

“No graces are greater
than the gift of friendship.”

St. Julie Billiart



artwork courtesy of Ohio Province Archives

Students for the first Notre Dame school were recruited in a most direct way. A novice and postulant were sent out with bells, and the two walked along the streets ringing their bells and spreading the news.

The times were marked by great hardship. The Revolution had just ended and life in France was difficult, especially for the poor. Social and economic reforms had not yet begun. Crop failures drove the cost of bread and other foods beyond the reach of many. There was no proper medical care. The absence of schools generated an overwhelming need for education. The repression of the Catholic Church was just lifting.

Imagine. In the midst of this turmoil, Father Joseph Varin — a spiritual advisor and Church leader in Amiens — begged Julie Billiart and her good friend Françoise Blin de Boudon to begin a religious congregation to educate young girls.

“Delay no longer, but in God’s name go forward! Establish a religious congregation to extend and perpetuate your work for God’s neglected children.”

As the two prayed to Our Lady for guidance, Father Varin hastened their decision by bringing them eight poor little orphan girls to care for, five of whom had nothing.

About a year later, during Mass celebrated by Father Varin, Julie and Françoise consecrated themselves to God. They vowed to devote their lives to the Catholic education of orphans and the formation of teachers, and to go where they were needed. It was February 2, 1804, the feast of the Purification of Mary, and they decided to call themselves the Sisters of Notre Dame. Julie was 53 years old.

Julie took charge of the spiritual formation of her religious family. She was particularly rigorous in her training of

Françoise, who was responsible for the scholastic training of the Sisters. For the next two years, as the congregation flourished, our Sisters were happy to teach the children who came to them at their convent on the rue Nueve. But soon, Mother Julie and Françoise, who by then had taken the name of Sister St. Joseph, concluded they needed to open a school. With help from the Bishop, they found the space they needed in Amiens.

Their marketing strategy to recruit the first class of students was simple but effective. A novice and postulant of the Sisters of Notre Dame were sent out onto the streets of Amiens. Each was given a bell to ring as loudly as possible. When enough children had gathered they made the following announcement:

“You are hereby notified that the Sisters of Notre Dame are opening a free school for girls. Go tell this to your parents.”

It worked. The very next morning 60 pupils arrived for registration.

The school’s impact was soon evident in the town. Neighbors commented on how well the children behaved, and how excited they were about their classes. The clergy saw the transformation as well, and passed along the word of this first Notre Dame school to fellow priests in other dioceses.

With a reputation for excellence spreading, Mother Julie began receiving requests to establish schools elsewhere. The first came from Ghent, then Montdidier. It was not long before schools and the congregation expanded beyond France.

This is the third in a series of stories about Julie Billiart and Françoise Blin de Bourdon, Foundresses of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur. Their remarkable friendship and the deep spirituality they shared shaped the congregation in its earliest days. They continue to influence our international Congregation and friends today, more than two centuries later. To read the first two stories about the two friends who founded the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, go to our website at www.sndohio.org and click on About Us.

“*I* thank you from a
very affectionate heart.”

Françoise Blin de Bourdon



The Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur

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