

FRANÇOISE BLIN DE BOURDON BECOMES MOTHER ST. JOSEPH — MOTHER GENERAL

It was 1820, four years after Julie Billiart's death and Françoise Blin de Bourdon's unanimous election as the congregational leader of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur. The community was 16 years old, with 82 Sisters and novices. They had established 10 Notre Dame schools in Belgium and earned a reputation as superior educators and faith-filled women — and this presented a problem.

ASSAULT BY GOVERNMENT

Years earlier, the Sisters were forced to move from France to Belgium to escape religious persecution during the reign of Emperor Napoleon. Now they were dealing with a similar challenge from king William. William envisioned establishing a single church of Belgium, which he alone would rule. To achieve this, he needed to rid the country of Catholicism — and especially faith-filled women who were superior educators.

He started by issuing a decree stating “teaching congregations would be tolerated.” But only until there were enough government schools in place to educate children of privilege. Soon one decree followed another. Each more hostile than the next. All with the goal of slowing down and eventually stopping the growth of Catholic education in the country.

The king set especially rigorous qualifications just for members of “teaching organizations.”

RULES OF SUPPRESSION

The Sisters had to submit detailed accounts of income and expenses to the government. The king also dictated how many Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur could live in each convent in his country — 50 in Namur, including novices, 14 in Gembloux, 12 in Dinant, and 5 in Andenne. And it was strictly forbidden to transfer Sisters from one house to another.

Furthermore, French Sisters were not permitted to teach in the country, and leaders of religious congregations could not be French.

When this law became known, Mother St. Joseph offered to resign. But the Sisters would not accept her resignation. So she sacrificed her citizenship of birth to become a citizen of Belgium to continue to serve as the congregational leader of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur.

With so many new and different rules and restrictions, the Sisters found it virtually impossible to accept new members and to replace sick Sisters. In a letter to a friend, Mother St. Joseph wrote about the constantly changing laws: “It's a means of killing us by inches so that there won't be too loud an outcry.”

Living the mission of Notre Dame had never been easy. Now the constantly changing laws made life virtually unpredictable. Yet the requests continued to come — asking for more and more new Notre Dame schools to be established in the country.

STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL

So despite the restrictions, and the vagaries of the time, Mother St. Joseph quietly went about continuing to build the community in Belgium.

For a time, it seemed as if the hostility from the government was lessening. The congregation began to feel as if it were back on solid ground. Suddenly vocations were flourishing again, and the Sisters started accepting more and more students in their schools. In Namur alone, there were 400 children in the day school, and more than 80 boarders. Could it be the worst was over?

Mother St. Joseph knew it was only a matter of time before the government returned to its heavy handed tactics. She was right. The lull was simply the result of a reorganization of the king's ministries. When the changes were complete, the hostile treatment of Sisters and other Catholic institutions returned with a vengeance.

Police routinely descended upon Notre Dame convents and schools, expelling Sisters usually because of their nationality. They were accused of turning boarding schools into the nucleus of conspiracy. One, two or even four Sisters at a time had to leave Jumet, Fleuris, St. Hubert, Liege, and Zele. Early one morning in Ghent, the police stormed the school and four Sisters were made to leave as they were teaching.

While she couldn't change the nationality of her Sisters, Mother St. Joseph insisted that no Sister of Notre Dame de Namur could ever be expelled from

Belgium for lack of qualifications. She developed rigorous courses and tests to make sure every Sister was thoroughly and professionally prepared to teach.

EXPANSION

The 10 years of Mother St. Joseph's second term as superior general was to end in 1826. She was now 70 years of age, and she made it clear she hoped the burden of the office would be carried by someone younger. It didn't happen. During a congregation-wide gathering, she was reelected for another term and she redoubled her efforts to keep the mission alive and vital.

Over the next five years she renovated, bought and expanded, despite being assailed by war, epidemics and adverse political climate. "The more we build, the more our buildings fill up," she wrote. "I don't know when it will be finished."

By the time of her death in 1838, there were 21 Notre Dame schools — all in Belgium. Mother St. Joseph would not live to see her spiritual daughters become missionaries to the New World, setting sail for Cincinnati in 1840. Others would establish mission territories in Britain in 1845, and in Africa in 1894.

Today, the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur continue our 210-year-old mission on five continents. Just as in the days of Julie and Françoise, it is carried out by Sisters and friends who are committed to educating the poor in the most abandoned places.

*This is the sixth 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 previous editions we explored the early days of their friendship and the founding and early years of the congregation. To read the previous stories, please visit our website at www.sndohio.org and click on **About Us**.*

Cover photo is a portrait of Mother St. Joseph (formerly Françoise Blin de Bourdon) painted by artist Monsieur Jacquin.

“I thank you from a very affectionate heart.”

Mother St. Joseph
(formerly Françoise Blin de Bourdon)



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“This is a very difficult century; we must, therefore, call down the Holy Spirit with the fullness of his gifts, because He alone is capable of directing our ship through these storms.”

Mother St. Joseph (formerly Françoise Blin de Bourdon) in response to King William's hostile measures against Catholicism in 1825.