

PRESENTATION ON SAINT JULIE AND THE BEGINNING OF NOTRE DAME: 2 VOICES

1. We would like, for a moment, to take you back to the beginnings of our Institute. Imagine a small bare room; lying in this room is a helpless invalid who can barely speak. Right outside the room wages the violent riots of the French Revolution. The invalid is in danger because of her religious beliefs. She is strongly affected by this violence and is praying. To this poor invalid, St. Julie Billiart, God sends a vision: a vision of the crucified Christ on Calvary surrounded by women in a religious habit that is unfamiliar to her, and she hears the promise: "Behold -- these are the spiritual daughters I give to you in an Institute marked by the cross." Julie's prayer during this time of paralysis, danger, dependence on others, is the seed of the Institute of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur.

2. Julie was a peasant raised in rural France. Born in 1751, the France of her lifetime was a France in turmoil. Its society was undergoing a process of secularization and disruption unparalleled in its history. Capitalism and political democracy were coming in, the power of the monarchy and the privileged position of the Church were going out. Little known to Julie and her contemporaries, the events that shaped their lives were to change the face of western culture. And we who now stand on the shores of space exploration and a global economy are not unlike her in feeling the shaking foundations of an old order and the heartbeat of the new.

1. Julie lived during the age of enlightenment which produced the Declaration of the Rights of Man. But this revolution also unleashed the Reign of Terror with its guillotine and destruction of many religious values in France. Caught in the midst of this revolution, which she could identify with but not fully support, Julie continued to witness to the goodness of God. She was a part of the Church, but she had another vision of its work. It was to be a church which would more strongly identify with the poor and thus proclaim the goodness of God.

2. From 1804 -- when Julie was 53 years old -- until her death in 1816, Julie shaped a new religious community. Responding to a call from her good God, and to a plea from the Fathers of the Faith for help in educating the poor in the Faith, Julie -- with Françoise Blin de Bourdon and Catherine Duchantel -- consecrated herself to the instruction of the poor; and together they formed the first community of Sisters of Notre Dame. Julie wanted a form of religious life which corresponded to the needs of her times. The divine office, the enclosure, the distinction between choir and lay sisters, and stability were all obstacles to the future of her community. For Julie, the essentials of religious life were a continuing experience of God, a consecration to God, the apostolate, and the primitive spirit of the Institute.

1. "Don't let us be chicken hearted...Whatever happens we need brave souls," she told her sisters as she saw the rampant destruction of a war-torn country. After a miraculous cure of her paralysis, Julie began walking hundreds of miles on the roads of France and Belgium building the foundations of the Institute which she had already started. "Take the poor, only the poor, the very poorest little girls, gather them in as many as you can. Because we exist first and foremost for the poor," she told her sisters. In order to reach the poor, Julie sent out postulants and novices into the streets of poor areas. They were given hand bells to ring, and this message to proclaim: "The Sisters of Notre Dame have just opened free schools for little girls. Go and tell your parents the news."

2. One need not have walked with Julie, nor have talked with her, to know her. Her spirit is touchable in the long line of women that have followed after her. Her sisters spread to the United States in 1840, and later to other parts of Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America. United by a spirit of simplicity and joy and by their faith in the goodness of God which formed the primitive spirit Julie instilled in the first sisters, these women reached out to educate the poor. Julie considered simplicity the basis and foundation of the Institute. She said, "Those who are not simple are neither God's children nor mine. The simple person sees the will of God, the help of God in everything. She is like a clear crystal which the rays of the Son of Justice penetrate, light and warm," and joy, Julie believed, was the fruit of simplicity.

1. Julie's spirit of simplicity is alive today as her sisters anguish over war, as they struggle to build peace and educate for justice, and in their stand with the poor and oppressed, all these areas need the hopeful spirit of Julie's proclamation of "How good is the good God!" Julie was a woman of vision. She gave birth

to this Institute through her own sufferings. Julie's vision was world-wide, and she was exiled from the diocese of her first foundation. Julie told her sisters to "beware of diocesan priests" as the priests and bishops wanted to limit her order and impose their rule on her sisters. Julie never wrote a rule for the sisters during her lifetime because the political timing was not right. So the sisters lived by an unwritten rule. She was true to the institute marked by the cross, as she held fast to the primitive spirit of the institute, suffering misunderstanding, disapproval and even censure, from the hierarchy, friends and even some of her own sisters. Her goal, however, was to remain open to the spirit and flexible to carry out its work in various local situations.

2. It was over the question of flexibility that Julie was exiled from the diocese of Amiens in late 1808. Julie took with her only those sisters who chose to follow her. To stay would not only have meant submission to a rule drawn up by the hierarchy and being limited to the diocese of Amiens, but it would have also meant cutting off the secondary houses already established in other parts of France and Belgium. Rather than do this, Julie moved the central government of her community to Namur, Belgium, and the sisters changed their title to "the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur." Julie believed her sisters had to be free to go where the needs were. Priests who interfered were quietly told that how she ran her houses was her business. She described herself as a little blind woman content to follow where the good God led, and she allowed nothing to stand in the way of what she saw as God's will.

1. Julie's ability to follow the lead of the good God developed into what she called the rapture of action. "My dear sisters, a sister of Notre Dame is called to be in some ways a mystic...the mystical life is sort of perpetual ecstasy, a long continued rapture of action and operation, it is to this type of rapture we are called and to which we can aspire...Grace works a real transformation in our soul for when we have attained this mystical life each one of us can say with St. Paul, 'I live now not I but Christ in me.'"

2. We catch the essence of Julie's spirituality in that often quoted refrain "God is good", or in these words: "If the world knew who he is who gives himself to us with so much love...if they but knew the gift of God." Like the apostle John, who had seen something which had existed since the beginning, Julie proclaimed the truth she too had seen -- that God is love. That in Jesus we have love given to completeness -- to the point of suffering our death that we might live, have life and have it to the full.

1. People came to her when she was paralyzed, asking of God. And then when she was cured she went to them, to speak of God, to say that God is not praised with words or even deeds, but only with a faithful heart. God called Julie and God calls us -- the Lord led her into a wilderness place as he leads us there. He spoke to her and she came to the Lord.

2. The Lord sowed her in the country and through her loved the unloved. Through her he said "You are my people." And because of her they answered "You are our God." Such is the heritage of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur.