

Marie Thérèse Brek

Marie Thérèse Brek was born in Frankfurt on September 9, 1755, and was baptized on the same day in St Bartholemew's Church. Her father, Peter Schwendel, was a rich wine merchant, and her mother Gertrude Lippertin, was the daughter of a wine merchant. She was the second wife of Peter Schwendel. Thérèse had three brothers and three sisters. She must have been one of the youngest, as she was only five when her father died.

At the age of 22, on September 30, 1777, Thérèse married Germain Brek, in St Bartholomew's Church. Germain was 43 and was a military engineer who had been married before. His first wife died after a short marriage leaving one daughter Catherine. Thérèse and Germain had three children - a son Jean Baptiste, known as Jean Marie, and two daughters, Louise, and Marie Françoise Gertrude, known as Fanny. Jean Marie was later described by Eugène de Regny (a St Louis Father¹) as having a 'want 'in him, having a heart of gold but the mind of a child. He could be troublesome and unreasonable at times. When he was older, he was unable to look after his affairs and at the request of his mother, Louise Humann was tasked with looking after his money. Louise, Thérèse's first daughter married Jean Georges Humann (Louise Humann's youngest brother) when she was fourteen years of age. She died in childbirth aged seventeen. Fanny was born in 1786 and was only seven when her father died in 1794. In later life she made trouble for Louise Humann, saying that the Humann Family enriched itself at the expense of the Breks.

When the children were still very young, the family left Landau, where they had been living, and had moved to Strasbourg, Thérèse's husband Germain died. Following his death, there was a lawsuit connected with his will, and the children of the first wife contesting the provision for Thérèse and her children. The case seems to have gone against Thérèse and left her in straightened circumstances for a while.

As a widow Thérèse needed help, she was sick and depressed and distracted by the inheritance problems, and it was at this time that she came into contact with Louise Humann. They were introduced to one another by Joseph Louis Colmar. Louise Humann took charge of Thérèse's children probably as a governess to begin with. By 1795, the two women had become true friends, and in August of that year, Thérèse expressed a desire that Louise Humann should take charge of the education of her children until they were grown up. She was seriously ill at that time and worried that she might die.

In 1796, when Thérèse had recovered from her illness, she and her children moved to a house in Rue Sainte Elisabeth. This house was a refuge for Louis Colmar² in times of

¹ *The St Louis Congregation began as a congregation of priests under the Leadership of Louis Bautain. They were helped in their work of education by a group of dedicated women, who under the direction of Louis Bautain, eventually formed the Sisters of St Louis. For various reasons the S. Louis Fathers ceased to remain a religious congregation.*

² *After his ordination as a priest in 1783, Louis Colmar became a professor of History and Greek at the Royal Seminary in Strasbourg and curate at St Stephen's. He was a much loved priest and Spiritual Director, and he was consecrated Bishop of Mainz in 1802.*

persecution³. It became a centre for clandestine Masses and it afforded a way of escape for Colmar as there was a stretch of city walls at the bottom of the garden. There was also a secret hiding place in the house. Louise Humann came to live here with her young sister Marie Louise and other young girls who were family friends. These were given religious instruction and prepared for the sacraments. The fact that children were educated on the premises provided some cover for the comings and goings of people who wanted to see Colmar. This house became a true religious centre. Thérèse showed great courage in putting her house at the disposal of Colmar, putting her own future and that of her children at risk. She was a truly valiant woman.

Thérèse was worried about her financial security, so she wished to invest money in property, and in 1796, in partnership with a Paul Lazare Zau, she leased the ruined Chateau de Turkenstein near Strasbourg, and the little house built within the boundaries. She relinquished this lease in 1801. During these years she also entered into a business venture in the hope of adding to the depleted fortune left by her husband, but this venture failed and further diminished what other money she had inherited from her mother.

In 1797, before the relinquishing of the lease, everyone needed a break. Louis Colmar, Louise Humann, Thérèse Brek, the children, and some servants, set out for a holiday in Turkenstein and stayed in the little house within the precincts of the ruined Chateau. There in that lovely spot they were free from snoopers and settled down to an ordered, leisurely life, made up of times for prayer, lessons, and walks in the forest. It was here on the Feast of the Sacred Heart, that Colmar, Louise and Thérèse made an Act of Spiritual Union under the motto *Ut Sint Unum* (The Turkenstein Pact). This Act of Union was seen to be God's will for the furtherance of the education of youth and the relief of the sick. At the end of this Act of Union, Louise and Thérèse were invited to promise obedience to Colmar as a father whom God had given them. Thérèse was also invited to renew a promise of obedience which she had previously made to Louise in July of 1794. This promise to Louise was 'as to a mother whose authority would be necessary to her for some time to come'. These three had no intention of founding a religious congregation and were long dead before the Sisters of St Louis came into being, but this Act was the root from which we as a religious community sprang. The promise of obedience made by Thérèse may sound strange to us now, but it fitted in the context of earlier times. It was also this promise that may have been the reason why Fanny (Thérèse's daughter) got the mistaken notion about Louise enriching herself at the Brek's expense, and she probably wouldn't have known the extent of her mother's commitment to Louise, but would have been very aware that it was Louise who was very much in charge.

In 1802, Louis Colmar became Bishop of Mainz, and by October 1803, both Louise Humann and Thérèse had joined him there. They set up a school, which by 1805 was taking in a few boarders. By the Spring of the following year, they bought a big house and set up a school named the 'Pensionnat Josephine' called after the Empress Josephine. There was a happy, harmonious, family atmosphere in the school. The pupils came from diverse backgrounds - French, German, Catholic, Protestant. *Sint Unum* was very much in evidence. Thérèse took

³ *The persecution and terror in Strasbourg was brought about by an apostate monk, who was a supporter of the French Revolution and created trouble.*

the junior children and was much loved by them and they called her 'Mère'. As well as teaching her class, she supervised the housework and saw to the provisions. She was a gentle, quiet, calm woman, who did not put herself forward. A year after Colmar's death in 1818, the two ladies returned to Strasbourg. They had an apartment in a house owned by Marie-Anne Carl (née Humann). However, by 1823, Louise Humann bought the house in Rue de la Toussaint. Thérèse Brek had an apartment in this house for which she paid rent to Louise. This house became known as the Cenacle and it was here that Thérèse died on January 25, 1825. She died of Tuberculosis, a disease which had undermined her health years before. Thérèse certainly has her place in the story of St Louis, just as surely as Colmar, and Louise Humann.