

## GIVE US THE POOR

At the end of September 1808, Julie wrote to Soeur St. Jean, who was then Soeur Caroline, at Montdidier: "I beg you again: take the poor, only the poor, the very poorest little girls who can't pay you anything. Gather them in, as many as you can, because we exist first and foremost for them. They are the blessing on our institute." A little later she wrote: "We are only for the poor, absolutely for them," and again: "If you have got one or two who are paying fees, send them away. If pupils come who want to pay, be sure that you take nothing from them. Our aim is to teach the poor." Quotations such as these, which are taken at random from the letters of 1808 and 1809, show where Julie's first interest lay. She referred more than once to having too many boarders, but never to having too many poor children. Twenty boarders were probably too much for Soeur Anastasie's health at Jumet, twenty-two were ample at Namur in 1810, nine quite enough for a start at Gembloux, even though the nine were five "whole" boarders and four halves, as four only stayed for dinner without being fully resident. But when she spoke of the poor schools she took obvious pride and delight in the large classes. From Gembloux she wrote: "The poor school is bursting, but as well run as if it had been going on for a year ... a hundred children, and more queuing up to get in. At Namur it was three hundred. The poor, the poor everywhere. Three classes of them! Mon Dieu! What a business."

This enthusiasm was quite exceptional in her time. It is instructive to compare it with the sentiments expressed by Père Thomas. This good Father of the Faith was an excellent priest and a charitable man, but when he spoke to the young sisters about teaching the poor, his language was reserved: "The poor school is a special branch of work," he said, "and perhaps fewer gifts are needed for it, but we must remember that the souls of the poor are just the same as everyone else's." The souls of the poor are just the same as everyone else's: this gives the minimal recognition to the human dignity of the individual, and yet it would be wrong to conclude that Père Thomas had an unchristian view on the subject. His whole life belied that. It was simply that he was still affected by the thinking of his day, and that all such thinking was pale and uninspired beside Julie's unbounded joy.

Julie's heart went out to the sheer physical needs of the world around her. In 1765 there were three million destitute in France, a disproportionately high number given the size of the population. Wealth was concentrated in the hands of a few, causing widespread poverty at the underprivileged end of the social scale; the peasants were helpless, the beggars famine-stricken. Not for nothing was this the age of St. Benedict Joseph Labre, who from 1748 to 1783 lived a life as physically wretched as that of the poor, his brothers. Nor did the revolution bring any improvement. The great revolt was a bourgeois movement which did nothing to help the lowest social class, and it brought in its train high prices and crushing taxation. Julie's France was in many ways an impoverished country,

and the Belgium which she knew was an imperial province bled white to make provision for Napoleon's armies.

She could sympathize because she had known poverty in her own experience. She knew what it was to go short, to bargain over prices, to take the remains of her father's wares to sell in Beauvais, to work as a casual harvest laborer so as to bring in something for the family. She knew poverty, too, in the first foundations of Notre Dame. At Amiens there was the solitary candle which was left lighted on the landing so that all could get such light as they were able through their open doors. There were the dyed dresses which had to make do as religious habits, the school texts which had to be made by hand because there was not enough money to buy printed books. At Ghent a foundation was made with butter, salt, potatoes and one mattress for seven sisters, and flour was bought when a boarder came who paid a florin. At St. Hubert the community consisted only of three sisters and yet there was not enough to eat. "God will look after the third," Julie said. "He will either feed her where she is or send her somewhere else." And when the superior of St. Hubert, Soeur St. Jean, came to Namur for the annual retreat, she was told to buy a donkey for the journey, sell him in Namur so as not to have the expense of feeding him during the three weeks of her stay, and then buy another one to go back. At Jumet, Soeur Anastasie was able to buy flour when three boarders paid their fees together. At Namur, fortunately, the cost of living was not so high, so when the house at Montdidier was closed and the four sisters of the community had to be provided for elsewhere, Julie sent word to Mère St. Joseph: "Send them to Namur. It is cheaper to feed them there than in Ghent."

Her travels, too, give evidence of Julie's poverty. The long journeys on foot in ice and wind and heat, the preference for a lift on a farm cart when she could get one, the choice of the cheapest route, the sparing use of the diligence are typical of a woman whose poverty was real.

Naturally, she wanted to raise the lot of the poor. Such a desire would have been entertained by any warmhearted woman touched by the distress around her and made sensitive by her own experience. Elizabeth Fry and Florence Nightingale probably found the inspiration of their life-work in this way. Julie could have responded to her own desire and yet have remained like them simply a social reformer. In fact, she was very much more. Her response was the material expression of something transcendent, something profoundly spiritual, which suffused the sordid conditions in which she worked and transformed them into a joy and glory. It was something which lifted everything to the divine plane. Without some appreciation of this transforming joy in her poverty, we of today run the risk of mistaking the significance of her pledge to the poor. But Julie was passionately in earnest about it. It was a whole-hearted commitment and, in pledging the congregation to the poor, she pledged every generation of Sisters of Notre Dame.

It is therefore important to see what her pledge to the poor sprang from, what her understanding of poverty was, what were its effects in herself and in what ways it is relevant today.

It sprang in the first place from her union with God and in particular from three manifestations of that union: her Christian sense of her time; her respect for the dignity of the individual, and her love of littleness, which was one of the most striking features of her spirituality. She had a remarkable Christian sense of her times, as the saints often had; and she was sensitive to its needs and opportunities because she was sensitive to God, who reveals himself in the concrete events of man's history. Julie was open to God; and this openness, which obtruded nothing of herself between God's will and the work to be done, made her a means by which God reached the needs of her day and took its opportunities. The almost uncanny accuracy of her views and assessments was the intuition of the saints, which singled out the major problems of the time by a supernatural instinct. She saw that what was wanted was a more emphatic affirmation and living out of the spirit of poverty. The Church always reverts to this in moments of crisis and it was natural that, in the critical years of the revolution, she should call on the most courageous of her children to do in the spiritual order what the state was striving to do in the realm of economics: establish the paradoxical right order of the gospel, by which the last are first and the poor men rich. The revolution was a purely natural movement, marked by the selfishness of fallen human nature, a case of the "have-nots" versus the "haves." It could produce no conclusive result, for it could only replace one group of "have-nots" by another, and so open the way to a new phase of the perennial conflict over wealth that Karl Marx exploited as the basis of his philosophy of communism. By contrast, Julie and the saints who were her contemporaries strove to find a Christian solution that was permanent, to make the Church shine again with the splendor of Christ's poverty. Each had a personal approach to the problem and Julie's was important because it was the first to recognize the unique place of the poor in the new order of things. A similar situation one hundred and fifty years previously had prompted St. Vincent de Paul to provide bread and shelter. Julie was led to provide education. She believed that education was for all: for girls, "that most neglected portion of society," as well as for boys; for the country as well as the town children; for those who could not pay as well as for those who could. She was unimpressed by social distinctions and by academic ones alike, refusing to break up the integrated process of education into separate stages which were mutually exclusive or into parallel patterns based on social status. Education was denied to none: a breadth of vision which prepared for Notre Dame's mission to every social grade, color and nation.

In the second place Julie respected the dignity of the individual. This in itself bore her towards the poor, for every individual is to some extent poor. All need the community to give scope, opportunity and encouragement; and all welcome that recognition of poverty which underlies personal attention to each individual, Julie was both kind and discerning with individuals. To Mère St.

Joseph in 1806 she wrote: "Use discretion about Sister X," who wanted wine with her supper; and "watch Sister Y," who needed an eye kept on her in class. She added: "You can't use the same methods every time; they work on the first occasion and fail on the next hundred. You have to vary them." She herself was very considerate towards sisters who were in any kind of suffering: "Poor X. she has to fight for it, hasn't she?" And she was patient with the awkward ones. To Soeur St. Jean at St. Hubert she wrote: "So Sister T. has had a little tantrum ... talk to her about the holy rule, but *doucement, doucement, ma chere Soeur* ... you can be as firm as you like if sweetness won't work, but sweetness first." At Jumet she noticed that one sister was restless, another up to her monkey-tricks (Julie's word is *singeries*), a third was over-pious and given to preaching long sermons in class but she had no respect whatever for Sister Superior Anastasie. No wonder Julie exclaimed: "Mon Dieu, what a job it is to form a good Sister of Notre Dame!" Yet she never abandoned the task. She might remark crisply about an obstreperous sister in Namur who was seeking attention by going into a decline: "Either Sister M. eats meat or she goes home!" But she kept a shrewd and kindly eye on Sister M. just the same. She respected the individual even while she recognized all the shortcomings and she was prepared always to meet the individual's need, going out to spiritual poverty with the wealth of her charity. For St. Laurence the poor were the treasures of the Church. For Julie they were the opportunity God gave her to serve him in faith.

She therefore put the least attractive ones first, whether sisters or children. "Love the unpleasant ones," she urged upon Soeur Xavier. "Love the unattractive ones most; be especially kind to them and ask our Lord to show you when you need to be firm ... you don't catch flies with vinegar but with honey." Naturally she was consumed with the desire to preach the gospel to the poor, an activity which in her day as in our Lord's was so rarely met with that it ranked among miracles. She must have loved the passage in the seventh chapter of St. Luke where Christ gave as proof of his messianic identity the fact that the blind saw, the lame walked, the lepers were cleansed and the poor had the gospel preached to them. Her excitement bubbled when she saw in Bordeaux in 1807 the rows of poor children, each one of whom she cherished: "Three hundred poor children in class ... I'd scour the world to snatch these poor little creatures from the devil and show them how precious their souls are. Come on; let's work for eternity, a hundred poor children now and perhaps three hundred by the end of the month." There was the same zest and challenge in her reply to Mère St Joseph, who was distressed because the sisters of an established religious order feared that the success of Notre Dame in teaching might have an adverse effect on their own boarding school: "Tell them that it is the poor that we want to teach. No one will be jealous of our privilege in that direction."

She taught the poor on their terms and in their conditions. She opened lace-making classes for them at Ghent, she made clothes for them, accepted alms for them, provided blue frocks with cotton kerchiefs and bonnets for their first communion days and faced what the translators euphemistically called

“inconveniences” in her contact with them. She herself frankly told her sisters not to be afraid of the fleas, bugs, lice and other visitors whom they might meet with in school. They had chosen the poor and accepted the conditions of the poor, conditions that were to be repeated in Lancashire and the Borinage, in Boston, Arizona, South Africa and Brazil. They might never become accustomed to them, but the steady will to accept and improve them was part of the poverty of the congregation. To work for the poor was an honor, even if the whole institute had been gathered together merely for the sake of one single soul.

In the third place, Julie’s own love of littleness undoubtedly influenced her dedication to the poor. Her spirituality belonged to that long and ancient tradition of “little ones” or “poor ones” that stretches back into the church of the Old Testament and was so beautifully expressed by Jeremiah and Second Isaiah. Our blessed Lady and Christ himself belonged to this tradition and were the glory of it and, after their example, saints from St. Francis of Assisi to St. Thérèse of Lisieux have expressed it in their various ways. The Hebrew *anaw*, the Lady Poverty, the *nada* of St. John of the Cross, St. Thérèse’s spiritual childhood and St. Julie’s simplicity are basically all one: poverty rejoiced in as a sign of complete dependence on God. Julie used the language of it frequently: “*pauvre enfant, pauvre Julie.*” *Pauvre* here is neither disparaging nor pitying, it simply establishes the fact of poverty. *Petit* on the other hand was a favorite word, almost as characteristic of her as it was of St. Thérèse: Sister T. has a little tantrum; the sisters do their little best; Julie herself is subjects are *les petites sciences*; Soeur Anastasie is *le petit conseil*. She enquires about “your little health” or “how’s your *petite personne?*” and remarks: “*Notre petite maison va son petit train*” (Our little house jogs along at its own little rate.)”

But littleness was in far more than mere language: Julie lived it. She shed all that was not God and shed it with a consistent generosity that amounted to heroism. Whether we look at the illness at Cuvilly, the frustrations at Amiens, the criticism at Namur, the opposition at Ghent, the last searching trial from her own at the end of her life, the picture is always the same: “God alone! God alone!” If Julie had not actually said the words, her life would have spoken them for her. She clung to all that was God, attaching herself with all the vehemence and energy of her vigorous personality to God’s will in whatever form it came. Her comments on it may have veiled the passionate intensity of her adherence under a gracious courtesy, as when she remarked that in whatever way God’s will came it was welcome; or she may have concealed it by playfulness, as when she said that affairs at St. Nicolas had her rolling to and fro like a ball between that village and Ghent; but the reality was strong and unmistakable. It was evident in her resistance to the attraction of material goods (she would have shared her last mouthful with the sisters at St. Hubert, she said) and in her detachment from influence and power. She would not impose herself, nor would she try to mark the work permanently as her own or lay personal claim to its success. It was God’s work and he had no need of her, except in so far as he chose to use her. Success and reputation were therefore matters of indifference. She would go on

whether the scale of work was large or small, and as we have seen she had little time for the “heresy of numbers:” “Get on with your teaching irrespective of numbers ... don’t look at them, go on if you have only two! ... Whether you have many or few matters not at all. Gideon won his battle with only a handful ... Don’t pay attention to numbers, if you do you will worry and then you will be miserable, and that is against the spirit of the institute.” Perhaps Julie’s spiritual poverty is nowhere more clearly seen than in this willingness to stay small and in her complete freedom from self-sufficiency.

What then was her poverty in practice? Considerable light is thrown on her understanding of poverty by looking at what she did not think it was. It was not dependence on alms. St. Teresa of Avila had had to fight for that as far back as the sixteenth century, and any such dependence after the revolution would have been out of the question. It was not destitution, for that would have made it impossible to conduct schools. Nor was it poverty as St. Francis had conceived it. “The practice of poverty for those responsible for the education of youth,” said Julie, “should be quite different from that of the Trappistines, the Poor Clares and the Carmelites. While keeping a perfect detachment from earthly goods, our sisters need to take good care that the children’s quarters and all that the parents are likely to see are fittingly furnished. If we do not do this we are frustrating our own main aim, which is education. Buildings should be healthy, light and airy. Everything connected with the chapel should be such as to inspire reverence and to lead the children to want to care for the altar themselves. It is also part of our poverty to see that the sisters ... are clothed, fed and housed in a way that helps them to bear the weight of their work.”

Julie’s views on poverty did not prevent her from making arrangements about property, from consulting a lawyer about the eleven thousand four hundred francs that M. de Sambucy wanted, from reclaiming Mère St Joseph’s money when it was owing to Namur from Amiens, or from reminding Mère St. Joseph to bring from Amiens goods which belonged to the congregation. She was detached from any spirit of private ownership yet she maintained the rights of the congregation, and this combination of freedom and exactness was the more remarkable in that it was found in a French peasant woman, and a peasant from Picardy at that, for the Picards have a reputation for driving a hard bargain and for being close in money matters.

When we look at it from the positive side, we see that Julie’s understanding of poverty involved openness and surrender. She saw it as an abandonment of self and of all that ownership could give to self in terms of security, prestige and satisfaction. On the spiritual level it was the surrender of peace, of pleasure, of rest, of desires, for the sake of the souls of the children. She said: “It’s an illusion to think that you are holy when you are keeping your soul in peace by avoiding work with the children. You must let everything go, generously; not only your rest, your pleasures, your peace and your life if need

be, but right down to your own ideas of sanctity, your favorite devotions and your spiritual satisfactions if the good of the souls entrusted to you requires it.”

On the material level, poverty demanded a faithful attention to detail for the good of the community. Julie’s personal care for material matters was unwearied. She supervised the buildings at Ghent almost stone by stone, and her letters back to Namur gave careful instructions about making the jam, laying in fuel, stuffing mattresses and cutting out petticoats. She directed the hiding of the silver when the French troops were drawing near to Namur after the retreat from Moscow. Marketing she liked to do herself spotting bargains for the kitchen, or poultry or piglets for the *basse-cour* which was part of every convent and which helped the sisters to live. She knew that the cost of living was less high in the south than in the north, and that she could get good curtain material more cheaply in Namur than in Ghent. Her own things were poor. Her cloak was cheap and light; her pen a goose feather quill that had to be cut every evening, or rather after every using, because the ink dried hard on it; her room so lacking in convenience that it had no fireplace and she had to be taken into Mère St Joseph’s room during her last illness. She was careful not to waste anything, and one of her strongest reproofs was to a sister who had left the top of a beer barrel open at St. Hubert. “It was only through God’s providence that you did not lose all the beer. What a waste!”

Nevertheless, Julie was not parsimonious. Her generous arrangements for help between the houses make that clear. Under the Napoleonic laws, convents were not to be a liability in a commune. The mayor and chief citizens were required to sign documents to this effect and these had to be forwarded by the local superior to the Minister of Cults at Paris. The convents had therefore to help each other. The crisis in this respect came during the Waterloo campaign in 1815 when Fleurus was sacked, Gembloux was saved by the *garde bourgeoise*, Namur was living in the cellars, Andenne was starving. Somehow Julie got a supply of flour through from Namur to Andenne. “We are all poor but their need is greater,” she said.

The only kind of poverty which Julie did not cherish was intellectual. She recognized the poor mental caliber of some of the early sisters, but she was determined that ignorance should not remain, and she applied herself to its removal as vigorously as she undertook the upholding of spiritual and material poverty in other fields.

The effects of poverty in Julie were very evident. She was free and joyous, utterly dedicated and sincere. Her liberty of spirit led her to wait on God for foundations and decisions, even though a temperament like hers would have found waiting naturally irksome. “Time is a great master,” she remarked. She was free to decide, unaffected by human respect and public opinion: she accepted girls who had been in service; she held out for day scholars at Namur; she refused candidates on whose behalf great pressure was brought to bear; she

was adaptable about arrangements. Joyousness too was a mark of her poverty. Smiling herself and ready to make the sisters laugh, she regarded gaiety as a proof of the spirit of the institute. Poverty prompted her sense of dedication. She had no time or thought for herself. At Abbeville in the early days she was “eaten up” by work; and the sisters, remembering her prompt joining in the wash at Ghent or taking over a class as soon as she arrived at St. Hubert, could only say: “She did not know what it was to spare herself.”

It was her poverty too which underlay her sincerity. In all things she sought the truth and she took her world as she found it, honestly and realistically. “This affair at Amiens,” she sighed, “it is a nice big bobbin that is well tangled up.” There was no blinking the fact, no refusal to face it; and neither was there a whitewashing nor a blackening of it. The same simple truth applied to people. Firmine was giving trouble at Jumet. “She has to have variety,” Julie wrote, “but she needs a steadying influence to get her ideas fixed. Firmine herself would like to go out shopping—*Jamais de la vie!* She won’t be fit to go out that way in twenty years.” And about a candidate who was much recommended she said, “She can’t be a Sister of Notre Dame. She hasn’t got our spirit, only her own tangle of scruples.” On just one occasion she had a little explosion to Soeur Anastasie. She wrote to her from Ghent in 1812: “*Mon Dieu!* What a business to run after people! I’ve got to be everywhere just as firm as I am here, or there would be trouble in no time. The devil has traps all over the place. Here is Sister E.! I thank God for ridding us of that kind. What a misery they are! I know that X accepts postulants six at a time, too easily as I did once, but what happens afterwards? This little minx is so full of ups and downs that it is wrong to keep her. What a poor lot postulants are these days. Pray for me. I’ve got to be a dragon, there is no other way of putting the devil to flight in the sort of world we live in, and I’m absolutely on fire to get the sisters on.” On fire she was, always consumed by a zeal that burned and gave her no rest and yet which was the well-spring of her strength and peace. Of all the effects of her poverty perhaps the purest was her ability to lay the whole work down, apparently unfinished, with a smile and a *Magnificat*.

Julie’s spirit of poverty and her dedication to the poor are not simply aspects of her life and thought to be admired across the years. They are important today because in this day and age too the Church is at a great moment in her history, and is renewing and reaffirming her poverty as the right underpinning of her interior renaissance and her ecumenical apostolate. Pope John XXIII said at the opening of the Vatican Council on October 11, 1962: “The Church is for everybody, but today it is more than ever the Church of the poor.” St. Julie can give that sense of the times which will enable Christians today to understand current trends and needs, and to make the right adaptations to them. She can help to give the right place to the individual in a world which is increasingly collective and comprehensive. She can hold firm the resolution to take the gospel to the poor, whether those poor are in Arizona, Brazil, the Congo, Italy, Japan, Nigeria, Kenya or Rhodesia. She can serve the Church today,

though she now has to offer her service through the congregation; and it is to the Church of the poor that she says now as she did in 1808: “Give us the very poorest, the ones who can’t pay us anything ... for we are only for the poor, absolutely for them.”