

**SUZANNE AUBERT,
FOUNDRESS OF THE SISTERS OF
COMPASSION**

Her life and teaching with its implications for the
Ministry of Spiritual Direction

by

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**A Research Project submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the
Spiritual Directors' Training Programme of Spiritual Growth Ministries.**

My choice of topic for this assignment is based almost entirely on two factors.

One: My life experience as a Sister of Compassion, which for over forty years has put me in contact with people in many different walks of life struggling with a wide range of human conditions.

Two: For the past two years I have studied the Course for Spiritual Directors as presented by Spiritual Growth Ministries. This has been a broadening and in many ways a deepening spiritual experience for me.

In spite of my background, spiritual direction had not been a part of my life and I had not given any thought to the possibility of Suzanne Aubert operating in this capacity. This woman was directed by the great Curé of Ars. She studied and deeply admired Teresa of Avila. We know that she became friend and confidant of men and women from all walks of life. She had a wide ecumenical outreach and a spirituality as simple as it was profound. Given such evidence we might ask how could she not have ministered to people, at least on occasions, in the capacity of “spiritual director”? One thing is for certain - I now see her in that capacity. This, I hope is indicative of a growing understanding on my part of what spiritual direction is, how it operates and the qualities that make for good spiritual direction. Over the past two years I have become increasingly conscious that Suzanne Aubert had these qualities to a high degree and used them to great advantage.

Who, then, is this woman who I believe has so much to offer the Ministry of Spiritual Direction?

Her Birth

Suzanne Aubert was born in Lyon, France, in 1835. She came to New Zealand with Bishop Pompailier in 1860. Suzanne was born at a time when French history was experiencing a renaissance. She was surrounded by men and women of deep faith, many of whom would become household names of the future, not just in France but throughout Christendom. The missionary spirit was in the air she breathed and many of those she grew up with were leaving their native France to take the faith to distant shores and the far flung Islands of the South Pacific were high on the agenda.

Contact with the Curé of Ars

Suzanne knew where her heart was leading her but there were problems. Her dreams for the future and those of her parents ran along opposite lines. One of the most influential figures in Suzanne Aubert's life, especially in her youth, and indeed in the whole of nineteenth century Catholic France, was John Baptiste Vianney, the parish priest of Ars, a small village some 30km from Lyon. The mystical vision of the Curé of Ars extended to predictions and prophecy.¹ Pilgrims were thronging to Ars from all parts of Europe. Suzanne, like so many others, stood in the queue for hours on end. Finally, she was able to kneel at the feet of the Curé and receive the guidance she needed. Suzanne sailed with Bishop Pompailier to New Zealand the year the Curé died. His predictions regarding her life in the far off Mission of Oceania were destined to support her for the remainder of her years.

¹ Story of Suzanne Aubert. J. Munro. Auckland University Press. Chap. 3. No. 28-29.

Arrival in New Zealand

The young Suzanne stepped onto New Zealand soil on December 30th 1860, bringing with her not only a deep love for God but that which inevitably goes with it; a great love for one's fellow men and women.

Her Years in New Zealand

Let us look briefly now at the implications of the life and teaching of Suzanne over the next 60 years to see where and how they impinge on the art of spiritual direction.

Spiritual Direction - What is it?

We see spiritual direction broadly as Barry and Connolly define it, as “that help given by one Christian to another, enabling that person to pay attention to God's personal communication to him or her to respond to this personally communicating God and to grow in intimacy with him.”² We have here I believe a definition that opens horizons as wide and as varied as are human beings and the situations in which they can inevitably find themselves.

Jessie Munroe in her recent biography, The Story of Suzanne Aubert, takes us into the very heart and thinking of this remarkable woman. In the process she gives us not just a glimpse but clear pointers to how Suzanne handled areas of concern for those seeking a deeper union with God.

Her Ability to be at One with People

Suzanne had the ability to meet people where they were and in whatever situation they found themselves, without in any way compromising her own standards or belief. Her story tells of nineteenth and early twentieth century Catholicism but she had the ability to respond to the here and now. Suzanne's faith breathed a matter-of-fact acceptance of her time and place, through the week as well as on Sunday.

“The dynamics of people shaped it.”³

Suzanne was able to create a model of faith that was natural and at home with people. She believed deeply that Christ was in everyone and she continually spread this belief out into the public domain. Her faith conveyed trusting tolerance and a shared identity.⁴

How Suzanne Saw Women, Their place in the Church and in Life Generally

Suzanne made an original claim in her “Directory” that the first Christian theologian was a woman - Elizabeth the Mother of John the Baptist. According to St Luke's account, during the pregnancy Mary visited her. Elizabeth was the first human creature, said Suzanne, to recognise and adore the Son of Mary, the Son of God, even before his birth. She was the first theologian to formulate, and the first evangelist to announce, the divinity of Jesus Christ and the Maternity of Mary.⁵

Suzanne herself may well have been the first to formulate a New Zealand expression of Christian Spirituality and to “earth the Gospel in local soil.”

² The Practice of Spiritual Direction. W.A. Barry & W.A. Connolly. Harper, New York: 1982, Chap 1. Page 8.

³ Story of Suzanne Aubert. J. Munro. Auckland University Press. Chap. 20, No. 125.

⁴ Story of Suzanne Aubert. J. Munro. Auckland University Press. Chap. 20, No. 128.

⁵ Directory of Sisters of Compassion. Part 5, Page 419.

Strong Women of the Gospel

Speaking of the “Strong women of the Gospel” she remarked,

“They must have been laughed at many times. When people saw them tramping after Our Lord they would have said, *‘Look at those crazy women. Why don't they stay home and care for their families?’* But the women took no notice ... Our life must be like that of the Holy Women. We have to do their work. Our Lord did not shut Himself up in a cloister when he came on earth. He led an active life. So too must we as we serve Our Lord in the person of his poor and afflicted.”

Suzanne continues,

“There is nothing in such a life to prevent attaining the highest contemplation. On the contrary, it is the life which of all others will lead quickest and surest to union with God.”⁶

A Woman Who Combined Strength and Gentleness

Jessie Munroe paints two contrasting pictures of Suzanne that indicate her strength and her gentleness.

Speaking of how certain members of the hierarchy saw Suzanne, she writes:

“The last thing they (the bishops) wanted was to be confronted by this energetic, free-lancing, somewhat unclassifiable, ex-diocesan nun. A sort of female religious 'forest ranger', who with talk of inalienable, non- diocesan property, would have been seen as beyond the pale.”⁷

This Same Woman Could Be So Sensitive, So Gentle

She knew that neighbourly co-operation among settlers was a thin membrane barely covering a turmoil of feelings going far back into inherited history. Her approach was to protect the delicate pulsating fontanelle of a new society until it had firmed and safely closed.⁸

Suzanne Could Lose Her Patience

When Suzanne felt strongly about issues, she could lose her temper. She would “slap her hands on her thighs and stamp her feet.” She knew that goodness had to be worked on constantly, crafted gently. She let one of her novices know that it is natural to have rebellious thoughts. She accepted and acknowledged the novices feelings and did not make her feel guilty. This helped her on her spiritual journey while letting her still be her own woman.⁹

Her Care For Others

All care for others was to be done with love, where the loving itself was also to be a perpetual exercise in learning to love fully. Love is the life of the heart and like the pendulum of a clock, which sets in motion all the other parts, love gives to the soul all

⁶ Letter to Sister Agnes. Chap. 13. No. 44.

⁷ Story of Suzanne Aubert. J. Munro. Auckland University Press. Chap 7. No. 19.

⁸ Story of Suzanne Aubert. J. Munro. Auckland University Press. Chap 8. No. 26.

⁹ Reminiscences. A. Moller, Chap 20.

the movement it has. It is by loving that we learn to love. She kept stressing that discipline was to be formative, not soul quenching.¹⁰

Vision and Ability to Change

Suzanne had the vision that could not only see the need and the necessity for change but also had the ability to initiate it. By catching the mood of the people, Suzanne could be a puzzle and a threat to those in authority. By her sense of shared identity with all comers she was signalling change. Suzanne reached wide and by very public example she “preached” a message of change. Hers was a prophetic voice. She was signalling much that surfaced later in Catholicism with the changes of Vatican II in the 1960s. The harmonising of liturgy with different cultures and contexts, the ecumenical reaching out to different faiths, the expression of freedom of conscience, the acknowledgement of women's rights.¹¹

We have looked at how Suzanne saw and coped with so many of the day to day difficulties that people could be struggling with and seen that they may well seek assistance as how best to use these difficulties as stepping stones to God. Let us now look at another side of Suzanne.

Prayer

We see the true greatness of Suzanne when we look at her directives in prayer. It is the utter simplicity that catches the imagination.

What is prayer? It is simply the speech of the heart to God. We can always find something to say to our friends, why should we not find something to say to God? Even if it were only to complain confidently to him when we feel tired and discouraged.¹² The life of all of us has the share of Martha but let us seize on the share of Mary. Prayer is the most powerful thing in the world for our spiritual advancement. God always takes care of a soul that throws herself into his arms. Perfect abandonment of ourselves in all things of the future, requires great courage. Our measure of the love of God is to love Him without measure.¹³

Let us go to God to be loved by him and to love him eternally, He is waiting for us. He wishes that we should hope everything from his goodness. But let us also do something, let us forget the past - God will look after it! God deals with us as if He had a better opinion of us than we have of ourselves.¹⁴

God's Eternal Now

God's "now" holds within it the needs of future good. The present moment, the now" contains all the love of the good God, all sanctity, our life and all eternity. What God wills, what he promises “now” is precisely what is necessary for our salvation, for our sanctification. That trial of “now”, God has willed or permitted through love for us. Prayer gains for us “now” and always the courage and strength for all our duties for every sacrifice, for every heroism.¹⁵

¹⁰ Directory of Sisters of Compassion, p207-208.

¹¹ Gender and History, Ch. 20, No. 122.

¹² Directory of Sisters of Compassion, No. 30.

¹³ Directory of Sisters of Compassion.

¹⁴ Directory of Sisters of Compassion, No. 103

¹⁵ Story of Suzanne Aubert, J. Munro, Auckland University Press, Chap. 15, No. 29

Patience: Is to know how to wait, how to suffer and endure, for God.¹⁶

Confidence: There is nothing like confidence to put the soul and God in complete harmony. How far can our confidence go? As far as the power and goodness of God.¹⁷

Simplicity: Let us go to God humbly and simply. Let us not seek innumerable ways. Let us take our heart at one bound and give it to him.¹⁸

Reasonableness: One is no longer reasonable when he no longer hopes to find others reasonable.¹⁹

All things are possible: Everything is possible to him who believes.²⁰

Suzanne, who taught herself Spanish as a young woman in order to read Teresa's writings in the original, was not a mystic in the usual sense. She interpreted faith in a framework attainable by ordinary people. In practical effect if not in style, Suzanne Aubert contributed to Christianity what Thérèse of Lisieux also did - a pattern of faith that was unthreatening, understandable and achievable. A faith that emphasised love above retribution.²¹

Suzanne wrote in her "Directory",

"Let us not try to tread any extraordinary mystical pathway. Let us go to God in a loving simple way, leaning only on him. Let us take our heart and give it to God in one bound!"²²

¹⁶ Directory of Sisters of Compassion. p180.

¹⁷ Directory of Sisters of Compassion. p186.

¹⁸ Directory of Sisters of Compassion. p209.

¹⁹ Directory of Sisters of Compassion. p250.

²⁰ Directory of Sisters of Compassion. p205.

²¹ Story of Suzanne Aubert. J. Munro. Auckland University Press. Chap3. p40.

²² Directory of Sisters of Compassion. p229.

Conclusion

That the life and teaching of Suzanne Aubert can contribute greatly to the Ministry of Spiritual Direction.

1. So much of her teaching speaks of the necessity of relationships.
2. The need for open communication.
3. The ability to relate to others - warts and all.
4. A very wide range of experiences.
5. No attempt to fit people into one's own mould.
6. An approach to prayer that is so simple, so normal, that no one would be left feeling uncomfortable.
7. Her ability to assist people become aware of God in their life and build a relationship of love with Him.

Suzanne died on October 1st, 1926.

O Whanganui-a-Tara,
Let not your heart be torn;
She walks 'neath an arch of rainbows,
Where morning lights are born.

From *The Welcome*
by Eileen Duggan