



## Marie Justine Raclot (Mother Mathilde)

*The Story of a Pioneering Christian Educator and her Adventures in Malaysia and Japan.*

Our first glimpse of Marie Justine Raclot shows us a little ten year old girl, sitting, day-dreaming in front of a map of Japan in her classroom in Surriauville, Lorraine. That was in 1824, in a school that had been opened by the parish priest. Her geography book was full of stories of warriors, marvellous scenery and splendid temples. Yet all that was inaccessible to visitors. For almost two centuries, Japan had kept its doors closed to all foreigners.

Her teacher added other exciting stories - about St Francis Xavier who had carried the gospel to this far away country, about the hundreds of martyrs who had been crucified, beheaded or burned alive, in the years 1597 to 1637. And yet, undaunted, Marie Justine dreamed of going, one day, to Japan!

When she was 18 years old, she left home to join a community of women who ran a school in Langres where she herself had been a pupil for a few years. These women were not really sisters, neither were they really lay people! They were the Infant Jesus Sisters. They had come together as a community to dedicate themselves to the Christian education and formation of children. Two years later, Marie Justine joined these sisters in Paris. There she received their habit and was given the name 'Mathilde'. She was sent first to teach in Bagnols sur Cèze, then to Béziers and later to Sète.

'Les Pères des Missions Étrangères' were already working as missionaries in several countries in Asia at that time. Marie Justine was 37 years old when she heard that they were appealing to her Institute for help in the education of young girls in Malaysia. How wonderful! Mathilde asked for nothing better! To set out! To be a missionary! She had expressed her wish - she had already begun to study English - but, sadly, it was not to be granted. She had not been chosen for this exciting missionary journey and, secretly, she cried with disappointment.

On 6th December 1851, the five chosen young women boarded a large sailing vessel, for the dangerous sea voyage was to take more than four months. Three weeks after they had set sail, Sister Radot, who was 30 years old, and in charge of the group, fell ill and died before they reached land. Her body was buried at sea. Then, during a bad storm, a pulley became detached and fell on young Sister Panot's head. She was badly hurt and was affected for the rest of her life by the shock and a resulting 'brain fever'. When they arrived at last in Singapore, Sister Bath, another 30-year-old member and the only one who spoke English, decided to leave the group. While on board, she had fallen in love! So it was, that just three young women, already worn out and sorely tried, left for Penang, their destination in Malaysia, ill equipped for all that awaited them there.

Faced with what looked like inevitable failure, it was decided to call on reinforcements. Another group of young women was chosen and one of them was appointed superior. However, it was argued that it would be very inconvenient, both for the community and for the 'little school' if this sister, who was in charge in Bailleul, were to leave at that time.

The boat was ready to sail. What was to be done? The Superior General turned to Marie Justine. On 15th September 1852, Sister Mathilde received a letter, calling her urgently to Paris : "Leave everything and come". No explanation was given. She arrived in Paris on the 16th and on the following day, with three other sisters, she left Paris for Southampton. From there, on 18th September, Sister Mathilde embarked for Malaysia... presumably never to return...

As soon as they arrived in Penang, certain things needed to be rectified. It was necessary to get out of the tight control that the fathers had assumed over the sisters' lives. In the 19th century it was not an easy thing for women to be independent! Nor was it easy to begin taking in abandoned babies and small children without sufficient financial means, or to teach little girls whose families could not afford to pay their way. In the evenings, the sisters sewed, embroidered and knitted, selling their handiwork to the colonial personnel in an effort to provide for all these children and themselves.

At that time Singapore and Malaysia formed one country. It was the bishop of Singapore who had signed the contract authorising the sending of the first sisters to Malaysia. Now, he persistently asked for sisters to come to Singapore. Meanwhile in Penang there were certain ecclesiastics who would not be too unhappy to see Mother Mathilde move on. It would give them a free hand to take back some of the control they had had over the sisters' lives.

The sisters arrived in Singapore on 2nd February 1854. The Christian community had prepared a great welcome with songs and organ music and speeches... but no breakfast! They forgot that the sisters would be fasting before Mass! Materially things were in bad shape. The newly arrived sisters took stock of their situation : the house they were allocated was without doors that could be closed : the contents consisted of two mats, two chairs, two stools, one saucepan and one frying pan. Then there was the evident disappointment of the clergy. The sisters were all French! Of course so too were they! The priests nevertheless had wanted English sisters in this country which was then part of the British Colonial Empire. So there was the problem of language though the sisters had struggled very hard to learn both English and Malay. In Singapore, they also had to contend with the presence of numerous English-speaking Protestant missionaries. In those days, ecumenism, as we know it, was still a long way off, rather, it was a case of active rivalry .

Our sisters quickly set about opening two classrooms to receive their first pupils. One room was for the young daughters of the English families. In fact, these were very few because these children were mostly sent home to schools in England. The other classroom was for orphans, who proved to be extremely difficult. The majority of them had been abandoned because of poor health, disability or superstition. Some had been rescued from dealers who dealt in the child-slave trade. How to cope with them except with patience and love: "For now, we become their servants", Mother Mathilde wrote, "later on, they will change". But in the meantime, discouragement gnawed at their spirits. When, for example, the foundation stone for the chapel had been blessed and the sisters had been ignored, sidelined, they asked themselves : why?

It was a bishop, who happened to be passing through from China, on his way to Rome, who encouraged them and helped them to have patience. Slowly, little by little, they earned the respect of the missionary priests and of the people. Reinforcements came, including some young English sisters. More and more children began to come to the school. The sisters also opened a room where they could care for destitute sick people.

Soon, they were requested to go to another town, Malacca. : "In founding Malacca, we knew well that we, ourselves, would have to provide everything. In that town, very few children would be able to contribute anything... Our house would be built according to the spirit of our Institute..."

The sisters worked there purely for the Glory of God. They earned what they needed for themselves and their orphaned children, with great difficulty. There were some consolations: "Baptisms are numerous, from the little babies who are about to die, to the young people and adults who make their own choice". The theology of the time saw baptism as the only gate to Heaven, so for these Christian women, there was no more wonderful gift they could offer to the people!

In 1858, Japan signed a treaty with several Western countries and began to open its doors to foreigners in a limited way. Two years later, the sisters in Singapore were offering hospitality to a missionary on his way from Japan to Paris. He shared with them the hope that one day it would be possible to have Christian schools for Japanese children. He sounded them out: "Would you be ready to go there one day if the country offers that possibility?" The response was an "enthusiastic yes" and from that moment on, Mother Mathilde's heart beat more strongly than ever for Japan. But that would have to wait...another 12 years!

In Japan, in 1872, an extraordinary discovery was made. A group of people, descendants of Christians from the Nagasaki region, came to see Mgr Petitjean. They revealed that their people had secretly transmitted the faith from one generation to the next for several centuries. So, the long awaited time to help them had come and Mgr Petitjean asked for sisters to come at once to 'the country of the rising sun'. Four sisters were chosen by the Superior General but again Mother Mathilde was not among them. She was to accompany the sisters to Japan and then return to Singapore. Her presence was considered more necessary there as a support for the newly founded mission. No doubt she was disappointed but she was also overjoyed that the Institute had responded positively to the call.

Once again trials came to mark this foundation in Japan. One sister fell ill and had to return to Singapore. Shortly afterwards another sister contracted tuberculosis and died within four months of her arrival. That left two sisters, in an unknown country, with, as yet, no knowledge of the language and facing a formidable task. What anguish for Mother Mathilde when the news reached her in Singapore! She was burning with the desire to go there herself but it was not possible. She begged the Superior General to send help. The answer was slow in coming. Mother Mathilde could not understand that priority was given to ensuring that there were enough sisters in France, where there were so many congregations, while "these poor Japanese children are deprived of all help".

Finally, she decided to go to France herself. She returned with 12 sisters! Once again, she set off for Japan to accompany some of the newly arrived sisters and then returned, as before, to Singapore. Sadly, Yokohama had not seen the end of its troubles. One sister died soon after and the superior, who had just arrived, developed breast cancer which proved fatal. She died in December 1875. A huge quandary for Mother Mathilde! What to do next? It was absolutely imperative that this new Japanese foundation be given a superior. Mother Mathilde wrote to Paris.

Post then took two months! So without waiting for the reply she set sail for Yokohama, ready to stay in Japan or to return to Malaysia, depending on the decision of the Superior General.

Then, when she was already 62 years old, Mother Mathilde finally received the letter telling her she could stay on in Japan indefinitely, asking her, nevertheless, to continue to assume responsibility for Malaysia and to travel there and back when difficult issues had to be resolved. Mother Mathilde's zeal did not diminish with age. She applied herself to learning Japanese. She had such a great desire to share the faith that she wanted to be able to teach people the catechism in their own language. She enlarged the houses in Yokohama and Tokyo because they were no longer adequate. Soon there were 700 pupils, both boys and girls, for whom the sisters took on almost total responsibility and in very precarious situations.

Mother Mathilde didn't stop there. She opened a room where sick people without resources could be cared for and a kind of hospice to shelter people who had lost everything in earthquakes or typhoons. She looked for collaborators such as the de la Salle Brothers, whom she had met in Malaysia, or followers of Don Bosco to whom she wrote personally, to come and take responsibility for the little Japanese boys but without success. When finally the Marist Brothers came to Japan, their schools were devoted to a different social sector. She moved heaven and earth to find the means to feed, clothe and care for the ever growing number of poverty-stricken people. Even certain miracles have been attributed to her when rice or money seemed to have appeared out of nowhere.

In 1892, the government changed its education policy, making education available to all children and giving precise directives concerning educational establishments. The bishop of Tokyo wanted establishments which the daughters of better off families could attend, believing that this was the best way to spread Catholicism in Japan. Mother Mathilde had no choice but to follow these directives. However, she would let go of nothing that was already in place for the service of the poor people for whom, she insisted, her Institute had been founded.

She died on the 20th January 1911 and is buried in Yokohama. Her memory still lives on today in Japan and she is venerated by some as a saint.