

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

St. Julie Billiart



illustration drawn by Genevieve de la Croix, SNDdeN

It was post-Revolution France, and Julie and Françoise began building a system of schools to educate all children and the women who taught them.

Building a community and a school system...

In a small chapel in Rue Neuve in Amiens, France on February 2, 1804, Julie Billiart and Françoise Blin de Bourdon vowed to devote themselves to the Christian education of girls, and to the formation of teachers who would go wherever they were needed to meet the needs of the poor. And they took the name of the Sisters of Notre Dame.

News of the congregation spread rapidly. Two months later, three postulants joined the new community, and the Sisters received their first request to establish a school — in France.

At the time, it was widely accepted that only men needed to be educated, to prepare them to attend to the affairs of state. It was felt that women, whose main job was to raise the family, had little need for such things. And the poor had no need for schooling at all. Education was confined largely to the upper classes.

But that's not how Julie saw things.

Julie felt education was an urgent necessity for all children — not just the aristocratic and working classes. To her, education was a right, not a social privilege.

She and Françoise found themselves in a unique position to influence the educational structure of the country, and most important, to restore Christianity to its core. So they acted quickly, accepting invitations from priests and bishops to start schools nearly as quickly as they were received.

In 12 years, from the founding of the congregation until Julie's death, the Sisters of Notre Dame opened schools in 19 cities in France and Belgium. They built a system of schools that educated the materially poor as well as the well-to-do, and trained Sisters to teach in all of them.

Julie and Françoise devised a teacher-training model to educate *“the whole child: heart, head and hands.”* And it would be denied to no one. Eventually the curriculum was remarkably comprehensive. It

Heart, head and hands...

reflected the classical education of Françoise and the spirituality and practicality of Julie.

For the heart—there were classes in Religion, Sacred History, Church History, Drawing and Music.

For the head—French Language and Literature, Arithmetic, General History.

And for the hands—needlework, plain and fancy. Julie considered it important to train young girls to be able to do manual work that would enable them to earn their living in the future. Useful work, as Julie saw it. No frivolities.

Julie also insisted that one point of doctrine serve as the heart of all studies: The goodness of God. Students were taught or learned to see this truth from their most tender years on. Most were in the habit of writing it as a motto at the beginning of their class exercises.

However, Julie said she did not wish to turn out little devotees but good Christians “*who would be useful in society, great souls capable of persevering in doing well.*” In other words, they would train strong, good women.

As time went on, Julie and Françoise opened Notre Dame schools not just for the poor but for young girls of all classes of society. Still when Julie spoke to her Sisters, she made it clear who was the priority.

“Have in view especially the children of the poor, the most neglected part of human society. Accept the very poorest little girls, the ones who can’t pay a penny.”

And wherever she went, Julie made sure to establish the poor schools first.

Today, 208 years later, that priority remains unchanged. Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur have never opened a school or ministry unless it has included, in some way, work on behalf of poor people.

This is the fourth in a series of stories about the two remarkable women who founded the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur in 1804 – Julie Billiart and Françoise Blin de Bourdon. In the first story we visited the moment when the two first met. In the second, we looked at their improbable friendship, their shared spirituality and the founding of the congregation. The third chapter explored the opening of the first Notre Dame school in Amiens, France. We pick up the thread in the evolution of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, tracing the growing influence of Julie and Françoise on education and social change in France and beyond. To read the previous stories, please visit 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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