

Celebration 250th birthday of Elisabeth de Robiano

Dear friends of our community,

We are delighted to see you all here in such numbers. We could not let the 250th anniversary of the birth of our foundress pass by without reason. We would like to celebrate it with you because all of you live strongly connected to us in one way or another.

Elisabeth de Robiano saw the light of day in Brussels on July 25, 1773.

She grew up in a time where the old nobility was strongly connected to the Church. Her father prepared her for her first communion (1785): getting up early, morning prayers, breakfast, going to church for Mass and catechism lessons from the parish priest. Then to a pious teacher for further religious instruction. In her youth, Elisabeth de Robiano entered the boarding school with the Ursuline Sisters in Tournai. She even had a spiritual leader living in Brussels, E.H. Cornelius Smet, theologian and former Jesuit. After the French definitively drove out the Austrians in 1794, our country was plundered: raw materials, finished products, art objects, everything was requisitioned by the French occupiers. For the common man it became even worse: famine and general unemployment. Her father wanted Elisabeth to pay attention to this. Elisabeth developed spiritually by attending retreats.

In 1799 she married Charles Lecandèle. From an early age Elisabeth de Robiano followed the evolution of Church and society. Gijzegem belonged to the diocese of Ghent. The foundress followed with interest what happened at the top of the diocese. Baron Lecandèle and Elisabeth thought well of their obligations to the little man. In addition, the Baroness began to care for the sick of the parish at home. Thus she found that there were many needy people waiting for help and appropriate care. In 1812 she wanted to start a hospital, without success. A little later there was talk of establishing an old people's home. This attempt also foundered. A few days before the departure of the Bishop of Ghent, Mgr. Maurice de Broglie, to France, the baron and the foundress discussed their intention to respond to the social needs of the region: in Aalst, there was famine while a cholera epidemic also broke out. The poverty and lack of development of working-class children caught the attention of Baron Lecandèle and Elisabeth de Robiano, and they wanted to remedy it. Then Bishop de Broglie recommended starting a school for poor children. Bishop de Broglie, came at odds with Napoleon and had to flee our lands. After Napoleon's abdication in 1814, Bishop de Broglie was able to return: he was received by Charles Lecandèle and Elisabeth de Robiano in the castle of Gijzegem. Bishop de Broglie even became her spiritual leader. On March 22, 1815, after a retreat, she wrote her spiritual will: ... "I affirm that I wish to die as a child of the Church. I thank God for all the graces I received"... "My children, also to you I ask forgiveness and I beg you to live for God alone". Elisabeth de Robiano further took the interests of the Church to heart by engaging wherever there were concrete problems: she maintained with her assets the young Jesuits in

exile in Brig (Switzerland). She was considered by the Superior General of the Jesuits (P. Roothaan) as co-founder of the Belgian Province of the Jesuits, of which Fr. Van Lil was the first provincial. Bishop de Broglie's childhood friend was Louis Guillaume Du Bourg. He studied in Paris at the Saint-Sulpices Seminary with Maurice de Broglie. At the beginning of the French Revolution, Du Bourg emigrated to America, became a sulpician, principal of the college in Baltimore and, in 1815, bishop of Louisiana. Correspondence between Bishop Du Bourg and Elisabeth de Robiano shows that she supported the "American mission" both materially (sewing and embroidery) and monetarily. Through Bishop Du Bourg, Elisabeth de Robiano received copies of the statutes of the newly founded "Propagation of the Faith" in France. He suggested she start a similar society in Flanders. Some caution was called for for fear of opposition from the Dutch rule. In 1839 Bishop Delebecque, who was a close friend of the founders, informed the priests of his diocese that the society was definitively affiliated with that of France and that the separate association of Ghent ceased to exist. Elisabeth de Robiano also worked diligently to convert Protestants (the Southern Netherlands then formed with the Northern Netherlands, Protestant, the United Provinces). She would employ young, converted Protestants.

Elisabeth de Robiano obviously played a very important role as the foundress of the Congregation and her dynamism drove her to sow the seed further. Very early there were annexes: Anvaing 1820, Basel 1820, Drongen and Berlare 1823. Attentive to the signs of the times, she answered calls from the lords of the castles and the local clergy and founded convents with schools with the help of her benefactors. In terms of expanding the congregation, Elisabeth de Robiano's contribution was great. She laid the foundation for the spiritual life of the sisters: with the help of Father Vincent Lemaître, she drafted a Rule of Life which was approved by Bishop de Broglie on May 13, 1819. This rule was largely inspired by the rule St. Vincent gave to his "Filles de la Charité. The fundamental virtues of humility, simplicity and love, were of prime importance and were the basis of spirituality. Father Lemaître provided spiritual guidance for the sisters. During teachings called "lectures" or "conferences," the foundress taught the sisters to have respect, appreciation and love for their Rule of Life. Another aspect of Vincentian spirituality that we find with Elisabeth de Robiano is the formation of "multipliers. Her acquaintances and friends, both noble and ecclesiastical, collaborated in her projects. Her eldest daughter, Elise, often came to the Spinhuys to teach the children, then French lessons to the sisters. The annals tell us that Pauline, her second daughter, taught lessons "de bonne tenue" (civility) at Spinhuys.

Amidst the family trials and difficulties of her time, Elisabeth de Robiano devoted all her concerns to the Spinhuys : she wanted to strengthen the internal organization, develop the rule, raise the level of education and combat social abuses by increasing the number of schools for elementary education. She thought it important that the nuns in the main convent at Gijzegem should do more and more themselves. Starting in 1830, the foundress involved Sister Marie-Louise more and more in the administration of the Congregation. This formed the basis for the further foundation of numerous annexes, the development of a structure in function of the quantitative development of the Congregation, the later missionary élan and the drawing up and revision of the precepts contained in the Constitutions.

The foundress was attentive to the signs of the times and wished to respond to them: the foundation of a hospital for poor, sick children in Haut-Ixelles is an example of this. The sisters will follow this example and extended their apostolate to: orphan care, care of the elderly, care of the sick.

Her spirit lives on to this day, here in Belgium, since 1896 in Brazil and since 1930 in Congo. Today the Congregation still numbers more than 250 sisters, most of them in the Congo. We are also represented in Paraguay, Cameroon, South Africa and in France. The latest addition is that of Taizé where, since February 2023, those Congolese sisters have been providing the first-aid post in this ecumenical community. During the last chapter, we also elected the new successor and gave a totally new direction to our Institute. Sister Brigitte Phemba Ndudi has taken the helm from me and will give a new impetus to what Elisabeth de Robiano once started.

Soeur Brigitte, nous vous disons : merci d'avoir accepté cette lourde tâche ...

Avec plaisir nous disons : " en avant vers un nouvel avenir ! "