, I do not recognise you, I will put myself in your place... It is not just in their hearts that those men say this; it is aloud, in their laws, in their institutions... So we need to pray for the re-establishment of his Kingdom in this world...¹¹

It is impressive to find that we can recognise in this prophetic saying a description of present global society: a political, economic and social system whose dynamic, based on its laws and institutions, is dedicated almost entirely to ensure increased production and consumption. And it does all this without taking account of the natural equilibrium and ignoring the spiritual and transcendent dimension of life.

Our earth, this common home in which we all live, in which life comes into being and develops, is under serious threat today. Marie Eugénie saw it as "*the place to give glory to God*",¹² the geographical place where we find our roots, discover our identities, meet our needs and support our feet to take steps in history. Earth was also, for her, the space of the transition from oppression to liberation, where our desires, attitudes and actions can anticipate that Kingdom that is God's Plan.

So it is right that we should go on praying for the Kingdom to continue coming to this world, that we may learn to recognise it, in its smallness and silence, but also full of strength and fruitfulness. It is right that we should work for it and widen the spaces in which it can reveal itself. To do this it would be perhaps be useful for us to redefine what we mean by progress, well-being, and needs. The Kingdom invites us to be creative, to have ideas in the areas in which we live and work for new relationships between human beings and nature.

⁸ Cf. Jn 17,21.

⁹ Chapter, Sept 7, 1872.

¹⁰ Letter to P. D'Alzon 1843.

¹¹ Chapter Dec 3 1882.

¹² Letter to Fr Lacordaire, around 1841-44.

It is right that, like Marie Eugénie, we should make the Gospel the key to the interpretation and transformation of our lives, so that we may understand ever more deeply that God's cause is the cause of humanity.