

JULIE AND FRANÇOISE—A FOUNDING RELATIONSHIP

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(Note: This is an adaptation of the Memoirs of Mère Françoise, based on the Chronological Tables and Biographical Index, pp. [227-238] of the English version, with some additions from Chapter 1 of the same.)

1751

JULIE:

July 12 was the day of my birth, and it was also the day of my Baptism. I was the sixth child in a family of seven children. We lived in Cuvilly, which is a small village in Picardy in France. My parents were Jean François Billiard and Marie-Louise Antoinette Debraine. They were good Christians who kept a small shop where groceries, linen, and lace were sold. This shop provided our family with a simple but comfortable living. The first four children in our family died in childhood. Only my older sister Madeleine and my younger brother Louis and I lived to grow up.

1756

FRANÇOISE:

On March 8 I was born at Gezaincourt, the home of my grandparents. My family was one of the oldest in Picardy. Our family history can be traced back to the eleventh century. My father was Pierre-Louis de Blin, Viscount de Dormart-en-Ponthieu, and my mother was Marie-Louise Claudine. She was the daughter of the Baron of Fouquesolles. In the Middle Ages there was a saying about our name that I am very proud of. When something was good, people said it was “Bon comme un Blin.” “Good as a Blin.”

1760

JULIE:

When I was nine years old, our parish priest, Father Dangincourt, allowed me to receive my First Holy Communion.

1762

FRANÇOISE:

I was six years old this year, and I spent the summer months at St. Michel with the Benedictines.

1764

JULIE:

The Bishop of Beauvais came to Cuvilly when I was 14, and I received the sacrament of Confirmation.

FRANÇOISE:

This same year I was confirmed too, by Bishop de la Motte at St. Michel. I was eight years old.

1765

JULIE:

When I was fourteen, I made a vow of chastity.

1767

FRANÇOISE:

This was the happy year of my First Communion at the age of eleven.

JULIE :

This year I was sixteen, and it was a hard year for our family. We began to have financial problems. Since my health was good then, I worked in the fields and made journeys on foot and on horseback in all kinds of weather to help our family business.

1768

FRANÇOISE:

When I was twelve I went to school in Amiens with the Ursuline Sisters.

1774

JULIE:

One evening when I was sitting quietly at home, a large stone was thrown through the window and fell at my feet. Then a shot was fired. I could only believe that an enemy was trying to kill my father. It was a severe shock, and soon after it I began to develop a nervous disease. I was twenty-three at the time, and remained ill and suffering afterwards.

1755

FRANÇOISE:

When I was nineteen I returned to Bourdon to prepare for my debut into French society. I was presented at the Court of Versailles.

1781

FRANÇOISE:

My brother Louis married in this year and settled with his wife Elisabeth at the Hotel Blin in Amiens. My sister Marie-Louise also married during this year, and she and her husband made their home in Amiens too. I was twenty-five at the time.

1782

JULIE:

A terrible epidemic broke out in Cuvilly when I was thirty-one. I had already been ill for eight years, and now the doctor thought I had symptoms of the epidemic. In those days the remedy was to draw blood from the feet of the victims. The doctor did this to me, and this made my pain more intense and I lost the power to walk. After about six months, I became bedridden, an invalid, and I lived that way for twenty-two years. I lost the use of my limbs so completely that I could not stand or take a step. I had to be lifted from my couch to a chair while my bed was being made. God is always good, though and I was allowed to receive Holy Communion daily when I became bedridden.

1784

FRANÇOISE:

This was a very hard year for me. I was twenty-eight. In February my grandfather died at Gezaincourt. For many months, even before my grandfather's death, my mother had been ill, and I took care of her. My mother died that same year, on April 2.

1789

FRANÇOISE:

The Revolution began this year in France. People talked of liberty, equality, and fraternity. At the same time our country was in flames. I had no idea how the French Revolution was going to affect our family who were part of the aristocracy of our country.

JULIE:

My family was not rich or aristocratic, but we were affected by the Revolution too. There were many terrifying times when I had to hide from the revolutionaries, and when I had to be carried from place to place as a refugee. I have always been so grateful to my niece Felicity, daughter of my sister Madeleine, who stayed with me and helped me for twenty-three long years.

1791

JULIE:

This was the year when I was hiding in Gournay, and had to move to Compiègne. How I thank the good God for Felicity, who traveled with me in secret, hidden in a haycart! It was so cold, and Felicity kept me alive by forcing some wine between my lips. We had to move five times during the forty months we stayed at Compiègne, living in fear and without the Mass and sacraments. I was forty years old, and my illness grew worse. I lost the power to speak at this time.

1792

JULIE:

My Father died this year, but always God is very good. God gave me a vision of a great future apostolic work that would be marked by the cross.

1793

FRANÇOISE:

As the Revolution raged on, my father was put into prison in Amiens. Later my brother was arrested and put there too. How strange that the place of their imprisonment was called "La Providence."

1794

FRANÇOISE:

How can I tell all that happened in this year? I can hardly believe now that it all really happened. I was thirty-eight years old. In February I was arrested and taken to prison at La Providence as well. Later I was kept in custody in the Carmelite convent.

In March my sister-in-law was imprisoned, and in that same month my dear grandmother died. In July the Revolution came to an end, and my father was freed on August 3. I was freed the next day, and by September our family was reunited at the Hotel Blin after eight months. God does bring joy out of the cross! Two months later I met, for the first time, Marie-Rose Julie Billiard.

JULIE:

In October Madame Baudoin invited me to come to stay at the Hotel Blin in Amiens. On the way there I asked to be taken to visit my mother. It was the last time I would see her alive. Less than a year before she died I met the woman who was to become my dear good friend, my daughter, a sister with me in Notre-Dame, Françoise Blin de Bourdon. I was forty-three at the time.

1797

FRANÇOISE:

My father died at Bourdon when I was forty-one; I was so grateful that he had been reconciled to God first. I was getting to know Julie better and better and was part of a little group of women who were her friends and companions.

1799

FRANÇOISE:

Julie and I lived together at Bettencourt for more than four years. Father Thomas was with us and Bishop de Villaret of Amiens saw that Julie was a great catechist. Julie was forty-eight and I was forty-three. It was a happy time.

1803

JULIE:

In February we moved from Bettencourt to Amiens, and settled at the Rue Nueve in August.

1804

FRANÇOISE:

It was ten years since Julie and I had first met, and it was a year filled with the goodness of God. On February 2, Julie, Catherine Duchatel, and I were consecrated as Sisters of Notre Dame. We formed a small community, and received our first postulants, Victoire and Justine. On June 1 Julie was cured of her long, long illness—on the fifth day of the novena to the Sacred Heart. Two weeks later she set out with Victoire and the Fathers of the Faith for the mission at St. Valery.

THIS IS ONLY THE BEGINNING OF THE SISTERS OF NOTRE DAME.

ALL: HOW GOD IS THE GOOD GOD!