



A Saint for Our Time— The Life of St. Julie Billiart

Script

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Subject: Vocation Education
Topic: Life of St. Julie Billiart

1. Title Frame: The Life of St. Julie

I'd like to share a story with you: the story of Saint Julie Billiart. She established, and her charism continues to animate, the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur: a community of Roman Catholic Religious women who have started educational ministries all over the world.

2. A Saint for our time

Julie was born on July 12, 1751, in the village of Cuvilly which is located northeast of Paris, France. The name Billiart had been known in that region for a long time, the family having formerly been one of some importance. At the time of Julie's birth, they still owned a small piece of land and a shop where linens and laces were sold.

3. Marie Rose Julie

Baptized "Marie Rose Julie," her earliest years were surrounded by a loving family and shaped by the rhythms of country life: of Baptisms, First Communions, weddings, funerals — and the succession of great religious feasts celebrated within the ancient walls of the parish church. The parish priest often witnessed Julie at prayer, and noted with some amazement the depth of her prayer. He decided that Julie should have the joy of receiving her First Communion at the age of nine, instead of 13 or 14, which was the practice at that time. This privilege nourished Julie's continued growth in her relationship with God.

4. Born to be a teacher

Although it wouldn't be considered much by our standards today, Julie did have some formal education. Her uncle was the schoolmaster, and recognizing Julie's natural gifts, he was able to keep her in the schoolroom for a little longer than was normal for girls of her economic class. Julie loved learning and loved to share knowledge with others. She would gather those children of the village too poor, or too neglected, to attend school. She effectively shared with them her lessons from school and Church, and many began to see her as a natural teacher who was wise beyond her years in matters of faith.

5. Helping her family

When Julie was sixteen, thieves broke into her father's shop and carried off his best stock of linens and laces. This meant bankruptcy, the loss of their little plot of land, and increasing poverty for the family. Julie borrowed a horse and rode to a larger town to sell the goods that had not been stolen. She then looked around to see what else she could do to help support her family. It was harvest time and Julie, knowing that neighboring farmers could use extra workers, immediately found a place among the adult reapers.

6. A teacher in the fields

Julie tried to make the work lighter for all by using her gifts of song and storytelling to entertain her friends while they worked. Remember: these people had few books, no TV, movies, radios or computers. Storytelling was a main source of entertainment, and Julie was one of the best story tellers around. In addition to her heavy farm labors, Julie continued her instruction of the children, and found time to care for the sick of the village.

7. Wounded heart, broken body

Julie was the main breadwinner in the family until the winter of 1774, when she witnessed an attempt on her father's life. The shock of that experience led to physical illness. The belief at that time was that illnesses were caused by unhealthy blood. Julie received the typical treatment of having blood removed. This further weakened her, and led to the total paralysis of her legs and partial paralysis of her vocal chords.

8. A quiet life (teaching from bed)

In spite of her physical suffering, Julie continued to share her faith and humor with others. Rich and poor alike would come to her bedside to hear her talk about her good God. The children came to learn their catechism for their First Communion. The great ladies from Paris who had a summer chateaux nearby had heard of the Saint of Cuvilly. They came to be inspired by her simple way of sharing the Good News in a time when life was becoming more complex.

9. Revolution (hay cart)

At about the same time Julie became ill, an illness of a different sort struck her country. History calls it the French Revolution. That war tore apart the social and political structures of France including the educational system and the Church. Anyone who argued with the revolution's philosophy became the hunted victim of the guillotine. That included Julie, who refused to follow the priests who took an oath of allegiance to the government, instead of one to the Church. Still paralyzed, Julie had no choice but to flee her home. One of her friends concealed Julie and her niece Felicity at her chateau. Julie's presence there was reported, and again Julie and Felicity took flight. This time loyal friends took Julie right by the angry mob demanding her capture. How? Hidden under a load of hay in an open farm cart.

10. A vision of the future

Her hay cart ride ended in the city of Compiègne. Again Julie found no safety; and five times she narrowly escaped arrest. Even during times of intense pain, suffering and fear, Julie's deep faith in God's goodness and love was what kept her going. Her trademark phrase was: "Ah! Qu'il est bon, le bon Dieu!" Oh! How good is the good God! In 1793 Julie's faith enabled her to believe what she saw in a vision as she prayed: women grouped around the cross and the words: "Behold the spiritual daughters I will give you, in an institute which will be marked by my cross."

11. Friends help shape the future

The worst part of the Revolution ended in 1794, and Julie could come out of hiding. One of her friends invited Julie to make her home in the house where she was living, in the city of Amiens. Julie and her niece Felicity, shared a small apartment, and there Julie met Françoise Blin de Bourdon. Françoise and Julie quickly became friends. Françoise experienced the magnetism of Julie who, though completely helpless and unable to speak distinctly, attracted a number of women to share her prayer-life and spiritual wisdom. On her part, Julie recognized Françoise as one of the daughters she was promised, in her vision at Compiègne. Julie's physical state improved: she was able to sit up and speak clearly. It was time to go to work. She and Françoise joined priests in attempts to re-evangelize the people of the area.

12. Teachers of the poor

Françoise made the decision to devote the remainder of her life (as well as her extensive fortune) to working with Julie. Encouraged to recruit others to help them with their work, they formed a small experimental community in 1803. Since girls had always been neglected in the educational system, Julie and Françoise made the work of their community, a school for poor girls. They knew these girls would grow up to be the mothers of the next generation. Together they trained their sisters to teach religion, reading, writing, arithmetic, sewing and lace making.

13. Sunflower

Julie's hope was that her students would experience God's goodness while receiving a basic education and learning a trade. In this way they could support themselves and their families. She also tried to instill, in her sisters and in the children, a sense of simplicity in dealing with life. Julie described simplicity as resembling the sunflower, which follows all the movements of the sun. "In the same way," she said, "the mind and heart should always turn toward, and follow, God alone."

14. A step of faith

Many people admired the work Julie and Françoise were doing. Many also thought how much more effective they could be if only Julie could walk. In 1804, while making a retreat, Julie was asked by a priest to pray for a special intention. She did not know the intention was her own cure. A few days later the priest came back and said to her, "Mother, if you have any faith, take a step in honor of the Sacred Heart of Jesus." Julie stood and took her first step in over 22 years! The remaining 12 years of her life, would find her walking hundreds of miles, throughout France and Belgium.

15. A community established

By the time of Julie's cure, the "experimental community" had become permanent. Julie, Françoise and their first novices took vows as Sisters on February 2, 1804. Julie named her community Notre Dame, which is French for "Our Lady." Her hope was that her sisters would model Mary's faithfulness in their lives. Within two years the community had grown to 18 members.

16. From France to Belgium

Julie's simplicity lead her wherever she felt God was calling her. One school led to another, as the community of women helping Julie grew. The Sisters branched out to St. Nicholas (Belgium) in 1806, Montdidier (France), and Namur (Belgium) in 1807, Rubempre (France) and Jumet (Belgium) in 1808, St. Pierre and St. Hubert (both in Belgium) in 1809.

17. Hearts wide as the world

On February 2, 1806 Julie had another vision in which she saw her daughters traveling across the seas bringing the Light of the Gospel to those nations which had not yet received the Good news. That vision was confirmed in the words of the Bishop of Ghent in 1809. He said, "You are not intended to remain in one diocese, Mere Julie; your vocation is to go all over the world."

18. Challenges in Amiens

That vision was threatened by the Bishop of Amiens. He wanted Julie's sisters to serve only in his diocese. Julie already had sisters in other places. She was not willing to cut off those sisters and schools from the motherhouse she had established. The Bishop of Namur invited her to move the motherhouse from Amiens to Namur. In faithfulness to what Julie felt was God's will, she accepted that invitation and moved the heart of the community to Namur in 1809. Thus her sisters became the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur.

19. Love for children

The work of the community continued to grow as foundations were made at Nouveau Bois (Ghent) in 1810, Zele in 1811, Andenne and Gembloux in 1813, and Fleurus in 1814. She saw education as the greatest work on earth, and the children taught by her sisters, as her own. Spare moments were spent in the classrooms and on the playgrounds. Each individual child, held for Julie a manifestation of God's goodness. She urged her teachers to teach the students what they needed for life, so that goodness could shine through, for all.

20. Walking love of God

Julie's joy was a kind of enthusiasm that bubbled over into others. It characterized the compassion she felt for all she met. Yes, times were difficult. She knew that, as well as anyone, yet she reached out and touched all she met with the message of her good God. She earned for herself the reputation of being the walking love of God.

21. Belief in God's goodness

The work was hard, but Julie's faith in God's goodness allowed her to meet every challenge with a smile. So a friend later said, "The joy in which Julie lived, was the fruit of her simplicity...smiling herself, she enjoyed making others smile." People loved her. As one said, "Mère Julie was every where at once, and somehow, you always felt better for having seen her."

22. To heaven on foot

Economic hardship, war, poverty, crumbling schools and Governments, a shortage of priests, homelessness, violence, abuse within families, hunger. . . Julie saw it all. She knew what she was talking about when she told her sisters, "We live in a century when so much strength of soul, so much character, is needed." And, "we must have courage in the century we live in." These words can also be a comfort for us, as we face the same problems in today's world.

23. Ah! How Good is the Good God

When Julie died on April 8, 1816 her community consisted of 83 sisters serving in two countries. Today, we, her sisters, number around 2000 and we serve on 5 continents making known God's goodness and love of the poor through a Gospel way of life, community and prayer. Continuing a strong educational tradition, we take our stand with poor people, especially women and children, in the most abandoned places. Each of us commits her one and only life, to work with others, to create justice and peace for all.

24. Logo and Contact Information



For more information, contact: Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, National Vocation Team
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