

A "LIVELY" CHILD

I am doing as I have been asked -- writing this autobiography -- although the labor is painful since I cannot study or reflect easily these days. I do wish, however, to paint in true colors the goodness of God to me. I wrote an earlier history of myself in which I mostly described my faults and said little of God's favors. I was ordered to burn it and to write another. In this one, I am to omit nothing that has befallen me -- even the remarkable things, scarcely to be believed. I've been asked not to list my sins, so I shall instead declare the favors of the Lord our God and magnify His mercies.

This story shows how devotion to God comes from pain and weariness. When God builds His sacred temple within us, He first totally razes our pompous self, and from its ruins He forms a new structure.

God's mystery and the secrets of God's conduct are hidden from the wise of the world, who view themselves as God's helpers. They claim through wisdom and intelligence to comprehend the height and depth and length and breadth of God, but they are enveloped in their own works. Wisdom that emanates from God is found only in dying to all things and being truly lost to them so we can move toward God and exist only in Him.

I was born Jeanne-Marie Bouvier de la Mothe on April 18, 1648, in the town of Montargis. When my mother was eight months' pregnant with me, something frightened her and she aborted me. Children born so early don't usually survive and so they thought I would die.

When it looked as if I would live, they sent for a priest to baptize me, only to stop because I again appeared to be dying. Because of these early troubles, my health has always been fragile.

A CHILD IN THE CONVENT

I continued to be quite sickly until I was two and a half years old when they sent me to live in a convent for a few months. On my return, my mother paid little attention to my education. She was not fond of daughters and left me to be cared for by servants. God, however, was my protector because even though I was sickly, I was also lively. I frequently got into accidents such as falling into a deep pit that held our firewood, but I always escaped unhurt.

When I was about four years old, a friend of my father, Monsieur De la Mothe, who was a religious man, urged him to send me to a convent with her. She delighted in my sweetness and mischievousness and I became her constant companion. I was always getting into scrapes but I conducted myself well when I had no one to lead me astray. I loved to hear about God and to be at church, and especially to be dressed in religious garb.

To tone down my liveliness, I was told one time about of the terrors of hell. The next night I dreamed of hell and I have never forgotten it. I saw horrible darkness where souls were punished as they pointed to my place among them. I wept bitterly and cried to God that I would behave better.

O Lord, Thou did hearken to my cry and poured strength and courage on me to serve even as a child.

After this dream, I wanted to go to confession privately, but because I was so young, the mistress of the girls carried me to the priest and stayed while I was heard. She was astonished when she heard me say I had doubts, but the priest laughed and asked me what they were. I told

him how I'd doubted there was a hell and how I'd thought my mistress made it up to get me to behave. Now I believed!

FAILED MARTYRDOM

After confession, my heart glowed and I decided I wanted to be a martyr for God. The girls who lived at the convent amused themselves by trying to see how far my fervor for God would carry me. They offered to prepare me for martyrdom and I was so pleased with my new religious passion that I begged them to kill me so I could enter into God's sacred presence.

So I knelt on a cloth spread out for my death (the cloth would absorb the blood) and as I saw a large sword being lifted up behind me, I cried, "Stop! It's wrong to die without getting my father's permission first." The girls then scolded me for saying this just so I could escape the sword. Since I'd gotten out of being a martyr, I felt sad. Something reproved me inwardly for not choosing heaven when I could have had it so easily.

Since I was sick so frequently, I asked to be taken home. On my return, I went whole days without seeing my mother while she paid attention to my brother. I felt so hurt that I stayed away from her. It is true my brother was more amiable than I, but she was so excessively fond of him that she was blind to my good qualities. She saw only my faults.

My father loved me tenderly and wanted me to be educated so he sent me back to the convent when I was almost seven years old. My two half-sisters lived there -- one by my father, the other by my mother. My father placed me under the care of his daughter because she was devoted to God and a fit teacher. This was a special show of God's providence because my sister loved me tenderly, which helped her see my amiable qualities.

This good sister instructed me well, giving up her personal time to be with me. If I answered her questions correctly (more from chance than understanding), she felt rewarded for her labor. Under her care, I mastered my studies.

My father often sent for me to come home and on one visit when I was nearly eight, the Queen of England was there. My father invited the queen's priest to amuse himself by asking me difficult questions. When he did, I gave such fitting answers that he took me to the queen, and said, "Your Majesty will enjoy this child." She was so pleased with me that she demanded that my father give me to her to be groomed as a woman of the royal court. My father resisted. Doubtless God influenced this refusal, for how could I have withstood the temptations and distractions of a court life?

I went back to my good sister at the convent, but I often went along with the other girls boarding there and picked up bad habits -- lying, moodiness, indifference, passing whole days without thinking on God. My sister's care quickly influenced me again and I loved to hear of God and pray. I liked going to church and developed tenderness for the poor.

At the end of the convent's garden, there was a chapel. I went there to pray and sometimes took my breakfast to sacrifice it to Christ, hiding it behind the statue of Christ. I did this to humble myself, but my self-love often kept me from doing it. When they were cleaning out the chapel, they found all I had left behind the statue and guessed I had done it. I believe God was pleased with my infantile devotion.

TROUBLES WITH MY SISTERS AND BROTHER

Life was easy with that sister. She taught me whenever I was well, but I often was seized with sudden, uncommon illnesses. In the evening I would feel fine, but in the morning I became

feverish and swelled up and developed bluish marks. At nine years, I was taken with such violent bleeding they thought I would die.

In the meantime, my other sister (on the maternal side) became jealous, wanting her turn to care for me. She wasn't as skilled an instructor as my paternal sister and so I didn't respond as well to her. She also saw that I loved my paternal sister better, so she didn't allow me to speak to my other sister. When she knew I had spoken to her, she had me whipped or she beat me herself. I could not hold out against her and so I no longer went to see my paternal sister. But she continued to be good to me, especially when I was sick. She understood that I was afraid of being punished for seeing her.

When my father was informed of this, he took me home. I was nearly ten years old by then, but after a little while, another friend of my father's, a prioress (leader of nuns), urged him to place me in her convent, which he did.

While there, I caught the chicken pox and stayed in bed for three weeks, but the women of the house feared it was smallpox so they did not come near me. I saw almost no one, so I found a Bible and read it from morning to night, especially the historical parts. But I was never happy at this house. The older girls picked on me and I got so little food that I became emaciated.

After about eight months my father took me home. My mother gave me more attention, but she still preferred my brother. If I was sick and wanted a certain thing, he would demand it and it would be taken from me and given to him. He beat me and one time threw me down from the top of the coach, but his behavior was winked at. This soured my temper and I stopped wanting to be good.

I looked with jealousy on my brother. Whatever he did was appreciated but if blame was in the air, it fell on me. My stepsisters by my mother gained her favor by catering to him and

persecuting me. True, I was bad. I relapsed into lying and moodiness. I prayed to God, loved to hear any one speak of Him and loved being charitable to the poor. Yet sin grew more powerful in me. I closed up the avenues of my heart so I could not hear that secret voice of God calling me to Himself.

O my God, Thy grace seemed to double with my sin! It was as if Thou attacked a walled city. Thou did surround my heart, but I raised defenses, adding every day to my wrongs to prevent Thee taking it. When Thou appeared to win over my ungrateful heart, I raised a counter-attack, and threw up barricades to keep off Thy goodness and to stop your flow of grace. No one could have conquered me, but Thee.

Not only did my brother trouble me, but the girl assigned to care for me beat me when fixing my hair. My father would have stopped this if he had known, but I told him nothing because I feared him besides loving him. I loved reading and shut myself up alone every day to read without interruption. When my mother complained of me, he always replied, "There are twelve hours in the day; she'll grow wiser."

MADemoiselle de la Mothe

As I grew tall for my age, my mother became more pleased with me. She dressed me well and brought good company to our home and took me with her traveling abroad. She took pride in the beauty God gave me. I perverted that beauty into a source of pride. Several suitors came to me, but my father did not listen to any proposals since I was not yet twelve years old.

When my father saw how tall I had grown, he placed me in the convent to receive my first communion at Easter. My most dear sister prepared me for this act of devotion. I thought now of giving myself to God in earnest -- to be a nun. I often felt a war going on between my good intentions and bad habits. I did penances.

When Easter arrived, I received communion with joy and devotion. Then my other sister demanded I join her class. Her manners, so opposite of my paternal sister's ways, caused me to step back from my former devotion to God. I no longer felt that new and delightful ardor which had seized my heart at my first communion. Alas! My faults and failings soon repeated themselves and drew me away from religion.

What helped me at this time was the visit of my father's nephew. He came to see us on his way to a mission to Cochin China (now Vietnam). I was taking a walk with my companions while he was there. When I returned, he was gone. I was so touched by his devotion (as they described it to me) that I cried the rest of the day. Early in the morning I went in great distress to seek the priest. I said to him, "I don't want to be the only person in our family to be lost. Help me in my salvation."

After that, I became so changed others scarcely knew me. I tried to make no mistakes and when I discovered the smallest faults, God helped me conquer them. As soon as I upset anyone, including the servants, I begged their pardon, which subdued my wrath and pride.

I gave all I had to the poor, taking expensive linen to their houses. I taught them the catechism and when my parents dined out I asked the poor to eat with me and I served them with great respect.

I read great religious works and in them I learned what inward prayer was. I asked my priest to teach me that kind of prayer, but he did not, so I worked out my own methods. I was not good at it, however, because I could not exercise the imagination. So I concluded it was too difficult, which troubled me for a long time. I earnestly asked God to give me the gift of prayer, as I would do many times more.

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