

REFLECTIONS ON BLESSED ANNE-MARIE RIVIER AND THE MISSION OF RIVIER COLLEGE

Speeches at the Mass to celebrate the Day of Feast of the Presentation of Mary to the Temple (November 19, 2006, the Date of the Foundation of the Order) and at the Heritage Day Mass to celebrate Blessed Anne-Marie Rivier (February 5, 2007)

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Let me start with a word of caution and an immediate disclaimer: I am not a homilist by training. Therefore, after being asked to speak to you this afternoon by Kristin Hallee from the Rivier Student Ministry Group, I asked Brother Paul about the proper length of a reflection. He answered: "It has to be long! Do not make me look bad by doing a short reflection..." So bear with me as you are my captive audience for the next 15 minutes...

What are we celebrating today? The Presentation Day! The day when we celebrate the foundation of the order of the Sisters of the Presentation of Mary. And we are celebrating this feast at Rivier College.

What is the name of this college? What do you call it? I am sure that all of you have been asked this question? Where do you work? Where do you go to school?

Rivier... What? Rivier! What? River? Revere? Riviera? Riv? Rivier! Like Perrier! But what is Rivier? Who is Rivier?

I am from France originally as you can hear from my accent, arriving first in the US in 1973! I married an alum of Rivier College! But I have to admit that, until I came back to Rivier as a full-time faculty member in January 2000, I did not know what or who Rivier was... Over the years, we had kept in contact with one Rivier sister, Sister Marie-Jeanne Ducharme, a former professor and a dear friend of my wife and our family. We had met at several times during the years with two former sister presidents, and we had come back on campus for alumni reunions.

As of January 2000, I now was an employee of an organization carrying the name of Blessed Anne-Marie Rivier. As a French person proud of his heritage, I wanted to know, I needed to know who Anne-Marie Rivier was, and why she had founded an order of sisters called "the Sisters of the Presentation of Mary" whose foundation we are celebrating today.

This was important because, as a professor, I wanted to identify with the goals and mission of this institution of higher learning. As students, you want to understand the heritage and tradition of your college. As all human beings, who are "social" animals, we need to belong. We have to develop relationships and we want to associate with people who share the same beliefs, the same ideals, the same mission, the goals and objectives, the values of the organization where we work and study.

You will agree, if you are old enough, that, historically, this has been hard to do in the Catholic Church. Lay people were taught, were instructed, and were talked to. There was a clear separation between average lay people like you and me and the ordained ministers, religious, priests, and leaders of the Church.

Vatican II changed all of this and called all of us, lay people, the faithful, to a greater involvement and role in the church. You and I are full members of the Catholic Church. You and I are full members

of this Catholic College, and it is our duty to know, to celebrate, to embrace the legacy of the sisters sitting next to us, the legacy and the spirituality of the foundress of their order, Blessed Anne-Marie Rivier.

This thirst for knowledge led me into joining two and a half years ago a prayer and reflection group closely associated with the order of the sisters, called a “lay associate” group in the US, or a “fraternity” group in France. During the last two years, once a month, we came together to pray, to learn about the life of Blessed Anne-Marie Rivier, and to deepen our knowledge of her spirituality. This culminated in a pilgrimage trip to France in the summer of 2006 that I called “in the footsteps of Anne-Marie Rivier.”

For one week in May 2006, I was one of 22 people from New England who visited the whole area of France called Ardèche where Anne-Marie Rivier was born in 1768.



Photo 1: Picture of the house where Blessed Anne-Marie Rivier was born in 1768.

We walked through the streets of her birthplace in Montpezat, stood in front of the house of her parents who were innkeepers, visited the village church and walked the rough path toward the Stations of the Cross that stand throughout the whole village.

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We visited Thueyts where Anne-Marie Rivier started her first school in 1794 and her congregation in 1796. She opened a second larger school there that still exists today and is still in use.

We visited Bourg-Saint-Andeol, where she established the Motherhouse for her order in 1814 in a former convent. This is a mighty “fortress” of a house, three-story high with thick walls and a beautiful garden along the Rhones River.

This journey culminated in my being received as a lay associate of the order at the beginning of October 2006, and wearing proudly this pin, similar to the small crosses that every sister wear.

Do not jump to any conclusion! You will not see me walking on campus wearing a veil or a dress. I am not a cross dresser! I am just a lay faculty member who embarked 6 years ago on a second career teaching at Rivier College, after 23 years in corporate America.

This physical journey to her birthplace and the study over the past two years of her life story lead me to a deeper knowledge and appreciation of Anne-Marie Rivier.

For her courage to live through some terrible physical pains, her humility to accept these afflictions, and to offer them daily as a living sacrifice to Jesus on the cross, and to his mother, the Virgin Mary.



Photo 2: Picture of the Pieta statue of the Virgin Mary.

For her unshakable faith and devotion to Mary, that she prayed daily as a little girl after suffering a bad fall that stunted her growth and who could have left her an invalid for life. For four years, her mother brought her daily in front of a wooden life-size statue in her village church, a Pieta, showing Mary holding Jesus in her arms after his broken body has been taken down from the cross. This wooden statue shows Mary crying her heart out, her grief and her sorrow at losing her son. This Virgin Mary healed Anne-Marie Rivier and she was able to walk again.

For her joy when she was healed! She had to show it by organizing all the children of the village and leading them daily in front of the Stations of the Cross located throughout the village.



Photo 3: Picture of Our Lady of Provencheres Church in Montpezat.

For her charisma that lead her to open schools to educate women and children in small villages in one of the most remote areas of France, to assist the poor and the afflicted, especially orphans, that were numerous during her time because of the many wars resulting from the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars.

For her charisma that attracted young educated women to follow her zeal.

For her courage to start this first orderly group of women right in the middle of the French Revolution when priests and religious men and women were tracked as criminals, put in jail, and sent to the scaffold for their faith.



Photo 4: View of the Bourg-Saint-Andeol Mother House and gardens.

For her accomplishments in opening schools all over the Ardèche region, and many other regions of France, and her constant care and attention for the poor: Whenever she was opening a new school, she made sure that there was a well in working order to provide drinkable water for the poor.

Because of her devotion to the Virgin Mary, she chose the name of the “Sisters of the Presentation of Mary” for her order because the foundation of the order on November 21, 1796, coincided with the Feast Day of the Presentation of Mary to the Temple.

I believe that there is a strong connection between the life of Anne-Marie Rivier and the Mission of Rivier College. The Rivier Mission Statement outlines that we will “take responsibility for ourselves and for others.” Anne-Marie Rivier certainly made a difference during her life. She was but one person, but look at her achievements during a very troublesome period in French history. Faced with the many problems, emergencies, injustice that exist in the world today, we are often left with the question of what can one person do alone against the sheer magnitude of today’s problems? Blessed Anne-Marie Rivier and her sisters show us the power of action: It only takes one person at a time and it could catch on.



Photo 5: Picture of Blessed Anne-Marie Rivier’s room and desk in the Bourg-Saint-Andeol Mother House.

Another piece of the College’s mission is “to engage in dialogue about basic human issues facing society, especially the plight of the poor and powerless.” Anne-Marie Rivier certainly put this in practice during her times and we are called to the same task today.

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In both Bourg Saint-And ol and Thueyts, I saw old posters representing a tree, with a trunk, branches, full of leaves. These were beautiful representations of how the order had grown over the years. From one remote location, the sapling has grown to a full tree. On one poster, dating back to the late 1800, celebrating the first 100 years of the order, the tree has many branches: Each branch representing a different region of France where she opened new schools, and each of the leaves representing the location of a school. On the second poster, prepared more recently, the branches of the tree represent the countries where the Sisters are present today: 19 in total.



Photo 6: Picture of the tree poster showing the branches as countries, and the leaves as schools.

I like the analogy of a tree. Underground, you have roots that are not immediately visible but that can represent history, the past, the heritage, the traditions of the order and the College.

Then, you have the trunk, the visible part, showing the strength, the height of the tree, the growth of the order and the College.

Finally, you have the branches and the leaves that represent our openness to the world, our reach across the whole world.

The roots feed the tree. They need to be well anchored in the ground to allow nutrients to feed the rest of the tree.

As humans, we are like a tree. If we are aware of our heritage, our past, we can grow in a more assured way, from our roots into the outside world. We need to be grounded in our heritage, in the values that are part of our families, our faith, and our college. This will ensure that we remain strong against the high winds of life, and that we will stand straight against the many cycles of rain and drought during our lives.

If we cut our roots, forget or even reject our history (either of our families or of a community like the Sisters, or of a College like Rivier) then, literally we can be uprooted, we can dry up like a tree would in real life.

Therefore, it is important on this day, and on other key dates, to reflect on this past and to celebrate this heritage that becomes part of our history. We have to accept proudly this past because it calls us to a renewed sense of belonging, a renewed sense of mission. It will also help us to see the future more clearly, and more confidently.

Blessed Anne-Marie Rivier lived more than two hundred years ago. But her charisma, her spirituality lives on today with the Sisters among us, it exists today through all of us that are connected with the Sisters and the College in whatever capacity we have, either as students, or as faculty and staff. It will exist tomorrow if we can have a long-term vision sustained by this faith, and this legacy that calls us to become better human beings, more balanced, more visionary, more faithful to our heritage in a world increasingly focused on short-term gains, individual gratifications, and materialistic pursuits.

One of the speakers in the Mission Series meetings held on campus last year, Brother Mark, President of Bishop Guertin High School, made reference to spirituality and charisma in his speech: "Spirituality is what we do because of what we believe... Charisma is not a thing; it is energy, dynamism, a power that cannot be contained, or possessed. It is relational. It becomes a reality only when it is acted on, believed in, and shared."

Let's share the joy of this day with the Sisters, and let's increase our knowledge and appreciation for their life long commitment to the spirituality and charisma of Blessed Anne-Marie Rivier. Thank you, Sisters, for your life-long service to the Rivier College community! May we, as lay people, be called and accept to follow your service commitment and your mission!



Photo 7: Picture of a stained glass window showing Blessed Anne-Marie Rivier in the chapel of the first school of the Order in Thueyts.

References

Brother Mark Hilton, s.c. Presentation on Charism and Mission for the Rivier Mission Series, April 2006.
Francois de Beaulieu. "L'Arbre de Vie." Unpublished reflection given during the 2006 Francophone Week Celebration at the Boston Richelieu Club, March 2006.

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