

## BEGINNINGS, BALANCE, ORDER

Julie Billiard left no literary legacy. There is no systematic body of writing, no treatise on education that gives formal expression to her thought. Her letters are not yet edited and there is not even a definitive version of her talks to the sisters. Her ideas are scattered in her letters, in the themes which young sisters wrote out after hearing her daily exhortation, in her conferences and in the reminiscences of her contemporaries. These sources, however, are sufficient to show that there were certain topics to which she returned again and again. Among them three of the most striking are the consciousness of beginnings, the insistence on a balance between virility and sweetness, and the need of order.

It was inevitable that Julie should be impressed by the need for new beginnings. She had lived through the total destruction of the educational system of her country. Before the revolution, France had depended for her schools mainly upon the religious orders. The Jesuits, the Christian Brothers, the Ursulines and the congregation founded by St. Peter Fourier had provided the greater number of the country's schools. There were some few classes organized by writing masters and, in some areas, *petites écoles* and charity schools, but these too were under the jurisdiction of the Church and usually controlled by the doyen of the nearest cathedral chapter. The anticlerical policy of the revolution, however, put an end to this provision. The hatred that abolished the Christian calendar proscribed the non-juring priests and turned the churches of Paris into stables and museums included the suppression of the religious orders in its general program of de-christianization. In so doing, it robbed France of her schools and found too late that its own educational scheme, unrealistic in concept and ineffective in application, did nothing to replace them. By 1804, a generation had been doomed to ignorance by the policy of the Jacobins.

Julie's vivid remarks about the desperate needs of the country and of the Church, and her insistence that Notre Dame's was an initiative taken in a new field of apostolate, were not exaggerations to impress the young or highly colored challenges to rouse a passing enthusiasm. She meant exactly what she said. Her own experience bore out her conviction that "we have everything to do." She came back frequently to the idea in her conferences, and could not hold back the tears when she reminded the sisters: "My dear children, there are no religious communities left, no one to care for God's interests ... Let us do whatever we can, even when we see no results." As late as 1815, when the Napoleonic drain on the seminaries had nullified one aspect of the Concordat of 1801 and reduced France to a situation that was not much better than the cold war under the Directory, she said: "We live in an age when priests are few and it is we, my dear sisters, who have to replace the missing ones ... Fill yourselves with zeal for religious teaching and your minds with the truth of God ... We may well be called upon to save the remnants (*débris*) of the faith in France." In the following year she returned to the point again. "There are no priests left ... Surely your zeal rouses you, sisters, to fly to the help of children who are abandoned in the most abysmal ignorance. Oh! I can't say it too often; the whole country should be full of our convents." Because she was so sharply aware of the need, her heart was torn between the desire to help quickly and

the conviction that the young sisters must be properly trained before being sent to take charge of a class. "You simply have not yet got what it takes to do God's work properly in school," she said towards the end of her life, "yet I have let you undertake it ... Oh! If we only lived in bygone days when there were plenty of priests to guide you, you would have had some instructions before you came but, after a revolution such as we have just been through, you come along all green and uninstructed. We have to start from the very A B C."

Formation was strenuous, as there were no precedents to appeal to and the very idea of religious life was strange to a generation which had grown up without the awareness of religious orders that one normally associates with a catholic country. The training had to be both personal and professional. Personal formation came first. "It is a most serious task to form young sisters who are to be sent out to secondary houses in a very short time," Julie said. Full attention had to be given to it and sisters might not be released for teaching duties until the first personal training was complete. This principle, which Julie upheld resolutely, was to remain in the congregation as a legacy of her thought and to be maintained, in spite of great pressure, by succeeding superiors general.

Professional training was equally thorough, and the more necessary as the early sisters had such a poor cultural background. "With the exception of Mère Blin and Soeur Anastasie," remarked Soeur Eulalie, "we were an ignorant lot." Julie used to pay frequent visits to the study room to keep things going. She had her own methods: lectures, debates, discussions, criticism lessons and teaching practices. There was dictation every evening at recreation, reading aloud in the garden, and arithmetic prepared in advance to meet the requirements of the lesson for the following day. Reading was an art and not everyone, in Julie's estimation, was qualified to teach it. "Let Sister Lucy and Sister Agnes take the reading classes," she wrote to the superior of Jumet, "but not Sister F. She is not ready." Writing was an even more formidable task, as two hands had to be learnt: ordinary calligraphy and the fashionable *écriture anglaise*. It was the nightmare of some of the superiors, who found their letters, written in too great a hurry, returned to them for more attention to the writing. Soeur St. Jean received regular admonitions on this point, and even Soeur Anastasie did not escape when her letters were scribbled. The teaching sisters were all the more carefully watched: "Tell Sister Thérèse that her writing is poor. She does not practice and it is getting worse ... I make myself rewrite letters that are illegible. Why don't you do the same?" In November 1815, only five months before her death, she had a little outburst to Soeur Anastasie about the very elementary state of the congregation's learning: "I'm checking on the sisters' writing and grammar and we are up to our necks in it. *Mon Dieu!* What a job! What a job! Getting the first notions of grammar into heads that have never heard of it ... not even the name of it! Let's trust in God. I don't think that there was anything so poor since Christianity began ... I mean, so poor an institute and so poor in its subjects, with all our fine display of grammar, geography and writing, what do we know? My God, bless the efforts that these good girls are making, they are as ignorant as their mother!"

The difficulties of the beginnings arose partly from the type of personnel. Julie selected her candidates very carefully: "I prefer not to receive aspirants without having had an eye on them for a fair time." Even so, she did not always get the kind of postulant that she wanted. To Mère St. Joseph she wrote in 1811: "We haven't got people of character, but poor weak subjects, so there will always be plenty of work with them and very little profit ... I can't tell you how important it is to have good subjects if we want God to be glorified when we are gone." She lamented the "half-vocations that will do no good in a congregation like ours," and smiled wryly at "a new postulant, a good farmer's daughter, a nice girl, but it will be four years before she will be able to do anything." The wrong kind presented themselves plentifully. Such hordes of them flocked in at Ghent that Julie had to put them off. "I'm getting choosy," she said. "All these young girls, and some not so young ones, who come to be received for nothing ... it's a regular traffic (*merchandise*) and a deceptive one at that!" When the right kind of candidates came, they were never in sufficient numbers. "Another new foundation," she wrote to Soeur St. Jean when she was busy with the arrangements for Fleurus, "and I am short of sisters. They are all too young! They would throw themselves into it with all their hearts but I can't throw them in! They are too young for a new house."

Whatever the personnel, it was vitally necessary to have the spirit of the work right from the beginning. Julie gave herself to this, though it was by action rather than by theory that she defined it. Her nearest approach to a definition was when she told a young sister that to live the life of Notre Dame was "to seek God and the salvation of souls." By implication, however, it is evident that the spirit she desired was a compound of love, joy, simplicity and trust. She did not like people to be afraid of her or to act through fear, which she considered a cramping motive, but she always took gaiety as a proof that things were going well. Its absence at Amiens under the rule of Mère Victoire was the crucial indication that the original spirit of Notre Dame had left the community there. Growth in the spirit of the institute was indefinable but very real. Without it, a sister was in jeopardy; with it she could work wonders: "Remember you are the first. Others who come after you will look to you, and they will build on the foundation which you have laid." Julie's own spirit was the inspiration of this first foundation, and it was on this that future generations were to build.

Julie was the most womanly of people, and yet no phrase occurred more frequently in her writings than: "Have manly courage." Realism and objective appeals to principle, both attitudes which are associated with men rather than with women, were typical of her. They blended, however, with a sweetness and patience that were truly feminine. Julie was neither masculine nor womanish, but she had a happy balance of active and passive qualities which combined virility and gentleness. It was this balance which was her peculiar characteristic.

The virile side of her nature showed in her courage and realism. She risked robbers on her travels as a matter of course, trusting to the guardian angels to protect her in an emergency. She was arrested as a spy during the Fleurus campaign. She faced flooded rivers at Andenne, uncertain tracks in the forests round Marche and St. Hubert. She saw the ravine which the wheels of her public coach had missed by inches.

Her moral courage, however, was stronger even than the physical bravery which refused to be deterred by either pain or danger. She would not yield an inch on what she believed to be right. "Folk think that I can't make a stand," she said, "and that I don't resist enough. They are very much mistaken ... We don't want what God doesn't want ... In these unimportant matters let us yield to what happens and let people say what they like ... but in questions of justice I can resist all right, you'll see." Resist she did whenever there arose a point of principle that affected the work of the institute. She resisted over Amiens, over reunion with Mère Victoire's community, over central government, over the liberty of the houses within the rule, over schism, over the question of male teachers in her schools. She could appreciate moral courage in others, too. Probably something of her great admiration for Monseigneur de Broglie, the Bishop of Ghent, sprang from the fact that, like herself, he had outstanding firmness and courage under pressure: "We could not have anyone better than Monseigneur de Broglie, he is completely firm. That does not embarrass me a bit and I tell him all I think."

Realism was the basis of Mère Julie's courage. She saw things with truth and faced them as they were. The shrewdness and directness of her advice often derived from her realism. "Don't go in for the unworthy means which attract children to oneself," she wrote. "We say, 'It's all to make them love virtue.' But it isn't. Not a bit of it. What wins children to virtue and to God is a good holy life." She urged Soeur St. Jean: "Be direct above all ... directness with God, with your sisters, with the children, with everyone, above all with yourself. Do you hear? I said, 'with yourself!'" She was realistic too about doing only the good that lies in one's power, warning Soeur St. Jean not to expect too much from one who had very little to give. "The best is the enemy of the good as far as she is concerned. If you try to make her too perfect, you will put her off right away ... and to want her perfect all at once is no good at all. Take things more easily!" She would not have dancing masters in her own schools, but she did not approve either of Sister N.'s over-ferveat preaching against it at St. Hubert: "I do not approve of it myself, but it will do no good to make a fuss like that over it." She took things calmly when it was a matter of making a decision, and preferred to respect what already existed if she could rightly do so. This did not mean, however, that she was not prepared to make changes, and quite drastic ones, where she had no other option. She wasted no lamentations over necessity. When St. Nicolas was in straits, she went to take stock of the position. Her verdict was brief: "St. Nicolas needs a class for the poor, another for boarders, a dormitory for the sisters and a dormitory for the boarders. It is quite impossible. We must move to Ghent." Then she made six journeys in one week between the two towns to make the necessary arrangements: "I am rolling to and fro like a ball between Ghent and St. Nicolas. It is all God's will."

Whenever Julie made a stand, it was on principle. She had definite principles of government: to uphold the unwritten rule with firmness for the general good, but to apply it with kindness to the individual. She would allow the rare exceptions which she considered necessary in the case of sisters who were tired or ill, but she would not admit of any exceptions to the common life in advance. "Let her take all the time she

needs to decide about coming, but there is no alternative to the whole training if she does come,” was the answer to an inquiry on behalf of a would-be postulant who wanted exceptions. On principle too she steadily upheld the authority of local superiors. She warned Soeur St. Jean: “Don’t be dictated to. It is not for the youngest arrival to tell you how things are done in the mother house.” She would often appeal to principles in making decisions. This was very evident in educational affairs. but it would occur too when she was asked about family visits, confessions of rule, the time of Vespers, or whether the children might be taken to church when school was over. In the last resort she would appeal to her basic principle: “Duty first ... Once and for all, duty before devotion.” Duty was to be done simply, thoroughly, honestly, in spite of human respect: “Die rather than not do it!”

Julie’s virility was balanced by a patience and sweetness which extended to the children, to events and to difficult characters alike. With the children it undoubtedly sprang from love. “You need a long, long patience to do any good to children,” she said; and such an unflinching patience could only come from a love which was prepared to sacrifice itself for them.

Less easily explained was Julie’s patience with events. By nature she was quick and impulsive; but her decisions during her active life were restrained, based on a calm reflection and a detachment from personal interests which could be neither hustled nor deflected from its purpose. She was humorous and serene even in the most trying circumstances. The Curé of Montdidier wanted sisters, and wanted them at once. Mère St. Joseph was anxious, but Julie remained undisturbed. “Quietly! Quietly!” she said. “The Lord has his moments, let’s try to follow them. Ah! my dear, things can’t always go as fast as we would like and God knows quite well how to cool our ardor.” At Ghent the schools were full of children, so that the classes were overflowing. Mothers stood in queues to secure admission for their little ones, and the lace-making groups were in the same state of overcrowding. Julie was urged to open new establishments, but she was content to bide her time. “No! No! We must go slowly. One step at a time.” She showed the same unruffled quietness when she was leaving Amiens. With great deliberation, she went round each of the sub-houses in northern France: Montdidier, Bresles, Rainneville—“those tiny houses which ought never to have existed,” she said—and saw every sister individually. “I am not cutting my cloth freely this time,” was her explanation to Mère St Joseph. “I’m going very gently.”

She had the same sweetness and calm with excitable characters. “Lively and aggressive natures think that they are working wonders when they are only making a noise,” she told Soeur St. Jean. “You won’t do any good by dashing at things in a hurry; when we hurry we do nothing that is worthwhile.” Then came the practical point: “Give me the consolation of seeing that you are trying with your writing.” Not long afterwards she returned to the same theme: “Don’t get excited because the children won’t learn; and never, never, get worked up about it. Perhaps you are at St. Hubert for the sake of one single soul.” To the sisters in general she said: “Gentleness is a necessity for us and we do not remain serene and peaceful unless we have real virtue. When we are not being tried by anyone, it is easy to think that we are gentle and in possession of our

own soul; but we should thank God when he tests our patience with awkward and obstreperous children. We must have the strength of Christian sweetness.”

“The strength of Christian sweetness” is a good summary of Julie’s ideas on the balance of virility and patience. Evenness was not colorlessness or absence of emotion, the mediocrity which substitutes conventionality for goodness and which conforms to a correct norm of conduct because it lacks the capacity to do anything else. In her, it was the complement of opposite qualities. The tension between two seemingly irreconcilable virtues, each rich and well developed, was the foundation of her spiritual equilibrium. She was therefore not afraid to let the sisters develop their own gifts, natural as well as supernatural, provided that balance was maintained. They had a duty to actualize their potentialities within the frame afforded by obedience. But in this as in everything else, perfection lay *in medio*. Even in the acquisition of virtue there had to be balance: “Cut one word in ten rather than speak at too great length ... but now don’t go and think you have to gag yourself and not speak at all!”

The word *ordre*, which was so frequently on Julie’s pen, had a wider connotation than the English ‘order.’ In the house it could include smooth running, organization, neatness, cleanliness, right provision. In the school, it covered discipline, uniform, timetable, surveillances, silence and punctuality. Julie spoke too of order of the spirit and of supernatural order. She was careful not to equate order with regimentation, but she did associate it with the right use of time.

She was glad when things ran smoothly. Her peasant ancestors in Picardy had favored orderliness in their cottages and farm work, in their family affairs and their small businesses; and she was of their stock. She therefore kept good accounts. Her provision was as prudent as she could make it, and she encouraged all to work towards the common good as a team. “Thank God all has been in order,” she wrote from St. Valery in 1804, “no one to nurse and no one to reprimand.” Ghent began to develop the true spirit of Notre Dame when Julie could say: “All is in order at last! We are doing one thing at a time!” While Amiens gave proof of falling away from the primitive spirit when “the whole house became unsettled and thoroughly disorderly.” The importance which she attached to order was evident in a letter sent to Soeur Anastasie at Jumet in 1809: “We are very busy. I’m getting a bit of order into Namur. Soeur St. Joseph and I spend our lives putting houses in order for other people to occupy. God be praised!” On occasion she would come down to details: “It seems to me that the last time I was in Jumet your beds were not very well made ... you must insist on tidiness there and have all those that are carelessly made done again.” She was horrified at the lack of cleanliness in the poor school at Ghent and at the state of the floors in Jumet. St. Hubert, on the contrary, was a joy to visit because its classrooms were “clean and orderly and nicely whitewashed.” She would tolerate the pile of *boulets* for winter fuel in the court-yard at Namur, but did not consider it a suitable ornament for the establishment when the new postulants were due to arrive from Flanders. “I am bringing with me two Flemish postulants,” she wrote to Mère St Joseph. “Please would you have the beds made. These Flemish girls are as clean as can be, so you had better put up fresh bed-curtains and get the fuel pile out of the court-yard.”

In more important matters too, order had its place. It was disorderly to live in conditions which did not make the right kind of home for sisters and children. St. Nicolas was given up because of the damp, the first house at Namur because it was too small; and the cloisters at Ghent had to be given extra buildings and warmth, “otherwise, it is so cold that they will all be ill.”

The exterior order in the house was meant to foster an inner spirit which would show itself in the good harmony of the community, in method and in quietness. Nothing upset this spiritual order so much as tantrums, outbursts of temper, “*petits rats*” as Julie called them. “They must be chased or there will be disorder in no time.” Once these were overcome, good organization would do the rest. “Put plenty of order in all that you do,” Julie instructed Soeur St. Jean. “God loves order, he blesses it, and he does everything in an orderly way himself! . . . God is a God of order and his children should be like him.” Quietness reflecting tranquility was a powerful help. It always worried Julie to find a noisy establishment even when, as at St. Hubert, the noise seemed to be made by the house itself. “I never knew a house which echoed so much ... The noise! No wonder Sister N. can’t keep an orderly class.”

On the supernatural level, Julie cherished the recollection and peace which are the tranquility of order. She contrasted them with noise, brashness and agitation. “What a blessing interior order is,” she said. “People who don’t fuss, who don’t let you know all about what they are doing, but who just go faithfully, seem at a casual glance to be accomplishing less than those who draw attention to themselves, but in reality grace is using them far more easily ... Let us stay in our silence, our calm, our order.”

Order, however, was far removed from regimentation. No two houses were exactly alike, and Julie never agreed with the rigidity that would impose a total uniformity. In fact, she opposed it. For her the bond that held the congregation in unity was interior rather than exterior: a common spirit, a common rule and a common apostolate; not adherence to a common timetable. On this she stood firm; and her firmness pointed the right way not only to her contemporaries, but to missionaries later who wanted to make of Ohio, Oregon or Guatemala reproductions of Namur.

Julie’s last point of order was the right use of time. She was anxious that none should be wasted, and saw to it that both the sisters and the boarders were well occupied. “Time is like loose change,” she said. “It is given to us here below to buy the real things of eternity ... Let us use it! Teach the children, too, to use it well.”

It was part of her balance and sense of beginnings that Julie saw the work in its intrinsic value and not in terms of quantity. The present day ‘heresy of numbers’ troubled her not at all. “Numbers as such do not glorify God,” she said to Soeur St. Jean. “They do not matter. You tell me that you have very few children at this season and that it will be the same every year ... All right then, you will get used to it.” Not long afterwards she wrote again: “So the children do not stay long? Well, do what you can while they are there ... Give of your best even if only a few profit.” Probably all her ideas

on a good foundation, courage, patience and right order are in that. She used the words again towards the end of her life, when she was speaking to the sisters in September 1815, and they summarize an ideal of selfless apostolate which she had lived before she preached it to others: "You say to me, 'There are so few who really profit by all our work' ... I say to you, 'It does not matter!' Let us go on sowing the seed just the same. Give of your best even if only a very few profit. It would be satisfying to see results, but it is not results that are important ... Let us do what we can and God will do the rest."