



St. Julie Billiard's Spiritual Vision

FOUNDER OF THE SISTERS OF NOTRE DAME DE NAMUR AND SAINT FOR OUR TIMES

Mary at the Foot of the Cross

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Spiritual vision is key to a congregation's growth in spirit, as it moves through various historical periods and expresses itself in cultures, different from its place of origin. This year we celebrate 200 years of the Congregation of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, founded by Julie Billiard and Françoise Blin de Bourdon in France shortly after the French Revolution. Today lay associates are drawn to Julie's spirit as a spiritual path for their lives, deepening Julie's vision in the world. In 2004 there are Sisters of Notre Dame on five continents, expressing the spirit of Julie in diverse cultures. Yet common to all these snapshots of Notre Dame is the living of its spiritual vision. Central to this vision is the spirit of Jesus' cross. In an early mystical vision, Julie saw members of Notre Dame standing at the foot of the cross. Here, too, the tradition of the Gospel of John places Mary, in loving solidarity with Jesus, as he endures this most difficult time of his life. Julie envisioned us, as sisters and brothers of Mary, in this spiritual place. What might this mean to us after 200 years?

I have always wondered if this vision marked the beginning of Notre Dame or was a promise of its ultimate fidelity to its mission. Is the cross where we began or where God promises us we will end up, ultimately on our feet, where we are supposed to be, with Mary who stands always with the people of God on their journey through life to God? The last fifty years in Notre Dame, in the Church and in the world have been as turbulent as the first fifty. They might mirror the apostle's and Mary's experience of Jesus' passion where established patterns of life and discipleship were turned on their head. The multitudes which once followed Jesus were now screaming for his death. The elders who first fascinated Jesus in the Temple as a young man had viciously and relentlessly challenged his every move and word before they ultimately had their way with him and condemned him to die. Mary and the apostles were witnesses to all this. Jesus' cross began long before his crucifixion as he patiently accepted the consequences of having a redeeming and

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saving mission to witness to the Kingdom of God before the resistances and hubris, manifestations of evil itself, which entered his own journey. Yet the gospel of Mark 15: 39 tells us that at the foot of the cross, the real manifestation of Jesus was made clear. Only there, Mark tells us, can the truth of Jesus as “the Son of God” be proclaimed and known.

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Mary's presence beneath the cross is a sign of the other side of Julie's charism, an unshakable faith in the Goodness of God, and trust in God's power, even before the difficulties of the cross. The cross and witness to the goodness of God have been the left and right hands of the mission of Notre Dame and the spirituality of Notre Dame for the last 200 years. As we commemorate these wonderful years and the gifts Notre Dame has brought to the world and into our lives, we can be encouraged by Julie's vision of members of Notre Dame, as Mary, beneath the cross. When we need

a sense of direction, we need only to look at this picture and seek where our stance of solidarity is needed, where our faith that God acts encourages us to endure what we cannot change and change what we can. This vision leads us to Christ on the cross of our world, and in each of our worlds, with the belief that where we find Christ, we also find God's goodness, expressed and given as a gift, a share in the resurrection. This is the posture of Mary's heart that trusted in the promise God made to her. This is the journey of Notre Dame which we have been on for 200 years. We celebrate all the steps we have taken. We anticipate the journey still ahead with joy. We rest assured that we have a map to follow and hold close the promise we will end up in the right place, with Mary, at the foot of the cross, always trusting that the cross is never the last word from God.

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