



Louise Humann

1766 - 1836

*A
Christian Woman
for our Times*

*L*ouise Humann will be forever remembered and revered in Sion, as a woman of deep faith and rare intelligence, an excellent educator, way ahead of her times, a woman with a great heart who knew how to love, both God and people. Louise Humann inspired Theodore Ratisbonne, the founder of the family of Our Lady of Sion, to study, love and centre his life on the Word of God in Scripture. At his request, she baptized him Catholic.

The story starts back in the middle of the 18th Century, over a hundred years before the Congregation of Our Lady of Sion actually came into existence. This woman named Louise was to have an enormous influence on the life of Theodore Ratisbonne, to such an extent that her spirit lives on in Sion today.

*E*arly Childhood. The eldest of seven surviving children, Louise was born in 1766 in Strasbourg, France. Built on the Rhine River which separated France from Germany, the city of Strasbourg dates back to medieval times. Because of its strategic position, the city prospered, down through the ages, playing a key, influential role in the developing history of France, right to present times. Louise's parents fostered a great love of learning in their children. Louise grew up an avid reader with a thirst for knowledge. At a time in history when education was largely available only to male members of wealthy families, Louise Humann became very knowledgeable and wise, mainly through her love of learning and self education through reading.

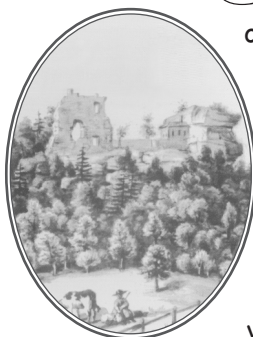
Although the family was quite poor and Louise was not able to attend school, history relates that she began to read at the age of three years from the only book in the house, the Bible. She had an incredible gift for languages. As a young child, she learned to speak both French and German fluently, along with the Alsatian dialect, the language of the people of Strasbourg. Later, in order to help her younger brother with his pre-seminary studies, she taught herself Greek and Latin. As an adult in Mainz, Germany, she was to learn Hebrew in order to read the Old Testament in its original language so as to better understand and live God's message.

Louise grew up a serious, reflective young woman, drawn to God and to prayer. Despite offers of marriage, she felt the call to enter a Religious Order, and was attracted to the Canonesses of St. Augustine, well known in France for the high educational standards in their schools. After six months, however, Louise left the Novitiate, possibly for health reasons. She was just 22 years old. At this

difficult and painful moment, she was helped by a cousin, Fr. Louis Colmar who was to become an important influence in her life. He encouraged Louise to channel her energies into works of mercy, visiting the sick, the poor and the imprisoned, fostering their individual prayer lives and teaching Catechism to the children. All this was occurring for Louise Humann against a background of mounting political and social dislocation. Most people lived in dire poverty, struggling to feed their children. Disease was rife and many of the children never survived to adult age.

Political Background of Those Years. In the 1780s, political unrest was increasing dramatically. By 1789, the French Revolution had broken out, bringing turmoil to the peoples' daily lives. The Civil Constitution of the Clergy required all priests to take an oath of allegiance to the State rather than to the Church. All who refused became suspect and were forced into hiding. Clergy, suspected of continuing their ministries, were hunted. A penalty of imprisonment, deportation, or even execution, by guillotine, awaited those caught.

Fr. Colmar was one of the most active of these priests with a price on his head. The Humann family risked their lives to give him shelter. Numerous narrow escapes are narrated about Fr Colmar who was most resourceful in finding new disguises to escape capture, a servant, a military officer, a coal merchant. Louise helped him in every way she could, sometimes carrying the Blessed Sacrament on her own person, walking at some distance from the priest lest he be apprehended. What an act of tremendous courage and faith on her part!



Turkenstein

The Pact of Turkenstein About this time, an event, later seen as quite providential, was to have a great influence on Louise's life. In 1793, a relative of Fr. Colmar, Therese Brek, moved to Strasbourg from Germany. She had been recently widowed and left with three young children, the eldest of whom had special needs. Fr. Colmar introduced Therese to Louise, and the two women became good friends.

Louise took over the education of the three children, a venture which soon developed into a small school. There, the children celebrated feast days, had catechism classes and

made their First Communion without arousing any suspicion. The school was also a safe place for priests to hide.

In 1797, Therese leased an old castle in Turkenstein, high in the Vosges Mountains, outside Strasbourg. Therese and Louise, along with Fr. Colmar, took the children there for the summer break. On the Feast of the Sacred Heart, 23rd June 1797, the three adults solemnly promised to devote their lives to God and to the service of others, especially to the education of youth, under the guidance of Fr. Colmar. Their motto was, "Sint Unum" - "That they may be one" (cf. John 17:11).

*L*ouise, the Educator. With Napoleon's advent in 1800, the political climate changed for the better. Two years later, in 1802, Fr. Colmar was named Bishop of Mainz, in Germany. He invited Louise and Therese to begin a school for girls there. The 'Institute Josephine', under the patronage of the Empress Josephine, Napoleon's wife, was soon well established and running smoothly. For the next 15 years, the two women educated girls from French and German families, Protestant and Catholic, wealthy and poor. A great family spirit marked the school. Louise set up a bursary system to help poorer families, unable to afford the fees, to educate their daughters. For every ten pupils enrolled, one was educated free. Far from undermining discipline, Louise believed that friendship and trust between teachers and students was a sure way of guaranteeing good behaviour and fostering self-discipline. School rules were not unduly numerous, and the list of 'forbiddens' was short. Louise believed in the merits of good order and was quite strict about tidiness.



Louise, aged 36 years

In her teaching methods, she was ahead of her times. She believed that girls were as clever as boys; had she not proved this in her own life! In her classes, she required little rote learning, requesting rather that her students give an intelligent account of what they had read, and think for themselves. For the times, the school curriculum was quite comprehensive, including lessons in music, art, dancing and household management as well as in philosophy, rhetoric and elementary logic. When Louise was dissatisfied with a prescribed text-book, she produced a series of her own. One of the most popular was a thirty-page booklet entitled, "The History of Egypt". What a dynamic, enterprising and

creative woman! The students loved her for her kindness, gentleness and thoughtfulness, and she loved them.

Pedagogy for Religious Education: Louise's teaching was anchored in a deep faith in God; she never ceased speaking of God's loving kindness and mercy to each one. She taught the Ten Commandments, not as a series of prohibitions with threats attached, but as the gift of a loving God who wants His children to live happy, peaceful lives. For Louise, religion was an affair of the heart; "to know more in order to love more" was one of her maxims.



Bishop Colmar

Return to Strasbourg: With Napoleon's defeat in 1814, the city of Mainz was occupied by Prussian troops and the school was forced to close. Vast numbers of soldiers, returning from places of conflict, had been infected with typhus and an epidemic broke out. Bishop Colmar and the women worked untiringly to help all they could, feeding soup to those too weak to nourish themselves. Worn out by fatigue, Bishop Colmar himself succumbed to typhus and died a year later, just 58 years old.

Louise meets Theodore. Unsure of what the future held for them in Mainz, the two women returned to Strasbourg. Once again, providence was at work. A brilliant young Philosophy professor, Louis Bautain, later to become the Founder of the Sisters of St. Louis, known today for their works of education in Ireland, England, U.S.A. and several African countries, met Louise quite by accident. In conversation with her, he discovered that she had not only read the German philosophers of the day but had actually met and corresponded with Hegel and Fichte. On leave from the University, Bautain was invited by Louise to set up his small philosophy class in her large house.

Theodore Ratisbonne, a troubled young student, 22 years of age, searching for truth and a meaning to life, decided to attend Bautain's course, and as a consequence met Louise. Her wisdom and passion for truth and integrity immediately impressed him. He later recounted how one evening, deeply troubled and depressed, unsure whether he should marry or not, he saw a star fall in the direction where Louise lived. In spite of the hour, Theodore went to

her for advice. She gave him wise counsel. "Never make a decision when you are troubled. Ask for three months' delay. When you are at peace, you will know what decision to make". He heeded her advice and decided not to marry but rather to continue his medical studies, at the same time that he was directing a Jewish School for boys.

Of Jewish background, Theodore had become deeply interested in the Christian faith and asked Louise for guidance. She encouraged the young Theodore to read the Scriptures, the Old Testament then the Gospels. In God's Word, he discovered the continuing revelation that was subsequently to influence his whole life, "God is Love", in particular, revealed in the human person of Jesus. Theodore asked for baptism. On Holy Saturday, 1827, Louise baptized him a Catholic. "The only imperative is to love", Louise would often repeat. "Love is for all times and all places. It is the most fundamental human law".



Theodore moves to Paris: After Louise's death on 19th Sept. 1836, Theodore, now ordained a priest, moved to Paris. In 1845, he founded the Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady of Sion there. Through her great influence on Theodore, Louise's spirit and heritage lives on today in the educational philosophy of the schools and works of the Sion family. The beautiful city of Strasbourg, with its numerous canals and magnificent cathedral, where Sion still conducts a College for Secondary students, will ever be remembered for the important pre-history of the Congregation that took place there.

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Patricia Watson, n.d.s.
Sisters of our Lady of Sion,
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**Turkenstein - Ruins of the
Castle with Mme Brek's house**
- from a painting by an unknown
artist in 1844