

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

St. Julie Billiart



This illustration depicts the moment Julie Billiart and Françoise Blin de Bourdon first met. It took place in a small, sparse apartment in Amiens while Julie was an invalid. This drawing by Sister Vincent de Paul, SNDdeN, captures the mood of uncertainty Françoise experienced at that time.

*T*hey appeared to have so little in common. Julie Billiard's family was considered peasant stock, belonging to the artisan and small business class. Françoise Blin de Bourdon, a member of the aristocracy, was presented at the court of Louis XVI. When they met, Françoise was a vibrant 38-year-old. Julie was 43, paralyzed and bedridden.

The two met in 1794 in Amiens, France. It was around the end of the French Revolution and Julie had been brought to Amiens from Compiègne, where she had fled when it was no longer safe in her hometown of Cuvilly. She arrived in Amiens after a profound religious experience.

While in Compiègne, Julie had a vision of a group of sisters standing around a cross dressed in a habit she had never before seen. The features of each sister's face appeared perfectly clear to her, and a voice said,

“Behold the spiritual daughters whom I give to you in the Institute which will be marked by My Cross.”

Françoise was already in Amiens. She had been brought there a year earlier and held by revolutionaries. She was released just days before being condemned to die by guillotine. During her confinement, Françoise spent the time exploring a personal desire to make God the setting for anyone and anything that might come into her life. When the political climate changed and she was released, she vowed to act on this calling.

The first meeting of the two took place in a small apartment that a

mutual friend had arranged for Julie. As Françoise approached the invalid's bed, Julie smiled and said with a fractured voice,

“I saw you in Compiègne.”

The experience unnerved Françoise. She thought Julie was either delirious or deranged, and chose not to ask what she meant by “I saw you...” How could that be? They'd never met.

Françoise was also disappointed by what she'd seen. She'd heard so much about Julie's steadfast faith and deep spirituality, but she could barely understand Julie's labored speech. Besides, the sickroom atmosphere completely repulsed her. By all accounts, it was not the best of beginnings.

But Françoise was drawn to return. She came to read to Julie, to care for her and to pray with her. Gradually, her discomfort was transformed into a deep admiration for the virtue she discovered hidden beneath Julie's pain-ridden exterior. A holy friendship sprang up between the two women whose backgrounds were so different.

Françoise loved Julie for her view of things spiritual, her unwavering and vigorous faith, her deep and invincible confidence, and her intense and active love of God. Julie loved Françoise for her innate nobility, her great capacity for self-sacrifice, her sweet serenity of spirit and her wholehearted desire to please God.

The common thread of their growing friendship was a deep personal spirituality, and an unshakable belief in the goodness of God.

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

Françoise Blin de Bourdon



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