

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

St. Julie Billiart



original document, Ohio Province Archives

Julie Billiart and Françoise Blin de Bourdon corresponded constantly. In this letter, Julie ends by asking, “Good bye; pray all you can for me. All your good sisters send you many kind regards.”

*A*fter a less than pleasant first meeting on that October morning in 1794, a most improbable friendship began to blossom. Françoise was initially repulsed by Julie's physical handicaps. But her unease didn't last long and soon she was visiting every day. Françoise read to Julie. She brought healthy homemade soups and fed them to Julie. She made Julie laugh.

The two began praying together.

It didn't take long for Françoise to develop a deep admiration for Julie's spirituality and profound goodness. Eventually she confided to Julie that she had decided to enter the Carmelite community and wanted Julie to become her spiritual guide.

Now this was a problem. Julie had a strong sense that Françoise was to work with her later on, and she didn't want to lose her to the Carmelites. But she agreed, and assured Françoise she would do her best to guide her — even though she was just a poor, unlettered peasant and Françoise was a rich and cultured gentlewoman.

Meanwhile, news of Julie's spiritual gifts spread, and a group of women started visiting Julie in her small apartment at the Hotel Blin in Amiens. They gathered around Julie's bedside, forming a little community. An altar was set up in her room and a local priest, Father Antoine Thomas, quietly celebrated Mass. Under Father Thomas's guidance, the group said a series of common prayers, carried out good works with the local churches and the poor, and they addressed Julie by an accepted monastic title, "Ma Mere."

These women stayed for various lengths of time, praying with Julie and learning about her good God. But soon, each left to pursue her life in other towns and cities. Except for Françoise, that is. She stayed on for a little longer, but then she too had to return to her family's estate to care for her aged and very sick father.

During their time apart, Julie and Françoise kept in contact through lengthy letters. Their correspondence revealed the deepest hopes and fears for their futures, as well as their growing understanding of each other and their relationship to the good God. Julie unburdened her heart to Françoise, writing about anything and everything — especially reports of her wretched health. Julie constantly fought infections and weaknesses. She was always cold.

She also encouraged Françoise in her prayer life, her study of scripture and how to improve on her daily meditation. Occasionally Julie discussed with Françoise her desire to enter the Carmelites, and she reminded her often that failure in prayer is sometimes as helpful as success.

Françoise was busy caring for her father, but she patiently read Julie's notes. She also looked after Julie's financial needs, sending her money, buttery cakes, muslin to sell, and more money when the price of bread rose. She even sent Julie a small writing desk.

After the death of her father, Françoise returned to Amiens and Julie. However, in a short time, the harassment of religious women and men began to heat up and they had to leave. A friend offered Julie the use of her small country house in Bettencourt, a little village about 20 miles from Amiens. And so Julie, Françoise and their mentor Father Thomas left Amiens in the dead of night.

For the next three years, Julie and Françoise devoted themselves to the people of the village — teaching religion, reading and writing.

The good country air agreed with Julie, and her health improved enough for her to sit up in an arm chair. She even recovered her speech. For his part, Father Thomas began to recognize more fully that Julie was the recipient of many special graces — especially her remarkable gift of prayer. He was amazed that a person with such physical disabilities could exercise so much influence over whomever she met. He interpreted this as an indication that Julie was destined for a particular work in God's Church. But the circumstances made the idea seem completely absurd.

Still, Father Thomas was struck by the thought of how much Julie and Françoise were able to accomplish when they worked together. He saw the need in France for religious congregations to devote themselves to the Christian education of young girls belonging to poor families. It was a concept he wrestled with constantly. Was it possible that a severely handicapped woman and a daughter of the aristocracy could possibly make a difference?

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

Françoise Blin de Bourdon



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