



St. Julie Billiard's Commitment to the Poor

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

In the Most Abandoned Places

by Sarah Fahy, SNDdeN

St. Julie's commitment to the poor in the most abandoned places grew from her radical immersion in the events of her times and her contemplative perspective on them. In speaking of prayer, Julie encouraged her Sisters to be always turned toward the good God, just as the sunflower turns toward the sun. She lived with her eyes and heart always focused on God's goodness, in times of light and in times of darkness. For just as the sunflower not only follows the sun across the sky, but also waits through the dark nights for the dawn, so in the dark time of the French Revolution Julie's commitment to her good God was shaped by what she experienced. Caught in the tumultuous sweep of events that changed the history of France, and ultimately that of Europe, during the last part of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century, she herself experienced poverty and abandonment at key moments in her life.

The French Revolution began July 14, 1789 when mobs of poor people stormed the Bastille. In the preceding years Louis XVI, who believed his power was absolute, had bankrupted the country supporting foreign wars and an extravagant court. Because of the alliance of the Roman Catholic Church with the wealthy, the revolutionaries nationalized the Church. Julie, loyal to the Church, refused to accept the priests who abandoned Rome. As a result, she was hunted by angry mobs and narrowly escaped death at their hands on at least one occasion. Paralyzed and in pain, she became what we would call today an "internal refugee," moving from one place to another, seeking escape from capture. During this time the revolutionaries suppressed all teaching and chari-

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table congregations which, in effect, abolished all the schools in France which were available to the majority of the population. In the time between the beginning of the revolution and the first vows of St. Julie in 1804, war, poverty, disease and chronic shortages of goods led to the abandonment of tens of thousands of children each year. Harvest failure and the large number of widows created by the revolution led to the existence of thousands of orphans.

This was the context within which the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur was founded. On February 2, 1804, Julie Billiard, Françoise Blin de Bourdon and Catherine Duchatel vowed poverty, chastity and obedience and promised "to devote themselves to the education of orphans and especially to the formation of teachers, who were to go wherever they were needed—never fewer than two—to instruct the poor, free of charge." By July 2, 1804, a little rule was written naming the purpose of the Institute to be "the education of young girls, in particular, the poor."

Young women were quickly drawn to the new Congregation, attracted by Julie's spirit of joy and trust in God. Schools were founded. As the number of schools grew, Julie's letters to these

Sisters spoke to both the struggle to make ends meet and her adamant insistence that the schools existed only for the poor. Perhaps the strongest statement regarding this is found in letter 86, Vol.2 of *The Letters of Saint Julie Billiard*. "I ask you again to receive only poor little girls who cannot pay at all. Collect as many of them as you can. We exist only for the poor, absolutely only for the poor." Another statement, among many, is found in letter 242, Vol. 4, "He (God) knows our good will for helping the poor children, for that is our only end." And Vol. 2, p. 229 "It is for the poor children that God has sent us to Montdidier."

The material foundation of the Institute was Françoise's inheritance, but it was not sufficient to support all the needs of the growing Institute. Julie was eminently practical and she and Françoise were careful managers of the funds provided by Françoise's inheritance. Rather than be limited by what these funds could support as the Sisters' work expanded, paying students were enrolled and their fees supported the poor students' education. In Vol. 7, letter 445, Julie writes about paying students in this way: "Examine whether the parents would like to pay less for your day pupils. ... If meanwhile some should

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come who cannot give three francs you must not send them away. I consider only religion in the unfortunate times we live in."

Although the initial impulse to serve the poor was rooted in the poverty Julie saw around her in post revolutionary France, within two years of founding the Institute, she knew her Sisters were called to go anywhere in the world where there is a need. February 2, 1806, while singing Simeon's hymn of joy to Christ as "a light of revelation to the gentiles and the glory of the people of Israel," Julie had an ecstatic vision of Sisters of Notre Dame carrying the light of the gospels throughout the world. Her heart responded with great joy and love for the many who would be reached beyond the limits of her own time and place.

Julie did not live to see the world-wide expansion of the Sisters of Notre Dame. As she was dying, April 8, 1816, she was heard singing Mary's great song of joy, the Magnificat, praising God who lives in a special way among the poor. It is a song that carries the purest impulse of the revolution that so encompassed and affected her life. She faced death with the eyes of her soul turned toward the work of the good God throughout the world among the poor she loved so well.

Sources

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