

Adolphe Monod and Caroline Malvesin (1806-1889)



In his monograph on the Deaconesses of Reuilly, Gustave Lagny (1912-2002) provides us with some information regarding the life of Caroline Malvesin:

“Marie-Françoise Caroline Malvesin was born in Marseille on the 27th of August 1806. Her father, a native of Saintonge, was a wholesale dealer of colonial goods. She was only thirteen years old when she lost her mother, a sincere and godly Christian. Caroline had two elder sisters and three brothers. Around 1820, Mr Malvesin, who had been ruined as a consequence of the ‘Continental Blockade’, retired to Saintonge with his three daughters. The two elder daughters married. In one of her letters (of 1841), Caroline relates that around the age of 17 (i.e. around 1823), she had the dream of becoming a Sister of Charity: “I told all the young girls, and they all said: “We will come with you.”” But after the death of her father¹ she had to find a position as a schoolteacher in one of the local families in 1824.

She left this family seven years later, around 1832, in order to assist her second sister, Ms. Gérard, who had opened a school for young girls in Bordeaux. She stayed there until 1841. She also gave private lessons in order to supplement her income. ...

This is when she met pastor Vermeil, whose ministry strengthened her inner dispositions. Subsequently, she and the Vermeil family became friends. However, it seems that there was no major spiritual breakthrough in her life before 1839.

¹ It was Caroline who took charge of him until his death: Sarah Monod, *Sœur Malvesin*, p. 6

A **sermon given by Adolphe Monod in Bordeaux** (he was then a professor at the theological faculty of Montauban) became a major milestone for her. Having been touched deep in her soul, she sent a letter¹ to the preacher informing her of her difficulties and asking for his advice. He answered her in a letter citing many Bible passages. She read this letter on her knees, seeking all the passages cited. And, so she tells, one day something strange happened in her soul: the peace of God, which she had been asking for and seeking for such a long time, filled her, together with a marvellous joy and force. From that day on, the assurance of salvation and of the love of God would never leave her again. ...”²

After her conversion, Caroline spread the gospel among her pupils. She was rather successful; Sarah Monod mentions³ “an authentic awakening ... among her pupils”.

On February 6, 1841, Caroline wrote to Antoine Vermeil, who had then accepted a pastoral position in Paris, in order to express her sadness “not to see any opportunity to dedicate herself to the service of the Lord” and ask for his advice. On that very same day, her former pastor sent her a letter to inform her about his project of a community of deaconesses. So the founding couple for the Deaconesses of Reuilly was established.

During the year 1841, right until the inauguration of the establishment, Vermeil and Malvesin exchanged many letters. On August 16, 1841, Miss Malvesin was in Bordeaux. Here is what she wrote to pastor Vermeil:

“Yesterday Mr. A[dolphe] M[onod] has preached on the love of money⁴. He could not have spoken differently if you had instructed him to prepare the hearts so that they would be generous towards the works of God. And if you had added: there will be one person in the audience who is in need of being strengthened for dedicating herself to the service of the Lord, he could not have said more or better than what he told me in the school. There are direct and indirect encouragements for me through a great number of people – God is so good! I am so very happy to be so clearly led by the hand of this loving Father. My friend, will you give thanks with me? Oh, I never thought that I might taste of so much happiness in this world!”⁵

So Caroline came to live in Paris. At first, she spent a few months with Mr and Ms Vermeil, then she occupied a little house near the Barriere Charrenton⁶.

We have not found any other traces of direct contacts between Adolphe Monod and Caroline Malvesin. In view of the influence Monod’s sermon have had on the spiritual life of Caroline, one would, however, expect that she took the opportunity to hear Monod preaching after he had been called to the Temple de l’Oratoire in Paris in 1847.

The first years of the community of deaconesses were overshadowed by attacks both from the liberal branch (led by Athanase Coquerel (1820-1875)) and from some representatives of the

¹ ... an anonymous letter: Sarah Monod, *Sœur Malvesin*, p. 8

² Gustave Lagny, *Le Réveil ...*, p. 49s

³ Sarah Monod, *Sœur Malvesin*, p. 9-10

⁴ This sermon of 1841, which is entitled “The lover of money” is still in our possession.

⁵ Caroline Malvesin et Antoine Vermeil, *Correspondance 1841*, p. 195

⁶ Sarah Monod, *Sœur Malvesin*, p. 12

evangelical branch (above all, Valérie de Gasparin (1813-1894)) of the national Church. Monod appears not to have voiced his support to the deaconesses, but to have encouraged their leaders. At least this is what Gustave Lagny suggests:

“Many in our Churches perceived what was specious and unjust in the critique of Mrs de Gasparin and Athanase Coquerel. Even when they did not directly support the cause of a community of deaconesses, they expressed their friendship to our Community or to its leaders, and the warmth of those expressions was as great as was their grief to see how much both were misunderstood. Among those supporters we will cite only a few great names: Adolphe Monod, Henri Grandpierre, Jules Pédezert ...”¹

Consequently, Gustave Lagny, the historian of the deaconesses considered that Monod “turned out to be a faithful, strong and valuable supporter for the young Community and its founders”².

Adolphe Monod died in 1856; Caroline Malvesin outlived him by 33 years. She envisaged retirement in 1862, but her designated successor, Ms Dunant-Widmer, suddenly died in 1863³. She again asked to be relieved of her duty as director in 1867, but it was only in October 1869 that sister P.-A. Waller actually replaced her.

Let us leave the final words to Gustave Lagny:

“Sister Malvesin soon left Fontainebleau for the neighbouring village of Changis. Having retired as the director, she still remained a deaconess! She initiated a pre-school and a primary school in Changis⁴. At the same time, she took in a nephew and a niece who had lost their parents. The development of this school resulted in two deaconesses being detached there. In 1887, at the age of 81, she returned to Reuilly in order to rest and await her last day: August 26, 1889.”⁵

Finally, let us mention that Sarah Monod (1836-1912), the daughter of Adolphe Monod, was very close to the Deaconesses and to their sister superior; it is she who wrote the booklet “Sister Malvesin, deaconess, 1806-1889”, which was published in 1893.

¹ Gustave Lagny, *Le Réveil ...*, p. 129

² Gustave Lagny, *Le Réveil ...*, p. 22

³ Sarah Monod, *Sœur Malvesin*, p. 28-29

⁴ Sarah Monod, *Sœur Malvesin*, p. 34, mentions that the pre-school was established in 1873 and the primary school in 1876.

⁵ Gustave Lagny, *Le Réveil ...*, p. 161

Sources:

- Sarah Monod, *Adolphe Monod, I. Souvenirs de sa vie. Extraits de sa correspondance*, Paris, Librairie Fischbacher, 1885, 479 p. A partial English translation is available : *Life and letters of Adolphe Monod, pastor of the Reformed Church of France*, London, J. Nisbet & Co., 1885, 426 p.
- Sarah Monod, *La sœur Malvesin, diaconesse, 1806-1889*, Paris, Librairie Fischbacher, 1893, 36 p.
- Gustave Lagny, *Le réveil de 1830 à Paris et les origines des diaconesses de Reuilly*, Paris, Association des diaconesses, 1958, 195 p. (re-published in 2007 by Editions Olivetan)
- Caroline Malvesin et Antoine Vermeil, *Correspondance 1841*, Lyon, Editions Olivetan, 2007, 230 p.