

Characteristics of Notre Dame Mission Spirituality



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of
Notre Dame
Mission Spirituality**

Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur
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INTRODUCTION

Mission and Charism/Mission and Ministry

Religious congregations in the Catholic tradition are founded by men and women who feel called to carry out the mission of Jesus according to a particular spirit. That spirit, or spirituality, is known as charism. Each religious congregation has the same mission rooted in the baptismal call to discipleship. The mission is the mission of Jesus — to bring about the reign of God.

However, the charism of each order is different because the vision, or spirituality, of each foundress or founder is unique. Thus in carrying out the basic mission, the members of each congregation manifest the particular charism of the foundress/founder.

In addition, the manner of carrying out the mission (i.e., ministerial focus) may vary, according to the particular needs present when the order was founded and according to the ongoing discernment of members in response to the contemporary situation.

The following pages are an attempt to describe the characteristics of the charism of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur.

Historical Development

The order was founded in 1804 by St. Julie Billiart and Françoise Blin de Bourdon. From the beginning, Julie had no doubt about the mission of the congregation. Her one aim was to love the “good God” and to bring others to love this good God. She saw the mission of the order as identical to the mission of Jesus.

In carrying out this mission, Julie was called to respond to the lack of religious education in post-revolutionary France; she established schools as the primary ministry of the new congregation. Julie had a clear focus on the primary mission - in her words, “to save souls.” She saw the ministry of teaching in the schools as the means or the good work necessary to accomplish the mission.

As the congregation grew with thousands of Sisters of Notre Dame staffing and administering hundreds of educational institutions at every level on five continents, the distinction between mission and ministry became somewhat blurred. If the question were posed prior to 1960, “What is the mission of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur?”, the response would most likely have been “teaching” (meaning classroom instruction). This response would change in the latter half of the twentieth century. In the 1960s, societal change, the process

of Vatican II Church renewal, and a new awareness of ministerial needs called the Sisters of Notre Dame to evaluate the ways in which the congregation was carrying out the original Notre Dame charism. Sisters reached out to a variety of new ministries which they saw as ways to live out the Notre Dame charism in response to contemporary needs. Thus Notre Dame ministries changed, but the Notre Dame charism remains the same.

Need to Articulate Charism

At this time, there is a need to articulate the characteristics of our mission spirituality in a clear and meaningful way. Persons who work with the Sisters and those who continue the work of Notre Dame in educational institutions have voiced a desire to know and incorporate the Notre Dame spirituality into their lives in mission.

Specifically, the content of this booklet may serve the following purposes:

- to introduce co-workers and sponsored institution board members to the Notre Dame charism,
- to guide Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur in reflecting on the communal dimension of their ministries,

- to assist in the discernment of change of ministry,
- and to facilitate review of sponsored institutions.

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FOUNDATIONAL CHARISM: THE GOODNESS OF GOD

At the core of Notre Dame spirituality is St. Julie Billiart's belief and experience that "God is good." Such a simple statement, yet what a depth of meaning!

Julie's belief that God is good enabled her to face life with a trusting and joyful spirit that gave meaning to all her life experiences. "Ah! How good is the good God!" was an exclamation continually on her lips. The one aim of her life was to love and bring others to love this God whom she knew to be good.

It is not surprising then that the first articles of the Constitutions of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur read:

The Congregation of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur was founded by Marie Rose Julie Billiart, a woman filled with love for God and God's people. She responded to the call to commit her life completely to God and to spread everywhere the Gospel message that God is indeed Good.

(Constitutions, Article 1)

In the spirit of St. Julie Billiart and the tradition of the Congregation, we, the Sisters of Notre Dame de

*Namur, see ourselves situated within
God's continuing action in history.
Our common aim is to express in our
time, as Julie did in hers, that God is
good.*

(Constitutions, Article 9)

All those in mission in the spirit of Notre Dame are called to proclaim the good news of God's goodness through word and action. In a postmodern society where people are plagued by the erosion of traditional values, by the insecurity of total relativity, and by the pain of self-doubt and a loss of meaning, there is a great hunger to experience the goodness of God, pervasive in all of creation and giving meaning to all of life.

The message of the Incarnation of Jesus—that God is and has been enfleshed in all of creation since the beginning of time—is the message of evangelization that the followers of Julie Billiart strive to proclaim. The Notre Dame charism calls the person in mission to be both the messenger and the message. The message is not only proclaimed but lived by the person in mission. Thus the messenger is recognized by certain characteristics that not only identify the messenger but also proclaim the message.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PERSON IN MISSION

Trust

A strong belief that God is good engenders an equally strong trust in God and in God's creation - an optimistic stance on life. Julie Billiart was able, to an heroic degree, to abandon herself to the all-wise ways of Divine providence. Her trust was tough and steady, tested by trials and suffering. She experienced God as a loving parent - "our good and tender Father" - who like the Abba of Jesus is ever faithful.

Julie passionately yearned to instill in others her own spirit of trust and her resulting freedom of spirit and action: "God knows how to make everything turn to the good of those who love with all their hearts and who put their trust in God." The mission of the followers of Julie is solidly founded on trust in the faithfulness of the good God, and all apostolic action is built on this foundation.

Liberty of Spirit

Trust in God's goodness is accompanied by a liberty of spirit which frees a person from taking herself/himself too seriously. God is to be trusted; God is in control. Julie believed that "the mark of true confidence in God is never to be shaken, no matter what

happens.” That liberty of spirit is shown in openness, flexibility, and serenity in the face of criticism and opposition — all qualities which speak of the wisdom and strength of a life focused on God’s goodness.

Liberty of spirit engenders a magnanimity of soul which is certainly characteristic of Julie’s spirituality. There was no place for pettiness in her approach to life. She encouraged her sisters to “cut from the whole cloth.” She had no patience for the fear that comes from smallness of mind and heart. “Better mistakes than paralysis,” was her advice.

With God’s grace, the Sisters of Notre Dame strive to develop in themselves and to share with co-workers and the people they serve the characteristics of trust, liberty of spirit, courage and wisdom.

Julie encouraged in her sisters deep union with God, liberty of spirit and courage, qualities needed for an apostolic vocation.

(Constitutions, Article 4)

Simplicity

Simplicity is a primary characteristic of the Notre Dame charism. A high priority was given to simplicity in the first Rule of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur (1818) and repeated again in the 1989 Constitutions:

“God knows how to make everything turn to the good of those who love with all their hearts and who put their trust in God.”

- St. Julie

The spirit of the Sisters is one of simplicity, charity and obedience.
(*Constitutions, Article 11*)

Simplicity, the single-heartedness that is a response of one's whole person to God experienced as good, was the outstanding mark of Julie's spirit from the beginning and the first quality in the spirit of the early sisters. Like the sun drawing the sunflower or the magnetic north attracting the needle of a compass, God held Julie and her sisters in a simplicity of response that was direct, total and uncomplicated. Simplicity affects all of life, one's entire style of being. It is at once Julie's great legacy and her great challenge, for simplicity is one and undivided; we cannot have it in one aspect of our lives and lack it in others.

A person with an inner quality of simplicity keeps focus on God and does not determine where God should be or how God should be. A person possessing simplicity can respond to new calls from God and moves with God as God continues to be revealed in the contemporary reality.

Centrality of Prayer

The ability to live a life of complete trust in God and total focus on God's action in all of life calls for a life of prayer and reflection. Notre Dame spirituality is centered in and flows from a tradition of contemplative action:

As the quality of our life response flows from our personal and communal prayer and asceticism, so the authenticity of our prayer flows from our life response.

(Constitutions, Article 46)

Continual attentiveness to God's presence in every aspect of life is the foundation of apostolic prayer. The needs and hopes and the joys and sorrows of all people - those known globally and locally - are brought to prayer. In God's loving presence, the person in mission gains a deeper understanding and is energized to reach out with a renewed sense of care. Mission-centered prayer calls for a heart attuned to hear God's word and a will to respond with Spirit-led action.

Like Mary, whose name we bear, we are called to hear the word of God and keep it. Our attentive listening shapes in us a contemplative and prophetic attitude toward the whole of life and enables us to act in ways which witness to God's love and justice.

(Constitutions, Article 47)

Notre Dame spirituality calls the person in mission to live in a continual cycle of prayer, an attentive presence to God's word and action in life, an openness to the transformative effect of God's presence, and a self-giving participation in the action of God's saving grace in the concrete historical reality.

Joy

In Julie, the spirit of trust and simplicity produced a manifest joy. She was known as the smiling saint. Joy is so much a characteristic of Notre Dame spirituality that at one point Julie declared that a particular convent was no longer a Notre Dame community because there was no joy there.

Followers of Julie are called to “become a community joyfully available to proclaim by presence and service to the good news of God’s liberating and reconciling love” (*Constitutions, Article 73*). In order to convincingly proclaim the goodness of God, the person in mission must feel the joy of that goodness and let that joy shine through as a message of salvation.

The Cross/Paschal Mystery

The joy of Notre Dame spirituality is the Christian joy rooted in the Paschal mystery. Julie’s joy was rooted in trust and strengthened by years of contemplative prayer in the midst of physical and mental suffering. The follower of Julie is called to embrace the cross, trusting in the mystery of life and death which lies at the center of Christian faith. Embrace of the inevitable suffering of the human condition is integral to the embrace of God’s action in all of life. This love of the cross was so much a part of

Julie's life that she continually called her followers to reach out to life's crosses with realism and self-giving love modeled on Jesus' acceptance of death on the cross.

Praised be Jesus! Praised be His holy cross! Let us love it. Let us carry it. May that be our joy for eternity.

Notre Dame spirituality calls for an embrace of the cross in all its embodiments:

- the human vulnerability to physical and mental pain and diminishment,
- the sometimes hostile consequences of taking action for God's reign in the here and now, being "disturbers of the unjust peace" (*ND Chapter Acts of 1975*),
- the pain and inconvenience caused by the movement from self-gratification to self-giving love.

Embrace of the cross is a test of authenticity, a sign that followers of Julie do not dilute the strong wine of the Gospel. Embrace of the cross places the person in ministry directly in line with Jesus' challenge to bear the cross. Julie focused on this challenge and emphasized that carrying crosses is necessary for true discipleship.

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Notre Dame spirituality leads the person in mission directly into the baptismal journey through death into resurrection, joy, liberation, hope and love. The journey is not made alone but in communion with the people of God. The journey has meaning because in the movement to fuller life, the reign of the good God is being accomplished.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MISSION

Christ-Centeredness

In Baptism, every Christian is called to a new identity as a disciple of Jesus and is empowered to engage in the mission of Jesus. Thus, the first articles of the mission section of our Constitutions call the followers of Julie Billiart to the mission of Jesus:

Through the needs of our world, God summons us to an ecclesial community to proclaim Jesus Christ and to participate in his liberating mission.

(Constitutions, Article 15)

We embrace this mission and seek that life in abundance which Jesus promised to all:

- *full communion with God*
- *liberation from sin and its consequences*
- *community rooted in justice, love and simplicity*

(Constitutions, Article 16)

Julie's view of the entire evangelical and educational enterprise of Notre Dame was in terms of Jesus who made the goodness of God known out of love. The methods and values of our ministry are to be those of Jesus.

In Julie's words, "Our good Jesus is our Way, our Life, our Truth." Thus, a loving familiarity with the Gospel is essential to the Notre Dame mission.

For the first disciples of Jesus, companionship and sending were not separate moments. Companionship with Jesus so filled their lives that it had to be shared and spread. Discipleship calls the person in mission, not only to proclaim the Gospel as message, but to share Jesus as a person to be known and loved and Christianity as a life to be lived, an experience to rejoice in.

The centrality of Jesus is the inevitable consequence of Julie's response to God because in Jesus God's goodness is made flesh.

Love for God's People

Julie Billiard was filled with a love of God and of all that God loves, particularly God's people. For her, each person possessed sublime dignity as an individual brought into being and loved by the good God. She saw the entire work of the Congregation as worthwhile, "to put one soul in the way of salvation." This deep respect for the dignity of every person is reflected in the call to mission in the Constitutions of the Sisters of Notre Dame.

We recognize the call of God in a growing consciousness throughout the world of the dignity and value of each person, race and nation, and of the ways in which society in its values, structures and systems denies this dignity.

(Constitutions, Article 20)

Julie's love for people was evidenced by her deep friendship with Françoise Blin de Bourdon, co-foundress of the Sisters of Notre Dame, her concern for the happiness and well-being of the sisters, and her burning desire to share the message of God's goodness with all people. Like Julie, the person in mission loves with particularity and with universality. No one is a stranger. Notre Dame spirituality calls for "hearts as wide as the world."

As a Congregation encompassing a diversity of peoples and cultures we want to develop a world-wide perspective which makes our own, wherever we are, the concerns of all people.

(Constitutions, Article 26)

We work with others to transform unjust structures and systems as we participate in creating new ways of relating which enable all to experience more fully the goodness of God.

(Constitutions, Article 23)

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the world."

...We commit ourselves to ongoing dialogue with believers of other faiths and with non-believers in our search for a deeper understanding of Truth.

(Constitutions, Article 27)

The Notre Dame charism calls for love that is not merely utopian. Rather, this love is the hard reality of loving with patient endurance and forgiveness, loving in the abrasiveness of daily relationships, and continuing to love without rancor or bitterness in the face of misunderstanding and opposition. It is this type of love which fosters the mission of community building. The Christian challenge that all may be one is reiterated in the mission statements of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur.

We commit ourselves to build community with all those with whom we live and work. We try to become a vital part of local churches and of the wider community.

(Constitutions, Article 38)

The Notre Dame mission, flowing from a deep love for God's people, is characterized by a deep respect for each person, the particular love of friendship, and a universal concern for all people. This love is manifested in ministry which proclaims God's goodness to all persons, builds friendship and community, reaches out to those who

lack resources to live a full human life, and fosters the development of social systems that are just and respectful of the dignity of each individual.

Preference for the Poor

Notre Dame's preference for the "poor in the most abandoned places" (*Rule of 1818*) flows directly from the priority given to the dignity of each individual. Julie knew well that people who are poor are the most likely to be deprived of a sense of dignity and a full experience of the blessings of creation. Reflection on scripture gave her a deep experience of God's preference for those who lack the necessities of full human life. Therefore she called her followers to a mission of preference for the poor:

We exist only for the poor, only for the poor, absolutely only for the poor.

This strongly articulated preference for the poor has kept the congregation in a state of healthy tension. Sister Ellen Gielty, former General Moderator, describes this preference as a statement of vision:

What makes this into a vision statement for me is that we will never fully achieve it. First, we know from experience that we will never identify who the poor are or where they are. We will always be challenged to seek

them. Sisters will continue to agonize over whether all of us should be in direct service to the poor or whether it is of more or equal importance to raise consciousness among the non-poor.

(Response)

Traditionally and at present, the Constitutions of the Sisters of Notre Dame support the high priority given to preference for the poor.

Through our developing understanding of mission, we search anew in each time and place for ways to spread the Gospel and to take our stand with the poor of the earth.

(Constitutions, Article 14)

In fidelity to Julie's preference for the poor in the most abandoned places, we choose to stand with poor people as they struggle for adequate means for human dignity.

(Constitutions, Article 17)

This priority necessitates action on behalf of justice. It is the poor who suffer from injustice and greed. Taking a stance on behalf of the poor and oppressed is merely empty rhetoric unless accompanied by action to build more just social structures.

In our decision making we give priority to situations in which we can:

- *respond to the needs of the local Church;*
- *promote Christian values by educating for justice and peace;*
- *accompany the poor as they work together to exercise their rights as human beings;*
- *work toward the alleviation of the effects of poverty;*
- *work toward the elimination of the systemic causes of poverty and oppression.*

(Constitutions, Directory 5)

The Notre Dame option and the option of the universal Church for the poor “continues to tantalize us and, like a stone in our shoes, never allows us to feel we have arrived. Rather it reminds us that we are always being beckoned to widen our horizons in response to the call of our mission” (*Response*). The 1996 Chapter Acts further emphasizes our preference for the poor and gives special priority to women and children.

Educational Dimension

Julie and early Sisters of Notre Dame established schools in response to God’s call. This call came through the experience of living in post-revolutionary France, where there was a critical lack of educational opportunity for youth, particularly those who were poor. The first Notre Dame

schools provided gratuitous instruction of poor children to prepare them for the duties appropriate to their state of life and for the sacraments (*Rule of 1818*). Thus the primary ministry of the Sisters of Notre Dame became education, chiefly in the classroom. As the congregation spread to the United States, Britain, Africa, Japan and Latin America, education of youth and the establishment of schools remained the greatest ministerial need. The Sisters of Notre Dame became experts in their teaching ministry, staffing and administering hundreds of schools around the globe.

For Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, education is more than a profession; it is a work of faith. From the beginning when Julie taught catechism to the workers in the hay fields, the purpose of teaching was clear: to make God known and therefore loved. In accordance with St. Paul's belief that hearing comes first, the followers of Julie have traditionally placed a high value on religious education, both in and out of the classroom.

Julie saw the classroom as a means to draw young people into an environment where they would have the opportunity to grow into their God-given potential. Her vision of education was broad and practical. She urged teachers to "let the foundations of the students' lives be laid on solid practical

faith, preach devotedness to God and our neighbor, by your conduct as well as your words. Save society and family life from useless members...Pave the way for lives of devotedness and fruitfulness.”

It is this broad view of education and, more recently, new perceptions of the needs of the Church and society that have called the Sisters from an exclusive focus on schools to a rich variety of ministries. At the same time, the value of the mission of education continues to be clearly enunciated in the most recent Congregational Constitutions.

According to our tradition, in all our ministries we value education as fundamental in bringing about the reign of God.

(Constitutions, Article 14)

We value the focus on education in our congregational tradition and give special attention to the educational dimension of our mission, which we carry out through a diversity of ministries among people at all levels of society.

(Constitutions, Article 18)

The implications of this value on the educational dimension of ministry are best expressed in the Directives of the Constitutions:

For Sisters
of Notre
Dame de
Namur,
education is
more than
a profession;
it is a work
of faith.

We encourage a style of ministry which enables people to develop a capacity to analyze experience, to recognize the presence of God therein, and to assume responsibility for shaping life according to Gospel values.
(Constitutions, Directive 2)

This directive is a modern paraphrase of Julie's direct and simple words:

Our aim is to form good Christians who know how to manage the household, their families, their affairs... and above all to be virtuous.

Responsiveness to God's Continuing Action in History

The Congregation of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur was founded in response to a call to give a particular ministerial service at a particular time in history. The need was a lack of opportunity for Christian education; the response was the establishment of schools.

Because Julie was so totally focused on responding to the call of her good God, those who engage in mission according to her charism are in continual discernment to recognize and respond to the action of God in contemporary society.

*Through the needs of our world,
God summons us as an ecclesial
community...*

(Constitutions, Article 15)

*We endeavor to discern the power
and presence of God acting in the his-
tory of our times. Our discernment is
rooted in:*

- *the word of God;*
- *the teachings of the Church;*
- *our congregational tradition;*
- *and the voices of the poor.*

(Constitutions, Article 19)

Both the sisters and those with whom they minister place a high value on awareness, analysis, and appropriate response to contemporary reality. What is changing? Where is new life surfacing? What new response is needed to God's continuing action in history? These are crucial questions that call for insightful and courageous ministerial response.

Marian Focus

By giving her congregation the name of Our Lady, Julie Billiart gave a strong indication of the Marian focus of the Sisters of Notre Dame. This focus is affirmed in the present Constitutions.

*Julie named her Congregation the Sis-
ters of Notre Dame as an expression*

*of her love for Mary, woman of faith,
who rejoiced in the glorious mystery
of salvation and in God's mercy to the
poor.*

(Constitutions, Article 8)

*As Sisters of Notre Dame, we give
a special place to Mary in our lives.
We strive to grow "in the spirit
of Mary, the virtue of Mary, the
strength and power of Mary."*

(Constitutions, Article 50)

Mary, the first disciple, the contemplative in action, is a model for those who strive to be in mission according to the Notre Dame charism. Mary welcomed the Word of God and gave that Word to the world. The spirit which the Sisters of Notre Dame desire to foster is a spirit of openness to God, serenity, joy, and self-giving love. These qualities embody the power of a woman whose Yes gave to God her whole being and gave God's people a model of discipleship.

Relationship to the Church

The Catholic Church of post-revolutionary France was beleaguered by loss of faith, humiliated by Napoleon, and divided by schism. Yet the ministry of Julie and the early Sisters of Notre Dame was characterized by ecclesial fidelity, loyal evangelization and zealous catechesis.

Julie was challenged to maintain a delicate balance between her own founding insights and the differing views of clergymen. However, she established the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur as an ecclesial body, existing within the Church and ministering in the healthy tension of charism and institutional authority.

The Constitutions of the Congregation call for followers of Julie to maintain this healthy tension.

*Along with all baptized Catholics,
we acknowledge the authority of the
Pope in accordance with universal
church law.*

(Constitutions, Article 24)

*Within the context of local churches,
we act responsibly and in cooperation
with both the diocesan bishop and
the people with whom we work...*

(Constitutions, Article 25)

Mary, the
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charism.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

For the person in mission, there is no end. Only beginnings. And at the beginning stands Saint Julie Billiart.

*...a woman filled with love for God
and God's people.*

(Constitutions, Article 1)

Generations have come and gone since St. Julie founded the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur in 1804. The challenge remains the same:

*...to spread everywhere the Gospel
message that God is indeed good.*

(Constitutions, Article 1)

...with special dedication to the poor in the most abandoned places (*Rule of 1818*).

The vision of Julie Billiart continues to call forth and guide new generations of persons called to live her charism.

*Sister Elizabeth Marie Bowyer
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SOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

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