



St. Julie Billiard's Commitment to The Poor

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

In Formal Education Today

by Mary Ellen O'Keffe, SNDdeN

The bell rang out clearly one morning in 1804 in Amiens: "The Sisters of Notre Dame are opening a school for poor girls." With that clanging bell and those words, Notre Dame's long history of formal education began. Today, the announcement may come through television, radio and Internet. The education offered includes children and adults of all ages, those who are poor and those who have more material goods. Notre Dame's tradition of formal education lives on in pre-schools and universities, in elementary and high schools, in day classes and evening sessions, in Asia and Africa, Europe, Latin America and the United States.

Initially, formal education was not the focus of Julie's vision; she saw her work as catechesis and the care of orphans. Post-revolutionary France called out for structure amid chaos, for clearly planned curricula, and most especially for well-prepared teachers. It was clear that if true religious and moral education were to take place, it would be necessary to "educate the whole child: heart, hands and head." It was not that Julie and Françoise, her friend and co-foundress of the Sisters of Notre Dame, abandoned catechesis; it always remained at the heart of their educational program. They recognized, however, that the education of young girls meant "to teach them to think." Providing formal education for young girls was essential to their spiritual and social development.

Today Sisters minister in Notre Dame sponsored schools and colleges, in parish elementary schools and in diocesan high

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schools. Some work in public schools and universities. Others teach in special programs designed to reach out to teens and adults whose formal education has been interrupted or neglected. They are in modern buildings, in prisons, in borrowed spaces. They are teachers, guidance counselors, librarians, administrators and aides. But always, the Sisters are committed to "teaching . . . whatever is necessary to equip (their pupils) for life." In Julie's time this meant religious instruction and the "three R's"; lace-making as well as gardening. Today it is basic education and computer literacy, fine arts and liberal arts, physical education and business science—the list of what is now necessary to educate the whole person is endless.

In almost all their formal education ministries, Sisters of Notre Dame work closely with dedicated lay people as co-workers, a tradition that began when the Sisters called on former pupils to assist them in the early classes. They cooperate whenever possible with state and local authorities, mindful of the efforts Mother St. Joseph made to

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enable the schools to survive during the Dutch domination of Belgium.

The education of teachers continues in colleges and universities and in all the educational institutions where SND administrators seek to guide and encourage beginning

teachers. They continue the tradition of Julie who said, "You do more good by training one good teacher than by looking after a hundred boarders."

Julie's classrooms had portable desks and hand-made books, flagstones for blackboards, a few pictures. What would she think of today's Power-Point presentations, elaborate science laboratories, computers and every sort of teaching aid? She would rejoice at the creativity that her sisters display in the classrooms and administrative offices of the twenty-first century. She would use whatever materials were at hand to challenge and excite the students to learn. It is neither the building nor the equipment that makes formal education today a continuation of Julie's charism. It is the commitment of Sisters who have that "combination of strength and sweetness, firmness and gentleness, zeal and calmness, energy and peace," that Julie urged her Sisters to develop. She never wanted her sisters to be satisfied with the status quo. "We must go on learning . . . consider study one of your chief duties."

Formal education is an integral part of the mission of Notre Dame. The outward form may have changed; the challenges may be different; adaptations may have to be made. The spirit remains the same: educating for life.