

## **Personal testimony of the life of Father Marie-Dominique Philippe**

Father Marie-Dominique Philippe was a Dominican and the founder of the Congregation of Saint John, of which I am a member. Herein I offer my personal testimony about what I knew of his person and his life.

In 2012, I began to write a “testimonial book” about Father Marie-Dominique Philippe: *Father Marie-Dominique Philippe, Worker for Wisdom (published by Editions Paroles et Silence)*. In this book I attempted to express everything that I was fortunate enough to experience close to Father, and especially the treasure of his teaching. In this way, I wanted to testify to the total gift he made of his life. I broached sensitive subjects without hesitation in a simple and direct way. These subjects are twice as current today faced with the extremely serious denunciations which have been pronounced against him.

I would like to offer a few supplementary elements to bring this work to completion.

### **Innocent**

In the beginning of the year 2006, the Congregation of Saint John was very strongly attacked several times by the media. I had the chance to speak with Father Marie-Dominique Philippe at the time about all these attacks which also personally affected him, even in his private life.

During a visit to Geneva, Father Marie-Dominique wanted to write to Father John-Pierre-Marie, General Prior of the Congregation of Saint John at the time. He wrote a letter which he asked Fr. John-Pierre-Marie to transmit to all the perpetually professed Brothers in the community and in which he responded very clearly to the allegations raised against him. Father Marie-Dominique transmitted the letter to me before even sending it to the General Prior. In fact, for reasons beyond me, this letter from our founder was never transmitted to the Brothers. I felt a duty of responsibility to publish it in my book(p. 190).

Who can forget the powerful things Father Marie-Dominique said in the letter? “I insist on saying that what I am openly accused of is not true and these accusations are based on jealousies.”

I am duty-bound by my conscience to transmit the facts through my testimony, which allows me to be the spokesman for Father Marie-Dominique. In his letter dated 2006, he responds emphatically against the accusations brought against him – accusations that oddly resemble those of today.

Another point strikes me as important to highlight:

## Life Rhythm

Those on pilgrimage to Ars, France, visit the home of Saint John Mary Vianney, the holy parish priest. They are stupefied to discover his phenomenal timetable which reveals that he spent his life in the confessional. The typical schedule of his day is presented and obliges our admiration. Over 14 hours a day in the confessional, a few hours of sleep and significant time given to prayer.

Anyone who knew Father Marie-Dominique and grew close to him could likewise testify of a life completely given to others:

- The day began at 6am, almost up to his death;
- Silent prayer and Lauds;
- Just a few minutes for a quick breakfast, while already a significant number of Brothers, Sisters and Laypersons waited at his door;
- Then, during very many years, a whole morning of teaching. During breaks between classes, Father met with those who wanted to see him.
- During the day, he celebrated the Mass which he preached everyday;
- After lunch, he allowed himself a 10 minute nap;
- Then it was time for confessions and meetings until the middle of the afternoon, followed by more teaching until the evening meal;
- Meetings and confessions followed afterwards until late at night; the meetings were brief, but Father Marie-Dominique Philippe impressed each person who came to see him by manifesting a unique quality of presence;
- A few hours of sleep.

With a few nuances, this was the schedule that he followed everywhere he lived, in retreat houses, convents and the places of teaching that he visited. He ceaselessly met with dozens and dozens of people every day. I never saw him grant himself one day of rest. This quite material description shows how Father Marie-Dominique's life was entirely offered up and given to all.

When he was not mobilized by teaching and preaching, his life was spent working untiringly. He gave thousands of hours of classes and conferences which were recorded and testify to this, as well as a very large number of books and articles that he left us.

## **Victorious in battle**

In addition, I would like to express how impressed I was by the militant climate that encompassed the life of Father Marie-Dominique. I quickly perceived, as early on as the novitiate, how this battle had an extreme character, since it aimed at Father Marie-Dominique as a doctor, witness to wisdom and founder of the Community of Saint John.

I will relate a few facts to this effect:

- When he began his teaching at Fribourg, Father Marie-Dominique had a bond of friendship with a great Spanish Dominican, Father Ramirez. They liked to discuss important philosophical and theological questions together. When Father Ramirez left Fribourg, he repeatedly and emphatically exhorted Father Marie-Dominique to continue his teaching of metaphysics, warning him at the same time of the battle he would have to fight: “You will be hated, hated, hated”. Many taped conferences recount this story.

I myself better understood the strength of this warning when it came to pass that I celebrated the Mass with Father Marie-Dominique at the very end of his life, while he was hospitalized in intensive care. The doctors had announced to us his imminent death. On his hospital bed, he wanted to preach after the Gospel had been read. He began by the following words which I have not forgotten and which wonderfully shed light on what Father Ramirez had said: “When we seek the truth, we accept to die for it.”

- Father Marie-Dominique had a very profound bond with Venerable Marthe Robin of Châteauneuf-de-Galaure, foundress of the Foyers of Charity. Even though he had preached many retreats over 20 years to the members and Fathers of the Foyers, at the end of her life, Marthe told him: “You’ll see, Father. You’ll be thrown out of the Foyers, but they will call on you once again for the Resurrection of the Foyers.” Marthe considered Father Marie-Dominique to be the one who should give the Foyers a doctrinal teaching and her words express well the militant climate in which Father Marie-Dominique lived his whole life.
- When Cardinal Danielou died tragically, Cardinal Renard, archbishop of Lyon, who was profoundly connected to Father Marie-Dominique, told him: “Be careful! The next one they are going to kill is you!”
- One more aspect that demonstrates his extreme battle: I remember once when I met with Father Marie-Dominique privately, that he showed me a letter which he had just received. It was written in blood and basically said: “I will kill you!” It was signed “Satan”. Father Marie-Dominique smiled at it, without letting it bother him too much, and continued to give himself in his apostolic life without counting the cost.

I could recount still more elements manifesting the militant climate, which is somewhat done in my book.

It seems to me that all this powerfully manifests how much those who were close to Father Marie-Dominique became witnesses of a combat of light with the forces of darkness. We were thus able to receive the greatness of this man entirely consecrated to God by the hands of Mary. He constantly abandoned himself to Providence in order to remain faithful to the truth which he sought constantly throughout his life.

Father Marie-Dominique was a watchman and a fighter in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He thereby knew how to help all those who were close to him to choose the path of the Gospel and thus follow Christ in absolute fidelity even to the Cross.

## **Mercy**

A short anecdote seems enlightening to me, since it manifests what the whole life of Father Marie-Dominique was about. When I was still a student, I was in a Paris hospital with friends who had just had a baby, born with a missing ventricle. The doctors only gave him a few hours to live. Shaken by the situation, I tried contacting Father Marie-Dominique who, happily, told me that he was supposed to come to Paris that very evening. I asked him if he could come and meet my friends. He immediately responded to my call. We met at midnight in the hospital. Father Marie-Dominique approached my friends and their little baby. He leaned over the baby in silence for a long time. He cried. After a moment, he greeted the parents with an unforgettable and unique goodness. He then celebrated Mass for the little baby, and afterwards we left. I still remember his first reaction. He was amazed by the faith of the young parents and told me: “I didn’t dare ask Marthe to work a miracle.” I was stupefied by his reaction which surely showed me what was greatest in Christian life – learning to offer to God what is most precious; a tiny first-born baby.

A few days afterwards, Father Marie-Dominique buried the child, giving thanks for baby Benoit, the robber of Paradise.

This fact that I recount enlightens magnificently what the whole apostolic life of Father Marie-Dominique was about. He had such concern for people and their good that he was always ready to go as far as he could to bring to light what was greatest and most beautiful in each one of them. There again, the testimonies would be unanimous. Like the Good Shepherd, Father Marie-Dominique had acutely grasped the words of the Gospel inviting us to abandon everything without hesitation to go seek out the lost sheep. He lived this requirement of mercy his whole life long without ever escaping the great responsibilities he bore in teaching and, at the end of his life, in the government and foundation of the Community of Saint John.

“He went to seek out...” Indeed, when the Good Shepherd acts with mercy, he is sometimes invited to wait for the little lost sheep. We see this in the parable of the prodigal son. The father waits for his son. Father Marie-Dominique lived evangelical patience profoundly, completely founded on trust. I can personally testify to the way that he committed to helping me become rooted in my vocation, without ever despairing, even though I confided to him my strong temptations which pushed me to doubt my vocation. He always encouraged me very patiently, with strength and gentleness, to go beyond my struggles by inviting me to once again choose my vocation. Without any imposition, his paternal presence invited me to rediscover what was most absolute in my life.

However, as much as Father Marie-Dominique was a witness to us of God’s patience, he also knew how to try everything, with originality and audacity, to “go seek out” the lost sheep. When Jesus finds the Samaritan woman on his path, we wanted to encounter her personally, something which was inconceivable for his time period. He encountered her alone and thanks to that, was able to awaken what was greatest in her heart, that which was beyond her sin. Jesus came close to this woman who had been so wounded, so impoverished, and debased to drawing water at midday. He awakened her greatest desire, thus saving her from the entire malediction into which she was plunged. During his whole life, evermore profoundly, Father Marie-Dominique helped us live of Christ’s gaze. He had Christ’s gaze of love for each one of us in a unique way. He never wearied of lifting us back up.

Infinite audacity is needed if one dares to meet up with lost sheep. He often told me that initiatives in fraternal charity should remain great secrets. And he added: “That is what the world cannot understand” (‘the world’ meaning that which is opposed to the light of God). Having known Father Marie-Dominique quite well, I now understand that what he is reproached for (gestures against chastity) could only come from people who falsely reinterpreted words and gestures of mercy outside of their intention and context.

I ardently desire that this simple testimony may be able to contribute to Father Marie-Dominique’s exoneration. And at the same time, I hope that the Church, knowing in her wisdom how to discern the gifts God gives to his children, will be able to acknowledge in Father Marie-Dominique’s person and life the mark laid on him by God which made him a man of the Gospel.

Father Benoit-Emmanuel