

CHAPTER IX

REVOLUTION AND DISEASE: 1830-1854

SISTER ROSALIE AS HEROINE ON THE BARRICADES AND AT THE BEDSIDE OF CHOLERA VICTIMS

The Sister Rosalie that we turn to here is unquestionably the best known. She is most often viewed as a heroine of nearly mythical proportions. Her biographers portray her standing on the barricades during the fury of the revolutions of 1830 and 1848. Moreover, not only is she seen defying death in the streets of Paris but also at the bedside of victims of the cholera epidemics that wreaked havoc in the Mouffetard area in 1832, 1849, and 1854. This image of the heroine is accurate. We do not dispute it. The problem lies not in presenting this reality but in limiting Sister Rosalie's life to these actions, however extraordinary they may be.

Given Sister Rosalie's character and up-bringing, it is not surprising that she reacted to events as she did. Born in 1786, she was not yet three-years-of-age when the Bastille was stormed and the Revolution of 1789, known simply as "THE French Revolution," began. The century that followed was unique in French history, or the history of any nation for that matter. It was an era of unprecedented political change as the government moved, generally amidst turmoil, from a monarchy to a republic, to an empire and then, once again, from a monarchy, to a republic to an empire.

Sister Rosalie experienced the Revolution of 1789 from a distance. She would live the revolutions of 1830 and 1848 firsthand. In Paris itself, she saw the end of the Consulate and the entire First Empire – Napoléon I (1802-1815); the Restoration of the Bourbon Monarchy – Louis XVIII and Charles X (1814-1830); the July Monarchy – Louis-Philippe (1830-1848); the Second Republic – Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte (1848-1851); and the beginning of the Second Empire – Napoléon III (1852-1870).

Along with this radical political change came social and religious upheaval. The Industrial Revolution created prosperity for the middle class, but misery for the new urban poor who had been drawn to the capital by the false hope of a better life for themselves and their children. The Catholic Church, decimated during the Reign of

Terror, was restored but wounded. In varying degrees, anti-clericalism was ever-present. Today's supporters would be gone tomorrow.

Through it all, Sister Rosalie never lost her focus: to serve Jesus Christ in the person of those in need be they poor or rich, government forces or insurgents. All that was necessary to become the object of her solicitude was to need it. The form of government interested her only in its impact on those who were poor. Such an apolitical perspective was risky, even dangerous. Yet she remained undaunted and went about doing good for all those whose lives she touched with the quiet courage she had learned from her mother during the terrible days of the Reign of Terror.

Let us now turn to Sister Rosalie as a revolutionary heroine. Until 1964, the Daughters of Charity wore a blue-gray habit which was modeled on the peasant costume of the Île-de-France, the area of the country surrounding Paris where the Company was founded. It was the dress of the first country girls who came to the infant community. It consisted of a skirt, pleated in the back, a jacket with wide sleeves, an apron, a white collar, and a white cap that covered the head. As time went on, a second, large white head covering called a "cornette" was adopted to protect the sisters against the elements. After the restoration of the Company in the XIXth century, starch was



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Archives, Daughters of Charity, Paris

added. Thus, it became “winged” and captured the imagination of artists worldwide as the symbol of charity.

Sister Rosalie wore this cornette for the better part of her life as a Daughter of Charity. Walking the streets of Paris in it, she became synonymous with charity in the Mouffetard district and throughout the French capital. Consequently, when she mounted the barricades in 1830 and 1848, she was highly visible and identifiable. While it was clearly a courageous act, it was also a dangerous one and would bring her condemnation as well as admiration. She was equally impervious to both. Nothing deterred her from reaching out to help wherever the service of those in need called her, be it on the barricades or at the bedside of the sick and dying.

The *Revolution of 1830: les Trois Glorieuses* – 27, 28, 29 July. The question most frequently asked concerning this very brief revolt is, “Glorious for whom?” There is no simple response. Indeed, historians, both French and non-French, continue to debate its origins, participants, and significance. The Revolution of 1789 had, once and for all, broken the aura of the Divine Right of Kings and its demand for unthinking respect and blind obedience, which had previously surrounded the French monarchy. While the absolute monarchy was gone forever, neither presidents, nor emperors, nor kings could establish a stable regime accepted by the majority of the French people. Consequently, political unrest, particularly in Paris, became a constant.

Since Sister Rosalie remained apolitical, forging working relationships to benefit those who were poor with whatever government was in place, we will limit our discussion to the proximate causes of the street fighting that broke out in Paris on 27 July 1830, and to her actions during the three-day uprising and the period following it. The spark that turned unrest into rebellion seems to have been kindled by Charles X when, on 25 July, he issued a set of ordinances. These were laws passed without the approval of Parlement. Charles X naïvely and arrogantly believed that this was his right, and that the ordinances would be accepted without opposition. Had these ordinances been adopted, they would have dissolved the recently elected opposition Parlement before it had even met; reduced by half the number of deputies; deprived nearly three-quarters of the already minuscule electorate of the right to vote; and sharply curtailed freedom of the press.



Charles X (1757-1836),
King of France – 1824-1830.
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Instead of servile acceptance, the new laws created generalized alarm. François-René de Chateaubriand, a well-known French writer widely viewed as conservative and supportive of the monarchy, recorded his shock upon reading them. He wrote, "I could not believe my eyes... [they revealed] a total ignorance about the present state of society."³⁶⁶

This shock, however, was not immediately apparent. Lulled by a false sense of security, on 26 July the police began to move to implement the newly promulgated restrictions on the press. Rather than comply with the new laws, but reluctant to continue to print liberal newspapers, many publishers closed down their print shops and laid off their workers. It must be remembered that, during the XIXth century, there were a large number of small, mostly liberal newspapers, published in Paris by about 5,000 print-workers. It was a Monday, the usual day off for these workers. Many of them were milling about trying to keep cool in the thirty-two-degree C / ninety-degree F heat. At the same time, Adolphe Thiers, an influential liberal politician, and a small number of liberal deputies were meeting to discuss a response to the ordinances. Thiers drew up a petition, which

³⁶⁶ François-René de Chateaubriand, *Mémoires d'Outre-tombe*, Volume III, P. Clarac (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1973), 159.

forty-three of his colleagues signed, urging the newspaper editors to ignore the ordinances and continue to publish. While the petition contained inflammatory declarations such as "The government has violated legality. We are no longer required to obey,"³⁶⁷ it was not intended to incite a revolution but to preserve freedom of the press. When, later that evening, the police tried to forcibly shut down a printing press in the center of Paris, there were a few scuffles with the crowd of onlookers. Nevertheless, the city was quiet by midnight.

The next day, 27 July, there were more minor skirmishes as the police proceeded to close down print shops and arrest journalists and editors. The level of unrest continued to rise as illegally published newspapers circulated through the crowds now in the streets. To further ignite the volatile situation, 1,500 armed troops were brought in to defend government buildings. The first deaths occurred in the late afternoon when mounted police, in an attempt to clear roads, charged into a crowd of demonstrators.

The night of 27-28 July saw intense revolutionary activity as demonstrators became insurgents. They broke into gun shops, made



Street scene of the 27, 28, 29 July 1830 Revolution.
Public domain

³⁶⁷ Pierre Rosanvallon, ed., *La Monarchie impossible* (Paris, 1994), 298.

primitive cartridges for the stolen weapons, and placed themselves under the command of some veterans of Napoléon's armies. By dawn of Wednesday 28 July, approximately 4,000 barricades had been erected across the narrow winding streets of the capital. The battle lines had been drawn. All it took was a single shot – fired from where or by whom, no one knew – for full-scale military clashes to develop. They would continue until, on 29 July, government troops were finally withdrawn from Paris.

At first glance, one would expect the army to triumph. They were better equipped and trained for battle. However, they lacked adequate food and water in the oppressive heat. Moreover, they were accustomed to fighting in open fields not in narrow streets. Nor were they prepared to respond to the guerrilla tactics so cleverly employed by the insurgents. Furthermore, they were demoralized. Charles X had abandoned Paris for his summer residence at Saint-Cloud, so they were left to guard empty buildings. They were also unaccustomed to fighting other Frenchmen, so their loyalties were divided. Their officers were confused by the street fighting and soon realized that they could not win. Thus, they began a strategic withdrawal which their troops readily executed. The revolutionaries had apparently won. They celebrated their surprising victory in the streets. Five days later, on 2 August, Charles X abdicated in favor of his grandson.

The influential politicians then invited Louis-Philippe, the leader of the Orléaniste branch of the royal family, to assume the post of Lieutenant-General in an interim government until the young prince came of age to take the throne. It immediately became evident that this would never happen: Louis-Philippe was crowned "King of the French" on 9 August 1830.³⁶⁸

So, we return to our initial question, "Glorious for whom?" If the July Revolution had been brief, it had also been bloody. In two days of street fighting, roughly 2,000 people had lost their lives: 200 soldiers and 1,800 revolutionaries. In addition, more than 5,000 had been seriously wounded: 800 soldiers and 4,500 insurgents.³⁶⁹ It is unclear just who all the revolutionaries were and what their agenda was other than the desire to overthrow the authoritarian rule of the Bourbon king. If there were journalists and students in the group, the dead and wounded came largely from the working class. They were,

³⁶⁸ Sharif Gemie, *French Revolutions: An Introduction* (Edinburgh, 1999), 1-26, 36-41.

³⁶⁹ Pamela Pilbeam, *The 1830 Revolution in France* (London, 1994), 62.

however, generally skilled laborers who, if not well-educated, were able, nonetheless, to enter into the political debate. In a word, they were not the illiterate, unskilled workers of the Mouffetard district.

When the dust had settled, the insurgents quickly realized that yet another autocratic government was in place. Nonetheless, the July Revolution did bring about some positive change. It increased the number of eligible voters; encouraged schooling; limited child labor; and permitted a bit more liberty to the press. But the big winners, for whom the *Trois Glorieuses* were indeed glorious, were the liberal politicians and the bankers. Once solidly in place, the liberal government, headed by Louis-Philippe, would do little to better the lives of unskilled workers and their families who, since 1825, had suffered the economic crisis besetting France. The result of this policy of neglect would be more years of civil unrest during which those who were poor continued to be the losers.

The Revolution of 1830 was a far cry from that of 1789, but it still had far-reaching consequences: ultra-royalism would never again be the dominant political culture in France and the Catholic Church, which had practically been an arm of government during the reign of Charles X, would face yet another wave of government sanctioned anti-clericalism. Nor did the liberal policies of the Louis-Philippe era bring about national stability. Rather, the *Trois Glorieuses* marked the beginning of a cycle of revolutions which continued to erupt throughout the XIXth century.³⁷⁰

Let us now examine Sister Rosalie's role during the terrible days of 27, 28, 29 July 1830. It should be noted that the Mouffetard district was not a focal point of this revolution. There were no barricades in rue de l'Épée-de-Bois. This, however, did not prevent Sister Rosalie from being directly involved nor did it shelter her from danger. The relative quiet of the neighborhood turned the sisters' house into a field hospital for the treatment of the wounded. It made no difference to Sister Rosalie, or to her sister companions, whether the injured were soldiers or revolutionaries; they all received the same devoted care.

While the sisters of the house provided most of the care for those who had been wounded, Sister Rosalie frequently went into the streets where fierce fighting was taking place. Combatants on both sides of the barricades urged her to seek shelter. She refused. Her

³⁷⁰ Gemie, *French Revolutions*, 36-38.

early days in the Mouffetard district had taught her that revolution did little to ameliorate the condition of those living in poverty. They bled and died only to see their misery increase. Thus, she went about pleading for an end to the hostilities. Eventually the gunfire ceased and the dead were buried.³⁷¹

In addition to her nearly constant presence in the streets, Sister Rosalie was involved in several well-documented actions that took place at the height of the July conflict and in the turbulent times following it: a highly dangerous rescue of a Civil Guard officer, Louis-Joseph Baccoffe de Montmahaut; her warning to and hiding of the archbishop, Monseigneur de Quélen, in the house on rue de l'Épée-de-Bois just before the episcopal palace was sacked by an angry mob; and her confrontation with the Prefect of Police who had issued a warrant for her arrest.

The Rescue. Monsieur Baccoffe was Sister Rosalie's age and had undoubtedly known her and her family as his father had land in the Gex-Confort area. His wife became Sister Rosalie's close friend and helper. Thus, in a moment of "terror," when her husband was missing, she turned to Sister Rosalie. The details were recounted by their daughter, Mademoiselle Marie Baccoffe de Montmahaut, then 80 years-of-age, on 21 July 1912. She had first met Sister Rosalie in 1838. Seventy-four years later, the details of this initial encounter were still vivid in her mind.

In November-December 1838, the six-year-old had accompanied her family to the house on rue de l'Épée-de-Bois. They were warmly received by Sister Rosalie and her sister companions. The little girl presented Sister Rosalie with a small donation. She never forgot her response, "How happy my poor people are going to be!" Then the child looked around at the Spartan little parlor, furnished with benches, and said, "I will buy you some beautiful chairs." Ignoring the attempts of her family to silence her, she added, "It is prettier at my aunt Ravinet's house." Unabashed by her young friend's frank observation, Sister Rosalie revealed in a few words her own preferential option for those who were poor, "That is because she is rich and I am poor." Little Mademoiselle Baccoffe had learned a powerful lesson. Before leaving, she promised that, once a

³⁷¹ Melun, *Vie de la sœur Rosalie*, 162-163.

grownup, she would give Sister Rosalie money. She was faithful to her promise.³⁷²

It is not surprising then, that Marie Baccoffe could recount in detail an event that had taken place two years prior to her birth. The facts are that her father, Commander of the government troops in central Paris, was missing for two days during the heaviest fighting. He generally checked on the horses quartered in the Saint-Marceau district and was reported to have last been seen near there. Moved by his wife's desperate appeal, Sister Rosalie set out to find him. There was no sign of him around the stables so she continued on to the center of the city where the fiercest fighting was occurring. Undaunted by the danger she was in, she searched for him among the dead. There she found him barely breathing and rapidly losing blood from multiple gunshot wounds. She somehow persuaded some of the combatants to help her move him to safety where he could be treated. He recovered. She had saved his life at great peril to her own.³⁷³

When one reflects on this brief account of heroism, two questions arise: "Where did Sister Rosalie get the courage or the audacity to go out alone, in the midst of battle, to try to find her friend?" and "How did she remain unharmed?" We have already spoken of the quiet courage she had learned from her mother. This is certainly the basis for her response to the situation. Marie-Anne Rendu had hidden fleeing clergy at great risk to herself and her family. Stealth, however, was a key ingredient in her success. Mounting the barricades, clad in a large cornette, was quite another thing. Either side had ample opportunity to kill or wound her. She knew this and went anyway. Was it recklessness? Despite appearances, such does not seem to be the case. Rather we find here her conviction that, if God was calling her to assist those in need, Divine Providence would protect her. She was not reckless but she was fearless. Physical danger did not deter her nor, as we shall see later, did the wrath of the powerful.

God may have protected her but why did the combatants? This phenomenon clearly shows how well-known and respected she was by people who could agree on little else. Her tireless devotion to the needs of others won for her the right to speak, to be taken seriously, and to act. Her warnings were not always heeded but they were never silenced by force. She was the symbol of goodness and

³⁷² *Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, Rendu, Positio; Sommaire*, 68.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, 68-69; see also Desmet, *Sœur Rosalie*, 208-211.

charity that insurgents and government troops alike needed, so she passed among them unharmed and even assisted.

Nor was this the first time that Sister Rosalie found herself involved with the military. According to Armand de Melun, she had entered into the fray as early as 1814. She was only twenty-seven years of age when this incident took place. Paris was occupied by the troops of the European nations allied against Napoléon. Sister Rosalie heard that a Russian soldier was to be executed for a violation of military discipline. Accompanied by an old woman, she went to the Russian encampment and demanded to speak to the commanding general. When he appeared, she dropped to her knees before him and pleaded for the soldier's life. Melun reports the ensuing dialogue:

"You know him and love him a great deal?" exclaimed the officer upon seeing the ardor of her request.

"Yes, I love him," she answered, "I love him as one of my brothers, redeemed by the blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ. I am ready to give my life to save his."³⁷⁴

The condemned man was pardoned as a result of her intervention. Melun goes on to say that Sister Rosalie, who had most likely recounted the incident to him, hurried home "astonished at what she had just done and frightened at her own daring."³⁷⁵

Further occasions calling for bravery would not be lacking. The violence of the Revolution of 1830 did not end with the withdrawal of government troops from Paris on 29 July, or with Louis-Philippe's elevation to the throne as "King of the French" on 9 August. This revolution, as others in French history, was in essence a civil war with Frenchmen killing Frenchmen. When it ended, the time had come to settle scores, for the victors to punish the vanquished. The Church found itself prominently among the vanquished in the eyes of Louis-Philippe and the new liberal government. A violent wave of anticlericalism followed, often carried out by unwitting mobs.

The only letter of Sister Rosalie that we have for the year 1830 is one, dated 8 October, to her friend and cousin, Mélanie Rendu. It begins, like so many others, with words of comfort at a time of

³⁷⁴ Melun, *Vie de la sœur Rosalie*, 113.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 114.

suffering. It moves quickly, however, to Sister Rosalie's alarm at the deterioration of the relationship between Church and State. She fears a possible repetition of the terrible events of 1793 when the Company of the Daughters of Charity was suppressed and the majority of the sisters were obliged to return to their homes.

It is clear in her letter that preparations were being made for another dispersal of the sisters. She describes the situation and her plans to her cousin, whose assistance she is seeking:

Enormous evils are afflicting France. We have reason to seek the mercy of God which we greatly need. The newspapers are inexact in their accounts of what is going on. I am limiting myself to telling you – and this is between us – that we are close to returning to our families, if our superiors so direct us. Circumstances will probably force them to do so. Also, my dear friend, please let me know if you would have a dwelling in Lancrans for my two Neyroud cousins and me and possibly Sister Jacquinod Cary. [Could the latter possibly be the Mademoiselle Jacquinot, with whom she entered the Daughters of Charity in 1802?] We have not yet reached this point but who knows whether it might happen when we least expect it. I believe that we should take precautions. If God grants us the grace not to make use of them, then we will be in for a pleasant surprise.³⁷⁶

Sister Rosalie does not want to alarm her family. Only as “a measure of prudence” was she sharing her “fears” with Mélanie and her cousin's mother. Twice more in this letter, Sister Rosalie speaks of her “fear.” She also acknowledges that “worry and fatigue” had taken their toll, but that she is better. This image of a woman who is fully aware of the danger in which she and her sisters were living and serving counterbalances that of the revolutionary heroine, seemingly unconscious of the perils surrounding her.

This letter also reveals Sister Rosalie's organizational abilities, even in stressful situations. Although she is making evacuation plans

³⁷⁶ *Letter of Sister Rosalie to Mélanie Rendu*, 8 October 1830, AFCP, 8J2 - Ro - Le 7.

“with tears in [her] eyes and a heavy heart,” she is attentive to the smallest details. She assures her cousin that she and her companions will have adequate resources and thus will not be a financial burden to the family. Moreover, she intends to bring the furniture, linens, and decorations from the sisters’ house and chapel with her. These were gifts to her and therefore the property of the Community. She states, “The agency cannot dispute this with me. I am in full compliance in this matter.”³⁷⁷

We should note here that Sister Rosalie’s critics have faulted her for inadequate record keeping. It is true that she often gave money to persons who were poor as fast as she received it, but this incident is another indication that she was careful in rendering an account of the goods of the community, the agency, and the poor.

Was Sister Rosalie being an alarmist? Had the situation really deteriorated to such a point that she would even consider leaving her “beloved poor” and returning to Confort? She acknowledges in this same letter, “It is very quiet here. This quarter, as you know, is isolated from all the vast tumult.” She is also forced to admit that, like so many others, the revolution and its aftermath had taken her by surprise. She writes, “Three months ago, how far I was from expecting these terrible upheavals that are doing so much harm.”³⁷⁸

It is clear from other sources that Sister Rosalie was not over-reacting. Nor would her “fear” prevent her from risking personal danger to help others who faced even greater perils. The violent anti-clericalism was all too real. The Jesuits of Paris, and other religious, were expelled from their residences.³⁷⁹ Closer to home, the Vincentian Priests and Brothers were fearful of a repetition of 1793. Adrien Dansette may be accurate in down-playing the anti-clericalism of the Louis-Philippe era when, in 1948, he states, “if one reflects on the terrible excesses of the great revolution [of 1789], one can assess the relative impact of the violence [of 1830]; it is more than a squall but it is not a cyclone.”³⁸⁰ However, the people who had experienced the events of 1793 were all too conscious of how quickly the situation could degenerate.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁹ See Paul Thureau-Dangin, *L'Église et l'État sous la Monarchie de Juillet* (Paris, 1880), 81.

³⁸⁰ Adrien Dansette, *Histoire Religieuse de la France Contemporaine*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1948), 1:286.

During the worst days of the July conflict, Father Étienne, future Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity, and his confrere, Father Aladel, future Assistant General and Director of the Daughters of Charity, dressed in lay attire and mixed with the crowds in the streets in an effort to learn if anything was plotted against the two motherhouses. They had reason to be apprehensive. Father Étienne described the attacks on religion that were occurring around them thus:

These were not directed only at the Monarchy but the Faith itself was subjected to its rigors; religious communities invaded, devastated, and their members dispersed; Priests were pursued and mistreated; the Archbishop of Paris himself is the object of the fury of the populace. He was obliged to put on a disguise and to hide in order to escape the dangers that threatened his life. We thought that the horrible days of 1793 were again upon us.³⁸¹

The Congregation of the Mission was also taken unawares by the July revolution. Three months earlier, on 25 April, they, along with Sister Rosalie and thousands of Parisians, had participated in the triumphal return of the relics of Saint Vincent de Paul, which had remained hidden since the sack of Saint-Lazare in 1789, to the chapel of their new motherhouse on rue de Sèvres. Hyacinthe-Louis de Quélen, Archbishop of Paris, presided. The Archbishop expressed his aspirations for the solemn translation of the relics as follows:

Yes, we maintain this hope because it is the desire of our heart and our consolation that through the protection and intercession of Saint Vincent de Paul, under whose patronage we are placing the faithful of our diocese and, more especially, the numerous Associations of charity that are established within it; that God will receive greater glory, religion will be practiced more faithfully, the fountain of almsgiving will flow more fully and more abundantly, good works

³⁸¹ Étienne, *Notice sur le rétablissement*, 30-31.

will multiply and charity will perpetuate its reign among us. As a result of this, we will soon see the prejudices that separate, the bitterness that irritates, and the passions which divide, fade and disappear. We will also see a solid and durable peace, which true French people must be intent upon and never allow to be altered, grow strong in our beautiful homeland in the shadow of a beneficent and revered scepter.³⁸²

Those hopes were never realized. Three months later, the Bourbons were gone and the divisions ever deeper. While the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission, Dominique Salhorgne, C.M. (1829-1835), as well as students, novices, and other nonessential personnel, left the capital for the provinces, the Daughters of Charity remained in Paris. Both motherhouses were preserved from damage and the priests and sisters unharmed.³⁸³



Dominique Salhorgne, C.M.
Superior General – 1829-1835.

Archives, Congregation of the Mission, Paris

³⁸² Hyacinthe-Louis de Quélen, *Mandement de Monseigneur l'Archêveque de Paris, qui ordonne que le Te Deum sera chanté dans toutes les Églises de son Diocèse, en actions de grâces de la Translation solennelle du Corps de saint Vincent de Paul et qui publie les Procès-Verbaux dressés à l'occasion de cette Solennité* (Paris, 1830), ACPM.

³⁸³ For more detail on this period, see Edward R. Udovic, C.M. *Jean-Baptiste Étienne and the Vincentian Revival* (Chicago, 2001), 146-158.

Several reasons have been put forth for this. The first is the appeal that Father Étienne made to the liberal mayor of Paris, Alexandre-Louis-Joseph, Comte de Laborde, who had earlier assisted the Congregation of the Mission when he had been an influential opposition deputy.³⁸⁴ Secondly, when a mob gathered to tear down the cross from atop the chapel of the motherhouse of the Congregation of the Mission, Father Étienne reprimanded them and then rushed to summon aid from the police. They responded and the crowd was dispersed.³⁸⁵

The third reason is a bit more complex. We referred earlier to Saint Catherine Labouré and the apparitions of the Blessed Virgin which led to the Miraculous Medal. They took place in July and November of 1830. The message of Mary to the young Sister Catherine on 18-19 July speaks of the “misfortunes” that will befall France and the protection the Company will know during them. Sister Catherine, herself, recounts it:

The times are evil. Misfortunes will befall France. The throne will be toppled. The entire world will be upset by misfortunes of all sorts.... But, come to the foot of the altar. Here I will spread graces over all persons who ask for them with confidence and fervor: both the great and the small.... My child, I particularly love to shower these graces on the Community. I love it very much.... The moment is coming when the danger will be great. It will appear that all is lost. There, I will be with you! Have confidence! You know of my visit and the protection of God and that of Saint Vincent for the two Communities. Have confidence! Do not be discouraged! Then I will be with you, but it will not be the same for other Communities. There will be victims... even among the clergy of Paris... the cross will be scorned... The streets will run with blood. The archbishop will be stripped of his vestments... the entire world will be sad.³⁸⁶

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 145-146.

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 152, note 48.

³⁸⁶ Laurentin, *The Life of Catherine Labouré*, 75-76.

Fourthly, when looking back at the Revolution of 1830 and its aftermath, Father Étienne, who had been Procurator General during this terrible period, attributed the protection of the two communities to the “general movement toward charity” that marked the time after the Translation of the Relics of Saint Vincent de Paul. He cites the founding of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul.³⁸⁷

Fifthly, Edward Udovic, C.M., puts forth a “less mystical explanation of why the community remained unscathed.” It was quite simply because it “did not meddle in politics and was committed to obey whatever government held power.”³⁸⁸

We have no way of knowing whether or not Sister Rosalie was aware of the details of the apparitions. We do know, however, that she was living its reality. The Daughters of Charity and the Priests of the Mission were protected. Blood was flowing in the streets, and other congregations of men and women were not so fortunate as to be spared. By February 1831 the archbishop, himself, would be forced into hiding. Once again we find Sister Rosalie directly involved in the struggle.

As pointed out earlier, the government of Louis-Philippe was strongly anti-clerical. While its most overt and violent manifestation was certainly in Paris, the provinces were not spared. The Bishop of Châlons in Champagne, Monseigneur Marie-Joseph-François-Victor Monyer de Prilly, who knew Sister Rosalie well from working closely with her during his student days as a seminarian at Saint-Sulpice, wrote to her in November 1830 to tell her of the burning of the minor seminary in his diocese. He told his mentor and friend:

We also, my dear Sister, have the honor of being persecuted. [Brigands] set fire to my minor seminary. Fortunately, the firemen rushed to us and saved the house. Without them, it would have been reduced to ashes. However, because our youngsters were continuously threatened and insulted and because, even after this attempt, [the brigands] revealed their plan to burn the house, I had to have [the boys] leave and return to their families.

³⁸⁷ Étienne, *Notice sur le rétablissement*, 32.

³⁸⁸ Udovic, *Étienne and the Vincentian Revival*, 157.

These poor children did not have a moment's rest. We had to watch over them while they slept. They did not dare to undress for fear of being surprised by another attack. It was truly pitiful to witness such wickedness and cruelty on the one hand and such gentleness and innocence on the other. They were like lambs whose throats enraged wolves wanted to rip out. However, wolves only devour [their prey] to appease their hunger. Instead, these villains had but one pretext and one motive, the desire to do evil. We were forewarned that we would be astounded by the circumstances, and that nothing would be like what we saw in other eras or during the first revolution. We accept what comes and have no other desire than to see the Will of God accomplished in all things. We need to assist one another by our prayers. May our Lord grant us peace and respond to the desires of those good souls who implore Him and strive to assuage His anger.³⁸⁹

Sheltering Monseigneur de Quélen. Back in Paris, the church and rectory of Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois were pillaged on 14 February 1831. The episcopal palace was to be attacked on 15 February. The night before, however, Sister Rosalie learned of this plan to punish Archbishop de Quélen for what was popularly believed to have been his role in the promulgation of the Ordinances of 25 July. A man in apparent need, to whom Sister Rosalie offered a voucher for bread, refused it telling her, "Sister, we don't need vouchers. Tomorrow we will sack the archbishop's palace."³⁹⁰

Sister Rosalie's reaction was that of her mother who, those many years ago in Confort, had hidden a bishop in their home. With the same courage Sister Rosalie warned Monseigneur de Quélen of the danger, and offered to hide him in the sisters' house on rue de l'Épée-de-Bois. He accepted and remained several days. The palace was indeed pillaged while the military passively stood by.³⁹¹

³⁸⁹ Letter of Victor Monyer de Prilly to Sister Rosalie, 20 November 1830, AFCP, 8J2 - Ro - Lc 9.

³⁹⁰ Melun, *Vie de la sœur Rosalie*, 165, note 1.

³⁹¹ Desmet, *Sœur Rosalie*, 211-212.

According to Melun, several religious also found refuge in the house.³⁹² Monseigneur Monyer de Prilly's letter, cited above, would seem to confirm this. However, only one is clearly identified. In his testimony during the diocesan process for Sister Rosalie's Cause of Beatification, Adolphe-Marie-François Cabon, C.S.Sp., a Spiritan priest, mentions that the Jesuit Procurator, Father Genesseau, had sought and been given refuge at rue de l'Épée-de-Bois. He was apparently still there in 1832.³⁹³ Whatever the number, one thing is certain, this was a very dangerous situation, far more perilous than hiding the bishop in Confort. The volume of traffic in and out of the house, of people of all political persuasions, threatened everyone there with discovery and the ensuing dire consequences. However, the refugees were never betrayed. The same general respect that protected Sister Rosalie on the barricades safeguarded her and those around her once again.

But the trouble was far from over. A letter to her cousin Mélanie, dated 19 March 1832, reveals Sister Rosalie's consternation. She wrote:

Oh! How miserable we are in Paris! Religious persons are persecuted. You have no idea of the fears that one rightly has for the future.... We expect anything at all. You must pray for us so that we will make good use of all these trials.³⁹⁴

Sister Rosalie's assessment of the situation was correct. On 5-6 June 1832 there were further bloody conflicts producing 800 victims in Paris.³⁹⁵ According to her biographers, it was at this time that some religious women who ran a school for little girls in the area of the insurrection turned to Sister Rosalie for protection. They had heard about rumors circulating in the streets that their establishment would be set afire. After assuring the sisters that they and the children would be unharmed, Sister Rosalie found several trustworthy armed men who agreed to stand guard around the building. Probably influenced by the sensitivity with which Sister Rosalie reached out to all in need,

³⁹² Melun, *Vie de la sœur Rosalie*, 165.

³⁹³ Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, *Rendu, Positio; Sommaire*, 7.

³⁹⁴ *Letter of Sister Rosalie to Mélanie Rendu*, 19 March 1832, AFGP, 8J2 - Ro - Lc 7.

³⁹⁵ J. Lucas-Dubreton, *Louis-Philippe* (Paris, 1938), 265-272.

the leader ordered his men to be quiet so as not to awaken or frighten the children or the sisters. Indeed, all were protected and the edifice remained intact.³⁹⁶

Confrontation with the Prefect of Police. The difficulty Sister Rosalie was to have with her superiors as a result of this incident has led to some confusion as to whether it occurred following the Revolution of 1830 or in 1848, as it was often assumed that the superior general in question was Father Étienne who was not elected until 1843. Melun, Desmet, and more recently Dinnat, however, place it in 1832.³⁹⁷ An interview in 1935, by Maurice Collard, C.M., with the then Superior General, François Verdier, C.M., which is part of the written testimony submitted for the Diocesan Process for Sister Rosalie's beatification in 1953, appears to both support and contradict this assumption.³⁹⁸ The final quote from Father Verdier states, "The blame was placed in such a way that [Sister Rosalie] was not mistaken by it and she believed that she was permitted to be heroic a second time."³⁹⁹ The "second time" presumably was during the Revolution of 1848.

Notwithstanding, there can be no doubt that this confrontation with the Prefect of Police occurred in 1832 as the prefect involved, Monsieur Henri-Joseph Gisquet, held this office only from 1831 to 1836. Nonetheless, one can be reasonably certain that the behavior that led to "blame" occurred during both revolutions. The government and the superiors of the Company were definitely concerned about it in 1830 as well as 1848. Governmental displeasure with Sister Rosalie could translate into problems for the Congregation of the Mission, as well as for the Company of the Daughters of Charity. Moreover, the government in power clearly resented her aiding and abetting those whom they looked upon as enemies. Yet Sister Rosalie, as a Daughter of Charity and as the daughter of Marie-Anne Laracine Rendu, could hardly have acted otherwise. What then was she doing to stir up the high and mighty? She hid and/or facilitated the escape of men accused of participating in the revolts.

The facts concerning Sister Rosalie's encounter with the Prefect seem to be that word of her activities had reached him, leading him to sign a warrant for her arrest. However, cooler heads prevailed.

³⁹⁶ Melun, *Vie de la sœur Rosalie*, 166.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 167-169; Desmet, *Sœur Rosalie*, 214-217; Dinnat, *Sœur Rosalie Rendu ou L'Amour*, 115-116.

³⁹⁸ *Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, Rendu, Positio; Sommaire*, 78-80.

³⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.

The officer charged with executing the warrant convinced the Prefect that such a move would lead to an uprising in the Mouffetard district, where Sister Rosalie was beloved by all regardless of their political persuasions. But Monsieur Gisquet was not completely deterred. He decided to go to rue de l'Épée-de-Bois to warn Sister Rosalie of the measures being prepared against her. When he arrived, he had to wend his way through the crowd of persons who were poor waiting to see her. He asked if he could speak with her in private. Sister Rosalie did not recognize him but, as was her custom, she welcomed him politely and explained that he would have to wait until she had received all those awaiting their turn to see her. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the story is that this powerful and angry man did indeed wait. When the last of the needy had left, Sister Rosalie returned and asked the Prefect how she might assist him. The following dialogue ensued:

“Madame,” responded Monsieur Gisquet, “I did not come seeking service but rather to render you one. I am the Prefect of Police.... Do you realize, Sister, that you are seriously compromised? In contempt for the law, you helped an officer of the former royal guard to escape. By his open revolt against the government, he had deserved the most serious punishment. I had already given the order to arrest you. I withdrew it upon the supplication of one of my officers. However, I have come and I want to hear from you how you dared to place yourself in a position of revolt against the law.”

“Monsieur le Préfet,” replied Sister Rosalie, “I am a Daughter of Charity. I do not have a flag. I go to the aid of the unfortunate wherever I encounter them. I try to do good for them without judging them. I promise you, if ever you, yourself, are being pursued and you ask me for help, it would not be refused you.”⁴⁰⁰

⁴⁰⁰ Melun, *Vie de la sœur Rosalie*, 168-169; Desmet, *Sœur Rosalie*, 214-215.

While this conversation surely revealed Sister Rosalie's courage and her commitment to all in need, it did not convince the Prefect of the validity of her position. As he was leaving, he turned to her and said, "I am willing to close my eyes on the past... but I beg of you, Sister, do not begin again. It would be too painful for us to take punitive action against you."⁴⁰¹ Sister Rosalie's response indicated that she had no intention of heeding the prefect's warning. She told him, "Truthfully, I cannot promise you this. I feel that if a similar situation presented itself, I would not have the courage to refuse assistance. A Daughter of Saint Vincent de Paul never has the right, whatever the consequences, to fail in charity."⁴⁰²

Indeed, the following week Sister Rosalie was again assisting fugitives from the police. This time both Sister Rosalie and the escapee were nearly caught right in the house on rue de l'Épée-de-Bois. An officer, from the province of Vendée, had come to thank Sister Rosalie for the help that she had provided for some of his men. While he was there, the police commissioner arrived. Sister Rosalie told the officer of the danger he was in and urged him to flee. In the meantime, she engaged the commissioner in conversation for an hour, allowing the man to escape. It appears that the commissioner later discovered her ruse and chided her for it. She told him, "I did it as much for you as for him. I wanted to spare you the distress of arresting him and the trouble of imprisoning him. Did I not do the right thing?"⁴⁰³

⁴⁰¹ Melun, *Vie de la sœur Rosalie*, 170.

⁴⁰² *Ibid.*

⁴⁰³ *Ibid.*, 170-171.



XIXth century Police Commissioner.
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While the commissioner would not go so far as to admit, even to himself, that Sister Rosalie was right, he must have reflected on the fact that, in those troubled times when, in a few hours, the vanquished once again became the victors, it was wise not to make too many enemies. Thus, he did nothing against her. This state of affairs became evident in the Mouffetard quarter when a representative of the government enacted an unwise measure for the population. They rose up against him. They massed before his house shouting threats. The terrified man turned to Sister Rosalie for help. She hastened to his home immediately, not pausing to reflect that he belonged to the same government that had issued a warrant for her arrest. When she arrived, she recognized the would-be insurgents. She chastised them for leaving their work to become involved in a potential riot which could have dire consequences not only for them but for their families. They heeded her admonition and left. The riot was avoided and the bureaucrat was safe. And, more importantly, in Sister Rosalie's eyes, there was no more bloodshed in a quarter that had seen so much.⁴⁰⁴

The government, however, was not content to let the situation continue. Sister Rosalie was judged incorrigible and indeed she

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 171.

was. So, they turned to the superiors of the company. In 1832, the Superior General was Dominique Salghorne, C.M. (1829-1835). These superiors were obliged to bring the government's remonstrances about her "imprudent and ill-considered" behavior to her attention.⁴⁰⁵ They certainly did so, but they did not remove her from the house on rue de l'Épée-de-Bois where she remained as superior until her death in February 1856. Sister Rosalie's critics cite this as an example of disobedience.

The government surely knew what it was doing when it changed the issue from a conflict between an individual sister and civil authority to a matter of religious obedience. Opinions are divided on both the thought behind the admonition she received and the intent of her superiors when they issued the reprimand. Father Collard's testimony sheds some light on the matter. Once again we turn to his interview with Father Verdier, during which the superior general stresses the distinction between the official position that superiors are obliged to take publicly and their innermost thoughts. They must always keep before them the good of the company and the risks it would face were they to ignore the complaints of the government. There seems, nonetheless, to have been no direct order for Sister Rosalie to terminate her activities. Thus, there is no question of a failure in formal obedience. Whether in 1830-1832 or in 1848, and most likely during both revolutions, superiors must have been concerned not only because of the delicacy of the company's relationship with the government, which was often anti-clerical, but especially because Sister Rosalie's actions, be they reckless or heroic, placed her companions, as well as herself, in very real danger.

Father Verdier goes on to reflect that, for Sister Rosalie, the inner conflict was to weigh submission to the counsels of prudence she had received and her duty of charity. Charity obviously and "rightly," in his opinion, prevailed. Father Verdier asks the questions that must have challenged superiors in these grave matters and persuaded them not to remove her from the Mouffetard district. Moreover, they surely realized that such a move would have given rise to a whole different set of problems since Sister Rosalie's "beloved poor" would never have allowed her to go gently into the night. The superior general asks:

⁴⁰⁵ *Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, Rendu, Positio; Sommaire, 79.*

Finally, can you imagine a Daughter of Charity driving away a poor soul threatened with being executed? A Daughter of Charity turning him in? But that is what would have imprinted an indelible blemish on the reputation of the Community...⁴⁰⁶

Thus, Sister Rosalie continued, with a clear conscience, and with no direct interference from major superiors, to protect and assist those whom the vagaries of war had turned into helpless fugitives. Let us now turn our attention to the Revolution of 1848.

The *Revolution of 1848*. The Revolution of 1830 had brought a constitutional monarch, Louis-Philippe, "King of the French," to power. The Revolution of 1848 would force him to abdicate, giving birth to the Second Republic on 25 February. The high hopes that had followed the Orléaniste's rise to the throne were quickly dashed for the vast majority of the population. His eighteen-year reign was marked by turmoil and violence, economic crises, the increasing misery of the working classes, and, in 1847, famine. Added to this were some excessively bitter winters and a cholera epidemic. Nearly seventy years after the Revolution of 1789, the ideals of "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity" were an impossible dream for most. The persons living in poverty in Sister Rosalie's "diocese," as she called the Mouffetard district, were increasingly "*Les Misérables*" whom Victor Hugo portrayed so poignantly in his novel of the same name. Hugo wrote:

It sometimes happens that, even against all principles, even against liberty, equality and fraternity, even against universal suffrage, even against the government of all by all, that, from the depths of its anguish, its discouragement, its destitution, its frenzy, its distress, its stench, its ignorance, its darkness, this great mass of desperation, the rabble, protests and brings the battle to the people.... These are dismal days because there is always a certain amount of justification even in this madness, suicide in the duel. And, these words that are meant to be insulting:

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 80.

“beggars, rabble... populace,” establish, alas! the fault of those who rule rather than the errors of those who suffer; the failures of the privileged rather than the fault of the disenfranchised.... The frustration of this crowd which suffers and bleeds, its violence in opposition to the principles that are its life, its actions against the law, are a popular coup and must be repressed.⁴⁰⁷



Louis-Philippe (1773-1850),
 “King of the French” – 1830-1848.
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And they would be. But what had led to this madness, which Sister Rosalie had foreseen so plainly as early as 1840? She expressed her apprehension to a friend and former collaborator, L.C. de Falvelly, in November of that year. She wrote:

In Paris, we are on a volcano. Every day we fear a revolution. Spirits are riled up; minds are tormented. It is true that we are so wicked that we need to be chastised. Irreligion is at its height. The population is demoralized. Never have we seen such a great torrent of corruption.⁴⁰⁸

⁴⁰⁷ Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 5^e Partie, Livre 1^{er} (Livre de Poche, II), Chapitre 1, 1577-1578.

⁴⁰⁸ *Letter of Sister Rosalie to L.C. Falvelly*, 15 November 1840, AFCP, 8J2 - Ro - Le 147 - La 8.

Sister Rosalie was not overreacting. In February 1848 the volcano of revolution erupted.

Let us now turn briefly to the confluence of circumstances that transformed street violence into revolt. One hundred and fifty-eight years ago, the Revolution of February 1848 brought about the rebirth of the Republic in France. Unlike the Revolution of 1830, which was essentially political in nature, the uprisings of February and June 1848 were rooted in the social conditions of the day and influenced, at least in part, by Christian social thought. They would have far reaching effects on society as a whole, as well as on French economy and culture. The anti-clericalism which followed the Revolution of 1830 abated. The dedication of numerous Catholics, including Armand de Melun, Jean-Léon Le Prevost, and Frédéric Ozanam, and the spread of charitable works had brought many closer to the Church. By the time the tragic events of 1848 occurred, Sister Rosalie had already become a symbol of charity in the midst of turmoil. The bloody events of February, and particularly June, 1848 would only enhance that image. While an in-depth examination of all these factors is clearly beyond the scope of this study, it should be pointed out that 1848 is considered by many historians as a key moment in the development of the democratic tradition in France and across Europe.

The principal players in 1830 had been the King, Charles X, members of the National Assembly, the King of the French, Louis-Philippe, liberal politicians, wealthy bourgeoisie, and bankers. The gains had been largely in the political arena. Louis-Philippe represented a compromise: a constitutional monarch. By 1848, the conditions in which those who were poor lived and worked had become intolerable. The government of Louis-Philippe, supported by the bourgeoisie, became ever more conservative and authoritarian. Meanwhile, liberal, democratic ideas took hold among the working classes. On 10 February, in the newspaper, *Le Correspondant*, Frédéric Ozanam urged Catholics to adopt a preferential option for the working class and to support movements toward democracy. Meanwhile, the factors leading to revolt were in place: government scandal and economic collapse that left 750,000 workers unemployed while prices rose. Troubled by what he saw around him, Ozanam wrote to his friend Joseph-Théophile Foisset, editor of *Le Correspondant*:

We must look after the people who have too many needs and not enough rights, who are rightly

demanding a greater role in public affairs, job security, and protection from misery.⁴⁰⁹

The very day that the principal founder of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul addressed this plea to his friend, that is, 22 February 1848, the masses took to the streets. Fifteen hundred barricades were erected in the poorest districts of the capital. Ironically, the Mouffetard district was not one of them. The Civil Guard was sent immediately to quell the rebellion. But some of the soldiers abandoned their posts and joined the insurgents. On 24 February, in a state of panic, Louis-Philippe abdicated. On 25 February, Alphonse de Lamartine and Alexandre-Auguste Ledru-Rollin formed a provisional government and proclaimed the Second Republic. As in 1830, the Mouffetard district had not been the center of the turmoil. The inhabitants, who had lived in misery for so long and had barely escaped the ravages of the famine of 1847, had little hope that government, whatever its form, could or would do anything to alleviate their plight. They accepted the Republic, but had not had anything to do with bringing it about. Indeed, Sister Rosalie, who saw those who were poor as the losers in every armed conflict, urged patience.



Barricaded street with dead insurgents.
Public domain

⁴⁰⁹ "Letter of Frédéric Ozanam to Joseph-Théophile Foisset," Paris, 22 February 1848; Frédéric Ozanam, *Lettres de Frédéric Ozanam*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1978), 2:379.

Once established, the provisional government moved quickly. It opened national workshops to provide work for the thousands of unemployed. It decreed freedom of the press, the right of assembly, and universal suffrage. This latter, of course, is universal male suffrage. The number of eligible voters went from 240,000 to 9,000,000. On Easter Sunday, 23 April, they voted for their representatives, including fifteen clergymen. This is a rather dramatic indication that the February 1848 Revolution, at least at the beginning, had none of the anti-clericalism that characterized so much of the Revolution of 1830 and its aftermath. On 24 February, a spontaneous procession was organized to transfer the crucifix and sacred vessels from the chapel of the Tuileries, which the insurgents had sacked, to the church of Saint-Roch. Monseigneur Affre, Archbishop of Paris, expressed his joy at the moderation and religious sentiment of the people. Preaching at Notre-Dame, Henri-Dominique Lacordaire, O.P., considered the greatest "pulpit orator" of the XIXth century, announced an alliance between the young Republic and the Church. He told the assembled faithful, "We are assisting at one of those hours when God reveals Himself. Yesterday He went through our streets and the entire world saw Him."⁴¹⁰ Even the parish priests, who had suffered so greatly during the First Republic, joined in the celebration and blessed the "Liberty Trees" that were being planted about the city.

But all was not calm. The poor working classes remained the object of considerable debate. The first issue of a newspaper entitled, *L'Ère Nouvelle*, "The New Era," was published on 15 April. Frédéric Ozanam was one of the principal contributors. In this republican, democratic newspaper he found a platform to express his strongly held convictions: democracy, the defense of those who were poor, the demands of justice. He went so far as to set forth a plan for social reform that went contrary to the tenets of economic liberalism. Nor did it take long for him to incur the wrath of conservatives, who had come to look upon democracy as a danger that needed to be rooted out by whatever means necessary.⁴¹¹

In the midst of this political and social turbulence, Sister Rosalie and her companions continued to minister to all in need, whatever their views. The spring of 1848 saw numerous popular celebrations.

⁴¹⁰ B. Chocarne, *Le Révérend Père Lacordaire* (Paris, 1866), 517-522.

⁴¹¹ Georges-Albert Boissinot, *Un autre Vincent de Paul: Jean-Léon Le Prevost (1803-1874)* (Montréal, 1991), 217-222.

On Holy Thursday, the people commemorated the national feast of Fraternity. On the Champs-Élysées, the army and the Civil Guard received the new flag while 300,000 spectators proclaimed the Republic and the Assembly. But the closing of the national workshops on 22 June would change all that. The next day, another insurrection exploded in the streets of Paris. And this time the barricades and fighting were right outside the sisters' house and all along rue Mouffetard. Despite the general euphoria the new republic inspired, Sister Rosalie had seen storm clouds gathering on the horizon. On 27 March 1848, she wrote to her friend, Cyprien Loppe, who was living in Rouen, "We are in a violent state here. You cannot imagine what Paris is like. This revolution is in no way comparable to that of 1830."⁴¹² The February uprising had been violent and produced many victims, but the June insurrection was deadly. Moreover, it would prove disastrous for her "beloved poor" of the Mouffetard district. They had already taken up arms and erected barricades by 18 June, when Sister Rosalie wrote once again to Cyprien Loppe to ask for prayers. She described the volatile situation, "...our needs are great. Never have we seen such anxiety as at the present time. Our poor are dehumanized, demoralized, and adrift. There is atrocious disorder."⁴¹³



Distribution of barricades in Paris during the June 1848 uprising.
Public domain

⁴¹² Letter of Sister Rosalie to Cyprien Loppe, 27 March 1848, AFCP, 8J2 - Ro - Le 212 L38.

⁴¹³ *Ibid.*, 18 June 1848, AFCP, 8J2 - Ro - Le 215 L39.

And when fighting broke out, the reality was even more horrifying than imagined a few days earlier. According to Melun, who had likewise lived this terrible time, Sister Rosalie described the horror thus, "I believe that if, at that moment, you had descended into hell, you would not have found a single devil there. They were all in our streets. I will never forget their faces."⁴¹⁴



Fighting in the streets of Paris – 1848.
Public domain

Once again, the little house on rue de l'Épée-de-Bois became a refuge and a field hospital for the wounded and dying regardless of which side they had fought for. Sister Costalin, who lived and worked with Sister Rosalie during those terrible June days, recalled the events in her testimony for the Cause of Beatification. She stated:

The insurrection was at its height. Our courtyard and entry hall were covered with straw on which the wounded and those who had died on the barricades were lying. We had come together for a little [spiritual] reading when a military aide to Cavaignac arrived: "The General has sent me to tell you that, because he cannot overcome the obstinacy of the district, he is going to go after them with hammer and thongs (an expression of the era). He is holding an escort at your disposition to take you and your sisters out if

⁴¹⁴ Melun, *Vie de la sœur Rosalie*, 174-175.

the insurgents do not surrender in two hours." The superior responded, "Sir, thank the General and tell him that we are the servants of those who are poor and also their mothers and that we want to die with them."⁴¹⁵

It is worth noting that General Louis-Eugène Cavaignac would become Chief of the Executive Branch of the new government. His message shows the concern and respect that he had for Sister Rosalie and the little community of rue de l'Épée-de-Bois, and his desire to see that no harm came to them. They were grateful for his warning and offer of safe passage but they chose to remain with their "beloved poor." Once again Divine Providence protected them.



General Louis-Eugène Cavaignac (1802-1857).
Chief of the Executive Branch, 28 June 1848-10 December 1848.
Public domain

There are other incidents, from this period, of extraordinary courage and daring on the part of Sister Rosalie. One involved an officer of the security police. He was being pursued by the insurgents when he succeeded in finding refuge in the sisters' house. Sister Rosalie went out into the courtyard and placed herself between the officer and his pursuers, crying out, "We don't kill here! ... In the name of my fifty years of devotedness, for all that I have done for you, your

⁴¹⁵ Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, *Rendu, Positio; Sommaire*, 49.

wives, and your children, I ask you for this man's safety." And the man was saved.⁴¹⁶

During these terrible June days, Sister Rosalie was frequently seen circulating in the Mouffetard neighborhood where some of the fiercest fighting was taking place. In a letter to Eugène Rendu in 1880, Claude-Philibert-Édouard Mounier, a government minister at the time of the June 1848 uprising, speaks of Sister Rosalie's heroism:

During the days of June 1848, huge barricades were raised close to rue de l'Épée-de-Bois. The fighting was terrible there, as it was in certain other points in Paris, when Sister Rosalie thrust herself into the midst of the turmoil and climbed the barricades, ready to give her life to stop the musket fire. Her attitude, gestures, and exhortations were understood. She saved the lives of a number of men.⁴¹⁷

Another account of Sister Rosalie's actions in 1848 comes from Albert Billaud. His testimony during the Cause of Beatification is particularly moving. He had heard of Sister Rosalie from his grandfather and his great-uncle as well as workers of his parents' generation who had known her or known of her. He was a simple newspaper vendor who worked nights, and he often talked about her with his customers who came from a wide spectrum of social classes. His responses to questions addressed to him, however, reveal how profoundly Sister Rosalie had touched the lives of the humble people to whose service she had dedicated her life. He tells what he had learned of her heroism in 1848:

During the revolution she did unbelievable things. Only our Good God knows about it. She went everywhere. She passed everywhere. The guns stopped when they saw her coming. They even helped her to cross the barricades. The insurgents offered to accompany her. She came to the aid of the wounded and the dying.⁴¹⁸

⁴¹⁶ Melun, *Vie de la sœur Rosalie*, 177-179; Desmet, *Sœur Rosalie*, 231.

⁴¹⁷ Letter of E. Mounier to Eugène Rendu, 25 September 1880, AFCP, 8J2 - Ro - SM - XV.

⁴¹⁸ Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, *Rendu, Positio; Sommaire*, 21-22.

Sister Rosalie's activities in 1848, as they had been in 1830-1832, are legendary. Sister Louise-Clémence Saillard, who had been with Sister Rosalie in 1851-1852, during the initial stage of her own formation, recounts what she heard and observed in her testimony for the Cause of Beatification, written 46 years after Sister Rosalie's death:

She was known and loved by these people whose mothers, wives, and children she had raised, whom she had assisted and consoled in all their suffering. This memory, which she evoked, gave her power, at the time of the revolution of 1848, to cause guns to fall from the hands of the insurgents, who were pursuing, to the threshold of the house, men they wanted to execute. Threatened with death herself, compromised if she refused to hand them over, she calmly addressed them, "I fear only God. Grant me the lives of these unfortunates. It is the first thing I have asked of you since I have been in your midst." The [fugitives] escaped over the garden wall while this discussion was going on. They never forgot the woman who had saved their lives.⁴¹⁹



Sister Rosalie stopping insurgents from pursuing the enemy.
Archives, Daughters of Charity, Paris

⁴¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 64.

Finally, the gunfire ceased, but not before the Church of France suffered a devastating loss. On 25 June, urged on by Frédéric Ozanam and Emmanuel Bailly, who had been the first President of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul (1833-1844), the Archbishop of Paris, Monseigneur Affre, mounted the barricades to plead for an end to the fratricide. Two of his vicars general accompanied him. He carried with him a declaration from the government forces, calling upon the rebels to lay down their arms and promising them amnesty. At the first barricade, he encountered a more or less receptive crowd but, at the entrance to the Saint-Antoine district, he faced a violent and recalcitrant mob. Shooting resumed and he could barely be heard in the chaos. Suddenly he collapsed. A bullet had struck him in the area of the kidneys. During the night of 26-27 June he died of his wounds. We do not know who fired the bullet that killed him. It is generally believed to have been a fanatic among the workers. The archbishop was surely recognized. He had assisted at many celebrations that church and state observed together after the proclamation of the Second Republic. He was respected by the people and trusted by the government. He was as safe in the midst of the tumult as anyone could reasonably expect to be in so dangerous an undertaking. But he was shot and fatally wounded. No one can stop a fanatic in the midst of mayhem, but more, perhaps, than anything else, this tragic incident shows the veneration that all the combatants had for Sister Rosalie, who had become the very symbol of goodness and charity in



25 June 1848, shooting of Archbishop Denis-Auguste Affre on the barricade near Saint-Antoine district.

*Courtesy of the Vincentiana Collection
DePaul University Libraries, Chicago, Illinois*

the capital. Divine Providence, and her quiet but tenacious courage to reach out in service to all in need, protected her.

Once calm was restored, the ruthless process of settling scores began. The government had won and went about rooting out and punishing those who had dared to take up arms against it. All resistance was to be crushed. To this end, all suspects were rounded up. Fifteen thousand were shot without any legal recourse. Twenty-five thousand were arrested and eleven thousand among them were sent to prison or were deported to a penal colony.⁴²⁰ The insurgents had, for the most part, come from the poor working classes. The wealthy population had always looked upon them as rabble rousers and dangerous. The terror of the rebellion led them to call for blood. A politically savvy government knew it had to oblige. So Sister Rosalie had another cause: to obtain the release of prisoners from the Mouffetard district whom she believed had been "more misguided than guilty." Moreover, she never hesitated to go to the highest levels of government when the well-being of those who were poor required it. We learn in a letter from General Louis-Eugène Cavaignac's mother to Sister Rosalie that the latter had written to her to plead her cause, and to ask Madame Jean-Baptiste Cavaignac to intervene with her son for poor workers who were the only source of support for their families. However, she sometimes encountered insurmountable obstacles, as in this case. Madame Cavaignac responded with regret, and with a testimony of her respect for Sister Rosalie:

When you spoke to my son about those men, whom you believed to be more misguided than guilty, and he told you to send him their names, there was not yet a question of review boards. He must have thought that those who would be designated, on the recommendation of people worthy of trust, as deserving a pardon would be pardoned and released. However, since the establishment of review boards, they alone, after reviewing the verdicts, pronounce on the fate of the accused. But, my son has nothing to do with this, at least at the present time. The review boards alone decide, confirm, or revoke verdicts already handed down. You know well, Mother, that

⁴²⁰ Dinnat, *Seur Rosalie Rendu ou L'Amour*, 167-168.

if matters depended on us, your very word, you the holy servant of [all who are] poor of this district whose mother and providence you have been for forty-six years, you know well that your guarantee would be the best of all. However, once again, from the moment that everything was placed in the hands of judges, it is for them alone to pronounce...⁴²¹

We do not know how many, if any, of the Moufflard insurgents in government custody and awaiting execution or prison for their participation in the revolution, Sister Rosalie was able to save. We can be certain that she tried every avenue open to her to achieve this goal. The bloody days of June had taken the lives of a thousand government troops and thousands of rebels, many of whom, unlike February, lived in the area of rue de l'Épée-de-Bois and whom Sister Rosalie knew personally. This was a terrifying reminder that she was absolutely correct in her conviction that, in these fratricidal conflicts, those who were poor were always the losers.

While all this was going on, the Second Republic was formally established and Napoléon I's nephew, Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, was elected its head. Within three years, he would be crowned Emperor Napoléon III. Once again, all the bloodshed had led to yet another authoritarian ruler whose government did little to alleviate the lot of the poor working classes.

If all of this were not enough, three cholera epidemics would decimate thousands more poor and unfortunate people. The heroism that had characterized Sister Rosalie during the revolutions of 1830 and 1848 would appear again as she, the sisters of her house, and her many collaborators struggled against this invisible enemy. Just as she had fearlessly mounted the barricades, so she would, perhaps, run an even greater risk, as she went about tirelessly bringing aid and comfort to the sick and dying, their families and even burying the dead. Let us now turn to this horrifying time for the inhabitants of the Mouffetard district.

The *Cholera epidemics of 1832, 1849, and 1854*. 1832 was a very bad year. The unrest and violence that had followed the Revolution of 1830 continued. As mentioned earlier, illness and malnutrition

⁴²¹ *Letter of Madame J. Cavaignac to Sister Rosalie*, 30 October 1848, G8202, BNP, catalogue of autographs, Charavay, no. 56147.

were an everyday occurrence in the Mouffetard district. Furthermore, families lived crowded together in unhealthy tenements. Because of working conditions, men died young leaving their wives and children with no support. Poverty became misery. Those struggling to survive in these sub-human conditions were defenseless against the onslaught of any disease. According to the Prefecture of Police in this era, the years leading up to the 1832 cholera epidemic had been marked by an outbreak of smallpox which began in 1830. Then came word that cholera was making an inexorable march across southern Europe, leaving innumerable dead behind. In July 1832, it struck France. It was not long before up to one hundred persons a day fell victim to it in the Mouffetard district.

It is not surprising that we have no correspondence from Sister Rosalie at this time. The needs of the sick were so overwhelming that she and the sisters of her house barely had the time to eat, sleep, or pray. Therefore, we turn once again to her friend and collaborator, as well as her biographer, Armand de Melun, to learn of Sister Rosalie's comportment in the face of the disease that had come to attack her "beloved poor." The aura of mystery surrounding cholera brought not only illness and death but also terror that led to frenzy. Even the doctors who risked their own lives to care for the stricken were feared and sometimes attacked. Thus, the service provided had to be physical, spiritual, and psychological. The victims and their families needed to be treated, calmed, and consoled.

The beginning of Melun's account is somewhat astonishing, especially in light of Sister Rosalie's actions in 1830 and 1848 when she seemed to be utterly fearless in the face of physical danger. Melun tells us that before cholera had claimed its first victim in the Mouffetard district, she was:

...assailed by great terror: she foresaw the ravages the disease was going to wreak within her district.... She trembled for her poor, for her sisters, for everyone. Her soul was troubled and she asked God to take this chalice from her.⁴²²

All this changed, however, when cholera struck the neighborhood and took its first life. Melun states that:

⁴²² Melun, *Vie de la sœur Rosalie*, 156.

...all her fears dissipated and she became intrepid. So long as the contagion lasted, no weakness, no trouble, no fear touched her soul. She was always the first to sit up with the sick [and to accept] fatigue. She was at the head of all the devotedness that she inspired. She animated her collaborators with her spirit of faith and her charity. She lent very active and intelligent cooperation to government measures and individual efforts. She organized field hospitals and made good use of the generosity of her helpers. Everywhere she established order, speed, and continuity of assistance.⁴²³

Sister Rosalie's greatest problem during the early days of the epidemic was trying to diffuse the rumors of poisoning and the desire for revenge that ran rampant among the people. They needed someone to blame for this mysterious and deadly disease that had befallen them and their loved ones. The most obvious targets were the doctors and pharmacists who were treating the victims. They were suspected of injecting poison into the sick. The inhabitants of the Mouffetard district never suspected Sister Rosalie and were open to her even in the midst of their rage. Her name was enough to protect those pursued by an angry mob. Melun provides an example of the power of Sister Rosalie's name and reputation. He writes:

One day Doctor [Hippolyte-Louis] Royer-Collard was accompanying a cholera patient who was being carried, on a stretcher, to the Hôpital de la Pitié. As soon as he was recognized, the [crowd] cried out:

"Murderer! Poisoner!"

He vainly tried to lift up the sheet covering the sick person's face and to prove that, by accompanying him, the doctor was trying to save him, not bring about his death. The sight of the dying person added to the frenzy. Cries and threats doubled. A worker

⁴²³ *Ibid.*

threw a sharp hand tool as Doctor Royer-Collard, completely out of arguments, cried out:

“I am a friend of Sister Rosalie.”

A thousand voices immediately responded:

“That is different.”

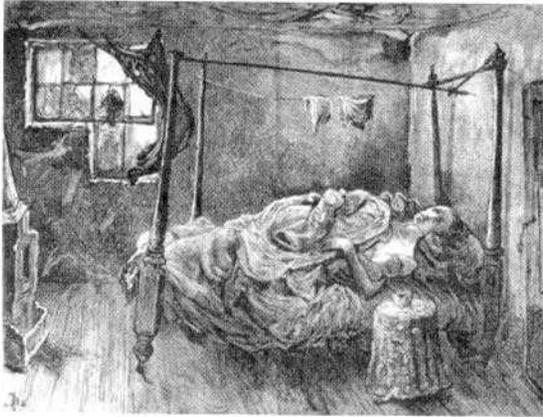
The crowd moved aside, cleared [a pathway], and let him pass.⁴²⁴

While this frenzy of the mob was irrational, it was also understandable. The full horror they faced is made clear by Dr. Joseph-Claude-Anthelme Récamier. In his *Recherches sur le traitement du cholera morbus*, written in 1832 and based on his lived experience, he describes the progression of the disease:

The sick person is overcome, almost all at once, with dizziness, vomiting, diarrhea, painful cramps in the extremities, and a sudden drop in body temperature causing [the victim] to take on the appearance of a corpse. This causes the eyes to [appear to] sink into the head and facial features to contort grotesquely. The pulse weakens ...and disappears in a few hours. ...The fingernails and fingertips turn blue. This progresses to the lips and around the eyes. Then, to a greater or lesser degree, reaches the entire surface of the body. ...Breathing is short, rapid, and gasping. The breath feels cold. All these symptoms of asphyxiation quickly end with the extinction of life.⁴²⁵

⁴²⁴ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁴²⁵ Joseph-Claude-Anthelme Récamier, *Recherches sur le traitement du cholera morbus* (Paris, 1832), 25-26.



Death of a cholera victim.
Public domain

As has been made evident, “extreme sensitivity” was Sister Rosalie’s dominant characteristic.⁴²⁶ It was the source of her great compassion for all who suffered. It meant, also, that she was personally affected by the tragedies around her. She grieved for the sick, the dying, and the disconsolate survivors of the epidemic. Nevertheless, she was able to control her emotions and remain calm and unshakeable as she organized relief services for her “beloved poor” struck down by disease.

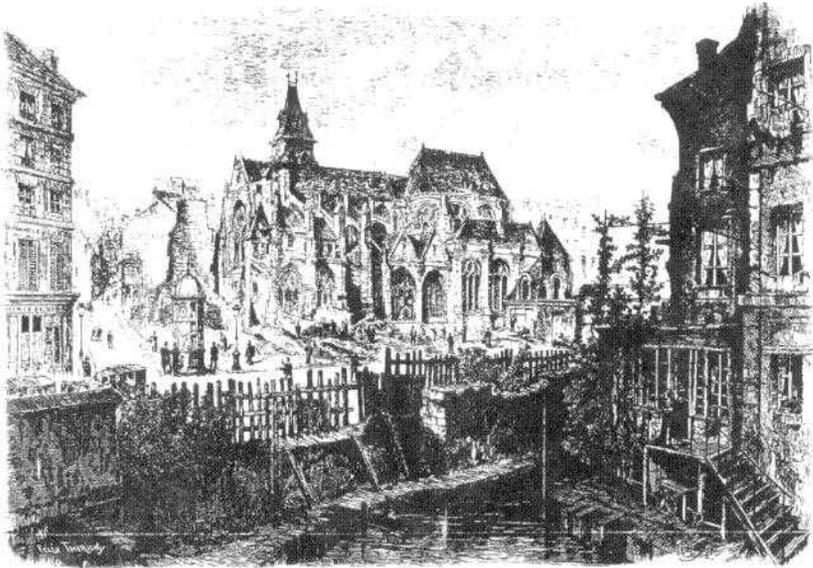
Once again Sister Rosalie became a heroine. The newspaper vendor, Albert Billaud, who told of her deeds at the time of the revolutions of 1830 and 1848, speaks also of her actions during the cholera epidemics. Her efforts to provide decent burial for the dead seem to have spanned both the revolutions and the epidemics. With evident awe, he recounted the following anecdote:

She also did unbelievable things for the dead. Monsieur Louis, an old carpenter from the Mouffetard district, could tell you, if he was still alive, that she asked him for boards she [then] used to make coffins to bury the dead whom she had gathered up from the streets. She repeated this deed during the cholera epidemics. She put the bodies in a pushcart, brought them to the church and then took them to the cemetery.⁴²⁷

⁴²⁶ *Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, Rendu, Positio*, 189-190.

⁴²⁷ *Sacra Congregatio Pro Causis, Rendu, Positio; Sommaire*, 22.

Seemingly fearful that such conduct would appear beyond even Sister Rosalie, he added, "I can affirm that all those who spoke to me about Sister Rosalie were scrupulous witnesses who had preserved a faithful recollection of these events and the actions of Sister Rosalie."⁴²⁸



Church of Saint-Médard along the banks of the Bièvre River.
Public domain

The epidemic that struck Paris in March did not release its hold on the inhabitants until the end of the summer. In the Mouffetard district it left behind exhausted workers, widows, orphans, and elderly who had somehow survived their decimated families. Sister Rosalie and the sisters of her house had escaped, bone weary but unscathed, despite their close service to the victims. During the immediate aftermath their work changed, although it was equally intense: aid for stricken families, comfort for widows, placement of children and elders. They continued tirelessly to alleviate the misery that two years of insurrection and disease had worsened. And those who had survived would face another tragedy, the flood of 1836 (a river, La Bièvre, with its filth and pollution from the nearby tanning factories, ran through the Mouffetard district).

⁴²⁸ *Ibid.*

Before moving on from this first epidemic, there is one further anecdote that sheds light on the principal players in the tragedy. This one concerns Monseigneur de Quélen, who was still Archbishop of Paris. As described earlier, warned by Sister Rosalie that his residence was to be pillaged the next day, 15 February 1831, Monseigneur de Quélen had fled from the episcopal palace and found refuge in the little house on rue de l'Épée-de-Bois. He was safe but the damage was extensive. Many of the insurgents involved became cholera victims leaving behind widows and orphans. Moved by charity and compassion, he pardoned his attackers and adopted several of their orphaned children.

1849 saw the return of cholera. This time there was not the general frenzy and paranoia that found mobs attacking health care providers as in 1832. This epidemic, however, was deadlier in the Mouffetard district. On a single day, in the parish of Saint-Médard, one hundred and fifty deaths were recorded, and this figure did not include children. This scourge was more selective, choosing its victims in the poorest neighborhoods in the capital while sparing the rich and even the doctors and religious who expended their energy to serve the afflicted. It was in the attics and cellars of decaying tenements, where those who were poor huddled together, that it selected its victims. The famine of 1847 and the bloody revolt of 1848, plus the deplorable conditions in which they worked and lived, made those who were poor ready prey.

Once again, in an effort to explain the inexplicable, the frightened victims and their survivors sought someone to blame. This time rumor had it that the epidemic was a government plot to weaken the working classes and to punish them for the 1848 insurrection. Only when some prominent and wealthy figures succumbed to the disease did the people come to realize that no one in government had started the epidemic and that they were powerless to stop its ravages. Poverty and misery were the real villains. Only meaningful social change would alter that, and it would be a long time in coming.⁴²⁹

As in 1832, Sister Rosalie was apprehensive before the epidemic struck. But once it claimed its first victim, she marshaled her considerable resources of calm, courage, faith, and devotedness to lead the struggle against it. Many of the sick were brought to the sisters' house to be assisted. As their number increased, Sister Rosalie

⁴²⁹ Melun, *Vie de la sœur Rosalie*, 158-159.

and her companions had little time to eat, sleep, or pray. Despite this, only one sister was stricken and she recovered.

However great the devotedness of Sister Rosalie, she could not have carried on the battle alone or even with the support of the sisters and doctors. As they had in 1832, many courageous volunteers came to work with her. Among them were members of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, founded on Frédéric Ozanam's twentieth birthday, 23 April 1833. In the beginning, it was known as the Conference of Charity. In 1834 the name was officially changed to the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. We will return to this subject in the next chapter as we study the vast network of charity Sister Rosalie was able to build as a result of her genius for collaboration, which brought together the rich and the poor, the powerful and the humble, the young and the old, in a concerted effort to serve Jesus Christ in the person of those in need in the Mouffetard district.

In the *Bulletin de la Société de Saint Vincent de Paul*, for 1849, Frédéric Ozanam recounts the work of the confreres during the epidemic. For a two-month period, some of them placed themselves under Sister Rosalie's guidance and direction "as the first founders of the Society had come together fifteen years earlier."⁴³⁰ And, when calls for help came to Sister Rosalie from outside Paris, she sent some of her volunteers, although this added to the work of those who remained in the Mouffetard quarter. Thus, more than 2,000 victims received physical and spiritual assistance. In addition to food and medicine, they brought hope, and "faith returned to the houses they visited."⁴³¹

It was at this time, also, that Sister Rosalie came to the aid of the smallest victims of the scourge, the children orphaned when their parents succumbed to cholera. As previously mentioned, despite her reluctance to putting children in orphanages, she and some sisters of her house entered into collaboration with Madame Jules Mallet who had founded an orphanage on rue Pascal. In just a few days they admitted seventy-nine children. Sister Rosalie was able to place other children with willing families.

1854. The 1849 epidemic finally ended, and once again it left those who were poor yet poorer. In their misery they were easy prey for the next attack. It came in 1854, two years before Sister Rosalie's death. She was sixty-eight-years-of-age and in failing

⁴³⁰ *Bulletin de la Société de Saint Vincent de Paul*, vol. 1 (1849), 250-252.

⁴³¹ Melun, *Vie de la sœur Rosalie*, 160-161.

health. Nevertheless, she once again gave her all to bring relief to her “beloved poor.” On 16 August, she wrote to the pastor in Confort telling him, “We are very busy and the cholera only spreads. We are losing many people. There is desolation.”⁴³² A letter of Sister Rosalie to a certain Mademoiselle Duriquem, dated a week earlier, shows that she was once again placing babies orphaned by cholera, even outside of Paris, with adoptive families. She recounts an event that must have been repeated numerous times:

I am sending you a little girl who is in good health. She had very good parents whom we had known for a very long time. They are worthy of consideration from every point of view. We have tried to make a good choice. I am confident that little Catherine Neu, who is eight months old, will please her dear little mother, your niece.⁴³³

As in 1832 and 1849, Sister Rosalie, her companions, the doctors, and her valiant and devoted volunteers, worked tirelessly to bring succor to the victims and support to the survivors of the 1854 scourge. This epidemic, like its predecessors, finally ended, leaving behind desolation and misery. Those who had worked at Sister Rosalie’s side, or under her direction, would continue the struggle with her to bring relief to the people of the Mouffetard district.

The portrait we have attempted to draw in this chapter is that of Sister Rosalie Rendu, the heroine. It is a realistic one. Her comportment during revolutions and cholera epidemics was clearly heroic. Sister Rosalie herself, however, would be the first to admit that she could never have accomplished all that she did without collaborators. Indeed, her genius for collaboration may well be the most significant challenge that she presents to all those who, in this XXIst century, seek to bring aid to the overwhelming needs of those who are poor around the world. We will now turn our attention to the vast network of people with whom she shared her ministry until her death.

⁴³² *Letter of Sister Rosalie to the Pastor of Confort*, 16 August 1854, AFCP, 8J2 - Ro - Le 278 - La 30.

⁴³³ *Letter of Sister Rosalie to Mademoiselle Duriquem*, 8 August 1854, Original, M. Mézières 27, rue Saint-Sulpice, Paris.