

Five Faces of Rosalie Rendu

Robert P. Maloney, CM at the Motherhouse of the Daughters of Charity, Paris, France, March 25, 2003

Rosalie Rendu was an extraordinary woman. Even though many of the biographies written about her are poor in quality.[1] Rosalie's energy, creativity, fidelity, courage shine out in the accounts of those who knew her.[2] Long before her death she had become famous. An immense crowd, estimated at 40-50 thousand people, from all strata of society flocked to her funeral on February 9, 1856. As we look forward to her beatification, I think of Shakespeare's eloquent words:

When she shall die,
Take her and cut her out in little stars,
And she will make the face of heaven so fine
That all the world will be in love with night...[3]

The Church beatifies and canonizes men and women precisely for that reason: that they might shine out like stars for us, that in the midst of darkness we might see, in their example, what it really means to be holy. Saints make holiness real, concrete. So, let me present to you today five faces of Rosalie Rendu.

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1. Prodigious Worker and Organizer

Rosalie was born on September 9, 1786, in Confort, a village in Savoy. At just 15 years of age she set off for Paris. There she spent more than 50 years of her life in the Mouffetard neighborhood. Her works were prodigious. They included a primary school where Rosalie originally taught and which she later ran. Though Rosalie herself had little formal education (biographers tell us that she never managed to write French very well), she and others labored strenuously to teach children to read, to write, to do basic mathematics, and to learn their catechism.

For young girls and needy mothers, Rosalie soon organized courses in sewing and embroidering. She later founded a day-care center and a nursery school where working mothers could have their children cared for during the day. For these same people, she founded the Children of Mary with a branch for Christian mothers and a branch dedicated to Our Lady of Good Counsel.

Though Rosalie was not an advocate of orphanages, in 1851 she took over the running of one; in 1852, she began a home for the elderly.

Besides these, she and the sisters ran a center for the distribution of food and firewood, with a pharmacy, a clinic and a clothes dispensary. She helped in establishing and counseling the Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul. She assisted in the reestablishment of the Ladies of Charity in 1840. She cared for the sick and the dying in the recurring cholera epidemics and, perhaps most of all, throughout her life she visited the poor and infirm in their homes. In the epidemics from 1849-1854, as many as 150 persons died in a day in the parish where Rosalie and the sisters worked. They attended to the living, accompanied the dying, and buried the dead.

The secret of Rosalie's prodigious energy and numerous works was precisely the secret that St. Vincent confided to all his followers: she saw the face of Christ in the person of the poor. That was the judgment of the theologian who examined her writings in April 1956.[4] One of the sisters who lived with her cites Rosalie as she encourages the community: "Let us love the Good God very much. Let us not be sparing with our duty; let us serve the poor well, always speaking to them with great kindness. If you do not act in this way, you will be punished: the poor will insult you. The ruder they are; the more dignified you must be. Remember, Our Lord hides behind those rags." [5]

2. Local Superior

A seemingly sickly Rosalie was sent away from the novitiate when she was not yet 17 years old with the hope that a change of air would improve her health. It is hard to imagine that the air was much better in inner-city Mouffetard, but as she completed her novitiate and lived and worked in the community there, she thrived. At the same time she quickly won the hearts of the sisters of the house. She returned to the Mother-house for "habit taking" with a word for the Superioress General from the then local superior, Sr. Tardy, "I am very happy with this little Rendu. Give her the habit, and send her back to me." [6] And so it was that Jeanne-Marie Rendu, now Sr. Rosalie, took her first steps toward becoming the "Apostle of the Mouffetard District," perhaps the most miserable quarter of Paris, where she would spend the remainder of her life. In 1815, when she was 29 years of age, she became the superior. She carried out this service for the next 41 years, until her death.

What was Rosalie like as a superior?

As I read the accounts of those who gave firsthand testimony about her, three things strike me:

1. Her cousin uses this phrase in describing Rosalie's relationship with the sisters in the community: "infinite tenderness." [7] Rosalie was very sensitive to what went on around her. This is evident both in her contacts with the poor and in her relationship with the sisters. One of the witnesses writes: "Did a sister seem tired to her? She went up to her class. 'I will watch your children, sister, while you go take what I have prepared for you!'" [8] Some judged that she was sensitive even to a fault. In 1844, at the death of two of her companions whom she loved deeply, Rosalie wrote: "I rebelled somewhat against the hand that struck us." One of the theologians who examined her writings did not like this, but actually Rosalie added: "but I am confident that these two angels will obtain mercy for me. They will pray as much as I try to imitate them; I have this confidence." [9]

Her cousin witnesses to having seen her break down in tears at the departure of sisters whom she cared for deeply. Once she spoke about her tears to a person she trusted, who responded: "Rest assured, if you did not so love your sisters, you would not love the poor so much." [10]

2. The house where Rosalie was superior became a "formation house," so to speak, to which many young sisters were sent. From her they learned firsthand how to serve the poor. Twenty-two postulants [11] lived with her over the years. Eighteen sisters prepared for vows under her direction, [12] starting in 1832. Twelve sisters lived in her community at the time of her death; [13] half of them had less than four years in vocation.

Her attitude toward the formation of young sisters is evident in a letter that she wrote in 1838 to a young novice for the Daughters of Charity: “Learn to become a child of St. Vincent, that is, Daughter of Charity, heiress of the promises he makes to give everything to one who gives without reservation.”[14]

Apparently she waged war against pride. One of the sisters in the house states: “In spiritual direction, she pursued this latter fault relentlessly: ‘It’s our number one enemy,’ she said, ‘look for it, you will find it at the base of everything, it disguises itself to trick us and confuse us, but we must grab it by the throat and choke it.’”[15]

3. Under Rosalie’s animation, this incredibly active house was also, quite notably, a house of prayer.

The community she animated rose each morning at four and prayed faithfully. Among the things that Rosalie read as a source for prayer were *The Imitation of Christ* and the writings of St. Francis de Sales, whom she called her dear friend and compatriot from Savoy.[16] One of her companions writes: “if we had to leave God for God and accompany her on a charitable visit, she said to us: ‘Sister, let’s begin our meditation!’ She suggested the plan, the outline, in a few simple, clear words” and entered into prayer.[17] The Viscount of Melun quotes her as saying to a sister: “I never pray so well as I do in the street.”[18]

3. Intrepid Woman

By all accounts, this tender woman was fearless. Rosalie lived in turbulent times. As a child, she experienced the Reign of Terror in France; her family hid a non-juror priest in their home. She came to Paris under Napoleon’s rule, when the Vincentians were still suppressed and the Daughters of Charity could not wear their habit. She expe-

rienced the Revolutions of 1830 and 1848, as well as terrible cholera epidemics in 1832, 1849 and 1854.

Rosalie walked among the sick and dying with little fear for her own health. She and the sisters ministered constantly to thousands of cholera victims. They organized the members of the newly-founded Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul to work with them among the cholera-stricken.

The most well-known incidents of Rosalie's bravery took place during the Revolutions. When Rosalie and the sisters hid revolutionaries, Monsieur Gisquet, the Prefect of Police, signed a warrant for her arrest. But the local policemen warned their chief that her arrest would cause a riot in the whole Mouffetard neighborhood. Gisquet himself went to notify Rosalie of the warrant. She replied: "I am a daughter of charity; I have no flag; I help the unfortunate wherever I meet them; I try to do good to them without judging them, and, I promise you that, if you yourself were ever being pursued and you asked my help, I would not refuse it." [19] The prefect dropped the matter.

Fierce fighting broke out within the city during the Revolution of 1848. The Archbishop of Paris, urged on by Frederic Ozanam, mounted the barricades in an effort to stop the slaughter. He was shot and the fighting became even more intense, with thousands killed. General Cavaignac decided on a massive bombardment of the Mouffetard neighborhood, but first offered the sisters safe conduct out. Rosalie responded to his messenger: "Sir, please thank the General and tell him that we are the servants of the poor and also their mothers and that we want to die with them." [20] Rosalie and the general, who was later President of the Republic, became friends who deeply admired one another.

The Viscount de Melun attests that during this same Revolution in 1848 an officer of the Garde mobile sought refuge at the sisters' house. He arrived at the door with rioters in hot pursuit. Rosalie stopped them, shouting: "There is no killing here! ... In the name of my devotion over 50 years, of all that I have done for you, for your wives, for your children, I ask you for this man's safety." [21] The officer was spared.

4. Friend of Rich and Poor

On two occasions recently, I have walked to the Cemetery in Montparnasse to visit the grave of Rosalie Rendu. Fresh flowers always lie there. On the simple stone are engraved the words:

To Sister Rosalie

Her grateful friends

The Poor and the Rich

Like St. Vincent, Rosalie knew how to be friend to both. The poor loved her deeply, because they sensed that she lived out precisely what she asked of the sisters who accompanied her. She asked of them, in the words of one of the witnesses: "welcome everyone, speak to the poor with both kindness and dignity, do not make them wait. 'Treat them,' she said, 'as you would treat your father, your brothers, your sisters.'" [22]

But the rich too were attracted to Rosalie. She was the real thing. They found her appeals irresistible. Rosalie knew how to engage their energies and their resources in the service of the poor.

Her correspondence extends to the Archbishop of Paris, to Superiors General, to politicians, to doctors, to young students and to family and friends.

She took on Frederic Ozanam and his companions as apprentices and thus participated in the birth of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

From 1833 until Rosalie's death, the Viscount of Melun visited her at least once a week to seek her advice and help in the service of the poor. Among those who gave Rosalie material aid were the King and Queen, General Cavaignac, whom I have already mentioned, writers and politicians like Lamartine and Caubert, and many local politicians and administrators. The Ambassador of Spain, Donoso Cortéz, came to Rosalie's house weekly to receive a list of the poor to visit. When he himself fell ill in 1853, Rosalie assisted him until his death.

On February 27, 1852, Rosalie was awarded the Cross of the Legion of Honor. On March 18, 1854, the Emperor Napoleon III and the Empress Eugénie came to visit her at her house. Sometimes, it would appear, Rosalie's extraordinary popularity raised eyebrows among her peers and her superiors.

The daily line of those seeking entrance into Rosalie's salon in the house on rue de l'Épée-de-Bois was long. She worked efficiently, writing little notes to remind herself of their requests. She sought to find some response, even if inadequate, to all the needs presented to her. She did not hesitate to ask the help of those whom she helped. Besides her own sisters, she engaged the poor themselves, young students, priests, religious, and the wealthy too in the service of the poor.

5. Faithful, sometimes misunderstood, Daughter of Charity

Of all the causes for the beatification of members of our Vincentian Family, the one that has interested me most is precisely Rosalie Rendu's. She was revered in her own lifetime. Those who knew her said that no one resembled St. Vincent so much as

she did. While her works were marvelous, her prayerfulness was also striking. While she could be tenacious and unyielding in protecting the poor, she had “infinite tenderness” in relating to them. While she had little formal education, she counseled people of all ranks who came to seek her (a fact that she accepted with a bit of humor).[23]

But in the latter part of her life Rosalie suffered from the disapproval of her superiors. It would appear that the troubles go back to the late 1830s and the conflict that arose during Fr. Nozo’s mandate as Superior General.[24] Because of a financial scandal and the loss of a considerable amount of money for the Congregation of the Mission, strong opposition to Nozo mounted up. Fr. Etienne and Fr. Aladel were among his most formidable opponents. News of the conflict hit the papers, so that much of Paris was talking about it. Finally, the Archbishop of Paris decided to intervene and composed a document of interdict against Fr. Etienne, Fr. Aladel and others. Rosalie, who wanted the matter to end peacefully and had good connections with the Archbishop, went to intercede with him. She remained on her knees and refused to leave, pleading with him to burn the decree of interdict against Frs. Etienne, Aladel, Legot, and Grapain, while pronouncing himself in favor of Fr. Nozo’s cause.[25] After long resistance, the Archbishop gave in. One account states that he finally responded to Rosalie: “Burn it yourself and remember that I hold you responsible before God for what you have made me do!”[26]

Looking back, it seems clear that Rosalie, by her intervention, wanted to mediate a peaceful settlement to a bitter dispute, but Fr. Etienne, elected a short time later as Superior General, remained quite unhappy with her. Only one Vincentian, Monsieur Marion, came to her funeral. He said that he told no one that he was coming, but that he could not stay away because of all he owed to Sr. Rosalie.

It is interesting that, despite their rather cold relationship, Rosalie would not tolerate criticism of Fr. Etienne in her presence. One day, during recreation, a young sister, with some humor, remarked how fat Fr. Etienne was. Rosalie responded rather severely: "I will let that remark pass because of your youth, but you would not talk like that if you saw God and St. Vincent represented in your superiors."^[27] That ended that conversation!

Those are five faces of Rosalie Rendu. In a rich personality like hers, I am sure that there were many others. Rosalie died on February 7, 1856. Her own mother died just three days earlier — news of which never reached Rosalie.

A contemporary author, Elizabeth Johnson, writes:

... paradigmatic figures who emerge in the course of history are like a Milky Way thrown down from heaven to earth ... a shining river of stars spiraling out from the center of the galaxy ... to light a path through the darkness. They are women and men who shine like the sun with the shimmer of divinity, showing the community the face of Christ in their own time and place. They distill the central values of the living tradition in a concrete and accessible form. The direct force of their example acts as a catalyst in the community, galvanizing recognition that yes, this is what we are called to be.^[28]

That is precisely what Rosalie Rendu says to us today.