



St. Julie Billiard's life as a "Woman of the Church"
FOUNDER OF THE SISTERS OF NOTRE DAME DE NAMUR AND SAINT FOR OUR TIMES

Celebrating 200 years as Women of the Church

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What does it mean to be a "woman of the Church"? Part of the answer to that question may be found in the example of St. Julie Billiard who, with two others, founded the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur on February 2, 1804. Julie's sense of identity as a "woman of the Church" was rooted in her baptism. Through baptism Julie received a call to holiness; she was invited into a personal relationship with God; she was made a part of the Body of Christ, and she was given a role in the continuing the mission of Jesus to build the Kingdom of God. She received what each Christian receives at baptism, and she lived her whole life as a response to the gift and grace of the sacrament.

What does it mean to be "women of the Church" for Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur? Like Julie, we are responding to the gift and grace of baptism: *"Rooted in faith in our loving God, baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and animated by the Holy Spirit, we commit ourselves to live the Gospel radically in community."* (Constitutions #10) We are a community formed of individuals from a multitude of ethnic, social and economic backgrounds. It is our common faith, our experience of God's goodness present within each sister, and among us communally, that is the source of our unity in diversity. It is our commitment to the Gospel that challenges us to fidelity to Julie's preference for the poor and helps us *"choose to stand with poor people as they struggle for adequate means for human life and dignity."* (Constitutions #17)

Faith and religion were, for Julie, two sides of the same coin that formed her sense of "Church". It was out of both her rootedness in God and in the best of Church as institution that she could say: *"Let us be very firm in our faith. The good God will lead us by the hand like a good father."* (Letter 256) **and** *"Be broad-minded. Take a large view of all that belongs to religion."* (Letter 79) As it was for Julie, "Church" for Sisters of Notre Dame today is the whole coin. It is a source of nourishment for personal relationships with God. It is the framework that helps us

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articulate, and ritualize, our experience of God. It is the community that loves us into being and calls forth our gifts for ministry. It is relationships that form and gave vitality to the communities we live in. It is people in need, the poor, around us. "Church", for Julie, was all of this and so much more.

Julie's sense of being a "woman of the church" enabled her to meet the needs of her times. She served as catechist and pastoral associate long before those terms were used! She refused to support the priests who took an oath of allegiance supporting the revolutionary government of France over the Church, a stand that marked her for death. She used her gifts helping with the great missions held to re-evangelize France when the Revolution ended; starting schools for the poorest girls, and walking hundreds of miles through war-torn France and Belgium establishing communities of her Sisters and more schools for the poor.

Today being "women of the Church" helps us more effectively offer our individual gifts as we seek to respond to the needs of God's people whatever they may be. Conscious of Julie's reminder "...*should we not gain more than the universe if we could win one soul?*" (Letter 454) we seek to recognize and lift up God's goodness in each individual we meet. Whether we're working with HIV victims in Southern Africa; teaching college students in Japan, the US or Britain; doing pastoral work in rural Peru, the Amazon, or the inner cities of Ohio and Maryland; working among migrant workers in California, providing home space for the homeless in Chicago or Boston, teaching English to recent immigrants in Lowell or Phoenix; starting a new high school in Lawrence or building housing for the poor in Cincinnati we are working with others "*to transform unjust structures and systems as we participate in creating new ways of relating which enable all to experience more fully the goodness of God.*" (Constitutions 23)

Julie's understanding of Church was not just her parish, her diocese or even her country. It was the universal Body of Christ that she felt called to serve and that she wanted her sisters to be available to serve. Over the past 200 years Julie's sisters have answered, and continue to answer, the call to serve the People of God, especially the poor, in Europe, in North, Central and South America, in Western, Eastern and Southern Africa and in Asia.

Julie's sense of Church made possible her standing fast in her vision of a new form of religious community in the face of persecution by priests and bishops. It also made possible her visit to Pope Pius VII -- prisoner of Napoleon -- weeping with him over the troubles of the Church, and asking his blessing for all her good daughters. Julie's church embodied the Paschal Mystery: its structures and hierarchy destroyed during the revolution because of abuses of power and identification with the aristocracy, and new life rooted in the needs and faith of the poor, sprouting out of the ruins.

As we celebrate our 200th anniversary, Julie's words "Let us be very firm in our faith," **and** "Be broad-minded," have new relevance for us. Our church embodies the Paschal Mystery, rocked by scandal, pain, demoralization, and uncertainty about the future. Yet there are signs of new life in the deep faith and commitment of the People of God. As women of the Church we stand within the Body of Christ, believing in God's faithful presence with us as we search together for appropriate expressions of our fidelity and search anew in this time and place for ways to spread the Gospel message that God is indeed good.