

HOW THE LORD WRITES STRAIGHT IN CURVED LINES... Sr. Myriam Ravyts

“Once upon a time,
There was a little instrument
-a violin may be-
so fragile that people said :
it may fall apart.
But the Artist who took it
in his hands probably thought
that it may serve him well.
He started playing it
and the instrument responded
with its own, unique sound.
The melodies the Artist creates
are still going on,
sometimes in major, sometimes
in minor, but knowing for sure
that one day, he will have completely
integrated them in his ever lasting
Symphony of Love.”

This is the way in which I could start the story of my own life. Once in your eighties, looking back at your past, you can see more clearly the often unexpected ways along which the Lord has conducted you.

Let me explain: I have a Belgian identity card but my language and culture are Flemish. The little triangle close to the North Sea has a long history of foreign domination: by the Spanish, the Austrians, the French and the Dutch. This finally ended with the creation in 1830 of a completely new state: Belgium. In fact, a constellation of two quite different cultures, each with its own sensibilities. An artificial combination. This could perhaps have worked out quite well wasn't it that church, royalty, nobility, the complete upper class in power, looked down on the mostly poor Flemish. We had to fight for the recognition of our own language and culture. We had to wait until the beginning of the 20th century for the creation of a Flemish university. I think, my Celtic speaking Irish sisters will understand quite well such struggle!

To give an example: in the 19th century, Aalst was an industrial town with hundreds of poor Flemish people -children as well- working for long hours and in extremely unhealthy conditions in the textile industry. A Flemish priest, Father DAENS, came up for them but was silenced by the French speaking upper class. He went to Rome to meet the Pope, but once arrived there, the planned meeting was unexpectedly cancelled. Once again by their intervention.

I want to tell this because it is very difficult to explain to foreigners the complexity of the Belgian cultural and political reality, but also because it influenced my own trajectory.



Back to my own story. Both my parents came from a poor background. Only my father had the opportunity of becoming a primary school teacher. Once married and pregnant, my mother fell gravely ill. A month too early, she gave birth to a very fragile little girl, weight 1kg, with undeveloped lungs and, as mother couldn't feed me, no immunity at all.

Against all odds, I survived but had to cope with the lifelong consequences of those poor beginnings. They had to take me out of primary school due to chronic bronchitis. I had to spend most time inside but when the weather was fine, I got close to nature, to trees and animals.

My secondary school years were painful: the bronchitis stopped but was replaced by severe asthma. There was a lot of incomprehension: from some pupils, from some teachers, but most of all... from the head of the school: a nun! And since at that time, nearly no drugs were available, I passed nights, sitting upright in my bed, nearly suffocating. But it was also the time of my first very personal encounter with Christ: I looked up at the Crucifix. He could understand what I was going through, in Him I could abide. The greatest gift of those days: the priests I met. They were great spiritual educators. I am still very grateful because they had the openness to share something of their own spiritual life with me and introduced me to meditation.

After having obtained my certificate, it was clear that I would start a training to become a teacher. And here, something quite unexpected happened. A former teacher of my father, a Brother of the Christian Schools, as they were called, told him that it would be good to send me to a French school, not a Flemish (!). The decision was made without asking me what I thought about it, and so I arrived at 'Le Régendat des Dames de Marie à la Chaussée d'Haecht' in Brussels. I think my father wasn't aware of what he was in fact asking from me. All the basic subjects were taught in French, I didn't understand the specific vocabulary, didn't speak fluently the language and had to study with a dictionary at my side. But I had a very good contact with the teachers and the other students. I spent two very fine years there and never regretted to have got my formation there.

After having graduated, I was immediately engaged to teach Flemish (officially called Dutch) in their secondary school. My early beginnings as a teacher were rather painful. I didn't know anything about the different tricks young adolescents had on their sleeves to test a new teacher. Moreover, those French speaking girls didn't want to learn my language and I was welcomed with the slogan 'A bas le Flamand' on the blackboard. Step by step, I had to overcome all this and to win their confidence. But I had great colleagues who were of great help.

One of them was Sister Anne-Marie Poncelet, our music teacher. She had to undergo a surgical intervention and to give her the opportunity of receiving visits, they gave her a room outside 'la clôture' which was forbidden ground for lay people. I still remember that Friday afternoon when, partly out of compassion, I went to see her. Out of this meeting developed a close friendship. Anne-Marie had left

a promising career as a professional singer behind her to devote her life entirely to Christ. I was fascinated, spellbound by her choice. The Lord was certainly aware of my great love for and interest in music! A first vocation-grain was planted.

At the same time there was a change of superior. Sister Marie-Bernadette was replaced by sister Marie-Magdala. She came from a completely French cultural background but was such a warm-hearted person with broad visions, always very understanding and encouraging. She granted Anne-Marie the permission of taking private recorder lessons. We went to the same teacher and began to play duets together.

In that period, few congregations would have acted that way. Step by step, my vocation got a clear outlining. One day, as clear to my memory as I lived it more than fifty years ago, standing at the door of Sister Marie-Magdala's office, I suddenly got the strong conviction that the 'Dames de Marie' was the place where the Lord was waiting for me.

Now, I had to announce my wish to my parents! I got a complete refusal from my father. Knowing how frail my health still was, I could partly understand one of his reasons. It was like a kind of betrayal looking back at all he had done for me. I felt split between my inner desire and the respect I had for my parents. Father no longer spoke with me and mother suffered terribly, caught as she was between the desires of her husband and her daughter. The situation was completely blocked. The Lord had to intervene.

Once more, something quite unexpected happened. As the situation at home got terribly tense, I was happy to get a holiday job in a Christian organization in Switzerland. The proposal came from Mouscron and I accompanied Sister Dominique and some of her pupils.

There was a daily Eucharist. The celebrating priest, completely unknown to me, made such a deep impression on me because of his intense way of praying. Here was someone who was completely involved in the mystery he was celebrating. Suddenly an irrepressible conviction arose in me: this is the person who is going to help you. From a rational point of view it seemed a stupid idea. Would I risk to follow it?

Finally, I couldn't resist and after the Eucharist I went knocking at his door. The door opened and I saw a priest, filling his suitcase, on the point of leaving. I briefly explained my situation and asked him if he would agree to help me through correspondence. The priest lived in Bruges and was head of the philosophy section of the seminary of his diocese. As my parents would have found it very suspect if I went regularly to Bruges, correspondence was the only option left. After some reflection, the priest accepted to guide me spiritually. His letters arrived in the letterbox of Sister Marie-Magdala. The correspondence got on for three years. Finally father gave in and I could follow my desire.

My departure to the Novitiate was on both sides an heartbreaking one. Sister Marie-Bernadette waited for me at the Chaussée d'Haecht in Brussels and we took the train to Louvain. There we lived in a big house, quite in the center of the town. What I remember most of it was the garden at the back of which stood an immense lime tree, very beautiful, and when it flowered you were entirely wrapped in its sweet and penetrating smell.

Some days later a bunch of very noisy and exuberant Spanish girls arrived. They were 16-17, I was 28! (I was part of the first group of postulants and novices without any Irish or English ones. I still regret their absence.) I passed a lot of time teaching them French. We had two novice mistresses, a French and a Flemish one. They had probably hoped for the arrival of more Flemish girls, but those never



came. So, in daily life, this constellation didn't work, and after a certain time, Sr. Marie-Lutgart, the Flemish one, left. I still feel a deep gratitude to Sister Madeleine Dejemeppe. As she had herself a lot of physical problems, she was very understanding and I felt close to her.



The novitiate had moved to Louvain because of the University. We followed courses at the Faculty of Theology as free students but had to pass exams. This was a great opportunity. I was in the Flemish section, the Spanish girls were in the French.

One on two weekends we returned to Uccle. What was the sense of that return? The novitiate stayed duly separated from the community. We were together for the Eucharist, watched the telly together and were there for the washing up. I don't remember any real conversation with one of the sisters, so I found it a sad time. But the gardens were splendid.

During my third year, just before Easter, Mother Provincial, Marie-Bernadette, wanted to see me. For the course of Old Testament, I had written a

consistent paper on the Songs of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah. She wanted me to explain the songs. After having heard my comments on the text, she considered letting me continue theological studies at the University. It was more or less a kind of promise.

At the end of June, I had to pass my exam on Old Testament. It went quite well and when the interrogation was all over, the Professor said to me: 'Listen, come to my room tomorrow. I want you to continue studying at our university. We need people like you. So, I want to speak your Provincial'.

I was of course very surprised (the professor was a tough one, many students were afraid of him) and full of hope. But the next day, when I arrived at his office, I found a paper 'ad valvas' announcing that the professor had died during the night. He had fallen asleep smoking a cigarette and had set his room on fire. It was a big disappointment.

Weeks passed by, each of the third year novices got to know her future destination. Nothing was said to me. I patiently waited, didn't ask anything. But one day, out of the blue, two sisters from Aalst, Sister Teresa De Vos and Sister Marie-Pia Poppe came to the Novitiate to tell me that I was going to join their community and teach at the Grammar School. The message came totally unexpected, I felt as nailed to the soil. Why had Sister Marie-Madeleine not spoken about it with me? And what with the words of Marie-Bernadette, the Provincial? I was sent with the two sisters for a long walk through Louvain, an opportunity to talk together. But there was another problem that had to be resolved before I could start working in a Flemish school. My certificate came from a French school, I could teach Flemish to French speaking girls, but it was not valid for teaching in Flemish schools. And there I would have to teach French to Flemish speaking girls. So I had to get another certificate.

I got a month to study on my own the content of a two years course French and had to pass another exam, which I did. I really felt trapped. At that time, you didn't ask why a decision was made, you just accepted. But I clearly felt that my novice mistress seemed to have had no influence on the decision making. Was that the reason why she hadn't said anything to me? Many years later, in Aalst, a lay woman told me that it had been her inspiration to push Sister Teresa to insist on sending her young sisters. Was it true or not? I don't know. Fact is that Sister Marie-Pia knew nothing about the Louvain project. The idea to send me to Aalst was not hers. A long term vision apparently did not exist.

I felt exhausted, needed time to digest all the deceptions. And the long thirty days retreat wasn't of a great help either. There was nobody I could really talk to, I felt left alone and could only do my best to accept and integrate the unexpected. To be honest, only intense prayer took me through this difficult period.

I arrived in Aalst in 1969. Those were the years after Vatican II. Expectations rang high during that period. Lots of new experiments were made possible. Some were very fruitful, others ended into failure. At that time, the Community of Aalst was a big one. Mother General, Eulalie (Judith Glouden) was a rather distant type of woman but very open-minded, always looking forward, not afraid of taking risks. Our provincial was in fact her complete opposite, attached to tradition, not eager to let things go, to embrace an uncertain future. So, as a result of this opposition and of the spirit of the time, the whole province got involved into a kind of conflict-situation. There were those who hoped that the past would be revived in its old glory and others who felt the need of being closer to the world outside, closer to common people.

Sister Judith wanted the big community to be divided into three smaller groups, each with its own superior. They had to live under the same roof, in three different parts of the building. But most of the sisters didn't want the community to split up. That formula didn't work. The elderly sisters lived on the third floor, waiting to go to 'The Clos' in Uccle. The middle aged sisters formed the second group and finally there was the third group, a mixture of younger and older sisters, to which I belonged. After a certain time, Sister Marie-Bernadette gave us the permission to move out.

For the local church it was a period of significant changes. The air was filled with enthusiasm and a real desire of renewal. We were lucky to have a very good Dean: he was a wise man, open to the new insights of Vatican II, but always back to basics. He had the inspiration of creating a local council for his parishes. It was a success. Lots of lay people were involved, different workgroups were started up and we, the sisters that had moved out, were part of it. From the practical and psychological points of view, we all at to learn a lot. The clergy wasn't accustomed to work together with lay people, but step by step the process was taken forward and we all lived an extraordinary time of renewal within the local church. At Easter vigil or Christmas Night Mass, the big Church of Saint Martin was filled up. Our dear Dean, supported by a lot of priests, was the motor of all this. He was open to what the Spirit was telling to the church. Not that there weren't a lot of obstacles to overcome. The first one was the relation to his Bishop. The latter was very attached to each detail of tradition, even to the most unimportant and superficial ones. So, he refused to come to our church for Confirmation if the old chairs were not put in kneeling position. But since they were always turned in sitting position, our dean didn't want to be an hypocrite; so the Bishop refused to come and someone else was sent to confirm the children. One day, a fellow bishop, a missionary who had spent years in prison in China, asked him: why are you so anxious, be confident, the Lord is leading his Church. The new insights and the changes they provoked, were not always met by approval. A group of people stuck to the past. Their fundamentalism was very aggressive and the letters they sent to the diocese were full of accusations. But our Dean (his surname was DE VOS =FUCHS!) could cope with it.



First vows

After several years, our little community finally split up. A lot of internal and external problems were at the base of it.

When I arrived in Aalst, there were still MOTHERS and SISTERS. Officially the distinction between both had been abolished, but you couldn't abolish their different past and experiences. I still have very fond and precious memories of those sisters. Some of them were very intelligent persons who never got the opportunity to study.

The first I want to remember is Sister CLEMENCE. What a woman! She came from the region of Mouscron, I think, and she never managed to learn Flemish. It was her daily task to distribute milk bottles to the little ones of the Kindergarten, expressing herself in a mixture of combined languages. It worked out quite well. The children loved her. Sister Clemence had a great devotion to Our Lady of Lourdes. Even at an already advanced age, she went each year to Lourdes to help out with the sick. One day, already over eighty, she needed hip surgery. The surgeon, an atheist, was amazed by her vitality and keen reactions. She even explained why Lourdes was so important to her.

Sister GERALDINE was our cat-woman. She had a great talent for stitching and repairing. The laundry was her domain. She was always there to help you with the practical things.

Nobody can forget sister JEANNE. She came from the Flemish lowlands near the sea, but her spiritual culture was completely French. She had a great sense of contemplation and wanted to devote herself to the elderly sisters. She felt that as her own special vocation and ministry. Unfortunately, at the same moment as myself, she was sent to Aalst. They wanted to introduce her to accounting and bookkeeping. It was not for her. That decision was a mistake of the worst psychological kind. I lived different years together with her: both of us had to cope with being sent to Aalst. We understood each other quite well. I knew what my sister was going through, how miserable that paperwork made her. It was a great relief when she could return to Uccle to take care of the elderly. It was a privilege to have known her and to have lived with her in the same community.

As to the MOTHERS, there was the wonderful HEDWIGE. Throughout many decades she had managed to keep her feminine sense of beauty safe. When she began to wear a simple veil, she wanted her hair well done, and I still see her rolling her 'bigoudis' and curling her hair.

A special memory also of Mother MARIE-EUGENIE : she was for years cloistered to her bed. As a young sister, I went to visit her, sat at her bedside reading passages of the New Testament. We meditated on the passion of Christ. For her, being completely involved in it, was a daily reality. Only the Lord himself knows how great her silent contribution was to the apostolic work of the whole congregation.

I have always loved teaching. It is such a joy to find new ways of explaining difficult subjects, to introduce the girls to the beauty of literature and poetry, to the mystery of nature, to make them detect their own gifts and possibilities, to open their eyes and hearts to the needs of others. There was always time to encourage and support those who needed help, who advanced at a slower rhythm. Later, in my function of headmistress, I got the most pregnant letter of my life. It came from a girl who, at a very young age, had been part of a drugs gang. She had been terribly abused and finally seen as a target to get rid of. Day after day, members of the police stand at the door of the school to protect her. Finally we could help her to find a new start in life.

At the end of my fifth year in Aalst, I felt really integrated into the school, loved my work and no longer thought about Louvain. But, and that is why I put as title above this walk along memory lane: THE LORD WRITES STRAITH IN CURVED LINES. Sister Teresa who had forced my coming to Aalst now, thinking about the future, wanted me, as the time would come, to take over the task of headmistress. But...once more, I needed another certificate, an academic degree. They asked me to return to the university of Louvain. This time, I hesitated, I was happy with my job in the school, why should I engage in more years of hard study, certainly at my age. Neither Sister Teresa nor Sister Pia put me under pressure. I am very grateful they didn't. I agreed, grasped the opportunity and returned for three years to Louvain.

These were three of the most enriching years of my life. The Faculty of Theology really became my 'ALMA MATER' and it still is. We formed a group of very united students and I had wonderful contacts with many Professors. At that time, Louvain was gifted with a lot of great thinkers, very gifted priests, some of international renown who had taken part in the theological work of Vatican II. One of them became the promotor of my thesis and became a real friend until the end of his life. I wanted to find out more about the spiritual third way THEILHARD DE CHARDIN was depicting in his book LE MILIEU DIVIN. The great Jesuit had a profound influence on my personal spiritual life. He was one of the spiritual masters who formed me.



Sr Marie-Pia and Sr. Myriam

1984 marked the beginning of a very significant decade in my life. Near to the school, I shared a flat with sister Marie-Pia. Just before the feast of Pentecost our dear Dean died. It was totally unexpected. We went to his funeral. In the evening Marie-Pia had to attend a meeting with other sisters in Brussels. On her return, she felt a heavy backache. She had got shingles. Her situation got from bad to worse and we had to take her into hospital. They did all they could to relieve the pain but nothing worked. Her nerves were badly damaged by the virus. The wounds healed but the pain staid. When she slept, she didn't feel any pain, but as soon as she wake up, it was there again. I was told that the brain had made a kind of photocopy of the pain, something like phantom-limb pain. She fell into a deep depression. Whatever they tried to break the vicious circle 'pain-depression-more pain-deeper depression, nothing worked.

I stood at the beginning of ten hard years, with a procession from hospital to hospital, always hoping for some relief. All the pain killers they tried out caused an intestinal obstruction : surgery again. Then she got almost blind, new surgery without any effect. She couldn't read anymore. And so it went on and on...up to the moment where the first signs of dementia became apparent. This was the worst of all.

The congregation let me engage a person to stay with her during the day when I was at work in the school. I got great support from Sister Simone Vandensteene, then Provincial, and from sister Thérèse Lange. As Pia's dementia got worse, we had to look for a specialized home to care for her. My choice fell on Erpe-Mere because our doctor (the angel at my door!) could still visit her there. The Sisters took her in, but after a month, Sister Augustine told me that I had to take her back: they hadn't asked their Director (a priest !) for permission to take her in. I couldn't believe what I heard. I took up contact with their Superior General, with the Diocese, but all for nothing. The Priest in question staid to his decision.

So it came that we moved out, taking also back the furniture I had bought. Sister Pia was at home again. The next four years the dementia got worse and one night she fell three times out of her bed and I had to call our doctor for help. She was taken into hospital again.

But it was clear, we needed a specialized home. I went to see our new Dean and told him what had happened. He knew the priest quite well, he was of the same group of seminarians as himself. He understood, and thanks to his intervention, after a short time, Sister Pia could return to Erpe.

Today, when I reflect on the hard words Pope Francis addresses to the clergy, warning them not to misuse neither their power nor their spiritual responsibility, I really know what he is speaking about. We, and the Sisters of Erpe as well, had been the victims of it.

Sister Pia died in Erpe after ten years of intense moral and physical suffering. I waked at her side during her last night. They were very precious moments. I never felt closer to Christ than during these hours of presence and silent prayer. She passed peacefully away in the morning.



I will of course never forget these years of hardship. I am grateful for all I could do for her or better said, be to her. It was a profound community experience, fully embedded in love and friendship. The most precious compliment I ever got, came from our doctor. Some hours after her death, he gave me a phone call and said: If you hadn't been there, she couldn't have borne that situation for such a long time. And another word that will always stay with me came from a Sister I only met once in my life: Jennifer Condron came to visit us, she understood which situation we were in. She said: Myriam, don't forget, here you stay ON HOLY GROUND! No other words have lifted me more up. They were an enormous gift. And wasn't it exactly those words that were used during the opening ceremony of our last chapter?

To return to my years as headmistress: I started at a very difficult moment in the history of our schools. They had been handed over to a board of lay people. For Aalst, it was Sister MAGGY KRAENTZEL who accompanied these new steps into the future. And she did it with a lot of respect and in a great way. If there is one person who is fully aware of all we lived through, of all the difficulties we met, it is Maggy. We could leave the school into the hands of profoundly engaged people. It is in safe hands. But the biggest problem I had to face and which caused lots of stress, was that the schools had to become mixed. We had always lived a good relationship with the nearby college of the Jesuits. They told us that they would recruit in a very active way. Lots of girls from our primary school left for the Jesuit college. There wasn't anything you could do against it. But this meant a loss of jobs. Moreover, schools were asked to regroup and form larger entities. It would be quite logical to form one group with the Jesuit college. It was a time of endless meetings, conflicts, discussions. We couldn't come to an agreement. We had to give up our own identity if we wanted to join them.

So, the time had come for me to retire from the Job. Now, years later, the school has completely recovered, has become a real mixed one with, at the same time, a good proportion of male and female teachers. All due to the hard work of so many devoted people. It has a good reputation not only as to the standard of its education but also because people know that we are not only there for the clever and brilliant pupils, but also for those who need more help and input.

Now I was in need of one or other relaxing activity. I took up my violin lessons, came into contact with a new teacher. This relation brought me on the path of a new kind of engagement. He asked me to help him with the translation of biblical studies. They were written by a Dutch protestant professor of exegeses, very interesting, with a lot of new insights. So I got involved into the work of a group of very engaged Dutch Christians whose aim it was to provide African pastors, mostly belonging to Pentecostal Communities, with valuable material when they had to prepare their sermons. Hundreds of books were sent to Africa.

Nowadays, much of my time is spent by listening to people, sharing their problems and spiritual needs. And there all the familial problems as well. This is now my way of living our charism.

If I decided to share my eighty years long pilgrimage, it is because I really believe in the value of sharing our mutual experiences. My lecture of the first book 'Gathering the fruits of the Years' made me enjoy the great variety of experiences and engagements. It made me think that the Lord has for each man or woman his own and unique kind of holiness in petto. It isn't something we can merit, only receive with an open heart and open hands. The words of two psalms fill my daily prayers and reflections: the little 131 and the 23 The Lord is my Shepherd. What would I have been without Him?



My future lies in his Hands. It is his work to weave my own melody into the great symphony He is creating!



Sr Myriam and her family.